

Thesis
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Call Centre Employment: A Qualitative Study

A thesis submitted to the University of Stirling for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy

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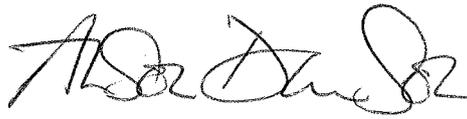
March 2002

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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.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 present data on the nature and experience of call centre employment. Chapter 7 is divided into two main parts. In the first of these I explore the nature of the recruitment and selection process for agent-level call centre employees. I begin by looking at the literature on aspects of recruitment and selection processes more generally, examining the ways in which such processes are typically managed. I then argue that these processes might be different in the case of call centres. I support my contention with data from a postal questionnaire survey of Scottish employment agencies, carried out as part of this study and probing the extent of such agencies' relationship with call centres, and excerpts from interviews with senior employment agency consultants. In the second part of the chapter, I present and discuss data on call centre recruitment and selection processes derived from the period of covert participant observation and semi-structured interviews with current and former call centre employees.

My objective in chapter 8 is to present a detailed narrative of call centre work. I seek to explore and illuminate the nature and experience of work in telephone call centres by drawing on a variety of sources. I start with a review of articles in the 'subjective experience' subcategory of the content analysis of selected newspaper articles first detailed in chapter 5 and presented as part of chapter 6. This material serves both as a contextual backdrop to the covert participant observation and interview data and as an indication of the increasing public exposure to first- and third-person accounts of call centre employment. Following this I present data, comprising excerpts from diaries kept during my period of covert participant observation, observations made at that time and on later reflection, and excerpts from interviews with call centre employees or ex-employees, relating to the nature and experience of call centre work. More detailed discussion of aspects of that experience in the light of other reported research appears in the 'Discussion' chapter.

Chapter 9 is concerned with the issue of employee turnover in call centres. I begin with a brief overview of the general literature on employee turnover before presenting and discussing interview data on voluntary terminations of employment in the context of the recruitment source effects and job satisfaction aspects of the turnover literature. I then consider in greater depth three recent models of the processes of employee turnover, each representing a different approach and drawing on very different theoretical underpinnings. Finally, I use interview data on individual decisions to

quit to evaluate the three models of the decision process previously discussed, examining the extent to which they confirm or reveal weaknesses in each model.

Chapter 10 is a more general discussion chapter in which I seek to relate the findings detailed in the previous four chapters to the wider literature and to changes in the general environment and to offer possible explanations for a number of the phenomena that I have observed. The chapter has six discussion sections. In the first of these I suggest an explanation for the peak and subsequent decline in the monthly volumes of call centre-related newspaper articles noted in the five-year review. In the next section I discuss the significance of findings from the employment agencies' survey that telephone interviewing was the predominant selection method and considered to be the most critical element in call centre employment selection processes. In the following section I compare the findings of this study in relation to call centre employment terms and conditions with other studies of call centre employment. In the fourth section I discuss the implications of the findings of this study for the likely job-related well-being of call centre employees, their susceptibility to psychological burnout, and their exposure to possible harm as a result of performing emotional labour. In the penultimate section I consider the question of call centre employees' orientations to work and offer a possible explanation for the high rates of voluntary turnover experienced by call centres. In the final section I discuss the 'evolution' of call centres into contact centres and present an appraisal of what current developments might mean for the future experience of call centre employment.

In the final chapter I consider the extent to which the study has met the objectives detailed in this chapter. I summarize the main conclusions reached by the study, identify its limitations, and discuss the practical and research implications of my findings.

Chapter 2

Employment and work in advanced industrial societies

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a context in which the development of telephone call centres can be considered. In examining the nature of advanced industrial societies it unearths clues as to the changes that have influenced the directions in which business organisations have evolved. In identifying the ways in which the nature of employment and work is changing, it provides a context in which the nature of employment in call centres can be better understood. It begins by exploring the contention that we live in a post-industrial society, arguing that the description 'advanced industrial society' is more appropriate. The economic, political and social characteristics of such societies are then examined. Evidence of these characteristics is drawn from studies of a number of countries rather than exclusively from studies relating to the UK because such characteristics are, it is argued, broadly common to all advanced industrial societies. The chapter then turns to questions of work and employment in industrial societies. The nature of work and employment is discussed in terms of changes taking place in the demographic, physical and psychological attributes of employment. Again, evidence of these changes is drawn from studies involving a number of different countries on the premise that the trends being identified are generally similar across all industrial societies.

2.2 Post-industrial or advanced industrial society?

The work of Daniel Bell (1973, 1980, 1987) has been seen by some authors (Kumar, 1981; Collins, 1997) as representing a central point in discussions of a so-called post-industrial condition. Bell argued that advanced societies were entering a new phase of evolution in which a change from an industrial to a post-industrial form would be precipitated by changes in economic activity. The production-oriented economy of the former would give way to the predominantly service-oriented economy of the latter, bringing with it both a shift from blue collar to white-collar employment and an increasing demand for and consumption of services. Accompanying these changes would be an increasing predominance of professional, scientific and technical employment. A new class of employee would emerge in response to the increased importance of and demand for information handling skills, information product development and scientific research in post-industrial society. Bell suggested that the rise of the 'knowledge worker', as this

class has been called, would lead to a fundamental change in the basis of society from the ownership of private property to the possession of specialist skills and/or knowledge.

Drucker (1969, 1993) has similarly suggested the importance of 'knowledge industries' to the 'knowledge economy'. He argued that in the USA in 1965 one third of GNP was produced by the 'knowledge sector' and that occupations relying on knowledge, such as teaching, science, engineering and accountancy, were replacing those relying on skills, for example farming and machine operation. He contended that specific occupational skills were increasingly being acquired 'on a knowledge foundation', with people learning how to learn. It was suggested that extended education would lead to higher employment expectations. Salaries, careers and mental work would replace wages jobs and manual effort. The supply of labour, not the demand, was creating the knowledge society and economy. According to Drucker discontinuities such as the growth of new science-based industries and technologies, incipient globalisation, large organizations run by managers for managers, and the emergence of knowledge as 'the central capital, the cost centre and the crucial resource of the economy' (1969: ix) were calling into being new groupings of knowledge workers.

Echoes of the knowledge worker can be seen in Reich's (1991) conception of a 'symbolic analyst'. Symbolic analysts were argued to be different from other groups of service workers that Reich termed 'in person servers' in that the former group are highly creative and their activities are focused on problem identification and solution. They 'manipulate symbols, juxtapose patterns, collate information from diverse sources, [and] transform reality into abstract images intelligible to fellow analysts' (Balasubramanyam, 1994: 441). Reich included research scientists, design and software engineers, investment bankers and even some 'creative accountants' in the symbolic analyst category. Reich saw this group as the USA's new elite, individuals that were not simply creative but also a source of innovation that added value to economic processes. Similarly, Blackler specified the contribution of knowledge workers to economic processes as including 'problem solving (research, product design, fabrication), problem identification (marketing, advertising, customer consultation), and brokerage (financing, searching, contracting)' (1995: 1027).

Others, for example Ackroyd, Glover, Currie and Bull (2000) have argued that the concept of knowledge workers is obfusatory and changes in division of labour of skilled people need greater understanding. They suggested that the growth occupations of the contemporary world do not produce or handle knowledge, understood in terms of the academic model of knowledge as an articulated and formalized 'free good'. According to these authors 'The new occupations at the forefront of innovation do not typically aspire to produce or to use knowledge. Such groups are, however, clear that the commodity they handle is anything but free. It is not free in multiple senses, not least of which being that not everyone can gain access to it or make use of it. Certainly, if we mean by knowledge articulated, formalized and synthetic understanding – as distinct from intuitive or implicit skill – very few occupations have ever had or aspired to have knowledge' (Ackroyd *et al*, 2000: 274).

It was asserted that the response of supporters of the knowledge worker thesis to such criticisms has been to undermine and displace 'traditional definitions of what counts as knowledge', substituting conceptions that lend more weight to their arguments. These include suggestions that unarticulated, tacit forms of knowledge have more practical application and that 'new' kinds of knowledge are being actively created. Ackroyd *et al* countered such attempts to redefine knowledge by suggesting that 'Many, if not most, traditional kinds of work have embodied skills – many of them largely implicit and not formalized – which is one source of their value. Business leaders, craftspeople, farm workers, skilled factory workers, most clerical and almost all professional people have always been 'knowledge workers' in this sense' (2000: 274). They argued that it was not new forms of knowledge but new occupations that were being created in which implicit skills were key components of their owners' capacities to contribute to economic processes.

Call centre employment may provide a test of the knowledge worker thesis. The growth of call centre use could be interpreted as a response to the increasing demand for and consumption of services predicted by Bell (1973, 1980, 1987). Call centre employees could be seen as part of the 'new class' of occupations developing in response to the increased importance of and demand for information handling skills. The activities of many call centre employees are focused on problem identification and solution. A study of the nature of the job is likely to make clear whether they are

to be regarded as 'symbolic analysts' or 'in person servers' (Reich, 1991). One of the questions that this study might be expected to answer is whether call centre employment represents an occupation relying on knowledge (Drucker, 1969, 1973) or an occupation in which the acquisition and ownership of implicit skills have become more critical.

Despite arguments against the emergence of a knowledge-based elite, there is some empirical support for contentions that there have been structural changes in economic activity in some societies. Kuemmler and Kleiner (1996) quoted statistics from the USA's Bureau of Labor Statistics that suggested that in 1994 service-related jobs accounted for 79% of all employment in the USA and generated 74% of GDP. Noon and Blyton (1997) noted how in Britain the number of people employed in manufacturing fell by over 4 million from 1971 to 1995 and how by 1995 manufacturing accounted for only 18% of the UK's working population. Also from 1971 to 1995 the numbers working in services rose by over 4.5 million to 16.1 million people, or 75.7% of the working population.

However, it has been argued that such figures do not provide unequivocal support for Bell's post-industrial thesis. Glover and Branine (2001: 8) rejected what they termed the 'very shallow notion of post-industrial society' on the grounds of the growing outputs, ongoing development and increasing significance of industry and/or manufacturing (Cohen and Zysman, 1987; Glover, 1992; Daniels and Radebaugh, 1998; Glover, Tracey and Currie, 1998). Others (for example Webster, 1995) have suggested that Bell's concept of a post-industrial society is flawed in that it suggests that manufacturing and the provision of services are discrete activities. According to Gershuny and Miles (1983) the two sectors are interdependent, with the latter including 'producer services' (Browning and Singelmann, 1978) and 'goods-related' jobs such as financial services, logistical and marketing support and so on, which help to sustain manufacturing. It is argued therefore that a proportion of the increase in 'services' employment is due to the creation of jobs that feed into or otherwise rely on manufacturing, rather than jobs that provide services for consumption by individuals as Bell had suggested.

Gershuny (1978) also has pointed out that in tandem with increases in employment in services there have been increases in the use of goods that have often undermined the demand for many of

the former. For example the widespread use of domestic washing machines has been coincident with a collapse in the demand for laundry services, and increasing car ownership has been accompanied by a decline in the use of public transport. Thus it has been suggested that there is in fact a trend not towards a service economy but towards a 'self-service' one in which innovative products replace services.

Ackroyd *et al* (2000) suggested the existence of 'cycles and phases in the development of capitalism' set in motion by industrialization. They argued that, despite 'massive continuities' in technological developments, the current cycle has passed and is still passing through three distinguishable phases: 'mechanization', 'electrification', and 'info-technologization'. They contended that mechanization began between two and five hundred years ago, depending on the definition adopted. Electrification, the second phase, can be thought of as a development and extension of particular aspects of mechanization and, following a similar pattern, info-technologization can be seen as an extension and development of electrification. The present could be seen as located in this third phase. They suggested that 'a fourth phase, bio-technologization, will in due course be clearly perceivable' (Ackroyd *et al*, 2000: 292). According to this classification, 'advanced industrial society' would be more accurate than post-industrial.

Although debate continues as to whether the post-industrial age as envisaged, amongst others, by Drucker and Bell has actually come to pass, the term post-industrial continues to be used by some authors. For example Greenbaum (1995: 141) in an examination of the effect of computerisation on clerical labour wrote of the 1960s and 1970s as 'the beginning of the "post-industrial" period' without defining what it might mean. Robertson (1985) encouraged the development of a relaxed attitude to its usage, saying: 'Some people dislike the term "post-industrial". They find it an ugly, woolly word that tells us nothing about the future. They say it is no more informative than if we called the great transformation of the 18th and 19th centuries the 'post-agricultural' revolution, and the age which brought it in the post-agricultural age. And they point out that industry will continue to exist for the foreseeable future'. He saw its use merely as an acknowledgement of the possibility that one historical period might be coming to an end, and that another, significantly different in a number of respects, might be about to begin. The term served only to focus attention on questions such as what possible direction the future might take. Until that time, and in deference to the

arguments presented suggesting that a post-industrial era is yet to arrive, the descriptor 'advanced industrial society' would seem the most appropriate.

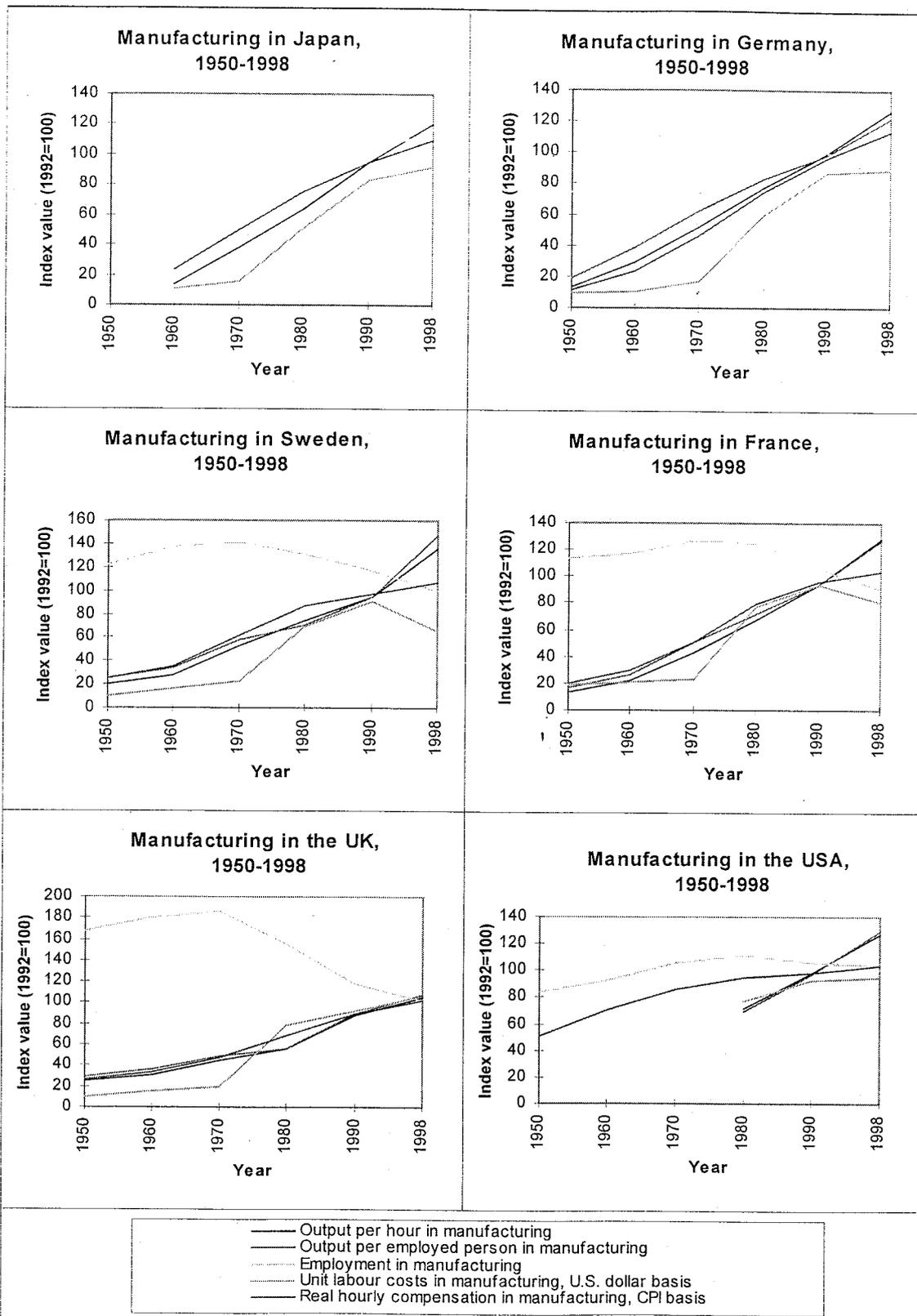
2.2.1 Economic characteristics of advanced industrial societies

One of the main economic characteristics of advanced industrial societies is an increasing level of manufacturing output. Case study evidence generally suggests that this is due to a combination of continued improvement of manufacturing processes, the displacement of human labour in production processes and the adoption of alternative management strategies. For example, Kenney and Florida (1993) looked at changes in US Steel, the largest integrated steel company in the USA, from 1980 to 1990. They found that in 1990 the company was producing approximately the same amount of steel that it had a decade earlier, but that over that time the workforce had been reduced from 120,000 to 20,000 as production processes were automated.

Evidence of this trend also exists at a more general level. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor (1999) compared the manufacturing performance of different countries and geographical regions over a period of nearly 50 years using a number of different criteria. Each criterion was indexed such that 1992 is represented by a nominal figure of 100. The indexed results are illustrated in Figure 2.1. When the measures for output per person employed in manufacturing, employment in manufacturing, and labour costs for selected countries that might be classified as advanced industrial societies are compared, a general pattern emerges. Increases in productivity are accompanied by reductions in both labour costs and employment in manufacturing. This is the pattern that would be anticipated if the explanations advanced for productivity gains in individual case studies were generalisable across manufacturing.

However, this trend has not been consistent. According to Appelbaum and Batt (1994) advanced industrialised economies appeared to be characterised by a slow-down in the economic growth which was experienced in the quarter century following World War II and which has been attributed to the cumulative gains in productivity and growth in output associated with mass production. They suggested that mass production combines, in the minds of many social scientists, dedicated machinery with an organisation of work based on the separation of conception from

Figure 2.1 Indexed manufacturing performance criteria for selected countries, 1950-1998



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999

execution and the detailed division of labour into repetitive tasks in order to output large volumes of standardised products. Mass production yielded economies of scale and a reduction in unit labour costs and generated increases in productivity when plants operated at close to full production capacity. Strong demand growth following the Second World War led to the increasing use of mass production techniques, a change reflected in the growth in factory output.

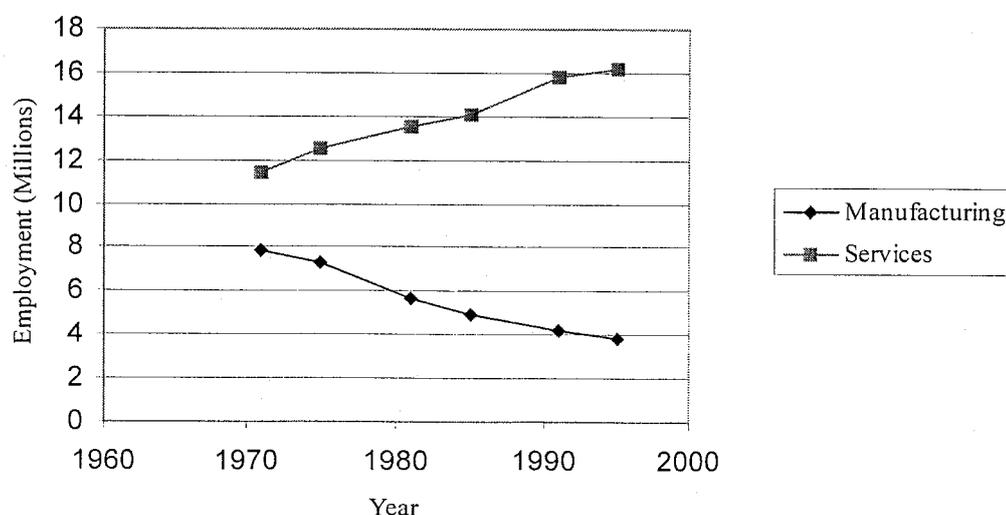
Appelbaum and Batt (1994) suggested that unions in mass production sectors negotiated wage increases in line with gains in output. Production in other sectors was increasing at a slower rate than in manufacturing. The effect of this was that increases in output outstripped increases in employees' incomes with the effect of lowering unit labour costs. In this period markets for mass produced goods were mainly national rather than international, allowing many firms to engage in oligopolistic pricing. This ensured that profits increased with output while the prices of standardised mass-produced goods tended to fall. Rising real incomes and falling relative prices of goods fuelled the growth of consumption, which together with a stable share of profit in output encouraged firms to invest in plant, leading to yet higher output. Because these productivity gains were shared (albeit not equally) between firms, employees and consumers, productivity growth effectively led to demand growth, thus completing a 'virtuous circle' of general economic growth.

Appelbaum and Batt (1994) identified two causes of the disintegration of this 'virtuous circle' of growth. The first relates to the strength of international competition in product markets. Newly industrialised and less developed countries were able to compete successfully in price-conscious markets for mass-produced products due to their lower labour costs. This acted to restrict increases in real incomes in advanced industrial economies that would have stimulated further growth in consumption. Additionally, reduced demand for home-produced goods was likely to mean home production facilities operating at less than optimal capacity, one of the conditions required to promote investment in new production technologies. The second cause identified by Appelbaum and Batt is the effect of microprocessor-based production. They suggest that this has both reduced the cost advantages of mass production and made possible increases in product diversity and customisation, thus increasing competition in increasingly quality-conscious and otherwise more demanding markets.

Appelbaum and Batt wrote of a slowdown in economic growth associated with challenges to manufacturing in advanced industrialised economies. As this chapter has already suggested, although important in terms of GDP and employment in general the significance of manufacturing as a source of direct employment in advanced industrialised economies has waned. The proportions of labour forces in services employment have increased across most advanced industrial societies although a high proportion of services jobs would not exist without manufacturing. Examples of such ‘downstream’ kinds of employment are jobs in haulage, tax collection, warehousing, advertising, and retailing. Upstream of factories there are many jobs in commercial, technical and financial services, such as those of advertising copywriters, software engineers and investment analysts respectively.

Noon and Blyton (1997) described how from 1971 to 1995 employment in manufacturing in the UK fell by more than 51% to 3,845,000 employees whilst the numbers working in services sectors in the same period rose by more than 41% to 16,138,000, or 75.7% of the UK’s workforce. Figure 2.2 illustrates these changes. Dearden (1998) noted how similar changes had been taking place in employment across EU countries, with the numbers employed in agriculture and industry falling by 13 million and the numbers employed in services rising by 18 million between 1980 and 1993.

Figure 2.2 Changes in employment in manufacturing and services in Britain 1971-1995 (Data source: Noon and Blyton, 1997)



Hipple (1999) found evidence of a change from non-services to services employment in a survey of displaced US employees. The survey looked at the re-employment fortunes in February 1998 of employees aged over 20 and with 'long' service of 3 years or more who had been displaced from their employment in 1995 and 1996 either because their plants or companies had closed down or moved, or their positions or shifts had been abolished, or because their employers had otherwise not had enough for them to do. Despite 5.0 million non-farm jobs being created in the USA in 1995-6 some 2.2 million longer-serving employees were also displaced. Hipple noted that, in general, 'workers in goods-producing industries - mining, construction, and manufacturing - continued to have a higher probability of losing their jobs than workers in service-producing industries' (1999: 16). By February 1998 1.6 million displaced workers had found alternative employment. Of those over half had relocated to different industrial sectors although 60 percent were employed in similar jobs to their previous positions. In total, 6 percent of those finding new employers had moved to services. Of the 534,000 previously displaced manufacturing employees, a quarter had found new jobs in services. The proportion of workers who had taken service jobs was highest (11 percent) for those displaced from operator, fabricator, and labourer occupations and lowest for those who had lost specialist professional jobs (2 percent).

Shah and Mehta (1998) argued that rising unemployment is one of the characteristics of advanced industrial societies. They suggested that two trends are responsible. The first of these is the relocation of manufacturing facilities and their associated jobs from industrial countries to less developed and more newly industrial countries, both to take advantage of lower labour costs and also (O'Reilly, 1992) to give access to new markets in these countries. Wood (1994) has similarly linked the declining demand for unskilled labour in Europe and the USA to increasing import penetration of manufactured goods from the newly industrial countries of South East Asia. In 1962 manufactured goods from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea accounted for only 1.7 per cent of manufactured imports to the European Community. In 1985 this proportion (of a much higher total) had risen to 8.6 per cent. 1995 figures put newly industrial countries' share of trade in manufactured goods worldwide at 21 per cent, compared to 26 per cent for the European Community and 24 per cent for Japan. Wood estimated that competition from newly industrial countries had cut demand for unskilled labour in both Europe and the USA by one fifth. Haskel

and Jukes (1995) similarly attributed a drop in the wage and employment share of manual employees in UK manufacturing in the 1980s to a rise in import penetration in the same period.

The second trend identified by Shah and Mehta (1998) concerns the increased use of and displacement of employees by 'robots, automation, and other forms of technology' in the manufacturing activities of advanced industrial societies. They acknowledged that this is not a new phenomenon, but drew a distinction between industrial technologies that primarily replace human physical labour inputs, and generally newer ones that, they argued, increasingly replace mental inputs to production and related processes. They concluded that in 'the past when new technologies have replaced workers in a given sector or industry, new sectors have always emerged to absorb the displaced workers. Today, all three of the traditional sectors of the economy - agriculture, manufacturing and services - are experiencing technological displacement' (1998: 227).

If the reasons advanced by Shah and Mehta for increasing unemployment are correct, then an examination of the labour markets in advanced industrial societies ought to indicate decreases in labour demand. Recently Dearden (1998) attributed persisting high levels of unemployment across the European Community to a fall in labour demand rather than an increase in labour supply. Dearden also suggested that whilst increasing unemployment seems to be a feature of many industrial countries, rates of increase and the degrees to which unemployment responds to economic cycles vary considerably. He compared the experiences of the European Community, Japan and the USA since the mid-1960s. In 1965 unemployment in the total civilian labour force of what were to become the first 15 Member States of the European Community stood at 2 percent. By 1985 this figure had risen to 10 percent, and had varied only slightly up to 1996 when it had reached 11 percent. Unemployment in Japan had risen from 1.2 percent in 1965 to 3.1 percent in 1996. By contrast, unemployment in the USA has experienced considerable fluctuation since the 1970s. Unemployment of 4.9 percent increased to 8.5 percent in 1975, falling to 5.8 percent in 1979. The next economic cycle brought a peak of 9.7 percent unemployment in 1982. This proportion shrank to 5.5 per cent by 1990.

Whilst manufacturing outputs in advanced industrial societies continue to rise (Kenney and Florida, 1993; US Department of Labor, 1999), the proportions of employment directly attributed to manufacturing have fallen and the proportions attributable to services have risen (Applebaum and Batt, 1994; Noon and Blyton, 1997; Dearden, 1998). Increases in call centre employment can be regarded as part of a continuing trend in advanced industrial societies. Following recent developments in UK retail banking, where the increasing use of call centres has been concurrent with contractions in branch networks, call centre growth might also be considered to be supporting evidence of a trend of 'technological displacement' in service-related employment in advanced industrial societies (Shah and Mehta, 1998).

2.2.2 Political characteristics of affluent advanced industrial societies

Some authors have suggested that the political landscapes of most advanced Western capitalist countries have come to be dominated by a (neo)conservatism which manifests itself in government policies which make plain the belief that issues of social justice are subordinate to economic considerations (Bowles and Gintis, 1988). For example, Kouzmin, Korac-Kakabadse and Korac-Kakabadse suggested that in 'most developed economies, the focus of economic policy invariably centres on current and predicted rates of inflation and unemployment' (1999: 230). They argued that the ideal of a welfare state has in many instances been cast aside in favour of policies which attempt to promote economic growth, but that this has proved difficult given the inability of national governments to control a number of important macroeconomic influences.

In part this political attitude rests on assumptions about affluence. Affluence and the distribution of wealth in advanced industrialised countries are considered later in this chapter, but within the political sphere different views exist about the levels of economic well-being enjoyed in society and the effect that this factor should have on government policy. One argument often advanced is that the conditions of poverty which existed in many industrial countries in the early part of the twentieth century and which prompted state initiatives for welfare have been all but eradicated, and that in times of greater affluence people should be prepared to be more self-supporting. Other commentators believe that the ranks of the poor are actually growing. They argue that to define poverty narrowly, for example in terms of income, is to fail to fully appreciate what it means to be

poor and that the most damaging effects of poverty are not only in terms of health but also social exclusion. Poverty and its repercussions are detrimental to society as well as the individual. They believe that the alleviation of poverty cannot be achieved without state intervention.

The former view seems to have informed recent policies in many Western capitalist societies, which have been based on the assumption that deregulation is the key which will allow the 'free market' to deliver desired results. Thatcherism and Reaganism were both examples of market-directed economic growth strategies. According to some the almost exclusive adoption of free market principles marked a significant departure from a long-run trend, discernible until the 1980s, of sustained and systematic state intervention in the sphere of employment (Keller, 1990; Hancock, Logue and Schiller, 1991).

It has been argued that one of the main political characteristics of advanced industrial societies is the inability of many citizens to participate meaningfully in politics. Commercial organisations are increasingly able to exert political influence both nationally and internationally, whereas individuals are finding their power to affect government decisions is being gradually eroded. This situation has been summarised by Rokkan (1966: 105) as 'votes count but resources decide'. Another defining characteristic of advanced industrial societies would appear to be membership of organisations which transcend national boundaries and which increasingly exert political as well as economic influence on their members. The European Union and multinational companies are examples of such organisations. Originally formed to facilitate trade, the European Union now exerts considerable political influence over its members.

2.2.3 Social characteristics of affluent advanced industrial societies

Two trends are apparent that influence the demographic profiles of advanced industrial societies. Better living and health care standards have increased average life expectancies. These same factors have contributed to falls in infant mortality, and this amongst other factors has led to a decline in birth rates. The combined effect of falling birth rates and increasing life expectancy has been to skew the population distributions of industrial societies towards increasing age. Table 2.1

shows changes in the population profile of European Community countries between 1965 and 1990. The trend illustrated is expected to continue.

Table 2.1 The Population of European Community Nations, by Age Groups, 1965 and 1990 in Millions.

Age groups (in years)	1965	1990	Percentage change 1965-1990
Under 15	71.63	58.06	-19
15-64	188.32	219.74	+17
65+	32.10	47.79	+49

Data source: Mallier and Shafto, 1994: 40

Note: Figures for 1965 relate to the 12 nations that were members of the European Community in 1990.

Turner, Giorno, De Serres, Voure'h and Richardson (1998) examined this phenomenon by looking at 'dependency ratios', which they define as 'the ratio of the population who are not of working age (both young and old) to those who are, where the population of working age is defined to be those between 15 and 64'. This measure can then be further refined to produce an 'old age dependency ratio', a measure which refers to the ratio of the number of older citizens (aged 65 and over) to the population of working age. Their study divided the world into five groups: Japan; the United States of America; the European Union; the 'fast-ageing rest of the world'; and the 'slow-ageing rest of the world'. The classification of countries other than the United States (USA), Japan and the European Union (EU) into fast- or slow-ageing regions was based on the projected change in the dependency ratio derived from United Nations projections to 2050. Countries where the dependency ratios increased over time were broadly classified as fast-ageing, while those where it decreased are classified as slow-ageing.

The two latter groupings seem to divide groups not just in terms of population ageing characteristics but also in terms of the degree of industrialisation. The more advanced industrialised countries fall into the 'fast ageing rest of the world' category, comprising OECD Member countries other than the USA, the EU, Japan, Mexico and Turkey, and all Eastern European countries (including Russia), China, China Hong-Kong, Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Chinese Taipei. The least advanced countries in terms of industrialisation belong in the 'slow-ageing rest of the world' category, which includes all of Africa, Latin America and Asian countries

other than China, China, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei, Korea, Singapore and Thailand. Based on United Nations projections, Turner *et al* have estimated dependency ratios in the ways depicted in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Estimated dependency ratios for selected populations, 1998-2050.

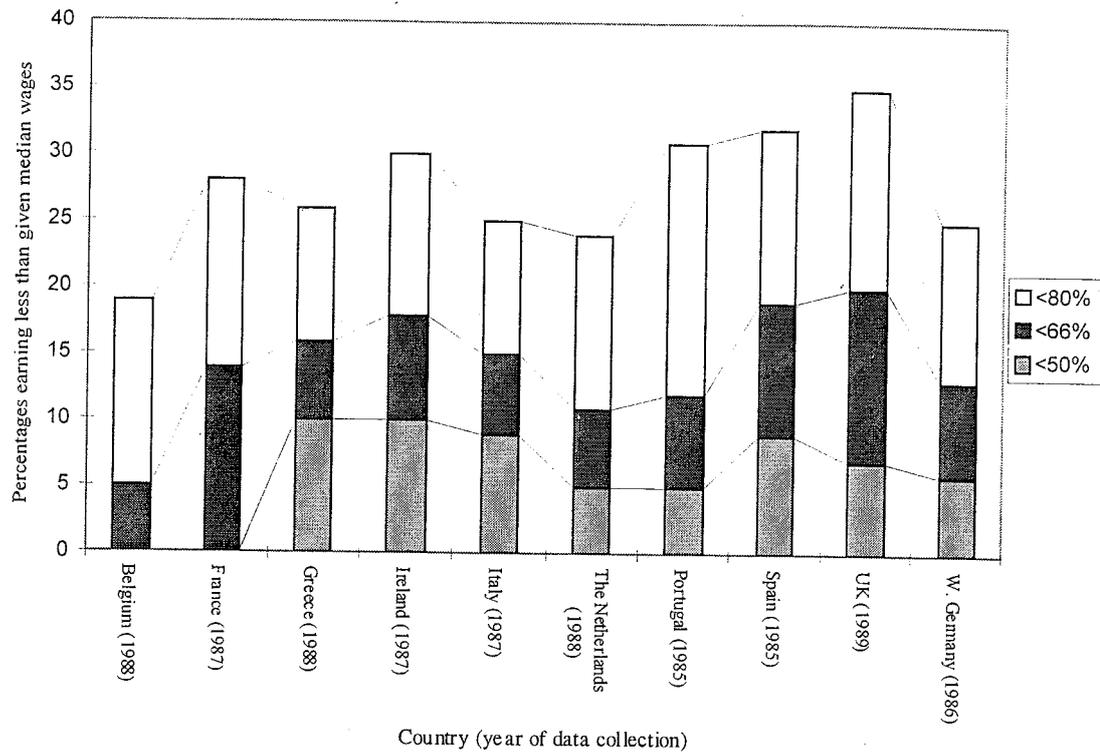
	Dependency ratios					
	1998	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
Japan	44		65	65		86
USA	52	48		65		65
European Union	49	49				78
Fast-ageing countries	44		44			63
Slow-ageing countries	65					50

Data source: Turner, Giorno, De Serres, Vourc'h and Richardson, 1998.

One consequence of population ageing is increasing demand on state-provided resources for older people. In the UK, these resources include, for example, the National Health Service and social security systems. Increases in demand have prompted reviews of the ways that services are provided in the UK. In relation to health care, the search for more cost-efficient modes of service delivery and mechanisms for relieving the pressure on over-burdened parts of the system has led to the introduction of NHS Direct, a network of call centres whose employees carry out telephone triage and dispense medical advice.

Some commentators have suggested that one characteristic of advanced industrialised societies is a widening in monetary terms of the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Per capita incomes have increased in all advanced industrialised societies but so, it has been argued, has the disparity in wealth and income between 'rich' and 'poor'. The extent to which low pay exists within EU countries depends on its definition (Dearden, 1998). Low pay is normally expressed in terms of a proportion of a given median wage. The choice of proportion, that is to say whether to classify low pay as for example a figure below 80 percent of the median wage or below 50 percent of the median wage, whilst apparently arbitrary, can lead to very different pictures of the prevalence of low pay. Centre d'Etudes des Revenus et des Coûts (CERC) figures from 1991 have been used in Figure 2.3 to show the differences resulting from different definitions of what constitutes low pay.

Figure 2.3 Percentages of full time employees earning less than given median wages in selected EU countries. Data source: CERC, 1991.



Pierce (1999) pointed out that looking at wage dispersion presents a distorted picture of the well-being of employees and argued that comparisons should be made on the basis of estimates of full compensation, that is to say the full amount given to employees when all benefits attaching to the job have been given a monetary value, including for example such things as medical insurance and nursery provision. He used micro data from the Employment Cost Index to look at the question of compensation inequality in the USA and how it had changed since the mid 1980s. He found that voluntary fringe benefits such as leave, pensions, and health insurance increased dispersion in the lower half of the total compensation distribution. Of these benefits, only the pensions component substantially increased dispersion in the upper half of the total compensation distribution, whilst health insurance reduced dispersion in that range. Compensation costs legally required to be paid by employers in the USA, such as workers' compensation insurance and social security, tended to reduce dispersion throughout the entire distribution.

His data indicated that compensation inequality in the USA had risen in the ten to fifteen years to 1999 by a greater amount than had wage inequality. The differences were apparent mainly in the bottom half of the respective distributions, and were largely due to reductions in health insurance coverage rates. The changes in distributions were consistent with income effects, where low waged workers, facing declining real wages, chose to take a disproportionately large fraction of the compensation decreases in the form of lower fringe benefits, but other explanations were possible and further research into causation was required.

Not all authors would agree that income inequality is a feature associated only with advanced industrialised societies. Thus Hinderaker and Johnson (1995) asserted that 'Dramatic stories portraying a widening inequality of income and a disappearing middle class in America have permeated the media in recent years. These stories have been based, almost universally, on biased analyses which manipulate and distort the underlying economic facts' (1995: 1). They argued that a wide distribution of incomes has always been a feature of American society, and that little variation has occurred in this distribution over time. They suggested that to a large degree income distribution reflects obvious demographic factors. For example, employees in their prime earning years generally have higher incomes than those who are starting out in life or who are retired. Income might reasonably be expected to vary with age, and employment experience and skills acquired over time might reasonably be expected to command premia in the labour market. They pointed out that in examining statistics that took the 'family' as the basic unit of analysis the actual composition of this unit was of critical importance. Differences in family income generally reflected differences in how many members of a family were in paid employment and how many hours a week this amounted to.

What Hinderaker and Johnson do seem to have been suggesting is that one feature of advanced industrialised societies is the potential degree of income mobility, that is to say degree of movement within the distribution of incomes of that society, experienced by individuals. They quoted studies by the USA's Treasury Department that used the tax returns of 14,000 individuals over the period 1979 to 1988 to track their incomes. For each year, they determined the distribution of income for the group and assigned each person to an income quintile for that year. Individual economic status at the beginning and end of the period was examined. The study found

that 86 percent of those who were in the bottom quintile (in the study designated as 'poor') in 1979 had moved to a higher quintile by 1988, with 14.7 percent of those former 'poor' in the top quintile. Hinderaker and Johnson argued that this degree of income mobility came about as a consequence of living in a society where technical skills, experience, a network of relationships and maturity are all conducive to career advancement and to increasing earnings capacity and that in the past these factors would not necessarily have had a similar influence on income mobility.

One aspect of advanced industrial societies that applies irrespective of the distribution of incomes is the ownership of chattels. Branzi (1988) suggested that at the beginning of the twentieth century a four person family of average means might have been surrounded by between 150 and 200 personally-owned items, including crockery and clothing. Towards the end of the century a family in the same economic position is likely to have nearer 3,000 objects, including electrical household appliances and decorative objects. Belk (1988: 139) suggested that North America subscribed to a culture of materialism in which 'we are what we have' was 'perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour'. McLarney and Chung (1999) argued that the 'dominance of materialistic values' in advanced industrial societies was the result of the 'market collectivity'. In general, advanced industrial societies operate in the context of market economies in which the collectivity is based on exchange. Notions of property ownership are central to such systems, as are assumptions that producers will seek to maximise profits and consumers to maximise utilities. It has been suggested (Douglas, 1989: 51) that 'a market system needs freedom to expand, to find new outlets, and to justify increased scale of production'. To create the demand necessary to facilitate these goals 'individuals are indoctrinated to the merits of ever-increasing levels of consumption' (McLarney and Chung, 1999: 293), thereby creating a culture of mass consumption.

There are those (for example, Inglehart, 1985; Inglehart and Flanagan, 1987; Knutsen, 1990; McLarney and Chung, 1999) who argue that a 'silent revolution' is taking place which the materialism that has characterised advanced industrial societies is being usurped by post-materialistic values that emphasise 'personal and political freedom, participation (more say in government, in one's community, and on the job), equality, tolerance of minorities and those holding different opinions, openness to new ideas and new lifestyles, environmental protection and concern for quality of life issues, self-indulgence, and self-actualization' (Inglehart and Flanagan,

1987: 1304). According to one hypothesis, the basis for this change is the increased affluence of advanced industrial societies. Drawing inspiration from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it suggests that once economic security is no longer perceived as a major concern, individuals will want to satisfy 'higher order' needs. Inglehart (1981: 881) argued that economic security should not be expected to precipitate an immediate sea-change in the values held by advanced industrial societies because 'to a large extent, one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's preadult years' but would become increasingly apparent 'as a younger generation replaces an older one in the adult population of a society'.

Increasing relative affluence has led in advanced industrial societies to the notion of 'disposable income', that is to say the proportion of a person or household's income that is not required to be spent on 'essential' items such as food, basic clothing and shelter, that are essential to the maintenance of life. Disposable income provides the rationale for the production of, and makes possible the consumption of, non-essential goods and services. The function of most call centres is to deliver or support the production and consumption of non-essential goods and services. Call centres can thus be seen as dependent on the affluence generated by, and at the same time helping to sustain the market economies operated by advanced industrial societies.

Increasing affluence has also been suggested to underlie issues of age, work and employment in advanced industrial societies. Branine and Glover (1997) proposed two alternative scenarios, 'commodification' and 'greening', that reflected contemporary labour market practices. Commodification was seen as a product of competitive pressures and technical change. This scenario envisaged different employment prospects for age-related sections of the labour force. Branine and Glover suggested that under conditions of commodification, those under the age of 25 are seen as lacking in skills or commitment. As a result they are perceived as only fit for low-grade employment or further education. Those aged from 25 to 40 are seen as the most employable section of the labour force. By this point they have acquired skills and knowledge, they tend to be reasonably fit, and their generally greater personal commitments are seen as making them more compliant. Those over 40 are by contrast perceived as tending to be less fit, less compliant due to their knowledge of organizational seniors and peers, and relatively more expensive to employ. As a result, their job situation tends to become more precarious and their ability to obtain alternative

employment declines. Commodification suggests that 'the pursuit of material progress in a highly affluent, consumerist and advanced industrial society dominates employment and management' and is seen as representing a view of employees as 'a commodity that can be bought and consumed only before its so-called sell by or use by date' (Glover and Branine, 2001: 9).

The alternative scenario of greening also considers employment in age-related stages. It suggests that as affluent societies bloom and average life-spans increase, the first thirty years of individuals' lives are spent in learning and self-discovery. The next thirty years are spent in productive and usually rewarding employment. The remaining years of individuals' lives are for the most part spent on recreation, social and civic activities and on transmitting experience and culture to younger people. Greening suggests 'that technical progress has produced such affluence that it is no longer necessary for people to work as many hours per day, days per week, weeks per year, and years in their lifetimes' (Glover and Branine, 2001: 10). Branine and Glover (1997) argued that, in reality, commodification tended to be experienced by those at or near the lower end of the social scale, and greening by those at the higher end, by the highly qualified and by those with occupational pension arrangements. They asserted that increasing affluence in advanced industrial societies led to the possibility, but no certainty, that greening would be experienced by more people and commodification by less. In any case, they suggested, ideals in which young people have the resources and freedom to develop themselves prior to engaging fully with employment and older people enjoy several decades of active and productive life after disengaging from it were increasingly attainable.

2.3 Work and employment in advanced industrial societies

The discussions of employment trends in advanced industrial societies presented in this section will inform the later examination of different aspects of work and employment in call centres. It will make possible the comparison of call centre employment and other contemporary occupations. One method of analysing the sphere of work and employment is to consider it in terms of different environments that can be examined and described separately. The physical work environment includes the location of employment, the characteristics of the workplace and the nature of the tasks undertaken. Workplace demographics cover the profile of the workforce in terms of age and

gender. The psychological work environment encompasses subjective elements of the work experience as well as the psychological correlates of developments in the physical and social environments.

2.3.1 Physical work environments

When thinking about the physical work environment it is important to remember that no trend is likely to be generalisable to the full range of economic activities that take place within any society, and even within particular sectors the rate of adoption of a given change is subject to considerable variation. With that proviso, this section identifies changes to physical work environments that have had and are forecast to continue to have significant effects on working lives.

It was noted above that there had been a shift in the distribution of employment in industrial countries away from agriculture and industry and towards services, and that part of this can be attributed to technological change. One of the consequences flowing from this is a change in the nature of the remaining jobs in manufacturing. Haskel and Jukes (1995) discussed skilled and unskilled labour in UK manufacturing in the 1980s. They found that manual income and employment share fell steadily throughout the decade, and that these changes seemed to be associated with rising import penetration. They were only able to consider changes in the skills composition of the manufacturing workforce for the period from 1984 to 1989, during which they noted a slight fall in the share of the unskilled.

The Office for National Statistics (2000) compared the occupational composition by gender of employees in the UK for 1991 and 1999. Their data, reproduced in Table 2.3, shows that proportion of male employees in craft and related occupations had fallen from 21 percent to 17 percent. In the same period the percentage of male employees classified as managers or administrators rose from 16 percent to 19 percent, and in 1999 this classification was the largest occupational grouping for male employees. A rise in this classification also took place for female employees, from 8 percent to 11 percent. A 3 percent increase was noted in the number of females classified as working in personal and protective services, and a 2 percent increase in females employed in professional occupations. The number of female employees working in occupations

classified as clerical and secretarial fell from 29 percent in 1991 to 26 percent in 1999, but still represented the largest occupational grouping for female employees.

Table 2.3 United Kingdom employees by gender and occupational grouping, 1991 and 1999.

Occupational grouping	Males (percent)		Females (percent)	
	1991	1999	1991	1999
Managers and administrators	16	19	8	11
Professional	10	11	8	10
Associate professional and technical	8	9	10	11
Clerical and secretarial	8	8	29	26
Craft and related	21	17	4	2
Personal and protective services	7	8	14	17
Selling	6	6	12	12
Plant and machine operative	15	15	5	4
Other occupations	8	8	10	8
All Employees (=100%) (millions)	11.8	12.4	10.1	10.8

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2000, page 72.

Notes: Figures from Spring of each year. Males aged 16-64, females aged 16-59. Total number of employees includes some who did not state occupation. Percentages based on totals excluding this group

Hecker (1999) looked at the growth of employment in technically advanced industries in the USA achieved and forecast in the period 1986 to 2006 by examining the USA's Occupational Employment Statistics survey data from 1993, 1994 and 1995. Sectors were considered technically advanced if employment in research and development (R & D) accounted for at least 6 employees per 1000 and employment in all technology-oriented occupations (engineering, scientific and technical occupations) accounted for a minimum of 76 employees per thousand. Twenty-nine sectors satisfied these criteria, twenty-five in manufacturing and four in services. Of those, ten were identified as intensively technically advanced, having a minimum of 15 R & D employees and 190 technology-oriented employees respectively.

According to Hecker, in 1996 total technically advanced employment accounted for 16.4 million waged or salaried jobs in the US, representing 14 percent of such jobs in the US economy as a whole. Only 9.3 million employees worked in technically advanced industries as such. A further 4.9 million were employed in non- technically advanced industries to produce the goods and services purchased by technically advanced industries, and the remaining 2.2 million jobs belonged to technology-oriented employees working outside technically advanced industries or their suppliers. He found that in the period 1986-1996 total technically advanced employment had increased by 13 percent, compared to an overall increase in employment for the US as a whole of 20 percent (see Table 2.4). However, a significant factor in total technically advanced employment growth for that period was the growth in non-technically advanced employment providing goods or services to the technically advanced industries. Nonetheless technically advanced employment in general and direct technically advanced employment in particular declined as a proportion of the US labour force in the decade to 1996, casting doubt on the popular belief that technical advancement was a growing source of new job creation.

Table 2.4 Percentage changes in technically advanced employment in the United States, 1986-2006.

	Percentage employment change (calculated or forecast)	
	1986-1996	1996-2006
Total non-farm wage and salary employment	20	15
Total technically advanced employment	13	32
Employment in technically advanced industries	9	23
Employment in intensively technically advanced industries	3	33
Employment in non- technically advanced industries generated by purchases of technically advanced industries	21	54
Employment in technology-oriented occupations outside of technically advanced industries or employment generated by technically advanced industries	15	18

Source: Hecker, 1999: 20.

However, Hecker suggested that in the period 1996-2006 total technically advanced employment would indeed become a significant source of new job creation, with the forecast rate of increase in total technically advanced employment of 32 percent more than double the rate employment

increase forecast for the US economy as a whole. Again, the most significant contribution to total technically advanced employment growth is forecast to come from increases in employment in providers of goods and services to industries classified as technically advanced. Hecker has suggested that this element of total technically advanced employment may grow by 54 percent. What this breakdown of the elements of technically advanced employment helps to make clear is that growing proportions of the new jobs created in technically advanced sectors will not themselves be technology-oriented employment. If the pattern of growth forecast for the US in this type of employment is generalisable to other advanced industrialised societies, it suggests that in the near future new employment in such societies is not likely to be concentrated in technology-oriented occupations despite the growing contribution of technical advancements to overall employment figures.

In addition to changes that are taking place in terms of the increasing concentration of employment opportunities in certain occupations, authors such as Smith and Rubin (1997) have also noted a change in the job stability of various previously privileged occupational groupings, for example middle managers. Smith and Rubin (1997) suggested that the frequent displacement of employees from occupations previously considered stable has two possible explanations. In the first, it is a sign of a healthy economy sloughing off redundant people and re-employing them in new occupations. The second and more pessimistic explanation is that this new instability is indicative of an economy in which the social contract of long-term stable employment is replaced by a new set of relations characterised by what Smith and Rubin term the 'hyperexploitability' of employees.

They believed that in capitalist economies the employer-employee relationship is one of exploitation by definition, but argued that some groups had been spared the full rigour of labour markets in the past, because for example they held scarce skills and/or were protected by unionisation. They noted that in the USA after 1945 the most privileged groups tended to be white males with qualifications and relevant experience. Smith and Rubin argued that such groups 'were the most tightly and lucratively connected to the labor market', that is to say that the same factors which privileged them would also enable them to find re-employment more easily. They suggested that under conditions of hyperexploitability these previously privileged groups would lose the

protection that qualifications and experience had previously afforded them, and would be subject to the same difficulties seeking new employment as those with lower qualifications and less relevant experience.

To test which of their two explanations for employee displacement was correct Smith and Rubin analysed data from the USA's 1992 Displaced Workers Survey. They examined the speed with which displaced employees of different gender, age, race and levels of education and work experience found alternative employment. They found that the displaced employees of the survey were heterogeneous, devoid of the archetypes suggested by some displacement literature. In terms of re-employment, they found that sex, race, and age were significant variables in predicting the length of time before securing other jobs, but that level of education and previous employment status were not. Women with young children experienced particular difficulties in finding new jobs. Looking at the position of previously privileged groups in labour markets, they concluded that they were no longer either more immune to displacement or faster to find re-employment when displaced. They suggested that such findings directly challenged notions of economic renewal and pointed to a situation in which most employees were subject to the risks and the consequences of displacement. Equally importantly, Smith and Rubin suggested that shifts in the value accorded to qualifications and experience in the sphere of employment would have important repercussions at an individual level: '[H]uman capital, as many feared, clearly is no longer a guarantee of either employment security or reemployment potential. If that is the case, then much of how people understand their life-course is based on an anachronism' (1997: 307).

Another aspect of working life that is in transition is the physical location of workplaces. A movement away from agricultural employment during the so-called industrial revolution shifted the location of employment and domicile from rural to urban environments, with attendant social consequences. More recently, shifts in the distribution of employment towards types of occupation which centre on the use and manipulation of information rather than the production of physical artefacts, coupled with the advent of technically advanced communications infrastructures, are enabling further relocations of employment.

Teleworking, also variously called telecommuting or home-working, represents one such relocation. Teleworking was defined by the European Commission (1994) as constituting three main elements; workplaces that are partly or fully independent from the locations of employers, contractors or clients, the use of information and communications technologies, and communication links to the employing organisations. This definition, subsequently adopted by Korte and Wynne (1996), Baruch (2000) and others, is flexible enough to encompass home-based, mobile and telework centre-based employees. It does however remove from consideration those home-workers identified by Hakim (1987) and more recently by Boris and Prugl (1996) whose employment amounts to 'old-fashioned sweatshop manufacturing' rather than a technically advanced occupation.

Predictions of the potential for teleworking in the UK far exceed the estimates of its current usage. An early suggestion was that more than half of all office work could be done from home (Olson and Primps, 1984). A few years later Steinle (1988) argued that some two thirds of all jobs might eventually be done by teleworking. Rothwell (1989) believed that by 1995 some 50% of all employees and 43% of all self-employed people might work from home. The National Economic Development Office (1986) was rather more conservative, predicting that some 10-15% of the UK workforce would be working from home by 1995, but even this seems to be far in excess of recent estimates of the uptake of teleworking in Britain. According to Brewster, Hegewisch and Mayne (1994), less than 1% of employers in the European Community had introduced teleworking. In the UK, Bertin and Denbigh (1998) suggested that the proportion of employees engaged in teleworking stood at 4 percent based on the 1997 British Labour Force survey, although Baruch (2000) asserted without offering empirical evidence that the practice of teleworking 'is spreading steadily'. There seems to be a belief (Baruch, 2000; Lupton and Haynes, 2000) that the previous estimates of the potential were not necessarily wrong, but that the large-scale adoption of teleworking practices has not taken place for a variety of reasons.

Lupton and Haynes saw employers' tendencies to regard teleworking as an all-or-nothing strategy, individual managers' tendencies to evaluate teleworking on the basis of its personal suitability rather than on an objective basis for individual employees, and a 'perception-reality gap' in relation to the advantages of teleworking as playing major parts in the lack of its more widespread

formal adoption. Baruch expanded on the model of Baruch and Nicholson (1997) in which the incidence of teleworking is seen as dependent on certain characteristics of the job, the organisation, the home/work interface, and the individual being simultaneously favourable, and argued that its slower than predicted spread was due to the need to have a favourable alignment of the four elements if teleworking is to be effective. What most commentators agree on is that, rate of growth aside, the incidence of formal teleworking arrangements is likely to increase in the future. There is, however, considerable divergence of academic opinion about the possible effects of teleworking on individual employees, employers and society as a whole. The potential effects of teleworking identified thus far in the literature are summarised in Table 2.5 .

Table 2.5 Potential negative and positive effects of teleworking.

	Potential positive effects	Potential negative effects
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved performance and better productivity - Less time spent on commuting - Satisfaction of need for autonomy - Less work related stress - More time with the family - Provides opportunity to join labour market where none existed previously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less opportunity for affiliation - Detachment from social interactions - More home related stress - Less influence over people and events in the workplace - Questionable job security - Fewer career development options
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher productivity - Wider labour market to draw on - Space saved - Lower overhead costs - Less absenteeism - Image of a flexible workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties in controlling and motivating home-workers - Less committed employees - Loss of team-working benefits
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less commuting, less pollution, congestion, accidents - Wider access to labour market - less discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The creation of an autistic society (i.e. individuals atomised and isolated from social institutions)

Source: Baruch, 2000, page 38.

At the same time that growing numbers of employees are experiencing part or all of their time outside of their employers' workplaces, the physical layout of workplaces is also undergoing a metamorphosis. Duffy (2000) argued that 'the revolution that shaped early twentieth century business life also shaped office buildings, office interiors and, indeed, modern cities'. He argued

that the design conventions which evolved at that time and which have held sway in the production of new business premises reflected the values and limitations of that period. For example, the convention that a fixed desk space was required for each employee was underpinned by a belief that people can only be supervised effectively if they are physically present. The convention of differential allocation of space for different job titles reflected beliefs about the need to indicate individual status and remind the organisation's members of the hierarchical structure.

Duffy (2000) may be mistaken in his contention that 'No one today would dream of running a business along the lines of Taylor's "scientific management"', but the determined pursuit of competitive advantage together with a growing recognition of its many possible sources, including that of the 'human resource', has caused many employers to re-assess the ways in which space is used. This re-assessment has given rise to a variety of new ways of using traditional workspaces, including practices such as so-called hot desking and hotelling. It has also prompted the incorporation of new areas in workplaces such as 'commons' and 'breakout areas', and the use of colour, texture, lighting and innovative furniture design in the creation of spaces for specific activities. Table 2.6 gives the meanings of some of the terms used to describe the different uses of space at work.

Table 2.6 Explanations of selected new ways of using the work-space

Cottaging	The practice of telecommuters gathering at local work centres for interaction and access to technology
Hot desking	A system of allocating a desk or workstation to more than one employee for use on a time-share basis
Hotelling	The practice of having no designated usage plan but instead allocating workstations to employees on a reservation basis as required

In suggesting that 'Cottaging, hot desking and hotelling using the technology of the 1990s can free up office space, benefit the environment and provide the flexibility demanded by workers' Stocks (1998) alluded to some of the possible benefits of reorganising the use of office space to complement new working practices such as telecommuting and there is evidence to suggest that

such initiatives are being jointly adopted. Lupton and Haynes (2000) noted that 73% of the organisations with formal telecommuting schemes that had responded to their survey had also adopted hot desking and hotelling practices. As well as increasingly losing the sense of personal ownership of their immediate surroundings, employees in many occupations are also being faced with unfamiliar terrain within the working environment in the form of breakout areas, in which smaller groups can discuss announcements, problems, projects and so on; quiet spaces, used for individual meditation away from noisy work environments; commons, where people may meet and socialise briefly during working hours, and so on. These reflect variously the current importance attached by managers to employee interaction as a way of stimulating innovative thinking, and the desire of managers to find ways to alleviate workplace stress and its negative effects on both employees and employers.

Changes to the location and layout of physical work environments are being accompanied by changes in the size and structure of employing organisations. In recent times the employer profile in advanced industrial societies has been changing. In the EU many jobs shed from larger employers have been replaced by employment in small and medium sized enterprises, with employment in firms of less than 100 employees growing at a rate of 250,000 per annum (Dearden, 1998). Lawler (1997) tried to provide an explanation of the trend toward smaller organisations, identifying two main influences. He pointed first to the increasingly competitive and unstable nature of most business environments, and second to the way in which these market changes had negated the advantages which greater organisational size had previously endowed. Those same environmental and competitive pressures have been the drivers for some of the changes which have taken place in terms of the physical parameters of employment in industrial societies, and it is to these that this section now turns.

Hewitt (1993) suggested that in the past the British employment model, based on the lives of a predominantly male workforce, could have been summed up by the phrase '48 hours for 48 weeks for 48 years'. That is to say that full-time, permanent employment would have begun following the end of full-time education and would have continued until retirement. Hewitt noted how social security, employment law and pension arrangements had both acknowledged and entrenched this model of working life. For a number of reasons this model, which was arguably never

generalisable to the British workforce as a whole, does not reflect current working lives. The first relates to the length of the working week. In many industrial countries the trend has been towards shorter working weeks as evidenced by a decrease in the annual number of hours worked. Table 2.7 shows that in the period from 1980 to the mid 1990s annual hours worked decreased in Japan, the UK, Ireland, Canada and Korea, only increasing in the USA.

Table 2.7 Annual hours worked per person across selected countries

	1980	1997 unless otherwise stated
USA	1,883	1,966
Japan	2,121	1,889 (1995)
Norway		1,399
Sweden		1,522
UK	1,775	1,731
Ireland	1,728	1,656 (1996)
Switzerland		1,643
Denmark		1,689 (1994, males)
Netherlands		1,679 (1994, males)
Australia		1,867 (1996)
New Zealand		1,838 (1996)
Canada	1,764	1,732 (1996)
Republic of Korea	2,689	2,467 (1996)

Source: International Labour Organisation, 1999

It should also be noted that the working week is not standard for all employees but varies with the type of occupation and, significantly, with gender. As Table 2.8 illustrates, the difference in the average length of the working week for men and women in full-time employment varies from country to country but the working week is invariably shorter for women. That having been said, the general trend towards shorter working weeks may mask the fact that many employees find themselves working longer days. For example, Heiler (1998) found evidence of a recent trend towards longer working days in Australia, with the longer working day being manifested in two forms; a traditional 12-hour shift and a 12-hour plus 'span'.

Table 2.8 Comparison of the average hours usually worked per week by full-time employees across selected European countries by gender, 1998.

	Hours	
	Males	Females
United Kingdom	45.7	40.7
Portugal	42.1	39.6
Greece	41.7	39.3
Spain	41.2	39.6
Germany	40.4	39.3
Luxembourg	40.3	37.4
France	40.3	38.7
Austria	40.2	39.8
Sweden	40.2	40.0
Finland	40.1	38.2
Italy	39.7	36.3
Denmark	39.3	37.7
Netherlands	39.2	38.5
Belgium	39.1	37.5
EU Average	41.3	39.0

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2000: 74

Note: Hours worked excludes meal breaks but includes regularly worked paid and unpaid overtime. EU average calculated using 1997 data for Eire

The use of longer shifts and shorter working weeks (sometimes called ‘compressed work weeks’) is not particularly new. Hung (1996) noted references to compressed work week arrangements in trade journals as early as 1963 and sustained academic interest in the subject, mainly in the form of published case-studies or survey results, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The emergence of 12-hour plus spans would however seem to mark a more recent departure from so-called traditional working time arrangements. Using data from a variety of sources Heiler tried to characterise the workplaces and industries in which each of these forms was likely to be most prevalent. A summary of characteristics is presented in Table 2.9. Heiler was particularly concerned with the increasing imposition of a ‘managerial model of working time’ on non-management employees that had accompanied the shift towards a longer working day. She explained that while ‘long hours have traditionally been worked by managerial and self-employed persons, a more recent phenomenon is the increasing level of unpaid over-time worked by wage and salary earners’ (1998: 270).

Table 2.9 Emerging forms of longer workday in Australia

12-hour "shifts" more likely to be:	12+ hour "spans" more likely to be:
Part of a structured roster design; for example fixed, rotating shifts, day/night shift	Part of "flexible, open-ended working arrangements; irregular extension of the length of working days
Introduced ostensibly to reduce costs of roster changes; reduction of overtime; move from eight-hour shifts	Introduced to cope with often short term or "seasonal" fluctuations in demand or delivery; reduction of penalties for overtime; irregular hours
Typically initiated by management, although sometimes initiated by union, employees	Typically initiated by management, although sometimes by employees in the hope of increased flexibility
Primarily at workplaces with continuous 24 hour per day operation and high capital intensity. For example mining, all manufacturing, oil, electricity, gas, water	Primarily at workplaces under pressure to lengthen the working day, for example service sector industries such as agriculture, finance, personal, hospitality, but also appearing in mining and some manufacturing
"Compressed" working hours rather than extended working hours; overtime paid	Extended or averaged hours rather than compressed; overtime unpaid
Wage-rate, paid overtime or overtime allowances absorbed into base rate	Salaried model; annualised salary or unpaid overtime
Some predictability and regularity	Less predictability and regularity
Potential for OHS planning, assessment, evaluation, monitoring	Less likely to be planned, monitored, evaluated
More likely to be unionised and have active unions	Union density likely to be lower
Male dominated industries and occupations	Males and females in the industries
Formalised bargaining arrangements, certified agreements or awards	Formalised bargaining and informal, verbal agreements

Source: Heiler, 1998: 272.

She saw no single factor as being responsible for this phenomenon, but attributed it to an aggregation of interrelated trends. Most of these trends are detectable in advanced industrialised economies. She argued for example, that globalisation exerted pressure on employers to reduce costs and increase productive efficiency and led to pressure to extend operating hours and increase the duration and intensity of the working day. A 'cascading effect' could be observed as deregulation of trading, operating and retail hours placed pressure on the operating hours of other services and on the support infrastructure and ancillary services. Actual and perceived job insecurity increased the ability of management to secure changes to working arrangements.

Accommodating regulatory regimes that see deregulation and the unhindered action of market forces as the best way to achieve economic objectives became more prevalent.

Heiler found evidence that the emergence of 12-hour working days had been accompanied by other changes to working time arrangements. For example, she noted an increasing incidence of provisions within negotiated agreements allowing for the 'averaging' of hours over extended periods, with periods of more than a month common in services. In addition there had been an increase in provisions designed to re-designate time within the emerging longer daily 'span' as normal working hours and therefore not subject to premium payments or allowances, and similarly to change the designation of Saturday and Sunday to that of 'ordinary' working days for the same purpose. She believed that a clear link existed between the degree to which the negotiation of remuneration was decentralised and individualised and the probability of having to work unpaid overtime. She wrote that it was 'significant to note ... that as an employee moves towards an individual, salaried model of remuneration, as with managers and professionals, and the nexus between hours worked and hourly rates of pay becomes weakened and open-ended, the more likely additional hours are to be worked and the less likely they are to be paid' (1998: 270).

Heiler drew tentative conclusions as to the result of the changes to working arrangements which she found to be emerging, and thus she argued that although 'the outcomes have not been explored in detail, they are likely to include increased diversity in working time outcomes, with some workers experiencing increased time sovereignty and others experiencing a decrease in autonomy and increased levels of work intensification. The likely results are increased fatigue and stress, further encroachment of work into a worker's family and social life and the further erosion of working time standards in this country' (1998: 279). Given that many of the factors which Heiler identified as contributing to the emergence of longer working spans and subsequent changes to working arrangements were common to advanced industrial societies in general, it seems likely that in the future employment in such societies would tend towards the divided model suggested by Heiler, with decreasing autonomy and increasing work intensification likely to be a feature of the work environment for many employees.

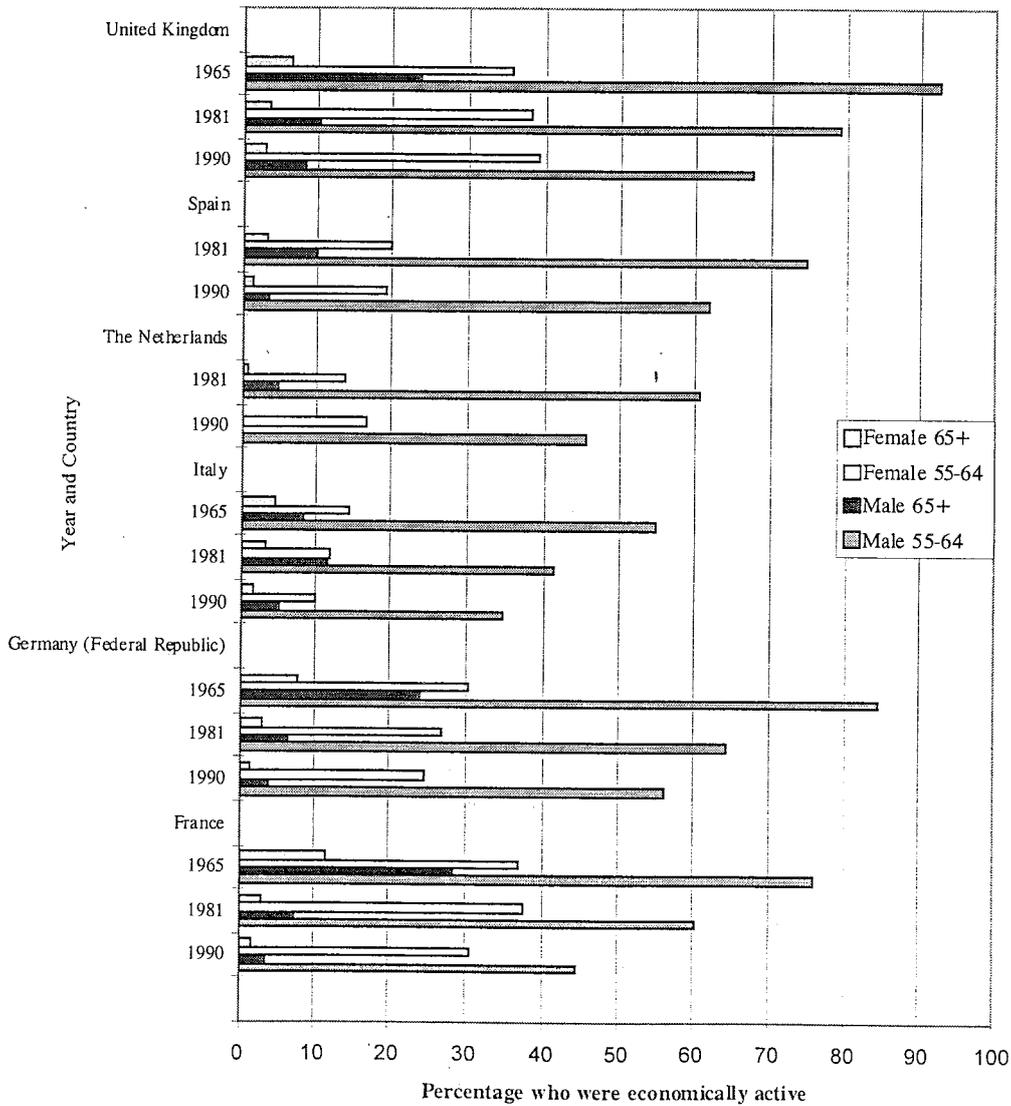
The third factor in Hewitt's (1993) formula for the British employment model, the number of years in employment, has also been declining in other industrial countries. The average age at which new entrants join the labour market has increased as people stay in education longer. Breaks in employment for further education or re-training are becoming more common. The average age of people ceasing continuous full time employment, whether voluntarily or through redundancy, has fallen. Figure 2.4 below illustrates the economic activity rates for over fifty-fives across a selection of industrial nations. In all cases the rates of economic activity can be seen to have fallen in the years to 1990. It may be that in the future this trend will be reversed due to the demographic changes leading to the 'ageing' of populations in advanced industrialised societies, and norms with regard to labour force participation shift to accommodate the increased demand on state pension funds and social welfare. There is early evidence that this may be the case. Glover and Branine (2001: 369) noted that 'in the USA, the average age at which people retire has begun to rise'.

The assumed pattern of full time permanent employment implicit in Hewitt's model of '48 hours for 48 weeks for 48 years' was challenged in the 1980s by the assertion (Atkinson, 1984) that a new form of organisation, the 'flexible firm', was emerging in response to an accelerating rate of change in the competitive environment. According to Atkinson's model the flexible firm would feature a planned division of its workforce into two distinct groups. The first would consist of a 'core' of full-time employees enjoying 'standard' terms of employment, holding relatively secure, interesting and well-paid jobs. This would be complemented by a 'periphery' composed of workers employed on less favourable terms in a variety of 'non standard' forms of employment such as part-time, temporary or fixed term contracts.

The core-periphery model suggested that attempts were being made by employers to achieve greater organisational flexibility on three main axes (Morley, Gunnigle and Haraty, 1995). The use of non-standard forms of employment would provide numerical flexibility by allowing the employing organisation to expand or contract its workforce as the competitive environment dictated. The multitude of employment forms would facilitate the introduction of performance related pay and would provide employing organisations with the financial flexibility to offer pay rates in response to labour and product market conditions. Finally, core employees would be expected to be multi-skilled, providing a degree of functional flexibility. Heralded with

considerable enthusiasm at the time of its initial exposition, Atkinson's flexible firm model was more prescriptive than descriptive. There was indeed evidence of the growing use of non-standard forms of employment but Atkinson himself was forced to admit that although 'the observed changes were widespread, they did not cut very deeply in most firms, and therefore the outcome was more likely to be marginal, ad-hoc and tentative, rather than a purposeful thrust to achieve flexibility' (Atkinson and Meager, 1986).

Figure 2.4 Economic activity rates by age group. Source: Mallier and Shafto, 1994: 42.



It is clear that the use of non-standard forms of employment has continued to expand. Skinner (1999: 425) suggested that in relation to much of Europe 'Flexible or non-standard working patterns i.e. those which are not Monday to Friday, nine-to-five, have become a significant element of the reality of employment in many organisations in the 1990s'. However, what is not clear is that this expansion is part of any strategic attempt by employers to create a core-periphery workforce for the reasons identified by Atkinson (1984). Green, Krahn and Sung (1993) examining non-standard working in Canada and the UK detected evidence of the growing use of non-standard workers in both countries, but not that this was a result of strategic decisions to increase flexibility. Skinner (1999) in an examination of the UK Civil Service noted that between 1984 and 1993 the number of part-time workers in the Civil Service tripled from 16,000 to 48,000, but pointed out that 'most of these employees could not be described as "peripheral" in Atkinson's terms (1984). They are permanent, established and experienced employees who cannot easily be shed to provide numerical flexibility' (1999: 426).

Table 2.10 Incidence of selected labour forms as a percentage of total employment across all industries, Spring 1994 LFS

Form of labour	Percentage of total employment taking this form
Full-time, permanent, fixed weekly hours	28.3
Full-time, permanent, variable weekly hours	42.9
Full-time temporary, fixed weekly hours	1.4
Full-time temporary, variable weekly hours	2.0
Part-time, permanent, fixed weekly hours	12.9
Part-time, permanent, variable weekly hours	9.4
Part-time, temporary, fixed weekly hours	1.3
Part-time, temporary, variable weekly hours	1.9

Source: Casey, Metcalf and Millward, 1997: 15.

Casey, Metcalf and Millward (1997) looked at the incidence of a number of flexible employment forms across twenty-eight different industrial groups as revealed by the results of the Spring 1994 Labour Force Survey (LFS). The picture presented by their analysis and summarised in Table 2.10

above was of a workforce whose employment predominantly involved some degree of 'flexibility', with 'conventional' employees (full-time, permanent workers on fixed weekly hours) forming a minority of only 28%. The largest proportion of workers (43%) were in full-time permanent employment with variable weekly hours, with the variation generally accounted for by either overtime (paid or unpaid) or flexible basic hours of work. The Spring 1994 LFS data did not allow Casey *et al* to determine how many workers in this group had flexible basic working hours but an examination of responses to a question on patterns of working hours added to the LFS at a later date suggested that overtime provided the variation in hours in about 70% of cases. Significant numbers of workers were in permanent part-time work, either with fixed (13%) or variable (9%) weekly hours.

Table 2.11 United Kingdom employees with flexible working patterns by gender as at Spring 1999

	Percentages		
	Males	Females	All employees
Full-time Employees			
Flexible working hours	8.4	13.3	10.2
Annualised working hours	2.9	3.0	2.9
Four and a half day week	2.5	1.9	2.3
Term-time working	1.0	4.6	2.3
Nine day fortnight	0.4	0.2	0.3
Any flexible working pattern	15.5	23.5	18.3
Part-time employees			
Flexible working hours	5.9	8.1	7.7
Annualised working hours	1.4	2.3	2.1
Term-time working	4.8	10.1	9.2
Job sharing		2.7	2.3
Any flexible working pattern	15.1	24.2	22.6

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2000: 74.

Note: Percentages based on totals that exclude people who did not state whether or not they had flexible working arrangements. 'Any flexible working pattern' includes all types not separately identified.

Whilst not directly comparable with Casey *et al*, figures from the Office for National Statistics (2000) give an indication of the prevalence of flexible working patterns amongst employees, that is to say those people aged 16 and over who during collection of Labour Force Survey data regarded

themselves as paid employees in Spring 1999. A breakdown of the incidence of different types of flexible working pattern reported is given in Table 2.11 above. At that time employees, both full- and part-time, numbered 23.3 million, equivalent to 88% of the total labour force. 18.3 percent of all full time employees had some sort of flexible working pattern, although this figure was higher for female full-time employees (23.5 percent) than for male employees (15.5 percent). The percentage of part-time employees with some sort of flexible working pattern also showed considerable variation with gender. Overall, the figure for part-time employees was 22.6 percent, but this varied from 15.1 percent for male part-time employees to 24.2 percent for female part-time employees.

2.3.2 Workplace demographics

This section explores changes in the labour force participation rates of various groups and considers the nature of the participation of employees of different ages and genders. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2000) looked at actual and predicted changes in UK labour force numbers for different age groups from 1971 to 2011. The breakdown of the labour force into age groups makes visible trends that might otherwise be masked. The ONS deemed the labour force to be composed of two elements: those in employment, and those who are unemployed according to the International Labour Organisation definition of unemployment. Figures 2.5 and 2.6 show the demographic profiles of the male and female components of the UK labour force for the years 1971 to 2011.

Figure 2.6 helps to highlight the increase in labour force numbers for the female 25 to 44 age group, which grew from 3.5 million in 1971 to 6.4 million in 1997. Less spectacular but still significant is the rise in the female 45 to 54 age category in the same period, from 2.1 million to 2.9 million, with a predicted increase to 3.6 million by 2011. The ONS suggested that the 'increase in the female labour force during the twentieth century has come mainly from a strong rise in the participation rates of married women' and that a 'major change took place during and immediately following the Second World War' (2000: 68). Changes since 1971 can be seen to be a continuation of that earlier trend. From 1971 to 1999 the proportion of women in the UK who were part of the labour force rose from 56 percent to 72 percent. In the same period the proportion of UK males

who were economically active dropped from 91 percent to 84 percent. The trend of increasing female labour force participation has been repeated across many industrial countries. Fullerton (1999) noted that US labour force participation by women aged 16 and over was 33.9 percent in 1950, rising to 59.8 percent in 1998. In the group aged from 25 to 34 the participation rates were 34.0 percent in 1950 and 76.3 percent in 1998, with increases of a similar order in participation rates in the 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 age groups over the same period.

Figure 2.5 Breakdown by age category of UK male labour force from 1971 to 2011. Data source: ONS, 2000

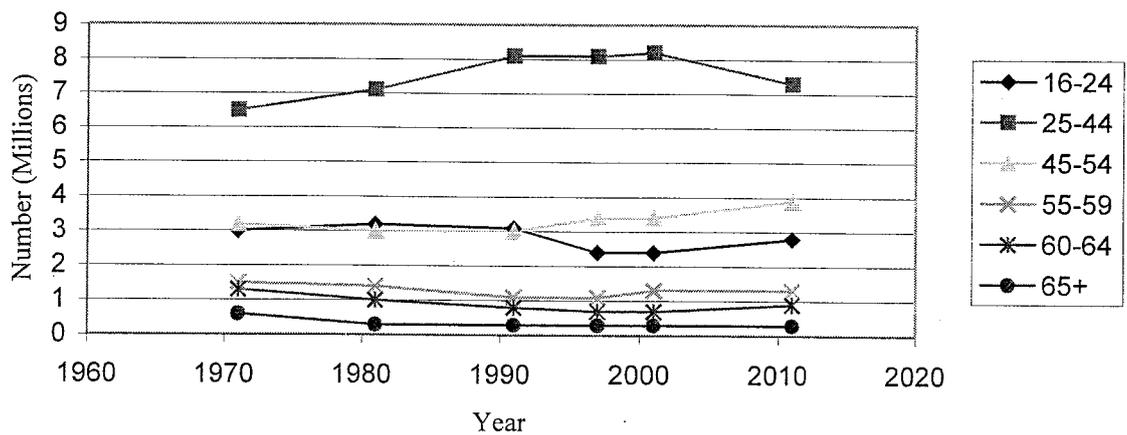
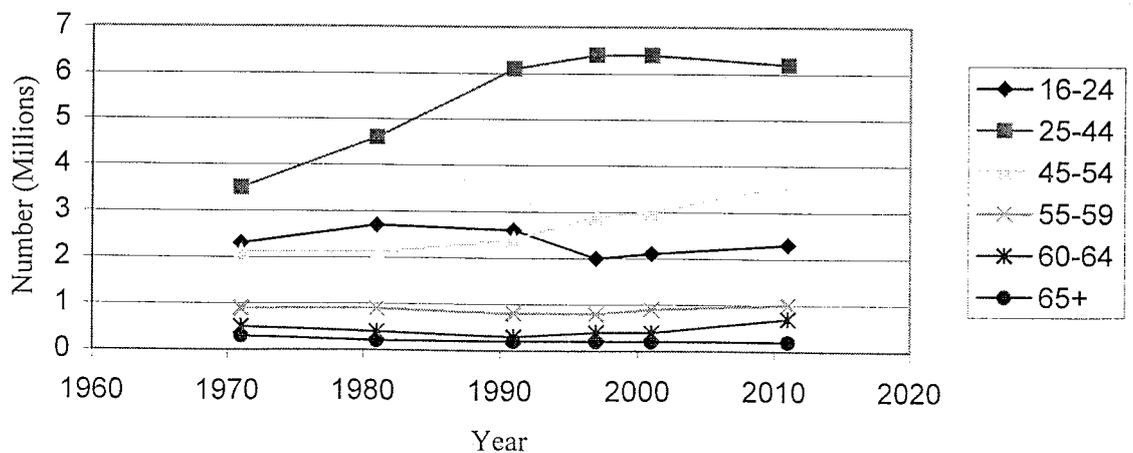


Figure 2.6 Breakdown by age category of UK female labour force from 1971 to 2011. Data source: ONS, 2000



A second trend that is suggested by Figures 2.5 and 2.6 relates to decreasing numbers of labour force participants, both male and female, in the group aged between 16 and 24 from 1971 to 2001.

The ONS explained the drop as partly due to lower absolute numbers in this age group as a result of lower birth rates in the late 1970s, and partly due to more young people choosing to stay in full-time education rather than enter the labour markets. Butcher and Hutchinson (1996) provided support for the latter explanation in an examination of UK labour market inactivity. Based on evidence from Labour Force Surveys of 1984 and 1992, they predicted rates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity for individuals of varying personal characteristics at each date. They suggested that the probability of economic inactivity had increased between 1984 and 1992 both for males and females in the 16 to 18 age groups, whilst the probability of unemployment had fallen. The predicted rates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity calculated by Butcher and Hutchinson are reproduced in Table 2.12. Butcher and Hutchinson concluded that youth 'is associated with high non-employment' and that 'the growth of further education is shown by the increase between 1984 and 1992 in inactivity for those aged 16 to 18, coinciding with the declines in their unemployment' (1996: 68).

Table 2.12 Predicted rates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity for males and females aged 16-18 in 1984 and 1992.

Year	Males aged 16 to 18			Females aged 16 to 18		
	Employed	Unemployed	Economically Inactive	Employed	Unemployed	Economically Inactive
1984	66.63	15.40	17.96	38.64	14.80	46.56
1992	60.22	7.78	32.00	39.17	6.22	54.61

Source: Butcher and Hutchinson, 1996: 69-70.

Evidence is also available from many industrial countries that patterns of increasing economic inactivity at youth were being mirrored by those of increasing withdrawal from the labour markets of older workers. Mallier and Shafto (1994) found that for many European countries labour force participation up to 1990 had fallen for both males and females in the 55 to 64 and over 65 age categories. Their findings are illustrated in Figure 2.4, shown earlier. It is however possible that after 1990 this trend may have been reversed. Visco (1999) quoted figures produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of the employment rates of older workers that suggested that in some industrial countries the proportion of 55 to 64 year olds in employment in 1998 had risen from its 1990 figure. Of the 24 countries for which comparative

figures were available, 10 had seen increases in the proportion of this age group in employment. Most increases were slight, but for the Netherlands the proportion of 55 to 64 year olds in employment rose from 22.4 percent in 1990 to 33.3 percent in 1998, and for New Zealand it increased from 41.8 percent to 55.7 percent.

Despite the OECD statistics quoted by Visco (1999) it is not possible to be sure that the trend noted by Mallier and Shafto (1994) has in fact been reversed. This is because the statistics used by each relate to different groups. Visco's figures relate solely to 55-64 year olds actually in employment on a given date. Mallier and Shafto's calculations are concerned with those who are economically active, including those who are not employed at that date but who are actively seeking and are available for employment.

One of the trends noted earlier in relation to the physical work environment was the increasing incidence of non-standard patterns of employment. There is evidence to suggest that some age groups are more susceptible to this trend than others. Felstead, Krahn and Powell (1999) used data from the UK Labour Force Survey to show that in the period from 1989 to 1994 the overall proportion of the labour force engaged on non-standard employment patterns increased. The size of this increase depended on the definition of non-standard employment used, but using a definition that included only part-time (less than 30 hours per week) or temporary employment they found that the proportion had increased from 23 percent in 1989 to 27 percent in 1994. They proceeded to analyse the data by gender and age group. They found that the most significant increases in non-standard employment patterns as previously defined were in the 15 to 24 and 55 to 64 age groups respectively.

In the group aged 15 to 24, the percentage of males engaged in non-standard employment had increased from 19 to 29 percent between 1989 and 1994. In the same period the percentage of females similarly employed rose from 29 to 40 percent. Felstead *et al* found that the greater part of this increase was accounted for by higher numbers working part-time rather than by increases in temporary employment. They suggested that a possible explanation was that increasing numbers of students were taking up part-time employment to supplement their incomes as grant funding diminished. In the age 55 to 64 category, the proportion of women in non-standard employment

increased only slightly, from 58 to 59 percent between 1989 and 1994. The number of men in part-time or temporary positions in the same period increased from 7 to 12 percent. For females the increase was accounted for solely by an increase in the proportion of employees engaged in part-time work. For males, the increase in non-standard employment came as a result of increases in both the proportion engaged in part-time work (from 6 to 9 percent) and the proportion in temporary appointments (from 3 to 5 percent). Felstead *et al* suggested a number of possible reasons for increased non-standard employment in this age group. Increases might be accounted for by changing attitudes amongst older employees to part-time work. Additionally, it might be that following displacement this was the only type of employment available to some older workers. It was also possible that increases could be a result of part-time positions being taken up by those who had taken or been forced into early retirement from full-time employment.

Although the increases were more marked for the 15 to 24 and 55 to 64 age groups, Felstead *et al* found that for males, both part-time and temporary employment had increased in every age group. For females, the proportion engaged in temporary work had remained fairly constant in each age group, but there had been changes in the proportions employed part time. The percentages had dropped slightly in the 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 age groups (from 50 to 49 percent and from 48 to 45 percent respectively) but had increased significantly in the age 25 to 34 group, from 28 to 38 percent. The authors did not comment on this point. They also reported that the numbers of persons who had involuntarily taken non-standard employment had risen between 1989 and 1994. In 1989 20 percent of males and 6 percent of females had given inability to find a full-time job as a reason for part-time employment. By 1994 these figures had risen to 32 percent of males and 11 percent of females. The proportion of males reporting that they were in temporary positions because they were unable to find permanent ones was both high and rising, from 37 percent in 1989 to 51 percent in 1994. The authors gave no equivalent figures for females in temporary employment.

Felstead *et al* concluded that women and those sections of the labour force 'at one end or other of the working age spectrum' were most likely to be employed in non-standard working arrangements. They also noted that certain sectors were more reliant on non-standard labour than others, and that those tended to be the ones 'in which women have made fewer inroads into the

higher reaches of (sic) the occupational hierarchy' (1999: 292). Additionally, they pointed out the increasingly involuntary nature of this type of employment in those age groups where its increase has been greatest.

2.3.3 Psychological work environments

In this section the nature of employment in advanced societies is considered from a psychological perspective. A number of approaches which have been taken in identifying influences on employees' subjective well-being at work are discussed. Within each approach the potential effects on the subjective work experiences of employees of the workplace trends identified earlier in this chapter are considered. An assessment is then made of relationships between subjective experiences of work and employee attitudes and behaviour and employment relationships.

It is necessary to acknowledge the inseparability of individual job-specific well-being and wider, employment context-free, well-being. Warr (1996) asserted that individual feelings about employment were necessarily components of subjective satisfaction with life in general. Tait, Padgett and Baldwin (1989) have found an average correlation coefficient between overall job satisfaction and overall life satisfaction of approximately +0.35. Research has also demonstrated the existence of 'spillover' effects, with the subjective experience of work influencing non-work interaction (Piotrkowski, 1989) and with family experiences influencing feelings about work (Crouter, 1984). The main focus of the rest of this chapter is on the ways in which the subjective experience of work can be affected by changes in employment and work, with less emphasis on external, non-work, influences on psychological well-being.

Gallie, White, Cheng and Tomlinson (1998) argued that there are four theoretical approaches to the understanding of subjective well-being in work, although they acknowledge variation within the literature relating to each. According to Gallie *et al* the 'first underlines the importance of the work task, in particular the extent to which it avoids fragmented, repetitive work and provides employees with scope to use their initiative. The second locates the key to worker satisfaction in the social supportiveness of the work environment, embracing both relations between colleagues and between individuals and their superiors. The third has been concerned with the implications of

the degree of participation in work, the extent to which employees were involved in the decisions that affect their everyday working lives' (1998: 16). To this they add a fourth approach that focuses on the implications of job insecurity.

2.3.3.1 Tasks and the subjective experience of work

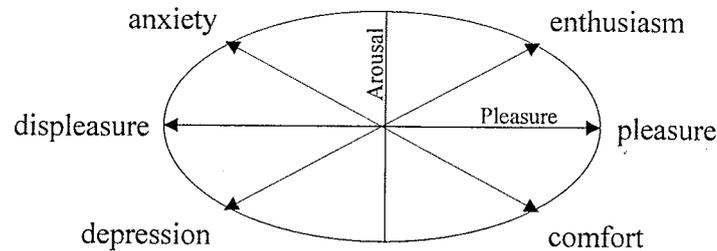
The first approach distinguished by Gallie *et al* focuses on the nature of tasks in the identification of influences on the subjective experience of work. This approach is generally informed by the Marxian belief that work is an important and vital way for people to fulfil their basic needs, and to develop their individuality and their humanity. According to the Marxist tradition the act of work, the labour process, holds out to individuals the possibility of realising their full potential as human beings, of making them spiritually and otherwise complete.

Degrading the labour process by fundamentally altering the nature of the work task has, according to Marx, the direst of consequences: "[the worker] does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.... [Work] is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague" (Marx, 1969: 99-100). Without embracing all of the ideas of Marx, theorists adopting this approach have accepted that changes in the nature of tasks are interdependent with employees' involvement in their work and opportunities for self-development. An effort has therefore been made by researchers adopting this approach to identify specific job characteristics that are likely to have effects on subjective well-being at work.

For example, Warr (1996) suggested that well-being might be measured along three main axes, as illustrated in Figure 2.7. The first axis was overall pleasure, measured in terms of satisfaction or happiness. The other two axes related pleasure to mental arousal to describe various emotional states. The second axis concerned anxiety and comfort, and ran from anxiety (low pleasure, high mental arousal) at one extreme to comfort (high pleasure, low mental arousal) at the other. The third axis concerned enthusiasm (high pleasure, high mental arousal) and depression or sadness

(low pleasure, low mental arousal). Using this model, a person's job-specific well-being is characterised by their position on each of the three intercorrelated axes.

Figure 2.7 Three axes for the measurement of well being



Source: Warr, 1996: 226.

Warr identified nine main groups of job characteristics that had been found to influence subjective job satisfaction. These are detailed in Table 2.13 below. He suggested that 'some job characteristics are more predictive of one form of well-being than others' (1996: 231) and cited the examples of high levels of job demands and very low levels of opportunity for personal control. The former were more strongly associated with low well-being on the anxiety axis than with low well-being on the depression axis, whereas for the latter the reverse was true.

The impetus for research in this area has frequently come from the idea that it should be possible to 'design' or 'redesign' jobs so as to help maximise the quality of working life for employees across a wide spectrum of workplaces. Research has shown that some job characteristics influence the subjective experience of work more strongly than others. The extent to which changes to the physical work environment will affect the psychological one depends on how they affect those job characteristics. In the previous section a number of employment-related trends were identified, some of which might be expected to affect work task characteristics directly, in particular technical developments. The increasing use of information technology is clearly a trend within the majority of workplaces. What is less clear is the effect that this trend will have on job characteristics that influence psychological well-being in work. Theoretical opinion on the effects of automation on general job characteristics is divided into two broad approaches, generally referred to as the 'upskilling' and 'deskilling' theses respectively.

Table 2.13 Main groups of job features that may affect job-related well-being.

Principal group label	Other terms commonly used in the literature
Opportunity for personal control	Employee discretion; decision latitude; autonomy; absence of close supervision; self-determination; participation in decision-making.
Opportunity for skill use	Skill utilisation; utilisation of valued abilities; required skills.
Externally generated goals	Job demands; task demands; quantitative or qualitative workload; attentional demand; demands relative to resources; role responsibility; conflicting demands; role conflict; normative requirements.
Variety	Variation in job content and location; non-repetitive work; skill variety.
Environmental clarity	(a) Information about the consequences of behaviour; task feedback; (b) information about the future; absence of job future ambiguity; absence of job insecurity; (c) information about required behaviour; low role ambiguity.
Availability of money	Income level; pay; financial resources.
Physical security	Absence of danger; good working conditions; ergonomically adequate equipment; safe levels of temperature and noise.
Opportunity for interpersonal contact	(a) Quantity of interaction; contact with others; social density; adequate privacy; (b) quality of interaction; good relationships with others; social support; good communication.
Valued social position	(a) Wider evaluations of status in society; social rank; occupational prestige; (b) more localised evaluations of in-company status or job importance; (c) personal evaluations of task significance; valued role incumbency; meaningfulness of job; self respect from job.

Source: Warr, 1996: 229.

The 'upskilling' thesis, supported by such authors Blauner (1964), and Wedderburn and Crompton (1972) argued that automating technologies would reverse the trends brought about by previous mechanisation of manual work towards increased task fragmentation and repetition. By removing the requirement to manually operate machinery, computer automation would provide an

opportunity for employers to train people to be multi-skilled, able to perform a number of different tasks or operations. Physical working conditions would be improved as a result of automation; multi-skilling would provide greater task variety and intrinsic work interest; hard manual labour would be replaced by a new hybrid that enabled workers to develop conceptual as well as manual skills. The value of the new multi-skilled worker would be increased and employers would act to protect their training investments, with the multi-skilled employee benefitting from increased job security and better employment terms as a result.

The deskilling thesis, by contrast, contained a far bleaker vision of a computer-enabled future. Proponents of this perspective such as Braverman (1974), and Crompton and Jones (1984) saw the introduction of automating technologies as likely to replicate the dehumanising effects noted as a result of the introduction of earlier mass production technology. The deskilling thesis suggested that computerisation would act to curtail the ability of employees to exercise control over tasks and would lead to jobs which were less skilled, more monotonous and practically devoid of opportunities for self-development. Supporters of the deskilling thesis saw this degradation of work reaching past manual labour and into white-collar working environments that had not previously been subjected to assembly-line forms of work organisation.

Other authors have argued that neither position is fully supportable. Grimshaw (1999), for example, suggested that recent technological changes have led to polarisation in labour markets. She argued that 'At one extreme there are opportunities for clever and highly educated people who can develop and implement new technologies and design and manage the industries based on them. At the other extreme low paid jobs in areas such as office cleaning, child and elderly care, retail service and catering provide the bulk of employment in the emerging service economy. Remaining office and factory jobs require lower levels of skill and specialist knowledge and skills are being transferred to machines' (1999: 11).

2.3.3.2 Social integration and psychological well-being at work

The second approach in the search for influences on the subjective experience of work identified by Gallie *et al* (1998) revolves around the concept of social support and takes inspiration from the

human relations school of thought of industrial sociology. Central to this approach is a belief that people are social, as opposed to economic, beings that are driven partly by a need to belong to relatively cohesive social groupings and who value status within such groupings. This belief can be traced back to Elton Mayo's interpretation of the results from the Hawthorne Studies conducted in the USA in the interwar years. The underlying assumption is that the desire to satisfy social needs is often stronger than the pull of economic incentives and that it shapes human behaviour across all spheres of life, including work. From this perspective the most significant workplace characteristics influencing the subjective experience of work are the social cohesion of the workgroup and the quality of supervisory relationships.

From a theoretical standpoint, it might be expected that changes to the physical work environment resulting from some of the trends identified earlier in this chapter would have negative effects on the social cohesion of work groups. For example, the rising number of people with non-standard terms of employment across a wide range of occupations might be expected to weaken the social cohesion of work groups because differences in contractual relationships might be expected to produce differences in group identification. One might also expect that different lengths of working week, different shift patterns and changing work locations would all effect the potential for shared experience within work groups and that this might in turn have negative effects on employee cohesion. For example, the physical isolation of teleworking might be expected to affect an individual's sense of social cohesion. Supervisory relationships are likely to be made more challenging in all of the above cases.

2.3.3.3 Degree of participation and the subjective experience of work

The last of the 'classic' approaches to examining the subjective quality of working life suggested by Gallie *et al* (1998) focuses on the ability of employees to take part in and influence decision-making. The origins of ideas which have informed this approach are diverse, ranging from motivation theories, for example Argyris, 1957; McGregor, 1960; and Likert, 1961, to sociological thinking about citizenship such as that of Marshall (1964). What they share is a belief in the positive effects on subjective well-being in employment bestowed by greater opportunities for participation and the correspondingly negative effects that result from a lack of such opportunities.

The question which then arises is one of what effects the general trends noted in the earlier section on changes to the physical working environment are likely to have on the individual employee, both in terms of their actual and their perceived ability to participate in decision-making processes at work. In a study of effects of part-time working on organisational commitment Jacobsen (2000) found that within the group studied there was a strong positive relationship between the number of hours worked, expressed as 'percentage work' and calculated as the percentage of full time hours represented by the part time arrangements worked, and the degree of participation in decision processes. This relationship was found to be independent of hierarchical level of employment. This is what might be intuitively expected, since it might be thought that part-time employees might well be excluded from the decision making process on the grounds that they are not present when decisions are made or that they are to have insufficient knowledge to enable them to participate fully.

Jacobsen identified participation as one of the two major antecedents of affective commitment, defined as the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in their employing organisation, the other being job scope, an index which reflects the degree of job enrichment. His research supported this conclusion, indicating a strong positive relationship between degree of participation and level of affective commitment. The subsequent finding that there was 'a direct and *negative* effect of percentage work on affective commitment' was both 'contrary to what was expected in the original hypothesis' and 'counter to other empirical studies reporting no direct relationship'.

A possible explanation advanced by Jacobsen for this finding rested on the levels of stress involved in the jobs of the respondents, who were mainly nurses and assistant nurses in institutions caring for elderly people in Norway. Stress had not been included as a variable in Jacobsen's research, but in an earlier study of Norwegian primary school teachers by Skisland (1999) a considerable proportion of respondents had indicated a desire to change to working hours equivalent to 70-80% of full time with the levels of stress associated with full time working cited as the primary reason for wanting the reduction. Jacobsen speculated that stress might influence affective commitment and that the number of hours worked relative to full time employment might be correlated positively with work-related stress levels. He concluded that it was possible that the

effects of stress and working hours on affective commitment could cancel each other out and that this might explain why earlier studies relying on bivariate correlation had not reported relationships between part time working and affective commitment.

2.3.3.4 Job security and the subjective experience of work

The fourth approach to assessing subjective well-being at work identified by Gallie *et al* (1998) focuses on the influence of perceived job stability on the subjective experience of work. They suggested that in the past links between workplace behaviour and the labour market had been underdeveloped in the literature. They argued that there was considerable evidence of the adverse effects of unemployment on psychological well-being (Warr, 1987; Whelan, Hannan and Creighton, 1991), and that in appropriate economic circumstances individuals might experience anxiety in relation to job security which might have a concomitant effect on their subjective well-being in the workplace.

Job insecurity has been described (Klandermans, Van Vuuren and Jacobson, 1991) as a combined product of the perceived probability and the perceived seriousness of losing employment. According to this definition, the higher the perceived probability and the more severe the perceived consequences of the event, the more intense the feeling of job insecurity. Such perceptions will vary across individuals in the same objective circumstances and are influenced by personal characteristics such as age and health, personal dispositions such as optimism or pessimism, and individual understanding of prevailing economic conditions. The objective reality of job insecurity has been a matter of some debate (Smith, 1997; Burchell, 1998) and there is evidence that perceptions of job insecurity are often inaccurate. For example a survey by Gregg (1996) found evidence of high levels of perceived job insecurity in the UK in the mid 1990s despite falls in overall unemployment levels.

Some authors have argued that in recent times job insecurity has become a major problem in relation to psychological well-being at work, with both individual and organisational consequences. O'Driscoll and Cooper, on sources and management of excessive job stress and burnout, wrote that 'job insecurity may be one of the single most salient sources of stress for

employees today' (1996: 200) although no empirical support was provided for this contention. In a study of middle managers Hallier and Lyon (1996) noted that one effect of experiencing job insecurity and subsequent redundancy was a reduction in the commitment given to new employers. This was manifested by decreases in effort, increases in time spent on non-work commitments, determination to maximise opportunities to gain new skills, and resistance to employers' objectives where these conflicted with personal commitments. Herriot, Hirsch and Reilly (1998) argued that increasing perceptions of job insecurity had contributed in some instances to the collapse of the psychological contract, a major consequence of which was reduced trust. Trust, they asserted, was critical to employing units and to their survival. In low trust environments employees felt unable to take risks, a fundamental requirement for innovation. They would be less likely to interact and collaborate creatively with colleagues and more likely to minimise their investment in their employing unit.

Earlier in this chapter a number of trends were identified, both in workplaces and in society, which might be expected to have effects on employees' levels of job insecurity. It seems likely that trends towards non-standard forms of employment, especially towards temporary and contract-based kinds, might increase perceived job insecurity. Equally, the ongoing automation of work might be expected to increase levels of perceived job insecurity. The dissemination of information through a wide variety of channels on the presumed sophistication of new technologies may exacerbate fears amongst employees that displacement by machines or computers is only a matter of time. Similarly, such practices as hot desking are tending to depersonalise the working environment. As a result employees will find it harder to visualise themselves as attached to particular work locations. This is likely to erode their feelings of belonging and security.

2.3.4 Employment relationships as a series of contracts

One attempt to understand how individuals relate to the particular circumstances of their employment explores their expectations of the experience. Mumford (1971, 1995) depicted the employment relationship as five types of contract, each of which encapsulated a set of role expectations between employers and employees. The five contract types are explained in Table 2.14. Mumford felt that if the employee met the needs and expectations of the employer with

respect to each of the contracts, then the employer would be satisfied with the performance of the employee. If the employer met the needs and expectations of the employee in relation to all contracts, then the employee would experience a high level of job satisfaction. She observed that frequently the parties' expectations were not met on all contracts, but that did not necessarily preclude a satisfactory employment relationship. According to Mumford, past research had indicated that the values contract was often the most critical, and that satisfaction with this contract could mitigate the effects of poor performance of the others.

Table 2.14 Contracts between employers and employees.

Type of contract	Employer	Employee
Knowledge	Needs a certain level of skill and knowledge in its employee if it is to function effectively	Wishes the skills and knowledge that he or she has to be used and developed
Psychological	Needs employees who are motivated to look after its interests	Seeks to further personal interests: e.g. to secure promotion, recognition, status, time for family, and so on.
Efficiency	Needs to achieve required output and quality standards	Seeks an equitable effort-reward bargain covering pay, controls, support services
Task structure	Needs employees who will accept technical and other demands and constraints associated with particular roles	Seeks a role and a set of tasks which meet his or her needs for interesting, challenging, non-stressful work
Values	Needs employees who will accept and support the firm's ethos and values	Seeks to work for an employer whose values do not contravene his or her own

Source: Mumford, 1995: 56.

The expectations surrounding any employment relationship will vary considerably because they tend to be both subjective and situationally specific, but Mumford (1995) noted that since the early 1970s a number of changes had taken place both internal and external to the work environment that might be expected to affect the expectations of employees generally. She saw the psychological contract as having experienced 'considerable negative distortion' and having 'major contradictions located in it'. Employer expectations had remained the same, but what the employee could expect to receive in return for loyalty and motivation had changed considerably. She

suggested that in the 1980s and 1990s employment reduction was seen as one of the keys to unit cost reduction. According to Mumford, years of down-sizing, de-layering and re-engineering had depressed the expectations of employees in relation to job tenure, promotion prospects, and so on. At the same time a resurgence of competitive individualism in the late 1980s had increased the expectations of reward for many entrants to the labour market. She argued that collective action, once a countervailing force against the erosion of employee expectations, had lost potency in a climate of individualism.

Regarding the knowledge contract, Mumford acknowledged that in the past employees at lower levels had found their expectations fulfilled only partly, at best. She suggested that changes in employee expectations since the 1970s were the result of skill polarisation. Opportunities for knowledge and skill acquisition in workplaces tended to fall to those already skilled, with the less knowledgeable skilled struggling to maintain their levels. She named the beneficiaries of polarisation as men not women, as full-time not part-time employees, and as the young and not the old.

Mumford (1995) argued that the efficiency contract now dominated work, and that employee expectations in relation to it were increasingly unsatisfied. Employees were being asked to work longer hours, to do more for less pay, and to work under increasingly tighter management controls. The task structure contract had also worsened for employees. Technical developments had improved the position of some employees by automating many routine operations. At the same time increasing management control over work and the constant threat of redundancy had increased job-related stress. She claimed that employee expectations in relation to the values contract had also been damaged. Companies which had been at pains to be seen as caring employers were responding to arguably more onerous economic and competitive conditions by cutting employee welfare provisions. She also suggested that communication and consultation with employees had been casualties of a perceived need by managers to act more quickly and decisively. Mutual loyalty and trust between employers and employees had often been replaced by scepticism and suspicion.

2.4 Summary

This chapter started with a brief discussion of the so-called post-industrial condition, concluding that the term 'advanced industrial society' was a more apposite description than that of 'post-industrial society'. Using evidence from studies involving a number of countries the common economic, political and social characteristics of advanced industrial societies were then identified. Following on from that the physical, demographic and psychological characteristics of employment and work in such societies were examined, patterns of change identified, and the implications for employment relationships examined.

Chief amongst the economic characteristics were changes in the distribution of employment, with decreasing direct employment in manufacturing and agriculture and increasing employment in services. Unemployment and job instability were also identified as features of advanced industrial societies. From a political perspective, such societies were seen as being characterised by conservatism and a belief that the application of free market principles would serve welfare interests better than state intervention. Another feature was said to be the inability of individuals to participate meaningfully in politics. Socially, advanced industrialised societies are characterised by demographic shifts, with static or falling birth rates and increased longevity creating fast-ageing populations. Affluence is reflected in greater *per capita* incomes compared to less advanced nations, but the uneven distribution of incomes is generally maintained. The operation of market economies in advanced industrial societies has led to cultures of consumerism and they are seen to have generally materialist values, although there is evidence of a trend towards post-materialism. The benefits of greater affluence are seen as contributing to working life scenarios of commodification and greening.

Employment in such societies is increasingly non-manual, with managerial and administrative occupations the largest grouping for men and clerical and secretarial the largest for women. The place of work is less fixed than in the past. Working lives are becoming shorter and interruptions more frequent. The majority of jobs are characterised by instability and the use of non-standard forms of employment is increasingly common. Working weeks are shorter, but working days are longer and overtime less likely to be paid for managerial employees. Women make up an

increasing proportion of the labour force whilst economic inactivity has increased amongst the late teens and the over fifty-fives, although there is evidence that average retirement ages are now increasing in the USA. These three groups are also the most likely to be engaged in non-standard employment.

The different approaches to the assessment of the psychological characteristics of employment in advanced industrial societies discussed in this chapter have all tended to lead to the same conclusion; that there has been a gradual degradation of the subjective experience of work for most employees and that this trend is set to continue. The combined effect of societal characteristics and emerging patterns of employment has been a perceived deterioration in employment relationships. Later chapters will examine the nature and experience of call centre employment to see to whether and to what extent this type of work mirrors the more general employment trends identified in this chapter.

Chapter 3

Management, employment and work in call centres I:

Call centres and their management

3.1 Introduction

Despite the claim of Prabhaker, Sheehan and Coppett that ‘the “modern” call centre has been around for over 50 years’ (1997: 223), call centres as defined for the purposes of this thesis are a relatively recent phenomenon. Evidence for this assertion is provided by a photograph forming part of an article by Coppett and Glass (1984) on the management of telemarketers. The photograph shows employees of a ‘telemarketing centre’ at their workstations armed only with telephones, paper and pens. The novelty of call centres has led some authors (for example, Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski, and Shire, 1998: 957; Taylor and Bain, 1999: 101; Bain and Taylor, 2000: 2) to note that there is a relative paucity of research on particular aspects. They have nonetheless begun to attract considerable academic interest, and a number of dominant themes have emerged.

In this, the first of two chapters examining the treatment of call centres in academic literature, I examine four themes. The first three of these could be considered to relate to issues external to call centres. The first might be described as ‘call centre development’ and includes historical information, quantitative accounts of call centres both in the UK and elsewhere and more speculative articles on the likely future development of call centres. The second looks at call centres in a wider societal context, exploring questions of location and use. The third theme examined in the literature relates generally to the use of call centres as a service delivery channel. Topics varying from the comparative efficacy of call centres as a service delivery channel to the determinants of customer satisfaction are included under this heading. The final theme considered in this chapter relates generally to call centre management and particularly to the choice and use of managerial strategies.

In the following chapter I shall be considering the two remaining themes that have tended to predominate in research and writing on call centres. The first of these might usefully be labelled the ‘characterization of call centre work’. A number of attempts have been made to characterize and suggest theoretical models for work processes in call centres. The final theme explored is that of call centre employees, within which the research spotlight has fallen on topics as diverse as desirable personal characteristics and subjective experiences of the call centre labour process.

3.2 Call centre development

Histories of call centre development, whether couched in terms of changes in technology or in terms of simple numerical growth are rare. Prabhaker, Sheehan and Coppett (1997) provide a typical example of the brevity usually given to the subject, encapsulating the development and spread of call centres in the USA in a single sentence which stated that call centres had 'grown from being a small niche-based industry in the 1980s to a formidable industry in the 1990s fueled by tremendous growth' (1997: 223). Munday (1996) provided a brief overview of the development of automated call distribution (ACD) systems, the technology considered to be at the heart of a call centre, and estimates of call centre growth over various periods can be found in market intelligence and consultancy reports (for example, Datamonitor, 1996; Mital, 1996), but in general there is little information on this topic. Some authors have marked a particular date or period as significant for call centres generally without giving detail of subsequent developments. For example, Arkin (1997) saw the establishment in the late 1980s of telephone-based insurer Direct Line and retail banking provider First Direct as marking the beginning of large-scale call centre adoption in the UK, but made no further comment on the subject. Marshall and Richardson (1996) and Richardson, Belt and Marshall (2000) also note that the expansion of call centres in the UK began in the financial sector with Direct Line in 1986 and First Direct in 1989, with both companies having since expanded out of their original markets and having since been followed by 'a host of competitors'. The latter authors suggest that call centres are now 'a rapidly growing phenomenon in a number of industries, including travel and transport, computers, marketing, distribution and logistics, hotels, telecommunications, retailing, utilities and, latterly, in some areas of government services' (2000: 360).

Quantitative detail in relation to the development of call centres in the UK seems to have been the province of consultants and market research companies rather than academic sources. Their conclusions, together with a discussion of the difficulties involved in comparing different companies' assessments of call centre growth will be discussed in chapter 6. More recently, attempts have been made by academic authors to contribute to the body of quantitative knowledge on call centres by providing information on mean numbers of employees per call centre, workforce characteristics and so on. Research has tended to be in the form of postal or telephone surveys, with the resultant descriptive data normally forming part of a larger piece of work. Comparisons of

reported workforce characteristics can be made, but may not be helpful in terms of understanding the development of call centres in the UK because the survey populations are rarely similar enough to equate to looking at the same population over time although, as the subsequent analysis reveals, certain workforce characteristics appear to be similar for different UK call centre populations and indeed for international call centre populations. Such findings as are available have additionally been made over a relatively short space of time and so possible trends may not necessarily be apparent.

Taylor and Bain (1999) found in surveys of Scottish call centres carried out in 1997 that 61.1 percent had workforces of less than 100 employees, with 42.6 percent employing less than 50 people. Despite this, call centres with workforces of greater than 100 employees accounted for 83.0 percent of call centre workers, meaning that the typical experience of call centre employees was likely to be that of working in a large operation. Fernie and Metcalf (1998) in a survey of UK call centres found an average workforce of 167. Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski and Shire (1998) studied an international sample of ten call centres sited variously in the USA, Australia and Japan which, they reported, had an average of 110 base-level employees.

Hook (1998) reported selected results from research that he had carried out in 1996 on 566 employees across 11 different UK call centres that he believed to be 'fairly representative of the UK call centre industry as a whole' (1998: 193). He found employees to have a mean age of just less than 30 years although the distribution was significantly skewed with 26 percent of employees aged under 23 and only 4 percent over 50. Taylor and Bain (1999) found that in 1997 69 percent of Scottish call centre employees were under 35 years old. Belt, Richardson, Webster, Tijdens and van Klaveren (2000), surveying call centres in three industry sectors in the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, found that 76 percent of all call centre employees were aged between 20 and 29, with a further 17 percent aged between 30 and 39 and only 1 percent aged over 40. They reported both national variation, with Irish call centre workforces generally younger than their Dutch counterparts, and variation across industry sectors, with computer services call centres likely to have younger workforces with narrower age distributions than those in financial services. Michel (2001) detailed a 1999 survey that found the average age of German call centre employees to be 30 but noted that larger call centres tended to have an average age lower than 30.

Hook suggested that youthful workforces might be the result of modest salary levels or the inability of older people to work the non-standard hours required by many call centres. He saw the high proportions of younger call centre employees as having a number of possible ramifications. He believed that the resilience of younger employees might have the effect of masking the impact of call centre work processes on individuals. He also felt that the formation of a 'dominant' age group in a call centre made it far more difficult to successfully retain employees recruited from outside that group, as such individuals were more likely to feel alienated from colleagues. He saw this as likely to become increasingly problematic as demographic trends decreased the number of younger people in the labour pool as a whole and call centres were forced to target other groups in order to maintain staffing levels.

An early study of call centres located in the Tyneside area of North East England by Richardson and Marshall (1996) found a 66 percent female workforce. Hook (1998) found a female to male call centre workforce ratio of 60:40. He suggested that, with one exception, this proportion had not varied 'dramatically' from one call centre to another. Taylor and Bain (1999) found a 67.4 percent female call centre workforce, a significant increase on that found in Hook's far smaller sample and one closer to the 70 percent found by IDS (1997) for UK call centres. Hook thought that the female bias in the sample might be explained as a reflection of the salary level of base level call centre positions, since other research had shown that women tended in general to occupy larger percentages of jobs in lower wage brackets.

The proportion of female employment found in UK call centres seems to be similar to that reported for call centres elsewhere. Frenkel *et al* (1998), reporting the characteristics of an international sample of ten call centres sited variously in the USA, Australia and Japan, found that women made up 70 percent of the total workforce. Belt *et al* (2000) found that 69 percent of call centre staff were female with 'little variation' between figures for the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands but significant variation between industry sectors. They reported case study evidence suggesting that there was also variation in the proportion of females employed across task and product areas in individual call centres, with women concentrated in roles that require minimal technical knowledge such as customer service and sales. This figure seems to be in line with earlier proportions found in UK call centres and in Ireland where Breathnach (1997) found that women accounted for 70 percent of the workforce in Irish call centres.

Belt *et al*'s finding in relation to the female constituent of the Netherlands call centre workforce is however considerably different to that of 47.3 percent reported by an Income Data Services survey (IDS, 1997). One possible explanation is the limiting of the survey to financial services, computer services and outsourced call centres by Belt *et al*. Given their finding that of the three types financial services call centres employed the highest proportion of women, it is possible that this limitation has made their finding unrepresentative of Dutch call centres as a whole. Michel (2001) found a different position in relation to German call centres, suggesting that around 60-70 percent of the German call centre workforce was female with this proportion higher in independent or outsourced call centres.

In relation to the nature of employment, a number of authors have noted the prevalence of part-time and temporary employment. Taylor and Bain (1999) found that in 1997 33.5 percent of the Scottish call centre workforce was employed on a basis other than full-time. In relation to part-time employment, Belt *et al* (2000) found that 27 percent of the UK call centre workforce was employed on this basis. They observed clear international differences, reproduced in Table 3.1, but pointed out that the figures for Dutch and Irish part-time call centre employment were in line with the overall figures for female part-time employment in those countries, whereas the percentage of part-time employment in UK call centres was considerably lower than that found for overall female part-time employment in the UK. The authors noted that 73 percent of part-time employees were female, and thus 35 percent of the total female call centre workforce was employed on a part-time basis. Whilst not giving a figure for part-time employment in German call centres as such, Michel (2001) suggested that about half of all call centre jobs were full time, that shift work was typical and that positions with so called 'tax-free' salaries, that is to say salaries below the threshold for payment of income tax by employers, were 'by no means prevalent...[but] still part of the system'.

A study by Income Data Services (IDS, 1997) found that 15 percent of the UK call centre workforce was employed on a temporary basis. Taylor and Bain (1999) suggested that in 1997 13.6 percent of the Scottish call centre workforce was supplied by employment agencies. Belt, *et al* (2000) noted that the practice of temporary employment was widespread in call centres. They found that 9 percent of the UK call centre workforce was temporary, a figure much smaller than that for Ireland or the Netherlands. In all three countries the rate of temporary employment in call centres was found to be higher than the rate of such employment generally. They suggested that

women made up 67 percent of all call centre temporary employees. From this they calculated that 12 percent of all female call centre employees were employed on a temporary basis. As Table 3.1 shows, the authors found a lower percentage of temporary employees in financial services call centres compared with outsourced or computer services call centres which, they hypothesized, might be the result of the recruitment of already permanent employees from elsewhere in the organization. According to Michel (2001) German call centre employees were almost invariably 'contracted employees', that is to say permanent rather than temporary.

As well as employment status, some authors have looked at the average length of tenure of call centre employees. Hook (1998) found that the mean tenure of UK call centre employees sampled was 26 months but the distribution was significantly skewed with a median of 12 months and a mode of 6 months. 46 percent of the employees surveyed had been working at a call centre for less than 10 months. Hook suggested that tenure was 'significantly influenced by geographical factors'. Hook's figure is similar to the average tenure of 2.5 years for German call centre employees found by Michel (2001), although Michel noted that this figure varied according to call centre type, with in-house call centre employees having longer average periods of service than their third party equivalents.

Table 3.1 Call centre workforce characteristics compared by country and by industry sector

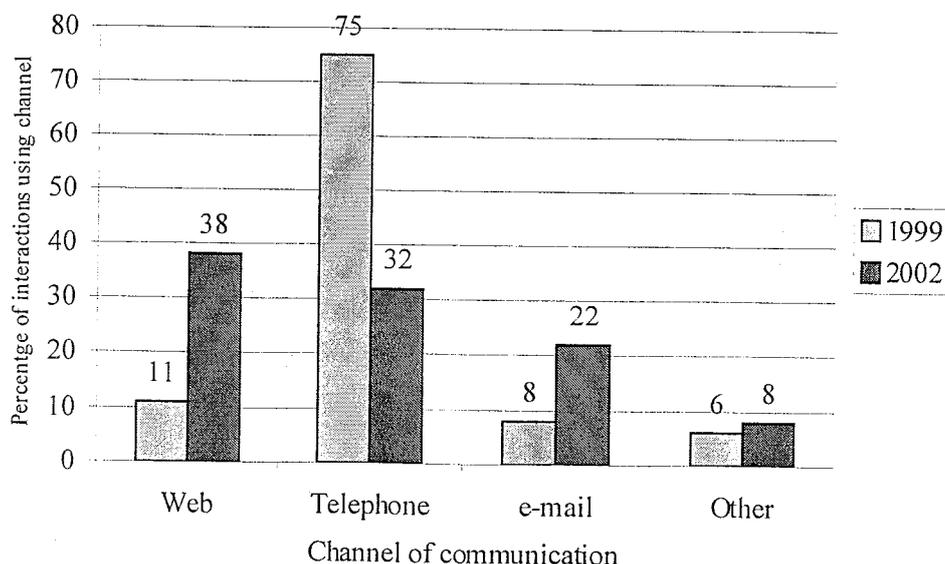
	Characteristic		
	Proportion of call centre workforce female (percent)	Proportion of call centre workforce employed part-time (percent)	Proportion of call centre workforce employed on a temporary basis (percent)
Overall	69	29	13
By country:			
UK		27	9
Ireland		22	27
Netherlands		66	33
By industry sector:			
Financial services	73	35	9
Computer services	48	21	42
Outsourced call centre	62	41	39

Source: Belt, Richardson, Webster, Tijdens and van Klaveren, 2000.

Relatively few studies have provided information on the educational qualifications of call centre employees as such. IDS (1997) looked at multilingualism in UK and Dutch call centre workforces. They found higher proportions of multilingual call centre employees in the Netherlands than in the UK, with 73 percent of Dutch employees speaking a second language and 44 percent speaking a third compared with figures of 26 percent and 7 percent respectively for the UK. Michel (2001) found that the average educational achievement amongst German call centre employees was high, with 'a great majority' having 'Abitur', a qualification indicating that they had graduated from secondary schooling and had obtained the university entrance standards. Michel suggested that this high average level of education amongst call centre employees was partly accounted for by the large numbers of students who were employed in call centres on a part time basis.

A number of authors have commented on the likely future development of call centres. Some, such as Anton (2000) and Calvert (2001), base their authority to forecast future changes on a long history of involvement with call centres. Anton (2000) argued that the proliferation of new channels of customer contact and the need for companies to compete on the grounds of accessibility would drive the metamorphosis of the call centre into the 'customer access centre'. He suggested that in the near future the distribution of channels used in customer-to-business contacts would change as per Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Estimated distribution of use of channels of communication in customer-to-business interactions, 1999 and 2002. Data source: Anton, 2000: 123,125



Amongst the 'strategic solutions' that he felt would 'drastically change the customer access centre of the future' were voice of internet protocol (VoIP), interactive voice response (IVR) and voice recognition, database engines and knowledgeware, e-mail management software, value-based caller routing, computer-simulated training, computer telephony integration (CTI), and middleware. Some of these technologies are already available but he saw them becoming increasingly sophisticated and their use becoming more widespread. For example, he estimated that from virtually nil in 1995 some 38 percent of all call centre contacts were being handled by IVRs in 2000, a figure that he believed was likely to increase to over 70 percent by 2005. The main trends in customer access centres forecast by Anton are summarized in Table 3.2.

Calvert (2001) agreed that increasing use of the Internet was the main impetus for the transformation of call centres into contact centres. She suggested that whilst the telephone had for many years been the primary customer interface, the internet was now a 'core communications channel' and increasing penetration of internet use in the UK would in fact lead to greater use of call centres. She quoted figures from a survey of 300 call centre operators carried out in 2000 which found that 36 percent of respondents expected more than 40 percent of their call centre communications to be via e-mail, internet or interactive television by 2005.

Table 3.2 The evolution of the customer access centre

From:	To:
Calls	Contact transactions
Anonymous customers	Customer segmentation
Call handling	Customer profiles
Voice	Cyber calls
Agent productivity	Agent profitability
Individual channel management	Integrated channel management
Proprietary data	Shared data
Call centre	Enterprise centre
Personal service	Self-service
Cost centre	Profit centre

Source: Anton, 2000: 130.

4.3 Call centres in a wider context

In a paper examining the regional significance of the growth of call centres in the North East of England Richardson, Belt and Marshall (2000) argued that call centres needed to be understood in the wider context of the spatial impact of the growing use of information and communications technology (ICT) in society. They suggested that ICTs appeared to promise new possibilities for the location and organization of work, and enterprises embracing these possibilities were becoming 'more complex, decentralized and network orientated'. The authors saw call centres as representing a novel way for organizations to expand their geographical reach in order to access new markets or to 'exploit spatial variations in factors of production more effectively and.... locate their functions more efficiently' (2000: 359). For them the most salient feature of call centres was their ability to 'extend ICTs further into the customer interface' enabling contrasts in the spatial division of labour between regions to be extended into locally-orientated consumer services. That is to say providing a means for services such as retail banking, in the past made available locally, to be delivered remotely via call centres thus concentrating formerly distributed employment in one location. They argued that whilst the question of whether call centres resulted overall in a net gain or loss of employment was complex, it was clear that 'regions that can attract or create call centres can gain additional jobs' (2000: 360).

The authors identified five general concerns regarding the impact of call centres on local economies. The first of these was that call centres represented a 'particularly effective manifestation of the increasingly capital intensive 'industrialisation' of service sector work' in which the work performed was both routine and highly intensive. The second concern was that call centres were associated with fine divisions of labour and thus hosted a limited range of occupations. The third focused on the use of technology for surveillance purposes in call centres and the way in which it allowed for greater control and discipline of employees. The fourth centred on the way in which factors common to call centres, for example flat organizational structures and fragmented task allocation, restricted opportunities for career advancement. The penultimate concern identified by Richardson *et al* was that the theoretical geographical mobility of call centres might lead to future movement to take advantage of cheaper factors of production elsewhere. Finally, concern had been voiced that call centre employment could be prey to future technological displacement.

In addressing these concerns in relation to the North East region, Richardson *et al* concluded that call centres were able to create significant numbers of jobs, with an estimated 11,000 having been created in the North East region. They argued that successfully attracting call centres has what could be termed a 'snowball effect' in that 'the skills developed [in call centres] are easily transferable between firms. Thus the successful attraction of a few firms to the region creates a pool of labour that can, in turn, attract other firms' (2000: 367). They suggested that this portability of skills following a concentration of call centres in a particular area might have a short-term advantage of increasing the price that could be commanded for such labour, leading to an increase in regional average wages. However, in the longer term wage inflation resulting from increased call centre concentrations would act as a deterrent, jeopardizing the region's chances of attracting further call centres.

They felt that questions of whether call centres merely diverted employment from other parts of the regional economy or encouraged the rationalization of local branch networks were to some extent moot, and that 'in a period of significant downsizing in staple areas of white collar employment, such as national and local government, retail financial services and utilities, call centres provide additional jobs which could easily be lost to other regions' (2000: 367). They acknowledged that call centre employment did not replace the male-dominated manufacturing jobs that the region had lost in recent years, but asserted that this did make such employment less worthwhile. They pointed out that in advanced economies services constituted the major employer and that increasing service employment opportunities would be needed for further economic growth. Additionally, with increasing female labour force participation, one of the features of employment in advanced industrial societies noted in chapter 2, call centres provided women with opportunities to (re)enter the labour market.

Richardson *et al* foresaw a number of problems in over-reliance on call centres as sources of employment growth. At the individual level they saw call centre employment as involving limited skills use and in general being experienced as 'intense, repetitive and stressful' in nature as well as being of relatively low social status. They found that call centres tended not to compensate employees for working hours previously considered unsociable, provided limited career development opportunities and suffered from high rates of staff turnover. They concluded that the region had failed to attract better paying pan-European operations, with most of its call centres

involved in 'low order activity' servicing the domestic markets. Such call centres tended to have higher levels of part-time and other 'flexible' employment arrangements. Low order activities were also seen as the most likely to be replaced by automating technologies. In addition, the North East had seen few of the dynamic benefits, such as the creation of 'support industries and other entrepreneurial spin-offs', that might have been expected from the establishment of call centres.

Breathnach (2000) was also concerned with the longer-term sustainability of a geographical concentration of call centres. She argued that the development of information and communications technologies (ICT) had 'facilitated the emergence of a complex global urban system in which many formerly lower-order cities have been carving out "niche" specialist functions serving urban fields of transnational dimension' (2000: 477). She identified Dublin as one such city, suggesting that it had developed a significant role as the base for a range of functions servicing the European mainland and delivered by, amongst other media, pan-European call centres. According to Breathnach, Irish agencies identified trends apparent in the USA towards the spatial separation of back and front office activities facilitated by ICTs and the subsequent relocation and off-shoring of back-office operations. In response Ireland had 'moved at an early stage to promote itself as a pan-European call centre location, offering, in addition to the existing grants and tax incentives, the cheapest rates in Europe for international freephone calls as well as low-cost, high-calibre, flexible bilingual staff' (2000: 481).

Ireland's state inward investment agency, the Industrial Development Board, introduced a call centre programme in 1992, aiming to create 3,000 call centre jobs by 2000. Breathnach stated that by mid-1998 more than 50 call centres had been set up in Ireland with a total workforce in excess of 6,000. Breathnach cited a 1996 survey of Irish call centre operations that had found that American firms accounted for 70 percent of the call centres and more than 80 percent of call centre employment. The survey also found that 55 percent of call centre employees used a foreign language in their work, with 43 percent of such employees being foreign to Ireland. She suggested that 90 percent of Ireland's call centres were based in Dublin, with perceived problems in relation to suitability of office space and support services outside the capital and concerns over the ability to recruit sufficient numbers of employees with appropriate language skills being seen as the main barriers to locating elsewhere.

Breathnach's concern was that Dublin's call centre employment gains were 'largely based on the attraction of branch plant operations which remain poorly embedded in the local economy' (2000: 482). That is to say that 'their Irish location is not crucial to the parent companies of these operations; rather, it is contingent on the availability of certain attractions which may be either transient or reproducible elsewhere' (ibid: 483). In addition call centre employment remained relatively poorly paid, despite high skill levels, in part due to its perception as 'women's work'. Further employment of this type would be more difficult to attract, she argued, because labour shortages were 'driving up labour costs which, in conjunction with increasing housing and transportation problems' were 'beginning to attenuate Dublin's attractiveness as a call centre location' (2000: 482). She also saw both current and future call centre employment in Dublin as likely to be increasingly threatened by technological developments including speech recognition technology and the Internet.

Richardson and Belt (2001) considered the role of call centres in the economic development of the UK's less favoured regions (LFRs). They noted how developments in information and communications technology (ICT) had contributed to the increased mobility of service investment. The authors were at pains to make clear that whilst they were 'not suggesting that ICTs have an in-built decentralizing logic or that they make all services hyper-mobile' they did believe that by 'increasing the tradeability across space of service activities, thus permitting the separation of production from consumption' ICTs were 'allowing a growing number of service firms to search for new sources of cheap labour, much in the way that the manufacturing sector has historically done, and thus to '(re)discover' the basic principles of national and international divisions of labour' (2001: 69).

Richardson and Belt acknowledged that not all services would be freed from requirements to have proximate production and consumption and that others though technically capable of such separation would be nonetheless geographically constrained by 'the uneven availability of production input factors across space (particularly appropriately skill labour)', but argued that a growing range of services would be amenable to spatial separation. They suggested that UK regional development agencies, which had traditionally targeted their efforts towards attracting manufacturing inward investment, began looking to promote and attract export-oriented service work following the realization that technology was freeing some services and hence the workforce

required to deliver such services from previous geographical constraints. According to Richardson and Belt (2001) previous research had identified a number of key factors taken into account by call centre operators when deciding on locations. These are reproduced in summary in Table 3.3. Case studies of the North East of England and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland structured around the key call centre location factors illustrated how the regional development agencies in each area had increasingly seen ICTs as a means of combating the disadvantages of remoteness and poor economic competitiveness and how each had been relatively successful in attracting call centre employment.

Table 3.3 Main factors taken into account by operators in choosing call centre locations

Factor	Comment
Telecommunications	Must be suitable for data and voice transmission and capable of hosting intelligent network services. Costs are also relevant. Liberalised telecommunications regimes with the potential to switch providers are favoured.
Labour availability	Richardson and Belt suggested that operators look for a 'plentiful pool of (often female) labour skilled enough to carry out the particular tasks required in the locating firm's call centre, bearing in mind that the call centre may have to be staffed 24 hours a day' (2001:73). The particular skills required depend on the nature of the call centre, for example a pan-European call centre would require multi-lingual staff, and an appropriate balance must be found between labour costs and skills availability.
Property	Timely availability and low occupancy costs in terms of rents, rates, servicing, parking and so on are seen as important, as is the possibility of further expansion on a given site. The latter has led to an apparent leaning towards out-of-town or edge-of-town locations.
Financial incentives	Financial incentives in the form of grant aid or fiscal assistance in various forms has been shown to play a part in influencing choice of location, although Richardson and Belt suggested that in interviews call centre operators had tended to 'play down' the importance of this factor.
Support	The existence of development agencies prepared to offer continued help and support was seen as persuasive factor in location choice.
Public transport	Good local transport infrastructures were seen as a factor affecting choice of location for some operators, especially those looking to find a significant proportion of their call centre workforce from sections of the labour force with low rates of car ownership.

Data summarised from: Richardson and Belt, 2001: 73.

In their subsequent discussion of the economic development potential of call centres in less favoured regions Richardson and Belt identified both a range of potential benefits to LFRs in attracting call centre operators and a number of possible limitations of call centre investment vis-à-vis regional development. These are compared in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Potential benefits and possible limitations of call centre inward investment for regional developments.

Potential benefits	Possible limitations
Call centre inward investment creates employment. In the regions currently successful in attracting such investments, call centres provide net new employment without displacing other local work.	In general, call centres offer limited career development potential due to the flat management structures normally employed. Whilst promotion to supervisory grades may be relatively swift, movement further up the hierarchy is often restricted, not least because inward investors are likely to 'import' their own higher management.
Call centre inward investment brings new capital and technological investment. Although subsidized in LFRs, call centre investments are capital intensive and often stimulate additional investment, for example in telecommunications infrastructures.	Evidence suggests that the LFRs have so far attracted a limited range of call centre operations, which tend to be 'at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of skills, remuneration and so on'.
Call centre inward investment may bring new types of employment to less favoured areas, as for example in the Highlands and Islands.	There are doubts about the sustainability of some call centre employment. Threats to call centre growth include contractions in overall call centre employment due to; more effective management of call centre capacity; the rationalization of call centres following convergence in some sectors; decreases in call centre numbers following increased use of third party outsourcing; movement of call centre work abroad for cost reasons; developments in call centre-related technologies such as interactive voice response and alternative delivery channels.
Call centre inward investment may act as a catalyst for the updating of skill sets, especially in terms of customer service skills, which are increasingly being seen as the foundation of a possible source of competitive advantage by organizations.	
Call centre inward investment may introduce new work cultures to an area, exposure to which might have a 'modernising' effect.	
Call centre inward investment may lead to higher levels of training for employees compared with more traditional low-level clerical employment, although any training is likely to be narrowly specified.	
Call centre inward investment tends to create employment opportunities for both women and younger workers, unlike the heavy manual occupations that previously dominated many of the regions now successfully attracting call centre investment.	

Data source: Richardson and Belt, 2001.

Richardson and Belt suggested that the main cause of concern in attracting call centre inward investment to LFRs was that 'call centres are mobile and may be short lived', countering this with the assertion that call centres were 'in this respect, little different to the other forms of inward investment which LFRs can reasonably expect to attract'. They concluded that the 'real problem for regions such as those considered in this article is not reliance on call centre per se, but overreliance on inward investment in general. These regions look set to remain branch plant economies in the 'information age', just as they were in the 'industrial economy'' (2001: 90).

4.4 Call centres as service delivery channels

Academic attention has been turned to a number of points in relation to the use of call centres as service delivery channels. Efforts have been made to determine what in the context of call centres contributes to customer satisfaction (Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, de Ruyter and Keen, 2000; De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000) and to examine the effect of employee attitudes on customer satisfaction (Schmidt and Allscheid, 1995). In addition call centres have been compared with other delivery channels in relation to customer expectations (Burgers, de Ruyter, Keen and Streukens, 2000), use (Wahlberg and Wredling, 1999) and customer satisfaction (Bennington, Cumane and Conn, 2000).

Customer satisfaction has been shown to influence customers' intended behaviour (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997; de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000). The comparative levels of customer satisfaction generated by different delivery channels are therefore of considerable importance to organizations required to make choices on how best to deliver their services. Using survey questions with 9-point Likert-type scales to measure customer satisfaction Bennington *et al* (2000) found a statistically significant difference in customers' ratings of satisfaction with call centre services and office-based services provided by Centrelink, an Australian government welfare-related services organization. In-person service satisfaction had a mean value of 5.37 as compared with a mean of 4.90 for call centre satisfaction, although the authors suggested that in practical terms the difference was 'quite marginal'. Contrary to their expectations, age was not found to be a significant factor in determining customer satisfaction with the Centrelink call centres. However, younger customers tended to be more critical of call centre operations. Using focus group techniques, Bennington, *et al* identified both valued attributes that the study participants envisaged a world-class call centre would possess and causes of irritation with call centres generally. These are reproduced in Table

3.5. The authors felt that the provision of such information would help to guide call centre operators in designing their service provision.

Table 3.5 Valued attributes and causes of irritation in call centres

Valued attributes	Causes of irritation
Reliable follow through	Lack of personalised/individualised service
Respect and mutual trust	Having to wait on the telephone
Understanding and caring staff	Uncaring communication
Prompt efficient service	Getting the 'run-around'
Easily accessible	The complexity of the telephone system
Open and effective communication	Unreliable information and service
Personalised/individualised service	
Reliable information	

Source: Bennington, Cumane and Conn, 2000: 170

Feinberg *et al* (2000) noted that there was 'nothing in the call centre research literature to suggest what variables are related to caller satisfaction', but that practical manuals on call centre operation including Anton (1997) and Cleveland and Mayben (1997) indicated a set of thirteen 'critical' operational measures through which service quality could be followed and assessed. They hypothesized relationships between these measures as independent variables and caller satisfaction as a dependent variable and predicted that 'percentage of cases closed on first call' would be the most important determinant of satisfaction.

Using data from the annual Purdue University Benchmark Study of US call centres to test their hypotheses they found that seven were supported in that the relationships between the measures and caller satisfaction were found to be statistically significant. Caller satisfaction was found to increase with increasing percentage of calls closed on first contact; with decreasing average speed of answer; with decreasing average abandonment rate; with decreasing time spent on after call work; with decreasing percentage of calls blocked; with increasing service levels; and with decreasing average queuing time. A subsequent regression analysis revealed that only percentage of calls closed on first contact and average abandonment rate were determinant variables, acting as causal agents for caller satisfaction, and that the relationship was weak. They described these findings as 'both confusing and obvious'. Although seven of the operational measures were related

to caller satisfaction, only two could be seen as significant causal factors and the calculated magnitude of causation was very low. Importantly, 'none of the 13 critical operational variables could be concluded to be *the* variable of importance in creating and maintaining customer satisfaction with call centre experience' (2000: 139, authors' own emphasis).

They argued that two mitigating factors needed to be taken into consideration when considering these findings. First, the measure of satisfaction used was that of the percentage of callers who gave the call centres the maximum score in relation to satisfaction in the centres' own customer satisfaction surveys. They argued that this variable provided for a degree of equivalence between the different rating systems used by individual call centres and was the only practicable solution given that the study participants were unwilling to allow the authors access to more detailed information or to allow them to conduct their own satisfaction studies. They conceded however that it was a 'weak and imperfect measure of caller satisfaction' and suggested that this might have been why the results of the regression were so weak.

The second point that Feinberg *et al* made was in relation to the operational measures seen as central to call centre evaluation and used in the analysis. They argued that technology might have been the driver in shaping what is currently regarded as important in call centres. They suggested that certain of the operational variables might have started out as 'a simple artifact of the technology', easily measured and automatically reported, but that call centre operators 'have measured these things so long that everyone believes that they are measured because they are important when in fact they are measured only because it was an automatic measurement' (2000: 139). The research findings suggested that many metrics believed to be essential were in fact poor predictors or simply not predictors of caller satisfaction, the generation and maintenance of which is a primary function of most call centres.

Borrowing from previous research on customer expectations in regard to face-to-face service encounters, Burgers *et al* (2000) developed a model of customer expectations with regard to employee behaviour during voice-to-voice contacts such as those with call centre employees, or as the authors called them call centre representatives (CCRs). They argued that call centres were increasingly being seen as central to customer relationship management strategies. Since Bittner (1990) had previously shown that customers' evaluations of the quality of services were frequently

based on their perceptions of 'service encounters' or interactions and Klaus (1985) had theorised that quality in the context of such interactions was measured by customers in terms of the value of perceived benefits from the interaction over their expectations, in order to maximize the perceived quality of their services call centre operators required an understanding of what customers' expectations of a voice-to-voice service interaction were.

In a face-to-face interaction, the customer can base their perceptions of service quality on a number of factors, including the physical characteristics of the employees with whom they interact and the environment in which the interaction takes place. With a voice-to-voice interaction the evaluation of quality has to be based almost exclusively on their perceptions of the interpersonal attributes of the CCRs with whom they converse. Burgers *et al* drew on previous studies by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), Bearden, Malhotra and Usategui (1998) and Boshoff (1999) to identify thirteen personality attributes which had been seen to moderate perceptions of service satisfaction in other circumstances and which they anticipated would play a part in determining customer expectations of voice-to-voice interactions. Using a questionnaire with a series of items employing seven point Likert-type scales, they measured public perceptions of the desirability of the thirteen attributes in CCRs.

An analysis of the results revealed that expectations in relation to voice-to-voice interactions were based on elements of eight of the thirteen attributes used in the questionnaire. Burgers *et al* arranged these elements into four scales; adaptiveness, assurance, empathy and authority. The meanings assigned to these scales are explained in Table 3.6. The authors noted that there were limitations to the generalisability of their model. Their research did not discriminate between the different circumstances in which a voice-to-voice interaction might occur, and they felt that a customer ringing to complain might well have different expectations to one phoning to make a simple enquiry. It specifically excluded voice-to-technology interactions, such as take place when call centres employ interactive voice response systems, which might give rise to an alternative set of expectations. It illustrated the expectations of Dutch customers experiencing an average of less than four voice-to-voice interactions per month, and the authors accepted the possibility of international differences in customer expectations. Finally, the study was also based on attributes identified by existing service quality literature, implying that these were generalisable to a voice-to-voice context.

Table 3.6 Scales in the Burgers, de Ruyter, Keen and Streukens model of customer expectations of voice-to-voice interactions.

Scale	Description
Adaptiveness	Expectations that CCRs will be able adapt to questions or problems by listening to the customer, helping to interpret their problems, and providing them with workable solutions. Additionally, expectations that CCRs will be able to assess customers in terms of relationship to the company, mood and so on and adapt their behaviour appropriately.
Assurance	Expectations that the CCR will be able to explain any necessary procedures adequately and will be able to reassure the customer as to the uses to which information required by them will be put.
Empathy	Expectations that the CCR will be able to empathise with the customer's situation and lead the customer to believe that they and their problems are important to the organization.
Authority	Expectations that the CCR will have the authority and the ability to deal with the customer's problems.

Source: Burgers, de Ruyter, Keen and Streukens, 2000.

Burgers *et al* saw their model as 'a useful service management tool' with a number of possible functions. They suggested that it could form the basis for measurement of performance quality of CCRs and perceived service quality by customers. It could also be used to inform the content of CCR training courses, providing a structure around which to base learning. It could also have a role to play in recruitment and selection procedures, with techniques such as personality testing and role-plays being designed to assess prospective employees' levels on each of the four scales.

De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) assessed the effect of the perceived listening behaviour of call centre employees on customer satisfaction, trust and future intent to use the call centre using a model suggested by Anderson and Martin (1995) which conceptualized listening behaviour as having three component parts. The first, attentiveness, was defined as 'the extent to which customers receive verbal and nonverbal cues from call centre agents during the telephone service transaction' (2000: 277). Nonverbal cues included the use of 'paralanguage', a term encompassing vocal characteristics such as pitch, rate and volume, vocalizations such as groans which carry meaning, and voice segregates such as pauses, 'um's and 'ah's. The second, perceptiveness, was taken to mean 'the listener's attempt to understand the message by assigning meaning to the verbal and nonverbal messages that are transmitted by the speaker' (2000: 277) and according to de

Ruyter and Wetzels could be conveyed by the call centre agent in, for example, asking for additional details and using rephrasing to check their understanding of the caller's problem. The final component, responsiveness, was a subjective measure of the degree of common understanding between customer and call centre agent based on the customer's perception of the extent to which their contact had been received, interpreted, evaluated and acted upon in an appropriate manner.

De Ruyter and Wetzels hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between each of the three elements of listening behaviour and both customer satisfaction and trust. They further hypothesized that satisfaction would be positively related to trust and that both satisfaction and trust would be positively related to an intention to use the call centre again. They carried out a telephone survey of 147 customers who had contacted the customer service call centre of a Dutch mobile telecommunications provider. Customers were contacted on the day that they had called the centre and were asked to complete a questionnaire with nineteen items requiring responses based on a five-point Likert-type scale.

They found that, contrary to their expectations, attentiveness was only significantly positively related to satisfaction and not trust and perceptiveness was significantly positively related to trust but not satisfaction. Responsiveness was significantly positively related to both satisfaction and trust. They compared this with Ramsey and Sohi (1997) who in examining the importance of listening behaviours in the context of face-to-face interactions had not found a significant relationship between listening behaviour and customer satisfaction, suggesting that their examination, conducted at a 'dimensional level', had allowed them to 'further nuance the link between listening behaviour and customer evaluations' (2000: 281).

They also found a significant and positive relationship between satisfaction and trust that, they argued, emphasized the importance of satisfaction as a mediating construct and suggested that satisfaction with specific service encounters could be seen as contributing to the creation of a relationship of trust with the customer. This conclusion was again in contrast to the findings of Ramsey and Sohi (1997), who had visualized trust as a variable mediating the relationship between listening behaviour and satisfaction. De Ruyter and Wetzels explained this difference as possibly due to the alternative ways in which the two studies had operationalised satisfaction, with Ramsey and Sohi requiring respondents to make a general evaluative judgment regarding a salesperson and

de Ruyter and Wetzels constructing their items with regard to a single interaction. However, both Ramsey and Sohi (1997) and de Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) found that both satisfaction and trust were positively related drivers of customers' intended behaviour.

De Ruyter and Wetzels suggested that there were a number of managerial implications from their findings. They called for more attentiveness training to assist call centre employees to be sensitive to and focused on customer needs and their reasons for calling, stressed the importance of increasing the employees' knowledge base as a route to increasing perceptiveness, and argued that responsiveness could be improved by appropriate training. They put forward a case for the development of a 'listening tracking system to monitor employee performance' which could be used to help improve employees' listening skills and determine training requirements. Finally, they suggested that, given the importance of listening behaviour indicated by their findings, listening skills assessments incorporated into the recruitment process would help to identify those candidates who were likely to add value to call centre interactions.

Schmidt and Allscheid (1995) examined the relationship between employee attitudes and customer satisfaction. They found support for a model of attitudes, intentions and behaviour relationships developed by Bagozzi (1992) from earlier work by Lazarus (1991). The model linked appraisal, emotional response and coping in a sequential process. It was suggested that appraisal centred on an evaluation of 'outcome-desire units'. When outcome matches desire, for example when an employee attains a target or has a pleasant experience, a positive emotional response follows. Where outcome does not match desire, the result is a negative emotional response. The coping intention depends on the polarity of the emotional response, with negative emotional responses provoking coping intentions that seek to reduce conflict and positive emotional responses giving rise to intentions to maintain, enhance or share the outcome. Behaviour follows from and is congruent with coping intentions.

Schmidt and Allscheid suggested that the Bagozzi model had already been used to explain the relationship between customers' perceptions of quality and intentions to use a service again in the future (Gotlieb, Grewel and Brown, 1994), but could be equally applied to the employee side of the service transaction. In such a case, the model would imply that employee appraisals of organizational climate and service would be positively related to affective response and

consequently influence their intentions in relation to service provision, with intentions being positively related to actual customer service behaviour. Their findings were consistent with this model. Strong associations were found between climate appraisal and underlying emotional response and between emotional response and coping intentions, although the latter were found to be only 'moderately related' to behaviour.

The authors argued that the concept of outcome-desire units could 'go a long way toward enhancing the knowledge of the mechanisms ultimately responsible for customer satisfaction (1995: 531)'. They suggested that, of the four variables examined in their study, management and service support were more strongly related to affect than supervisor support or monetary support, although they acknowledged that there were climate variables not considered in their study that might also be expected to influence employees' appraisal of climate. The model proposed by Bagozzi (1992) and supported by Schmidt and Allscheid (1995) could be used as a framework to hypothesize the behaviour of call centre employees in response to various environmental factors.

As noted earlier, call centres in the UK initially tended to be concentrated in the financial services sector, but recognition of their potential has led to call centres being used for the delivery of a wide variety of public and private services which would previously have taken place on a face-to-face basis, including telephone triage or medical assessment via 'NHS Direct' call centres. The study by Wahlberg and Wredling (1999) of the function of telephone triage in Sweden highlights the need to recognize that a new delivery channel for a particular service might not be used in the same way as the arrangements that preceded it. Previous studies had noted the degree to which the loss of visual cues in voice-to-voice interactions limited the amount of information exchanged (Kacperek, 1997) and the ways in which triage nurses at medical call centres had attempted to compensate, for example by listening to the caller's breathing pattern and general tone and including this information in assessing the caller's problem and the most appropriate advice to give (Edwards, 1994). Wahlberg and Wredling examined the reasons for calling and the outcomes of calls to a medical call centre and compared these with previous studies of calls to health care centres and Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments to see how this relatively new service was being used and perceived by callers and to what extent that differed from the uses and perceptions of other health-care settings.

They found that 61 percent of callers were female, far higher than the proportion of females in the population of the Stockholm area (51 percent). This was ascribed to women's traditionally greater concern about relationships and the care of others. 47 percent of callers were phoning on behalf of another, in the majority of cases their child (67 percent) or partner (13 percent). Wahlberg and Wredling suggested that this 'could be a problem for the advisor because it is always wiser for the health professional to speak directly to the patient' (1999: 168), hypothesizing that possible reasons for patients not telephoning themselves could be embarrassment in some cases or a desire not to make the call in others. The majority of 'patients' were children under the age of 10 (30 percent) and adults aged between 20 and 40. Wahlberg and Wredling hypothesized that the high numbers of 'young adults' calling for advice might be due to the need for medical support and advice increasing as members of this group live away from home and parents for the first time, or a perception by those in the 20-40 age category that time cannot be taken away from employment for medical consultations.

The most common reasons for calling were to seek advice about symptoms of infection (31 percent) and chest or abdominal pains (9 percent). Previous studies on reasons for calling A&E departments in the UK (Crouch, Patel, Williams and Dale, 1996) and Australia (Edmonds, 1997) had found that the most common reason had been chest or abdominal pains, with dental problems and fevers also common. In terms of the advice given, 49 percent of callers were advised on self-care, 24 percent were given information, for example about other health-care services or about drug interactions, 18 percent were advised to consult a doctor immediately, 6 percent were advised to attend an A&E department and in 2 percent of cases an ambulance was dispatched. Wahlberg and Wredling suggested that the difference between common reasons for telephoning call centres and A&E departments might be explained by the perception of the latter as only appropriate for urgent enquiries, a hypothesis which might also explain the far higher percentage of callers to A&E advised to attend in person found in other studies.

Of those responding to the follow-up questionnaire, 85 percent followed the advice given with a further 7 percent seeking further medical advice. 95 percent of respondents had been 'completely satisfied' with the service that they had received (one of four possible response categories). Wahlberg and Wredling noted, however, that almost a fifth of questionnaire respondents even when completely satisfied with the advice that they had received had commented on the difficulties

of getting through to the medical call centre and on the length of time they were held in a 'queue' before being connected to a triage nurse.

Wahlberg and Wredling (1999) concluded that nurses who were employed in medical call centres needed to be appropriately trained. Most health professionals dispensed some advice by telephone, but were generally accustomed to examining patients in person before advising them so were more likely than medical call centre employees to advise callers to visit a hospital or health-care centre. Those working in medical call centres needed to have a wide knowledge of different aspects of health care as reasons for calling were diverse, to be well trained in self-care techniques, to be informed about the range of possibilities open to callers, and to be able to communicate their advice in a way that will be easily understood by callers. In addition, medical call centres needed to have adequate staffing levels if public confidence in their efficacy as a health-care solution was to be developed and maintained.

4.5 Management and management strategies in call centres

A number of authors have concerned themselves with the question of call centre management. Some have commented on general call centre management issues (Crome, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Others have looked to assess different management strategies in relation to specific call centre problems (for example, Betts, Meadows and Walley, 2000) or identify particular strategies used by call centre managements to cope with particular issues (Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee, 2000). Management strategies have also been assessed in the context of the ability of call centres to provide sites for organizational learning (Houlihan, 2000). Studies have ranged from the purely descriptive, exemplified by Wallace *et al*, through a continuum mixing description and prescription to the exclusively prescriptive, such as Coppett and Glass (1984) and Crome (1998).

Taylor and Bain (1999) mentioned briefly the difficulties faced by call centre managements trying to reconcile notions of customer relationship management with financial and competitive concerns. In the past, call centres have been seen primarily as a way of handling external enquiries, but they are increasingly being regarded as a means of managing the customer-organization interface to maximize competitive advantage (Burns, 1995; Prabhaker, Sheehan and Coppett, 1997). As a consequence, the question of customer satisfaction with the services provided by call centres has

been brought to centre stage. At the same time, competitive pressures in many industries have intensified, not least because call centres have allowed new entrants in markets that had previously been perceived as having high barriers to entry. For example, call centres have enabled vastly increased competition in UK personal banking because they remove the necessity for entrants to have a branch network, allowing supermarkets such as Tesco, life assurance companies such as Prudential and diversified enterprises such as Virgin to enter the market and build up significant customer bases almost immediately.

Call centre managements have therefore been confronted by a quality-quantity dilemma that they have found practically impossible to resolve. The importance of quality of service delivery as part of a customer relationship management strategy has led to increasing pressure on employees to perform emotional labour and increasing monitoring and assessment of their efforts in this regard. The suggestion of a link between customer satisfaction and speed of service delivery and requirements to increase efficiency for financial reasons have encouraged call centre managements to introduce measures which have intensified workflows. As a result employees' experience of work is, in general, mentally and physically demanding and stressful.

The problems faced by call centre managements are compounded by a tightening labour market. Various studies (Richardson and Marshall, 1996; Taylor and Bain, 1999) have suggested that call centres in the UK have tended to be geographically concentrated in areas of high population density, frequently those in which regional assistance grants have been available following the decline of more established heavy industries. Call centres have nonetheless been found to suffer from high rates of employee turnover or 'churn'. Taylor and Bain (1999: 110) suggested that annual turnover rates of more than 30 percent were not uncommon in call centres. The reasons for such high turnover are complex, but have variously been suggested to include employee 'burnout', the availability of alternative employment including other call centres (Welch, 1997) and poor working conditions in some call centres.

The decision to site call centres in areas of high population density whilst giving call centre operators access to a large potential labour pool also means that employees will have relatively easy access to other forms of employment. The availability of other employment, whether of a similar nature or otherwise, does seem to have a bearing on employee turnover with call centres

established in areas where little other employment is available reporting lower than average figures for employee turnover. Taylor and Bain (1999) have suggested that amongst the strategies employed by call centre managements to combat the problems occasioned by high employee churn are the increased use of part-time employees as part of a targeted recruitment strategy, the use of financial incentives including but not limited to individual and group related bonus schemes, and the adoption of 'a wide array of employee involvement techniques' including team-working arrangements.

Betts *et al* (2000) examined the strategies employed by 12 call centres in the UK financial services sector to manage the problems of demand fluctuation. They suggested that the literature had identified four broad strategies for capacity management across a range of contexts. 'Level' capacity approaches maintain resources at an approximately constant level in contrast to 'chase' approaches, which try to adjust capacity to meet demand. Organizational buffering strategies introduce measures such as queuing systems to increase the time given to organizations to respond, whilst demand management approaches employ a variety of measures in an attempt to manipulate demand to suit the organization. They used the concepts of range and response flexibility (Slack, 1995) to discuss the requirements and abilities of different call centres to cope with changes in demand, defining the former in the context of capacity management as 'the ability of an operation to move to a much higher or lower output rate over a long time horizon' and the latter as 'the ability of the operation to move from one output rate to another very quickly' (2000: 186).

They found that ten of the twelve call centres studied required relatively high response flexibility, that is to say that significant variations in demand could occur during time intervals of a day or, in five cases, an hour or less. Two of the ten, a personal loans call centre and a relationship banking service, also had high requirements for range flexibility, that is to say that the difference in extremes of demand for each was high relative to its maximum demand. Two, a card loss reporting service and a business leasing call centre, had low requirements for both measures. The authors explained these differences in requirements in terms of the susceptibility of the tasks performed by different call centres to external factors. For example, a call centre for an insurance claims operation included in the study experienced significant seasonal variation in demand due to weather conditions and a direct banking call centre found that demand was influenced by not just

the time at which their television advertising appeared, but also by whether it appeared prior to, during or after a programme and how popular programmes scheduled to follow its screening were.

Looking at quantitative data obtained from the twelve call centres studied, the authors found that there was wide variation between them in terms of the number of calls answered per employee per day, labour utilization, percentage of calls abandoned and demand variation. For example, the number of calls answered per day varied from 18 per employee in the case of an insurance 'service line' to 235 per employee at a card authorization call centre. Labour utilization tended to vary in direct relation to number of calls answered, with the card authorization call centre having a labour utilization of 79 percent and the insurance service line of only 11 percent. The call centres used a variety of methods to forecast demand, including systems based on manual calculations, Erlang theory derived from the general literature on queuing, and marketing information. Betts *et al* found that 'managers did not fully understand the complexity of the [forecasting] systems installed' in their systems (2000: 191), that 'no one system appeared to be consistently more effective' but that nonetheless 'many of the call centres had found effective methods of forecasting' (2000: 192).

In the single case for which they had performed regression analyses they found that forecasting accuracy did have an influence on call centre performance when measured in terms of percentage of calls answered within a set time or percentage of calls abandoned, but that random daily variation in demand was 'a far more significant factor' in daily call centre performance. This led them to conclude that 'call centre managers have a limited degree of control over the short-term capacity performance of their operations'. The authors described as 'unexpected' their finding that some call centres experienced practical limitations to the extent to which they could employ chase strategies for capacity management because they had not implemented appropriate means of achieving staff flexibility, and were consequently unable to reduce staffing levels during quiet periods. They noted that management reported 'higher levels of employee dissatisfaction and misbehaviour during very quiet periods' and concluded that this phenomenon had led to the elevation of inactivity minimization as a managerial decision-making criterion.

They suggested that their study supported the theory that capacity flexibility was needed to achieve high service level and efficiency. They noted that the operations research literature supported the idea of networking sites, and that from a capacity management perspective this provided a potential

means of smoothing demand and creating a buffer against extreme demand variation. They argued however that this was unlikely to provide a universal solution to capacity management problems in call centres, although their reasoning as to why not seemed a little weak. They suggested that location had a bearing on a call centre operator's ability to implement tactical solutions in the form of flexible working arrangements in order to increase capacity flexibility.

Betts *et al* observed that all the call centres they had studied had experienced demand patterns which tended to include severe short-term fluctuations and which were 'difficult to resource adequately'. They argued that capacity management problems in call centres were exacerbated by a need to respond quickly to calls and an inability to employ buffering strategies. They noted that both under- and over-resourcing call centres had consequences for employees; with the former causing stress due to workload and the latter leaving employees bored and dissatisfied and also likely to cause stress. They observed from a quantitative analysis of data from one call centre that 'operations managers within call centres only have a limited degree of control over their short-run performance' (2000: 195), although they found that structural decisions such as capacity networking appeared to have a greater influence. They asserted that this, coupled with variability of demand, meant that in general call centres would struggle to chase demand effectively. They concluded that conventional capacity management optimization tools, for example Erlang formulae, would be of limited use to call centres because the assumptions on which they were based were only partially applicable to call centre operations.

Wallace *et al* (2000) described the operation of what they termed a 'sacrificial HR strategy' in call centres. Their conclusions were based on a multiple-case study of four large call centres. The call centres, all situated in Sydney, Australia and with workforces of more than 100 employees, were operated by a bank, an insurance company, a telecommunications company and a third party outsourcing organization respectively. Each had been rated in the top 10 percent of an international benchmarking study of 227 call centres in terms of efficiency, customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction. The authors argued that the competing goals of efficiency and service excellence were central to all service environments but were especially salient to call centre operations. They suggested that management strategies to improve efficiency in call centres had focused mainly on the acquisition and employment of technologies that allowed them to control workflows and closely monitor employee performance, but that the managerial pursuit of this goal had had

negative consequences for employees in terms of emotional exhaustion, stress and for call centres in terms of high rates of staff turnover.

According to the authors, service excellence was perceived as important to call centres because there was evidence to suggest that high levels of customer satisfaction were a predictor of long-term organizational profitability (Jones and Sasser, 1995). They asserted that the HR literature pointed to supportive employee management as the primary means of securing high levels of customer service from employees, particularly in environments where emotional labour was required, and that employment security, extensive training and decentralized decision-making were all part of such a supportive management regime. They contended that one of the most important aspects of service management was 'the degree to which efficiency is compromised in order to provide service' (2000: 178). They suggested that it was possible to design HR strategies in circumstances when it was clear which was the overriding imperative, but in situations where it was desirable to give similar weighting to each it was necessary to manage the resulting tensions. They suggested that one method of managing such tensions in circumstances where both service quality and cost focus were high on the agenda was to have management perform two distinct but complementary roles: a task-oriented role in which managers might be expected to organize and structure workflows and to focus on results, and a relations-orientated role in which managers would provide support, coaching, feedback and encouragement with the aim of reducing employee stress, role ambiguity and burnout.

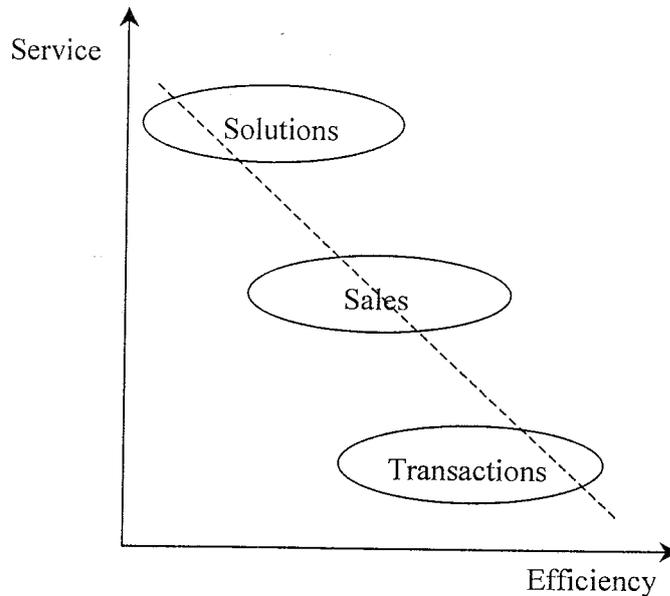
They found that 'in the call centres studied, the relations-oriented management was not present. Instead, the management of the efficiency/service tension was pushed onto the front-line. There was a clear understanding of the savings that could be gained by turning over burnt-out staff rather than investing in programs targeting morale, commitment and enthusiasm. By deliberately selecting individuals whose intrinsic motivation was service, high service levels were assured and the need for the organization to provide this motivation external to the employee was removed. By accepting burnout and high turnover, there is a reduced need for the organization to manage the emotional labour' (2000: 179). Wallace *et al* labelled this approach 'the sacrificial HR strategy'. The authors argued that the strategy involved a deliberate misalignment by management of the task demands and employees' intrinsic motivation, resulting in employee stress, burnout and turnover. The strategy imposed physical and psychological costs on employees, but offered those

organizations adopting it considerable reductions in expenditure on employee development and support. Levels of service provision would not be jeopardized as, using the sacrificial HR strategy, they were a product of employees' personal characteristics rather than of management action or inaction.

Wallace *et al* reasoned that the apparently independent adoption of this strategy in all the call centres studies suggested the possibility that certain commonalities had prompted a common managerial response. The persuasive power of this line of reasoning is weakened by the fact that the call centres in the study were all in the same city, allowing for the possibility that the common response was in fact the result of a cross-fertilisation of ideas as the result, for example, of the movement of managerial personnel or discussions in the context of a local call centre forum or other trade body. They asserted that the nature of the tasks performed in a call centre, the 'power and centrality of the IT system' and the state of the labour market were significant determinants of the adoption of a sacrificial HR strategy. In relation to the nature of tasks they identified three major, though not necessarily entirely separable, call centre activities; the completion of 'well-specified' transactions; the generation of sales; and the provision of solutions to and advice on complex and technical issues. They argued that each of these provided different challenges for management because each suggested a different relative prioritizing of service and efficiency objectives. The optimal 'trade-offs' between service and efficiency suggested by Wallace *et al* for each of the major call centre activities are illustrated in Figure 3.2 below and, they argued, the attainment of each would require a different managerial strategy.

The authors contended that call centres that performed more than one of the three main tasks would require adjustments in the managerial strategies adopted, and that the potential for conflict between task and management would be greatest where a call centre dealt with both routine transactions and more complex calls requiring inputs of emotional labour. This, they argued, was the case in the call centres in the study, all of which carried out basic transactions and as a consequence had adopted a task-oriented management approach but also required employees to deal with complaints. Wallace *et al* asserted that complaint handling required a high level of emotional labour and was more akin to problem solving than dealing with routine transactions. They suggested that in the past the expenditure required to support a relations-oriented management strategy had been accepted by organizations because it was perceived to be less than the costs associated with employee burnout.

Figure 3.2 The optimum trade-off positions for call centre tasks (Source: Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee, 2000: 181)



They argued that this perception was based on five underpinning assumptions. First, that every customer contact was valuable and any in which service delivery was poor would be costly to the organization. Second, that turnover needed to be minimized because the cost of training replacements was high. Third, that customers formed a relationship with specific employees and could be persuaded to move with the employee. Fourth, that difficulty in evaluating service quality at a micro level made assessing the effect of employee burnout on customer interactions hard to detect. Fifth, that the pool of good CSRs was limited and replacement would be both hard and costly.

They argued that advances in call centre technologies had invalidated three of those five assumptions. According to Wallace *et al* as 'technology has become more sophisticated, product and process knowledge as well as customer information have been embedded in the system, reducing training costs' (2000: 181). Technology that allowed voice-to-voice interactions to replace their face-to-face equivalents had led to a situation where 'the decoupling of the service from the delivery helps ensure that customers feel allegiance to the company rather than the service provider' (2000: 181), and the advent of systems that allowed managements unrestricted and unobtrusive access to employees in the course of service delivery meant that workforces 'can be monitored closely for performance and burnout and appropriate interventions made' (2000: 182).

They also argued that the last of the assumptions underpinning managerial acceptance of the costs associated with relations-oriented management strategies, that relating to the labour market limitations, was also no longer valid. This was the case, they asserted, in part because embedding knowledge in the system had changed the skills requirements for potential CSRs such that the only critical requirement was a strong service orientation. Also, unemployment rates in Australia at the time of the study were relatively high and, it was argued, the dominance of external over internal labour markets for call centres meant that potential recruits were not expecting long-term employment (Capelli, 1997).

Qualitative support for the 'sacrificial HR strategy' described by Wallace *et al* (2000) was provided by Callaghan and Thompson (2001), who quoted from an interview with a manager at Telebank in which the view was expressed that attrition might be expensive for the employer but was not necessarily deleterious to the call centre: 'To me attrition is very healthy, very costly, but very healthy. Because of the stressful nature of the job and because you want these people to keep constant energy and enthusiasm, it does the organization good if you can pump in some fresh blood' (Manager 6, quoted in Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 33). Callaghan and Thompson suggested that such views were not 'the official view of the industry'.

A very different conclusion was reached by Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (2000), who noted that there appeared to be 'a contradiction between the ways employees are managed and controlled and the type of emotional labour required for high levels of service and customer satisfaction' (2000: 968). They found evidence of call centres adopting and adapting high commitment management practices. According to the authors, in the past such practices had tended to be exclusively associated with high levels of employee discretion and not to tightly constrained working environments such as those which characterize call centres.

Houlihan (2000) looked at call centres from a perspective that was concerned with an analysis of the assumptions underlying call centre design and management as a means of revealing the extent to which they are intended to act as learning sites or sites for behavioural control. She explained that, whilst there was a positive side to call centres and in focusing on negative aspects of call centres it was easy to overlook that many call centre employees enjoyed their job much of the time, it was necessary to explore the tensions and contradictions 'in order to frame considerations for

potential gaps and development needs' (2000: 232). She argued that call centres were 'rooted in contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes' and as a result managements were forced to make trade-offs. The way in which tensions were resolved and paradoxes were managed played an important part in determining attitudes towards the organization and had the potential to create conflicting role requirements for call centre employees.

She made reference to the business advantages frequently claimed for call centres, which include 'efficiency, a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, reduced dependence on employee skills and substantial cost savings' (2000: 229). She argued that the critical factor distinguishing this environment was the use of an integrated information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure as a basis for work processes, providing the potential for work to be routinised, monitored and controlled 'in far-reaching ways'. According to Houlihan, there were, from a managerial perspective, underlying assumptions that this combination of technology and management would result in 'motivated and fine-tuned employees, supported by sophisticated performance management, low levels of hierarchy and extensive training and cultural intervention' (2000: 230) whilst fulfilling the organizational requirement for competitiveness and delivering total management flexibility and control.

Houlihan argued that the 'rational architecture of call centres' tended 'to imply that employee agency is minimal or "managed out"' (2000: 230), whereas her research painted a very different picture. She listed a number of examples of 'agents circumscribing prescribed routines with their own strategies', including call avoidance tactics, cutting off or providing incomplete services to difficult or uncooperative customers, and 'editing' call scripts. She pointed out that such actions did not negate the intent of managerial control strategies and that employees risked punishments ranging from censure to dismissal if caught, but that they did question the totality of management control promised by call centres. For her, one consequence of the absence of full control was a tendency to use and perceive employee monitoring, which would ideally function as a developmental activity, as an 'organizational defence routine'.

Houlihan contended that the 'intended outcomes of call centre organization, particularly the key characteristics of routinisation, performance monitoring and textualisation, can also invoke unexpected, unintended outcomes' but that these outcomes were 'mediated by and enmeshed with

both personal modes of coping and organizational sustaining mechanisms (2000: 230-231). Her study identified a number of broad themes amongst the coping strategies adopted by call centre employees to help them deal with the environmentally and psychologically stressful nature of the work. She described these as 'embracing, ignoring, distancing, "misbehaving" and resisting' strategies respectively. Her research suggested that individuals tended to adopt a portfolio of coping strategies, the exact make-up of which varied over time and context. She asserted that resistance strategies such as misbehaving or exploiting deficiencies in the system were in fact attempts to channel employees' stress.

In her view, the normal reaction of managements in attempting to increase control in order to eliminate such behaviours was both mistaken and counterproductive. She contended that 'increased control will incur and indeed necessitate increased resistance', arguing that in general call centre employees tried to do their job well and to act in the interests of both employers and customers. When employees perceived this to be impossible, it was usually because of constraints in the system. As a result, work became 'a psychological battlefield of trade-offs that the agents negotiate on an ongoing basis' (2000: 231). Houlihan suggested that call centre employee motivation was 'rooted in perceptions of fair play' and that employees regularly revised their expectations of employers in order to avoid frustration. When their expectations were not met, or they perceived that they were being mistreated or that managements were attempting to distance themselves from the failings of their systems, then employee morale dipped and the eventual outcome was a deterioration in work effort.

She also argued that organizations sought to minimize problems experienced as a result of employee coping mechanisms by using a variety of HRM initiatives. These included recruitment and selection initiatives such as person-job fit analyses, multiple selection techniques and realistic job previews; initiatives relating to work organization, including the use of teams; and socialization initiatives which help to introduce and reinforce organizational norms, values and beliefs and acceptable coping mechanisms. She suggested that coaching and mentoring initiatives encouraged employees to visualize the successes and failures of the system as their own, and that in this sense Foucauldian analyses of call centres had some resonance.

Although Taylor and Bain (1999) suggested that team building activities were given a low priority and that team meetings were often either cursory or missed, Houlihan argued that call centre employees benefited from such 'forums for de-stressing' where concerns and frustrations could be aired and in many cases defused. She also suggested that employees frequently talked to each other during breaks about difficult or unusual customers, not only de-stressing but also resolving divergences between personal and organizational interests. She contended that these processes for 'smoothing over the conflicts' had a negative outcome in the longer term because they stifled and absorbed important information 'enabling issues to persist and become longer-term problems (2000: 232).

In common with other commentators (for example, Taylor, Mulvey, Hyman and Bain, 2002), Houlihan identified the quality-quantity issue, which she described as 'the conundrum of trying to get closer to the customer while routinising, centralizing, reducing costs and prescribing standards' (2000: 232), as a concern central to all call centre operations. She argued that much of the design and management effort put into call centres was focused on attempting to predict inherently unpredictable demand levels, and that when predictions failed and systems became overloaded the pressure to speed up travelled down through the system to call centre employees via the use of on-screen and overhead displays of statistics such as the number of calls waiting, average queuing times and percentage of calls abandoned. She explained that managerial actions to find an appropriate compromise between quality and quantity often produced unintended outcomes, arguing that 'customer service and rhetoric and quality customer care are juxtaposed against pressure to keep calls short in order to maintain service levels and meet performance targets. Frequently, this tension is "resolved" by persistently shifting priorities. This results in a systemic and individual ambivalence, which is precarious and easily knocked out of balance' (2000: 233). She contended that the net result of continually 'tweaking' the system was that employees became unclear about organizational priorities. Emphasis on the importance of service quality against a backdrop of endless reporting of business and individual performance statistics acts to send out mixed messages that, according to Houlihan 'undermine confidence and induce agent scepticism towards management intentions and deep concerns about accuracy and fairness'.

Houlihan (2000) has argued that managerial decisions in relation to strategy, structure and approach imply 'root assumptions and guiding beliefs' about call centre operation. In relation to the

role of employees she suggested that, regardless of the actual role performed, the call centre employee 'is largely constructed as a mouth-piece rather than as a brain...[employees] are cast as having restricted skill repertoires and the implication is that they are required not to think beyond a programmed level...[and the] level of micro-control [applied to employee behaviour] betrays an assumption about the agent as automaton and the activity as simple and explicit' (2000: 234).

In common with Wallace *et al* (2000), Houlihan concluded that call centre managements had accepted that call centre employment was necessarily monotonous and poorly rewarded and that as a consequence there would be high rates of employee turnover. She questioned the inevitability of this scenario. She argued that control was a 'self-justifying dynamic' and that 'in an atmosphere of low trust people are likely to behave predictably untrustworthily' (2000: 237). Systems which could be used for feedback were instead employed as a means of correcting behaviour, and the resulting culture of control led to defensiveness at all levels of the organization. A focus on the measurement of outputs resulted in a situation where, throughout the organization, each layer of the organizational hierarchy worked primarily to satisfy their immediate targets and not wider organizational goals.

She felt that there were four strategic choices open to call centre managements, which she labelled as 'to control, to contain, to humanize or to radicalise' respectively. The control strategy was, she suggested, the most widely used in call centres and was based on central assumptions that total compliance was required and that this could only be achieved through close monitoring and corrective action. A containment strategy looked to provide workforce stability through the use of various HRM practices and benchmarking rather than individual measurement regimes, the aim being that focus on employee stress, motivation and job satisfaction would help to contain problems of employee burnout, absenteeism and turnover. The humanizing strategy acknowledged the difficulties faced by call centre employees and tried to lessen these by improvements to the physical environment, extensive training in and support with coping strategies. She contended that call centres employing this approach still made the same underlying assumptions as those adopting control strategies, with the result that humanism tended to be simply a veneer. The final strategic choice was 'to radicalize – to completely rethink the knowledge, purpose and underlying assumptions of call centre organizing... It is not necessary to reject the benefits of performance management, but rather to eradicate the mixed messages, to give people scope to be true members

of the business, and organization space to breathe its own natural wisdom. This calls for reassessment of management orientation, job design, staffing levels, task mix and the type of skills developed and expected in agents' (2000: 239).

The prescriptive tone which characterized the end of Houlihan's analysis is shared by authors such as Crome (1998), who suggested that if UK call centre operators were to maintain their market share in the face of competition from longer established and more experienced US call centre operators 'they must improve customer service levels [and] they must recruit and retain skilled and motivated people capable of delivering service excellence' (1998: 137). He detailed the 'soft skills' in which operators must be trained if customer service is to be improved, including rapport building, 'spin doctoring', active listening and questioning, service recovery and problem solving techniques. In relation to the latter part of his formula for success, he argued that 'too often call centres resemble battery farms where line after line of employees are force-fed a continuous stream of calls. Automated call distributor (ACD) data are used as a stick to beat people with and supervisory style is more akin to that of a kindergarten... To achieve success, call centre managers have to create a "free range" environment designed around the needs of staff and which encourages employee involvement in the centre's day to day operation' (1998: 139).

4.7 Summary

In this chapter I have tried to review the growing body of published literature on four call centre-related themes, general call centre development, call centres in the wider social context, call centres as a service delivery channel, and the management of and management strategies employed in call centres. In relation to the first, I found no detailed academic accounts of the growth of call centres in the UK or elsewhere. The subject has generally been given very cursory treatment and has tended to form part of the preamble to studies of other call centre-related topics (for example, Marshall and Richardson, 1996; Prabakhar, Sheehan and Coppett, 1997; Richardson *et al*, 2000). There have more recently been academically-based surveys to establish the extent of call centre growth regionally, nationally and internationally (such as Richardson and Marshall, 1996; Hook, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Breathnach, 1997; Michels, 2001; Belt *et al*, 2000) but earlier estimates of call centre activity were generally provided by commercial research organisations.

What the various studies have suggested is that it is possible to make some broad generalizations about call centre workforces, but that it is necessary to be alert to the possibility of exceptions. For example, although most studies have indicated that call centre workforces are predominately female, usually in the region of 60-70 percent, this figure has been found to be significantly lower for call centres providing computer and technical services, and significantly higher for call centres in the financial services sectors (Belt *et al*, 2000). Call centre workforces have been found to be relatively young with the majority of employees in the 20-30 age bracket although there is evidence that age distributions vary significantly with the function of the call centre and it has also been suggested that age distributions may shift as this type of employment becomes more established. Non-standard working patterns are common in call centres as is the use of temporary employees, although there is considerable variation between call centres in relation to both. Employee tenure generally has a very negatively skewed distribution, with mean average tenure considerably greater than mode average, that is to say the most frequently occurring value (for example, Hook (1998) found a mean tenure of 26 months compared to a mode average value of 6 months).

Despite repeated forecasts of call centre growth and increasing call centre employment, some authors (for example, Anton, 2000; Calvert, 2001) have suggested that call centres have an unsettled future. Anton (2000) suggested that a shift in the primary communications channel for business to customer interactions from the telephone to internet and e-mail communication was imminent. Allied to this was the increasing deployment of new interactive voice recognition (IVR) technologies. He estimated that, from virtually nil in 1995, some 38 percent of all call centre contacts were being handled by IVRs in 2000 and that this figure was likely to increase to over 70 percent by 2005.

Questions of call centre employment stability and permanence have also been uppermost in the minds of authors looking at call centres in the wider social context. These have tended to focus on the way in which information and communications technologies have enabled changes in the spatial division of labour by making possible the geographical separation of service providers and consumers. In theory, organizations providing services where such separation was possible, or those seeking to expand their markets or to differentiate themselves by offering additional services or products were no longer geographically constrained but could locate so as to take maximum

advantage of spatial variations in the factors of production. Call centres are seen as an organizational form capable of exploiting the advantages of spatial separation.

Richardson and Belt (2001) have suggested that telecommunications infrastructure, labour and property availability are the most salient factors in call centre location decisions, with financial incentives, the support of public agencies and local transport infrastructure playing a lesser role. Both Breathnach (2000) and Richardson *et al* (2000) examined the effects of an influx of call centres on a local economy. In the former study Dublin was shown to have successfully targeted inward investment to set up pan-European call centres. In the latter, the ability of the North East of England to attract mainly domestic call centres was examined. In each case the same pattern of call centre growth emerged. Richardson *et al* argued that 'the skills developed [in call centres] are easily transferable between firms. Thus the successful attraction of a few firms to the region creates a pool of labour that can, in turn, attract other firms' (2000: 367). As the concentration of call centres increases, the availability of labour decreases and the price commanded by labour increases. Wage inflation and increasing pressure on local resources such as housing and transport negate the previous advantageous spatial variations in the factors of production and the rate of call centre growth slows. Both studies identified gains in the local economy from the establishment of call centres but feared for the longer term, concluding that such inward investments entrenched rather than challenged the locations' previous status as 'branch plant economies'.

The third theme discussed in this chapter encompassed aspects of discussion of call centres as a communications delivery channel. Bennington *et al* (2000) compared customers' ratings of satisfaction with call centre services and office-based services provided by an Australian government welfare-related services organization and found the difference to be statistically significant but from a practical perspective 'marginal'. However, as a 1999 study of telephone triage in Sweden by Wahlberg and Wredling demonstrated, it is not safe to assume that a service provided by a call centre will be perceived as or used in a manner the same as its face-to-face service equivalent. Comparisons of ostensibly similar in-person and telephone-based must therefore be treated with caution.

The manipulation of call centre customer satisfaction was central to many studies included in this subcategory. Attempts to find critical determinants of customer satisfaction in this context have

yielded some surprising results. Feinberg *et al* (2000) looked at the relationships between customer satisfaction and a number of operational variables commonly measured by call centre operators, but found that 'none of the 13 critical operational variables could be concluded to be *the* variable of importance in creating and maintaining customer satisfaction with call centre experience' (2000: 139, authors' own emphasis). They concluded that many of the metrics commonly believed by call centre operators to be essential were either poor predictors of or were not predictors of caller satisfaction.

Callers' perceptions of employee behaviour have been found to play an important part in determining customer satisfaction. One study (Burgers *et al*, 2000) indicated that callers' expectations and assessments of telephone interactions were based on eight interpersonal attributes that the authors condensed into four scales and labelled 'adaptiveness', 'assurance', 'empathy' and 'authority' respectively. The key to customer satisfaction would lie in meeting and exceeding customer expectations along each of these scales. Another (De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000) demonstrated positive associations between the perceived listening behaviour of call centre employees and customer satisfaction, trust and future intent to use the call centre.

If caller satisfaction is influenced by the behaviour of call centre employees it is important to know what influences employee behaviour. Schmidt and Allscheid (1995) found evidence that customer service behaviour was linked, via mechanisms of affective response, to employee appraisals of organizational climate and service. They suggested that, of the four variables examined in their study, management and service support were more strongly related to affect and thus likely to have a greater influence on employee behaviour, than supervisor support or monetary support, although they acknowledged that there were climate variables not considered in their study that might also be expected to influence employees' appraisal of climate.

Authors concerned with the management of and management strategies employed in call centres have almost universally noted that call centre managements are confronted by a quality-quantity dilemma. The importance of quality of service delivery as part of a customer relationship management (CRM) strategy has led to many call centre operators placing additional pressure on employees to perform emotional labour as well as increasingly monitoring and assessing employees' efforts in this regard. At the same time evidence of links between customer satisfaction

and speed of service delivery and requirements to increase efficiency for financial reasons have encouraged call centre managements to introduce measures that have intensified workflows. Many believe that these elements of call centre management lie behind the very high rates of employee turnover experienced by some call centres.

Whilst a number of studies tended to focus on specific elements of call centre management practice, several meta-strategies have been suggested. Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell noted that there appeared to be 'a contradiction between the ways employees are managed and controlled and the type of emotional labour required for high levels of service and customer satisfaction' (2000: 968). They found evidence of call centres adopting and adapting high commitment management practices, in the past exclusively associated with working environments characterized by high levels of employee discretion.

By way of contrast, Wallace *et al* (2000) found evidence of what they called 'the sacrificial HR strategy' operating in a sample of Australian call centres. They argued that the relations-oriented management strategies normally considered essential in environments requiring high levels of emotional labour were not present. Efficiency was viewed as the prime directive. Call centre managements had 'a clear understanding of the savings that could be gained by turning over burnt-out staff rather than investing in programs targeting morale, commitment and enthusiasm. By deliberately selecting individuals whose intrinsic motivation was service, high service levels were assured and the need for the organization to provide this motivation external to the employee was removed' (2000: 179). The organizational advantage of accepting burnout and high turnover was a reduced need to manage the emotional labour demanded.

Houlihan (2000) noted the use by call centre employers keen to reduce employee turnover of recruitment and selection initiatives such as person-job fit analyses, multiple selection techniques and realistic job previews; initiatives relating to work organization, including the use of teams; and socialization initiatives which help to introduce and reinforce organizational norms, values and beliefs and acceptable coping mechanisms. She argued that high levels of employee turnover in call centres were not inevitable, but depended to a large degree on the management strategies adopted. She felt that call centre managements could make one of four strategic choices; to control, to contain, to humanize or to radicalize. The control strategy was, she suggested, the most widely

used in call centres and was based on central assumptions that total compliance was required and that this could only be achieved through close monitoring and corrective action. Her prescription was for call centres 'to radicalize – to completely rethink the knowledge, purpose and underlying assumptions of call centre organizing' (2000: 239). This strategy would call for reassessments of management orientations, job designs, staffing levels, task mixes and the types of skills developed and expected in call centre employees.

This chapter has examined four of the six main themes that have been developed in research on call centres. In the chapter that follows the remaining two themes, the characterization of call centre work and individual level aspects of call centre employment, are explored.

Chapter 4

Management, employment and work in call centres II:

Work organization and employment

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined four themes emerging from the growing body of call centre-related literature. These related to UK call centre development, call centres in a wider societal context, the use of call centres as a service delivery channel and call centre management and managerial strategies respectively. In this, the second of the two chapters examining the treatment of call centres in academic literature, I examine two further themes that have tended to predominate in research and writing on call centres. The first of these might usefully be labelled the 'characterization of call centre work'. A number of attempts have been made to characterize and suggest theoretical models for the work processes in call centres, and these are reviewed. The final theme explored is that of 'call centre employees', within which the research spotlight has fallen on topics as diverse as desirable personal characteristics and subjective experiences of the call centre labour process.

4.2 Characterisation of call centre work organization

Of all of the themes explored in relation to call centres thus far, this has seen the most heated debate. It has proved possible for different authors to see the organization of call centre work as fitting a number of theoretical models, with considerable disagreement about the degree of fit provided by each. Call centre organization has been examined from a Taylorist perspective (Bibby, 1996; Demaret, Quinn and Grumiau, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999), a post-Taylorian perspective (Peaucelle, 2000), a Foucauldian perspective (Ferne, 1998; Ferne and Metcalf, 1998) and a structural control perspective (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). In addition, it has been seen as evidence of the emergence of new patterns of work organization (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire and Tam, 1999; Norling, 2001).

Bibby (1996) argued that call centres represented 'a major change in the way in which many white-collar office-based jobs are structured and undertaken' (1996: 35). He suggested that the way in which technology was being employed in call centres to control workflows made employment in them 'more akin to assembly-line manufacturing' than to office work as it had previously been experienced. He identified an apparent paradox in which call centres could be seen both as

encouraging 'innovation in various aspects of flexible working' and as places of 'relatively inflexible work organization'. He resolved this paradox by arguing that it had been necessary to conceive new forms of working to meet the needs of call centres to be able to react to demand fluctuation whilst keeping employees motivated in the face of what could be 'a numbingly tedious way of working'.

The similarities between call centre work and factory assembly-line labour processes have been reiterated by authors such as Demaret, Quinn and Grumiau (1998: 1) who suggested that working conditions in call centres bore 'a suspicious resemblance to the assembly lines of the early industrial era' and noted that some commentators were drawing parallels between call centre employees and skilled labourers and describing call centres as 'communications factories'. Taylor and Bain (1999) also noted similarities. Whilst acknowledging that variations in the complexity of tasks performed at different call centres did exist, they described the 'common and defining call centre labour process' as one 'in which operators scan and interpret information on VDU screens, manipulate keyboards to enter or retrieve data and simultaneously communicate with phone-based customers' (1999: 108). They argued that in terms of the forms of and the extent of use of monitoring call centres represented a significant development in the Taylorisation of white-collar work, likening the experience of inbound call centre employees, who are under continuous pressure to perform and who are acutely aware that one call will be immediately followed by another, to having 'an assembly-line in the head' (1999: 109).

Fernie (1998), commenting on the potential for control of call centre employees offered by developments in computer telephony integration, suggested that the 'possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output in call centres are amazing to behold – the 'tyranny of the assembly line' is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony' (1998: 7). Bain and Taylor (2000) took exception to this contention. They suggested that this comparison was 'outlandish' and 'historically inaccurate', providing as support for their assertion an excerpt from an account by Beynon (1973) of the Ford assembly plant in 1930s Detroit prior to unionisation. Whilst fascinating in itself, the relevance of Beynon is questionable given that the use of present tense suggests that Fernie and Metcalf intended to make comparisons with modern-day assembly lines. Even if the quotation from Beynon was apposite, the tyranny detailed therein was not that of the assembly line as a method of work

organisation per se but was directly related to Ford's then strongly anti-union stance. Whilst the language might be inflammatory, it is difficult to see why Fernie and Metcalf's assertion that computer telephony offers greater scope for managerial control of employees than does assembly line forms of work organisation should have caused Bain and Taylor so much anguish.

Fernie referred to the potential to monitor and measure employees which, when compared with the possibilities to do so in the vast majority of workplaces, could reasonably be said to be amazing. Also, and notwithstanding the abilities of employees to resist or subvert such attempted control (see for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; Houlihan, 2000), there is a sense in which computer telephony can be said to facilitate far greater control than assembly line forms of work organization. Assembly line forms of work organization exert control over the pace of work and over the physical actions of employees. Computer telephony allows managements to do this in call centres but also provides the means to control the way in which those actions are carried out, for example by providing scripting for interactions and the means of constantly monitoring via software that not only is the script being delivered but that the delivery has the tonal qualities desired by management.

Peaucelle (2000) saw call centres as one of the means employed by post-Taylorian enterprises to achieve their objectives. He argued that two objectives characterized the Taylorian enterprise, regardless of the variety of methods employed to achieve them; increasing efficiency and increasing output. These help guide management in its day-to-day operations and lead towards the ultimate objective of profit maximization. A post-Taylorian enterprise is characterized by its simultaneous pursuit of the objectives of efficiency, flexibility, timeliness of service or product delivery, quality and variety or diversity of product or service. Peaucelle insisted that the pursuit of all of these objectives was still consistent with the overarching objective of profit maximization. Peaucelle argued that post-Taylorian organizational means, including the use of call centres, 'enable the simultaneous attainment (or with little contradiction) of various objectives... What matters is that the outcome is a simultaneous improvement of various objectives attained, or the attainment of new objectives without affecting the former ones' (2000: 459). He saw call centres as primarily a means of attaining the post-Taylorian objective of timeliness of service delivery in a cost-efficient way. He acknowledged that as a result the conditions in many call centres resembled 'those of Taylorian workshops, where work rates are close to the maximum that workers can

manage. There are very few breaks in between different tasks and the deadlines create a high level of tension' (2000: 461).

Fernie (1998) introduced the Foucauldian perspective to call centres later developed by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) as part of an empirical investigation of the theory of the new economics of personnel. She suggested that as far as call centres were concerned 'Bentham's Panopticon was truly the vision of the future' (1998: 7) and that they were the epitome of what Foucault had had in mind when he used the Panopticon as a metaphor for the workplace of the future. The Panopticon was an 18th century design attributed to Jeremy Bentham for a prison based on the premise of a central tower from which a single guard could at any time and without being seen observe any of the prisoners confined and isolated in individual cells ranged around it. Bentham believed that the knowledge that they could at any point in time be subjected to the 'carcereal gaze' would ultimately cause prisoners to internalize the behaviour desired of them and to act as though that gaze was in fact permanently focused on them. Fernie provided an excerpt from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in which he described the physical layout of such a workplace. The majority of call centre workers would be likely to have little difficulty in recognizing similarities between Foucault's description and their own call centre. However, her subsequent assertion that in call centres 'the agents are constantly visible and the supervisor's power has indeed been rendered perfect - via the computer screen - and therefore its actual use unnecessary' (1998: 8) is certainly contentious.

It seems incumbent to examine the possible reasons for Fernie's conclusion in this regard, given that other studies (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Tyler and Taylor, 1997) demonstrate clearly the imperfections in managerial power over employees. There were relatively small numbers of agent-level employees in Fernie and Metcalf's three case study call centres. They had 80, 27 and 40 such employees respectively, compared to an average workforce of 167 found in Fernie and Metcalf's call centre survey. It is possible that smaller centres might have a higher supervisor to agent ratio, which might act to suppress overt resistance in the workplace, leading to a conclusion based on observation that supervisory power had been rendered complete. However, Fernie suggested that case study visits had 'provided the opportunity to talk at length with call centre workers' and it might be expected that the topic would have been explored at least informally at this point. Another possibility is that Fernie and Metcalf were allowed to come to this

conclusion by the call centre workers with whom they spoke because of a perception that they were agents of management and that imperfections in the system revealed to them would be reported back and employees' avenues of temporary escape would subsequently be closed. The potential for the means of access to the research setting to restrict or bias the data that can be gathered by researchers is given further consideration in the chapter on research methods below.

It is also possible that Fernie and Metcalf's perception of supervisory power apparently rendered perfect owed a great deal to prevailing economic and labour market factors. The decision to quit a particular position is mediated by a number of factors. These include the availability of alternative employment and the perceived costs to the employee of changing jobs. On a psychological level, there are costs associated with resisting workplace regimes (See Houlihan, 2000, detailed in chapter 3). It may be that at the time of the case studies a situation existed in which on an individual basis, the majority of employees in the call centres studied perceived that the costs of resisting the management regimes exceeded those of quitting and finding alternative employment, leading to a situation where turnover was the only evidence of challenge to management. Fernie did, however, mention a problem with 'burn out', suggesting that eighteen months was 'about as much as a computer telephonist can cope with' (1998: 11).

Taylor and Bain (1999) rejected the 'electronic Panopticon' perspective advanced in relation to call centres by authors such as Fernie (1998) and Fernie and Metcalf (1998). For them such a perspective was problematical in several respects. They noted with approval the assertion of others (McKinlay and Taylor, 1998; Thomson and Ackroyd, 1995; Lyon, 1993) that workplaces were not, and neither were they akin to, total institutions incorporating carcereal regimes characterized by all-encompassing surveillance. They argued that the so-called 'Foucauldian perspective' suggested a model of complete managerial control in call centres that understated 'both the voluntary dimension of labour and the managerial need to elicit commitment from workers' (1999: 103). But in Taylor and Bain's view the most important deficiency of the perspective was 'that it neglects both the actuality of, and potential for, employee resistance' (1999: 112).

They suggested that their research had uncovered evidence of both individual and collective forms of resistance. They argued that employees were 'not automatons' and would seek 'to varying degrees and in a variety of ways...to combat or circumvent what they perceive to be unacceptable

managerial practices' (1999: 112). They suggested that in circumstances where individual 'oppositional practices' were both deeply embedded in the workplace culture and were facilitated by or copied by other 'disaffected' employees such practices took on a 'quasi-collective form'. They cited an example from an interview of a part-time employee who claimed to have successfully used a tactic of threatening to resign in order to obtain a change of shift and who suggested that others had then used the same tactic for the same purpose, with management cognizant of the strategy but powerless to act.

Taylor and Bain argued that many employees found weaknesses in the surveillance systems employed by their call centres and learned to tell when they personally were being monitored or recorded, an assertion also made by employees in other call centre studies (for example, Tyler and Taylor, 1997). They ascribed considerable meaning to this, asserting that 'in both union and non-union environments, the frequency with which operators described the limitations of the monitoring equipment was clearly related not only to the widespread resentment at its utilisation, but also to a collective desire to defeat its purpose' (1999: 112). This conclusion is however based on interviews with twenty-one employees at twelve different call centres, and therefore the evidence on which claims of 'widespread resentment' and 'collective desire' are based seems somewhat slight. They also mentioned various arrangements negotiated by different unions in a number of call centres, arguing that 'evidence of membership gains and negotiated improvements, combined with an expanding bargaining agenda, indicates growing union organization. All this points unmistakably to the conclusion that the call centre is indeed 'contested terrain'' (1999: 114).

In a later paper (Bain and Taylor, 2000) the same authors presented a critique of so-called Foucauldian models used in the description of employment in call centres, especially that presented by Fernie and Metcalf (1998). Their primary concern was that because of the widespread publicity generated by the latter 'these authors have gained a wide audience for a mistaken representation of essential characteristics of the call centre. Not only have they erected a simplistic and false model which ignores the complexities of the employment relationship and the labour process, they have committed an equally serious error in underestimating, even eliminating, the potential for, and actuality of worker resistance' (2000: 3). Employee resistance to control in call centres has been noted by, amongst others, Taylor and Bain (1999) and Houlihan (2000).

One of the points made by Bain and Taylor was that that the majority of so-called 'Foucauldian' analyses of call centre employment tend to borrow both sparingly and selectively from the works of Foucault. References tend to be made primarily to excerpts from 'Discipline and Punish' (1977), particularly those which discuss the Panopticon, an eighteenth century design for a prison used by Foucault as a metaphor for societal surveillance. The term 'Foucauldian' is thus arguably a misnomer for those explanations that draw parallels less with the works of Foucault than with the idea of the Panopticon and its hypothesised effects as initially espoused by Jeremy Bentham. They might more accurately be termed 'panoptical analyses'.

Panoptical analyses have been employed in recent times to explain the effects of electronic workplace surveillance and monitoring (for example Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Delbridge, Turnbull and Wilkinson, 1993). Such accounts have attracted criticism for presenting a picture that overestimates the scope and depth of managerial control over employees (McKinlay and Taylor, 1996) and fails to acknowledge and account for resistance by employees (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). Bain and Taylor reiterated the earlier assertion by themselves and others that the Foucauldian framework was 'inherently flawed as a way of explaining workplace relations' on the grounds that factories and offices were not directly analogous to the carceral institutions on which the theory was premised. What the detractors of panoptical analyses of call centres do not seem to consider is the possibility that it could and does provide an explanation of the experience of such work but that accounts up until now have failed to consider the effects of the discontinuous exposure to panoptical conditions on employees. Bain and Taylor observed that call centres are not prisons and that 'inmates can leave their cells at the end of the shift' (2000: 14) but this is not a sufficient reason to abandon the use of panoptical analysis as a framework within which the experience of employment in call centres could be explained.

Bain and Taylor (2000) used data from their study of employees of Telecorp to provide the means of a rebuttal to the central thesis of Fernie and Metcalf (1998). Before considering their arguments three points should be noted. The first point is that their data was gathered from employees of a call centre but not from employees at the call centre. The distinction is an important one. At no time did Bain and Taylor gain access to the call centre as such. All their rebuttal evidence was gained outside of periods in which panoptical pressures were being exerted by the call centre on those employees. The second is that although Bain and Taylor suggested that their case study 'location'

employed 350 agents working 24 hours a day and 365 days a year providing seven different services including directory enquiries, international enquiries and 999 emergency response, their data was drawn from meetings of a group of call centre employees, not all of whom were agents, and the size of which fluctuated from four to ten with a composition that was fluid but almost invariably included 'the leading core'. That is to say that Bain and Taylor's data was obtained in the main from just three or four individuals.

The third point is that Bain and Taylor described the meetings from which they derived their data, which took place over the course of a three-month period, as 'the organising efforts' of an 'informal committee' as they 'strove to combat an anti-union employer'. Bain and Taylor explicitly acknowledged the presence of 'what might be regarded as a bias in the source data' and suggested that their research did 'not pretend to be empirically exhaustive' (2000: 8). They nonetheless felt justified in using the data obtained to refute arguments advanced by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) despite having criticised that study on the basis that its conclusions were drawn from research which was 'based neither on a broad survey of call centres nor on an empirical investigation of work organisation and the employment relationship' (2000: 6).

Turning to the main arguments advanced by Bain and Taylor (2000) in criticizing the use of panoptical analyses, the authors had previously asserted (Taylor and Bain, 1999) that, in many call centres, managements faced common problems. These included 'high labour turnover ('churn'), sickness absence rates, problems with motivation and commitment caused by an intrinsically demanding labour process, lack of promotion opportunities in typically 'flat' structures, and loss of staff following an investment in training' (2000: 11). They argued that the presence of such problems indicated that electronic surveillance had not perfected supervisory power in call centres as Fernie and Mecalf had suggested, and that the proportion of managerial time spent analysing performance data was evidence of a lack of managerial confidence in its own authority.

Bain and Taylor suggested that the confusion of the formal characteristics of systems and managerial intention with actual practice and outcome was a feature of explanations that employed panoptical analyses. They asserted that despite surveillance, some Telecorp agents were able to find and exploit gaps in both the systems and the supervisory controls. Bain and Taylor contended that call centre managements were unable to render perfect the carcereal gaze, even with 'remote

observations'. They argued that supervisors or managers would reveal their intentions through patterns of behaviour which, over time, became predictable and which employees could then read. 'The fact that some workers at Telecorp, either intuitively or through experience, are able to anticipate being observed challenges the assertion that the 'electronic Panopticon' renders managerial power perfect' (2000: 12).

Their third point in opposition to Fernie and Metcalf's portrayal of call centres involved the incidence of collective resistance at Telecorp. They suggested that between September 1998 and February 1999 union membership at the call centre grew from zero to 'at least 100'. No acknowledgement is made or explanation offered for the fact that union membership had been zero from April 1995 to September 1998, and the serendipitous nature of the coincidence of the researchers' access to the 'organising committee' and the sudden rise in unionisation is equally left unexplored. Bain and Taylor suggested that there was 'no single reason why the organising efforts of, initially, a small group of employees proved successful' and that the strength of the unionising campaign had lain in 'its multi-faceted appeal, tapping differing sources of discontent amongst the workforce' (2000: 13). They argued that the 'very process by which this group coalesced' was evidence of the inapplicability of the panoptic analysis championed by Fernie and Metcalf.

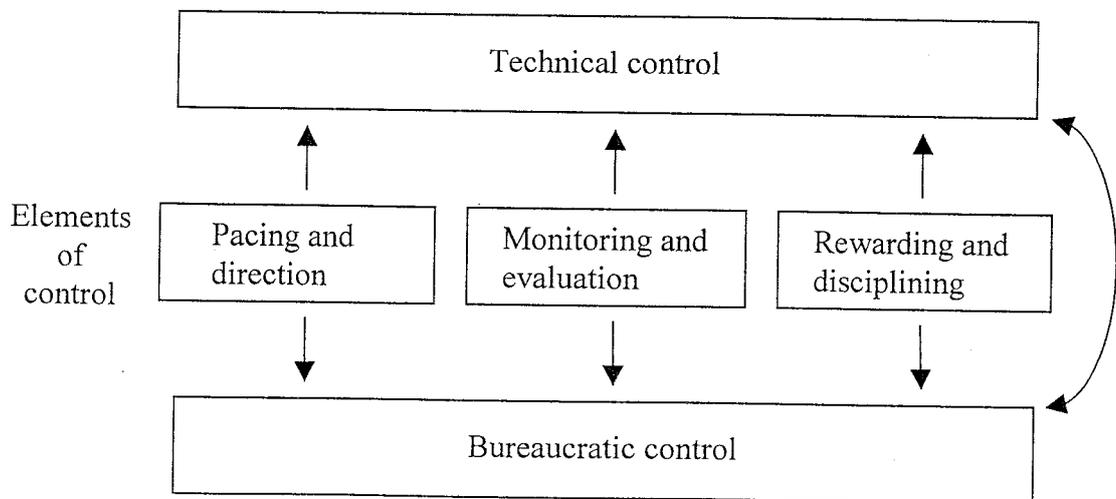
They asserted that the first step in this process occurred when 'a number of agents exploiting the gaps created by slacker supervision and less than complete surveillance on a particular shift, following months of discussion, arrived at a common outlook and a general desire to improve conditions' (2000: 14). The 'number' of employees taking advantage of these managerial and systemic control inadequacies is not given, but the number of 'core' members of the informal organising committee was earlier implicitly suggested to be no more than four. If the 'gap' in control measures was so great, why did it take 'months' to arrive at a consensus opinion? Also, Bain and Taylor inferred that this step took place exclusively when agents were 'exploiting the gaps' left by management and yet it is clear from their account that considerable discussion between the employees involved took place outside of the workplace.

Bain and Taylor questioned why the panopticon metaphor 'which so palpably fails any serious theoretical and empirical examination' (2000: 16) had been so readily adopted by some commentators. They suggested that its adoption is in fact an expression of other influences, notably

technological determinism and postmodernism. They asserted that proponents of such a perspective have assumed that because call centre software claims to provide managerial omniscience as to employees' output and behaviour then total managerial control must follow. They argued that such a view ignored the complexities of managerial practice and the contested nature of the employment relationship and provided no account of employee subjectivity. From a Foucauldian perspective, any possible resistance is individual rather than collective and inevitably takes the form of seeking 'spaces for escape'. Bain and Taylor argued that their case study provided 'a powerful repudiation of the crude transfer of the panopticon metaphor to the capitalist workplace (2000: 16).

Callaghan and Thompson (2001) presented an explanatory framework of structural control in call centres built on but progressing beyond Edwards' (1979; 1984) separate concepts of technical and bureaucratic control. In this framework, developed and discussed in the context of a study of customer service representatives (CSRs) at Telebank, a Scottish inbound call centre with 500 employees engaged mostly in routine banking enquiries and transactions, the authors conceptualise the configuration of elements within the call centre control system as a combination of technical, bureaucratic and other dimensions. This framework is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Representation of the framework of structural control in call centres (From Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 27)



Edwards had argued, in the context of continuous flow production methods employed in manufacturing, that the components of any system of control consisted of; the mechanisms by which employers direct work tasks; the procedures that they use to supervise and evaluate

performance in production; and the apparatus of discipline and reward they employ. Callaghan and Thompson suggested that the first of these components, the mechanisms for pacing and directing work, was most commonly associated with technical control. They pointed out that call centres differed from the manufacturing processes considered by Edwards in that rather than modifying a product on an assembly line call centre employees could be thought of as completing successive individual production cycles, but that the concept of technical control could nonetheless be applied.

Callaghan and Thompson argued that technology tended to control the speed of work in call centres 'not through running the line at a constant rate but rather through ensuring that CSRs know queue numbers and average waiting times. In Telebank, constantly changing figures on LCD panels hanging from the ceiling act as a weight upon workers, a pressure that puts a priority on speed' (2001: 18). Whilst agreeing that call centre workflows are controlled by technology, it is difficult to understand Callaghan and Thompson's subsequent suggestion that it is the knowledge of numbers queuing and average waiting times that drives the pace of work rather than the automatic feeding of calls to CSRs. The latter is indirectly acknowledged as the real source of the pacing and direction of work when they say that Taylor and Bain (1999) reached a similar conclusion about the role of technology in controlling workflows in outbound call centres, 'where power dialing software ensures a constant stream of customers'.

Edwards had suggested that one of the problems of continuous flow technical control was the way in which, by linking the workforce, it presented individual employees with the means to threaten the entire production line. Callaghan and Thompson pointed out that the individualized nature of production in call centres precluded this possibility, with the cessation of individual activity producing only a marginal drop in the overall productivity of the call centre. Callaghan and Thompson also highlighted the 'power' of technology to 'direct specific work tasks within calls'. They provided excerpts from interviews carried out during the study, which showed that management had deliberately controlled the ways in which particular procedures could be carried out in order to improve productivity by cutting out any delays associated with employee decision-making over the most appropriate route to any given outcome. They saw this as evidence of conscious management decision to harness the available technology to maximize workflows and thus of the social construction of call centre technology.

Callaghan and Thompson argued that, in general, technology 'is used to control the pace and direction of work in call centres such as Telebank in much the same way as assembly line production. Such ACD technology systematizes control, with the power to push and pace work flowing not from the boss or supervisor but from the technology. This system of control is strongly embedded in the physical fabric of production and is therefore less obtrusive' (2001: 21). They pointed out that Edwards had presented this point and developed themes about 'the appearance of the removal of human agency and the objectification of control' long in advance of more recent treatments based on the writings of Foucault. One of the principal differences between Edwards' work and later conceptualizations derived from Foucault is Edwards' belief that such control acts not to eliminate but to displace conflicts between management and employees with the result that, contrary to a Foucauldian reading, supervisory power is neither rendered obsolete nor made wholly unobtrusive.

Unlike assembly line technologies, the technologies employed in call centres are able not only to impose technical control on the pace of production but also offer possibilities for the monitoring and evaluation of individual performance. Promotion of such features is a key part of the sales strategy employed by providers of call centre technology, and computer-generated performance measures and monitoring capabilities are used almost universally by call centre operators. Callaghan and Thompson asserted that 'the structural nature of technical control in call centres' was 'made more powerful by the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation as part of the system of production', but that management was still visible. Managerial visibility tended to be greater in the monitoring and assessment of 'quality' as opposed to 'quantity' in call centres, although these processes were simplified by the availability of technologies allowing calls to be stored for later evaluation or making possible the 'remote' monitoring of employees' work.

According to Callaghan and Thompson, although 'conflict over productivity ultimately involves manager-worker confrontation, the systematic preparation and presentation of statistics helps displace conflict' (2001: 22), thus providing support for Edwards' contention that technical control deflects direct confrontation. They argued that the degree of use of statistical information in call centres made CSRs 'more likely to exercise self-control over their output' and that when conflict arose over performance issues the results generated by the system would generally go unchallenged. They additionally asserted that the availability to management of remote monitoring

facilities also served to encourage and enforce employee self-discipline, a belief shared with Foucauldian analyses of call centres.

Although Edwards' third component of control systems, the apparatus of discipline and reward, is present in the technical control of call centres through the self-discipline which results from the possibility of surveillance and the publication within call centres of individual and team performance statistics for comparative purposes, Callaghan and Thompson argued that 'its real power is felt when the management information it produces is used in formal appraisals associated with bureaucratic control' (2001: 24). Edwards' conceptualisation of bureaucratic control was as an alternative to technical control, sought by companies to overcome the latter's perceived weakness of homogenizing the workforce in such a way as to produce a potentially powerful, if demotivated, opposition to capital. The basis of bureaucratic control was the simultaneous use of 'objective' work and employment rules and incentive systems incorporating career ladders, rewards for seniority and so on, producing an indirect means of control which acted to differentiate employees and thereby erode the bases for collective resistance.

Callaghan and Thompson suggested that at Telebank bureaucratic control operated 'mainly by instilling behavioural patterns, specifying performance standards and developing written definitions of skills' which, whilst not producing the job differentiation or career ladder development visualized as central to bureaucratic control by Edwards, 'do institutionalize values and give supervisors (and workers themselves) specific criteria against which to evaluate workers' (2001: 24). They argued that Telebank's 19 'core standards of behaviour, inherited from traditional banking structure' with their emphasis on appropriate behaviour towards both other employees and customers, both helped to maintain organizational structure and exerted influence on all three of Edwards' control system components and particularly, via the appraisal system, on the apparatus of discipline and reward. The authors asserted that, under bureaucratic control, management at Telebank specified values, beliefs and standards. They noted that 'attitude' shifted 'from being important in work to being the work itself; with people being recruited and trained in part to produce 'units' of attitude which met customer service criteria' (2001: 26). They felt that in order to do this management required and exercised not only bureaucratic control but also normative control via the specification and manipulation of 'emotional labour' as conceptualized by Hochschild (1983). The definitions of behaviour qualifying for top ratings during appraisals were

phrased in such a way as to make clear to employees the necessity of managing emotions if maximum rewards were to be achieved.

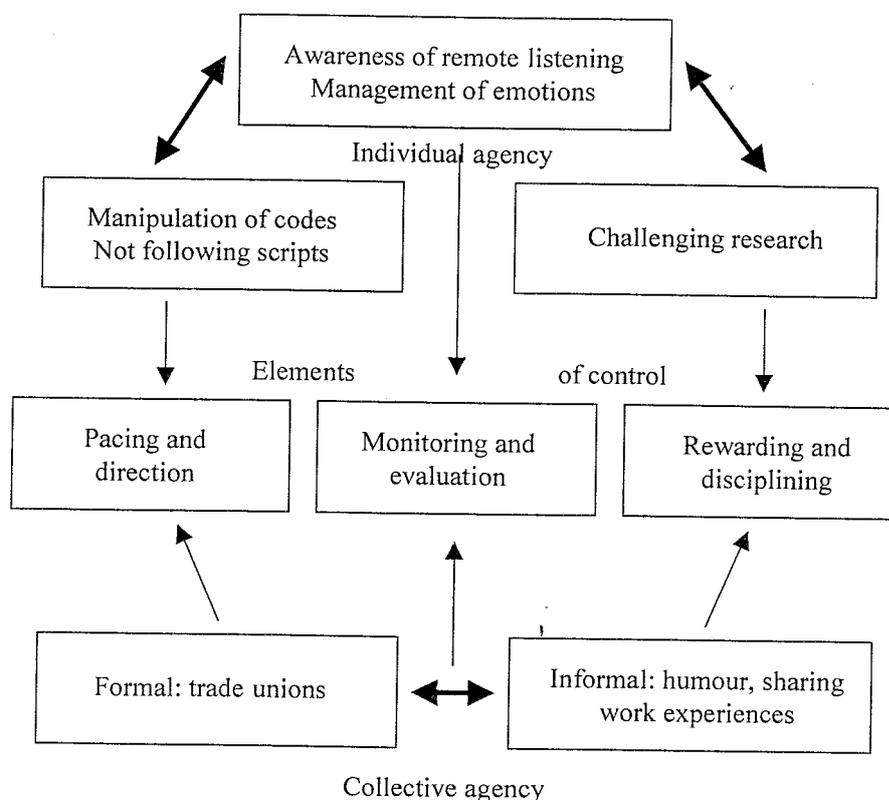
Callaghan and Thompson argued that recruitment and selection processes helped managers to identify individuals that had the appropriate range of social skills to deliver effective customer service, following which they employed training in areas such as conversation control and self-management techniques and training mechanisms to establish and embed in employees' thought processes the 'feelings rules' (see Leidner, 1993) perceived as necessary to deliver consistently high levels of customer service in an interactive environment. Messages delivered during training were supported and reinforced by the framework of 'scripted interactions' to which employees were supposed to adhere.

In Callaghan and Thompson's proposed framework of structural control, bureaucratic and technical control systems are integrated with the normative control provided by emotion management. Callaghan and Thompson suggested that if Edwards' earlier conceptualizations were correct both the bureaucratic standards used to evaluate and reward work and the statistical information generated by the call centres to measure outputs would be perceived by employees to be 'objective', deflecting direct conflicts and leading employees to target their frustration on the statistical information rather than on management. In their opinion there was only partial support for this conclusion. They found that data derived from monitoring systems did appear to 'constitute a source of managerial power' that was 'seemingly more independent and more difficult to confront on a collective level' (2001: 28) and yet there was evidence from their study to suggest that employees were aware of and hostile to the 'human agency that designs and enforces the system'.

Callaghan and Thompson noted that management at Telebank was aware of the possible negative effects of workplace surveillance in terms of demotivation of employees and that in 'the search for additional ways to develop an apparatus of reward' Telebank had like many other call centre operators employed the device of organizing CSRs into teams. In some call centres the rationale for such organization is that it is part of the technical division of labour, but the authors suggested that in Telebank this was not the case and that the twin objectives had been to mitigate the individual nature of the work process by providing 'some element of sociability' and to 'introduce

competitive mechanisms for boosting productivity' (2001: 28). During their study Callaghan and Thompson found limited evidence of the success of team-based organization in promoting social relationships between CSRs, but no evidence that it was an effective management tool for either motivation or control.

Figure 4.2 Employees' engagement with elements of call centre control
(Source: Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 30)



Callaghan and Thompson (2001: 29) argued that despite 'the sophistication of the technical, bureaucratic and normative controls that structure the operation of call centres' employees were able to 'retain and articulate agency, both individually and collectively'. They found that Telebank employees actively engaged with each element of control as described in Figure 4.2. The manipulation of codes refers to the system requirement to key in alphanumeric codes to identify when time is being spent on particular activities outside of call answering, for example when time is to be spent assisting others or writing a memo, and the ability of employees to manipulate this requirement by keying in inappropriate codes which take them outside of the automatic call feeding routine but still identify them on the system as working productively in order to gain 'rest' time. Agency in the form of code manipulation tended to be exercised by employees with longer tenure, because the techniques employed 'come with experience'. The authors suggested that employees

'know comfort breaks and all the other codes are monitored, the talent is knowing when to use which code and for how long' (2001: 30). Other forms of individual agency, such as not sticking to the scripts or not performing emotional labour to the standards demanded by management, were in more general evidence. In Telebank, CSRs also demonstrated resistance by challenging the findings of a remote assessment team.

Callaghan and Thompson suggested that communication, verbal and non-verbal and often involving humour, between team members at Telebank in response to boredom, frustration and irritation could be seen both as an individual act and as a collective response in the sense that experiences and stories were shared. They noted that there was 'no formal, focused and organized bargaining over the labour process' at Telebank at the time of their study, although they felt that there was the possibility of more formal collectivism in the future. Callaghan and Thompson asserted that for some Telebank employees the decision to quit the call centre was an 'externalisation' of their dissatisfaction, arguing that while 'the conditions of local and national labour markets are clearly factors, there is little doubt that 'push' factors are a strong influence on labour turnover' (2001: 33). Whilst not disagreeing with this statement, their evidence seems to be a little weak on this point given that they interviewed only current Telebank employees.

Whilst the previous authors have attempted to fit call centre work organization into pre-existing theoretical frameworks, there have been several attempts to provide new explanatory theoretical frameworks. For example, Norling (2001) argued based on evidence gathered from an apparently small and non-representative sample of companies that call centres provided examples of new patterns of organization. He believed that at a micro level there was a discernible shift towards a new work unit, consisting of a person who 'has become one with [a] computer and [a] network for communication' to form what he termed a 'bio-technological unit'. According to Norling, bio-technological units now formed the building blocks of organizations. He suggested that new patterns were emerging concurrently at an organizational level, with the established pyramidal hierarchical organizational structure being replaced by 'organisations built from projects, projects run by teams, which are constantly changing in structure (and management), according to customer demands or internal problems' (2001: 159). The old linear structures were still in place; they determined who should be in new teams carrying out new projects and organizational members returned to them when projects had been completed and the project organization dissolved.

Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski and Shire (1998) presented a model of the nature of work organization in call centres as a hybrid of bureaucratic and knowledge-intensive schemas. They argued that two contrasting images of call centre work organization were emerging from the literature. The first presents a pessimistic view of call centre work organization as constraining employees within a de-skilled, monotonous and highly pressured work environment, accurately described by metaphors such as electronic sweatshop (Garson, 1988) or panoptical wired cage (Menzies, 1996). The second and more optimistic interpretation is of call centres as the base of operations for semi-professional, empowered workers (Winslow and Bramer, 1994) who are viewed as a 'key strategic resource' and rewarded accordingly with favourable employment relations including longer-term employment and on-going training and development. The authors claimed that, in attempting 'to reconcile standardization of processes and products, aimed at lowering unit costs through scale and transaction economies, and customization aimed at generating revenue by focusing on individual customer requirements', call centre managements had moved away from a purely bureaucratic model. They had instead adopted what Frenkel *et al* described as a mass customized bureaucracy model; 'a form of work organization that remains primarily bureaucratic but includes elements associated with professional or knowledge-intensive settings relevant to the provision of customized products and services' (1988: 958).

Frenkel *et al* suggested that there are three elements central to work organization. Work relations, which they see as encompassing different attributes of the work itself and the demands it places on employees in terms of skill, creativity and so on. Employment relations, which 'are essentially the human resource management practices that regulate CSR employment' and control relations, a term that refers 'to the primary and secondary mechanisms that management use to encourage CSR compliance and commitment to work and the organization' (1988: 959-960). Using these elements as a guide and the results theorized for the bureaucratic work organization model as a comparative benchmark, they examined the work organization of customer service representatives (CSRs) at number of call centres situated variously in the USA, Japan and Australia. They found that work organization in the call centres differed from that which would be expected under an ideal-type bureaucratic work organization model in a number of important respects and was more akin to their mass customized bureaucracy model.

In terms of work relations they found that because of the proliferation of customized products and the range of customer contacts generated by new product launches, CSRs' work tasks were 'less routine and more challenging' than under purely bureaucratic work organization models. Additionally, the frequent changes in both product and IT system specifications meant that CSRs had to be able to learn and unlearn information and have sufficient knowledge of IT to be able to navigate systems effectively. The authors argued that this demonstrated that CSRs, like those in professional occupations, needed to be both knowledgeable and flexible.

In relation to employment relations they found that call centre recruitment practices differed from those under bureaucratic work organization models, with employees selected on their ability to demonstrate customer orientation, self-management skills and personal initiative rather than on the criterion of dependability. Call centres showed a greater reliance on on-the-job training rather than more formal training programmes as a means of employee development, provided less employment security and more limited opportunities for career advancement than the bureaucratic model of work organization, and had a greater variable reward element with pay rises more likely to be linked to actual performance than to the criteria of seniority or skill acquisition found in examples of bureaucratic work organizations.

According to Frenkel *et al* control relations in call centres also differed significantly from those which might be found in archetypal bureaucratic organizations. They noted that control relations in call centres tended 'to be more pervasive and continuous' (1998: 962), with IT able to provide performance-related information on a continuous individual and collective basis. They argued that this information was 'available as objective data which can be used to establish and reinforce performance norms'. They asserted that employees tended 'to endorse these norms in part because supervisors adopt a facilitative rather than directive role. This is associated with the importance of quality (for satisfying customers, with which workers identify), and not merely productivity (for achieving cost reduction)' (1998: 962). They also suggested that rather than the disciplinarian role adopted by supervisors in a purely bureaucratic work organisation model, call centre supervisors adopted a more supportive role and encouraged closer relations both between employees and between themselves and their charges with the object of providing a source of social-psychological support against the socially isolating and stressful nature of the work tasks.

Taylor and Bain (2001) presented what they described as 'a limited critique' of Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire and Tam (1999). The latter expanded on the analysis of the nature of work organization given in Frenkel *et al* (1998), in which the authors had suggested that call centres represented a mass customized bureaucracy model of work organization, to look at forms of work organization 'in the information economy' more generally. In the later study the authors distinguished between different types of service work involving customer contact, proposing three distinct types of workflow. Taylor and Bain's critique related specifically to 'the findings and analysis which bear directly on work organization in call centres'.

Their first criticism was that although Frenkel *et al* (1999) made distinctions between three basic types of service work, they failed to make further distinctions within any of those types which, Taylor and Bain argued, significantly weakened the persuasive power of their treatment of work organization in call centres. Taylor and Bain asserted that given 'the multisectoral spread of call centres, the problem of ascribing 'typicality' to their operations is self-evident' (2001: 49). This assertion is slightly puzzling given that Taylor and Bain had themselves suggested during the exposition of their model of call centre complexity that it was possible to produce a broad range of characteristics that would describe 'the majority of call centres', although Taylor and Bain's concern that Frenkel *et al*'s ascription of typicality was based on a study of only five call centres spread across three continents does seem reasonable.

Taylor and Bain argued that given that five of the seven service-type workflows studied by Frenkel *et al* were call centres, of which four were in the financial sector, then they were 'for all practical purposes, describing and analyzing call centre work organisation'. Their second criticism was that Frenkel *et al* made 'many generalizations on the nature of service/call centre work, without recognizing the quality/quantity distinctions that certainly exist in the UK context' (2001: 50). The purpose of Taylor and Bain's emphasis on the predominance of financial sector organizations in Frenkel *et al*'s study seems to be to suggest that this fact alone makes their selection of workflows insufficiently representative from which to generalize, which seems a fair point.

The question of quality/quantity distinctions is however more vexed. Taylor and Bain had previously argued that 'many' call centre managers had recognized that 'overintensive monitoring and tight controls can be counterproductive leading to possible underperformance by operators and

an undermining of the quality of customer service' and that this on occasions had led to managements relaxing statistical controls such as call handling times and instead placing a premium on customer service. However, according to Taylor and Bain, their evidence showed that 'any relaxation tends to be temporary as sharp competitive pressures kick in, compelling reversion to a tougher emphasis on quantity' (2001: 49). If this is the case, it is possible that Taylor and Bain's quality/quantity distinctions are based on observations of temporally limited distortions of call centre work organization, rather than being an enduring phenomenon, and as such any observed differences are in fact artifacts of limited duration research periods.

Taylor and Bain insisted that Frenkel *et al* (1999), although coming to a very different conclusion, had made a 'similar error' to Fernie and Metcalf (1999) 'in the sense that they tend to treat all call centres as if they were the same', with the former seeing all call centres as similar hybrids of routinization and customization 'without expressly acknowledging that the relative degree of each does vary' (2001: 50). This conclusion, Taylor and Bain argued, led Frenkel *et al* to present 'a single portrait of work organisation' which, they believed, was 'overoptimistic' and failed 'to capture the reality of call centre work in many locations'.

Taylor and Bain were unhappy at Frenkel *et al*'s conclusion that 'service workers' experienced less stress than their other two groupings of sales workers and knowledge workers, and particularly at their identification of 'job responsibility' and 'length of working hours' as key causes of stress. They felt that the evidence of earlier research (Health and Safety Executive, 1992; Dalton, 1998; Keefe and Batt, 1997, specifically referred to in Frenkel *et al*, 1999) suggesting that routinised work and lack of control were significant contributors to workplace stress had been ignored, and that a more complete picture of the pressures acting on those in this type of employment would emerge if these factors were considered alongside job responsibility and length of working hours.

Most particularly Taylor and Bain (2001) questioned Frenkel *et al*'s conclusion that because service work (and hence from Taylor and Bain's previous argument, call centre work) included elements of both quality and productivity and because management's ability to measure the former was limited, supervisors tended to adopt a style that was more facilitative than directive and that did not consider 'behaviour measures' to be key performance indicators in the call centre. Taylor and Bain asserted that Frenkel *et al*'s 'benign depiction of the use of performance data, statistics,

targets and the impact of call monitoring' was 'sharply contradicted' by their own evidence and findings. They concluded that 'it would be a grave error' to see such a depiction 'as applying to the specific experience of call centre operators in the UK financial sector' and that the degree to which it was appropriate to generalize from Frenkel *et al*'s conclusions about the nature of call centre work was open to question.

Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor and Gall (2001) argued that in addition to exerting control and direction over quantitative aspects of call centre labour processes, call centre managements had formulated ways to assess and therefore, contrary to Frenkel *et al*'s findings, to measure qualitative or 'soft' aspects of task performance such as the structure and style of speech, the development of rapport with customers, the use of interpersonal and problem-solving skills, and adherence to prescribed call conventions. They also asserted that target-setting attainment levels in qualitative as well as quantitative aspects of the call centre work task had profound implications for employees. They suggested that 'methods used to assess the 'soft' items are equally firmly rooted in the application of Taylorist techniques – in the dis-aggregation of employees' tasks by management, and the application of numerical means of measurement to enforce, monitor and assess employee performance' (2001: 18). As a result call centre employment, even that located towards the 'complex and qualitative' end of Taylor and Bain's (2001) two-dimensional model of call centre diversity discussed below, was likely to be 'characterized by target-setting and Taylorism'.

Whilst some authors (for example, Frenkel *et al*, 1999; Fernie and Metcalf, 1999) proposing models of call centre work organization have tended implicitly to treat call centres as being essentially the same, there have been recent attempts to distinguish between them. Houlihan (2000) identified a range of different call centre foci and designs. She suggested that in four of the six activity types detailed, labour processes were 'routine'. Hutchinson, Purcell and Kinnie (2000) distinguished between 'essentially transactional, short and highly repetitive' work tasks and those that were more 'relational' in nature and emphasized elements of quality and empathy, with Holman and Fernie (2000) making a similar distinction. Taylor and Bain (2001) have argued that all call centres are 'characterised fundamentally by the integration of telephone and computer technologies'; their adoption is driven by 'the prospect of cost savings in the pursuit of competitive advantage'; and their labour processes are 'composed of common defining characteristics' (2001: 40). They assert that call centres are not, however, 'uniform either in their operational functions or

in the organization of the labour process', facts which the authors felt had not been properly acknowledged by earlier academic studies such as that of Fernie and Metcalf (1998), whose 'characterisation of the call centres as 'new sweatshops', dominated by the all-encompassing surveillance of the 'electronic panopticon' in the authors' opinion treated 'all call centres as if they were the same, failing to recognize differences in relation to a number of important variables' identified elsewhere by the authors (Taylor and Bain, 1997; Bain and Taylor, 2000).

To rectify this apparent failing in the literature they proposed a two-dimensional model of call centre diversity, a single axis, with a range from 'simple and quantitative' to 'complex and qualitative', along which different call centre operations could be positioned according to organizational form and call complexity. Call centre operations at the quantitative extreme were characterized by 'relatively simple and straightforward calls, which require agent responses to customer queries or requests and which may well be scripted. These types of calls are invariable subject to relatively tight [call handling times] and control mechanisms based on strict statistical measurement' (2001:44). At the qualitative extreme call centre operations would involve 'calls where the nature of customer interaction is more complex and unpredictable, and agents, of necessity, respond more flexibly. Call times are more relaxed, and while temporal measurements might still apply, other criteria, emphasizing the quality of the agent's service to the customer, are also important' (2001:44).

Taylor and Bain acknowledged that such a model was inevitably a simplification of reality, that the characteristics they suggested were indicative of differences in call complexity rather than exhaustive and definitive, and that all call centres regardless of their position on the model's axis shared the defining call centre characteristics of automated workload distribution and the integration of computer and telephone technologies. They nonetheless argued that the model provided 'a useful means by which we can assess the relative emphases placed on quantity and quality'. They suggested that their research to date had indicated that 'the majority of call centres tend to lie at the quantitative end of the spectrum' (2001: 48).

4.3 Call centre employees

In a face-to-face interaction, the customer can base their perceptions of service quality on a number of factors, including the physical characteristics of the employees with whom they interact and the environment in which the interaction takes place. With a voice-to-voice interaction the evaluation of quality has to be based almost exclusively on their perceptions of the interpersonal attributes of the call centre employees with whom they converse. Burgers, de Ruyter, Keen and Streukens (2000, discussed in detail in Chapter 3 above) identified eight personality attributes perceived by the public to be desirable in call centre employees. The authors arranged these into four scales; adaptiveness, assurance, empathy and authority. The meanings assigned by the authors to these scales were explained in Table 3.6 above. Although they noted certain limitations to the generalisability of their model, Burgers *et al* saw their model as 'a useful service management tool' with a number of possible functions, amongst which was a role in recruitment and selection procedures, with techniques such as personality testing and role-plays being designed to assess prospective employees' levels on each of the four scales.

In another study aimed at improving call centre recruitment and selection processes, Bernardin (1987) developed a forced choice scale to measure job-related discomfort among customer service representatives (CSRs). He suggested that, in the main, little in the literature on turnover had offered guidance for managerial decisions at the employee selection stage. Although indices of person-job fit had proved to be linked statistically to outcomes such as voluntary termination of employment, Bernardin argued that the instruments used to assess such characteristics were 'transparent', non-verifiable and easily faked by applicants with a strong desire for employment. Devices such as realistic job previews, which work on the theoretical principle that applicants will self-select themselves out of jobs which do not meet their requirements (Breaugh and Billings, 1986), will be rendered impotent if an applicant's desire to have employment of any kind is so strong that it smothers any negative perceptions of job content.

Bernardin felt that an instrument that used a forced choice methodology with behavioural situations relevant to a specific job could have good predictive validity as well as limiting the deliberate faking of results. Such an instrument could be developed using a multiple stage process. First, job analysis could be used to determine key causes of discomfort or negative affect. Then members of

the applicant population could be asked to rate both job-relevant and other behavioral or situational items causing discomfort. Items would then be grouped in the test instrument according to degree of discomfort in a forced choice format. The valid forced choice items would be those key characteristics that from the first stage in the process were identified as describing the job and which had been hypothesized to be predictors of turnover, but the scoring would not be transparent and therefore amenable to deliberate distortion by job candidates.

A discomfort scale was developed for the position of CSR with a large newspaper, a position that largely involved the incumbent taking complaints from customers over the telephone in relation to accounts and delivery. Through interviews with CSRs and supervisors, site visits and participant observation the study identified five main causes of discomfort for CSRs, which can be summarized as; shift patterns, which included mandatory working on both Saturday and Sunday; having to deal frequently with angry or irate customers; being monitored by and interrupted by supervisors; working in a noisy and hectic environment; and having restricted movement and limited privacy whilst working. The next step was to have job analysts draw up a list of statements, which described similar situations to those identified as discomforting to CSRs, but which were not clearly drawn from the role of CSR. According to Bernardin this stage 'was necessary to hide the ultimate scoring key from job applicants and thus limit or eliminate deliberate distortion of ratings' (1987: 165). These statements constituted the valid items of the scale, that is to say those items whose selection the author hypothesized would predict candidates' likelihood of quitting. Descriptions of a variety of discomforting situations not relevant to the job of CSR were also drawn up. All the statements were rated by a group not connected with the CSR recruitment process for discomfort on a six-point scale.

At the same time as testing the ability of his forced choice instrument to predict voluntary turnover Bernardin compared the efficacy of two other instruments in this role: the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF) (Cattell, Eber and Tatsuoka, 1970) and the weighted application blank (Bernardin, 1985). The study included measurements of both intentions to leave, which had previously been found to correlate with actual turnover (Mowday, Koberg and McArthur, 1984), and voluntary termination. He found that scores from the work application blank were significantly correlated with voluntary termination, the scores from the forced choice instrument were significantly correlated with both intention to quit and turnover, but none of the personality factors

analysed were significant in relation to voluntary termination. The mean scores of job applicants and incumbents on the forced choice instrument did not vary significantly (24.1 and 25.5 respectively), a factor that, the author argued, substantially overcame doubts about the use of incumbents in the instrument's validation design.

One of the significant features of Bernardin (1987) is that the author does not apply the term 'call centre' to the research setting, leading the reader to conclude that the research pre-dated the employment of ACD technology in a setting otherwise typical of inbound call centres. Bernardin identified the position of CSR as one 'with high rates of voluntary termination and a number of negative characteristics that, for one reason or another, organizations cannot improve' (1987: 164). A comparison of the job characteristics particularly discomfoting to CSRs found by Bernardin with those that are discomfoting to current call centre employees might enable an evaluation of the extent to which technology has affected an occupation that already suffered from negative characteristics. As a first step towards such a comparison, chapter 8 includes findings on the aspects of their employment that call centre employees most disliked.

Bernardin suggested that the degree of person-job fit influenced voluntary turnover in call centres. Burnout has been conceptualized as a possible result of poor person-fit, and therefore may be considered as an intermediate variable in the turnover process. Singh, Goolsby and Rhoads (1994) looked at the relationships between burnout, role stressors and behavioural and psychological job outcomes for customer service representatives (CSRs). They defined burnout, a term which they used interchangeably with that of burnout tendencies, as 'a psychological disposition characterized by emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and a tendency to depersonalize others' (1994: 558) noting that, contrary to popular usage, in the scientific literature the term referred to a continuum expressing the degree to which a subject evidenced the psychological symptoms associated with the burnout construct rather than a state of being as such.

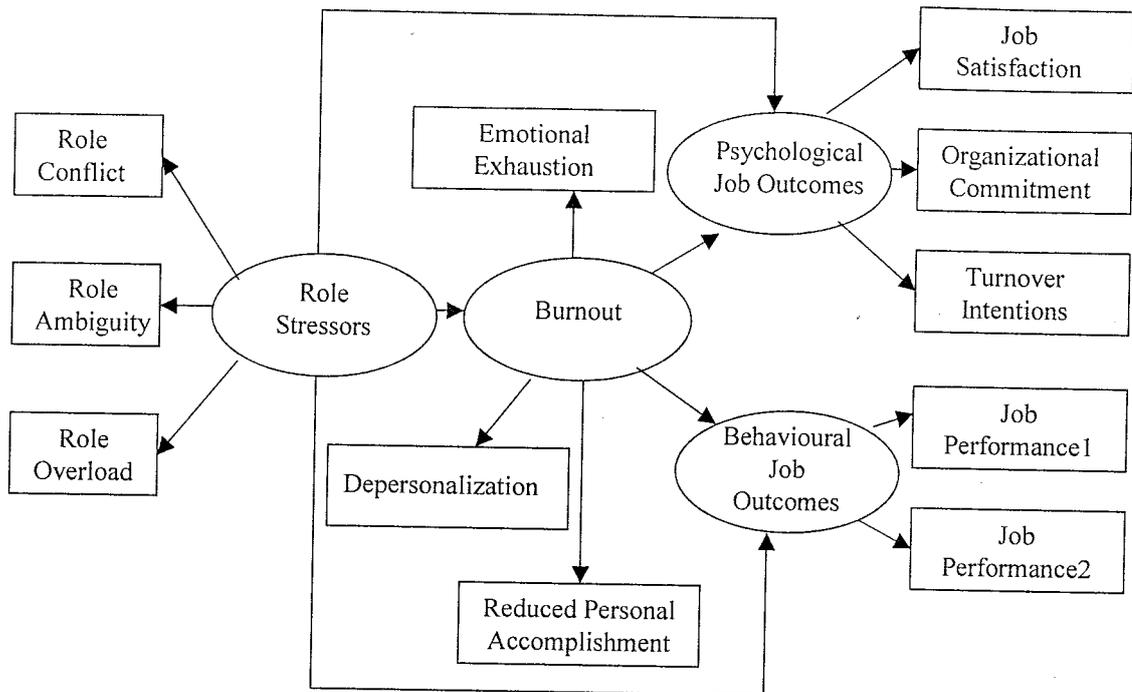
Previous research (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993) had indicated that such tendencies were visible in occupations that combined a significant interpersonal element with high levels of role or job stress. They argued that burnout played an important part in understanding the effects of job stressors on employee performance, satisfaction, commitment and turnover. They contended that prior research had established that excessive role stress results in lower performance and more negative job-

related attitudes, but that appropriate amounts of role stress would actually stimulate individuals to excel. The point at which role stressors switched from producing positive to negative effects varied from person to person, so a simple measure of role stress would not reveal whether its effect was benign or injurious to a given subject. The authors asserted, however, that burnout occurred only when stressors had exceeded an individual's ability to cope and as such it potentially provided a 'more accurate predictor of critical job outcomes than the presence or extent of key role stressors' (1994: 558).

The authors argued that the burnout and role stressor concepts were separate and distinct, despite being 'embedded in the same nomological network'. They pointed out that role stressors could have either positive or negative effects on the individual, whereas burnout was believed to be purely dysfunctional. The effect of each on job outcomes would therefore be different. They also noted that burnout was not itself a stressor, but originated in the cumulative effect of multiple role stressors (Hunsaker, 1986). There was thus a recognition that a given role might bring with it a number of stressors, each of which was not individually at a level that would have dysfunctional consequences but which might cumulatively be sufficient to overwhelm an incumbent's coping resources and lead to burnout. They presented a 'partial mediation thesis' to explain the relationship between role stressors and burnout. They argued that burnout was 'an important partial mediator of the effects of role stressors on job outcomes' and 'a more potent predictor of various job outcomes than one or more role stressors' (1994: 559). Their thesis is illustrated in Figure 4.3 below.

To test their thesis and various hypotheses suggested by it they surveyed a sample of CSRs, obtaining a total of 351 usable responses. All the CSRs in the study worked for a US multinational company in service centres employing between 10 and 50 CSRs. The role required CSRs to both handle complaints and inquiries about billing and to sell services, with daily quotas to be met for the latter and CSRs subjected to random monitoring for service quality. The authors reported that the CSRs typically complained that they worked long hours, lacked autonomy, bore responsibility without authority, had insufficient resources and guidelines to handle problems, faced demanding quotas, often endured manager apathy and were caught in a 'dead-end job' (1994: 562).

Figure 4.3 Partial mediating thesis for the relationship between role stressors, burnout and job outcomes (From Singh, Goolsby and Rhoads, 1994: 560)



They found that for CSRs the mean values for each of the burnout dimensions were frequently higher than those found in other studies for other occupations. The mean value of the emotional exhaustion element for CSRs was higher than that found for police (Gaines and Jermier, 1983), teachers (Jackson, Schwab and Schuler, 1986) and nurses (Leiter and Maslach, 1988) but lower than reported for lawyers (Jackson, Turner and Brief, 1987) or nursery workers (Lee and Ashforth, 1993). CSRs experienced mean values for reduced personal accomplishment higher than teachers, lawyers and nurses but lower than welfare workers (Leiter, 1991) or public contact employees (Maslach and Jackson, 1985). The mean value of the measure of depersonalization was higher for CSRs than for any of the other occupations compared in relation to the other two dimensions of burnout.

According to Singh *et al*, research into role stress in a marketing context had focused on three constructs; role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. Role conflict was said to refer to 'the degree of incompatibility of expectations associated with the role' (1994: 559). CSRs might, for example, experience role conflict in relation to the differing expectations of managers and customers or as a result of inconsistent workplace directives. Role ambiguity was a measure of the

'degree to which clear information is lacking about the expectations associated with a role, methods for fulfilling role expectations, and/or consequences of role performance' and role overload was said to occur when 'role expectations are far greater than the individual's abilities and motivation to perform a task' (1994: 559). Of the role stressor constructs measured by their survey, the authors found that CSRs reported relatively high mean levels of role conflict and role overload (scores of 3.24 and 2.95 respectively when measured on a five-point scale) with lower mean levels of role ambiguity (2.61). The standard deviations for each of the construct scores suggested considerable variability in the reported levels of role stressors from CSRs, but this is to be expected as a reflection of the individuality of CSRs' abilities to cope and the resultant differing perceptions of stressor levels by employees.

The study provided support for Singh *et al*'s partial mediation thesis. Statistical analysis showed that role stressors had a significant positive effect on burnout. In turn, burnout had a significant negative effect on both psychological and behavioural outcomes, although the influence of burnout on the former was around one and a half times greater than on the latter. In other words, CSRs who perceived higher levels of role stressors tended to exhibit higher burnout tendencies, and as burnout tendencies increased so did the dysfunctional effect on CSRs' behaviour on and attitudes towards their job. They noted that the partial unmediated effect of role stressors on psychological job outcomes was insignificant but that their partial unmediated effect on behavioural job outcomes was both significant and positive. Taken together with the finding that the total effect of role stressors on behavioural job outcomes was insignificant, the authors saw this as evidence that two opposing influences were at work; a positive effect from the presence of role stressors as a catalyst for performance was being cancelled out by a negative effect as role stressor levels produced burnout tendencies which had deleterious effects on behavioural outcomes.

The importance of their approach, Singh *et al* argued, was that previous studies had tended to study role stressors and their direct effects on psychological and behaviour outcomes for those in 'boundary spanning' occupations. These studies invariably revealed the possible dysfunctional effects of role stressors, leading to the 'conventional wisdom that boundary spanning roles ideally must be free of role stressors to maintain optimal performance and psychological well-being' (1994: 567). Their study had shown burnout and role stressors to be conceptually and etiologically distinct and had demonstrated that burnout could account for variation in individual vulnerability to

role stressors by controlling for excessive role stress, making the positive effect or eustress inherent in role stressors more visible.

Tam Yeuk-Mui (2001) examined the use of information technologies (IT) in the context of call centres with a view to identifying factors that mediate between employees' experience of IT and their levels of subjective well-being, expressed in terms of job satisfaction, work stress and work capability, defined as the self-assessed ability to satisfy customers. Following a review of different theoretical approaches to understanding the effects of technology on work organization and general theories on the determinants of satisfaction, stress and work capability, she presented findings from fieldwork in seven call centres based variously in Australia, Japan and the United States and an associated survey of 452 customer service representatives (CSRs) drawn from across the fieldwork sites.

The findings of the study were that the perceived effectiveness of IT systems had positive effects on CSRs self-assessed ability to satisfy customers, that those perceptions contributed significantly to their overall job satisfaction, and that perception of IT effectiveness was significantly negatively related to reported levels of stress. The same relationships were found in relation to the reliability of colleagues outside the call centre on whom CSRs depended for the completion of customer requests. She found that the pervasiveness of IT-generated data on work processes and behaviour had no significant effects on job satisfaction, work stress or the ability to satisfy customers. The supportiveness of immediate supervisors was negatively related to stress levels, but the trustworthiness of senior management had no significant effects. Contrary to expectation, participation in decision-making at task level and above did not contribute significantly to job satisfaction or capability but was positively related to stress. The results suggested that interaction effects, where statistically significant, were considerably weaker than the significant main effects.

Tam Yeuk-Mui argued that three main conclusions could be drawn from the study about the effects of the use of IT. First, that CSRs' experiences of IT systems were important. The extent to which the systems were perceived as enabling had no effect on the three dependent variables, whereas their perceived effectiveness had positive effects on job satisfaction and ability to satisfy customers and was negatively related to levels of stress. This was interpreted as evidence of an instrumental value of IT to CSRs. Second, that the pervasiveness of IT-mediated monitoring had virtually no net

effect on the variables examined. It was suggested that senior corporate management did not regard performance data as important because it did not reflect the financial performance of the call centre and as a result 'call centre management and CSRs did not attach much importance' to the data generated either. 'Furthermore, both management and CSRs knew that IT-generated data were partial – they did not reflect the quality of the services. They were also aware that failures and inefficiencies indicated by these qualitative data were partly caused by other functional departments' (2001: 196). Third, of the social relationships examined, both the reliability of external colleagues and the supportiveness of immediate supervisors were important. Both were seen as having a part to play in reducing CSRs' exposure to difficult calls from irate customers, with this reduction instrumental in lowering stress, and increasing job satisfaction and work capability.

Many of the studies discussed in this section have concluded that call centre employment is, for the most part, experienced by employees as stressful. Research on the effects of employment related-stress (Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Marmot, Bosma, and Hemingway, 1997) has found that employees in occupations that were classed as high demand and low control in relation to decision-making responsibility had a higher incidence of coronary heart disease. In addition, a study of employees of a telecommunications company (NIOSH, 1992) has identified a number of key psychosocial variables associated with upper body musculoskeletal disorders, including fear of being replaced by technology, increasing work pressure, lack of job diversity, high information processing demands and surges in workload. The same study had found that these variables together with job uncertainty and lack of support from coworkers and supervisors tended to dictate the severity of symptoms experienced by employees, with symptoms also being exacerbated by the use of electronic monitoring systems.

Most (1999: 135) noted that call centre employment 'combines some of the elements of machine-paced manufacturing jobs with the psychosocial strain of the office environment'. He surveyed employees in two call centres operated by an American catalogue retailer and found that around 15 percent of responding employees regularly experienced pain at the end of a shift, although 50 percent completed a pain survey suggesting that they had at some point experienced work-related pain. Responses indicated a predominance of back and upper body pain locations consistent with musculoskeletal injuries. He suggested that psychosocial variables were in part responsible for the

delayed self-reporting of pain, with concerns over future restrictions in working hours (26 percent), fear of job loss (23 percent), need to take time off of work (17 percent) and damage to promotion prospects (10 percent) cited as the most important reasons for not reporting pain. Whilst it is possible to see serious flaws in Most's survey instrument, for example the use of closed sets of possible responses, that would make it necessary to question the robustness of his results, his work does draw attention to an important and perhaps under-explored facet of the experience of call centre employment.

4.4 Summary

Whilst most commentators tended to agree with Bibby's (1996) assertion that call centres represented 'a major change in the way in which many white-collar office-based jobs are structured and undertaken' (1996: 35), characterizations of call centre work organization have diverged considerably from that point on. Call centres have been seen by some as evidence of the emergence of new patterns of work organization (Frenkel *et al*, 1999; Norling, 2001) or 'hybrids' of existing patterns (Frenkel *et al*, 1998). Others have described them in more established and familiar terms. Call centre work organization has been variously described as Taylorist (Bibby, 1996; Demaret *et al*, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999), post-Taylorian (Peaucelle, 2000) and Foucauldian in its use of panoptic monitoring and surveillance practices (Ferne, 1998; Ferne and Metcalf, 1998). An attempt has also been made to understand them via a 'structural control framework' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). The existence of explanations using very different models, each in some respects compelling without any being fully convincing, suggests a need for further investigation of this aspect of call centres.

The literature relating in general to call centre employees has tended in the main to focus on employees as 'objective' units rather than looking at their subjective experiences of the workplace. Studies have explored such topics as the personal attributes of a 'good' employee (Burgers *et al*, 2000), the causes of job-related discomfort for call centre employees (Bernardin, 1987), relationships between burnout, role stressors and behavioural and psychological job outcomes for customer service representatives (Singh *et al*, 1994) and the incidence, nature and reporting of call centre work-related injuries. Many authors have used brief excerpts from interviews with call

centre employees to support the contentions made in their work, but few if any appear to have included fuller accounts of the experience of working in a call centre.

Call centres are a relatively new focus for research, and many facets remain unexplored. Call centre recruitment and selection procedures have not been studied extensively, and this thesis makes a contribution to the understanding of that subject. Whilst the experience of call centre work and employee turnover have both been the subject of prior academic attention, accounts involving the perspectives of individual call centre employees seem to be underdeveloped in the literature. My research, using participant observation data and drawing heavily on the results of interviews with current and former call centre employees, makes a contribution to the understanding of call centres at this level of analysis. I hope not only to contribute to some of the debates that have been explored in the literature, but also to bring a richness and depth of detail that will help to broaden any understanding of these issues.

Chapter 5

Research Methods

5.1 Introduction

In the first section of this chapter I briefly discuss in general terms the importance of methodology to research. This provides a framework within which to locate the particular research methodology employed in this research. In the second section the data collection methods used are described and discussed in relation to the theoretical merits and limitations of each method as set out within the research methodology literature. In the third section there is detailed discussion of how the data collection methods selected were employed, of the practical problems that arose, and of how they were dealt with. The final section provides a commentary on the methods of data analysis employed in the course of this thesis, together with an examination of what appear to be the main strengths and weaknesses of the resultant arguments.

5.2 The importance of methodology

The word 'method' derives from the Greek word *methodos*, meaning the pursuit of knowledge. It has come to be associated with the systematic use of various research techniques and procedures. In the context of research, 'methodology' tends to be used to refer to the body of methods or techniques associated with the production of a piece of research. Usually an examination of the methods used within a given piece of research reveals more than the techniques that have been used in the processes of data collection and analysis:

'The research methodology is the instrument through which the research objectives are achieved. It represents more than a technique since it reflects the (usually unarticulated) ontological assumptions about the nature of human activity and epistemological assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge about human activity' (Wass and Wells, 1994: 4).

Several philosophical positions can be adopted in relation to both ontology and epistemology, and it is useful to summarise the possible positions and the implications that the adoption of any given position has in terms of methodology. Table 5.1 provides such a summary, although it is important to note that only three points are identified and explored on what is in effect a continuum of possibilities in relation to epistemological perspective. It is important for a researcher to consider the various philosophical assumptions that underpin particular methodologies at an early stage of the research design process.

Table 5.1 Different research perspectives

Epistemological perspective	Positivism	Realism	Naturalism (naïve)
Ontological assumptions	Etic 'realist', real world exists independently of subjective consciousness, the latter is irrelevant to explanation; enquiry can converge on reality	real world exists independently of subjective consciousness but experience of the real world is through subjective consciousness	Emic 'idealist', real world does not exist outside consciousness of individual, hence multiple conceptions of reality and enquiry cannot converge on a single reality
Epistemological assumptions	<p>i) phenomenism; only that which is objectively observable is valid knowledge</p> <p>ii) empiricism; explanation comprises of causal laws inferred from empirical regularities; subjects subservient to definition of knowledge, subjective consciousness is meaningless</p>	<p>i) knowledge includes the observable and the intangible</p> <p>ii) general laws are not deterministic, they only partially explain human action; equally subjective interpretations are only partially explained by the external world; human action open to various interpretations; possibility of indeterminates</p>	<p>i) phenomenism; valid knowledge comprises individual comprehension of the 'external' world</p> <p>ii) empiricism; explanation comprises of causal laws inferred from actors' subjective perceptions of their social world; definition of knowledge is determined by the subject; generalisation beyond context is meaningless</p>
Scientific objective	nomothetic with natural science; abstract from subjective idiosyncrasies to uncover general laws; replicability, generalisability	inclusion of subjective in traditional model of science to uncover general laws and how these are interpreted by subjects; laws are tendencies i.e. not deterministic; often applied research, practitioner driven	from hermeneutics to uncover and explain individual conceptualisation and interpretation of external factors; internal validity, ecological validity
Nature of scientific knowledge	privileged, impersonal, value-free, exact, precise, causal, rational, determinate, general	personal, value-bound, multi-causal, plausible, indeterminate, particular	personal, interested, value-bound, uncertain, non-rational, indeterminate, particular
Cycle of enquiry	deductive; abstract theories - operational hypotheses - observations - inference using statistical tests 'predictive'	'retroductive'; iterative cycle observation = theory	inductive; theory grounded in empirical world observation - reflection - construction of abstract concepts 'descriptive' explanations
Methodology	nomethetic e.g. census or sample survey, quasi-experiment, operationalism; outsider looking in; extensive and general	methodological pluralism, triangulation, interactive, participatory, action research; method determined by subject of research	ideographic e.g. ethnography; insider seeking 'verstehen' with subjects
Type of data	quantitative, systematic and precise; directly observable and measurable	all data which are relevant to subject; quantitative and qualitative, observable and interpretive	qualitative, intangible, subjective conceptions and interpretations of actors; intensive and contextualised, detailed penetrating, 'processual'; written texts
Techniques for data collection	self-completion questionnaire, structured interviews, simulation, use of secondary data	complete tool kit of techniques often in context of a case study	participant observation, unstructured interviews, textual analysis
Bias	concern to account for measurement error and missing data; use of statistical controls	methods are combined with a view to compensate for weakness in a single method	concern to account for reactivity and reflexivity in data; use of reflective and reactive accounts

Source: Wass and Wells, 1994: 9.

Whilst it is likely that a person will gravitate towards particular methodologies with which they feel 'comfortable', and that this may be a subconscious reflection of their personal epistemological perspective, an awareness of such issues allows the researcher to consider the likely weaknesses of the techniques which they would like to employ and to account for or design in safeguards against any methodological frailties which might lead to later criticisms of their research.

5.3 Data collection techniques employed in this research

The research for this thesis consisted of five relatively discrete activities. There was a period of desk research in order to collect and collate general information on call centres, the techniques for which are generally regarded as straightforward and are therefore not discussed further. Allied to this there was a review and content analysis of call-centre related newspaper articles for the five-year period from 1 January 1996 to 31 December 2000. A survey was conducted on the levels of involvement of employment agencies with call centres in Scotland consisting of self-completion postal questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Covert participant observation was conducted in a call centre over a 16-week period. Finally, a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out with call centre and former call centre employees. In this section I outline the major elements of each of the latter three methods of data collection before considering generally their relative strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the ethical implications of covert participant observation are examined.

5.3.1 Questionnaires

Ferber, Sheatsley, Turner and Waksberg (1980: 3) defined a survey as 'A method of gathering information from a number of individuals, a "sample", in order to learn something about the larger population from which the sample is drawn'. The questionnaire is the instrument used to gather such information. May (1993) identified three main types of questionnaire; mail or self-completion questionnaires, telephone survey questionnaires, and face-to-face interview schedules. Since the major data gathering instrument within the survey phase of this research was a self-completion questionnaire, the discussion that follows focuses mainly on this type.

The self-completion questionnaire normally has two components: a covering letter explaining the purpose of the study, making the case for participation by the recipient, stressing the anonymity of individual replies, and indicating how and where the results will be reported; and a questionnaire consisting of a number of questions organised and presented in a variety of possible ways, depending on the purpose and nature of the survey. Ackroyd and Hughes (1983) suggested that there were four possible categories of survey, each with a different primary purpose: factual, attitudinal, social psychological, and explanatory. The first two categories are practically driven. Factual surveys were the earliest type of survey. They collect 'hard data', that is to say data which are quantitative, directly observable and measurable. Attitudinal surveys, as the name suggests, seek information on attitudes and opinions, collecting 'soft data'. The second two categories are more theoretically driven. Social psychological surveys evolved from interest in questions generated as a result of attitude surveys, and seek to elucidate possible links between attitudes and behaviour. Explanatory surveys are surveys specifically designed to test hypotheses drawn from theory.

Wass and Wells (1994) identified sample survey techniques with a positivist epistemological approach. They classified surveys as being based on 'nomothetic assumptions, that is to say a method capable of being used to state 'laws'. May (1993: 67) identified seven characterising themes that help to place questionnaires within the positivist part of the spectrum of research perspectives. Chief amongst these were: the ability to generalise from a sample to the population from which the sample was drawn, the analysis of data using statistical techniques imported from the natural sciences, the belief in causality as an explanation for human behaviour, and the ability to replicate findings as a check for bias.

A defining feature of survey methods might be said to be the importance that tends to be placed on structure. Confidence in the generalisability of survey findings to the population as a whole is ensured by the rigorous application of statistical probability theory in construction of the survey sample. The ability to replicate the findings of a survey is facilitated by the attention focused on standardisation of the survey instrument in terms of the questions to be asked, the manner in which they are asked, the way in which answers are scored for analysis purposes, and so on.

May (1993) identified four criticisms of the survey method, based on instances where the method is used as part of a positivist research strategy. The first centres on the way in which questionnaires attempt to identify causal relationships. The concept of causality has been criticised as being one imported from the natural sciences which, it is argued, is inappropriate to the explanation of human action, which does not follow 'rules'. That survey data reveals a correlation between two variables does not *ipso facto* mean that changes in one 'cause' changes in the other. Surveys are normally unable to reveal the processes by which one variable comes to be correlated with another.

The second of May's criticisms focuses on the deductive reasoning associated with questionnaire design and analysis. Questions are constructed on the basis of, and designed to either support or refute, the researcher's presuppositions. Decisions have therefore already been made on what questions are important to the research. Additionally the design of the question can act to limit the possible range of responses, sometimes leading to the provision of 'proof' for the researchers' theories. The third attacks the ability of the survey method to reflect social reality. It is argued that attitudes and meanings that people confer on particular events are inadequately captured by a method that compartmentalises answers into fixed categories at a specific point in time. It provides an over-simple version of the social world and takes no account of how views change over time.

May saw the last of his criticisms as being the most important: 'The central issue in social research for the critics of questionnaires is a hermeneutic one: how can researchers legitimately understand the ways in which people interpret the world around them and act within their social universe? How can survey researchers guarantee that their questions will be interpreted by the respondent in the manner in which they intended when there is no opportunity for dialogue?' (May, 1993: 87). In order to give any credibility to their results it is necessary for the researcher who uses questionnaires to uncover concepts such as 'attitudes' to show that there was what Hughes (1980: 97) termed 'meaning equivalence' between themselves and their respondents, that is to say that shared a common understanding as regards the interpretation of the questions used and what meanings could be ascribed to the answer categories.

In addition to criticisms based upon epistemological considerations, there is a fundamental problem with survey results of a more practical nature. That is to say that there is sometimes a disparity between what people say they would do and what they do in reality. This problem was highlighted by the work of Lapiere (1934) on the prejudices of hotel proprietors towards 'dark-skinned people'. His initial survey appeared to reveal widespread prejudice against letting rooms to people within that category, but he later observed that in practice such persons arriving at the hotels were almost invariably given accommodation. Whilst a number of epistemologically based criticisms can be levelled at survey methods generally, the literature also identifies a number of strengths and weaknesses, both theoretical and practical, more specific to the self-completion questionnaire. These are detailed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Strengths and weaknesses of the self-completion questionnaire

Strengths	Weaknesses
Written questions help to eliminate the bias that might be introduced as a result of an interviewer asking the questions.	Questions have to be kept simple and straightforward, as the researcher has no control over how respondents will interpret questions.
In some situations, for example, when dealing with ethically or politically sensitive issues, the anonymity that they provide might encourage participation.	There is no control over who actually answers the questionnaire. The respondent might not be the person that the researcher had intended.
Respondents are able to consider their responses without feeling under pressure from time constraints.	There is no possibility of probing beyond the questions actually asked.
Mail surveys have a lower cost than other survey methods, such as face-to-face interviews.	There may be a low response rate, and reminders might have to be sent.
It is possible to cover a wider geographical area at relatively little cost.	It may not be possible to check for bias in the sample actually obtained, leading to doubt as to whether it is representative of the population that the researcher wished to survey.

Summary drawn from multiple sources

5.3.2 Interviews

In the context of social research, interviews may be defined as 'encounters between a researcher and a respondent in which the latter is asked a series of questions relevant to the subject of the research. The respondent's answers constitute raw data analysed at a later point in time by the

researcher' (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1983:66). A range of different interview types have been suggested which tend to be characterised along a quantitative-qualitative dimension, although the nomenclature used by different authors is not consistent. May (1993), for example, identified four types of interview: structured, semi-structured, focused or unstructured, and group interviews. Yin (1994) wrote of open-ended, focused and survey type interviews. Healey and Rawlinson (1994) made a single division between standardised and non-standardised interviews.

In general, 'quantitative interviewing' is highly structured, using a formal questionnaire that provides pre-coded response categories to each question. Questions are of a factual nature. The interviewer surveys each interviewee in an identical manner, allowing the researcher to be confident that differences between the answers given by interviewees are real and not merely an artefact of the interview situation. The data so produced are said to be comparable and therefore amenable to aggregation. If the data are collected in accordance with an appropriate sampling procedure, then the aggregated responses can be said to be statistically representative of the population from which the sample came.

Mason (1996) used the term 'qualitative interviewing' to refer to interviews characterised by a relatively informal, often conversational style; a thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach; and the assumption that data are generated via the interaction. The concern of qualitative interviewing is with an explanation and understanding of the particular rather than a desire to be able to generalise from the data obtained. The interviews that have taken place as part of this research have been of a loosely structured nature consistent with Mason's description of a 'qualitative interview'. Because of this, the following discussion will relate specifically to the philosophical underpinnings and strengths and weaknesses of this type of interview, rather than to interviewing generally.

The focus of qualitative interviewing, that is to say on the understanding and explanation of the particular, characterises it as a technique associated more with naturalist approaches to research. In such approaches importance is placed on achieving an understanding of the way in which the individual interprets and gives meaning to events and relationships. The qualitative interview facilitates that process by allowing interviewees to discuss subjects using their own 'frame of

reference' rather than have a frame of reference imposed by the researcher via an interview structure.

One of the main strengths of the qualitative interview lies in its flexibility. The researcher is able to tailor the interview to the individual in terms of matching the wording of questions to the vocabulary of the interviewee and thereby attempting to eliminate problems of misinterpretation. Particular points can be approached in different ways in order to help the interviewee articulate information which is complex or not fully formulated by them. The researcher is able to be reflexive in following up unexpected responses or exploring avenues of interest that they might not have considered prior to the interview. Another strength of the technique claimed by its proponents is its capacity to produce data that have depth and complexity, and which they would argue is thus more suited to providing explanations of complex social phenomena than that produced by survey techniques for example. One particular practical strength of qualitative interviewing, identified by Mason (1996), is that 'the data you want may not feasibly be available in any other form, so that asking people for their accounts, talking and listening to them and so on, is the only way to get at what you are interested in. For example, records of existing research, documents, letters, diaries, and so on, which you might use if you could, may not exist, or perhaps direct observation of the phenomena in which you are interested is simply impossible' (1996: 42).

Perhaps the major weakness of interviews identified within the literature on research methods is the susceptibility of the technique to data contamination. According to McCall and Simmons (1969), interview data are subject to contaminating effects from three main sources. First, contamination is possible from reactive effects of the interview situation on received testimony. Second, there may be distortions in the testimony itself. Third, problems may arise due to the inability of the interviewee to report events. A review of the underlying causes of contamination of interview data was provided by Dean and Whyte (1958), who argued that researchers need to be aware that 'The informant's statement represents merely the perception of the informant, filtered and modified by his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through his personal verbal usages'. They stressed that interviews are highly context-specific and that, in terms of information, researchers get only what the interviewee is willing to reveal in a particular interview situation.

They suggest that in analysing possible sources of contamination, an interviewee's contribution could usefully be considered separately in terms of its report of 'subjective' and 'objective' data.

In evaluating the report of subjective data, they suggested that the data revealed by the interviewee might be influenced by a number of factors. Chief amongst these they listed four main points for consideration by researchers. First, whether the interviewee has ulterior motives for modifying their report of the situation. Second, whether bars to spontaneity exist which inhibit the responses. Third, whether the interviewee desires to please or impress the interviewer with their responses. Fourth, whether there are idiosyncratic factors that might distort the interview, such as the emotional mood of the interviewee or the particular way in which a question is worded.

In relation to the statements of objective data, Dean and Whyte suggested that researchers need to consider how much of a report is an accurate record of events and how much is a reflection of the interviewee's own personality and perception. They suggested that there are four major sources of distortion. Data may be corrupted when the interviewee does not actually witness or recall witnessing an event but reports what they 'suppose' happened. Distortions may occur when the interviewee makes an honest report but their mental set¹ has caused them to selectively perceive an event. Problems with accuracy may arise when, because of an emotional need to do so, the interviewee has unconsciously modified their report of an event or situation to fit their own perspective. Accounts may be corrupted when the interviewee consciously modifies their account to give a distorted impression. According to Dean and Whyte, some of these sources of distortion can be detected and compensated for.

In a similar vein, Vidich and Bensman (1954) identified the underlying sources of data distortion by interviewees under three main groupings. The first, which they termed 'purposeful intent', included distortion of data for reasons such as self-aggrandisement, self-protection, or the carrying on of personal feuds or vendettas. The second grouping, which they related to the temporary role of the interviewee, included a desire to give the interviewer what the interviewee believes they require, based on the interviewee's assessment of the interviewer and the organisation they represent. The third group, under the banner of 'psychology of the interviewee', included considerations of the language style and vocabulary size of the interviewee.

Argyris (1952) suggested that people might react to being interviewed by triggering defence mechanisms. These could be related to the personality of the interviewee vis-à-vis the researcher, in situations where for a variety of reasons the prospect of being interviewed causes anxiety to the interviewee. In such cases Argyris suggested defence mechanisms might be manifested in terms of behaviours such as problem denial, surface collaboration or physical or emotional signs of fear. Alternatively, he suggested defence mechanisms might be related to the social organisation as expressed through the individual and which serve to protect the organisation from outsiders until the role, objectives and methods of the researcher have been explored and accepted.

5.3.3 Participant observation

Participant observation has been variously defined as:

‘...A data collection technique within ethnography. Specifically it implies a field strategy of immersion in the research setting, with the objective of “sharing in peoples lives while attempting to learn their symbolic world”’ (Delbridge and Kirkpatrick, 1994:37).

‘[Referring to]... methods of generating data which involve the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions, events and so on, within it’ (Mason, 1996:60).

‘...A characteristic blend or combination of methods and techniques that is employed in studying certain types of subject matter....[It]...involves some amount of genuinely social interaction in the field with subjects of the study, some direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a great deal of informal interviewing, some systematic counting, some collection of documents and artefacts, and open-endedness in the directions the study takes’ (McCall and Simmons, 1969:1).

The three explanations given above of what is meant by the term participant observation serve to illustrate the point that no standard definition exists although common elements are apparent. The first of these is that participant observation is a data collection technique that, although using direct observation as a primary data source, uses a number of different media as data sources. The second is that it requires the fieldworker to adopt an interactive role with respect to the subjects of study, although the nature and extent of the interaction may vary.

Some authors (for example Delbridge and Kirkpatrick, 1994) have seen participation as a single technique within the methodology known as ethnography, and indeed it has been said that ‘in its most characteristic form [ethnography] involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or

covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 1). Others (for example Wolcott, 1992) see participant observation strategies as a central plank in a number of different qualitative methodologies, including phenomenology and conversation analysis as well as ethnomethodology.

Few attempts seem to have been made to provide a theoretically systematic account of the nature of participant observation. After discussing why this should be the case, Ashworth (1995) produced a phenomenology of the method as a process of social interaction, identifying four elements: attunement to others' stock of available knowledge; emotional and motivational attunement to the group's concerns; taking for granted that one can contribute appropriately; and being able to assume that one's identity is not under threat. This systematic focus on the activity of participant observation provides a basis for consideration of some of the technique's practical difficulties, discussed later in this chapter.

Table 5.1 (above) places participant observation in the category of techniques appropriate to a naturalist epistemological perspective. This perspective derives intellectually from arguments put forward which attempt to differentiate the social sciences, and by implication the methods appropriate for research in the social sciences, from the natural sciences. Weber defined 'sociology' as 'a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effects' (1947: 90). A distinction is drawn between social sciences and natural sciences in terms of the nature of the phenomena being investigated. It is argued that in the natural sciences, this understanding, or in Weberian terminology "verstehen", is unnecessary because the phenomena under investigation are passive objects with no internal logic of their own. In contrast, all human action possesses an internal logic or meaning that needs to be understood if the action is to be intelligible to the observer. In the social sciences, the research subjects are, by definition, agents who 'act towards things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them' (Blumer, 1969: 2). An understanding of the meaning of the internal logic of social action is therefore critical if an adequate explanation of the behaviour of social actors is to be produced.

It is important to recognise that as well as being a core component of all forms of social activity meanings are also contextualised. That is to say, meanings are unique to their specific contextual and historical location. Individual behaviour is shaped by the meanings ascribed to things in any given situation. Qualitative changes in the physical or social situation may result in different meanings being ascribed to the same things. If social phenomena are to be explained properly through an understanding of meanings, the contextual and historical positioning of such meanings must be accounted for.

One of the main strengths of participant observation is that the research takes place within the natural setting. Although the presence of a researcher will inevitably have an effect, even in the case of covert participant observation, the advantage gained over artificial laboratory settings is that the observations focus on ordinary events naturally occurring within their normal context. According to Miles and Huberman (1994: 10) this gives the research 'a strong handle on what "real life" is like', a feeling that is reinforced by what they term 'local groundedness', which results from the collection of data in close proximity to the situation under study. As well as taking place within the natural setting, the method is seen as utilising natural human behaviour. As Shipman (1997) has pointed out, observation is the 'usual way of obtaining information'.

The method is seen to be flexible, as opposed to the closed and inflexible nature of more positivist methods of data collection. It is possible within a period of participant observation for the researcher to decide to turn their attention to a specific line of enquiry if they feel it is warranted, even if this had not been in their original 'plan' for the research. Positivist methods tend to have a more tightly prescribed procedure that does not cater for such deviations. The essential difference between the two is that participant observation is normally used as part of an interpretive methodology, where the central aim of the research is to achieve a representation that has been enriched by understanding. The fact that participant observation is normally carried out for an extended period makes it possible to study processes, rather than being confined to the snap-shots of situations produced by techniques such as surveys or interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In addition, participant observation has the potential to provide a richness of data that is perhaps more suited to revealing the complexity of specific situations. The resulting ability to provide densely detailed descriptions plays a part in the overall persuasiveness of accounts of the research

in which 'the researcher's sensitivity, not his adhering to a sterile set of mechanical procedures, becomes the basis of his claim to have adequately represented the phenomenon' (Fielding, 1982: 99).

Whilst most of the strengths of participant observation are seen as deriving from the 'naturalness' of the technique, most of the method's perceived weaknesses result from the use of researchers as conduits for data collection. For example, Shipman (1997) regarded the fallibility of the observer as a critical weakness. A key assumption of social researchers selecting this technique is that reality is socially constructed and that truth is relative. The observer must identify key episodes from which to construct theory and this gives them an incentive to 'see' selectively. What is seen is often a reflection of current theory, or of the observer's own political persuasion:

'Observations are not the result of the senses detecting events out there that look the same to everyone. Our perceptions are structured. We see the world through our attitudes, prejudices, values and through the models in the mind that we have learned. As researchers these models that structure observations into knowledge come from some branch of social science, some professional competence and more general social and political views. Given the extraordinary specialization within social science there will be many models and hence very different aspects will be in focus and the same event will be interpreted in very different ways' (Shipman, 1997: 72).

Atkinson (1992) identified the presence of 'conceptual lenses' that 'distort' the vision of the observer in a slightly different context by considering not so much how different events are seen by researchers but how what has been observed is treated. Observations are only transformed into data by the observer's act of recording, whether in written or other form. But not everything that has been seen by the observer is recorded. As Atkinson noted 'What may be generated as 'data' is affected by what the ethnographer can treat as 'writable' and 'readable'' (Atkinson, 1992). In arriving at a text version of the observations made, the selectivity of the observer in terms of what they consider to be recordable may act to produce accounts in which important contextual information has been irretrievably lost. For example, an inability to record in text form such subtleties as intonation or inflexion may cause the interpretation of a text version of a particular conversation to be very different from the interpretation that would have been made had such information been available.

In addition to in-built selectivity in what is both 'seen' and recorded by the participant observer, there is also the possibility of error in the interpretation of what has been observed. Shipman

argued that intermediate steps are required between observation and meaningful, contextualised and distinct knowledge, i.e. that the technique requires the observer to interpret what has been observed and thereby introduces threats to validity:

‘[O]bservation is interpretation. That applies to researcher and to researched. Our observations are instantaneously interpreted by reference to existing beliefs and knowledge. These vary by age, class, race, sex and all the characteristics we wrap together as culture’ (Shipman, 1997: 72).

One further weakness associated with the method of participant observation is the possibility of the researcher ‘going native’. Monti (1992) defined this state as ‘identifying so closely with one’s subject that one inadvertently skews his description and analysis of the world being portrayed or totally compromises the work and standards of appropriate conduct in the field’. Monti suggested that this particular danger might be avoided if researchers took care to keep some sort of distance between themselves and their subjects, although he admitted that in some circumstances this might be difficult to do.

5.3.3.1 Covert participant observation

The discussion thus far has centred on participant observation generally. However, the method is usually subject to further refinement in terms of the strategy by which the researcher gains access to the research setting. Two basic strategies are identified in the literature (for example, Jorgensen, 1989). The first of these, the ‘overt’ strategy, involves the researcher in openly requesting permission to observe. The obverse of this, the ‘covert’ strategy, requires the researcher to assume a role within the research setting without informing those already within that setting that the research is under way.

There are a number of reasons why a researcher might prefer, or indeed require, covert rather than overt access to the research setting. For example, it may not always be possible to negotiate access for a period of participant observation, or overt access might not provide appropriate access to the phenomena in which the researcher is interested. Covert participant observation may overcome these difficulties, but gives rise to a different set of problems for the researcher. It is likely that if the covert researcher is discovered access to the setting will be terminated, a situation likely to be detrimental to the research as a whole. In addition, some researchers find that it is difficult to

manage interactions with others when they are obliged to conceal their research intentions. But perhaps the most fundamental difficulty raised in pursuing a strategy of covert participant observation is that posed in relation to ethical considerations, and this issue is now addressed in greater depth.

Discussions concerning the use of covert participant observation strategies arouse strong feelings in many commentators. These range from being passionately against their use, for example Bulmer (1982) argued: '[T]he use of covert participant observation as a method of research is neither ethically justified, nor practically necessary, nor in the best interests of sociology as an academic pursuit' (1982: 217), to being, like Douglas (1976), equally passionately in favour of their use: 'Social actors employ lies, fraud,...., the social scientist is justified in using them where necessary in order to achieve the higher objective of scientific truth'. The purposes of this section are three-fold. First, it seeks to examine the arguments that have been put forward in relation to the ethical issues raised by the use of covert strategies. Second, it outlines ways in which a 'moral analysis' of any given research employing such methods might be performed. Third, it provides an analysis and evaluation of the ethical issues to which the generation of this thesis has given rise.

According to Flew (1984: 112) 'the word 'ethics' often suggests a set of standards by which a particular group or community decides to regulate its behaviour - to distinguish what is legitimate or acceptable in pursuit of their aims from what is not. Hence we talk of 'business ethics' or 'medical ethics''. Barnes (1979) wrote of ethical decision making in the context of research as a process of deciding 'between one course of action and another not in terms of expediency or efficiency but by reference to standards of what is morally right or wrong' (1979: 16). May (1993: 42) referred to such decisions as being 'concerned with what is right or just, in the interests of not only the project, its sponsors or workers, but also others who are the participants in the research'.

The problem is that the 'community' which might be expected to regulate such behaviour, that is to say the general group that comprises those who work within the social sciences, have not been able to reach any agreement on the appropriate ethical stance to adopt in relation to covert research strategies:

'[T]here is simply no consensus on the key ethical questions raised by our research. There is no hard-and-fast way to calculate the costs and benefits of social scientific research.

Indeed the debate on this area reveals polar extremes that are irreconcilable. We are not, as a profession, in a position to concur unanimously on what is public, and what is private; which institutions are "reprehensible"; and when does the end of knowledge justify the scientific means?' (Punch, 1986: 81).

Reynolds offered an explanation for this lack of consensus:

'[T]he constant change in objectives and methods of social science investigators (as they study new phenomena and develop new research techniques) and the shifting standards of society (as the rights and privileges of its members are revised, usually expanded) makes it difficult to develop a set of principles that are specific, timely and appropriate to all future research activities' (Reynolds, 1982: 187).

The 'polar extremes' referred to by Punch might be seen as being represented on the one hand by the views of authors such as Erikson (1967) and Bulmer (1982), who were emphatic in their denouncement of covert methodologies; and on the other by Denzin (1968) and Douglas (1976), who were equally emphatic in their support. These two positions might be seen to represent ends of an ethical continuum on which those who would conduct covert participant observation must locate themselves.

Bulmer (1982) was adamant that covert participant observation is not ethically justified. He bases this assertion on the premise that such methods are 'clearly a violation of the principle of informed consent'. The principle of informed consent states that:

'[The] person involved should have legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, over-reaching or any ulterior form of constraint or coercion; and should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision' (The Nuremberg Code, 1949).

The principle of informed consent was developed in the course of the trials following the end of World War II of those accused of carrying out particular medical experiments on subjects held prisoner in concentration camps. Some detractors of covert research methodologies use the medical analogy to illustrate their argument: '[W]ith people who have expressed no readiness to participate in our researches....we are in very much the same ethical position as a physician who carries out medical experiments on human subjects without their consent. The only conceivable argument in favour of such experimentation is that the knowledge derived from it is worth the discomfort it may cause. And the difficulties here are that we do not know how to measure the value of the work we do or the methods we employ...' (Erikson, 1967: 369).

The principle of informed consent, first formulated in exceptional circumstances as a guiding principle has, for opponents of the use of covert methods, become a 'norm' in the conduct of research. In terms of research, a 'norm' may be seen as an overarching rule of good practice, something which is initially put forward as an ideal to strive for but which, over time, becomes entrenched further into methodologies until it eventually achieves the status of absolute prescription. All such ideals have an originating context, that is to say that they result from reflections on a particular piece of research, in a particular academic field. As their desirability is recognised and they are applied in other analogous fields, they start to become generalised, losing their connections with their original context. The transfer of methods from one academic discipline to another can result in the simultaneous transfer of associated methodological norms that are less appropriate to the discipline to which they have been transferred than to that from whence they came. It might be argued that informed consent is just such a case.

For instance Wells (1994) argued that '[T]here are real limitations to the extent to which the 'role models' of ethical behaviour developed within medical and legal disciplines can be successfully applied to social sciences in general, and to business and management research in particular' (Wells, 1994 : 282). He suggested that medical and legal ethical models have been developed in a way that projects a 'disinterested' professionalist ethos. They combine a written code that is quite narrow in scope with the possibility of sanction on discovery of any breaches of the code deemed to constitute 'unethical behaviour'. He saw such models as being more concerned with development and practice of the discipline and its skills and the practical use and testing of knowledge than with processes of research within the discipline. As such, he argued, neither can be considered appropriate to the social sciences.

Others would suggest that the medical analogy is inappropriate for reasons more concerned with the actualities of social and management research than the intent that informed the development of the medical ethical model. Jorgensen (1989), for example, drew a distinction on the grounds of the differing involvement of those observed in different research contexts: 'Participant observation, unlike survey research or experiments.... does not have human "subjects". Rather, situations in which human beings are involved are observed under otherwise natural conditions. Furthermore, whilst people may be the source of information, they are not manipulated or controlled in any way

resembling the design of other kinds of research' (Jorgensen, 1989: 48). In a similar vein, Fielding (1982) questioned the appropriateness of the medical analogy employed by Erikson by drawing a distinction between the immediate and apparent physical effects and impact of descriptive and ethnographic fieldwork as compared to that of medically based research.

The question of whether informed consent is a moral requisite for research feels much more clear-cut in relation to medical or biological research contexts than in relation to social research contexts. To allow research to proceed which might affect the subject in terms of their physiological or psychological well-being without their prior knowledge of inclusion in that research appears morally repugnant. It offends our sense of equity, of what is right and just. In such a context, the requirement for informed consent of human subjects goes some way towards satisfying both society's requirement of propriety and the individual's need for protection against the possible abuse of over-zealous research methods. It does not prevent research from taking place without informed consent. What may prevent such research from taking place in many instances may be the censure such researchers would receive when research conducted without informed consent was published, together with the requirement in most research settings to publish research for examination by one's academic peers. In the absence of the need to publish, the decision with regard to informed consent comes down to the sense of morality held by those individuals with knowledge of the research.

As regards the study of work using participant observation, the position with regard to a requirement for informed consent seems much less clear-cut. The objective of such a method is to understand what is happening in the research setting in the same terms that events are understood by subjects working in that setting. Instead of a desire to see a change as the result of intervention, the researcher is instead concerned to effect as little change as is practically possible. The method and the context of such research require the well-being of subjects to be unaffected by the research. It is more difficult to see the potential for harm to the subjects as a result of the research, and therefore more difficult to see a need for protection against such research. The question of moral correctness simply does not produce the same upsurge of emotion in this context.

A further argument, based on practical impossibility, can be advanced against the imposition of a mandatory requirement to obtain informed consent from all participants before conducting research. Envisage a situation where a researcher decides to follow a strategy of overt participant observation. The researcher would seek permission from those in authority to be present within the research setting. Approaches would be made, for example, to the board of directors of a company. The researcher would provide full details of their proposed research to those from whom permission was being sought. If permission were to be granted, the researcher would gain access to the research setting. It is less likely that those subjects within the research setting would be given as full an exposition of the aims, objectives and methodologies of the research as those who had been a part of the 'gatekeeping' function. Even if they were fully informed, a question remains as to whether they would be able to exercise any real choice over whether or not to participate in the research, although some vestigial degree of control over the extent of their participation might exist. It might be suggested that in practice it is more difficult to maintain an ethical distinction between covert and overt methods based upon the principle of informed consent. 'Not everyone is informed of the research interest (and true purpose of research) even when an overt strategy is employed. Conversely, even when a setting is approached covertly, it is likely that at least a few people eventually will be provided with information pertinent to the research aims' (Jorgensen, 1989: 48).

There are those, such as Denzin for example, who have suggested that the different context of covert participant observation and its less obvious potential for harm to those observed in comparison with medical research means that different ethical standards should apply:

'I suggest the sociologist has the right to make observations on anyone in any setting to the extent that he does so with scientific intents and purposes in mind. The goal of any science is not wilful harm to subjects, but the advancement of knowledge and explanation. Any method that moves us towards that goal, without unnecessary harm to subjects, is justifiable. The only qualification is that the method employed should not in any deliberate fashion damage the credibility or reputation of the subject' (Denzin, in Denzin and Erikson, 1968).

Although the conclusion is substantially the same, that is to say that the end of scientific advancement justifies the means, Denzin can be distinguished from the stance taken by Douglas (1976) in that Denzin's justification was based on there being no deliberate harm to others through the use of such methods as long as appropriate measures are taken, whereas Douglas justified his

conclusion on the basis that covert strategies mirror the normal behaviour of individuals and should therefore be considered acceptable.

In considering the potential harm which may be done to those covertly observed, some authors have stressed the effects on the subjects of discovering that they have been covertly observed and that their trust has in some way been betrayed. Bulmer suggested that 'If those studied subsequently learn or read of the publication of the research, they must come to terms with the fact that they have been cheated and misled by someone in whom they reposed trust and confidence' (Homan and Bulmer, 1982: 115). He argued that such revelations might lead to individual psychological damage, to damage to the values and beliefs of a group, or to damage to the well-being of the group as a whole. Others, such as Homan (1982), have pointed out that: '[C]overt methods may be so practised as to require either the absolute trust of the subjects in the investigator (in role as a prominent actor) or the subjects' total oblivion of the presence of the person who is investigator. So trust is not a necessary element in the conduct of covert methods: conversely, overt methods also afford the betrayal of trust, notably at the report and publication stages' (Homan and Bulmer 1982: 116). The argument is thus that covert strategies are potentially neither better nor worse than overt research strategies in terms of the betrayal of subjects' trust and that blanket generalisations in this regard are misleading.

A further issue raised by critics of covert methodologies relates to the impact that they may have on those investigators who might be asked to use them. Comments in this regard seem to presuppose the scenario of a research team in which the methodologies are decided by the principal researcher(s) and then carried out by research assistants who have had very little input into the decision-making process but are asked to shoulder the burden of possible risks to their psychological well-being as a result of carrying out covert participant observation. Erikson (1967) argued that in such circumstances, the researcher has a responsibility towards those who are being asked to carry out participant observation and for whom the experience might be stressful. The notion of stress within the research setting is not unreasonable. In circumstances where the participant observer is required to play a role during fieldwork that is outside of his or her natural inclination and experiences, there is the possibility of emotional dissonance, a condition identified

by Hochschild (1983) during her studies of the behaviour of airline cabin staff. This may precipitate personal crises outside of the research setting.

William Caudill provides an example of a researcher who suffered as a result of carrying out covert participant observation. He conducted covert research into the role of patients in a psychiatric hospital. When the results of the research were published, Caudill stated 'I have no wish to rationalise my actions in the earlier [covert] study. I did it, and learned much from it. I do not recommend others doing it because I believe the price is too high' (1958: xiv). Following his death some years later, a close personal friend in the course of an obituary commented 'The strain on Bill between his role as an objective observer and his human sensitivity to people who were deceived by his dissembling developed into a severe personal and career crisis' (de Vos, 1973: 234).

Proponents of covert research methods accept the argument that such methods may pose psychological risks to the participant observer, but counter that such risks are not necessarily any greater than those posed to researchers using different research methods. For example, the impact upon a researcher of encountering a hostile interviewee might be equally traumatic. This line of logic, that the evils of covert participant observation are no greater than those of other more easily and widely accepted research methods, seems to be employed on a regular basis by supporters of covert strategies. In one sense, this is something of a red herring because it fails to address the issue of whether covert methods are themselves ethical or not. Instead, the argument seems to imply that they should be accepted because other methods that are, on close inspection, equally dubious in this regard have been accepted. Such 'justifications' of covert methods have been advanced in relation not only to the risks to be assumed by the researcher, but also in relation to issues of the invasion of privacy (Homan, 1982); damage to the reputation of social science (Denzin, 1968); the extent to which informed consent is actually obtained (Jorgensen, 1989); and the potential challenge to the quality of data obtained (Gans, 1962; Denzin, 1968; Punch, 1986).

Equally superfluous to a consideration of the ethical merit of covert participant observation are the appeals often made to practicality as a defence to the charge of unethical behaviour. For example,

Punch (1986: 36) argued that on occasions gaining informed consent from all participants is inappropriate:

‘Let us say, for instance, that during my research with the police in Amsterdam the patrol car was directed to a fight and the two constables jumped out and started wrestling with the combatants. Was I supposed to step up to this writhing shindig and shout “freeze!” and then, inserting my head between the entangled limbs, whip out my code and, Miranda-like, chant out the rights of the participants?.....In these circumstances gaining consent is quite inappropriate, because activity is taking place that cannot be interrupted. Indeed, to have endeavored to do so in many other situations that I encountered in the field would have effectively destroyed my research’.

Whilst accepting the truth of his statement, it cannot be said to be in any way answering the ethical criticisms of the method.

Given the lack of consensus within academic circles as to the appropriate ethical stance to take in relation to covert participant observation, there is an onus on the individual researcher to carry out their own ‘moral analysis’ when considering whether to include the method as a part of their research strategy. But how should this analysis be conducted? Just as there is no agreement over the ethical nature of covert methods, equally there is no one view on how the question should be analysed. Holdaway (1982) presented a simple but, somewhat ambiguous form of analysis, although he did emphasise the need for wider consultation within the analytical process:

‘The most significant question to ask when deciding on any research strategy is this: “If I were to place myself in the situation of those I wish to research, would I object to the covert method?” If we begin with this very human question and pit all our evidence against it, preferably in debate with a number of others concerned with the research, then a good decision might well be made’ (Holdaway, 1982: 79).

The answer will depend on whether the researcher is to imagine him or herself as a member of the group of prospective subjects, holding the same values and adhering to the same norms in thought and behaviour as are common to that group, or whether the researcher is to envisage him or herself as being part of that group but still carrying all their own cognitive and cultural baggage. Equally, how can the researcher know prior to carrying out observation what the ‘situation’ of those they intend to research is on anything other than a very superficial level?

Reynolds (1982) presented three alternative strategies for ‘the ethical and moral analysis of all research involving human participants, including covert participant observation’ (1982: 187). According to Reynolds, the strategies he outlined are the result of attempts to find acceptable

solutions to three questions that have 'been the subject of religious, political, legal and philosophical analysis related to moral controversy for centuries'. The first strategy, which emphasises the rights of the individual, is seen as evolving out of debates centred on the justification for the establishment of a political state. Whilst the benefits of an organised political state for individual members are easily recognised, concern exists that those empowered to act on behalf of society might for their own ends use that power to abuse ordinary citizens. It has been assumed that rather than fetter those in power by restricting their mandate, it is more beneficial to society as a whole to emphasise the rights and privileges of the individual and to allow rulers a broad authority so long as the rights of the individual are not infringed. The recognised rights of individuals have expanded over time and have been explicitly recognised through the adoption of political documents such as the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

Occasions arise when the rights of different individuals conflict, or the rights of the individual conflict with actions thought to serve the common good. Generally, the rights of the individual are seen as subservient to actions required for the common good, for example where individual rights to freedom may be curtailed (by imprisonment) for those who violate the rights of others. Additionally, an individual may be allowed to waive certain rights as a willing volunteer, for example waiving the right to property in return for money when taking out a mortgage. Whilst many rights are made explicit and incorporated in legal standards, still more have only the status of proposed rights. Reynolds (1982: 189) listed in this category 'the right not to be deceived by others; the right not to be treated as less than an autonomous, mature adult; the right to full knowledge and motives of all associates; the right not to be embarrassed; the right to a private personality; and the right to an opportunity to provide informed consent prior to contributing to any type of research activity'. Covert participant observation is a research method that brings the conflicting rights of different parties into sharp focus. The rights of the subjects as members of society have to be considered against the rights of researchers to pursue ideas and the right of society to scientific advancement. Using this particular strategy to complete a moral analysis of proposed research therefore requires the researcher to decide which of the many competing rights of the different parties should be given precedence.

The second strategy outlined by Reynolds was based on an approach developed to evaluate public programmes and legislation and used a type of cost-benefit or utilitarian analysis. When public administrators are called upon to decide upon various competing project proposals 'the most common strategy for analysis is to systematically compare the costs and benefits of viable alternatives and adopt those where the benefits outweigh the costs and, implicitly, the rights of individuals are not violated' (Reynolds, 1982: 191). This approach has several attendant problems. First, in some cases particular costs or benefits are not easily quantifiable, for example the value of human life when the saving of life may be a benefit of fitting safety equipment. This makes it difficult to aggregate such factors to produce a cost/benefit ratio that would enable proposals to be compared. Second, the question arises of costs or benefits to whom. In what circumstances do costs to many members of society justify benefits to only a few? The recent example of attitudes governmental and public to the prescription of Viagra, a relatively expensive drug that provides treatment to sufferers of male impotence, serves to show that such issues are frequently not clear-cut. Cost-benefit analyses are widely used in assessment of proposed projects with possible societal benefits. The appeal of the method may lie in its *prima facie* appearance of objective and scientific rationality. However, it is clear that effects not easily reducible to numerical terms will inevitably be subjectively assessed, and that decisions on where a balance between cost and benefit lies are more likely to be intuitive than purely rational.

The third of Reynolds' suggested methods of moral analysis involves an appeal to personal morality. The question of what criteria are involved in being a good or moral person has long been debated, and has led to the development of 'at least three' (1982: 193) very different approaches to its resolution. One possible approach is known as a 'deontological' approach. 'Quite simply, ethical judgements in sociological research would, from this point of view, follow a set of principles which guide the conduct of research itself. Research ethics take on a universal form and are intended to be followed regardless of the place and circumstances in which the researcher finds themselves' (May, 1993: 42). Reynolds made the point that in such an approach the major focus switches from the rules themselves to a discussion of the basis on which the rules are adopted. Deontological approaches have been criticised on a number of counts. A major concern is that the inflexibility of a predetermined set of rules may lead to a situation where 'the only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether'

(Bronfenbrenner, 1976). A rather different argument alludes to the possibility that rigid codes of ethics might become a mechanism for abuse if imposed to protect the powerful from exposure: 'Is not the failure of sociology to uncover corrupt, illegitimate, covert practices of government or industry because of the supposed prohibitions of professional ethics tantamount to supporting such practices?' (Galliher, 1982: 160).

Opposing the imposition of inflexible rules, a 'teleological' (Reynolds, 1982) approach 'emphasises analysis of the situation where a choice is required and consideration of the effects of alternative actions' (1982: 193). Different forms of teleological approach include the individual application of cost-benefit analysis; 'consequentialism' (May, 1993), in which the concern is for the context in which the researchers find themselves and the consequences of their acts; and 'situational ethics' (Holdaway, 1982) in which the researcher tries to assess the likely attitude of prospective subjects by asking: 'If I were to place myself in the situation of those I wish to research, would I object to the covert method?' (1982: 79).

Reynolds outlined a third approach to moral analysis through appeals to personal morality, which may be summarised as the 'intuitive' approach. This involves neither adherence to rules nor lengthy and time-consuming consideration of detail. Instead, it relies upon the researcher's instinctive reaction to the situation to determine the appropriateness of their behaviour. Reynolds (1982: 194) identified both the strength and the weakness of this approach: 'Without a complete immersion in the situation with all the perceived constraints, alternatives and obligations, it is not possible to determine the morally appropriate choice - the one the choice-maker finds the most comfortable. While this strategy may be similar to that used by many individuals, it prevents others from verifying the decision to determine if it was appropriate'.

From the above discussion it will be clear that there is no consensus view amongst the research community in relation to covert research techniques. Neither is there any clear agreement on how a 'moral analysis' of proposed research ought to be carried out. In the course of carrying out my research I have had to address a number of ethical dilemmas, not just in relation to the decision to forego the principle of informed consent and to carry out covert participant observation, but also in

relation to questions of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy both within the fieldwork setting and in relation to producing a subsequent written account of the research.

It would be fair to say that although I was informed of the arguments put forward both for and against the use of covert research methods, in the end my decision was based not so much on any of these but partly on an 'intuitive' approach to the question. I say only partly intuitive because I did feel discomfort at the idea of deliberately misleading people, but I set against this the more pragmatic reasons for choosing covert techniques. That is to say that I allowed myself to be comforted by thoughts such as the practical impossibility of gaining informed consent from all those likely to play a part in the field; the impossibility of getting the same data by any other method; and the fact that covert techniques reduce to a minimum various 'researcher effects'.

Whenever possible I tried to ameliorate the feelings of discomfort that I had about covert participant observation. For example, although I used my employers in the sense that I took the opportunity provided by my employment to carry out fieldwork, I do not feel that I abused them. I was paid to work and I worked hard. I tried my best to do the job as I was instructed. Some researchers have gone to extraordinary lengths to obtain data, and would no doubt argue that their work was the richer for it. My data were for the most part obtained in situations that were in the context of the work setting, public. That is to say data were gathered in locations to which all employees had access. I did not hide behind furniture and eavesdrop or 'bug' rooms when I was not present, nor do I think that I would have felt happy doing so. If I heard or was told things, it was because those who said them were prepared to have them heard by someone who held the status of stranger or, at best, acquaintance. My limited time at the call centre together with the variable shift patterns to which we all worked served to ensure that field relations were no more intimate than this.

The principle of informed consent is a powerful tool for demonstrating a researcher's concern with the rights and well-being of their subjects. I believe that in some contexts, of which the setting for this research is one, the same level of concern can be demonstrated and an equivalent level of protection provided if care is taken as regards issues of confidentiality. I have done my best to

ensure that informants are given anonymity by changing the names of people and places, and providing a low level of detail where to provide more might facilitate identification.

5.4 The research strategy in practice

It would be possible to present the different research methods used in the production of this thesis as a formal strategic plan, giving it the appearance of a methodology fully worked out in advance of the research, but this would not entirely be accurate. In truth, the research strategy evolved and emerged in a series of phases as the research proceeded. As each phase progressed, it was possible to reflect on the data that had been collected, and to decide on the implications for the research as a whole. This allowed for considerable flexibility within the research process and enabled more informed decisions to be made as to how the research would proceed. Five main data gathering activities were involved in the study, namely; a period of general desk research using various secondary sources, content analyses and reviews 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. These are now discussed in detail.

5.4.1 Desk research using secondary sources

The study began by gathering data from newspaper articles. These seemed to relate most frequently to the creation of new jobs in call centres. A number of sources were examined in order to gather sufficient information with which to assess the research potential of call centre employment. Included in these were CD ROM databases of newspaper articles. Various key words were used to find references to call centres. The articles were then printed direct from the CD or retrieved from the University newspaper archives as appropriate. CD ROM databases of journals were also interrogated to find published academic works on or involving call centres and copies were obtained. Different CD ROM databases were used to search for call centre-related book publications. Internet searches were conducted, but these were found to be in general less useful than other sources. Subscriptions were taken out for 'Call Centre Focus', a British publication initially issued on a bi-monthly basis but now produced on a monthly basis, and 'Telemarketing and CallCenter Solutions', an American publication with monthly issues. The results of this phase

of the research are detailed in Chapter 6, 'Call centres in the UK', which concerns itself with UK call centre growth and call centre technologies generally. Reflecting on the information gleaned during this phase of the study led to the conclusion that there was indeed scope for a research project.

5.4.2 Content analyses and reviews of call-centre related newspaper articles

Although carried out at a later stage, because it can be regarded as an extension of research using secondary sources, it is appropriate to detail here the content analyses and reviews of call centre-related newspaper articles published over a five-year period that are included as part of this study. To identify relevant newspaper articles, searches were made using LEXIS-NEXIS, an electronic news and information database. The search parameters were set to restrict the search to information in the 'UK News - newspapers only' subset of the database and to search on a month by month basis, starting with January 1996 and finishing with December 2000. All searches were made using the search term 'CALL CENTERS', a term that according to the system's 'SmartIndex' 'targets customer contact centers based on telephone communications. The scope includes Internet-based call management systems, call center providers and call center technologies'.

Once the search had been completed for a given month, the articles were downloaded for subsequent examination. In all, 12,763 newspaper articles were downloaded. A number of articles were examined in order to identify recurring themes and map out appropriate categories into which the articles could be divided for later discussion. Each article was then manually scanned for content and placed into one of nine categories, depending on what the main purport of the article was assessed to be. These categories are explained and explored in chapter 6, which relates to the development of call centres in the UK. It was necessary to read each article because it was not possible to discern just from the title whether the article was related to call centres or what issue(s) the article sought primarily to address.

Both the initial drawing up of categories and the subsequent allocation of articles to those categories was subjective, and therefore may have given rise to researcher bias. This risk was

considered to be acceptable because the numbers of articles in each category were seen as indicative of levels of public information or interest in different issues rather than as having particular numerical significance. Nonetheless, every effort was taken to ensure consistency in allocating articles to categories. To give confidence in the results of the sorting exercise a check was made by processing six months' articles twice, once at the beginning and again at the end of the period in which this work took place, and comparing the results. There was no appreciable difference in the numbers allocated to each category.

5.4.3 The postal questionnaire

The strategy chosen to investigate the relationship between employment agencies and the call centre industry was an initial survey by means of a self-administered postal questionnaire followed by interviews with questionnaire respondents. A questionnaire was drawn up consisting of two parts. The first part consisted of a single sheet that gave respondents four options with which to indicate the extent of their participation in the survey. The second part consisted of eight questions which probed the extent of the agency's involvement with the call centre industry in terms of the number and type of vacancies handled; the way in which vacancies were advertised; the volume of interest generated and how this compared with other types of vacancy; and the techniques typically used to filter and select applicants for the call centre vacancies.

The survey sample was constructed in May 1997 using BT Yellow Pages telephone directories covering Scotland. There were 7 such directories that between them covered the whole of Scotland. All of the directories used to compile the survey sample were 1996/7 editions with the exception of the South West Scotland Yellow Pages, which was a 1997/8 edition. The survey sample was composed of selected entrants in the 'Employment agencies and consultants' sections of the directories. All organisations appearing under this heading were selected for the survey sample unless the directory entry indicated that the organisation catered specifically for an industry not likely to be allied to the telephone call centre industry in any way, for example the oil drilling industry. Branches of the same employment agency in different locations were treated as separate organisations for the purpose of the survey. This produced a sample size of 336 organisations.

In June 1997 each organisation in the survey sample was sent the questionnaire, a covering letter and a pre-paid return envelope. No cut off date was specified within which questionnaires were to be returned. Following the return of questionnaires, follow-up interviews were arranged. These took place between August and October 1997. Interviews were conducted at the premises of the employment agencies and were semi-structured in that a schedule intended as a guide to the areas likely to be explored was drawn up and sent to interviewees prior to the interview. A covering letter stressed that the schedule was only a guide. This allowed for flexibility and reflexivity within the interview process. Each interview was tape recorded and as soon as practicable thereafter transcribed verbatim. The results of the survey and the comments made during the follow-up interviews are considered in chapter 7, which presents data on call centre recruitment and selection processes.

5.4.4 Covert participant observation

It is possible to pursue a number of very different strategies in order to gain insight on a particular perspective. The choice of a particular strategy is dependent on a number of factors. Textbooks on research theory tend to point out often unconsciously held philosophical underpinnings which influence the choice of research strategy: 'When we speak of "qualitative" or "quantitative" methodologies, we are in the final analysis speaking of an interrelated set of assumptions about the social world which are philosophical ideological and epistemological. They encompass more than simply data collection techniques' (Rist, 1977: 62). Researcher preferences play a part, although this again is frequently left unarticulated. Practicalities play a part, although it is not always seen as desirable to admit to this.

In order to understand the perspective of a call centre worker, the research strategy adopted included becoming a call centre worker. The arguments for and against participant observation as a research method have been outlined in some detail above, and no attempt is made to reiterate them here. However, it may be of relevance to briefly outline the rationale for adopting this method prior to discussing the practicalities of its exercise. One argument often advanced in the course of discussions on particular perspectives is that 'You cannot possibly understand because you are not [what I am]', where 'what I am' is frequently a category to which the respondent to the remark has

no possibility of access, that is to say gender, race, religious or sexual persuasion, disability, etc. As unsatisfactory as such lines of argument are, it is generally necessary to accede to their logic. In such instances, as an 'outsider', any understanding of that particular perspective is limited by the ability of 'insiders' to identify and articulate what defines that perspective and the researcher's own ability to accurately interpret and empathise.

In other instances, the category of 'insider' appears not to be so closed. It may be that, as a researcher, it is possible to come much closer to an understanding of a particular perspective by matching, as far as possible, the experiences of those who share that perspective. This matching exercise may perhaps be easier in some instances than others, depending on what are seen as being the experiences critical to adopting that perspective. It may be that by operating a milk round for a period of time and experiencing what a milkman might experience it is possible to understand far better the perspective of milkmen. It is naïve to think that a particular perspective can be completely understood, even if you appear to be perfectly emulating the physical experience of those holding that perspective. To believe this would be to assume perfect homogeneity of perspective amongst members of a particular category and to deny the influences of individuality. But it may be possible to establish whether there is any degree of common ground.

Having decided that participant observation would form a part of the research strategy, the decision was then made that the fieldwork would be covert. The reasoning behind this had three main strands. First, it was believed that in the timeframe available there would be considerable difficulty in arranging for suitable access. Second, in attempting to arrange for access to research sites, the researcher is sometimes obliged to negotiate on questions such as the 'ownership' of the research and the freedom of the author to express particular opinions. Powers to limit publication of the findings that have been traded in return for access might lead to subsequent difficulties and compromise the apparent validity of the findings. Third, it was believed that negotiated access might lead to being perceived as part of the management apparatus, and it was felt that this would jeopardise the quality of the data collected.

The prospect of operating 'under cover' was not the concern that it might be to many novice researchers. Part of the reason for this was my previous employment. Prior to joining the ranks of

academic research I was employed for about six years in the Trading Standards Departments of two local authorities. During that time I was involved in a number of covert operations, carried out with the aim of enforcing various consumer law statutes. I felt that this previous experience would enable me to be more comfortable with the idea of leading a dual role than I might otherwise have been.

The 'choice' of call centre in which to carry out the study was limited by a number of factors. First, interview data from employment agency representatives suggested that some call centres did not employ graduates as a matter of policy. Since a decision had been made to be honest about my background when applying for positions, this would mean that some call centres would necessarily reject any application. Second, the same sources suggested that employment agencies would generally not consider appointing or putting forward candidates who lived too far from the call centre for which they were recruiting, because the wages were not generally sufficient to justify or pay for commuting costs and the need to commute for considerable distances frequently led to poor attendance records and early exits from positions. This was less of a drawback than it might have been because being situated within central belt Scotland gave potential access to the majority of Scottish call centres without falling foul of this constraint. Third, a decision was taken not to work in call centres in capacities that involved the direct selling of products or services. I had serious concerns about whether it would be ethical to be pro-active in my assumed role. I did not know whether I would be able to commit myself fully to selling given my ulterior motives for being at work, and if I could not do so then I would feel dishonest to my potential employer in taking their wage. The only way in which I felt comfortable in carrying out covert participant observation was if I felt that I was doing whatever my assumed job was to the best of my abilities as well as collecting data for my research. Additionally, it was felt that my service-related employment background would be a positive factor in the selection process for service-related call centre jobs.

Having decided on the locus within which any call-centre related job required to be situated, employment was sought. Local and regional newspapers and employment-related publications were reviewed for suitable job opportunities. It was decided that an attempt would be made to record all telephone contacts resulting from attempts to gain entry into the field. This proved to be

quite difficult, as no specialist equipment was available, only an ordinary telephone and a small tape recorder. In order to record the conversation in full, it was necessary to secure a microphone close to the telephone earpiece. This made using the telephone cumbersome and uncomfortable. In this position the microphone also picked up the rustle of clothes, the sound of hair brushing against the receiver, and considerable amounts of other background noise. The resultant recordings were of very poor quality.

Attempting to record returned calls also proved very difficult in that it was not known when a particular call would be in connection with responses to advertisements, or from other sources of calls to a domestic telephone number, such as family members, friends, double glazing or fitted kitchen firms, and so on. However, one item that was of use in this situation was an answerphone. On a number of occasions messages and information relating to the search for employment were left on the answerphone. Recordings by this method were clearer and far easier to transcribe, although they were monologues rather than conversations as such.

In the end, the call centre position did not come through an advertisement, but through a friend, who advised me that a friend of hers worked in a telephone call centre and was aware that the call centre in question was looking for additional staff. The vacancies were available through an employment agency that supplied staff to the centre on long-term temporary contracts. The name and number was obtained of the person at the employment agency who was dealing with the vacancies. The initial telephone contacts were recorded. At the subsequent interview it was felt that covert recording was not feasible. Instead, an account of the interview, in terms of what happened, what was asked and what answers were given and received, was tape-recorded immediately after the interview.

Clearly, this is less satisfactory than a verbatim recording of the interview and already starts to carry the burdens of interpretation and selective recording through partial memory. However, in the circumstances, it seemed the most practical alternative. The dictated account was transcribed as soon as practicable thereafter, giving a second opportunity to go in detail over the events that had taken place whilst they were still fresh in the memory. This method was used throughout the pre-employment and training phases of the fieldwork, although during the training phase it was

possible to take brief notes during the day as an aide-memoire with which to structure and supplement tape-recorded accounts.

In the probationary phase that followed the two-week training phase it was not possible to take meaningful notes whilst working. Some brief notes were possible before and after shifts and occasionally during rest periods, but most fieldwork notes were typed direct to the computer on returning home after shifts. The change from tape-recorded notes to directly written notes during this period occurred because, when working on evening shifts, the far fewer number of cars in the car park by the ends of shifts caused me to feel conspicuous dictating. It was considered that tape recording notes whilst driving home was inadvisable, because road safety would be compromised by the division of concentration. It would have been possible from the car park to drive elsewhere, stop the car, and dictate notes but it was felt that, at that point in the fieldwork, it would be possible to retaining all the day's information for the duration of the journey home, between fifteen and twenty minutes. In place of the opportunity provided by transcription for reflection on the day's fieldwork notes, the day's account would be written and then the previous day's computer file would then be reviewed. This allowed any additional information to be filled in as necessary.

During all phases of the fieldwork, all available documents were collected. These included employee handbooks, contracts of employment, and so on. No documents were taken that were not either issued to me directly or freely available to any employee working within the call centre. It was felt that it would not have been acceptable or defensible to do so. Where possible attempts were made to engage others working at the call centre in conversation. In this study, these conversations are regarded as informal interviews. It was not possible to record them verbatim, but strenuous efforts were made to record them as faithfully as possible. This was achieved by making notes as soon as possible thereafter, from which to recreate the conversation. It may be that in regard to conversation, the biggest drawback was in not smoking. It seemed that many others working the same shifts smoked. Smoking was only permitted in designated areas. These areas were not sufficiently attractive to merit their being occupied by a non-smoker without arousing suspicion, nor was any credible explanation thought of for being there. Prior to the starts of shifts, during rest breaks and immediately following the ends of shifts, the smokers would congregate in

the designated smoking areas. There were no other areas in which employees congregated in any significant numbers.

Data from the period of participant observation are detailed and discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9, which deal with issues of acquiring call centre employment, the nature and experience of such employment and employee turnover in call centres respectively.

5.4.5 Semi-structured interviews

In addition to the period of covert participant observation, interviews were conducted with people who were, or had been, employed in call centres. The interviewee sample was constructed through personal contacts. In all cases the interviewee was either known personally or contact was made through mutual acquaintances who were aware of the study. This provided a sample population free from possible contamination effects through discussion with prior interviewees and also meant that interviewees were not drawn from just one or two call centres but were able to provide details of the experience of employment in an array of functionally and sectorally different call centres.

Although the interviews were conducted primarily as a check on the validity of participant observation experiences and a way of providing for the triangulation of data collected as a result, the number of call centres represented in the interviewee sample increases the confidence that experiences found within the sample to be common to call centre employment might be generalisable to the UK call centre employee population as a whole. The interviews were very loosely structured, with a schedule of topics forming the basis for discussion. All of the interviews took place in non-work environments suggested by the interviewees. The duration of the interviews was variable, but tended to be between one and one and a half hours, and all the interviews were recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. Data from the interviews are detailed and discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9, which deal with issues of acquiring call centre employment, the nature and experience of such employment and employee turnover in call centres respectively.

5.5 Summary

This chapter began by discussing in general terms the importance of methodology to research. Different research perspectives were defined in order to provide a framework in which to locate the research methods employed in this study. It was suggested that five relatively discrete activities took place in the course of the research, namely desk research using secondary sources, a five-year content analysis and review of newspaper articles, a survey by means of postal questionnaire, a period of covert participant observation, and a number of semi-structured interviews. The research perspectives framework provided suggests that the first three of these techniques tend to be associated with a positivist perspective, whilst the last two are considered to be techniques appropriate to a naturalist perspective. Thus the study may be classed as adopting a realist perspective in which multiple methods have been combined in order to compensate for identified weaknesses in any given method.

The chapter then considered the main strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires, participant observation and interviews for data collection. The strengths of the postal questionnaire method were identified as the elimination of possible bias in interviewer questioning, the possibility of offering respondent anonymity, allowing respondents time to consider their answers, the ability to cover a wide geographical area, and the relatively low cost. Set against these were perceived weaknesses in terms of having to keep questions simple to avoid problems of interpretation, an inability to probe outside of set questions, low response rates, having no control over who answers the questionnaire and no check on whether the respondent sample is representative of the population targeted.

Interviews were identified as taking a number of forms, most simply expressed as structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The semi-structured interview was considered in terms of strengths and weakness, since this was the type used in the study. The strengths of this technique include its flexibility in terms of allowing the interviewer to phrase questions in the vocabulary of the interviewee and approach particular points in different ways in order to help the interviewee articulate complex or incompletely formulated information, the opportunity it gives interviewers to be reflexive in questioning and pursue new lines of enquiry, and the fact that it allows for the

capture of complex data that might not be available in other forms. The major weakness identified in using interviews as a data collection method was its susceptibility to data contamination from reactive effects of the interview situation on received testimony, distortions in the testimony itself or the inability of the interviewee to report events.

It was suggested that whilst there was not a standard definition of participant observation, it could be summarised as a data collection technique that, although using direct observation as a primary data source, uses a number of different media as data sources and which requires the fieldworker to adopt an interactive role with respect to the subjects of study, although the nature and extent of the interaction may vary. Its main strength is seen as being that the research takes place within the natural setting, with the 'local groundedness' of data collection leading to perceptions of richness and authenticity of data. It is also flexible, allowing for changes in research focus and is usually carried out over an extended period, enabling the study of processes rather than providing a snapshot of the research context. The weaknesses in the technique are generally seen as stemming from the use of researchers as conduits for data collection. Chief amongst these are in-built selectivity in what is both 'seen' and recorded by the participant observer and the possibility of error in the interpretation of what has been observed.

Because the study used covert participant observation as a data collection technique, the chapter considered debates on the ethical acceptability of this method. The literature showed there to be a lack of consensus on this issue. Many of those considering the technique to be unethical based their arguments on the principle of informed consent that was developed after World War II in the context of medical experimentation on prisoners of war. They argue that this principle is as applicable to the social sciences as to the medical sciences. Those in favour of the use of covert methods tend to rationalise their views in a number of ways. They may suggest that the social scientist is justified in using them where necessary in order to achieve the higher objective of scientific truth, that models of ethics developed for other disciplines may not be applicable to the social sciences, that medical analogies are inappropriate, or that informed consent is practically impossible in some research settings and rarely achieved in reality.

It was suggested that in the absence of consensus within academic circles as to the appropriate ethical stance to take in relation to covert participant observation, there was an onus on the individual researcher to carry out their own 'moral analysis' of covert methods. Several methods of analysis were considered, including a simplistic one based on whether the researcher would object in the subjects shoes, an analysis based on the primacy or otherwise of the rights of the individual, a utilitarian approach based on cost-benefits analysis, and a method that relied chiefly on appeals to personal morality and is strongly influenced by the individual's adoption of deontological, teleological or intuitive approaches to morality.

In the final section of the chapter the research strategy adopted for this study was detailed and discussed. Some of the difficulties encountered in using particular methods were explored, and comment offered the experiences of data gathering. Justifications were provided for, and explanations given of, the decisions and actions that formed the data collection process. In the following chapters the data obtained are first presented and then used to inform discussions on the nature and experience of call centre employment.

Chapter 6

Call centres in the UK

6.1 Introduction

As was suggested in Chapter 1, the main and most general purpose of this thesis is to describe and examine the nature of work in telephone call centres. Call centres are a recent phenomenon. Although there is general awareness of their existence, thanks in part to the attention that they have been accorded in the media, the same cannot be said, for example, of the technology used in call centres or of the increasingly widespread variety of tasks for which they are being used. This chapter aims to provide an overview of both the development of call centres in the UK and of the extent and nature of their use, in order to provide a backdrop to subsequent chapters.

The chapter has three main sections. The first presents a brief history of call centres in the UK, charting their development using selected call centre related articles appearing in national and regional newspapers. The second discusses the current scope and scale of call centre use, drawing together disparate statistical information to arrive at an overall picture. The third section provides a layperson's guide to call centre technology, using sales literature to give a flavour of the way in which the benefits of particular products are presented to call centre operators.

6.2 Call centres in the UK through newspaper articles

Media coverage of aspects of the development of call centres provides an indirect measure both of the importance of call centres in society and of those facets of call centre operation being brought to the public's attention. One would expect that the growing economic importance of call centres in the UK would be mirrored by a growth in the number of news items having a call centre connection. This section provides an indication of the growth of call centres by reference to numbers of call centre-related articles published over time in a selection of national and regional newspapers. A total of 12,763 articles were examined. A simple content analysis of the articles was performed classifying each article according to its major theme. Nine categories of article were identified, and these are defined in Table 6.1. A subsequent review of articles' contents revealed how call centres have been and are being presented by the national press. Details of how the content analysis and review were performed appeared in Chapter 5, 'Research methods'.

Table 6.1. Content-based categories of articles

Category	Examples of articles falling into this category
1 Company news	Reports of companies setting up call centres; appointment announcements; news of companies involved in call centres.
2 General call centre-related	Reports on spread of call centres; articles on merits of call centre employment compared to manufacturing jobs.
3 Incidental mention	Articles mentioning but content not directly related to call centres. For example, fund-raising activities of call centre employees, books, plays or films set in call centres, and so on.
4 Employment-related	Reports of job creation by call centres; reports of job losses associated with call centres.
5 Service quality	Anecdotal accounts of or reports of research into levels of service quality provided by call centres; investigations into or explanations of 'phone rage'.
6 Training	Reports of new call centre qualifications, training schemes for potential call centre employees, training aids, and so on.
7 Subjective experience	Articles incorporating first-hand accounts of the experience of employment in call centres.
8 Health and safety	Accounts of research into call centre employee health and safety; anecdotal evidence of problems; reports of compensation claims.
9 Irrelevant or repeated	Articles flagged up by search but not relevant in any way to call centres; repeated articles.

Before looking at the results of the newspaper article searches in more detail, it is necessary to consider how the idiosyncrasies of the database might have affected those results. The first and most important point is that although the database contains articles from a wide variety of newspapers, not all of the newspapers have articles archived in the database from as far back as January 1996, the point at which these searches begin. This does leave this study open to the criticism that the numbers of articles recorded for later months in the study show significant increases, not because call centres are attracting more media interest but because the database being searched is larger. However, a significant proportion, including all of the national daily and Sunday newspapers, are on the database from the start of the period under study and the pattern for these in isolation follows that described for the database as a whole.

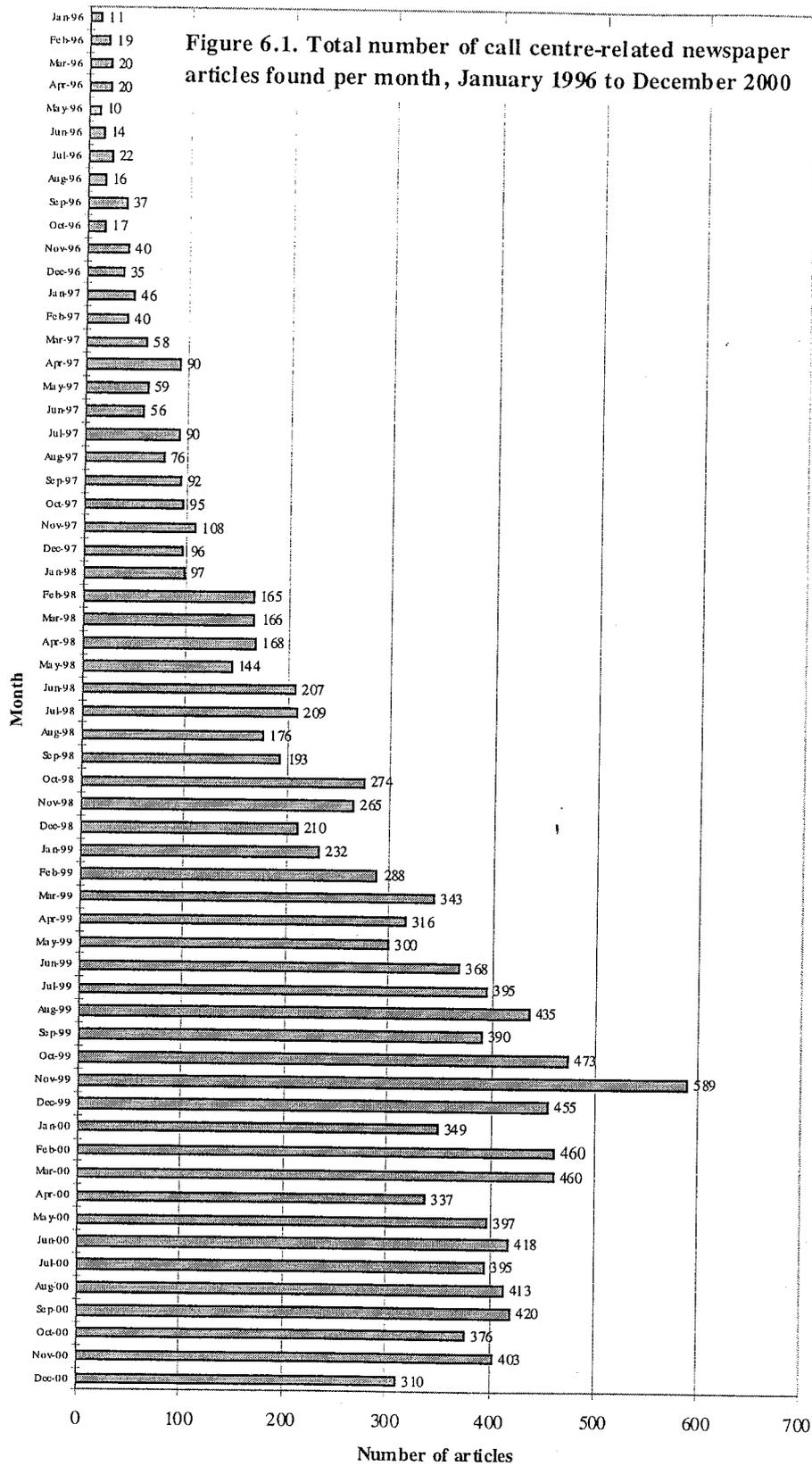
The second point about the database relates to the use of the search term 'CALL CENTER'. The system identified as relevant all articles containing either 'call center' or the UK spelling 'call centre' as well as the plural versions of each. The searches also identified as relevant spurious articles that contained phrases such as 'call the centre' and 'call from the centre'. Using the search

term 'call center' meant that articles where call centres were referred to as a customer service centre or a customer contact centre were not identified as relevant and included in the search results, and therefore it might be argued that the data obtained underestimates the number of articles which relate to call centres as defined by this study. Some call centre operators have started to use such alternative descriptions both to cover the changing nature of call centre operations and to shield themselves from the bad publicity that some call centres have generated.

The total number of call centre-related articles for each month of the search period is shown in Figure 6.1. These totals represent the number of articles found by the database search less any articles deemed on inspection to have been irrelevant or repeated. Irrelevant articles were included in the search results because of the way in which the search term operated. Repeated articles tended to occur when the same article had two different specifications, for example a difference of one in the word count. This may have happened as a result of different databases being merged to create the LEXIS-NEXIS database.

A summary has been produced for each of the categories in Table 6.1 that details the number of articles in that category and examines the themes emerging from that category over the search period. Although the search results were assessed on a month-by-month basis, the numbers of articles are displayed per three months for ease of presentation. The content of call centre-related articles is of interest in that it might be expected to have a bearing on the way in which call centres are perceived by the general public and that, in turn, has important ramifications for operators, employees and for society as a whole. For example, the tenor of articles relating to experiences of call centre employment might influence the application decisions of suitably qualified people thereby having a direct effect on recruitment.

Summaries for the first three categories in Table 6.1 have been included in this chapter, as they deal with general themes relating to the development of call centres in the UK. Summaries for the remaining categories, with the exception of those for articles relating to service quality, training and health and safety which were considered outside the scope of this thesis, are included elsewhere in the text as they tend to deal with specific themes more appropriately dealt with elsewhere.

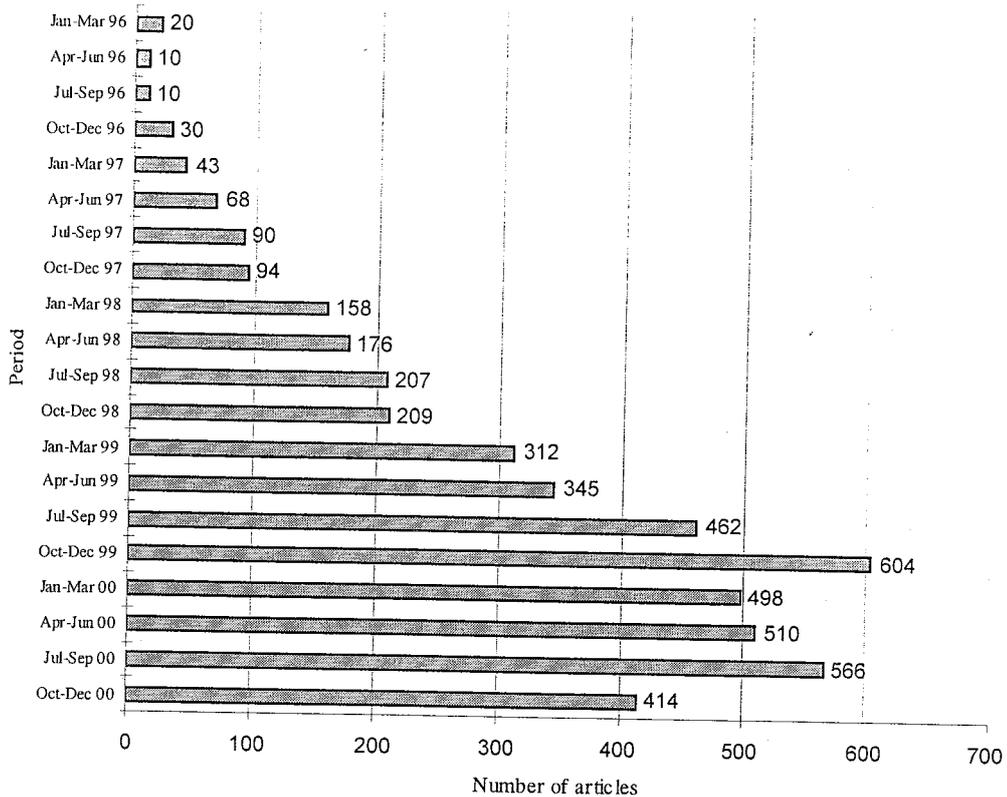


6.2.1 Articles relating to company news with a call centre connection

Articles which report the setting up of call centres or the appointment of call centre managers or which detail the fortunes of companies which supply goods or services to call centres all serve to bring call centres to the public attention. This section examines the numbers of such articles appearing in the search results and highlights the ways in which such issues have been discussed. Figure 6.2 shows the numbers of articles over the search period that have been generated by call centre related company news. There is a steady increase in the number of such articles from April 1996 to a peak in the three months to December 1999, with the volume dropping off slightly in 2000. This might reflect a slowing down in the growth of call centres generally, or it could be a result of the decision by some organisations to call their facilities customer contact centres or customer service centres to avoid being tarnished by recent negative publicity in relation to call centres. For example, in September 1999 Cogent Communications launched a new 'customer contact centre' (Calder, 1999). According to the report, the company had deliberately avoided the term 'call centre' to describe the new set-up because of the poor working conditions, low pay and high pressure with which it had become associated. They had opted to use the term customer contact centre instead because they felt it more accurately reflected the service that they intended to offer. The new centre was said to be fully internet-enabled and able to offer clients 'an integrated service' for marketing and distribution purposes.

Direct Line is one of the highest profile call centre operators in the UK. Launched in 1985 and acknowledged as the pioneer of telephone-based direct insurance selling, Direct Line was reported in 1997 to have become the biggest car insurer in Britain with 2.2 million customers (Anon, 1997g) or around 12 percent of the UK motor insurance market (McConnell, 1997). It had established call centres in Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds, Croydon, Bristol and Birmingham and at that time had 4,000 employees. Using its automatic call distribution systems it was able to answer up to 3,000 calls simultaneously. From an initial focus on motor insurance, the company had widened its product offerings to home insurance, financial products and pet insurance. A 1996 study by analysts Merrill Lynch had claimed that Direct Line was one hundred times more productive than non-telephone based operations.

Figure 6.2. Numbers of newspaper articles on company news related to call centres, January 1996 to December 2000



Whilst Direct Line may be the most widely recognised user of call centres, the search results show that call centres have been set up to conduct or support a wide range of businesses. Examples of types of business conducting their affairs partly or purely by telephone include house-letting businesses (Anon, 1997f), restaurant food delivery services (Hamilton Fazey, 1997), holiday tour operators (Cameron, 1997a), home improvement and repair providers (Croft, 1998), cinema chains, for ticket sales and programme advice (Stanistreet, 1998), animal protection agencies, to take calls from the public (Anon, 1998l), direct-sales wine merchants (Jones 1998), national lottery operators (Clayton, 1998), debt collection agencies (Gray, 1999), the Environment Agency's fishing rod licensing department (Anon, 1999k), football clubs, for club information and match ticket sales (Hardie, 1999; Williamson, 1999), airlines, for bookings and reservations (Powell, 1999), property and facilities management companies (Harrison, 1999), a job candidate credentials checking service (Anon, 2000g) and theatre ticket agencies (Trapp, 2000).

Call centres are being set up to provide innovative new services across a range of different areas, as the following four examples demonstrate. Partridge (1996) reported on the use of interactive voice response (IVR) and voice processing technology by Milk Marque, formerly the Milk Marketing Board, to provide farmers on demand with the results of previous weeks' milk quality tests. According to Milk Marque, farmers benefited from the increased accessibility and accuracy of the automated system that also freed Help Desk operators to deal with more complex enquiries.

Dobson (1988) detailed the launch of a heart telemonitoring service. The service was designed to enable patients with symptoms which might indicate heart problems to avoid the delay and stress of having to wait for an appointment to have their heartbeats monitored at hospitals and instead to monitor themselves in their own homes. The patient is supplied with a special recorder about the size of a credit card. When they feel the onset of symptoms, they hold the recorder to their chest for around 30 seconds and an ECG record is made. The patient then dials a freephone number and holds the recorder to the telephone mouthpiece. The ECG appears as a graph on a screen in front of a cardiac technician at the call centre, who then contacts the patient's doctor, with the speed of contact dictated by the technician's assessment of the ECG results.

Davies (1998) described a telephone-based service designed to protect the identities of whistle blowers, that is to say employees who expose the unlawful or otherwise undesirable practices of others in their company. Expolink provided a service in which the employees of subscribing companies telephoned the call centre to report wrongdoing at work. The call centre agents then telephoned designated managers at the employee's company to detail the problem, preserving the caller's anonymity if they had been requested to do so by the caller.

Curries Direct offered a call centre-based Indian food takeaway service (Shields, 1997). Callers throughout the West and Central Scotland delivery area were given the opportunity to use a single number to connect with the call centre and to order from a standardised menu. Food would then be prepared at the nearest of more than fifty participating Indian restaurants and delivered to their doors within an hour of their calls.

Call centres are also being set up by companies in an attempt to protect their markets and to identify new sources of competitive advantage. For example, in 1997 BT set up six new outbound call centres employing around 3,500 agents to help the company keep in contact with its 21 million domestic and 5 million business customers (Anon, 1997j). The call centres, in Warrington, Glasgow, Belfast, Bristol, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Doncaster, cost in excess of £100 million to establish, but were seen by BT as an investment in their bid to keep customers following market deregulation. Agents at the centres would promote BT's range of discount schemes, products and services as well as ringing customers on a regular basis to check that they were satisfied with the service being offered.

The call centres were equipped with desktop applications such as call scripting and screen popping from Scottish software developer Graham Technology; automatic call distribution and predictive dialling systems from US suppliers Davox Corporation; call load balancing and networking software from US CTI specialists Genesys; switching technology from Nortel; and servers from Sun Microsystems (see later in this chapter for explanations of some of these technologies). It was reported that most of the 3,500 agents working in the new call centres would work part-time, typically 25 hours per week, and that around half of them would be contract workers 'supplied by external agencies in order to give BT maximum flexibility in coping with unpredictable peaks and troughs in demand' (1997: 10).

Organisations such the Trades Union Congress and the Royal College of Nursing have sought to maintain and increase their memberships by using call centres to offer additional products or services. The Trades Union Congress announced plans in 1997 to form partnerships with energy companies through a new body, Union Energy Limited, which would offer cheaper gas and electricity to union members (Taylor, 1997). A call centre was planned to take calls from some of the 4.6 million union members and therefore potential customers via a freephone number. John Monks, then TUC general secretary was reported as saying 'By entering the energy market in this way, we want to exercise a positive influence on the power supply industry and help our members get the best deal in a new competitive market' (1997: 8). Welford (1998a) reported on the launch of RCN Direct, a 24-hour telephone advice service run by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) from a call centre in Cardiff and employing 30 advisers to offer advice on subjects such as

employment, education, and nursing practice as well as to provide information on RCN events. A RCN spokesman was quoted as saying 'Nurses work round the clock, 365 days a year, with increasingly complex responsibilities. RCN Direct will provide them with fast, reliable and informed advice wherever they are, whatever time of night or day' (1998: 22).

As the search results make clear, call centres are not just for the private sector. Local government organisations have also seen the attraction of call centres, primarily as a means of providing access to council services either outside normal office hours or for residents based away from administrative centres, but also to carry out specific services. For example, Brent London Borough Council set up a direct-line call centre in Brent in 1996 to handle enquiries from residents (Caulkin, 1997a) and has been outsourcing the processing of parking tickets to a third party call centre in the Scottish highlands since 1994 (King, 1999). With funding from the European Union South Ayrshire Council set up a call centre for its Trading Standards Services division in April 1998 (Anon, 1998k). The call centre accepts calls on UK consumer protection issues and problems from South Ayrshire residents as well as from dissatisfied consumers from across Europe whose telephone calls have been redirected from the European Commission's own call centre in Holland. In 1998 Surrey County Council announced plans for a call centre to provide telephone access to Council services for residents across its county (Gosling, 1998). Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council in the West Midlands scaled down local housing offices and set up a freephone call centre instead to speed up the processing of claims for housing and council tax benefits in the borough (D. Jones, 1999).

In January 1999 government plans were unveiled to create single 999 emergency call centres, bringing together police, fire and ambulance services under one roof (Waugh, 1999). It was suggested that combining the area headquarters of each of the services would both cut response times and save money. Lower response times would result from the ability of a single telephone call to trigger responses from all three emergency services simultaneously. Cost savings would be achieved as a result of reducing the number of buildings used and sharing certain resources, such as call centre operations and vehicle maintenance facilities.

Central government functions have also been developing call centre capabilities. Sometimes legislation has been required to enable central functions to conduct their business this way. For example, in March 1998 chancellor Gordon Brown announced legislative changes to enable the Inland Revenue to set up a call centre to transact business by telephone (Anon, 1998j). Whilst the Inland Revenue already provided advice to taxpayers by telephone, changes allowing them to accept claims for income tax allowances from individuals by telephone or other electronic media in specified circumstances meant that, for the first time, it might be possible to sort out tax problems without the need for paperwork. In other instances, the drive to set up a call centre has come as a response to public concern about the adequacy of central services. The UK Passport Agency set up a call centre in 2000 in a bid to prevent a repeat of the passport application problems of 1999 (Marsh, 2000). Working in shifts, the 170 call centre employees were expected to be able to answer general passport-related queries and check on the progress of individual applications. It was suggested that this would help to ensure that employees at the regional passport offices were free to get on with the work of processing passport applications. The Bristol call centre was expected, together with a second in Northern Ireland, to answer up to 2.5 million calls each year at full capacity.

On other occasions, call centres have been put in place to supplement other services under strain. One of the best examples of this was the launch of a call centre-based advice line to supplement other National Health facilities. Welford (1998b) reported on the launch in Northumbria of one of three pilot trials of NHS Direct, a 24-hour advice line designed to help ease the burden on National Health Services by providing expert help and advice over the telephone 365 days a year. The other two pilot areas were Milton Keynes and Preston, Lancashire. Calls would be answered by trained operators at Northumbria Ambulance's call centre, with qualified nurses also on hand to assess problems and to advise callers if necessary. The hope was that NHS Direct would field calls from members of the public who had previously dialled the emergency services for help in situations which did not actually require ambulance crews but which the service was legally obliged to respond to. In the past as many as one in three emergency calls had been found to be for trivial complaints (Walker, 1999). The subsequent introduction of NHS Direct nationally has not been entirely trouble-free. Concerns voiced initially about the wisdom of dispensing medical advice over the telephone have come to be seen as largely unjustified, although there have been mistakes

with tragic consequences in rare cases. Hudson (1999), amongst others, reported on changes that had been made to the Telephone Advice System software used by nurses at the NHS Direct call centres to assess patients' problems and offer appropriate advice following an incident in April 1998 in which a man died after following advice received from the service. He had complained of stomach pain and had been advised to stay at home, take painkillers, and ring again if there were changes in his condition. He subsequently died from an aortic aneurysm. It was believed that the computer software had not linked his symptoms with the condition, although health officials suggested that even had there been a correct diagnosis and an ambulance had been immediately dispatched, the man might not have survived.

The articles looked at suggest that, in the recent past, charities have begun to see the potential of call centres for fund-raising. Bibby (1997) reported on the use of call centres to raise money for charity. Some charities have their own call centres. Bibby cited the example of ActionAid, a charity with a ten year history of using the phone to generate charitable income which boasted a National Telephone Team of more than 160 staff and a call centre in Bristol. Telephoning on their own behalf and under contract for other charities, the ActionAid call centre was said to make more than 300,000 calls each year. According to Bibby, other charities outsource their telephone activities to specialist third party call centre operators such as Pell and Bales or Personal Telephone Fundraising who canvass supporters on their behalf. In the past concern over the use of third parties, some of whom operated on a commission basis, led to a legal requirement, introduced by the Charities Act 1992, for agencies which are being paid to work for charities to disclose that fact during calls. In addition, there is a voluntary code of practice for telephone fundraising, drawn up in 1994 by the Institute of Charity Fundraising Managers, which helps to clarify acceptable telephone practices.

It is possible using the newspaper articles identified in the search to chart the increasing use of call centres in specific types of business. One such example is the provision of personal banking services. First Direct, a division of Midland Bank, was the first large-scale telephone banking service in Britain (Shennan, 1997). Launched on 1 October 1989, it took more than 1,000 calls in the first 24 hours of its operation. By 1997 it had over 750,000 cheque account customers and was

attracting another 12,500 accounts each month, and was taking an average of 38,000 calls each day during the week and 22,000 per day at weekends.

Since 1989, First Direct has been joined by a number of other telephone banks, some of which are operated by newcomers to the UK banking market such as supermarket chains. Sainsbury Bank was launched in February 1997 with banking expertise and call centre capacity being provided by Bank of Scotland (Burrell, 1998). Tesco launched its telephone banking service in July 1997, and its call centre immediately experienced an excess of demand over call-taking capacity (Barrow, 1998). Standard Life Bank, launched at the beginning of 1998, marked the entry of life assurance companies into the personal banking market (Collier, 1998). In addition to increases in the numbers of telephone banking providers, many more established banks have launched internet-based banking services, including the Prudential Life Assurance Company's 'Egg', the Cooperative Bank's 'Smile', Lloyds TSB Bank's 'Evolvebank', 'IF' from the Halifax Bank, and 'Cahoot' from the Abbey National Bank. Whilst most providers have stressed the added convenience for customers of new service delivery channels, cost is a big part of this new wave of banking provision. In terms of cost per transaction, telephone banking costs operators considerably less than what a branch-based banking system costs, with internet banking costing less to provide than telephone banking.

Call centres will still have a part to play in on-line banking, as most internet banks offer telephone support, although customers usually have to pay for calls, sometimes at premium rates. But the banks are actively looking at ways to cut the cost per transaction in call centres. For example, in October 1999 the Nationwide Building Society carried out trials of a speech recognition system developed by Vocalis that confirmed the identity of callers by analysing speech patterns (Anon, 1999). The trials, being held at the Society's Isle of Man call centre, were expected to involve around four hundred Nationwide customers. During the trial, an automated system would ask customers to key in their account numbers and then to say particular service access numbers. A check by a call centre agent would also confirm the customer's identity, but this step would be removed if the system were to be adopted. A Nationwide spokesman was reported as suggesting that the introduction of such a system would 'streamline call handling procedures, making the process quicker and easier for the customer'. It would of course also automate part of the current

call process, cutting down on the average time required by agents per call and thereby reducing required manning levels in the call centre and cutting the cost per transaction. Caven (2000) reported on a study of a similar system being carried out on behalf of Lloyds TSB by voice experts at Edinburgh University. The research included using voice mimics and identical twins in order to check the ability of the system to distinguish different 'voiceprints'. Lloyds TSB were said to be anticipating that voice recognition systems would replace the current need for customers to remember passwords or personal numbers and make it easier for customers to use telephone banking services.

Another sector in which it is clear from the newspaper articles that call centres are becoming more important is retailing. Supermarket shopping by telephone has emerged during the period covered by the database search. The first article on this subject detailed a pilot project by Sainsbury to test a new Order and Collect service (Anon, 1997h). A third party call centre in Bristol took calls from customers, ordered the goods and arranged a time for collection from Sainsbury's Watford Dome store. Following on from the success of the scheme, Sainsbury was reported to be considering extending the number of stores in which the service was available. In January 1999 Somerfield was reported to be about to pilot Somerfield Direct, a telephone shopping service, to customers in and around Bristol (Mills, 1999). Under the scheme, customers would telephone a local call centre at any time between 8am and 10pm to place orders from Somerfield's range of 16,000 products. The orders would be passed from the call centre to a warehouse, where they would be packed for delivery within a two-hour guaranteed period previously selected by the customer. Television (TV) home shopping also emerged as a heavy call centre user. Jones (1999) reported on the activities of QVC UK, operators of Britain's first TV home shopping channel. QVC began selling in the UK in 1993 through its 24-hour live broadcasts and QVC UK's call centre in Knowsley on Merseyside was established in 1997. By June 1999 the Knowsley site had 1,500 employees including call centre agents, warehousing and distribution staff. The call centre took 13 million telephone calls in 1998, with more than 5 million being answered by automated response systems.

Many articles in this category could be further sub-categorised as relating to the development of new products for call centres; relating to partnerships or alliances between companies with an interest in call centres; or acting as advertisements for the product or company featured in the

article. As regards the development of products for call centre markets, many reports have focused on the development of new software products. An early example of this was news of a software product called Basix, developed by Data Discoveries (Clayton, 1996). The software, targeted at call centre operators, would enable the full names and addresses of individuals or companies to be retrieved from a database using only ten keystrokes. Call centre agents would be able to bring callers' details rapidly up on screen for distribution or invoicing purposes. Freeborn (1999) reported on speech-related products being developed by Lernout and Hauspie (L&H) including a software system which instantly translates telephone conversations in foreign languages and a product called RealSpeak, designed for use in automated call centres, which provides computerised speech with natural intonation. The translation system was expected to be publicly available initially via the L&H internet site, with users paying a charge for each call being translated.

Dawe (2000) described a system called QueueBuster that offered callers to a busy number the option of being called back when an agent became free rather than waiting in a call queuing system. QueueBuster, developed by NetCall Telecom, was designed in response to research that suggested that being kept on hold was likely to trigger so-called 'phone rage'. The details of callers opting to be phoned back are automatically registered and held in a virtual queue, to be automatically re-dialled when they reach the head of the queue. As well as offering choice to the caller, the system has significant benefits for call centre operators in that where freephone numbers are employed, the time spent queuing by customers is paid for by the call centre operators rather than by the caller. Reducing the time spent by callers queuing saves on such telephone charges.

Cole (2000) described an interactive home shopping service that allowed callers to both see and talk to a 'personal shopping assistant' by simultaneously transmitting pictures of call centre employees on to the caller's television screen. The system, called iSee and designed for cable television systems, works by having the call centre agent seated in a cubicle in front of a computer with a video camera mounted on top. The computer gives the agent access to all the available sales information, whilst the video signal is routed via the cable service operator direct to the caller's home using a dedicated video feed on the individually addressable set-top control box. Cole reported that cable operator Telewest planned a large-scale pilot of the system in 2000.

Another sub-set of articles detailed partnerships or alliances between companies, perhaps to offer a more complete portfolio of call centre products or to exploit a particular niche in the call centre market. For example, in 1997 it was reported that Microsoft had formed alliances in the UK with the call centre experts Royalblue and the software house Staffware in order to sell low-cost call centres to medium-sized companies, a market niche which Microsoft saw as under-exploited and potentially lucrative (Anon, 1997i). Partnerships could be formalised, for example in the formation of third companies resulting from joint ventures, or in more *ad hoc* ways, resulting from particular circumstances. Starkie (1998) described the launch of Call First, a joint venture between the call centre operators The Customer Contact Company and the recruitment company Opera Holdings. Based in Bristol, Call First was set up to specialise in call centre employment issues, both advising call centres on recruitment and training and carrying out those activities under contract. Raynor (1997) reported on a deal between Barclays Stockbrokers Limited (BSL) and BT to provide BSL with an 'alternative call centre' in anticipation by BSL of a surge in demand for its telephone-based share dealing services in the wake of a series of large-scale windfall share issues scheduled over the summer of 1997.

A further sub-group of articles were effectively advertisements either for new products or services being offered by call centre operators or for call centre-related companies more generally. Examples of the former include articles by Caine (1996), who detailed the decision by the Birmingham Midshires Building Society to offer financial products by telephone and Quinn (1997), who wrote of plans by the Scottish Widows Bank to launch a mortgage with optional loan facility that would be authorised through its call centres. An example of the latter is an article by Nairn (1999) profiling specialist speech recognition company Vocalis. Formed in 1993 and floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1996, Vocalis has in the past specialised in high-value call centre-based speech recognition applications that automate routine requests for telecommunications providers. Labour costs make up a large percentage of the total cost of running most call centres due to the labour-intensive nature of operations. The automated systems supplied by Vocalis enable companies to reduce their call centre staffing levels and hence their costs whilst leaving the remaining employees to deal with more complex calls. An example of this was a £1.2 million speech recognition system that automated the directory inquiries service of the Swedish telecommunications operator Telia and that, it was suggested, paid for itself inside six

months. According to Nairn, Vocalis had recently developed two products, SpeechHTML and SpeechMail, which sought to broaden the application of speech recognition systems by linking them to internet-based services. The former provided organisations with a means to make web site information available to telephone callers, whilst the latter enabled users to access and use e-mail facilities by telephone, hearing incoming messages, editing e-mail folders and sending replies. Both products used speech recognition in tandem with text-to-speech capabilities.

It is sometimes said that call centres are not geographically restricted and can be set up anywhere. A number of articles in this category dealt with problems either directly or indirectly related to location. For example, Lester (2000) discussed some of the tensions that may accompany the proposed development of a call centre facility. He detailed the then-ongoing process of obtaining planning permission for a large call centre on a site on the outskirts of Plymouth. The process of gaining planning permission had started in late 1999. The developers wanted to build a speculative call centre, possibly creating up to 1,000 jobs, on land identified in the Local Plan as being for employment use. Eighty-four objections had been received to the original plans for the development, covering topics as diverse as increases in traffic, loss of common land and wildlife habitats, likely noise nuisance and parking difficulties. By August 2000 the developers were ready to submit amended proposals before the Council's planning committee. They suggested that 'radical changes' had been made in an effort to accommodate many of the objections. They would not comment on progress in finding a prospective occupier for the development, but suggested that 'opportunities may well have been lost' due to the delay in gaining planning permission.

The story is typical of many larger call centre developments. In theory, call centres can be sited anywhere. In practice, call centre operators need to site facilities within easy reach of a ready pool of labour. Because of the labour-intensive nature of call centre operations, they often need comparatively large amounts of parking space to accommodate employees. If the site is not central, they may be compelled to provide facilities such as staff canteens, rest or leisure facilities, crèches, and so on in order to attract and retain employees. The public demands employment opportunities, but there is an understandable element of self-interest and 'nimbyism' (not in my back yard) from people who live near to proposed developments.

Difficulties can occasionally arise from the choice of location after a call centre has been established. Harper (2000) commented on a problem being experienced by operator iomart in relation to its call centre in Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides. In an area known for its strict observance of the Christian sabbath, certain sections of the island's community expressed unhappiness at the operation of the call centre on Sundays. Harper, writing in support of iomart, pointed out that the nature of iomart's business demanded that its call centre be operational round the clock, seven days a week; that work carried out in call centres did not usually disturb the immediate environs; that employees at the call centre were not being compelled to work on a Sunday, against their will; and that the employment opportunities and wealth created by the call centre were necessary if younger members of the community were to be persuaded to stay on the island.

A recent case indicated that call centre operators might face problems as a result not so much of where their call centre is located but of where it is not. Dolan (2000) reported that concern was being raised by Harrods that customers with Harrods store accounts ringing for advice and/or help might soon be getting it from a call centre agent in Delhi. She revealed that GE Capital, who provide the credit arrangements for storecards for many of the UK's top retailers, including Harrods, Debenhams and the Arcadia group of companies, had decided to use Indian call centres to service part of its UK business because wages in India were far lower. Poulter (2000) picked up on the same story, suggesting that the switch from using a Leeds call centre to using one in Delhi had been made by GE Capital unilaterally. A spokesman for Harrods was quoted as saying 'Harrods is not happy with the plans by GE Capital to move its services abroad. It never sought this change... Harrods places customer care as its highest priority. It is concerned with the loss of any jobs in Britain as a result of this plan' (2000: 17). Other of GE Capital's clients were reportedly less concerned by the switch. Both Debenhams and Arcadia were said to have known about and supported GE Capital's intention to switch some work to its Delhi call centre. A spokesman for Arcadia made it clear that they believed that GE Capital was entitled to make that kind of business decision and that their only concern was that the standards of service expected by their respective storecard holders should be maintained.

According to Poulter, an Indian call centre agent could expect to earn from £115 to £170 per month, depending on experience, whereas their British counterpart in Leeds would start at £625 per month. This would provide GE Capital with substantial savings, even after absorbing the cost of international telephone calls charged to UK callers at local rates. GE Capital was said to be insistent that there were no plans for a wholesale switching of business to India, and that Leeds was still 'an enormous call centre' for it. However, Poulter suggested that although there were to be no compulsory redundancies in Leeds, employees lost through natural wastage would not be replaced.

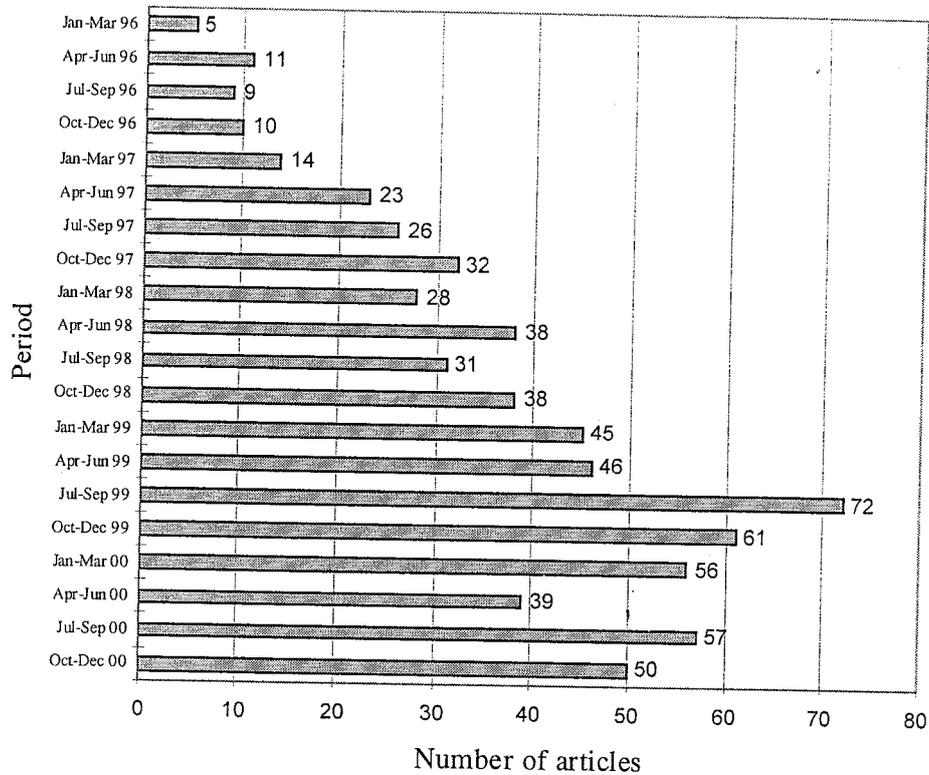
Finally, an article by Perry (2000) on difficulties experienced by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) when operating its advice line suggested that it was possible for a call centre to become a victim of its own success. DVLA discovered that BT, its telecommunications provider, was blocking calls to its advice line on some occasions even when lines were available. BT admitted to restricting calls to the centre at peak periods so as not to risk overloading the telephone network in the Swansea area and to blocking a proportion of calls when the DVLA was issuing cherished number plates or new vehicle registrations. According to Perry, BT said that it used a facility called 'call gapping' to ensure that calls to any given number did not exceed the network's physical capacity and overload an exchange, which would lead to a breakdown in services. Call centres are likely to trigger the use of call gapping, especially those used for direct response marketing campaigns where television advertisements are likely to encourage large numbers of people to ring a particular number simultaneously.

6.2.2 Call centre related newspaper articles with general themes

Articles in this category had more general call centre-related content. Many of the articles could be further sub-categorised, with call centre technologies, the spatial distribution of call centres and threats to the stability and longevity of call centre employment in the UK emerging as major themes. Others such as Bain (1998), detailed below, in which the status of call centre employees under a new system of social classification was discussed, could be grouped only loosely under the general description of call centres and society. The number of articles in this category over the survey period is illustrated in Figure 6.3. The trend is for increasing numbers of articles up to the

end of the quarter to September 1999, with a drop in numbers thereafter. Whilst there does not appear to be a clear reason for this change, it does mirror the pattern for total numbers of call centre related articles shown in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.3. Numbers of newspaper articles relating to general call centre issues, January 1996 to December 2000



The relative novelty of call centres was suggested by a group of articles in this category that explained what a call centre was and what technology one might be expected to employ. For example, Black (1997) in an article on setting up call centres which seemed to be targeted at business readers suggested that a call centre 'typically comprises a switching system, either private branch exchange (PBX) or automatic call distribution (ACD); a client-server computer system; and a number of software applications such as call logging and routing, scripting, voice mail and interactive voice response (IVR)'. He went on to describe the work carried out by different types of call centres, to outline the main decisions which had to be made when setting one up, and to explain the advantages to an organization of outsourcing their call centre requirements. A number of articles on call centres from early in the period under study talked in slightly awed tones about

features enabled by computer telephony integration that might now be considered commonplace. For example, Nelson (1996) suggested that consumers were often unnerved by the ability of call centre employees to address them by name before they had introduced themselves and to talk knowledgeably about their previous dealings with the company. Five years on and far from caller line identification, sophisticated customer databases and specialized call centre software being considered out of the ordinary, customers now expect that such information will be available to call centre employees to whom their calls have been routed.

Healy (1996) reported that systems using case-based reasoning (CBR) were being introduced in call centres to help less experienced employees answer enquiries. He suggested that 'smart' computers were being used to replace human experts, and profiled the experiences of map-making company Ordnance Survey. The company decided to adopt CBR software in 1993 to help employees manning its enquiry line when it discovered that four of the longest-serving employees on the service were going to be leaving simultaneously. The CBR software provided a means of capturing the knowledge of those employees before they departed for the use of their replacements. By 1996 the Ordnance Survey system had evolved to include more than 7,000 commonly asked questions, providing invaluable assistance to the seven employees in the enquiry team as they tried to answer an annual 60,000 calls, 6,000 letters and 2,000 e-mails.

Bray (1997) detailed how changes in the technology employed by some call centres were improving efficiency. The same changes were also increasing work intensity for call centre employees, but this effect was not examined in the article. He described the technology behind the TSB's telephone banking call centres, including systems for intelligent call routing, screen-popping, account detail access and access to other computer systems maintained by the bank. He suggested that by 'continuously improving and redesigning' its telephone banking system the TSB had 'halved the average length of calls and halved the training required from six weeks to three'. It was alleged that the addition of predictive dialing software to an outbound outsourced call centre had improved employees' outbound call productivity by more than 120 percent. The reason for the increased efficiency, it was said, was that the employees' productivity was then driven by the system 'rather than them putting down the phone and deciding who to call next'.

The growth of call centre use in the UK and their effect on society was brought into focus when Halpin (1999) reported on the introduction of legal protection for homes and businesses from unsolicited telephone calls from telemarketers. The new legislation was the result of the implementation of European legislation by the Data Protection Registrar. The Direct Marketing Association under an agreement with Ofcom would hold two databases, known as the Telephone Preference Service and the Fax Preference Service. These would contain the details of individuals and companies which by registering with the services had indicated that they did not wish to receive unsolicited communications. Copies of the database would be made available to direct marketing organisations. Any organisation making unsolicited calls or faxes to someone whose details were registered with the services could be fined up to £5,000. The new scheme was set to replace the previous Telephone Preference Service, adherence to which had been voluntary.

Hazell (1997) suggested that Britain's 'flexible labour laws' were behind the growth in the use of call centres in the UK. More than one million people were employed in call centres according to Hazell, with that figure set to rise still further. He argued that the reason why many pan-European call centres were being established in the UK was that employment costs were cheaper than in other European countries, especially for call centres where employees would be required to work shifts. He quoted figures of \$26 per employee per hour to run a call centre in Germany, \$23 per hour in France and \$15 per hour in the UK, with the difference between the three being the result of different social security liabilities and overheads rather than differences in pay.

The way in which UK call centres have become increasingly concentrated in particular locations is illustrated by a series of articles claiming that various cities qualified as 'the call centre capital of the UK' or even 'the call centre capital of Europe'. McIntosh (1997) quoted one property manager as saying that it was a 'fact' that Glasgow was then the UK's premier call centre location. Payne (1997) suggested that Ireland, and especially Dublin, had been particularly successful in attracting pan-European call centres operated by US-owned firms. Buckland (1998) alleged that the West of England was 'emerging as an increasingly popular location for call centres'. Groom (1998) quoted a report by economic development consultants Mitral that 26 percent of all UK call centre employment was based in either London or the South-East and Pike (1998) noted a statement based on the same research and used by London First, an inward investment agency, which

suggested that London was 'the call centre capital of Europe'. Morris (1998) was a little more reserved in his suggestion that Sunderland was the call centre capital of North-East England. Collier (1997b) explained why some locations had been more successful in attracting call centre operators than others. He suggested that the factors that drove call centre inward investments were 'relatively straightforward' and that what call centre operators required was 'suitable office space, a labour pool, an excellent telecoms infrastructure and good public transport links to get their employees to and from work. Also highly desirable is the availability of experienced local call-centre managers and, of course, a generous financial assistance package' (1997: 7). This assessment concurred with that of the marketing director of Manpower, a recruitment agency said to supply 10,000 employees daily to call centres across the UK, who told Hazell (1997) that it did not matter where a call centre was located geographically, but that the main considerations when deciding on a location were the educational standards, language skills and availability of the local labour force together with the total costs of establishing a call centre.

Groom (1999) detailed a report by Mitial on call centre locations in which they provided a 'league table' of 'most efficient' call centre locations in the UK. Efficiency was determined by examining such criteria as the cost and availability of property and labour, communications infrastructures and satisfaction of existing call centre operators. The most efficient locations were considered by Mitial to be Sittingbourne in Kent, followed by Belfast, Medway, Birmingham, Thanet/Folkestone, County Durham, Coventry, Glasgow, Sheffield and Merseyside. Of those, only Glasgow and Merseyside had been in the list of top locations when the exercise had been carried out two years earlier. Of the locations that had dropped in Mitial's estimation over the two years, the report identified Dublin, Sunderland, Bristol and Leeds as having 'suffered due to supply and supply management problems, notably in labour and property'.

A number of articles in this category have explored perceptions of regional accents as a reason for setting up, or not setting up, call centres in particular locations. McAlpine (1996) examined the apparent preference for Scottish accents from call centre operators whilst Sheard (1996) reported that the insurance company Legal and General had chosen to locate its call centre in Wales because the accents of local people were perceived to be trustworthy by customers. Sheard suggested that research into reactions to different regional accents had shown that listeners tended

to make assumptions about speakers based on their accents. In his experiments participants listened to speakers with different regional accents and rated them in terms of their trustworthiness, competence, and sociability.

A number of articles had suggested that in many cases decisions to locate call centres had been at least partly based on the perceptual rating by customers of different regional accents. Several different surveys had suggested that Scottish accents were given particularly high ratings. This fact had been used by inward investment agency Locate in Scotland as part of its campaign to promote Scotland as an ideal location for call centres. However, Duckers (1998) reported on the results of a nationwide survey of critical factors in determining the location of customer care services carried out by employment agency Office Angels. The survey suggested that only six percent of companies selected their call centre locations because of regional accents, whereas seventy percent of respondents chose a location on the basis of large pools of skilled labour and good transport infrastructures.

One sub-group of articles in this category talked about the need for appropriate buildings to house new call centres, the lack of such structures in particular areas, or the speculative construction of buildings designed to appeal to call centre operators. For example, an article in February 1999 focused on the conclusions contained in a report by commercial property developers DTZ Debenham Thorpe and its implications for the North-East of England (Anon, 1999r). The report suggested that as more companies came to appreciate the value of call centres as business tools, the effect on the commercial property market would be considerable, both in terms of a demand for properties to house new call centres and in terms of properties coming on to the market as a result of the reorganisation of some businesses following centralisation made possible by call centre technology. It was suggested that call centre developments over the previous ten years had taken floor space equivalent to the entire stock of office space of Birmingham. Working on forecasts which had estimated that within three years 2 percent of the UK working population, more than 1.2 million people, would be employed in call centres DTZ had calculated that a total of 11 million square metres of commercial floor space would be needed by call centres by 2002, equal to 16 percent of the total UK office stock in 1999.

The article suggested that the 'stereotypical image' of a call centre was 'of rows of telephonists in vast rooms, but in fact call centres come in all sorts of guises. They vary enormously in terms of size, location requirements, and employment profile'. It was suggested that whilst in the North-East of England call centres had been established both in city offices and out-of-town developments, a dearth of office accommodation with large floor areas on a single level favoured by many call centre operators had encouraged the refurbishment of vacant older industrial premises to provide appropriate call centre facilities. The DTZ report suggested that call centre operators would examine the viability of sites in terms of availability of local authority financial support, an area's image and the quality of the working environment they can expect. An important criterion was the availability of 'a large, skilled labour supply within 5-10 miles, or half an hour's drive time' of the site. The report suggested that because of 'the predominance of women call centre employees, and the need to retain staff' operators placed considerable emphasis on the availability of surrounding amenities, including shops, catering facilities, childcare and public transport. Another important site criterion for call centre operators tended to be the availability of a sole occupancy agreement, which was seen as helpful in terms of helping the operator to maintain security and to assure clients of confidentiality.

An article in May 1999 reported that property consultants and chartered surveyors GVA Grimley had launched a 'call centre website' containing amongst other things a regularly updated list of properties and sites available to call centre operators and details of call centre research carried out by and services provided by the company (Anon, 1999s). The company, which had established a dedicated call centre team in 1997, believed that the site was one of the first of its kind in the UK.

Many articles in this category discussed the potential effect of different advances in technology on call centre employment. For example, in an article that focused on the launch of a series of web-based products designed to enable companies to provide self-help tools for consumers experiencing problems with their products or services Calder (1996) asked whether the availability of such products would signal the demise of call centres. The new products included one called Web Advisor that used a process known as case-based reasoning to 'learn' about the nature of the problems occurring with the product for which users sought help by examining the questions asked of it. Calder believed that whatever the advantages of products such as Web Advisor, they were

unlikely to replace customer support call centres because there was 'something comforting about being able to speak to another person who can talk you through your problem and offer sympathy about the way machines always manage to go wrong'.

Others took a different view. Schlapopolski (1997) reported on the 1997 Price Waterhouse Technology Forecast, a periodic study regarded as an indicator of the future effect of new technology on businesses in the US which, he said, read 'like the Book of Revelations' for call centres. The report predicted that on-line services would replace telephone-based support services, with the promise of considerable cost-savings for call centre operators as a result of the reduction in the number of employees needed to provide such support. The editor of the report conceded that there was little immediate threat to call centres but warned of possible obsolescence in the medium term. Schlapopolski suggested that call centres already under threat from internet-based services included those providing direct insurance and directory inquiry services, for which web-based equivalents had already been launched.

In an article that reported on an agreement between computer manufacturer Compaq and US telecommunications provider Ameritech to develop high-speed internet services via Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Lines (ADSL) Ayres (1998) suggested that such connections could also 'mean the death of the call centre'. His argument was that for simple queries to telephone banking call centres, where employees had the basic function of inputting data supplied by the caller and then interrogating a database to supply the caller with information contained therein, the job could as easily be done by callers themselves over the Internet. Thornton (1999) detailed the publication of a report by the economic consultants Business Strategies that suggested that increases in sales over the Internet and through digital TV might undermine the viability of many UK call centres. The consultants had argued that areas that had seen a concentration of call centre developments would experience unemployment as a result of their technological redundancy most severely. High levels of unemployment in those areas would then be exacerbated by the fact that skills developed whilst working in call centres did not equip employees for other occupations.

Scott (1999) reported that Egg, the direct banking subsidiary of the Prudential Life Assurance Company, had ceased taking requests to open new accounts over the telephone and was in future

only going to open new accounts requested via the Internet. She asked whether this news ought to concern employees and supporters of call centres across the UK. The chief executive of Egg was quoted as saying that although the company believed that the Internet would 'dominate the direct financial services sector in future' and saw 'the net as the primary channel' with 'the telephone in support', it was likely that call centres would 'co-exist' with the net. This was also the view taken by a representative of the Call Centre Association, who suggested that although there might be some job losses, most call centre operators had been planning for a web-enabled future and that this was 'an inevitable part of the development of call centres, not their death knell'. He asserted that the effect of further development of the internet as a way of providing services would be to 'simplify many of the more mundane tasks and restrict growth in that particular area, restrict [call centre] jobs in that mundane, simple area, but not in the more complex areas. The more complex jobs or roles, the more interesting ones, will continue to grow because customers in many cases need to speak to the operator who can give more in-depth information'.

Little more than a year after his article on the possible effect of ADSL, Ayres (1999) was reporting that there 'was a theory, popular a few years ago, that the Internet would bring about the demise of the call centre. However, many now believe that the two technologies actually complement each other'. This he suggested would be achieved by 'web-enabling' call centres so that they could be used in conjunction with a company web-site. The most usual way of doing so was to have an icon on the web page that customers could click to request that a company representative contact them. Details of the request would then be logged at the call centre to be acted upon when an employee became available. Additionally, web-enabled call centres had the facility to respond in the same medium to customers who contact the company with enquiries, complaints and so on by e-mail.

In many cases it was suggested that automated systems would not replace call centre employees because such systems could not provide 'the human touch', but Dourado (1999) reported on efforts being made to 'humanise' automated response software. He suggested that he had 'conversed' with Andrette, a computer-generated face on a monitor screen who 'smiles, jokes, frowns, and occasionally gets annoyed' when answering questions posed by internet customers of US technology specialists Big Science Corporation. He also described Mavis (Multi Language Automated Voice Independent System), a software package that could answer 56 simultaneous

telephone calls in seven different languages, recognise names, match them against a database of staff and departments and put callers through to whoever they have asked for. Mavis's developers claimed that most callers would not recognise that Mavis was not human.

Tran (2000) described a virtual representative, or vRep, called Yasmin employed on the website of mobile telephone operators One 2 One whose job it was to answer questions from customers on issues from current offers to tariffs and network coverage. According to Tran, Yasmin was 'a computer program which can interact with users through natural language conversation'. Yasmin was said to be the first vRep employed by a British company and since its installation in summer 1999 the number of e-mail questions received by the company was said to have halved, producing considerable savings in terms of the cost of having to reply. A number of companies have already developed software capable of producing three-dimensional virtual assistants designed to act like real people, for example UK-based Stratumsoft developed EVA (Electronic Virtual Assistant) (Goodley, 2000). The growing market for 'electronic personalities' was graphically demonstrated in July 2000 when mobile telephone operator Orange paid £95 million for Ananova, a virtual newsreader developed by the Press Association.

From the articles it is clear that the Internet was not the only new technology to be seen to threaten call centres. Reports in 1999 of new speech recognition software that, the developers claimed, could make call centre employees redundant caused considerable concern (Holme, 1999). The software was said to have overcome problems relating to understanding dialects, coping with natural speech flow that had limited the application of previous speech recognition packages. It was suggested that Microsoft and Intel had together invested more than £56 million in the Belgian software developers Lernout and Hauspie, an investment that had been seen by many as an indication of the potential of the product. Holme argued that, as with the internet, such developments would be more likely to refine the role of call centre employees by allowing routine information to be provided by interactive voice response systems and freeing up employees to deal with more complex matters rather than replacing them entirely. Cane (1999) described a report by international communications consultants OTR Group that had concluded that advances in speech recognition technology could both slow down future growth in call centre employment and reduce the number currently employed. OTR estimated that one in five of the new call centre jobs forecast

within the next five years could fail to materialise and up to 40 percent of current call centre employees could be replaced by such technology. The report suggested that by replacing employees with new systems incorporating speech recognition technology call centre operators would be able to make substantial savings on running costs and as a result achieve rapid payback on investments.

Royle (1998) reported on the threat to UK call centres from abroad and specifically from India, suggesting that British trades union leaders were right to warn of the danger that call centres in Bangalore might win back office work which would previously have been done in Glasgow or Edinburgh. As he pointed out, with modern communications the location of a call centre increasingly became less important relative to the quality of service and cost of the operation, and there was no doubt that Indian call centres were able to compete on the former and out-compete UK locations on the latter.

One group of articles detailed trends in the way in which call centres were managed, for example in relation to the use of employment agencies or the use of outsourced facilities. Knox (1996) spoke to Graham Cook of the recruitment agency Melville Craig about the company's involvement with call centres. Mr Cook suggested that they had been involved in supplying call centre employees for more than five years. During that period they had 'placed several thousand people in call centre posts - and we see a future in which tens of thousands more will be required in telesales and services jobs'. The article described call centre employment as 'a world which has both a part-time and a seasonal element, ideal for many of the people involved who are attracted by often short shifts, a good pay structure, and a degree of mobility'.

Dempsey (1996) reported on a trend in the USA towards outsourcing telephone sales and support services. According to Dempsey, the US Direct Marketing Association had estimated that by 2000 the value of goods and services sold by telephone would be around \$600 billion. He suggested that most of this selling would be done through call centres, many of them operated by third parties under outsourcing contracts. He cited the example of Microsoft, who outsourced their software support services to different third party call centre operators around the globe.

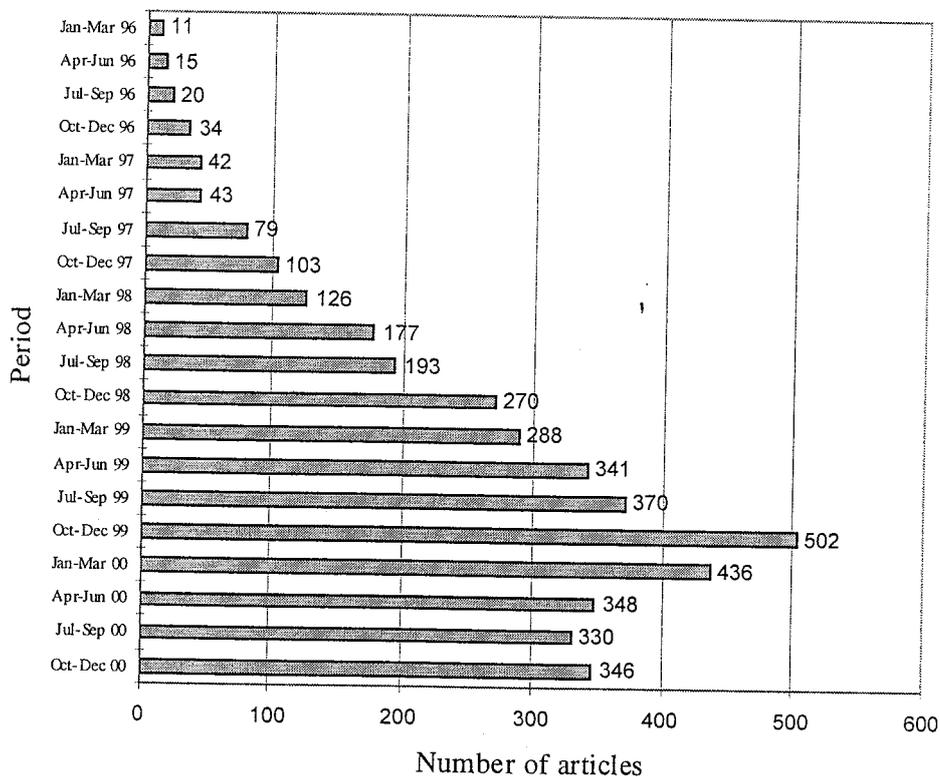
Whilst the focus of each article differed, a number of articles in this category could be loosely grouped as commentaries on the position of call centres in society. For example, Bain (1998) reported on the development of a new system of social classification in which, amongst others, call centre employees were regarded as 'the new working class'. The previous system of occupational classification put people into one of six subdivisions, based on presumed occupational skill levels. According to Bain, the new system incorporating fifteen subdivisions would classify individuals by reference to occupation, size of employing organization and employment-related criteria such as contractual status, elements of remuneration package and job security. It would be better able to reflect changes that had taken place in the structure of employment since the inception of the old system eighty years earlier. The article suggested that such changes included the shift from a predominantly male workforce to one more evenly split by gender and decline in employment in various forms of heavy manual labour accompanied by increases in employment in services. He remarked that the UK now had significant numbers of 'young men and women working in shops, behind the counter at McDonald's and most of all working in places like call centres. One per cent of the employed population answer telephones. People like this are the new working class. At the other end of the spectrum, policemen and firemen are no longer considered to be working class. One reason is that their terms of employment and the conditions in which they work are better' (1998: 12).

6.2.3 Newspaper articles in which the mention of call centres is incidental

It was often difficult to group articles in this category and also to draw out themes. Some identifiable clusters of articles emerged, and these are described below. The number of articles in this category over the survey period is shown in Figure 6.4. Whilst the pattern is broadly similar to that of the other categories the increase in the number of articles in this category is quite striking, from 11 in the three-month period ending March 1996 to a peak of 502 articles in the quarter to September 1999. Much of the increase was as a result of articles which gave the occupation of the subject of the article as call centre employee, reflecting the rise in call centre employment and possibly also an increasing editorial comfort with the use of such a description.

A number of articles in this category dealt with technical innovations that had been expected to have effects on the ways in which call centres operate. For example, Stewart (1996) reported on the international approval of a dialling format for Universal International FreePhone Numbering (UIFN). UIFN will allow free calling from anywhere in the world. So, for example, a travel insurance company could provide its customers with a single freephone emergency number for use anywhere around the world. Stewart suggested that, as far as call centres were concerned, this meant that calls to a company's freephone number could also be answered anywhere in the world, allowing operators to set up call centres wherever labour costs were lowest.

Figure 6.4. Numbers of newspaper articles incidentally related to call centres, January 1996 to December 2000



In articles included in this category call centres were often mentioned in relation to the economic regeneration of an area. For example, in the context of an article on the revival of Glasgow's economic fortunes Buxton (1996) talked of the growing number of call centre positions in the city; up from an estimated 2,000 in 1995 to around 4,000 in 1996. Collender and Kuper (1996) mentioned how European Objective I funding designed to create jobs and boost local GDP had

been used on Merseyside to help persuade QVC, the operator of a television shopping channel, to establish a call centre in Knowsley. Groom (1997) reported the economic resurgence of Norwich following the establishment of call centres by companies including the airlines KLM and its subsidiary Air UK, Virgin Direct, Norwich Union, Anglia Railways, the power generators Eastern Group, and the boating holiday specialists Hoseasons, between them providing work for more than 1,600 employees.

Equally, some of the articles in this section suggested that many areas bemoaned their inability to attract call centres, which were seen as desirable generators of employment. For example, an article in September 1998 suggested that Aberdeen had not been chosen as a call centre location up to that point and was unlikely to be selected in the future because, as the chairman of Grampian Enterprise put it, 'you don't place a call centre in an area with the highest wages in Scotland and the highest land costs and building costs [when] the labour cost base is the key factor' (Smith, 1998: 9). Halladay (1998) reported on research by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the West of England Development Agency and Devon and Cornwall Development International that suggested that the area was failing to attract large-scale call centre developments because of a lack of suitable modern buildings and a failure to convince property owners or developers to convert or build premises specifically for the needs of call centre operators.

A number of articles included in this category mentioned call centres in the context of discussions essentially about inward investment policy. For example, Parsley (1997) described calls from Sir Colin Marshall, then chairman of the London First Centre, an inward-investment agency, for a code of practice setting out guidelines on appropriate behaviour for regional development agencies looking to woo and win potential investors. The call came in the wake of a series of incidents that suggested that the various agencies were competing with each other, to the detriment of the public purse. Attempts were being made by some agencies to persuade companies already established in one location to relocate elsewhere, assisted by public money. These included approaches made by the Welsh Development Agency to call centre operators in Chester and Southampton, and by Locate in Scotland to financial services providers in Leeds. The Welsh Development Agency was also criticized for spending £900,000 of its budget of £30 million on advertising that promoted the region at the expense of other UK locations. Parsley specifically mentioned a campaign involving

posters displayed at London railway stations which stated 'You're welcome to London. But for friendlier faces, fascinating places and a better quality of life try Cardiff'.

The Commons Trade and Industry Committee, following a review of the co-ordination of inward investment activities, endorsed Marshall's suggestion of a code of practice 'to prevent rival agencies poaching investment from within the UK' (Atkinson, 1997). The Committee agreed that there had been an 'unhelpful degree of internal competition for projects' in the past. In their view this had led to a situation where on occasion potential investors had used this competition to persuade the various inward investment agencies to increase their offers of financial assistance to a level that, the Committee believed, was 'excessive'. The Committee also called for changes to the method of calculating the level of assistance for which a project might qualify, arguing that in basing figures on the number of jobs proposed developments either created or preserved there was a danger of 'a bias towards those projects which are manpower-intensive, such as call centres, as opposed to high value-added, technologically advanced projects, or where follow-on supply-chain contracts are particularly valuable' (1997: 15).

Sometimes articles have been directed at specific instances of the use of public money to attract inward investment, as opposed to general policy. Young (1997) voiced concern over the role of state aid in the decision to locate a First Direct call centre promising employment for up to 5,000 in Lanarkshire. His concern was that the provision of personal banking in the UK was clearly undergoing structural changes. Building societies were converting to banks. Supermarket chains and insurance companies were launching new banks. Banks new and old were almost universally developing telephone-based services. The question of what would happen in the longer term to branch-based banking employees when the so-called telebankers took an increasing share of the market was, he felt, one that needed to be considered. Young asked what justification there might be in using public funds to persuade First Direct to locate its call centre in Lanarkshire, given that this might result directly in the loss of jobs at its smaller call centres in Leeds and contribute indirectly to the closure of bank branches across the country. He suggested that there was 'a case for using state funding to help attract investors from overseas who are either bringing new technologies or reviving technologies that we have long since lost' but not necessarily one for using public money to convince expanding British companies to relocate elsewhere in the UK.

Many of the articles in this category related at a general level to call centre employment. For example, an article by Murden (1998) reported on figures released by the Scottish Office on job losses and gains in 1998. The figures were based primarily on announcements made to the media, and indicated that in the preceding twelve months 23,255 jobs had been created against 15,268 positions lost, a net gain of 7,987. It is not clear whether these are figures for immediate employment creation or for projected job creation over a number of years. However, it was suggested that call centre employment had accounted for 38 percent (8,773) of all new jobs in Scotland in 1998. In the same period there had been no direct job losses in call centres. The biggest net loss of employment occurred in the textiles sector, where nearly 2,000 jobs were lost and not replaced. Whilst the figures suggested that in 1998 manufacturing-related employment created more new jobs than were created in service sectors (11,953 as against 11,302), nine out of every ten jobs lost over the year had been in manufacturing (13,919 as against 1,449 lost in services).

In the subcategory of general employment-related articles, many articles reflected a concern with the quality of call centre employment, often in the context of discussions on the loss of more established manufacturing jobs. For example, a Fellow of the Fraser of Allander Institute, Kenneth Low, was reported to have said that the creation of jobs in call centres following losses in manufacturing employment was 'not replacing the same level of skill' and that such employment shifts were 'effectively de-skilling the workforce' (Swanson, 1998: 10). In an article in October 2000 detailing the decision by the Ministry of Defence to award a £150 million contract to build two landing vessels to the Swan Hunter shipyard in Wallsend on Tyneside, Bill Midgely of the North East Regional Assembly was quoted as saying that the employment created as a result would be 'real jobs, not just call centre work. It is skilled employment using the talents of thousands of men who thought their day may have passed. It is the kind of work which made the North East great, it is recapturing a way of life which has given so much to this region and will again' (Anon, 2000i: 12). The idea that manufacturing employment is in some way superior to call centre employment is not universally held. One article which expressed a contrary opinion was cynical about the reasons for such an assertion from some quarters, saying that the 'argument that a job in manufacturing is somehow more valuable than one in, say, a call centre, is a myth. A job in a service industry bringing a product to the customer is as valuable as one making the product in the

first place. Manufacturing is much easier to organise, of course, which is why [some trade unionists] prefer them...' (Anon, 1998o).

Another point made repeatedly in articles about employment prospects for those made redundant following the closure of mines, factories and shipyards is that there is a mismatch between the former employees of such establishments and the requirements of call centre operators. Jowit (1998) in an article on the closure of a Fujitsu semiconductor factory in County Durham with the loss of 600 jobs, suggested that unions for the workers had said that an estimated 1,200 vacancies within a 10-mile radius of the plant were 'largely in call centres' and 'not suitable for skilled factory workers'. Similarly, an article in the Independent in April 1999 reporting the likely closure the Kvaerner shipyards in Govan and Clydebank suggested that 'straight- talking ship workers' were 'unlikely to fit cosily into the booming service sector and its telephone call centres staffed by sweet-talking twentysomethings' (Anon, 1999o: 3).

Other articles suggest that the take-up of call centre employment by those previously employed in male-dominated manufacturing occupations has more to do with questions of economics or self-esteem than with skills as such. Ross (2000) described the shut-down of a fabrication yard for the oil industry in Easter Ross. Although call centre vacancies being created in nearby towns were supposed to offset the number of jobs lost at the yard, it was clear to some commentators that these would not provide employment for the predominantly male workforce that had just been displaced. The Provost of nearby Nairn was quoted as saying 'I can't see the oil workers being interested in call centre jobs. It's not their scene and I can't see welders, used to earning GBP 12 an hour, going down to pounds 4 an hour' (2000: 10). Paterson (2000) reported the findings of research carried out at Sheffield Hallam University into true levels of unemployment in the UK. The research pointed out that official figures for the number of people unemployed tended to underestimate because they did not include the 'economically inactive'. The number of economically inactive men were said to outnumber those registered as unemployed by more than two to one. The research identified widespread so-called detachment from the labour force by males in former industrial areas, with many highly skilled manual workers registered as long-term sick. According to Paterson, one of the conclusions reached by the research was that for a significant proportion of economically inactive men 'the jobs on offer are simply not an attractive option. This may be

because the pay is derisory. Or it may be that for a miner or a steelworker with years of experience, retraining to answer phones in a call centre is demeaning’.

It is interesting to note that there is a general tone of sympathy evident in articles which suggest that transitions from manufacturing or industrial occupations to service sector occupations such as call centre employee would be difficult for men. This is in direct contrast to similar transitions for women, for example following recent contractions in UK textiles manufacturing where the majority of displaced workers were female. Their movement from manufacturing to services employment does not seem to have been seen as problematic, or to have given rise to the same concerns about loss of skills, lower incomes or incompatibility with self-image.

One reason for this might be that women are seen as having become accustomed to low-paid work. Call centre employment has been mentioned in articles that have suggested that employers in other poorly paid predominantly female occupations have had difficulty in recruiting as the UK labour market has tightened. For example, Oliver (2000) reported on the large number of unfilled vacancies in Bristol. An influx of major employers was said to have created conditions of ‘virtually zero unemployment’ in the north of the city. Many employers were finding vacancies difficult to fill, especially retailers in the city centre. Oliver claimed that people who might previously have taken up such positions were ‘opting for better paid jobs in places such as call centres where they can earn a third more’. It was suggested that retail positions in Bristol were being offered at around £4.50 per hour, whereas call centres were paying in the region of £5.70 per hour with the possibility of additional bonuses. Gillan (2000) suggested that staffing problems at a five-star hotel in central London were typical of employee shortages in hotels and catering. She pointed to a number of factors that might be responsible for the difficulties faced by relevant employers. Chief amongst these were the relatively low level of unemployment in the UK, leading to a situation where in some instances potential employees could pick and choose amongst prospective employers, rather than vice versa; and the perception of employment in hotel and catering as ‘low-paid and stressful’, resulting in job hunters ‘opting for reasonably well-paid jobs in call centres and on supermarket tills’.

Many articles containing an incidental mention of call centres focus on developments in particular services, for example in relation to personal banking. The advent and increasing popularity of telephone-based banking was seen in a number of articles as being significant, leading to structural changes in UK banking and having far-reaching consequences for those employed in the provision of banking services. Bates (1996) in a report on telephone banking suggested that the cost to banks of servicing customers over the telephone was half that through a branch. He reported that First Direct, the telephone banking service launched in 1989, took more than half of its 26,000 daily calls in 1996 outside normal banking hours. He quoted predictions that 30 percent of current accounts would be telephone-based by 2000, compared with 7 percent in 1993.

Caulkin (1997b) suggested that the increasing use of call centres to run customer service and sales functions could be seen as a 'graphic index' of the 'industrialisation' of financial services that had followed the introduction of new technology and the intensification of competition from new high-profile entrants including supermarkets Tesco and Sainsbury, high street store Marks and Spencer, and the Virgin group. He suggested that the way in which call centres were being used, their tendency to be operated for longer hours and the relatively low pay offered to call centre employees, was playing an important part in polarising the financial services workforce. A number of shifts in the composition of labour in the sector were apparent: from a predominantly male to a mostly female workforce; from full-time to increasingly part-time or non-standard employment; from stability and accumulated experience to high staff turnover and inexperienced front-line employees.

Whilst incidental to articles themselves, call centres have sometimes been central to the subject matter of articles in this category. For example, an article in July 1997 reported on intense competition in the direct car insurance market (Anon, 1997i). According to the article, Direct Line, perhaps the best-known early adopter of call centre technology to sell motor insurance, had not been the first to offer direct sales. Preferred Direct's entry into this market had predated that of Direct Line, but Preferred had enjoyed considerably less success, with losses of £13 million on premiums of £65 million in 1996. It was suggested that the reason for this had been that Preferred had never managed to reach the 'critical mass' required for it to be able to run a call centre and market itself effectively. The article contended that most direct insurers and brokers had not as of

1997 made a profit, and that there had already been some casualties of the difficult market conditions including RAC Direct, CGA Direct and direct brokers OneQuote. The cause was seen to be one of overcrowding in the car insurance market. The barriers to entry for direct insurance provision were perceived as relatively low, and as a result new entrants were numerous and attempts to gain market share were based on price. This, together with the mobility of customers, made it difficult for telephone-based insurers to acquire and maintain the aforementioned critical mass.

A number of articles have detailed the appearance and use of call centres as settings for literary, theatrical and artistic works. It might be argued that the use of such settings in works of fiction demonstrates increasingly widespread public recognition of call centres. For example, in the book 'Eight Minutes Idle' by Matt Thorne the main character works in a call centre (Johnson, 1999). 'The Secret of Call Centre Zebra' by Angela C. Rice was described as a 'passion-packed story of newly-awakened love and electronic drama amid the chill labyrinths of phone salesmanship' (Morris, 2000). The fictional Department of Social Inclusion Call Centre was part of the backdrop for the play 'The King of Scotland' by Iain Heggie, based on the Gogol novel 'Diary of a Madman' (Spiers, 2000). There have been several film credits for call centres. Ward (1999) reported that Scottish company Ideal World Productions had won a commission from FilmFour to produce a feature-length film called 'Late Night Shopping' about the lives of four young men from Glasgow employed on late shifts in call centres, and the central character in the May Miles Thomas film 'One Life Stand' worked in a call centre as a chatline tarot card reader (Russell, 2000). The call centre has also been immortalised in song. G. Brown (1999) described a concert he had attended by singer and social commentator Billy Bragg, during which Bragg was heard to say 'Used to sing songs about miners and dockworkers. Now it's all about someone in a call centre in the Fens', after which he sang a song entitled 'Saint Monday', written and sung from a call centre employee's perspective.

6.3 The development of call centres in the UK

This section uses reported statistics to build up a picture of the scope and scale of UK call centre use, but before embarking on an analysis of reported statistics it is necessary to highlight the

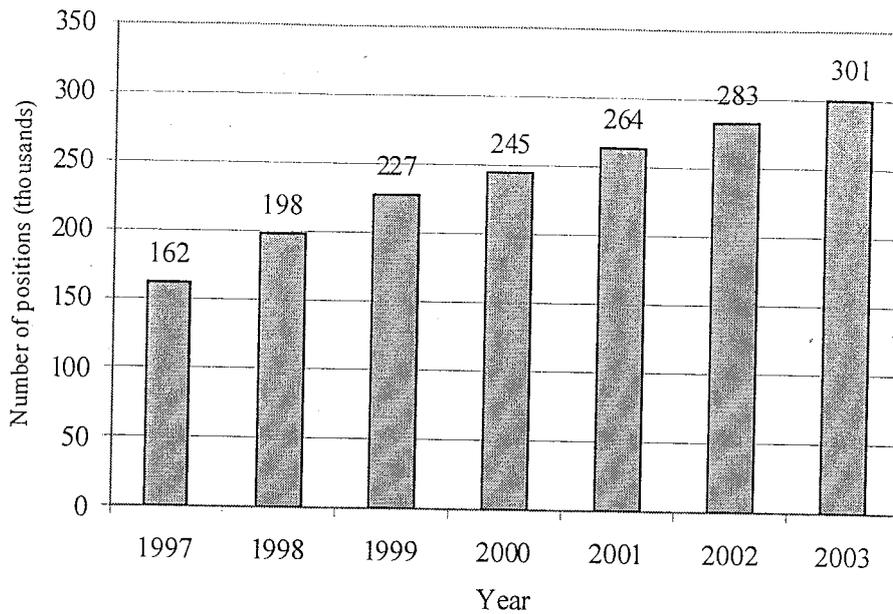
problems associated with this approach. The most significant of these relate to access to information and the use of non-standardised definitions. There is a considerable body of information potentially available on the growth of call centres in the UK, most of which has been compiled by market research companies. Some companies have had considerable experience of studying this sector. Dataquest, for example, has been conducting market research on call centres since 1992, and Datamonitor has had an involvement since 1996. Some research has been commissioned by specific organisations, but much has been produced as a commercial product. Market research is expensive to carry out, and this is reflected in the price of the end product. Because of this, access to such reports is for many academic researchers limited. It is however possible to glean some information from such sources via associated press releases, executive summaries sent out as part of company sales literature, articles in which reports are quoted, and so on. The problem is that usually only excerpts of the report are made available. Critical supporting information, such as detail on how statistics contained in the report have been compiled, is rarely provided. It is therefore impossible to make any judgement on the suitability of the data collection and analysis methods employed or on the reliability of the data provided from such excerpts.

One of the most serious omissions in information provided outside of a full market research report tends to be that of definitions of call centres. As Chapter 1 suggested, no standard qualitative definition of a call centre exists. In addition, for the purposes of calculating the number of call centres in use market research companies tend to include a quantitative element in their definition in terms of a minimum number of call centre employees or, in perhaps euphemistic industry parlance, agents. This affects the figures quoted by different reports in terms of numbers of call centres. For example, Datamonitor defines a call centre as 'a dedicated business telephone function with an [automated call distribution system] and more than 10 agent positions' (Menday, 1999). By comparison, Dataquest does not have a quantitative element to its definition, but refers only to 'a formal unit which utilises call centre technology, of which the most frequently used is an ACD'. Research conducted by Schema, another market research organisation, in 1996 suggested that more than 20% of all UK call centres had less than 10 agent positions (Piggott, 1998) with a further 66% having between 10 and 24 agent positions. Assuming that these percentages are even approximately correct, it is clear that research using different quantitative measures to help define a 'call centre' will come to substantially different conclusions on call centre numbers.

Using estimates from a single source bypasses the problem of lack of standardisation in the definitions used, although it may also lead to less confidence in their accuracy. Accordingly, this section uses the figures provided by the market research company Datamonitor, which has been looking at the expansion of call centres in the UK and Europe since 1995. Its definition of a call centre specifies a minimum number of 'agent positions'. This term refers to the numbers employed in actually making or answering calls, and as such is an under-estimate of the levels of call centre-related employment because it excludes managerial and administrative staff as well as ancillary employees such as cleaners, building maintenance staff, and so on. Figure 6.5 illustrates the estimated numbers of call centre agents for 1997 to 2003. According to Datamonitor (1999) the number of agent positions in the UK was set to increase significantly in the five years from 1997 to 2001, from an estimated 162,000 positions in 1997 to a forecast 264,000 in 2001. Further expansion was anticipated in following years, but the growth of UK call centre employment was expected to slow. However, it has been suggested (e-skills NTO, 2001; Datamonitor, 2000) that by 2000 call centre employment accounted for 2.3 percent of the UK working population, providing work for more than 500,000 people. The same sources estimated an increase by 2005 to one million call centre employees, amounting to over 500,000 full-time equivalent positions.

Datamonitor (1999) suggested that in 1998 there were approximately 4,100 call centres in the UK, a figure which they estimated would have risen to 5,000 by 2000. They believed that most growth would occur in call centres in the 31-100 agent position size range. A later Datamonitor report (2001) stated that 5,358 call centres had been established in the UK by the end of 2000, estimated to increase to 8,665 call centres by 2005. Using Datamonitor's 1999 estimates, the mean size of a call centre in the UK in 1998 was around 48 agent positions, rising marginally to 49 agent positions by 2000. Most call centres will be smaller than this mean. Piggott (1998) referred to research by Schema, another market research company, which estimated a total of 7,000 call centres in the UK in 1997 but suggested that some 87 percent of those had less than 25 agent positions. Schema's definition included call centres with less than 10 agent positions. In contrast, Fielding (1997) found that 40 percent of call centre operations had less than 50. This is a far lower percentage than figures from Datamonitor and Schema would lead one to expect, but might be explained by the call centre definition used in Fielding's study having a substantially higher limit in terms of minimum size for inclusion.

Figure 6.5 Estimated numbers of 'agent positions' in UK call centres, 1996-2003. Source: Datamonitor, 1997; 1998; 1999



In the same way that opinion is divided over how many call centre employees there are in the UK, there is also considerable debate about the demographic make-up of this labour force. A survey by Income Data Services (IDS, 1997) on pay and conditions in call centres was based on responses from 37 call centre operators regarding 60 call centres and covering more than 17,000 employees. The IDS survey found that with the exception of one, all the call centres surveyed had a predominantly female workforce. The gender composition ranged from a minimum of 50 percent to a maximum of 98 percent female employment, with a mean of 70 percent. The call centres with the highest proportion of female workers were located in the home shopping sector. The same call centres had the highest proportion of part-time workers. The predominantly male exception was a European call centre providing computer technical support and advice.

A 1999 survey titled 'Management and motivation in UK call centres' carried out jointly by The Oxford Group and the Call Centre Association surveyed 47 organisations, each with one or more call centres. There was no information in the summary as to the nature of business conducted by these organisations. The survey found that more than 40 percent of the full time employees in the call centres surveyed were male. When part time employees were taken into account, only 35 percent of the total labour force was male. The survey also found that the age distribution of the

call centre employees surveyed was skewed towards youth for both males and females. Almost 80 percent of males were aged 19 to 30, and only 5 percent were aged 40 to 59. 60 percent of females were aged 19 to 30, with 20 percent aged 40 to 59.

A BT Consulting Survey in 1999 suggested that the gender composition in call centres depended and had always depended on the type of work done by each centre. Tables 6.2 and 6.3 show the overall and management gender composition found by the survey according to the primary function of the call centre.

Table 6.2 Gender composition of workforce by call centre function

	Male %	Female %
Customer service	29	71
Inbound sales	31	69
Technical helpdesk	85	15

Source: BT Consulting, 1999

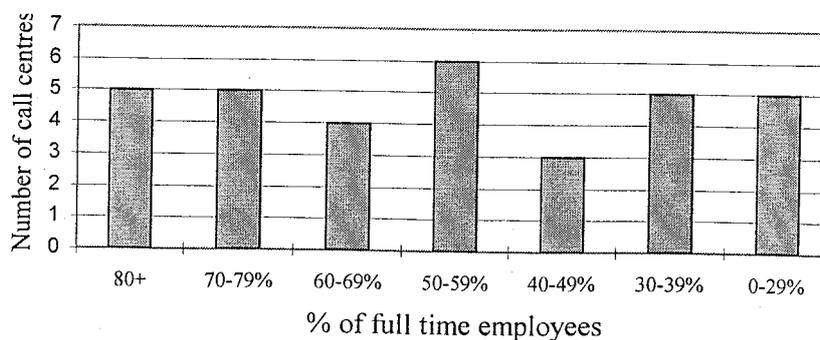
Table 6.3 Gender composition of management by call centre function

	Male %	Female %
Customer service	37	63
Inbound sales	38	62
Technical helpdesk	88	12

Source: BT Consulting, 1999

There is a perception that much call centre employment is non-standard, although this has not necessarily been borne out by various studies. In a 1997 report by Income Data Services (IDS), 33 call centres volunteered information on their proportions of full time employees. The results are shown in Figure 6.6.

Figure 6.6 Percentage of full-time employees. Source: IDS Report 739 / June 1997



Full time employment accounted for less than half the workforce in 13 of the call centres. According to the report, of the call centres that volunteered this information, those employing least part-time employees tended to be in the financial sector. Two thirds of the call centres in the IDS survey employed some temporary staff. The levels of such employment varied but with one exception amounted to less than 50% of the call centre workforce. Temporary workers accounted for 15% of the employees in the survey.

A more recent Income Data Services study (IDS, 1999) reported that part-time employees formed a majority of the workforce in less than 10 percent of the call centres included in the survey, with most call centres having less than 10 percent of their employees working part time. It suggested that the average proportion of temporary employees in the call centres surveyed was 12 percent, with the highest proportions of temporary employees found in outsource call centres and call centre operations subject to extreme peaks and troughs in call volume. A 1999 Datamonitor study of call centres in the UK forecast increases in the proportions of part time and other non-standard employment in the period to 2000, summarised in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4 Proportion of full-time, part-time and other staff, 1998 and 2000

Full-time		Part-time		Other	
1998	2000	1998	2000	1998	2000
54%	41%	35%	46%	11%	13%

Source: Datamonitor, 1999

6.4 Call centre technology

A call centre is an aggregation of many different products and technologies that fit together like building blocks and that are ideally all integrated with the pre-existing business or other systems of employing organizations. Not all call centres use all of the available products or technologies that might conceivably play a part in their work. This said, there are a number of building blocks that usually form the nucleus of most call centres. These include automatic call distributors (ACDs), voice processing, computer telephony integration (CTI), and management information systems (MIS). Each of these important call centre components is discussed in detail below. Excerpts from

sales literature are used to give an indication of the claimed benefits of each component to the call centre operator.

Automatic call distributors, or ACDs as they are usually known, are what many would consider to be the heart of call centre operations. Menday (1996: 70) went further, writing that 'The ACD is synonymous with the call centre'. She defines the ACD as a 'telephone system handling large call volumes which automatically offers the next call to the agent waiting for the longest period'. The first commercially available ACD was developed and supplied by the American company Bell Systems, and was used by Bell's airline customers to make their ticket reservations operations more efficient. The airlines already had call centres before the introduction of the ACD, but its introduction boosted efficiency and productivity by distributing the calls received amongst the available bookings staff. The first ACDs were integral parts of the telecommunications network. American telecommunications providers housed the ACDs and supplied them to their customers as a service.

The next step in the evolution of ACD technology was the production of a stand-alone ACD. This had the advantage of freeing the purchaser from the need to be or stay with a particular telecommunications provider. In the USA, where the national telecommunications infrastructure had been made up of many different companies all vying for the same business almost from the beginning, the ability to change service provider in order to secure the most advantageous terms was seen as very desirable. Collins Radio, part of the Rockwell group of companies, developed the first stand-alone ACD in 1973 for Continental Airlines (Menday, 1996). Others soon followed. Some of these, for example Datapoint's Infoswitch ACD, are still in use. As the potential for ACDs became apparent, other products with ACD capabilities were developed. In the late 1970s manufacturers of PABXs (Private Automated Branch Exchanges, the telephone systems which allow for multiple extension numbers found in the premises of individual organisations) in the US began to incorporate ACD functions as an added feature of their products. In 1978 the Scandinavian telecommunications company Ericsson pioneered the world's first digital ACD system, another step forward in the evolution of call centres (Ericsson Business Networks, 1996).

In the 1980s as ACD technology matured, specialist products were developed for different market niches. The availability of specifically developed products encouraged the proliferation of smaller call centres. This encouragement has continued into the 1990s with the introduction of the personal computer-based ACD, also called a soft ACD or an adjunct processor. A few years ago the rise of the smaller call centre was heralded in the sales literature for many call centre products.

For example:

‘ACD’s (Automated Call Distributors) have played an important part in the call centre structure for some time. No call centre would be complete without the many functionalities an ACD can provide. Unfortunately these functionalities come at a cost. In large call centres an ACD is a saving grace and the associated costs can seem like a small drop in the ocean. But what about smaller organisations who have the same needs, but not the same budgets?

CCS have developed the Soft ACD, focusing on customers who need ACD, IVR and CTI functionality, to enhance their existing services.

The Soft ACD is scaleable up to 100 agents and integrates quite comfortably on top of a company’s existing telephone system thus keeping costs at a minimum. Typical configurations are for 8-30 staff’.

Source: CCS, 1997

‘It used to be that only big business could benefit from call centre technology. That has all changed. Now, even small and mid-sized organisations can put call centre technology to work for them, and reap the benefits’.

Source: Ericsson Business Networks, 1996

Such literature would suggest that the latest developments in call centre functions are available in a form that is financially accessible to organizations large and small. In addition, it implies that the image conjured up in many minds by the words call centre of row upon row of operators seated in front of computer monitors in huge open plan office spaces is not necessarily accurate. In respect of their call centre operations small organisations can now afford to compete on similar if not equal terms with much larger ones.

Voice processing is the storage of the human voice on computer disks. Voice processing has been technically possible for quite some time. However, the development of voice processing for commercial use was limited because of its requirement for comparatively large volumes of hard disk space. The availability and decreasing cost of larger hard disks in the past decade has led to the development of a wide range of variations on the voice processing theme. From an initial very specific definition, voice processing has now come to be regarded as ‘a generic term for a variety of applications which process voice transactions automatically. It enables the call centre to

automate tedious transactions, to provide a 24 hour service to customers who might otherwise have to call back the next day, to handle overflow calls at peak times, and to give a personalised service to your regular callers' (Menday, 1996: 90).

'The xmu-s is a perfect solution for "front-end" call processing requirements. The xmu-s can provide ACD queues with DTMF call processing/call routing capability as well as provide enhanced ACD announcements such as customized time of day messages or queue time hold announcements. The xmu-s can also be used as a stand-alone automated attendant system or as an interactive audiotext system providing consistent, repetitive information 7 days a week, 24 hours a day'.

Source: Interalia Communications Solutions, 1996

The many variants of voice processing include call-answering, interactive voice response (IVR), topping and tailing, voice mail, voice forms, audiotex, and auto attendants. Call answering is the provision of an automatic pre-recorded message that is played to customers as soon as they are connected. It may consist of information about the company or services that the customer is trying to contact or obtain, or information telling the customer that a queuing system is in operation and advising them to wait to be connected to a member of staff.

IVR is a voice processing application that has been made possible by the evolution of Computer Telephony Integration, CTI. The caller is answered by a recorded message asking for a particular response to a series of specific questions or statements. Usually callers are invited to navigate themselves through the system to the end point they require by choosing single options from a series of menus. Frequently the response requested is for the caller to press particular numbers on a touch-tone telephone. Each number produces a specific tone, which is recognised by the IVR unit which then tells the system how to respond.

'FirstLine, the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system from CCS, manages incoming and outgoing service calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without human intervention. FirstLine will intelligently interpret and act upon your customers' requests, enquire into your computer database, and respond to problems and enquiries in the same friendly manner as your customer service representatives - all with the use of a touch-tone phone.

The system uses pre-recorded, digitised speech or synthesised voice to "speak" with the callers, guiding them through the information exchange and verbally relaying the requested information'.

Source: CCS, 1997

Not all telephones have touch tone facilities. To cater for this, some IVR systems work using speech recognition capabilities. The caller is once again invited to indicate their choices from a menu which may contain just two options, such as yes or no, or which may have a number of

different options with the caller invited to speak the number of the option required. Speech recognition is a rapidly expanding and developing interface between customers and call centres and one with the potential to affect call centres profoundly.

Topping and tailing is a voice processing variation that allows a call centre to automate phrases or information that is standard in every call made. This means, for example, that a friendly and cheerful greeting from a call centre operative can be recorded and then played back to each customer handled by them as soon as the call routing function of the ACD has selected that operative and prior to the call being put through. This means that the customer will always hear a greeting, or salutation as it is often called, which is optimally welcoming. Equally, the parting pleasantries, the tail of the call, can be pre-recorded and played automatically at the termination of a call. The operatives benefit because they do not have to repeat the same greetings or parting words many times a day, which would otherwise be tedious and might lead to deterioration in tonal quality. Additionally the call centre operators make gains in efficiency because automated topping and tailing enables staff to handle more calls in the time saved by automation.

An everyday example of topping and tailing is a telephone call to BT directory enquiries on 192. Most callers are now familiar with the automated voice which tells you 'The number you require is....' at the end of an enquiry. Many callers are just as familiar with the opening salutation 'Directories, (Name of Operator) speaking, what name please?' without realising that it is also automated. It has been pre-recorded by the operators themselves and is then automatically played to customers before they are put through.

Voice mail facilities are similar to answering machines, in that they enable callers to leave messages. The superiority of voice mail lies in what it enables recipients to do with messages. Voice mail systems enable them to be reviewed, copied, stored, annotated, or forwarded to single or multiple other recipients with or without additional comments. Different voice mail systems advise recipients of new mail by a variety of means, including screen pop-ups, flashing lights, or ringing telephones or extensions.

'The Storacall VoxMail range of voice mail systems will allow your organisation to communicate more effectively by providing a new channel of communication and eliminate the biggest weakness of telephone communication - being unable to get through, because the person you wish to talk to is unavailable.

With a VoxMail system your callers will always be able to get through and leave messages. A voice message to an individual or group is often the most succinct, understandable and immediate form of communication. In addition called persons will be provided with a range of powerful options for dealing with those messages.

Voice mail like fax machine is becoming an essential business communications tool, providing organisations with a whole host of benefits'.
Source: Storacall Voice Systems, 1997

Using voice mail facilities in call centres mean that at particularly busy times of day customers can be offered the choice of waiting for an available operative or leaving voice mail to which the call centre staff can respond when the call traffic diminishes. Additionally, urgent or important information, for example about product or service availability, can be distributed immediately and simultaneously to all staff logged on to the call centre system.

Voice forms are similar to voice mail in that they allow callers who do not wish to hold when lines are busy to leave messages. Voice forms differ in that they ask callers to leave specific information after each prompt. This helps to ensure that the information left by callers is received in an appropriate order for further processing by the call centre staff and that the amount of information obtained is sufficient to enable callers' needs to be identified and the appropriate actions taken.

Hook (1998) described a possible use of voice forms in the telescreening of job applicants. Voice forms were considered useful in this context because they allow many calls to be taken in a short time, meaning that the initial peak in interest generated by the publication of job details is catered for. Voice forms enable callers to leave their details outside normal working hours or at weekends, which might not be an option if a 'live' recipient was required. It helps to ensure that the information from each applicant is standardised. It means that all the applications can be assessed by the same people, eliminating the difficulties of reliability between different assessors, and that all applications can be reviewed together after a suitable period rather than being reviewed as they are received in ways which might also compromise assessment reliability. Clearly voice forms might be suitable for other call centre activities where similar conditions might apply, for example for recording requests for further information following the screening of a television commercial in which a contact number is displayed.

Audiotex is the storage of spoken information for later retrieval through a touch-tone interactive voice response system. It is most suited to the dissemination of highly repetitive information to callers in instances where interaction with the caller is most unlikely to be required, for example in giving weather information, sports results or timetable information. Menday (1996) reported its use internally in some larger organizations, enabling staff to get information about canteen menus, internal career opportunities, and so on.

Computer telephony integration (CTI) is a technically complex and sophisticated phenomenon. Fortunately it is possible to define it at a conceptual level as a state 'where the computer and the telephone are given the ability to speak with each other and give each other commands' (Menday, 1996: 181). This ability of each to communicate with the other has allowed the development of a number of uses, the main purpose of which is to automate many time-consuming but relatively unproductive activities that have been a feature of call centre work in the past. CTI-enabled uses (described in detail below) include caller line identification (CLI), screen popping, and automated outbound dialling.

'Consono Call Centre integrates your computers, telephones and software so agents can easily retrieve call-related information from corporate databases - from detailed customer records to scripts that support them while they sell. This gives agents fast access to the data required to change customer records or make new ones, answer queries or take orders. Any time calls are transferred to another agent or individual within the company, the data on-screen are forwarded too.

Just think about what fast access to on-screen information can do for your business. In just a few seconds, agents can pull up a distributor list for any region where your products are sold. They can then check to see which stores have your product on their shelves and relay this information to your customers.

Consono Call Centre also supports customized and off-the-shelf computer-telephony applications. Smart call routing lets the system check your database to verify that callers have paid for previous orders before accepting new ones. Callers with delinquent payments are routed directly to the collections department instead of sales. There are also outbound dialing applications that speed sales and market research. Agents don't waste time looking up or dialing numbers; your system keeps track of who has been called and automatically dials those who have not'.

Source: Ericsson Business Networks, 1996

When a call is received by the ACD at a call centre, the CTI link attempts to determine the number dialled by the caller and what number the caller was dialling from. A call centre may be receiving calls on behalf of a number of different organizations, each of which may have a different salutation. If the CTI link recognises which client organization has been called, the appropriate

salutation can automatically be played to a customer, after which the service provided by the agent might be identical for each client organization. Alternatively, an organization might operate a call centre housing a number of different functions such as sales, customer service, technical support, and so on. Recognising the number dialled would enable the call to be routed to the most appropriate employee or group of employees in the call centre.

Where the CTI link is able to determine the number from which the call has been made, it can then automatically interrogate available databases to see whether the originating number matches that of a previous contact. This is only possible if the call was made from a telephone connected to a network supporting caller line identification and by somebody who has not blocked that information for this to be possible. For example, BT's network allows caller line identification. If someone dials '1471' from a BT telephone they will receive details of the last caller's number. But the last number is not always available, for example because the last caller used the blocking mechanism, or because the last call came from abroad, or because they called from an organization which has a main switchboard and extensions. The CTI link automatically does an operation equivalent to dialling 1471 the instant the call is received at the ACD. If it is able to determine the originating number, it checks the available databases to see if that number matches any already held. If it does match a number already held, the details held in the database against that number can be retrieved automatically and sent to the call centre employee to whom the ACD routes the call.

If the CTI link recognises either the number dialled or the originating number it is then able to put the necessary information in the appropriate format on to the computer screen in front of the employee at the same time as it delivers the caller to them. The employee then simply has to check that the details displayed are the correct ones for the caller. This application, known as 'screen popping', is seen as one of the biggest benefits of CTI. It can save considerable time and lead to substantial increases in efficiency, because the employee does not have to ask for and record the caller's full details before processing each call. It can also benefit the caller because less time is spent on the call. Also, where the caller has to be transferred, for example to a different department, then the call and the information about the caller can be transferred simultaneously, minimising the need for the caller to repeat information.

CTI has not only affected inbound call centres, but has been developed so as to be automated and to offer greatly improved efficiency in outbound call centres. Before the introduction of computer technology, employees in an outbound call centre would have spent much of their time dialling numbers manually from a list. Time would have been spent waiting for a connection, and time would have been wasted where numbers were engaged, or connected the operative to an answerphone or fax machine, or were not recognised, or rang but were not answered. CTI has enabled the linking of ACDs with successive generations of ever more sophisticated automated dialling technologies. Basic power dialling capabilities allowed employees to dial a telephone number using the keys on their computer keyboard rather than using the telephone. Since then CTI-enabled dialling technology has evolved to the extent that leading edge systems have removed the employee from the dialling process entirely. Progressive dialling, the most sophisticated system currently available, monitors all employees in the call centre, immediately supplying free employees with live calls which have been selected automatically from computerised databases and dialled by the system itself.

The terms first party (or desktop) and third party (also known as server/host) are used in relation to CTI to denote where CTI links are situated. This in turn has implications both for its cost and for its use. In first party CTI, the link is situated in a single PC. All the benefits of the CTI package are available, but only to that PC. In third party CTI, the link resides in a server and the benefits provided by the CTI package are available to all PCs networked to the server.

Management Information Systems (MIS) are software packages that provide the means by which managers can fine-tune the operational efficiency of a call centre. They provide a means of monitoring the work-rates of call centres and, in most cases, of individual employees in 'real time'. They also enable managers to produce statistics on operational parameters such as the average time taken for calls to the centre to be answered, the total number of calls answered, the average length of calls, the number of calls which were abandoned before being answered by an employee in a given time period, the average length of time calls waited in a queuing system before being answered, and so forth. For example:

'The QMS Call Centre Management System...

- Maintains an accurate forecast of customer demand and Agents required for every 15 minute period
- Designs optimum Shift schedules in line with your contracts of employment

- Manages Agent Rotas week on week and accounts for Agent day to day absences
 - Reports expected Quality of Service levels with 'real time' colour graphical displays
 - Uses powerful and fast 32 bit technology for Windows 95 and NT allowing for full multi-tasking
 - Full Multi-User and Multi-ACD functionality with LAN based servers'
- Source: Q-Max Systems Ltd, 1997.

6.5 Summary

This chapter began by presenting a brief history of call centres in the UK, charting their development using selected call centre-related articles appearing in national and regional newspapers. A total of 12,763 articles published between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2000 and recorded on the LEXIS-NEXIS electronic database as at 1 February 2001 were read and analysed. The monthly numbers of articles increased from an average of less than 22 per month in 1996 to 395 per month in 2000, having peaked at 589 articles in November 1999. Content analyses were performed and nine categories of articles were identified. Reviews of articles from three of those categories; company news, general call centre-related and incidental mention categories, were then used in a discussion of the development of call centres in the UK.

The company news category of articles illustrated the growing number of call centre uses, both in established industries and to provide new services. Examples were provided of their adoption for the provision of public sector and not-for-profit as well as commercial services. The articles also detailed the development and launch of increasingly sophisticated call centre products, including translation and interactive voice response and speech recognition software. Article themes that emerged from the general call centre-related category included explanations of call centre technologies, call centre growth and legislation, aspects of the geographical location of call centres, call centre property needs, the likely effects on call centres of various technical advances, and the social and occupational classification of call centre employment. The third category of articles reviewed, those in which the mention of call centres was incidental to the main theme of the article, included articles concerning the (ab)use of public money to attract inward investments, the (in)ability of call centres to replace employment lost in 'traditional' industries, the likelihood that call centres were causing recruitment difficulties in retailing, catering and hospitality sectors, and the use of call centres as settings for literary, theatrical and other artistic works.

Following this, statistical information gathered from secondary sources was used to arrive at an overall picture of the current scope and scale of UK call centre use. Difficulties associated with the use of such information, for example in terms of access and of differences in definitions of call centres, were noted. It was suggested that there were more than 5,000 call centres in the UK with a mean size of 49 entry-level employee positions. Workforces tended to be predominantly female, although significant variations in proportions according to call centre function and task complexity were noted by some studies. Much call centre employment involved working non-standard hours, with part time employment accounting for an increasingly large minority of positions and an average of more than 10 percent of call centre workforces employed on temporary contracts.

The third section provided a layperson's guide to call centre technology, using sales literature to give a flavour of the way in which the benefits of particular products are presented to call centre operators. It was suggested that automated call distribution systems (ACDs) were generally considered to be at the hearts of call centres. The first ACD capable of use independently of a telecommunications provider was developed in 1973 (Menday, 1996), and the first digital ACD system became available in 1978 (Ericsson Business Networks, 1996). ACD functions can now be supplied by software run from a personal computer. Voice processing was said to be another set of technologies central to call centres, and variants such as call-answering, interactive voice response, topping and tailing, voice forms, audiotex and auto attendants were explained and discussed. The role of computer telephony integration (CTI), a state 'where the computer and the telephone are given the ability to speak with each other and give each other commands' (Menday, 1996: 181), in call centres was explored. Finally, the section discussed the abilities of call centre management information systems to provide a means of monitoring the activities and outputs of individual call centre employees in 'real time'.

From findings of this chapter it is clear that call centres form a significant and expanding new area of employment in Britain in which computers and automating technologies play a major part. This chapter has used both newspaper articles and sales literature to illustrate the way in which call centres are being presented to different audiences. The next chapter is the first of three presenting and discussing the study data, and is concerned with call centre recruitment and selection processes.

Chapter 7

The Employment Process

7.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first explores the nature of the employment process for agent-level call centre employees. It begins by looking at the literature on aspects of recruitment and selection processes more generally. It examines the ways in which such processes are typically managed, particularly in relation to the so-called white collar and clerical occupations that might be argued to have most in common with call centre employment. It then provides arguments as to why such processes may be different in the case of call centres, supporting this contention with data from a survey of Scottish employment agencies probing the extent of such agencies' relationship with call centres and excerpts from interviews with senior employment agency consultants.

In the second part of the chapter, the fieldwork experiences of the author and the recollections of current and former call centre employees of the recruitment and selection processes experienced by them in securing such employment are discussed.

7.2 Recruitment and selection

The recruitment process has been variously defined as the process of 'searching for and obtaining potential job candidates in sufficient numbers and quality so that the organization can select the most appropriate people to fill its job needs' (Dowling and Schuler, 1990), as encompassing 'all organizational practices and decisions that affect either the number, or types, of individuals who are willing to apply for, or to accept, a given vacancy' (Rynes, 1990: 249) or, from an economic perspective, 'the purchase of one of the production factors' (Russo, Rietveld, Nijkamp and Gorter, 1995: 4). Under the first two of those definitions recruitment can be differentiated from selection in that the former deals with a positive process of accumulating a body of candidates whereas the latter is a negative process of discarding candidates (Whitehill, 1991). However, many authors (for example Yei-Fang and Kleiner, 1999) do not differentiate, providing descriptions that combine both as elements of a single process of hiring. Wright and Storey (1994) argued that the recruitment process has the twin objectives of attracting and retaining the interest of suitable applicants and projecting a positive image of the organization to those coming into contact with it.

A number of authors (for example, Torrington and Hall, 1991; Wright and Storey, 1994) provide practitioners with prescriptive models of the recruitment process, incorporating best practice. Wright and Storey (1994) map out a nine-step 'typical' recruitment process, beginning with gaining authorization for a new position or replacement employee. This should start with a job audit (Luszez and Kleiner, 2000) which examines whether a new or replacement employee is required and provides an opportunity to review the possibilities for restructuring and redeployment of staff as an alternative to recruitment and/or for delay of the recruitment process.

Once authorization is obtained, the next step is the production of a job description and person specification. According to Wright and Storey a job description 'enables the recruiter to know exactly what the purpose, duties and responsibilities of the vacant position will be and its position within the organization structure' (1994: 195), but has the draw-backs of being time-consuming to compile, needing regular updating, and tending to constrain development in ways which may be detrimental to the recruiting organization. A person specification is drawn up to assist recruiters by identifying particular personal characteristics required by an appointee. A number of formats have been developed for person specifications, including Rodger's seven-point plan and Munro Fraser's five-point grading system. Stewart and Knowles (2000) found that 90 percent of respondents to a survey of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) on the recruitment of graduates used job descriptions as part of their recruitment process, but only 46 percent used person specifications.

The next stage in the recruitment process is for general agreement to be reached on the terms and conditions applicable to the position to be recruited. Wright and Storey pointed out that although in practice certain elements, such as hours and remuneration, are often negotiated in the latter stages of selection the prescriptive approach to recruitment requires the negotiating range to be clarified at this point. The degree to which terms are seen as negotiable is probably related to the seniority of the position being recruited for. Wright and Storey suggested that an indication of salary and benefits gives potential applicants a realistic indication of job suitability, whereas its absence may project an image of the recruiting organization as disorganized and may lead to the perception that they are exploiting the inequality of bargaining power in their favour at the interview stage.

Following on from reaching agreement over the terms and conditions to be offered for a position, a decision has to be made over whether to recruit internally or externally. This may be dependent on

the position being recruited, for example where a position has been subject to a succession planning process and successor has previously been identified and groomed, or it may hinge on organizational policy. Wright and Storey argued that policies of promotion from within, particularly in cases of flattened organizational structures, have possible benefits that include the promotion of a positive image to current employees, boosts to employee morale, and assistance in identifying those employees with a desire to further their careers within the organization. Schuler and Jackson (1989) pointed out however that such policies also commit the organization to providing appropriate training and career development opportunities for employees. In addition, Wright and Storey asserted that recruit from within policies might fall foul of both organization equal opportunities policies and equal opportunities legislation, as well as not necessarily identifying the best candidate for the job and leading to organizational introspection.

The next step typically prescribed in the recruitment process is to decide on target groups. This is determined to some degree by the person specification, for example where specific qualifications or periods of experience are seen as critical to the position. Wright and Storey suggested that in relation to 'positions where the possible source of suitable applicants is much wider (e.g. trainee positions requiring no previous experience, or those where there is no requirement for qualifications), opportunities exist to target potentially disadvantaged groups, for example long-term unemployed, the homeless, disabled people and ethnic minorities. This would project a caring and socially responsible image, with the possible benefit of high retention rates in the organization. Among other factors to be considered are the possible benefits of flexibility by targeting those willing to consider part-time or non-standard hours and/or temporary contracts' (1994: 200).

Once the target groups have been determined, a decision needs to be made about recruitment channels. According to Russo *et al* (1995) channels may be classified as either internal or external and as either formal or informal, with all channels having both advantages and disadvantages. An important consideration in the choice of recruitment channel is the possibility of unintentional indirect discrimination, for example by geographically limiting the placement of vacancies or by exclusively using employee referrals for recruitment. The recruitment communication must then be drafted, giving due consideration to the codes of practice issued by amongst others the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM). The inclusion of key information on terms and conditions may

influence the number and quality of applicants. Loretto, White and Duncan (2000) found that employees of a UK financial services organization ranked annual salary reviews with performance-related increases, job security, competitive salary, training opportunities and occupational pensions as the five factors most likely to influence their job choice. Wright and Storey emphasized that, whatever the actual content, the final communication 'must provide a screen that allows candidates to self-select out of the process if they feel they do not possess the attributes required by the person specification, whilst at the same time retaining and encouraging the interest of those with the potential to be suitable' (1994: 206).

Having placed the recruitment communication, the next stage in the process is typically responding to applicants. This stage has considerable impact on applicants' perceptions of the recruiting organization and so it is particularly important that any communication projects the desired image. The appropriate response will depend on what form an expression of interest was required to be in when the position was notified to potential applicants, and this in turn may influence the number of enquiries or applications received (Redman and Matthews, 1995; City Research Associates, 1988). It may simply have required those interested in further details to contact the recruiter. Mechanisms such as the sending of further information prior to application or the provision of an opportunity to discuss the position with a representative of the organization allow interested parties a further opportunity to self-select out of the recruitment process, thereby reducing the number of unsuitable applicants. Or it may have required a response in writing, such as a letter of application, a completed application form or a cv and covering letter. It has been shown (Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart, 1991) that delays in responding to applicants can cause some applicants to self-select out of the process on the basis of having secured employment elsewhere or perceptions of a lack of professionalism on the part of the recruiter.

The final stage of the process typically prescribed by authors is evaluation of the recruitment exercise to assess the validity and effectiveness of each of the previous steps. Wright and Storey (1994) listed a number of possible analyses based on evaluating the process itself, the various recruitment methods used and adherence to equal opportunities requirements.

Following on from, or in some views melded to the recruitment process, is the process of candidate selection. Langtry (1994) suggested that correct selection was 'critical to the organization's

success' and that poor or inappropriate candidate choices had negative consequences for organizations, their new employees and their existing workforces. Many selection methods exist. Robertson and Makin (1986) have grouped selection methods into three categories. The first contains methods that relate to past behaviour, such as biodata, references and peer group ratings. The second category consists of methods that focus on present behaviour, including personality tests, self-assessment exercises, work samples, repertory grids and handwriting analysis. The final category consists of selection methods that look at future behaviour, such as situational interviews and future biographies.

Langtry has argued that there is 'no single fail-proof method of selection' and that the use of multiple complementary methods is likely to be the key to success. Selection method effectiveness is often measured in terms of the 'evaluative standards' (Muchinsky, 1986) of fairness, cost, user-friendliness, acceptability to candidate and selectors, validity and reliability, and applicability. Cost should include not just direct costs, for example interviewer time, but also hidden costs such as the cost of selecting an inappropriate candidate. Validity is often broken down into three sub-types. Face validity 'refers to the feel or image of the test' (Langtry, 1994: 248), that is to say the degree to which it is perceived to be a valid test by both candidate and selector, and provides an indication of the likely acceptability of the selection method. Predictive or criterion validity is a measure of the ability of a selection method to predict subsequent job performance and to distinguish good performers from poor measured against specific criteria, most usually subsequent performance appraisal, promotion or rated potential for promotion, salary growth and so on. Content validity indicates the extent to which a selection method assesses a skill or ability relevant to the position being selected for.

There have been frequent attempts to measure the validity of different selection methods. Some authors have performed subsequent meta-analyses of individual studies in order to gauge method validity more accurately. Cook (1998) calculated average (corrected) method validity coefficients for different selection techniques based on data obtained from earlier meta-analyses and validity generalization analyses. These are reproduced in Table 7.1. Whilst giving a fair indication of the ranking of validity of different methods, it is necessary to remember that these are mean figures. More important than the mean value of validity coefficient is the range within which the 'true' validity coefficient might lie. It has been argued that sample size is critical to selection method

validity. From meta-analyses of studies published in three leading psychology journals from 1983 to 1994 Salgado (1998) noted that median sample sizes, whilst larger than those found by Lent, Auerbach and Levin (1971) for studies published between 1954 and 1969 and by Monahan and Muchinsky (1983) for studies appearing in Personnel Psychology between 1950 and 1979, remained small. As a result sampling error, as illustrated by the width of confidence intervals calculated for the validity coefficients in individual studies, continued to be the most important artifactual error for explaining the variability of validity coefficients.

Table 7.1 Average (corrected) method validity coefficients for different selection techniques

Selection method	Average (corrected) validity coefficient
Structured interview	0.53
Peer rating	0.49
Mental ability testing	0.45
Assessment centre	0.39
Biodata	0.36
Work sample	0.36
Unstructured interview	0.31
Education	0.25
References	0.22
Graphology	0

Source: Cook, 1998: 297.

Additionally, the validity of a selection method depends critically on the way in which it is performed. Inappropriate responses by the selector will affect the validity of the selection process. For example, recent research has questioned the use of assessment centres, previously thought to have had a relatively high validity coefficient, for selection purposes. A study by Garavan and Morley (1998) of an assessment centre used to select graduates for an Irish personal banking organization found 'low criterion validity and the existence of a significant exercise effect'. That is to say that the assessment centre in their study was found to be a poor predictor of subsequent job performance measured against the criterion of performance appraisal 12 months after appointment and that there was a marked tendency for assessors at the centre to rate candidates in terms of their overall performance for a given exercise rather than in terms of the individual traits or qualities that the exercise was designed to reveal. They argued that their findings gave rise to 'fundamental questions as to the value of the assessment centre as an approach to graduate selection. The reductions in error which the validity coefficients reported in this paper suggest are practically non-

existent and are no better than random selection. One must therefore question their utility in the selection process' (1998: 217).

Terpstra (1996) surveyed 200 human resource professionals working in US organizations with more than 200 employees. He asked them amongst other things to rate on scales of 1 to 5 the effectiveness of particular selection methods in terms of their ability to predict future job performance. The mean ratings are given in Table 7.2. It is interesting to compare the ratings for selection methods obtained by Terpstra with the validity coefficients found by academic studies. A quarter of the respondents suggested that they had carried out validation studies on their selection methods. The top-rated methods generally have relatively high validity coefficients in the literature (although c.f. Garavan and Morley, 1998, re assessment centres). Terpstra explained the ratings given to unstructured interviews and references in terms of their perceived versatility and ability gather richer applicant-related information than other selection techniques. He suggested that cognitive ability tests, personality tests, and biographical information blanks owed their low rating to their lack of face validity and consequent tendency to give rise to negative reactions from candidates.

Table 7.2 Mean effectiveness ratings of selection methods by US HR professionals on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = not good, 3 = average and 5 = extremely good)

Selection method	Mean effectiveness rating
Work samples	3.68
References/recommendations	3.49
Unstructured interviews	3.49
Structured interviews	3.42
Assessment centres	3.42
Specific aptitude tests	3.08
Personality tests	2.93
General cognitive ability tests	2.89
Biographical information blanks	2.84

Source: Terpstra, 1996: 17.

A number of studies have examined the popularity of different selection methods in Britain in particular contexts. For example, Robertson and Makin (1986) and Shackleton and Newell (1991) were both concerned with management recruitment and selection, the former in Britain and the latter comparing UK and French practices; Keenan (1995) looked at UK graduate recruitment and selection; and Foster, Wilkie and Moss (1996) examined the selection of staff by British

universities. Other studies (Bevan and Fryatt, 1988; Hodgkinson, Daley and Payne, 1995) have looked at British employers' selection practices more generally. Dany and Torchy (1994) compared practices across 12 western European countries, including the UK. Table 7.3 displays for comparative purposes the results of a number of studies. It should be noted that for the Makin and Robertson, Shackleton and Newell, and Bevan and Fryatt studies the figures quoted are of the percentage of respondents who indicated 'always' using a given selection method.

Table 7.3 Comparison of results of studies of selection methods used by British employers.

Selection method	Makin and Robertson (1986)	Shackleton and Newell (1991)	Keenan (1995)	Bevan and Fryatt (1988)	Dany and Torchy (1994)
Interviews	81.4	90.5	100*	82.2	71
Application forms	-	70.0	94	74.8	97
References	67.3	73.9	90**	38.7	92
Personality tests	4.0	9.6	***	0.7	
Cognitive/aptitude tests	5.2	12.3	***	0	45
Biodata	1.9	4.2		-	
Assessment centres	-	4.2	44	-	18

* 54 percent of respondents used screening interviews, whilst all respondents used interviews as part of the final selection process

** Although 90 percent of respondents took up references, only 21.9 percent of those took up references prior to final selection

*** Of those who used assessment centres, 80 percent included personality tests and 91 percent included aptitude tests. No figures were reported for respondents not using aptitude tests.

Shackleton and Newell compared their results with those found by Robertson and Makin five years earlier and noted that some changes in selection method preferences had occurred. Keenan noted the difference between the figures for use of assessment centres found by his study and the earlier study of UK managerial selection by Shackleton and Newell (1991). Nearly 25 percent of respondents in the latter study used assessment centres in selection for 50 percent or more of their managerial vacancies, although as stated above, only 4.2 percent used them for all managerial selection. According to Keenan, it was unclear whether this difference indicated 'a real tendency for assessment centres to be more popular for graduate recruitment as opposed to recruitment of managers in general or whether it is due to a slight difference in how the term 'assessment centre' was defined in the two studies' (1995: 315).

Comparing Bevan and Fryatt's results with those of Shackleton and Newell leads to the conclusion that tests of personality and aptitude have perhaps been seen as unnecessary or unjustifiable on grounds such as cost for non-managerial positions. Bevan and Fryatt appear to indicate lower levels of use of interviews and references, although if respondents indicating use of these methods for 'most' vacancies are also included for each study, the figures are similar. The figures found in later studies of UK selection practices appear to show rising general use of assessment centres and aptitude tests, but the so-called 'classic trio' (Cook, 1998) of application form, references and interview have been and remain the preferred selection techniques in Britain. When other selection methods are used in combination with these they are frequently given less weight. For example, in a study of organizations using behavioural interviews, Barclay (2001) found that nearly a third relied entirely on interviews to reach selection decisions. Although 65 percent of respondents also used tests and/or assessment centres, 75 percent of that group weighted the interview more highly than either test or assessment centre results.

There is evidence to suggest that the choice of recruitment and selection methods may be influenced by factors external to the recruiting organization. For example, Koch and Hundley (1997) found that that unionization affected the extent and patterns of use of recruitment and selection methods for both union and non-union positions in American firms. Unionisation tended to produce a more limited use of recruitment sources, which they explained in terms of the greater attraction of positions in unionized firms due to higher wages resulting in a larger number of applicants without the need to invest in more expensive recruitment media. In terms of selection methods, unionism was seen to be associated with greater use of physical examinations and drugs tests, but decreased use of skill and aptitude tests. This was explained in terms of union resistance to the use of formal selection procedures that 'might help management to break down the collective identity among workers' (1997: 368).

7.3 Recruitment and selection for call centre positions

The previous section looked briefly at 'standard' recruitment procedures as prescribed by management texts and generally adhered to by human resources departments when recruiting. It considered various selection techniques in terms of both estimates of their validity and evidence of their popularity. This section suggests that the recruitment procedures used and selection methods

employed to staff many call centres differ in important respects from the 'standard' practices identified in the last section. Support for this contention is provided by the results of survey of Scottish employment and recruitment agencies exploring their relationship with Scottish call centres. Subsequent interviews with senior employment agency personnel and current and former call centre employees and fieldwork notes and comment from a period of participant observation at a call centre add fine detail to the picture provided by the survey results.

Before examining the survey, it is worth considering what reasons there might be to suppose that call centres would have recruitment and selection procedures that differed from those used in other employment contexts. First, call centres have not tended to develop organically, that is to say following the gradual expansion and growth patterns of many more established businesses. Call centre start-ups often involve large numbers of employees from day one. It might be anticipated that mass recruitment and selection would produce demands not experienced during phases of in-fill recruitment or slower business expansion. There is also an increased possibility in such circumstances that the call centre operator does not recruit themselves but engages a third party for this purpose. Second, recruitment procedures might have to be adjusted to take into account the fact that call centres are a relatively new form of employment. Because of this it is unlikely that there would be a pool of experienced labour from which recruiters could attract applicants, and it would therefore be necessary for the recruitment message to include additional detail explaining the type of work to potential applicants.

Third, and following on from the last point, the mode of application for call centre positions might well be different because the types of information normally contained on standard application forms or curriculum vitae, such as biographical information, previous employment experiences and academic qualifications, do not necessarily give an indication of candidate suitability for call centre employment with its particular demands in terms of skill sets. Fourth, the selection methods used to assess candidates for call centres may differ from those used for other types of employment because of the peculiarities of the job. For example, the skill sets required for call centre employment are not generally assessed by existing formal qualifications, so testing for specific competences may be a desirable part of the selection process. Face-to-face interviews, for many organizations a primary selection method for other positions, may have less relevance because call centre employees are not generally a visible part of an organization. Telephone interviews on the

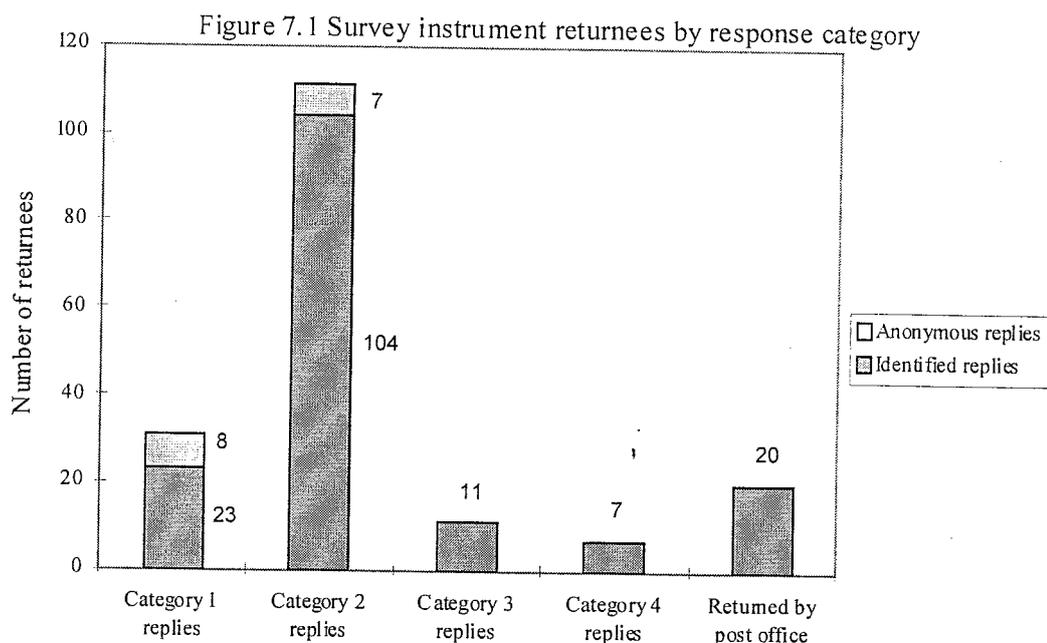
other hand assume a far greater relevance because they provide an opportunity to assess the vocal qualities of the candidate independent of the non-verbal communication that takes place at a face-to-face interview.

7.3.1 The survey

The survey took the form of a postal survey of the involvement of employment agencies based in Scotland in the telephone call centre industry. The survey sample was constructed in May 1997 using BT Yellow Pages telephone directories covering the Scotland area. There were 7 such directories that between them covered the whole of Scotland. All of the directories used to compile the survey sample were 1996/7 editions with the exception of the South West Scotland Yellow Pages that was a 1997/8 edition. The survey sample was composed of selected entrants in the 'Employment agencies and consultants' sections of the directories. All organizations appearing under this heading were selected for the survey sample unless the directory entry indicated that the organization catered specifically for an industry not likely to be allied to the telephone call centre industry in any way, for example the oil drilling industry. Branches of the same employment agency in different locations were treated as separate organizations for the purpose of the survey. This produced a sample size of 336 organizations. In June 1997 each organization in the survey sample was sent a short questionnaire, covering letter and pre-paid return envelope. No cut off date was specified for the return of completed questionnaires. By 21 July 1997, eight weeks after the questionnaires had been sent out, a total of 180 (53.6 %) had been returned. This could be considered a high response rate for a survey instrument of this type. The bulk of the responses were received within 10 days of the start of the survey.

The first item of information collected by the survey instrument, contained on a separate front sheet, related to whether or not the organization had had any involvement with the telephone call centre industry. Organizations were invited to indicate the nature of their response by means of ticking one of four option boxes. The purpose of this sheet was to encourage responses from organizations for which the main questionnaire might have no relevance by enabling them to supply a single but important piece of data without having to work through the questionnaire itself. It was felt that the four options offered on the front sheet would help to maximise the number of responses received.

Figure 7.1 shows the numbers of responses falling into each of the front sheet response categories, with anonymous and identifiable responses shown separately. The survey instrument was not marked in any way to enable responses to be attributed to organizations unless the organizational information requested by the front sheet was given. In retrospect this was a mistake, as a number of anonymous returns were subsequently received. An additional category is also included, that of replies returned by the post office. The size of this category may say something about the rate of attrition within the employment agency industry, since it might be expected that organizations that had simply moved rather than ceased to trade would leave forwarding addresses.



Category Key

- Category 1 response: Agency unable to help at this time
 - Category 2 response: Agency has had no call centre industry clients as yet
 - Category 3 response: Agency has returned completed questionnaire
 - Category 4 response: Agency has completed questionnaire and agreed to interview
-

Category 1 responses are interesting. The logic behind the front sheet was that organizations who selected this option would actually be working with call centre industry clients, because for organizations who were not doing so it would be just as easy to tick the category 2 box and say that they would like to help but couldn't. It was hoped that the wording of the available responses would also encourage this to happen, with the category 2 response deliberately worded to be more satisfying to and to promote a better perception of the image of the responding organization. Whilst

it would be wrong to place too great a reliance on this line of argument, and there might be many reasons why a person would tick category 1 when category 2 response was equally applicable, the relatively large number of category 1 responses does perhaps suggest a greater involvement in the telephone call centre industry by respondents than is indicated purely by the numbers of category 3 and 4 responses.

Although 7 agencies ticked the category 4 response, follow-up interviews were in the end only carried out with three agencies. The remaining agencies either subsequently withdrew their offer or were unable to make a representative available during the period in which interviews were conducted. Of the interviewees Gordon, Business Manager based at the Glasgow office, spoke on behalf of agency I, a Scottish based employment agency with multiple offices across Scotland; Jacqui, a managing director based at the Edinburgh office, answered for agency K, a Scottish agency with UK-wide partners; and Linda, the owner, represented agency R, a single office agency based outside of Scotland's central belt.

7.3.2 Questions and answers

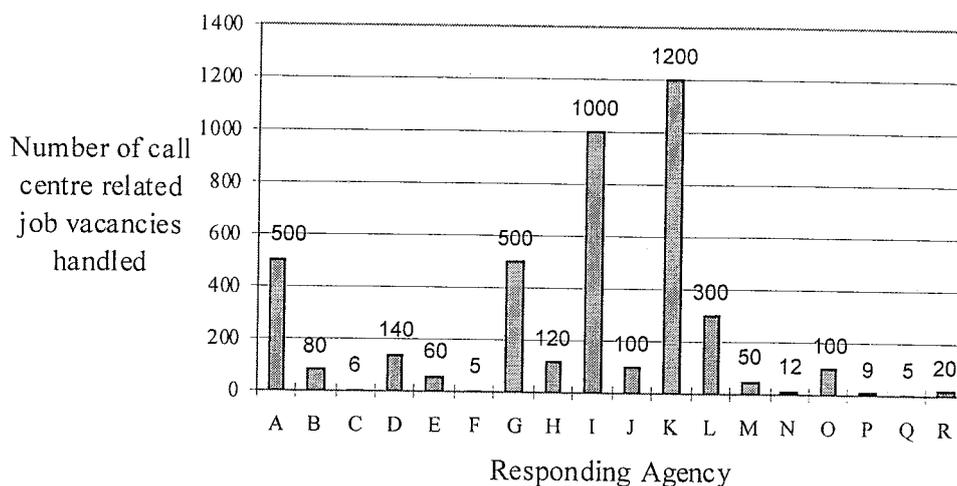
The total number of respondents in Category 3 or 4 of the front sheet was 18. Each of these respondents filled in at least part of the questionnaire, although not all respondents completed all questions. The first questionnaire item related to the number of telephone call centre related jobs handled in the last 12 months. There were 18 responses to this question. The responding agencies had handled a total of 4207 call centre related vacancies in the year to June 1997, a mean average of 233 vacancies per organization. Figure 7.2 shows the actual numbers handled by each of the responding agencies.

Agencies agreeing to be interviewed were asked what proportion of the call centre vacancies dealt with in the previous twelve months had been in connection with the setting-up of call centres and what proportion had been the result of dealing with ongoing staff turnover for call centre clients. According to Linda the 20 vacancies dealt with by agency R had been an initial mix, but subsequently all were staff turnover related. Both Jacqui and Gordon indicated that considerable numbers were turnover-related, nearly 500 employees in the case of agency K and up to 850 employees in the case of agency I, the majority of those from a single organization:

Jacqui: 'Um. Hmm, let me think. Probably 50% were an increase in people at UtilityCo. Increasing. Um, and a small proportion was increasing the numbers at TelCo, a small proportion. But I would say that at least 40%, *at least*, were staff turnover. It might even be higher'.

Gordon: 'Er, its dominated by one large client which is ongoing replacement and replenishment coupled with some expansion of their operation. So new set-ups is probably only, I would guess, maybe 15 percent, something like that, of those jobs'.

Figure 7.2 Call centre related job vacancies handled by responding agencies in the 12 months to June 1997 (Number of responses = 18, total number of job vacancies handled = 4,207)



On the question of whether there would be any differences in their agency's approach if the brief was for a call centre start-up project as opposed to supplying replacements following employee turnover, all three interviewees suggested that there would for them be no difference. Whilst making essentially the same point, the different responses from Gordon and Linda appear to illustrate the differences in scale of the two agencies. In considering the position of other, unnamed agencies Jacqui's reponse highlights the difficulties faced by some agencies because of the large initial size of some call centres:

Linda: 'No. Just the same people. The idea is to put the people in at the beginning who match the job, and from there on its the same thing. If we don't, somebody else will. And you can't, you don't get second chances at this job unfortunately'.

Gordon: 'From a recruitment point of view no because you have a specification which has to be met whether it's a replacement job or a new job. More on the HR consultancy side, then yes. If it's a new set-up then there is no recruitment process in place and you're probably developing that alongside. If it's a high turnover situation again you are looking at the job specification and looking from an HR point of view, but the recruitment requirement is essentially the same'.

Jacqui: 'Well, for me personally there wouldn't be any. For other agencies I know its a bit bums on seats at the start-up point, and I'm not making a judgment on them. It's because there is so

much pressure on them to put in 'X' amount of people incredibly quickly. The expectations are probably unrealistic. Er, but, for me personally.... This is my worry, you see. All you have in this business is your reputation, and the more people you deal with on a temporary, in a temporary capacity, the more enemies you can make. The more can go wrong, and the more can dilute your reputation. And you know I, I... If I had a request from a greenfield site saying we want 300 people in 6 weeks time I would have to really debate whether I want that business. I'd really... I'd have a struggle'.

The interviewees were asked how the figures that they had given for numbers of call centre vacancies handled in the year to June 1997 compared with the twelve months preceding it. Jacqui (agency K) interrupted the question to suggest that the figure of 1,200 positions that the agency had indicated for the year to June 1997 was probably inaccurate and that the agency had 'probably dealt with more than that, because the attrition rate in UtilityCo was so high at one time. You know... (laughs)'. Gordon (agency I) replied that it was 'difficult to say because a lot of that includes temporary staffing, which is very volatile and is at the behest of our customers. I would probably guess that it's slightly higher than last year, just imagining the additional customers which we've had this year over last year from the call centre industry'. Linda (agency R) felt that numbers had been approximately similar to the previous year.

Speculating about the following twelve months, only Gordon felt positive about the likelihood of increasing numbers of call centre related vacancies. Jacqui was unsure, suggesting that the agency would 'have to review our strategy, especially in Edinburgh, as to, you know... going... are we going to make a real... make it really part of our strategy to go after other call centres in Edinburgh? Um, I... our call centre activity in Glasgow I think has probably reached a sort of plateau. Um. TelCo is growing. Our business there is increasing. Um, and RetailBank is under review at the moment. I mean, the [England-based part of the agency] had a huge part of the contract, but I don't know if they've got Scotland. Um, AssureCo is firmly with us, but its not a large centre, and PowerCo is a very sort of up and down type arrangement. We do different types of things. Um, so the answer is I don't know'.

Linda also had doubts, but these related more to the increasing intensity of competition in the employment agency sector, rather than to call centres as such. Her concern became evident when she was asked whether she thought the number of call centre positions handled by her agency would increase over the following year:

Linda: 'I would like to think so, but the problem we are up against at the moment is that the nationals are also in. Because they're nationals, they can cut their margins very much. Um,

they don't think twice about cutting their margins right down, because they know there's other offices can carry them, and I can't afford to do that.

Interviewer: Right.

Linda: And I'm a great believer that if you pay peanuts you get monkeys. So I will not do that.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Linda: And I might be very wrong, but I won't do it. It's paid dividends in the past and I think that it'll pay dividends again.

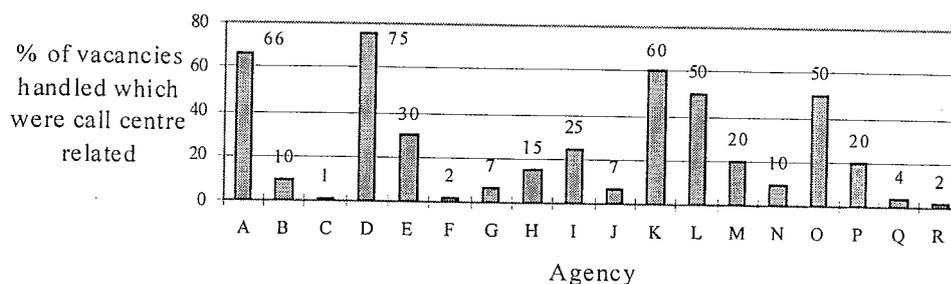
Interviewees were asked approximately what proportion of the call centre positions they had handled in the previous year were for temporary positions and what proportion were for non-standard working hours. All three interviewees indicated that a high proportion were, at least initially, temporary positions but that prospects for longer term employment tended to be good. Jacqui suggested that 95 percent of the call centre related vacancies dealt with by agency K, which equates to over 1,100 positions, would have been temporary. She added that some of those would have had the opportunity to become permanent or going on to contract, but did not specify what proportion. Gordon talked again about agency I's main call centre client, whose strategy was to use current temporary employees to back-fill permanent places as they became available, meaning that replacements would initially be temporary. Seventy percent, or around 700, of the call centre vacancies handled by agency I would be temporary. Linda replied that 95 percent of agency R's positions had been 'temporary to permanent', arguing that this had benefits for both clients and potential employees: 'I think it gives everybody a chance to just see what's going on. It allows the client to see how the individual works, and it allows the individual to see how the client works. If it doesn't work in that period of time, and there is something not right, then they don't have to accept the position'.

According to the interviewees the vast majority of call centre vacancies involved non-standard working hours, that is to say that they were not 9am to 5pm, five days per week. Jacqui said that 98 percent of agency K's vacancies were non-standard. She explained that in many cases people 'are employed between say 8 and 8, and you are told what hours you will work between 8 and 8... And quite a large proportion of them are part time'. Linda replied simply that 'Call centres are never standard working hours, unfortunately... It would be very nice, but in this, the real world, it doesn't happen I'm afraid'. Gordon admitted that he would be guessing, but suggested that around 80

percent of agency I's vacancies were 'either part-time or spread over maybe until 6 or some weekend work'.

The second item on the questionnaire sought to establish to what extent the agency appeared to be specialising in telephone call centre related work, and asked the respondent to express the number of call centre related vacancies handled in the previous 12 months as a percentage of the agency's total job vacancies handled. There were 18 responses to this question, illustrated by Figure 7.3.

Figure 7.3 Call centre related job vacancies as a percentage of all job vacancies handled by responding agencies in the 12 months to June 1997



The mean average of responses was 25%, although for five respondents call centre related vacancies represented fifty percent or more of their total vacancies handled.

There are dangers for an agency in being too closely associated with the provision of particular services or to particular types of client. As part of a response to a question not directly on this point Jacqui, speaking for agency K, said that she did not 'want to be seen as a call centre specialist'. She explained that this was because she did not want 'to be boxed in. I don't want, I mean, for example, this is how people see you. InstitutionOrg - we put temps in there on an *ad hoc* basis with them all the time. But we've done two contracts for them so far this year to date. One of them was computerising their human resource department, and we had 10 people in there for 3 months. And the other one was in our call centre upstairs where we were tele-sifting for employees. And I had a long, long meeting with one of their procurement officers about [our executive recruitment section], because I know they do, they outsource their managerial recruitment. And it didn't matter what I said - I mean I overcame every objection. He still said he saw us as a general temporary recruitment agency'.

The interviewees were asked how their agency's involvement with call centres began. For agency R the association with call centres began around the beginning of 1995 as the result of work for a call centre client who had just established in the area. For agency I it began in 1989 when they were recommended to a company looking to set up a new call centre operation by inward investment agencies. Gordon explained that agency I 'helped to find their management team, having been introduced as a potential supplier by the development agencies who were trying to encourage them to come to Scotland. They then asked us if we would help them to identify the first group of call centre operators. We discussed the kinds of jobs that they would have to do. We looked around at what skills were available in the marketplace, and hired some of these people. That was our introduction to call centres. We didn't know at that time how big the industry was, but that was the start of it'.

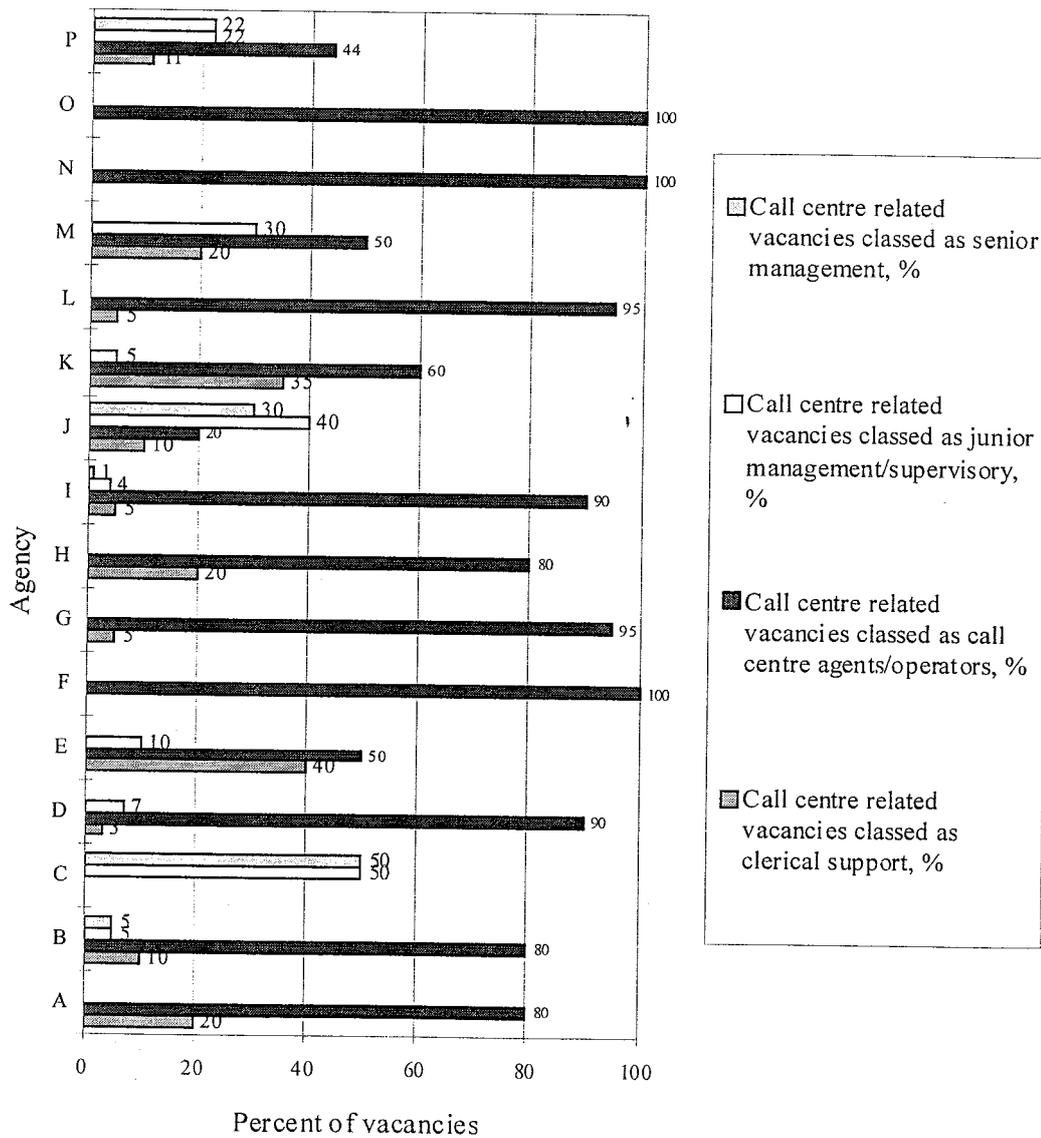
For agency K, the introduction to call centres came as a result of linking up with new partners based in England eighteen months prior to the interview. Jacqui admitted that agency K 'had no previous experience of call centres at all. Our partners are huge in call centres, massive. They run about 12,000 temps every week, and probably 60% of them are call centres. Huge suppliers to EnergyCo and TelCo. Massive. And to people like ComputerCo. Anyway... oh no, not ComputerCo, MobileCo. Sorry. Um, but loads of others. You know. Um, we took over UtilityCo in Edinburgh and that was our first introduction'.

The purpose of the third item in the questionnaire was to establish at what hierarchical levels agencies were being involved in the recruitment process. Five job classifications were offered and agencies were invited to indicate what percentage of the vacancies they had handled in the last 12 months fell into each of these categories. None of the agencies that responded had dealt with vacancies at a non-clerical support level, for example for cleaning or catering services and so on. Figure 7.4 below shows the breakdown of job vacancies handled by job classification for each of the responding agencies. From these data it is clear that for most employment agencies most of the call centre vacancies handled are for agent or operator level employees.

From published accounts of call centres it was clear that the majority of jobs within a telephone call centre were at the level of agent, that is to say the person who interfaces with the customer via the telephone. Questions four and five of the questionnaire were accordingly targeted specifically at

this level of vacancy. In question four, agencies were asked how many applications they might typically receive for a vacancy offered at this level. There were 14 responses to this question. Answers ranged from a minimum of 5 applications per vacancy to a maximum of 150 applications, with a mean average of 30 applications per operator level vacancy. These figures might suggest that relatively large segments of the local labour markets believed themselves suitably qualified for this type of employment.

Figure 7.4 Percentages of vacancies handled by responding agencies by job classification



Item five on the questionnaire asked the agencies to compare this figure to the number of applications received per vacancy for jobs which might be classed as clerical / administrative vacancies and which offered similar terms and remuneration to the call centre agent jobs. Of the 12 agencies who felt able to offer an opinion on this question, only one agency believed that call centre vacancies attracted less applicants than similar clerical vacancies; seven agencies thought that the number of applications were about the same in each case: and four agencies said that more applications were received for telephone call centre vacancies.

Several explanations might be advanced for the instances where applications for call centre vacancies outnumbered those for clerical positions with similar terms and conditions. There is the possibility that, in some locations at least, the newer form of work offered by telephone call centres might be considered more attractive by applicants than more traditional forms of white collar employment, perhaps because the former is perceived as offering better promotional prospects than the latter. Alternatively, it is possible that skills and attributes needed by call centre employees are generally not yet as well understood by the labour market as the requirements and qualifications for other white collar work and it is thus perceived as suitable employment by larger numbers of applicants.

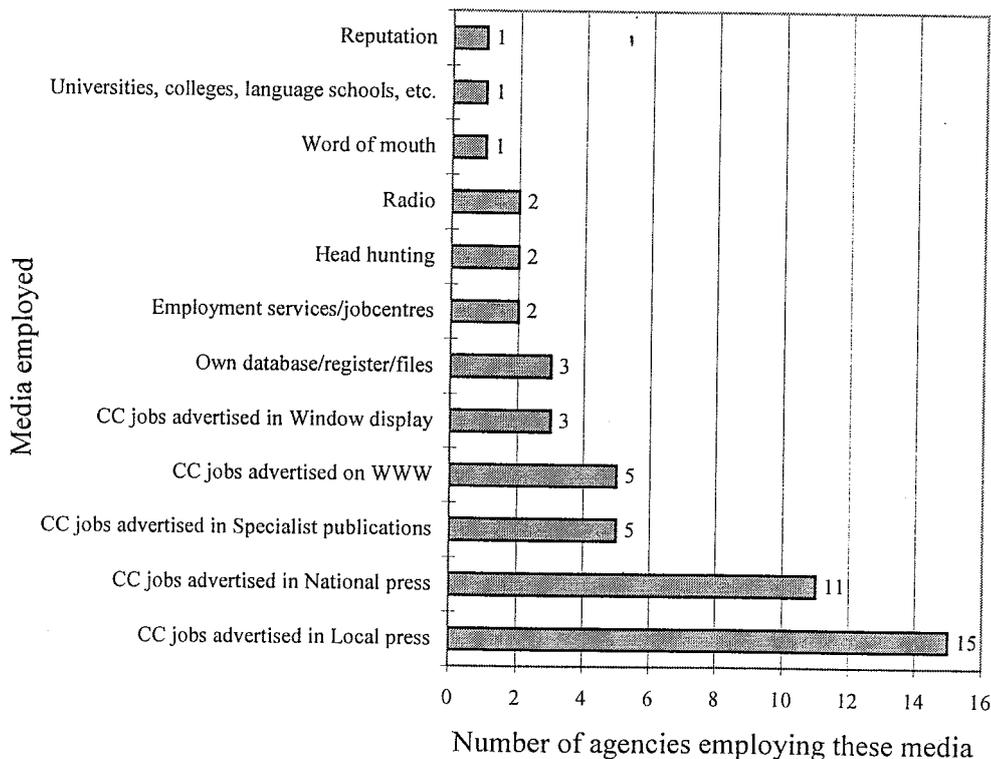
Responding to the questionnaire, agency K said that it received approximately 15 applicants for every call centre position and that that was less than for comparable clerical positions. When asked why she thought that might be the case Jacqui replied 'um...probably because we want many more applicants (laughs). Um, I think probably because people need to be educated about call centres. Um, I think the more people become aware of them, the more applicants there will be. And its still, in the working world, most people veer towards straight forward, known clerical type things'. Agency R found that they received about the same number of applications, in general, for call centre vacancies as for clerical vacancies with similar terms and conditions. Linda admitted that this had initially surprised her 'until I sent down and sort of analyzed a lot of them, and then I realized that the more clerical orientated requests or applicants that came in did not fully understand what a call centre was doing. Um, there's two type, two types of person who applies to a clerical ad. One, which is the old school and think clerical work is hands-on; 'right, clerical work, nae bother!' You will also find somebody who thinks clerical work is data entry work. So, you hit the different types. I think a lot depends on the actual age group that's applying'.

Item six of the questionnaire invited agencies to indicate the methods they employed to advertise call centre related job vacancies. A number of tick box options were given and agencies were also requested to detail any methods they used which were not listed in the tick box section. Figure 7.5 illustrates the range and popularity of the various methods employed by the agencies.

The three interviewees were asked about how they made their choice of media for the recruitment message. Responding to the questionnaire, agency K had indicated use of national and local press, window displays and radio. Jacqui explained the difficulties:

‘Um, well, I suppose we’ve gone... in fact we did buses and all sorts of other things in Glasgow. I suppose we’ve gone to the traditional, to the press, and we would have advertised the Evening News, the Scotsman and the Lothian Courier - same in Glasgow. Not got the response, because you actually need huge numbers because you select so many out. And then gone to the radio as a last resort. However we’ve done, we have on occasions done some very large advertisements. We did a half page in the Scotsman at one time, and so we’ve done large advertising. Its very expensive advertising call centre work’.

Figure 7.5 Media used by agencies to publicise call centre related job vacancies (Data from 18 responding agencies, agencies used multiple media)



When asked about whether the agency had considered the Internet or specialist publications in relation to call centre recruitment, Jacqui stated that they had not ‘because the kind of people that

you are trying to encourage into call centres probably do not have access to the Internet or to specialist publications'. A follow-up question asking whether such media had been considered in relation to the junior to middle call centre management posts handled by the agency also met with a negative response, but different in tone, with Jacqui suggesting that the agency 'probably haven't needed to'.

In their questionnaire response, agency R had indicated using only local press and the agency's own paper database to find suitable candidates for call centre vacancies. According to Linda, this was because the city's own newspaper was superior in that it had six editions per week whereas the Record, a national newspaper, only ran a jobs section in one edition per week, but also the local newspaper accessed only the local labour pool. Linda explained the importance of this last point:

Linda: 'If we advertise further afield in the likes of the Record, or the Sun, or some of these papers, you'll get mainly from the west coast. Why, I don't know. The majority of them are all, I would say, Glasgow in very big inverted commas. Glasgow area. They're definitely nearer the Glasgow area than they are ours.'

Interviewer: And that causes problems?

Linda: Yes, well yes. I know it sounds nasty, I don't mean it to sound nasty. It really is a waste of time, because call centre work is a limited working hour in the day. It's not worth the time to travel. They would spend as much time travelling as they would actually doing the job, and you can't afford to pay their travelling time'.

Although agency R had declined to answer the questionnaire item that asked for a hierarchical breakdown of call centre positions handled in the previous twelve months, Linda indicated that in the case of junior to middle call centre management positions she might also consult the local Chamber of Commerce, who had 'quite a good register for that sort of person', in her search for suitable candidates.

In response to the questionnaire, agency I had indicated use of multiple media to deliver the recruitment message. Gordon suggested that the choice was determined by a variety of competing factors, including the assignment budget, the location of the vacancies and the degree of competition at the time of the vacancies for similar types of staff. The choice of media used by the agency did not include specialist press. When asked if he could explain this, Gordon suggested that he suspected it was 'because the call centre employees are not likely to have come from any one targeted occupational or interest background, so - that is the only reason for using specialist press in any other type of recruitment. Where they have these skills then you target applications already

in the area, but there's no such a thing in the call centre industry. There are a couple of call centre magazines but those have developed through the management, rather than through the ordinary workers'.

When viewed as a group, the responses of the interviewees to questions on the choice of recruitment media offer insight into who is viewed as a potential call centre employee and why. Although it must be remembered that the interviews took place in October 1997 and that home computer ownership and internet access have increased significantly since then, the comment made by Jacqui is suggestive of a belief that the 'kind of people' the agency was trying to encourage into call centres were generally those in lower income brackets. This may be because the remuneration offered by call centres would not attract those used to a more substantial income. The limitation imposed by remuneration was brought into focus by Linda's comments on the need to keep recruitment within a local radius. Gordon's comment about the heterogeneity of call centre employees in terms of background highlighted the difficulties faced by the agencies in trying to target their recruitment efforts, a point also picked up on by Jacqui.

The agency-client relationship was not something that, it was felt, could be addressed in its entirety by the survey instrument. Instead, item seven on the questionnaire sought to shed light on a single important facet of this relationship. By asking who determined the techniques used to filter and select job applicants, the agencies or the clients, it was felt that an insight might be provided as to the nature of the power balance within the relationship. It was hypothesized that experience and knowledge of the telephone call centre industry were likely to have a bearing on the relationship. If the client had had previous experience within the industry and was using the services of the agency as a matter of expediency, then it might be expected that the client would be able to and would want to dictate the manner in which work is to be carried out on their behalf. If, on the other hand, the client had had no previous experience of the call centre industry, their purpose in engaging an agency might be to use the agency's experience as a means of acquiring knowledge of the industry. It was hypothesized that the relationship in such a case would be more collaborative in nature, with the client not only purchasing the agency's expertise in filling job vacancies, but also buying access to knowledge which they might hope in the lifetime of the relationship to transfer to themselves.

There were 18 responses to this question. Of these, the vast majority (15) suggested that the arrangement was collaborative in nature in that the agency and client together decided on filtering and selection techniques. Two agencies suggested that they alone decided such issues. One agency said that the situation varied with different clients. If the dynamics of the relationship had been correctly hypothesized, such data would be interpreted as meaning that in most cases agencies were being used when the client's knowledge of either the industry or the local labour market was not such as to allow them to dictate requirements to the agency.

The question of employment agency-client relationships was explored further with the interviewees. They were asked in general terms whether there were particular times when organizations called on the services of employment agencies. A number of instances were identified, including; giving clients workforce flexibility by providing temporary cover for absent staff or providing temporary employees for specific projects; providing services that do not exist in-house, either because of the size of the client organization, or because the client has lost the necessary expertise following downsizing, or because the client's human resources function has been entirely outsourced; handling recruitment and selection for positions that are difficult or time-consuming to fill; and 'any major expansion when there's a dramatic headcount increase required'. Linda expanded on the concept of flexibility, suggesting that it encompassed situations where clients 'know they're going to do something and need X amount of people to do it, but once that project is complete they don't need those people. If they recruit them themselves they can land themselves with a lot of employment um, legislation, that is an extra on-cost to themselves. They can't just take somebody on their books and then say "Bye. I don't want to know you". So it's easy to say 'Right, we'll get somebody from an agency or people from an agency and once the job is complete they then go back to the agency, and its the agency's problem to find them something else'.

All of the interviewees suggested that their agencies were proactive in terms of generating clients. The approaches taken varied little, with the initial contacts with clients generally coming in the form of literature about the agency and its capabilities and personal visits to prospective clients by agency consultants. Gordon summed up the procedure, saying that 'in most cases the actual invitation to, to fill a position will come from the client in terms of them saying "Well, I now have a vacancy" but the initial step in terms of introducing employment agencies has probably come

from the agencies themselves and at that point its really a case of improving the relationship and contact with the client so that they remember and are aware of any other issues to be clarified'. All the interviewees agreed that personal networks were critical to the success of an agency, suggesting that clients would often follow individual consultants when they changed agency.

Asked whether the process of attracting call centre clients differed in any way from that of attracting other, non-call centre clients, Gordon replied that 'probably the only difference has been the amount of start-ups recently. And just by its very nature in the call centre industry even established indigenous firms have set up separate centres. So that brings with it very a large recruitment requirement, a requirement for probably large numbers of people to be recruited quickly and the approach for that kind of client would be different than someone who has an ongoing need for recruitment, but just in ones and twos. So its not so much the recruitment as just the way the industry has grown, which is different from manufacturing'.

It was also suggested both by Jacqui and Linda that gender might play a part in the success of any approach or tender for work. Responding to a question on whether the process of attracting call centre clients differed from that of attracting clients from other employment sectors, Jacqui said that it was 'because its dog eat dog and, you know, the big, the real big boys are after it... um... and boys not women'. Asked whether she felt that call centres were male-dominated, she replied 'Yes. I would say the call centre environment is. I mean there are a lot of women in them, and there are women at quite senior positions, but the top posts tend to be male. Um, its ah... it's mostly contracts, although bit by bit we are making inroads into call centres where we don't have contracts'. The implication is that Jacqui felt that the coincidence of work being negotiated on an agency contract basis and contracts being negotiated by males had made it more difficult for her as the head of her agency to secure call centre clients.

Linda's assertion of gender-based discrimination from prospective call centre clients came when, in discussing dealings with prospective call centre clients, she suggested a need to be 'very delicate'. When asked why, she replied 'dare I say it 'If the face doesn't fit...'. There is one particular person that, unless its trousers that goes to visit them, you've got a real job trying to get hold of them. Now, to me, um, that's all very well, but there's an awful lot of bodies running around in trousers and – dare I say – they're not female. Know what I mean? Um, nice white teeth and nice flashing

smile and a trip down the pub can work wonders, but it doesn't give you what you're looking for. It's not something I would ever get involved in. I refuse point-blank to do business like that. If that's the way it's got, they can keep it. I would prefer get it honestly or not at all'.

Although the comments were made in the context of an interview concerning their agency's relationship with call centres, it seems likely that Jacqui and Linda's comments were an expression of their dissatisfaction with more widely encountered gender bias in their work. It is also possible that the gender of the interviewer significantly influenced their willingness to give form to their frustrations. Both interviewees appeared to check with the interviewer for common experience, Jacqui by using the phrase 'you know,' and Linda by asking 'Know what I mean?' in the midst of their respective comments.

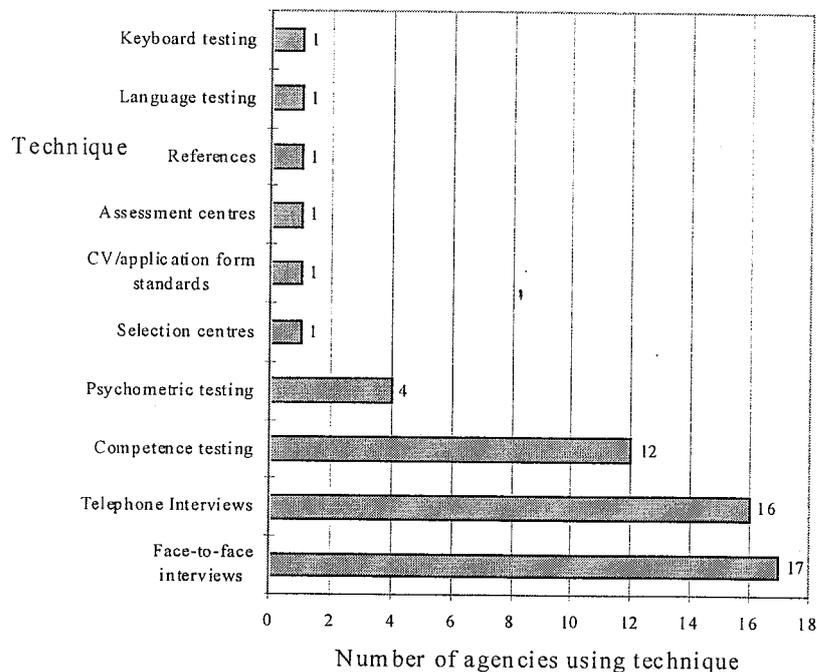
The final item on the questionnaire asked agencies to indicate what techniques they might typically use to filter and select applicants for call centre agent level vacancies. A number of tick box options were given, together with an invitation to list techniques used by the agency that had not otherwise been listed. Figure 7.6 below illustrates the range and popularity of the various techniques used. It is possible that the more specific category of keyboard testing mentioned by one respondent was for other respondents subsumed in the more general category of competence testing.

Agency K said in response to the questionnaire that they would typically use telephone and face-to-face interviews and competence testing in filtering and selecting applicants for call centre positions. According to Jacqui, the first of these would be what she termed 'a competency based telephone interview'. She explained the purpose of this carefully scripted interview as two-fold. It was to assess qualities such as politeness, voice clarity and persuasiveness, but also 'you are also going to be finding out, um, how available that person is. You're going to be making sure that they can supply you with two references. Um, and in the case of TelCo, 5 years' references. Um, you're looking for, to see if they will work the particular hourly rate, whatever it is for that job, and you're looking to see if they've got the necessary basic skills. Um, most of the call centres you want VDU skills'.

Telephone interviews were likely to follow on immediately from a potential applicant's initial expression of interest and feedback from the interview would be equally immediate. Jacqui

suggested that as a telephone interviewer for agency K 'you will say, um, after you've discovered what media they responded to, you will then say 'I'm now going to do a telephone interview with you, which will take about 10 minutes. Have you got the time now?' And you will go through it. And if, at the end of all that, the person doesn't have all the criteria you say 'I'm very sorry but unfortunately you don't have all the necessary criteria'. If the candidate was deemed to have met the criteria assessed by the telephone interview, they would be invited to the agency to undergo a 'skills evaluation' followed by a face-to-face interview, and finally what Jacqui described as 'an assessment centre'.

Figure 7.6 Techniques used by employment agencies to filter and select applicants for call centre agent/operator level job vacancies (Responses from 18 agencies, agencies used multiple techniques)



According to Jacqui the skills evaluation had in the past contained both numerical and audiovisual components, but was due to change as the agency was 'just about to possess a new software package which will evaluate more intensely; it will identify weaknesses and then we'll be able to train people to overcome those weaknesses'. Successful completion of the skills evaluation would lead to 'a full competency interview. That is looking for, I suppose, general business acumen, communication skills, decision making, planning, um, team work. And they will be - they are

asked questions. If they come through that, they will then go to an assessment centre and within the assessment centre they will, generally between 8 and 10 people maximum, they will be given a case study where they will have to work as a team to discuss, and then they will have to present it. And they are given 20 minutes to do the work, 5 minutes to present. And in that you are looking for influencing skills, you are looking for reasoning, listening, questioning, um, communication, teamwork again. You are looking for a variety of things. And if they come through that, they're in!

Although that is the end of the selection process from the agency's point of view, Jacqui suggested that some call centres also required successful applicants to undergo a procedure with elements similar to realistic job previews and induction procedures that she termed 'familiarization'. She explained 'TelCo for example, we're recruiting for TelCo, who do a presentation on what their expectations are. Er, they have a user guide. They are, um, told exactly what the domestic code of conduct is about absenteeism. They are told there is a focus, a focus on absenteeism. They are told that when they are absent they will have a meeting with us. Um, they are told they needn't think about fraud because they are monitored - you've no idea of the fraud! They are monitored (laughs) all the time. Um, and they're also told, you know, the good things! And then they will be taken around TelCo. UtilityCo, it's the same with them'.

A number of points can be drawn from Jacqui's description of the familiarization process. In the case of agency K, no part of the recruitment or selection processes is carried out by the call centre operator, nor are successful candidates employed directly by them. The selected candidates are employed by the agency and used to provide call centre operators with numerical flexibility. This practice, though not universal, is widespread and seems to have been accepted as a necessity in many call centres. Call centres may thus provide an example of the flexible firm model discussed in chapter 2. It is clear from the presentation of the client call centre's expectations prior to the commencement of a placement that agency employees are expected to behave as though they are employees of the client and to meet their requirement in terms of dress, conduct and so on. The tensions that may arise in the workplace as a result of this are discussed in the chapters below.

In common with agency K, agency I's battery of selection techniques for call centre vacancies typically included telephone and face-to-face interviews and competence testing, but in addition

included psychometric tests. Gordon suggested that 'because the job is actually delivered by telephone the ability to communicate coherently and competently is the one of the first things to check' so the telephone interview was again the first filter of applicants. These tended to be fully scripted and conducted exclusively by the agency. He added that, to an extent, it depended on the actual vacancy, but as a general rule the scripts for telephone interviews were drawn up 'in such a way typically to gain information to form an objective assessment of whether the person is capable or not of doing the job' and might include items on autobiographical detail to checks of technical knowledge and capability where relevant. A successful telephone interview would typically be followed by skills testing sessions and psychometric personality profiling. According to Gordon 'usually face-to-face is a final interview' although he suggested that holding these was 'more unusual for a call centre'. Asked whether most call centre clients wanted the agency to do the full range of skills and competency tests, Gordon allowed that it varied 'according to the budget [and] according to their own internal HR policies for selection. I would say that an increasing proportion are going down the competency route, primarily because people are coming from such diverse backgrounds in terms of their previous experience, and a biographical interview is less relevant to the call centre'.

In contrast to agencies I and K, agency R used only face-to-face interviews and competency testing when selecting for call centre vacancies. Linda suggested that the length of the interview depended on 'how forthcoming the individual is. If you can get an easy, chatty kind of person you will get what you are looking for relatively quickly. If it's a case of really grinding away, it can take a while. I've seen it take a couple of hours'. Although she said that the interviews were structured, Linda argued that the 'initial approach has got to be to get the person to unwind and be comfortable before you can get any information'. In the initial interview, the agency would be looking to assess 'how the person performs' and whether they would be suited to a call centre environment. The clients would specify beforehand the nature of the competency tests to follow the interview.

As well as describing the selection process, the interviewees were all drawn to some degree into describing the 'type' of person they felt was most suited to call centre employment. Gordon was the least forthcoming, saying only that he felt that there was a personality profile more relevant to call centres, and that such a personality would combine enthusiasm and 'softer skills' with qualities relating to diction and dialect. Linda went a step further when she admitted to having, drawn from

her experience, a 'mental picture' of the kind of person the agency was looking for to fill call centre vacancies. But, she said, she 'couldn't describe it, I just know what I'm looking for when somebody walks through the door'. When pushed, she identified qualities such as being easy to talk to, sounding good on the telephone and being able to speak properly. She did not think that call centre positions were suitable for school-leavers because, she said, they 'don't have enough confidence to do it. I think it's something that comes, dare I say it, with age...I mean that I think it goes with age because I think that people tend to mellow as they get slightly older and they can sit and listen to someone moan without jumping down their throat, where a young person doesn't because, for many reasons, they look after number one'.

Jacqui's was the most formed opinion. She said that she would 'hesitate from saying that there is a type that suits the call centre, but in actual fact there is'. When asked what type that was, she replied that it was 'generally speaking between 21 and 25; male or female; um, not too intelligent but with good communication skills, so they're bright and - they're what I would call bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. They can chat to anybody - they like chatting - they're natural chatterers (laughs). Um, and they're comfortable with chatting. And in the past they might have done pretty mundane jobs within retail, um, catering, um, jobs that don't keep their lively personalities satisfied, so the call centre environment really suits them. The down side of it is that they are people that can frequently be swayed very easily and so they take days off, or they leave, or they cause trouble. All of it is very understandable'.

Jacqui agreed with Linda on the subject of the suitability of call centre employment for the young, saying 'I do not think a call centre is a place for young people. I feel that very, very strongly. I am concerned about 17 and 18 year olds going into call centres. It is not a career - it is a job. It can be a jumping-off, if you're sensible and you don't get caught into the institutionalization of it, um, but, its, its definitely not a career'. On the subject of comparison with retail employment and the possibility of employee migration from retail to call centre work, Jacqui thought 'that retail offers variety, a visible product and face-to-face communication. And other tasks. You know, stock room, tidying-up - a variety of things. Call centre work is one type of employment - 95 percent of the time on the phone. So it doesn't actually suit a broad spectrum of retail people, it suits some'.

6.3 Experiences of call centre recruitment and selection

The previous section illustrated the typical processes involved in recruitment and selection specifically for call centres from an employment agency perspective. The numbers involved in the survey and subsequent interviews from which that illustration was drawn were, however, small. Their ability to accurately represent the reality of such processes for prospective call centre employees might therefore be questioned. The following section examines the experiences of the author and others who have sought call centre employment. An examination of these experiences provides a means of validating and elaborating upon the survey findings.

Interviews conducted as part of this research with current and former call centre operatives from a range of different call centres together with data from a period of participant observation reveal a broad range of experiences of the recruitment and selection procedures for call centre positions, although some common ground exists. There are a number of routes into call centres. Many call centre operators already have an established presence, and it is possible for employees to transfer from the existing business into the call centre as Ginny, 25 and single, who worked as a deputy call centre team manager for AssuranceCo at the time of the interview, did. She was asked about how she first found employment in a call centre:

Interviewer: What made you apply to AssuranceCo in the first place?

Ginny: I applied for it before I left from England. I think that it was a local company that was quite big. Um, I think they were my two main reasons. It was local to me and it was big. And I'd heard fairly good reports about it, you know, saying they were good employers and things like that. So that's why I did it. That's why I applied. And I knew people who worked there already.

Interviewer: Where did you first see the advertisement for the job?

Ginny: I didn't I just wrote off on spec.

Interviewer: OK. You wrote on spec.

Ginny: Yes. So I didn't know what I was going to be doing or anything until they phoned me and said, you know, 'You've got the job. You're working in this department'.

Interviewer: OK. How long were you processing proposals for?

Ginny: Only for six months. What I did was I just went in and it was six months, it was kind of like a training thing. And at the end of the six months I said 'Right. I don't want to carry on doing this - I want to go and work in the call centre'.

(Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000)

As well as transferring employees from other parts of the organization, AssuranceCo also carried out external recruitment for their call centre. Sharon, who at the time of the interview was 30 and single, had been working in different call centres for around seven years. Her first call centre position had been with BankCo in Cheshire. Asked about the recruitment and selection processes for both that job and her current employment with AssuranceCo, her answer illustrated two of the possible roles of employment agencies in those processes, as an initial filter for applicants and as a provider of full recruitment services to the client.

Interviewer: When you applied for this particular job...um, what did they do in the way of selection? Were you interviewed, was there a telephone interview, ...face to face interview?

Sharon: They started off with a telephone interview. I think they got RecruitCo to do that, the employment agency. I then was successful and got a physical interview. Um, which lasted for more than three hours. An hour talking to people, and two hours doing aptitude tests, mathematical tests, English tests. Um, and they did it on a Saturday morning for me, which was very good.

Interviewer: OK. Because, presumably, you were still working at the other place?

Sharon: Yes. They were, you know, quite flexible about that.

Interviewer: How did you find out about the job?

Sharon: It was in the local paper.

Interviewer: How did you find out about your first, your very first, call centre job?

Sharon: I went through an agent.

Interviewer: Went through an agent?

Sharon: Yeah.

Interviewer: You just signed up and they said 'Oh, I think we've got something you could do – a call centre'?

Sharon: Yeah, basically. I was just out of college. I didn't have a job to go to. I thought 'Oh that'll do. That'll do as a stop-gap'.

(Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999)

A third mode of employment agency involvement in the process is as an employer, placing their own employees in the client's call centre. Two interviewees, Mike and Stewart, found call centre employment in this fashion. The period of participant observation was also carried out on this basis. At the time of his interview Mike was 39, living with his partner, and completing a Masters degree in Computing. Mike had had two separate call centre jobs with TelCo. The first, a sales position, was in 1997 and lasted for around six months. The second, following on from that, was

working off-line in a business billing section and lasted nearly eighteen months. Both were placements via an agency for which he had previously worked handing out customer loyalty cards in a supermarket. Mike did not apply for a call centre position as such:

Interviewer: [In relation to the first call centre position] Did they do any kind of, er, testing on you to determine your suitability for such a post, or did they just say 'You'll do' basically?

Mike: More or less the latter. When I joined them I actually had, um, I just, er, I spoke to someone that er, who was staying in our flat - we were staying together in a flat in Glasgow at the time. She'd seen an advert on a bus which was actually for EmployCo. They found me the job at Sainsbury's before that. They just told me to come along. I went along and they just sat me at a computer and they had, er, you know - the normal kind of thing that you get in agencies where they test how fast you can type - copy typing. But they also had other things to do - a spelling test, and a filing test on the computer, and that was basically it. And then the woman who was interviewing me briefly just sort of found out vaguely what I'd done before. It was very brief, but they had that Sainsbury's job coming up, so they were just sort of collecting people towards that. And then obviously they had the TelCo contract at the time and, er - for the sales jobs - and they just seemed to get a number of people together. I don't think I was, er, identified as particularly suitable for a sales job at that particular time.

Interviewer: You think you just happened to be on the books at the time?

Mike: Exactly. I think that's how they work with all of these jobs. As long as you're not completely unsuitable as far as they can tell, they just sort of give you whatever comes up. They don't try and target you towards things which, er, follow your chosen career path. Or at least that's my general impression of what happens.

(Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000)

By contrast, both Stewart and the author had approached agencies in relation to advertised call centre vacancies, with similar results. The experience of recruitment and selection for call centre employment that forms part of the participant observation data began in late 1997. I had heard about vacancies at a TelCo call centre in Centraltown through the friend of a friend, who knew that I was looking for call centre work. He said that there had been an advertisement in Centraltown's local newspaper, but I had not seen it. He was able to give me the name of a contact in the agency involved in recruiting for TelCo. I subsequently rang AgencyCo, to be greeted by an answering machine. I left a message, explaining where I had got the AgencyCo representative's name and that I was interested in applying for any vacancies at TelCo. Later that same morning Shona, AgencyCo's representative, returned my telephone call and conducted a 'telephone interview'.

Shona started by asking about my work experience. She explained that the positions were a minimum of twenty hours per week, working part time in the evenings, and asked me if that would fit in with my current studies. I said that it would. She asked whether I would be able to attend the two-week full time training programme prior to taking up a position. When I indicated that I could

accommodate that, she asked when could I start and was next week possible? I said that it was, to which she replied that prior to that she would need to interview me and carry out a 'skills assessment' and so on. She confirmed once again that I felt I would be able to spare five evenings a week, before arranging for me to go to her office at the call centre that same afternoon.

Shona's office was down in the basement level of the large call centre building located in the centre of town. The walls were plain and painted off-white. The furnishings were spartan, with Shona's desk and chair and a telephone/answering machine on the desk, two other chairs in front of the desk and, to the left hand side on entering the room, two PCs only one of which was on at the time. There was a window with frosted glass behind Shona's desk.

The interview began with general questions covering background and biographical details. Following these, Shona confirmed what she had earlier said over the telephone regarding the position, that is that it would involve a minimum of twenty hours per week, spread over five evenings. On each shift I would be entitled to one 15-minute break, but I would be expected to be in my seat ready to plug in at the beginning of the shift. According to Shona shifts were allocated by the computer, and 'operatives' received a three-month print-out of their shifts and were able to swap shifts with other operatives if necessary.

Shona then said that I needed to complete various competency or assessment tests. These had to be done wearing headphones with sound coming through only one ear. This was supposed to simulate the kind of one ear headphones actually used at the call centre. The tests required the interviewee to be sat in front of a computer screen and to follow fairly basic instructions heard via the earphones and played on a cassette recorder. The test was divided into four sections. The first section required you to type in the names of twenty local towns, villages and company names. The second part of this section contained another twenty place names from elsewhere in the UK. Shona stressed that although the questions being asked were there to test people's ability to spell, they wouldn't be considered to be something which would have direct impact upon a person's chances of being accepted for the position because the place names were not random, but had been chosen because they were not spelled phonetically. The list included, for example, Leominster (pronounced Lim-ster), Alnwick (pronounced Ann-ick), Bicester, Leicester, Towcester, and so on. The second section asked you to provide two alternative spellings for a list of ten different

surnames, for example White, Heywood, and so on. In the penultimate section two seven-digit numbers appeared on screen side by side. There was an allotted time to compare the two numbers, after which you were asked to say whether the two numbers were identical or different. The final section consisted of eight surnames that you had to order alphabetically.

My test was only partially supervised, because Shona left the room on a number of occasions whilst the test was taking place. Prior to the start of the test she had suggested that if, at any stage, I found myself slipping behind it was acceptable to pause the tape or to stop the tape, rewind and replay the tape. This appears to indicate that time was not critical in completing the competence tests, although Shona made it clear that that in the call centre time would be a factor. Although operatives would be expected to work up to full speed, it was anticipated that after some seven or eight weeks in post they would be expected to get through two or three phone calls a minute.

After the competence tests had been completed, Shona and I discussed rates of pay for the position. I was told that there was an increment for night-time shifts. The basic rate would be just over £4 an hour, but there would be time-and-a-quarter for any work after 8 o'clock in the evening and time-and-a-half on Sundays. She suggested that overtime was frequently but not always available and that it could be applied for by anybody and was not allocated on the basis of previous agreement to do overtime. If there were more volunteers for it than overtime available then names would be drawn out of a hat.

She indicated that the position was not as a TelCo employee as such but as contracted temporary employee of AgencyCo and therefore subject to the latter's terms and conditions, which she summarized. She indicated that there was a sickness scheme in operation and there was an entitlement to paid leave of four weeks per year plus eight days public holidays per year although entitlement to these things did not begin until an operative had been in post for 65 days. Shona said that the call centre operated a dress code, and that smart but casual clothing was acceptable. Use of the staff canteen was discussed, although Shona pointed out that the staff canteen closed at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and was therefore not going to be available during evening shifts. There was however a room available with a microwave, a kettle, a fridge and so on. She explained that the building was a no smoking building, although there was a small smoking room that you could retire to for a cigarette. There was a car park available for employees. This got locked at night, but

keys would be provided to the gates. A swipe pass would be provided to access the building when the security guard was not present. All personnel were required to sign in and out of the building, noting arrival and departure times.

Shona asked me to fill in some written details, including personal and educational information and details of any employment in the previous five years. Shona suggested that at one time there had been an information leaflet that got handed out to applicants, but that had been lost and in fact the induction tour usually took the place of such things anyway. Shona suggested that there would be an induction day the following Thursday at 1.30am, unless otherwise arranged. Shona indicated that training was likely to start a week on Monday. She said that training was likely to take place during office hours, which is to say between 9am and 5pm. After that the part time shift pattern would be five evenings per week. According to Shona, training was likely to consist of a group of new operatives. This was the standard intake for trainees. She said that positions at the call centre were filled on a rolling basis, but it appeared there had not been too many people lost recently.

At the time I felt that the telephone interview, personal interview and assessment tests had all been very cursory. The personal interview, including the skills assessment and the filling in of written details, had lasted no longer than an hour. In notes made subsequent to the personal interview I also recorded surprise at the rapidity of the recruitment and selection process, with telephone interview, personal interview and assessment tests completed in the same day as my initial expression of interest. Both these perceptions may however be due to my previous experience of recruitment and selection procedures having been primarily in relation to full-time permanent graduate vacancies. It is also possible that the two-week training programme, described by Shona as 'fairly intensive but challenging' was seen as both a further test of applicants and a final filter in the selection process. Shona was clear that not everybody would make it through the training to the point of becoming an established call centre operative.

I had felt apprehensive going to the interview. Partly because I was concerned about my typing speed, given my assumption that both speed and accuracy were likely to be tested. In the end this proved not to be a problem, because the assessment tests were not as rigorous as I had expected them to be. But my main concern was that in the interview I would be asked questions about my PhD at a level of detail that would compromise my ability to carry out covert participant

observation. The issue was only indirectly addressed during the interview, when Shona said that they had had a number of students applying for positions in the past and in her experience students had often found it difficult to commit themselves properly to the hours required by the job. I assured her that this would not be a problem in my case. Although the PhD was mentioned as something I was currently engaged in and I was asked when it was likely to end, at no time during the interview was I asked to discuss the content of the PhD. Thus I avoided what I had foreseen as a possible ethical and practical dilemma.

Although following the interview Shona had indicated that I had successfully passed the selection procedures and gave me a starting date for training some ten days later, it was not to be. The sequence of events following the interview provides an illustration of the dynamics of the relationship between agency and client. Four days before the date Shona had given me I received a letter, which read;

‘Dear Alison,

I am sorry to have to inform you that due a change in the staffing requirements for the TelCo call centre in Centraltown we are unable to proceed with the planned training on [date]. I do appreciate that this is extremely disappointing and that you have been badly let down and assure you that the circumstances leading to the cancellation are completely outwith my control.

Telco will let me know as soon as possible when training will be re-commencing and unless you no longer wish to go ahead I will contact you with the new date. Please let me know if you do not wish to proceed any further with your application. I wholeheartedly apologise for any inconvenience caused and hope that you will bear with me over the next few weeks.’

The letter suggested that Shona had not been a party to any prior discussions which might have taken place in TelCo leading up to the ‘change in staffing requirements’ at the Centraltown call centre. If AgencyCo had been involved, it is unlikely that they would have committed to recruitment expenditure in the form of newspaper advertisements and so on so close to the date of such changes. A request from Shona to ‘bear with me over the next few weeks’ could be seen as an indication of her continued uncertainty about the situation. I heard nothing further about the ‘job’ until, some four weeks later, when I telephoned Shona at AgencyCo’s office in the TelCo call centre. Shona said that she hoped to be able to confirm a start date for training in the first weeks of 1998. Early in the New Year, Shona left a message on my answerphone saying;

‘Alison, this is Shona here from AgencyCo in Centraltown, phoning once more to apologise for the delay in your start date. I don’t think it’s going to be the 13th, obviously, or they would have told me by now. But I am looking forward to having you working here, so, um, please, if you could last another couple of weeks I would be eternally grateful and I

will let you know as soon as I get a date. Thanks a lot Alison. If you've changed your mind obviously give me a call back, and hopefully I'll see you quite soon. 'Bye'.

Another answerphone message, three weeks later, suggested that a start date for training some three weeks later was a possibility. Shona apologized for the delay, but said that she was 'on the end of TelCo's string' and had to do as they requested. A week before that date arrived I received another letter from Shona, in which she once more alluded to the fluidity of the situation and her lack of control over it. The letter also reveals Shona's frustration with the situation as a whole and, in the final paragraph, with the way in which their actions have prevented her from carrying out her job;

'I am writing to inform you I'm still unable to confirm a starting date. I had been told that the 16th February was being considered, but I have now heard that the 23rd is the first available date, and even that is not "set in concrete". All I can do is apologise and hope that you can continue to bear with me.

I fully understand how frustrated you must feel and it probably doesn't help to tell you that I'm in the same boat, but it makes me feel better! I wish I could do something more positive than make excuses, but the situation is outwith my control (This supply / demand curve can really hack you off!).

I will be delighted if you are still available to commence training at this time. I have stressed to TelCo that high calibre staff cannot be put on hold for long, and that postponing the start date is extremely inconvenient. They appreciate the position you are in and hope to see you commence training as soon as can be arranged'.

A week later, another answerphone message was received from Shona. She apologized for all the previous delays and said that a starting date for training had been confirmed some two weeks later. She asked if I could come in for the induction tour the week prior to the start date. Training for the call centre position finally commenced approximately thirteen weeks after the initial date given following the interview.

Single and in his late 30s, Stewart was a former human resources professional who was taking time out to complete a law degree. He worked briefly as an agency employee in an outsourced call centre in Spring 1998. His experience of the recruitment and selection was substantially similar to that experienced by the author during the participant observation. However, the way in which delays were handled in his case suggested not that the agency was a relatively powerless intermediary at the mercy of its client. On the contrary, it seems likely that the agency was engaged in 'pre-recruitment', that is to say garnering interest in positions that were not necessarily available at the time but which the agency anticipated needing to provide people for at some point in the future. This is strongly suggested by the use of the present tense in the recruitment advert, followed

by the agency representatives' later admission that the next training intake was likely to be some 3-4 weeks distant, the letter received three weeks after the selection meeting which stated that his application was being held 'in a bank', and the news two weeks further on that the agency was 'hopeful' of getting a new contract with OutsourceCo and wished to know if Stewart was still interested in the position.

In at the beginning of October 1997 Stewart saw an advert in a local newspaper placed by JobFind, an employment agency, which detailed apparent vacancies at a local call centre;

'CALL CENTRE

Part-Time

CUSTOMER SERVICE ADVISORS

Due to further expansion within this exciting new venture in Scottown, our client has a requirement for Customer Service Advisors.

The role involves handling telephone calls efficiently and effectively, accurately recording data, providing excellent customer service and ensuring quality standards are achieved.

Working as part of a team and reporting to the team leader, you will be professional and responsive to all customers' demands by exceeding their expectations. As an effective communicator you should possess an excellent telephone manner and keyboard skills.

We offer extensive training and a competitive hourly rate.'

He contacted JobFind on the number given at the foot of the advert. His name and telephone number were taken and he was told that someone would ring him back that same day. Later that day Helen, the agency's regional manager, telephoned him. She conducted a telephone interview that lasted approximately 25 minutes. She said she would be in contact, and the next day a representative of JobFind phoned Stewart to invite him to a 'selection meeting' at the call centre the day after. Stewart described the meeting;

'The interview started with a 10 minute tour of the call centre, watching it in operation. We were offered no explanation at this point as to what the centre actually did. There were three invitees plus two staff from the agency, one of whom was Helen, the person who had conducted my telephone interview.

Helen then conducted a slide presentation, reading out the contents of a number of slides on the following items.

- a) The culture of OutsourceCo, that is to say that the customer is king.
- b) The total quality required on every call, along with an expectation that we would have the ability to handle the volume of calls and the pressure this would produce.
- c) The importance of teamwork to the success of the venture.
- d) The fact that they were not immediately concerned about keyboard skills and speed as these would be taught.
- e) That the hourly rate would be £4.05 per hour. This fact was stressed 4 times during the presentation, always followed by 'Do any of you have any problem with this?'

There was a brief description of the work carried out by the centre. The centre answered zero tariff, that is to say free-phone numbers on behalf of OutsourceCo's clients. The call centre could conduct various transactions with the customer on the client's behalf. The technology employed at the call centre allowed workers to access customer details from the clients' own databases. As far as clients' customers were aware, workers at the call centre were employees of the client company itself.

We were then given a multiple choice test which looked at your ability to hear and recall alphanumeric sequences. This consisted of a cassette tape and a set of answer sheets. The first sequences on the tape were numerical. An answer sheet was provided with five options, A-E, for each sequence that was heard. You had to circle the answer corresponding to the sequence given by tape. There were 20 questions like this. The tape started off with 4 digit sequences, finishing with 8-10 digit sequences at the end. The sequences also went faster as you went through the exercise. This was then repeated for letters - same operation and 20 questions. The final exercise was sequences containing both letters and numbers.

Next we were given paperwork to complete. What I can remember was a P46, three copies of OutsourceCo's equal opportunities policy, three copies of OutsourceCo's confidentiality policy, one reference form which asked for two business referees and one character reference. A bank and personal details form. A very basic JobFind application form. Whilst filling in the forms we were questioned about our eyesight, our backs, and any 'health problems we should know about'.

We were told about the 4-day full time training course for the centre and advised that the next intake was likely to be in 3-4 weeks time. We were questioned regarding our flexibility of hours and about the shift patterns and so on. Finally we were given the opportunity to ask questions, following which we were told that we could go, and that we would be informed of the outcome of our assessments in the next few days. No information was offered at this point as to how we had performed in the tests. In total the assessment had lasted some 1.5 hours'.

Stewart next heard from JobFind by letter approximately three weeks after the selection meeting.

The text was as follows;

'Dear Stewart,

With reference to your recent application for a temporary position with our client OutsourceCo, I am delighted to tell you that you have successfully come through our selection process.

We now have your application in a bank and will notify you immediately when we have confirmation of the next start date. Many thanks for your interest and involvement in this project and I look forward to communicating with you soon.

Yours sincerely,'

The next communication from the agency was a postcard received by Stewart some ten days after the letter and requesting that he contact the agency. He telephoned the agency three days later, and was told that the agency were hopeful of getting a new contract with OutsourceCo and wished to know if Stewart was still interested in the position. Stewart confirmed that he was and was told that

a representative of the agency would phone him back. The following evening Stewart received a telephone call from Helen at JobFind. She had tried unsuccessfully to contact Stewart earlier that day. She asked Stewart if he could start work the next morning. Stewart explained that he had prior commitments and could not start on the Wednesday morning, but could start the following morning if this was acceptable. Helen promised to telephone Stewart back and let him know.

Helen phoned back the following day, but Stewart was not in. Answering the call, Stewart's father explained that Stewart would not be in until about 7pm and Helen told him she would call Stewart again that evening. But the phone call never came. Stewart telephoned the agency on the Thursday morning and was told that Helen was out of the office, but that a message would be left for her. In the following four weeks Stewart called the agency four more times. He never got to speak to Helen, but was reassured by a different JobFind employee that he was 'still on file'. When Stewart explained that he had seen the same advert that he had responded to reappearing in the local paper, he was told that the agency were 'looking for lots of people' and that they would be in touch with him when a vacancy arose.

In mid-December 1997 Stewart wrote to Helen at JobFind to say that he was still interested in the position and to try and find out when he was likely to be able to start. There was no reply until the end of January 1998 when Stewart was contacted by another consultant from JobFind, who asked whether he was still available and still wanted a job with them and, if so, could he start the training the following Monday? Stewart said that he was still looking for a job but that he could not start on the date suggested due to prior commitments. But, he said, he would be available to start the training one week later. JobFind said they would ring him back on whether or not that was acceptable to them. The JobFind consultant rang Stewart back on the Friday of that week. She said that yes, Stewart's start date could be delayed by the week that he had suggested during their previous conversation. She said that she would ring him the following Monday to confirm the details of his employment. Although Monday came and went with no word from JobFind, a letter arrived later that week confirming a start date of 2 February 1998 and detailing the terms and conditions under which he was to be employed.

Sometimes it is possible to circumvent agency involvement and apply to the call centre operator directly. At the time of her interview Catriona was 36 and a widow with two young children. She

had worked in a call centre on the outskirts of Edinburgh for 3 years up to September 1999. She was a University graduate with an MSc. In her interview she explained the thinking behind her direct application strategy.

Interviewer: So, how did you hear about the job in the call centre?

Catriona: Um, my friend worked there. She... now she started in the July and I started in the September. I think we both got to the stage where we were totally skint and we were looking for, you know, just something just part-time that fitted in with the kids. And her next door neighbour worked there and she said to her 'You know SatCo are recruiting at the moment - why don't you come along?'. So Rhona had sent in her c.v. and all the rest of it. She got an interview and got started. It was at the time there was a massive recruitment drive going on. And Rhona sussed out the fact that if you went through an agency you got less money, and if you sent your c.v. to them directly then it was a lot better. Conditions as well, if you were a permanent employee. So she said 'Why don't you send in your c.v.?' So that's what I did. And I got an interview and got started.

Interviewer: After you first applied, you sent your c.v. to the company, did they phone you up and interview you, or did they just ask you to come in for an interview, or...

Catriona: I got a letter asking me to go for an interview, and I went up and it was the personnel manager plus A.N. Other person, I don't know who it was. And then after that I got a letter, it was by letter again, saying that I'd been successful and start on such and such a date.

Interviewer: Was that just a sort of a chat type interview or did you have to do any tests?

Catriona: No. It was just a chat, yes. They just asked questions, you know; 'How do you think you would deal with an irate customer?' and 'How would you deal with this?' and all the rest of it. It was just a chat. Actually the personnel manager at that time, he was a lovely man. He was really nice. He actually died one Saturday night. Had a heart attack and died on the floor. He was really nice. But after that a new chairperson came in and he introduced the personality profiling when you went for an interview. And when I was put up to EO and SO it was just basically somebody came and asked to speak to you in the office and said 'We're putting you up to this' and right, fine, that was it. But after that you had to do a personality profile as well before you could get put up.

Interviewer: Do you think the personality profiling helped?

Catriona: I don't think its very fair really. I mean a lot of people, a lot of people would be different at work. You know, like I was different on the telephone to what I would be just sitting chatting to someone so no, I don't really think its fair. Your personality could come through on a profile but you wouldn't necessarily be like that dealing with a customer, you know. I was a lot more patient with customers! (Laughs).

(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000)

Rob, 27 and studying for an Aquaculture MSc, had worked whilst studying for his first degree for Thirdparty, the operator of an outsourced call centre in London. Like Catriona, he saw advantages in applying directly to the call centre operator for employment rather than going through an agency. He also offered an explanation as to why an operator might prefer to have agency staff rather than its own employees, temporary or permanent.

Interviewer: OK. So you were employed directly by Thirdparty?

Rob: Yes, I was. Yes.

Interviewer: OK. Was everybody there employed by Thirdparty, or were some people agency temps, or..?

Rob: There was a lot of people from agencies. The agencies used to kind of market students if you like, get students on to their books. And, again, the agencies, even though they would treat you a little less well than Thirdparty would, and Thirdparty used to pay you more than the agencies would pay you for the same work, you know, it was just one of those student kind of things. The agencies are good, but if you can get your foot in the door directly its much better.

Interviewer: Why do you think more people didn't try to get their foot in the door more directly?

Rob: It was very difficult. The organization, Thirdparty, would turn around and, if you like, find the organization - the administration - was much easier for them to go through the temp agencies. More often than not I would have to hassle them, to turn around and say 'Look, you'd better sort out these forms. Let's get me on the books - I want to get paid! I want to do some work'. The workload obviously was quite high on the executives in Thirdparty, but they were making a, you know, a good wage. But, again, I was probably the same. They were receiving a good wage because they had a lot of work to do. So there was always, again, a balance'.

(Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000)

The recruitment and selection process is important for a number of reasons, one of which is the opportunity it affords the recruiter to project a positive image of the recruiting organization to applicants. The face validity of selection methods is instrumental in forming applicants' perceptions. Processes that are perceived by the applicant for whatever reason to have low validity will tend to leave them with a negative impression. As discussed earlier, Mike had reservations about his recruitment into a call centre based on his perception that he had not been adequately assessed for such a position, and this left him feeling that the agency involved had no interest in his personal advancement. But face validity hinges not just on the content of selection methods but also on such factors as how much time the process takes. The swiftness of the recruitment process in the participant observation study, at least up to the point of offering the position, was noted together with its tendency to make the researcher feel that the process was cursory. The ability of selection procedures to make an applicant wary of the recruiting organization is illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview with Julie, a student aged 20, about her brief experience working at an outbound call centre.

Interviewer: How did you come to find out about [the call centre job]?

Julie: Right. Well, I had been working in the [large hotel in a nearby town], so I had. Um, I mean everybody in our flat was working in [large hotel in a nearby town]! (laughs). And then it got refurbished so we were basically all unemployed. So we were all looking for jobs in various ways, you know, jobcentres and stuff. So I came home one day and Anne-Marie said she'd read the [local newspaper] and it had an advert in it. And she said that she'd

phoned up and she'd got an interview that day. You know, for... what time was it?... maybe like two hours from when I got home. After she'd phoned they just said 'What time?' and she said a time and they said 'That's fine'. She said 'Why don't you phone up and see if you can get an interview too?' So I phoned up and sure enough they gave me the same time, you know, as Anne-Marie - the one that I wanted. So we both went along and, um, we both got the job! (laughs) Its like, we should have realised there and then that there was something really suss about the whole thing, but....

Interviewer: So you both arrived for this interview. What sort of format did the interview take?

Julie: Um, we all had to... before you went in we all sat in a room filled with telephones and that. There's quite a lot of people had turned up. And you had to fill in a form, you know, just stating - it wasn't really an in-depth form it was really just general information. You filled it out, and then you went in with this guy who just sat there and told you about the job and looked over your application thing. And then he just offered it to me. And then he offered it to my flat-mate, Ally, simply because he'd offered me a job, supposedly. Its like, well, you know, 'You can both come and work'.

(Interview with Julie, 24 April 2000)

6.4 Summary

Cook (1998) described face-to-face interviews, application forms and references as the 'classic trio' of selection methods. These techniques have enjoyed an enduring popularity in recruitment for a wide variety of positions (Makin and Robertson, 1986; Bevan and Fryatt, 1988; Shackleton and Newell, 1991; Keenan 1995) despite the publication of studies suggesting that they have low validity as predictors of future employee performance (see Cook, 1998 for a summary of research findings to date). Research on the preferences of US human resource professionals (Terpstra, 2000) showed that the 'classic trio' continued to be among the most popular selection techniques and that they were also highly rated by respondents in terms of effectiveness in predicting future performance. The high ratings given to unstructured interviews and references were explained in terms of their perceived versatility and ability to gather richer applicant-related information than other selection techniques. The far lower ratings received by cognitive ability tests, personality tests, and biographical information blanks were ascribed to their lack of face validity and consequent tendency to give rise to negative reactions from candidates.

The survey of Scottish employment agencies found that 10 percent were actively involved in recruitment for call centres and willing to provide further information. This is likely to be an underestimate of the total number of agencies involved in call centre recruitment, which may be as high as 33 percent of Scottish employment agencies. The survey figure, together with evidence from other studies, suggests that applications for call centre positions via an employment or recruitment

agency are a common route into such employment. For example, IDS (1997) found that 15 percent of the UK call centre workforce was employed on a temporary basis and Taylor and Bain (1999) suggested that in 1997 13.6 percent of the Scottish call centre workforce, which they estimated by November 1997 numbered in total around 16,000 employees, was supplied by employment agencies. Agencies providing information for the survey had dealt in some capacity with more than 4,200 call centre positions in the year to June 1997, representing more than a quarter of the total Scottish call centre workforce. For just under a third of the agencies, call centre employment accounted for 50 percent or more of their business in that period. For all but one of the agencies entry-level positions made up the majority of positions handled.

Local and national press were identified as the most popular channels for the recruitment communication, but the agencies had variously tried a range of different media in order to generate the level of interest they required. Specialist publications and the internet had been used on occasion by nearly a third of the agencies, although the interviewee for one employment agency recruiting for large numbers of entry-level call centre positions commented that 'the kind of people that you are trying to encourage into call centres probably do not have access to the Internet or to specialist publications'. Only two agencies suggested that they had used employment services or jobcentres as a communications channel.

The selection processes used by agencies for call centre placements differed significantly from the 'classic trio' of face-to-face interview, application form and references that has been a consistently popular combination for selection processes more generally. Agencies favoured a combination of telephone interview, face-to-face interview and competence testing. Telephone interviews were used by all but one of the respondents. The telephone interview has a dual purpose, according to one employment agency interviewee. It enables the agency to check that the applicant has understood and is comfortable with the position being offered in terms of hours of employment, terms and conditions and so on. At the same time the interviewer is able to assess the applicant in terms of such attributes as 'politeness, voice clarity and persuasiveness'. Face-to-face interviews were employed by all but two of the respondents. It seems likely from the comments of the interviewees that the face-to-face interview was used more for the purpose of gathering personal information and reviewing the terms and conditions of the position being offered than for any rigorous personal examination of the candidate. Competence testing was carried out by more than

two thirds of agencies. Again, the experience of the call centre and former call centre employees interviewed suggested that the tests administered were low level and difficult to relate fully to the employment being sought.

This chapter has sought to explore the nature of entry-level call centre employment using data from a survey of Scottish recruitment and employment agencies, participant observation, and interviews with employment agency representatives and call centre employees. The findings that have been detailed suggest significant differences between the recruitment and selection processes used by call centres and those used for other types of employment. The next chapter considers the nature and experience of call centre employment with a view to identifying further differences.

Chapter 8

The Nature and Experience of Work

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the nature and experience of work in telephone call centres. In seeking to illuminate the topic I draw on different kinds of source. The chapter begins with reviews of articles in the 'subjective experience' subcategory of the content analysis of selected newspaper articles, the methodological detail of which appeared in Chapters 5 and 6. The inclusion of this material has two purposes. First, it serves as a backdrop to the covert participant observation data and extracts from interviews of current and former call centre employees carried out as part of this study. Second, it demonstrates the increasing public exposure to first- and third-person accounts of call centre employment that are both limited in scope and of indeterminate partiality. In this sense it highlights the need for and importance of more rigorous academic scrutiny.

Following the review of newspaper articles, I present data on the nature and experience of call centre work. The data comprise a combination of excerpts from diaries kept during my period of covert participant observation, observations made at that time or remembered later, and excerpts from interviews with call centre employees or ex-employees. My intention in this chapter is to present a detailed narrative of call centre work incorporating both my experiences and those of my interviewees. A more detailed discussion of aspects of that experience in the light of other reported research appears in Chapter 10.

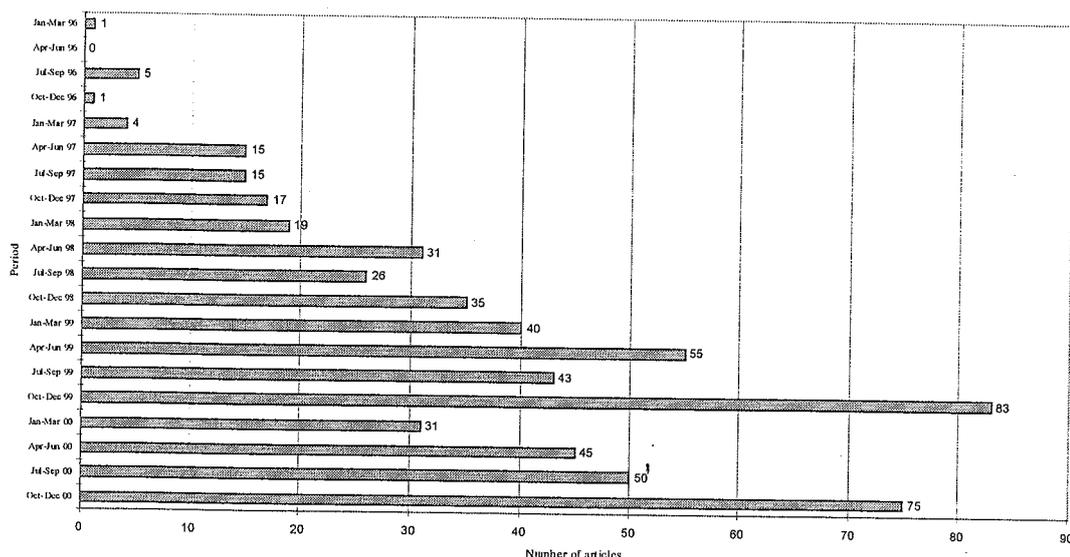
8.2 Newspaper accounts of call centre employment

From the content analysis of newspaper articles carried out as part of this study it is clear that from 1 January 1996 to 31 December 2000 there was considerable public exposure to articles that could be categorized as concerning the experience of employment in call centres. The numbers of articles adjudged to be in this category are illustrated by Figure 8.1. From a negligible number per quarter-year in 1996, there was an average of more than 50 articles per quarter-year in 2000. A peak in public exposure to reports of call centre employment occurred in the three months to December 31 1999 when there were 83 such articles.

The articles in this category could be sub-categorized further into non-observational or observational articles. Former category included reports of events or actions related to call centre

employment and descriptions of facets of call centre work. The latter category encompassed three types of articles. First, there were articles that rely on accounts of call centre work given by persons other than the author. Second, there were articles that detail the authors' own observations and comment thereon. Third, there were articles that describe the experiences of the author when undertaking participant observation in call centres. The content review of articles concerning the experience of employment in call centres that follows has been structured according to this non-observational/observational classification.

Figure 8.1. Numbers of newspaper articles related to the subjective experience of employment in call centres, January 1996 to December 2000



8.2.1 Reports of events or actions related to call centre employment

Moyes (1996) reported on the steps taken by the home shopping catalogue company Freemans to reduce employee stress at its new call centre. A company spokesman was quoted as saying that the call centre was likely to generate 'an intense working atmosphere and Freemans' attitude is that if stress is high in such an atmosphere you're going to be losing more staff to sickness - it will be more of a drain than a motivator'. The call centre was expected to house 1,000 employees and to handle more than 25 million calls annually. To help reduce stress in the working environment the building had been designed to include Japanese-style anti-stress rooms equipped with futons and fish tanks for a tranquil atmosphere, glass partition walls which appear to have water flowing through them and a wishing well. Employees would also be able to use the on-site gym, and to obtain help and advice from a professional counsellor and a nurse based at the centre.

Gray (1997) reported on the results of an Incomes Data Services (IDS) survey of pay and conditions in call centres. One point made by IDS related to the 'exaggerated' effect of job creation by call centres. Gray quoted the IDS study, which stated that jobs were 'often being lost elsewhere almost as fast as call centres create them, since two-thirds of call centres replace activities previously carried out in local branches and offices' (1997: 11). The authors of the IDS report were suggested to have criticised the lack of career progression and flat pay structures that operated in most call centres, linking them to poor employee motivation and high staff turnover rates.

Cameron (1997b) reported on an unusual addition to the remuneration package offered to most call centre employees. Recruitment company Pertemps, engaged by BT to fill vacancies at a new BT call centre on Tyneside, were said to be offering a 'golden hello' of £100 to encourage further applications for 50 unfilled vacancies at the call centre for agency employees. Of the 1,200 employees at the call centre 150 were directly employed by BT. The other 1,050 staff were agency employees on short-term contracts. The payment of £100 was said to be conditional on the new employee completing four weeks' work at the call centre excluding any training period. The move was seen as a response to difficulties in recruiting staff, thought to be partly due to the concentration of other call centre operators in the area.

Denny (1998) commented on the publication of research from the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics that labelled call centre employees 'the victims of industrial tyranny'. The report on call centres, by Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, focused on the degree of control exerted by managers in most call centres, suggesting that the 'tyranny of the assembly line is but a Sunday school picnic compared to the control that management can exercise in computer telephony'. It was however suggested that employees quickly became 'acclimatised' to more intensive monitoring and were attracted by the rates of pay offered for working in what Denny called 'battery farm-style telephone barns'. In contrast Willcock (1998) reported on a decision by the chief executive of Direct Line to relax dress rules for the company's 4,500-plus call centre employees. The relaxation from 'Business Dress' to 'Business Casual' was said to have occurred as a result of the chief executive's belief that more casual attitude towards dress would help to keep down barriers between staff and that a more relaxed atmosphere would promote team-building. Employees were told that they would be required to dress 'appropriately'.

Williamson (1998) reported on concerns that call centre employment might not have a long-term future. He suggested that an unnamed 'senior economic expert' believed that most call centre employment was of low grade and of 'questionable long-term value'. In addition, concerns were voiced that considerable amounts of effort and public funds were being expended to encourage call centre operators to set up in the UK when future advances in technology might make many of those routine call centre operations redundant in 'the next 10 years', leaving large numbers of former call centre employees without work. Only those call centres providing a specialist service would survive, according to Williamson, and they accounted for only 20 percent of Scotland's 18,000 call centre positions at that time. Other commentators saw a greater danger in the possible migration of call centres to overseas locations such as India where labour costs would be significantly cheaper. There were also worries over the working conditions in many of the less specialised call centres. A spokesman for the Scottish MSF union was quoted as saying that many call centre employees were 'sitting in front of computer screens for hours doing mundane repetitive jobs. It's a very strict regime where people are virtually chained to their desks. Many people working there are on low rates of pay and are working to a prepared script to sell products over the telephone' (1998: 5).

The article also mentioned the high employee turnover in call centres, a phenomenon due in part to what Williamson suggested had been dubbed 'call centre burnout'. Whilst few disputed that average tenures in many call centres were less than 18 months, it had been noted that there were a significant number of employees who moved from one call centre position to a similar grade with another call centre operator. Opinion was divided as to the significance of this. Some observers saw it as a sign of the virility of the industry, whilst others viewed it as evidence of 'a new breed of factory-fodder going nowhere on low pay with limited skills'.

Howard (1999) argued that call centres did not necessarily have to be 'sweatshops' or 'light satanic mills'. He suggested that concerns over the working conditions in call centres generally centred on the use of very tightly scripted work routines that limited employees' autonomy and the use of monitoring to ensure that performance targets are met. It was believed that these were contributory factors in the high levels of staff turnover experienced by many call centres, as was the willingness of some call centre employees to switch employer to do approximately the same for only a few hundred pounds per annum more. He said that research had shown that stable teams of experienced call centre employees were able to generate higher average daily revenues than teams of less

experienced employees whose composition changed frequently. There was therefore a considerable advantage to call centre operators in being able to retain the best performing employees.

He asserted that research into call centres in the North-East of England had found that there was a difference in the age and personality profile of the great majority of call centre employees when compared with those who typically outperformed as measured by the indicators normally used to monitor call centre performance. This, he argued, suggested that many organisations' recruitment practices were not optimal in attracting or selecting these higher performers. He felt that selection techniques such as psychometrics and competency based interviews could help employers to improve their choice of candidate. Call centre operators could also take steps to train and retain the best employees, including setting up extensive induction processes, using self-directed teams and team bonuses, and providing extensive coaching and opportunities for job rotation. Howard believed that such measures were necessary if operators were to make loyalty and job satisfaction a part of the call centre environment.

MacErlean (1999) reported the findings of an Income Data Services (IDS) survey of call centres that suggested a wide disparity in working conditions. Staff turnover in the call centres surveyed averaged 18 percent but varied between 1 percent and 80 percent per year. It had been found that the most common reason given by ex-employees for quitting call centres was the intensity of work, but that a significant number left to take up positions in other call centres. It seemed that a number of the call centre operators surveyed were offering additional 'perks' as a way of retaining staff. Amongst those identified in the survey were gym facilities or memberships and crèches or childcare allowances.

Neill (1999) noted that the UK government had spent some £20 million in attracting call centre operators to Northern Ireland, and that it was estimated that 7,000 people in the region would work in call centres by 2001. The value and longevity of such employment was therefore an important issue. He pointed out that opinion about the value of call centre employment seemed to be polarized, with perceptions tending towards a view of call centres as either 'the cutting edge of a social and economic revolution creating quality jobs and opportunity for the 21st century or old fashioned sweatshops with long hours, tedious work and poor pay'.

Neill quoted politician Peter Mandelson on the announcement of a £10 million investment in call centres in Northern Ireland by BT as saying that the province's 'future economic growth and prosperity' was 'directly linked to our investment in information and communication technologies'. This was contrasted with the views of a local representative of the Communication Workers' Union who suggested that the Government appeared 'to have endorsed American style labour practices which create 'McJobs.' Call centre work is often part-time, poorly paid and insecure. It is not the long-term sustainable employment which is the European model. We welcome all jobs but have serious reservations about the quality of the jobs provided by call centres and their long-term economic value'.

Townsend (1999) reported on the first strike at telecommunications firm BT for more than 13 years, when more than 4,000 members of the Communications Workers' Union from call centres across the UK staged a one-day walkout in protest at 'intolerable' working conditions. Reporting on the strength of feeling behind the strike, Griffith (1999) reported that 81 percent of those who voted said 'yes' to industrial action, although it was reported elsewhere that only 47 percent of those union members who were balloted in fact voted (Anon, 1999p). The action was thought to be the first British strike at a call centre (John, 1999). Reasons put forward by the Communications Workers' Union for calling for industrial action included allegations of 'oppressive' 19th century-style managers; insufficient staffing; stress and excessive pressure; tight deadlines which prohibit calls being handled in a professional manner; and excessive use of agency staff. Townsend suggested that Union claims that the strike had been '80 percent successful' had been countered by BT's assertion that it had had a 'minimal' effect on services. Orr (1999) reported that another of BT's responses to the strike by call centre employees had been an announcement that it was looking to reduce its call centre workforce by three-quarters, replacing a mixture of BT and agency employees with voice-recognition technology and Internet access.

Vickers (1999) reported on actions taken in the aftermath of the BT call centre employees' strike action in November 1999. It appeared that a letter that had been sent out to union members by the branch secretary of the BT call centre based in Gorgie, Edinburgh had intimidated some of the union's members. The text of the letter included the following statement: 'Although the response from our members was excellent there were a very small number of members who actually attended for work. It is unfortunate but every organisation has its parasites and we will deal with

this in the fullness of time'. The letter's author later said that it had not been meant as a threat and that term parasite had been referring to employees who chose not to join the union but were prepared to take advantage of the terms and conditions negotiated by unions. A union member at the call centre was however quoted as saying that 'whole point of the strike was about the stress and pressure the workers were being put under by the management but now the union seems to be resorting to the same tactics against its members'.

Members of the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) were escorted from the premises when they approached a call centre in Dingwall to find out why the call centre operator paid employees at the Dingwall call centre £2,000 per annum less than employees at its Edinburgh call centre (Anon, 1999q). The operator shrugged off the union's accusations of discrimination by saying that they paid 'a fair local rate'. TSSA officials alleged that the call centre operator had consistently refused to negotiate with the union. One declared that general 'a climate of fear' existed in call centres that could only be addressed by 'having a proper forum for consultation and discussion' and the union was 'the only organisation which can provide that'. Officials also suggested that the only reason a call centre had been based in the Highlands was that the operator knew that it would be able to 'get away' with paying employees less. The operator responded that it had no plans to harmonise salaries at its three Highland-based call centres with those of employees at its Edinburgh call centre because it believed that it was 'paying well for the local market'. It added that it was happy for employees to join the union but it had no intention of entering into collective bargaining with the union as it was company policy to address employee concerns via the employee consultative groups based at each centre.

In February 2000 it was reported that, following allegations by the GBM union over poor working conditions in a Swansea call centre, Welsh Assembly Member Owen John Thomas had repeated calls for independent research into both the risks faced by call centre employees and the dangers of economic over-dependence on call centre employment (Anon, 2000q). The GMB union had raised concerns over a number of call centre-related health and safety issues following a rise in stress-related complaints from members.

A report in April 2000 suggested that the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) was targeting call centre employees of the mobile telephone operator Orange (Anon, 2000r) in a

bid to increase union membership in their call centres. The article suggested that the AEEU was handing out union literature to employees as they arrived for work and that the campaign had followed the findings of recent surveys that call centre employees worked in stressful environments. Whilst there was no suggestion that Orange provided poor working conditions in its call centres, an AEEU representative said that the company had 'nothing to fear' and that the union simply wanted to 'ensure staff were looked after'. A spokeswoman for Orange said that the company did not recognise any unions at its call centres and preferred to communicate with its employees directly rather than go through third parties. The Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) union was said to be targeting employees at the Egg call centre in Derbyshire in a campaign to increase membership (Anon, 2000s). A representative of the MSF suggested that the union already had 'a very small group of members' at the call centre, but hoped to attract more. According to the article union members were leafleting employees on their way to work and an Action Day was planned involving speakers and a theatre performance designed to reflect call centre stress. The recruitment drive was said to be in response to reports of high levels of stress and poor treatment suffered by telephone call centre staff around the country.

In July 2000 a day of industrial action was held by members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) at a call centre operated by SSL, part of the Post Office, in Plymouth (Anon, 2000t). The dispute centred on contracts and payments for weekend working, with the CWU claiming that employees at Plymouth were treated unfairly in comparison to staff at other Post Office call centres regarding bonuses for working on Saturdays. The extent of disruption was uncertain as the CWU claimed that two thirds of the call centre's employees had not reported for work on the day of the strike but the Post Office reported that only one third of its employees were absent.

An article in November 2000 about problems experienced by the mobile telephone supplier One-2-One in recruiting employees for a new multi-media call centre suggested that the job requirements for call centre employees might be changing. It was reported (Anon, 2000u) that at one of the company's call centres only 90 of the 200 employees who applied for positions in the new e-mail customer service teams passed a basic written English test. Of the 90 who did pass, only 45 were considered sufficiently proficient to undertake basic training for the new teams. The company's director of customer services was quoted as saying that so-called 'contact centres', the multi-media

successors to the call centre, would require staff with additional skills. It was suggested that in future the company would be actively seeking to recruit graduates to its call centres.

Grant (2000) reported on the decision by BT to require employees at some of its call centres to sign 'no sickness' agreements. The call centres all serviced a contract to run the national rail enquiries service, and BT had introduced the measure to combat high levels of illness-related absence amongst employees. Any employee who had already been absent through illness three times in the course of the year was required to sign the plan, promising not to become ill over a three-month period. Anyone not keeping that promise would be subject to a series of verbal and written warnings before eventually being dismissed. Employees at the call centres worked 12-hour shifts with one thirty-minute and two fifteen-minute breaks and were subject to performance targets including an average length of call target of 85 seconds. They claimed that job-related stress was causing illnesses. BT said that the agreement was for employees who were 'habitually ill' and was designed to help improve communication between employees and their managers. In relation to possible causes of stress, MacErlean (1997) reported on research by Reed Recruitment that suggested that people were up to seven times more likely to be rude over the telephone than in a face-to-face encounter. 65 percent of people were prepared to be rude over the telephone as opposed to 9 percent who would be rude during a face-to-face discussion. Distance and anonymity were seen as critical factors.

The articles in this section suggest the public airing of a number of call centre related debates. The first relates to call centre working conditions. Although it was suggested (Howard, 1999) that call centres did not have to be 'sweatshops' or 'light satanic mills', the majority of authors contributing to this debate tended to offer negative appraisals of call centre employment. Many articles appeared to have been generated as a result of actions taken by various unions related to their involvement, or attempted involvement, in call centres and the second debate centres on the roles of unions. Call centre employers are portrayed as generally antagonistic toward unions that are, in turn, presented as concerned solely for the welfare of employees trapped in oppressive and pressured work environments. It is worth bearing in mind that the unions involved may have agendas of their own. A third debate relates to the quality and longevity of call centre employment, with authors tending to view both aspects negatively.

8.2.2 Descriptions of facets of call centre work

Calder (1997) described the working environment at Kwik-Fit's direct motor insurance call centre in Uddingston as 'more like the set of a gigantic game show than any traditional idea of a workplace'. The centre both took inbound and made outbound calls in an effort to sell policies. Across the open-plan office call centre employees were divided into teams named after high-performance car marques and 'competed' to see which team could convert the most calls into sales. The centre had an average conversion rate of 40 percent, said to be 'twice the national average'. Sales were flashed up onto a board for all the teams to see, and incentives to sell included scratch-cards, spot prizes and performance-related lotteries for meals at a local restaurant.

Didcock (1997) described the working environment inside an outbound BT call centre in Glasgow. The 500 employees in the call centre, known as 'sales advisors', sold BT products and services including various discount schemes by telephone. Performance charts and 'performance-inducing slogans' were said to adorn the office. Exhortations to 'Sell to the MAX!' appeared on mouse mats, whilst placards hung from the ceiling suggested that 'There's no limit' and challenged employees to 'Dare to be best'. The slogans were changed every three months otherwise, Didcock was told, 'people would get fed up with it'. There were vertical blinds at the windows, water dispensers scattered around the huge open-plan office and giant pictures of snowboarders and windsurfers on the walls. He suggested that call centre had a 60:40 male to female ratio. Male employees tended to be no older than their late twenties, whereas a considerable proportion of female employees appeared to be aged between thirty and fifty. Twelve percent of the 500 sales advisers were educated to degree level. Employees were expected to work a five-hour day starting at 9.30am or 3.30pm, during which they would make up to fifty calls to existing BT customers to try and persuade them to adopt new products or services. Basic salaries were paid, with individuals qualifying for additional bonuses worked out on the number of sales they had made and the total value of the products and services they had sold. Sales advisers were also grouped into 35 teams of 14 advisers, and the top-performing team each month received gift vouchers on top of their sales commission.

Wylie (1997) discussed working conditions in call centres in a report based mainly on remarks made by Simon Roncoroni, a director of call centre consultants the L&R Group, to attendees at a

conference on Computers in Personnel and Training run jointly by the Institute for Personnel Development (IPD) and the Institute of Employment Studies (IES). Roncoroni had warned the conference that call centres risked becoming the latter-day equivalents of the so-called 'dark satanic mills' of the industrial revolution. He explained that labour was the most expensive element in a call centre, so there would always be pressure to find ways of bringing labour costs down. He was quoted as having said that conditions in some call centres - with 'offices where individuals sit in tiny pig-pens with high screens around them or in a long line as though they're in a factory' - brought to mind industrial sweatshops.

Wylie suggested that some call centres resembled 'the huge factory warehouses of mass production, where the productivity of each 'agent' is monitored and analysed continuously as part of a relentless squeeze on costs' (1997: 2). Staff turnover in call centres was almost invariably high and, he argued, reflected the conditions which had to be endured by employees rather than being a product of the increasing competition for call centre workers in some locations, an explanation put forward by some call centre operators. He detailed the results of a survey of call centre employees by recruitment consultants Austin Knight which had found that call centre work was intensive, stressful and frequently repetitive, and that employee morale in call centres was generally low. In a similar vein, Kemp (1998) reported on the launch of Standard Life bank. The call centre supporting the new telephone bank employed around eighty people on a mix of full- and part-time contracts. The average age of employees at the call centre was approximately 25. There had been three weeks' training for call centre staff prior to the launch. On the first day the telephones rang constantly. The centre took 6,000 calls, some 2,000 more than originally anticipated, with customers waiting an average of six seconds instead of the target of between three and four seconds before being answered.

Godsmark (1998) described plans by BT to 'cold-call' some 15 million of its domestic customers on a quarterly basis in a bid to retain its market share by offering them discounts on existing services and selling additional ones. The customers being targeted by the campaign were those who had not at that time taken up BT's 'Friends and Family' discount scheme. He reported that BT did not regard its actions as cold-calling but as part of an on-going relationship with its customers. BT confirmed that most of the calls would be made in the evening or at weekends when customers were most likely to be at home, but said that in line with a telemarketing code of practice they

would not be making calls early in the morning or after 9pm at night. Power diallers would telephone BT customers. On answering the call, the automated system would put the customer through to an employee at one of BT's telemarketing call centres, simultaneously 'screen popping' the customer's details and information on their current calling patterns onto the call centre employee's monitor. The employee would then ascertain the customer's satisfaction with the services they currently received and offer additional services, with the conversation being guided by pre-scripted questions appearing on-screen in front of the employee.

Cameron (1998) discussed the control of language in corporate contexts, including in the context of call centre employment. She noted how speech was intimately bound up with social and personal identity and how some exercises of linguistic control were requiring employees to use words and phrases alien to them. She pointed out that employers had always exerted some control over their employees' behaviour and that appropriate individual performance, including appropriate verbal performance, had always been a tenet of professionalism. What had changed, she argued, was the extent to which the use of language was proscribed, for example by the use of pre-written scripts by call centre employees, and the degree to which verbal behaviour was subject to surveillance and assessment.

For Cameron, call centre employees were 'perhaps the clearest and most literal example of service work as "language work"'. Cameron suggested that the consequences for the individual employee of a managerial decision to attempt to control both the content of their speech and their tone of voice in the name of service quality were grave. She drew an analogy between the deskilling of production workers following automation and the deskilling of language workers who were prevented from exercising linguistic creativity. She emphasised the way that this loss of conversational control distances the employee from the transaction, arguing that although 'the operator may introduce herself by name, this apparent personalisation conceals a deeper de-personalisation, since she is no longer free to make even trivial linguistic choices, like whether to say "hello" or "good morning", "can I help you?" or "how may I help you?"' (1998: 32).

She also voiced concerns over the potentially alienating effect of emotional labour resulting from the strict managerial control of language. She felt that this was particularly a problem in UK service environments where the phrases favoured by management were often 'imported' from

America and emphasised intimacy or friendliness, for example by requiring employees to precede customer contacts with a first-name introduction such as 'Hello, Alison speaking. How may I help?' This might cause discomfort to British call centre employees for whom the politeness norm in interactions with strangers tended to be more distant. At a more general level, she expressed the view that there was insufficient critical attention directed towards corporate 'verbal hygiene' practices that, in her opinion, were 'altering our linguistic and cultural landscape'.

Overell (1998) provided a review of the way in which call centre work was being seen from different viewpoints. He imagined call centre employees as 'the new urban cyber serfs, shackled by telephone headsets, whipped into a sweaty fervour of customer service by punishing sales targets and desensitised by the constant drone of marketing-speak' (1998:66). He noted that the popular view of call centre employment was as 'part of that generation of no-choice choices', a job suitable for those who were unable to do any other. He suggested that 'the first drafts of what the call centre phenomenon actually means to the world of work' were beginning to emerge, describing them as 'an exercise in living heritage interpretation'.

Overell identified one of the first warnings on what call centres might become as being given in a speech in 1997 by call centre consultant Simon Roncoroni, who suggested that unless call centre operators paid more attention to the needs of their employees call centres risked becoming the 'dark satanic mills' of the computer age. Overell believed that this and other warnings had been a catalyst for subsequent academic opinion to the effect that call centres marked the 'industrialisation' of white-collar work. However, he argued, the prevailing view was now that call centres were not a homogeneous group, but ranged along a spectrum from telemarketing operations paying low wages to unskilled young employees to specialist help centres with highly educated workforces. The problem seemed to be that the public perception of call centres was being unduly influenced by stories concerning conditions at the worst. For example, the image of call centres as giant sheds with employees arranged in cramped conditions like battery hens belied the efforts of call centre operators such as Thomas Cook and Freemans to design and build attractive working places with calming interior decoration and facilities for relaxation.

Overell examined the question of job creation in relation to call centres. He suggested that according to an Income Data Services (IDS) report 1997 had been the peak year for job creation by

call centres, with an estimated 45,000 jobs having been created. The report's authors believed that the contribution of call centres to job creation would fall thereafter, to an estimated 12,000 new jobs in 2001. It was argued that more than 65 percent of call centre positions had simply replaced those lost in the existing branch networks of banks and insurance companies. Overell felt that the evidence appeared to suggest that some jobs might in fact have been lost as a result of the centralising effect of call centres. He cited the example of BT customer service support, including fault-reporting, billing and sales for the London area which, until the early 1990s, had been carried out by 1,170 staff employed at 35 separate locations in London. The same task was now managed by some 125 employees at a call centre in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, working to service level targets which required them to answer 90 per cent of calls within 15 seconds, 16 hours a day, every day of the week.

An article on Christmas bonuses (Anon, 1998q) discussed possible tensions between agency workers and employees of the call centre operator carrying out the same work. Employees at a call centre in Thurso operated by the employment agency Manpower carrying out a contract for work with BT expressed unhappiness at the level of Christmas bonus they received when compared to BT employees elsewhere in the country doing the same work. The BT call centre employees elsewhere received Christmas bonuses of between £85 and £275 each, whereas the Manpower call centre employees were given a contribution towards the call centre's Christmas night out equivalent to less than £2 per employee. A Manpower employee was quoted as saying that it was 'pretty galling when we see what BT staff on exactly the same grades as us are getting'. Manpower responded to the allegation that it was 'acting like Scrooge' by saying that the comparison was not a relevant one and that it was clear that its employees did not enjoy the same pay and conditions or benefits package as BT.

Palmer (1999) described employment conditions at a telecommunications company's call centre in Glasgow. Although the centre's manager was quoted as saying that it was 'nonsense' to make out that conditions resembled a sweatshop, Palmer noted that working life was very regimented. Call centre employees were expected to wear formal business dress. Workstations were not allocated, so that employees rarely sat at the same desks for two days in succession. There were rules prohibiting employees from bringing drinks of any kind to their desks or talking to colleagues during working

hours. During their eight-hour shifts employees were entitled to two 15-minute breaks every four hours, plus 40 minutes for lunch. Employee performance was closely monitored.

Palmer suggested that considerable care had gone into creating the physical environment for the call centre. The colours of the furniture and interior décor had been chosen, according to the centre manager, to 'keep the brain active and encourage people to be positive'. He felt that the same attention to detail singled out the call centre of a holiday company in Falkirk. A business-like reception area gave way to a brightly-lit 'sensorama' passageway leading to the operational part of the call centre. Walking through the passageway to their desks employees were subjected to the sounds of children playing and elephants trumpeting, the exotic scent of coconut oil, and the sight and sound of running water. Palmer described the scene inside the call centre itself, where wall murals complemented the blue ceiling and fake palm trees were interspersed between the purple desks.

Palmer suggested, however, that the philosophy at the Falkirk call centre seemed to be distinctly different from that of the Glasgow call centre. Desks were arranged in islands rather than long rows facing the front, and employees were dressed for the most part casually with jeans '*de rigueur*'. The manager of the Falkirk centre was quoted as suggesting that this image was 'the future of call centres'. He argued that there was 'no need to have rows and rows of people sitting as if they are on an assembly line. And if people aren't happy in their environment, they won't sell anything anyway'. Support for his contention was to be found in the productivity of the employees at his call centre. The average employee was said to sell £800,000 in holidays each year, and staff turnover at the centre was low, with only seven employees out of a total of 240 having left in the previous 14 months.

An article by Prentice (1999) examined the role of employees at an outsource call centre with a contract to service the radio pagers of a national telecommunications company. The employees received calls from the sender, who dictated the desired message. The employee then typed the message and transmitted it to the appropriate pager from where it could be read. It appeared that in some instances senders could be very emotional, for example when asking for a message to be paged about the death of a relative, but the employees were under strict instructions not to get involved with callers. The managing director of the call centre operator was quoted as saying that it

was 'a disciplinary matter if people start chatting to callers. Nice as it may sound to try to help someone who is upset, there are organizations such as the Samaritans for that sort of thing'.

The articles in this section tend to view aspects of call centre employment in negative terms. A number (for example, Calder, 1997; Didcock, 1997; Wylie, 1997) discuss the 'otherworldly' nature of some call centre work environments, emphasizing for example the scale of larger call centres or the decor. Many articles raised issues of control. For example, Cameron (1998) considered the control of language in call centres and its implications for employees and Palmer (1999) noted the regimentation of workplace behaviour. Pay was also a central issue, with many articles noting call centre salary ranges. The unequal treatment of agency as opposed to other call centre employees in relation to Christmas bonuses (Anon, 1998q) was acknowledged.

8.2.3 Articles relying on the accounts of others

An article in April 1997 described the working life of an employee at a Sitel call centre in Stratford-upon-Avon (Anon, 1997m). The featured employee was female, aged 40 and was the mother of a seven year-old child. She had worked in a bank before her child was born and had been offered her old job back but felt that the hours were insufficiently flexible. She suggested that the call centre position offered her flexibility of working hours, enabling her to do a day shift during term-time and an evening shift during school holidays. She was quoted as saying that when interviewed for the job, she had been asked about her previous customer service experience and her knowledge of computer keyboards but that on reflection she felt that the job required other, 'soft' skills, such as 'patience and also a bit of natural ability to talk to the customer and home in on what they want' (1997: 3). She also noted that because of the noise generated by 150 call centre employees all talking at the same time it was necessary to 'have to have the ability to concentrate'.

West (1997) suggested that large-scale employment in call centres had 'really all started only in the last decade, and especially in the last four or five years, when many of Britain's bigger organisations realised that great cost savings could be made by replacing scores of expensive offices and high street shops with huge sheds, often in dreary locations enjoying cheap rents, holding large regimented teams of telephone sales and enquiry staffs' (1997: 8). He cited the example of Talking Pages, a telephone-based version of Yellow Pages, which had been developed

from scratch over the preceding ten years and by 1997 employed 1,500 people in eight call centres to provide a round-the-clock service answering more than a million queries a month. Talking Pages' head of customer services was quoted as saying that it was the type of employment that tended 'to attract people who either love it and stay forever, or people like students just filling in'. Qualities that Talking Pages looked for in a potential recruit included empathy, a good speaking voice and computer literacy, together with 'an inquiring mind as people can ring and be very vague or have strange requests'.

West profiled a male employee at a direct insurance sales call centre in Watford and a female call centre employee working for another direct insurer in Bromley. Both were aged 24 and they said that they were expected to take around 70 calls per day working a shift pattern and that although the shifts interfered with outside socialising there was a good team environment in their call centre. The male employee described a typical day as consisting of 'a continuous flow of calls, with an hour for lunch and morning and afternoon breaks of 10 minutes. Your performance is monitored all the time. The team leader listens into calls, and you're given a percentage mark for performance' (West, 1997: 8).

Wainwright (1998) referred to studies by researchers at the London School of Economics that had warned of the 'Orwellian potential' of call centres and likened them to 'panopticons' (Ferne, 1998; Ferne and Metcalf, 1998. See chapter 4). The article featured a male employee at a telephone banking call centre. Because of the inconsistent use of tense it is not clear whether the individual was still working at the call centre at the time of the article, but the purpose seems to have been to explain how working conditions might affect an employee at a 'respectable' call centre operation before suggesting that conditions would be far worse at less respectable establishments. The employee in question had worked for a year in the sales and service advice section of the business on eight-hour shifts with a maximum of two hours at a time manning the telephones. After that time the intensity and monotony of the work combined with the closeness of management control and monitoring had taken its toll, with the employee quoted as saying 'I couldn't take it any more - it was driving me mad... I found it all right for most of my time, but at [the end] of the month, when everyone's just been paid, it was peep, one call, finish that, then peep, another one, all the time' (1998: 21).

An article in November 1998 detailed a 'typical day' in the life of a male call centre employee working for an insurance company (Anon, 1998p). He worked eight-hour shifts on a pattern related to the expected volume of traffic. This particular shift started at 9am on Sunday, but he could be required to work on any day of the week and from 8am and 9pm on weekdays and 8am and 4pm at the weekend. He was required to be in position and ready to take calls from the minute his shift started, with the threat of possible disciplinary proceedings for late starts. He was required to answer calls requesting quotations for policy renewals continuously from the start of his shift until his lunch break, and he handled up to 100 such calls each day. He described the working environment as including a 'central display [which] flashes up the number of calls that are waiting, together with exhortations to step up the pace', adding to the pressure caused by the intensity of the work, and the 'supervisor [who] walks around the desks giving encouragement'. The computer system logged employee activity on a minute-by-minute basis and employees were required to enter codes to explain any time spent away from their desks. He explained that such absences, for whatever reason, were generally frowned upon and that he had been put through disciplinary procedures 'for going to the printer too often. I wanted to ensure customer letters got sent quickly, but management said I was spending too much time away from my desk'.

Employees were driven by their pay structures and by the monitoring systems. He suggested that his basic wage of £8,000 could be topped up to a maximum £13,500, but that to get 'a decent pay packet you have to beat 20 performance targets'. He said that he made an average of around £11,000, and that only 4 out of 250 employees at the call centre managed to make £13,500. He felt that there was 'constant pressure to keep up the pace and quality of your work, to keep on selling'. There was continuous computerised monitoring of employees' activities and all telephone conversations were recorded. There were a number of performance targets imposed. He gave the example of call lengths, saying that 'On average each should take about seven minutes. If you consistently go over 11 minutes you get hauled in to explain why you've taken so long'. One reason he gave as to why the figure might be higher was the amount of time taken by callers who wanted to complain. These tended to be lengthy calls and often required employees to 'soak up lots of aggression' with some callers in his view ringing up just to be abusive. As a result, most shifts ended with him feeling stressed and 'completely exhausted'.

An article by Tighe (1998) examined the perception of call centres as gendered employment. The article centred on efforts by Sunderland City Council to persuade more people, and especially more men, to apply for positions in the growing number of call centres in the area. The Council was spending £10,000 on a campaign promoting call centre work with slogans such as 'Not only for women' and 'Train and still claim'. The City's call centre development officer was quoted as saying that many people 'still think it's ringing up people and selling double glazing; a lot think it's women's work'. A 'centre of excellence' for call centre training was being set up, and the Council was in the process of running nine-week courses to train people who were either unemployed or just returning to the labour market in call centre skills. It was anticipated that the courses would train a total of 600 people over a two-year period. The article profiled a number of male call centre employees and male trainees on the call centre training course. Details of the profiled individuals invariably included age and former occupations, as if to highlight that neither of these was a barrier to future employment in call centres. It was suggested that many younger men espoused the belief that call centre employment was 'women's work', despite not having any personal experience of the shipbuilding or mining industries that had previously accounted for much of the male employment in the region.

Saunders (1998) argued that despite negative epithets such as 'the new sweatshops' and 'dark satanic mills' about the use of call centres there was a growing body of evidence that suggested that call centre employees were largely satisfied with their lot. He suggested that call centres were more likely to be located in former industrial heartlands such as the West of Scotland and the North of England, as much for the cheap land and availability of labour as for the 'friendly' regional accents; that call centre employees were more likely to work at inbound call centres than outbound ones as the majority of UK call centres were of the former type; and that the workforce was predominantly young and female.

Whilst agreeing that on the face of it call centre employment could seem 'appalling', Saunders pointed out that this view was based on certain preconceptions, many of which were challenged by the findings of an Income Data Services (IDS) survey (IDS, 1998). Of the call centre employees surveyed, most worked full-time and permanent contracts were not uncommon, although a small proportion of the workforce did consist of students and mothers looking for flexible employment. In rebutting negative views of call centre employment Saunders quoted the opinions of an

experienced female call centre senior supervisor. He argued that she was 'in a position to know how things really are' because 'she has worked in call centres for seven years'. The woman said that in her experience employees stayed for longer than the average of 18 months which one study had suggested was the length of time that it took for employees to fall victim to 'call centre burnout'. She also disagreed with suggestions that conditions in call centres had been 'hellish' in the past. She agreed that there had been improvements to call centre environments, but insisted that the call centres she had worked in previously were 'good for their time'.

Palfreyman (1999) reported the views of a male who had worked at a mobile telephone company's call centre in Birmingham for six months. The man suggested that repetition and boredom had made him physically drained by the end of a shift. He had suffered health problems including a sore throat from speaking so much, headaches, eye-strain, and repetitive strain injuries to his back and hands. He said that the work was intense, with 'literally calls all the time'. The stressful nature of the work eventually got to him. He explained his decision to quit by saying that employees 'do get burned out. I was fed up of dealing with problems not of my making. You get loads of grief and hassle and at times it feels like a sweatshop' (1999: 38). Palfreyman reported a spokeswoman for the Communication Workers' Union as suggesting that such experiences were not uncommon and that the Union had dealt with many similar cases where stress had been 'brought on by the level of work and the targets introduced by managers'. A CWU survey in the Midlands had shown that employees found performance targets to be the most stressful aspect of their work.

Reviewing the articles in this section, it is interesting to note that despite the gendered nature of most call centres, noted in chapters 3 and 6, many of the call centre employees whose views have been used are male (West, 1997; Wainwright, 1998; Anon, 1998p; Palfreyman, 1999). With notable exceptions (Tighe, 1998; Saunders, 1998), most of the articles tended to convey negative impressions of call centre employment, frequently referring to task monotony, work intensity and employee control.

7.2.4 Articles based on the authors' own observations of call centre employment

Middleton (1996) described a day spent at the Paddington station enquiry bureau, a call centre dealing with rail travel enquiries. He noted that the centre's thirty full-time and fifty part-time

employees answered up to 200 queries in a 12-hour shift. The centre manager was quoted as saying that he looked for employees to answer 'an ideal figure of about 20 calls an hour. If it goes up to 35, we start to worry about the quality of the information being given out. If it goes down to nine or 10, we will be on at that person to speed up' (1996: 19). Middleton reported that of the 60 million calls made to railway enquiry bureaux annually, only 66 percent were actually answered. At the time of his report the Paddington centre was answering 82 percent of the calls that were received on its telephone number. From October 1996 it was due to be networked into the national rail enquiry service, which was operated from a single national number with calls automatically directed to whichever bureau had capacity at the time of the call. Middleton pointed out that this would mean that if an employee dealt with an enquiry poorly, or was rude, the caller would not know which centre to complain about and asked whether the move encouraged lower standards in the centre. The centre manager explained that standards would be maintained by increasing the number of 'mystery shopper' calls made by the rail companies' representatives. He said that employees could expect on average to receive three or four calls each day from such sources assessing the efficiency and politeness of their responses.

Middleton explained that many callers became impatient with the time taken to deal with enquiries and often vented their frustrations on call centre employees. They failed to appreciate the fact that delays were often the result of employees having to wait for answer from the computer system after employees had entered the necessary keying sequence for their enquiries. He suggested that employees themselves occasionally became exasperated when callers were particularly vague about their needs. Their exasperation became more acute when the wall-mounted system of three warning lights operating in the centre indicated that other callers were waiting.

Johnstone (1997) prefaced her article with the warning 'If you've never been in a call centre before, at first sight it's daunting: in row upon row of grey booths women and men of all shapes and sizes, kids fresh from the chalkface to cheery grannies jabbering into headsets and hammering at keyboards' (1997: 13). Her article is typical of many in this category in that it appears to carry a subtext suggesting that call centre employment is open to all. This is achieved by emphasising the growth in call centres; mentioning male to female workforce ratios; suggesting that personality and even accent are more important than formal qualifications; detailing the availability of a range of

different shift patterns; and profiling a number of current call centre employees of varying age, gender and circumstances, almost invariably including a mother with young children.

Stanford (1999) observed the working environment of a BT outbound call centre in Newcastle. He described the call centre itself as 'an oversized warehouse in the middle of downbeat estates and rag-tag fields on the outskirts of the city' the size of three or four football pitches. A balcony enabled him to look out over the main operating area of the call centre, a vast cavern filled with smartly dressed call centre employees all working in identical individual grey and blue booths 'neatly lined up into groups of 12 as far as the eye can see'. He revealed that in the call centre agency employees on successive short-term contracts worked alongside colleagues employed directly by BT, although the centre managers declined to say what proportion of the workforce agency employees represented. According to Stanford, the difference in employer was significant for employees because 'agency staff are paid at lower rates, have to rely more heavily on bonuses, do not get BT pensions, sick pay, discounts on the company's services and they cannot apply for internally advertised staff jobs. In short they have no job security'. The latter point was highlighted in a discussion later in the article of the dismissals of two men formerly engaged by an employment agency to work at the call centre. The work carried out by the call centre employees, or 'advisors' as they were titled, followed a set routine. Stanford explained that for 'around £4.50 per hour, 35 hours a week, advisors cold-call numbers selected anywhere in the country by a central computer, read from a pre-prepared script on a computer screen and try to charm the voice at the other end of the line into buying trimmings for their phones such as charge cards, extra lines and the Call Minder answering service' (1999: 12).

Kane (1999) visited the call centre of a leading high street bank with the express intention of finding out whether call centres deserved their 'sweatshop' reputation. She reported surprise at the openness of the call centre and the fact that she was allowed to speak to any employee she chose. On talking to various call centre employees she admitted to being 'astonished at their candour when discussing their employers... and suspicious about how animated they got when they discussed what they did for a living'. However, she said, employees did appear to be enjoying their jobs and the call centre's union representative assured her personally that he had heard no complaints and that the centre was 'no sweatshop'.

Aitken (2000) reported on working conditions in one Glasgow call centre previously described as a 'sweatshop'. She said that she had seen call centre employees with their hands raised to ask for a drink of water and that on some occasions forms had to be filled out when employees went to the toilet. It seemed that these were the result of a payment system that required employees to be at their workstations and 'call-ready' for 97 percent of their shift time outside of designated breaks in order to qualify each month for individual bonuses that could be worth up to £70 per month. Whilst in theory anyone could go for a drink, in practice employees would ask supervisors to bring drinks to them so that their call-ready status was maintained. Employees were also divided into teams. Loss of individual bonuses by one member could jeopardise the team bonus for their team-mates. There was therefore pressure from fellow employees to make the 97 percent call-ready target. Aitken suggested that that pressure would intensify as the call centre operator moved the target to be achieved to qualify for bonuses to 98 percent. Any time outside of designated breaks spent away from their workstations, including trips to the toilet, had to be accounted for and employees were required to fill in forms stating the reason for their absence.

As well as meeting the call-ready criterion, employees at the call centre had to ensure 100 percent attendance and always log on to the computer system within thirty seconds of the start of their shift and after breaks in order to qualify for bonuses. Aitken suggested that staff turnover at the call centre was 'huge', possibly as a result of so many of the call centre's part-time employees being students. A spokesman for the call centre operator suggested that the percentages of log on and call-ready time used in the call centre were 'the industry norm' but Aitken suggested that requirements were considerably more relaxed at BT 192 directory enquiries call centres. She alleged that employees there were given 'half an hour of every shift in addition to their official breaks to go to the toilet or have a cigarette without any effect on bonus', equating to a required call-ready time of 85 percent. Certainly in the past bonuses had not been paid to agency employees working in call centres providing this service, so the comparison is not necessarily a valid one.

The articles in this section have tended to draw attention to aspects of call centre employment that for whatever reason seem 'unfamiliar' to the authors. For example, Johnstone (1997) suggested that people might be 'daunted' by the sight of an operational call centre. Again, many authors' attentions seemed to have been captured by call centre size and/or décor.

8.2.4 Articles describing participant observation in call centres

There were only two articles of this type. In the first, Wazir (1999), as part of an investigative report into working conditions in call centres, applied for a two-week contract for a position in an outsource call centre in London. He described the application process via a local employment agency. As well as attending an interview he was required to take what the recruitment consultant described as 'an aptitude test'; a computer-based list of questions, each with two possible answers, which appeared designed to produce a crude personality profile. He passed the test and was offered the position. A week later and Wazir entered the call centre for the first time. He described the interior of the call centre as 'clinically clean' with its multitude of corridors and operations rooms 'all manned by crews of twentysomethings armed with headsets'. Entrance to and exit from the call centre building was by electronic security pass, enabling the call centre operator to monitor the movements of employees. There was a canteen but no food was served, and a postal room doubled up as a rest room for employees on breaks from their work stations.

Following role-play training with twenty-four other starters, they were introduced to someone who described himself as the 'operational systems manager' who told them that they would 'have fun' but that there would be 'no slacking' and no 'downloading crap from the Internet'. Their operations room housed a variety of computers of different ages, some with mirrors attached to the screens. There were no allocated seats and, Wazir suggested, this led to a daily scramble for places in front of the latest computers. He explained that his 'human resources manager' had said that looking in the mirrors as he answered each call would help him to ensure that he smiled for the customer, because customers could tell when you were smiling.

Wazir was part of a group of employees at the call centre servicing a contract between the call centre operator and a mobile telephone operator client to provide help desk support for its loyalty programme. As such, all conversations with callers had to be preceded by the phrase 'Thank you for calling Vodafone Rewards Service, my name is "X" how may I help you?'. He suggested that he could hear the voices of other call centre employees, 'clinical and starved of all emotion flatly dealing with customers that have the same inquiry' despite regular reminders that their conversations were being recorded and would be monitored for 'efficiency and etiquette'. He commented on the intensity of the work, saying that there was 'no let-up throughout each shift' and

'no time between conversations'. He noted that as a result few employees had 'time to engage in any conversation' and almost all sat 'hunched over their terminals'. It seemed that many of the employees complained of stress brought on by having to answer a 'relentless' stream of calls, all of which had to be dealt with at an average of less than four minutes per call. According to Wazir, there was little post-work interaction between employees with most just going straight home. He explained that there seemed 'little point in any social activities'. Employees were paid £4.75 per hour, but all breaks were unpaid, including cigarette breaks which lost employees seven minutes of pay. The only perk seemed to be a monthly visit to a local pub at which the call centre operator's managing director bought all the employees a drink.

Under the guise of investigative journalism Mollard (1999) also carried out covert participant observation, in her case in two different call centres. The first was an outbound call centre operated by a company running a home shopping catalogue. She was employed on a four-week temporary contract working evenings from 5pm to 9pm and paying £4.50 per hour via an employment agency. She described the call centre as being like 'a huge, under-ventilated aircraft hangar' with some 2,800 employees, male and female, arranged in rows 'as far as the eye can see'. Her contract began at the same time as that of three other women: a young mother, a woman of over fifty who had just returned from living abroad, and another in her twenties who was just 'filling in' whilst she considered her options.

They were told that they would be making calls by the end of their first evening, the aim of which were to discover why customers preferred shopping with the call centre operator's competitors. After ninety minutes' instruction the 'trainees' were taking calls dialled automatically and with the customers' details 'popped' onto the screen in front of them. They were instructed that when a call was answered they were to ask if the customer could spare 'a few minutes' to complete a survey. Mollard said that in fact the survey took more than fifteen minutes to complete, with the employee asking questions and keying in answers as prompted on-screen. Calls were periodically monitored by supervisors and employees could see their own real-time progress as measured by a 'little yellow face on your computer screen which smiles if your calls are efficient but scowls when you're taking too long'. Mollard spent three nights working at the outbound call centre, not long but long enough to notice that at least one of her co-trainees had already given up. She described a telephone call that she had made at 7.45pm one evening. The customer had summarily terminated

the call having indicated simply that she did not have time to take it. Mollard recalled that the rebuff had made her cheeks 'burn with humiliation' and that she had felt 'like life's lowest living form'. She had described what had happened to the employee sitting next to her who had apparently responded that she could expect to get 'loads of snooty ones like that' and had suggested that revenge could be exacted on the woman by arranging to have her called back early on a Sunday morning.

Mollard's second call centre position, at the inbound call centre of a telecommunications provider, was not reported in the same level of detail. She said only that she had been placed next to a male employee who had been at the call centre for two years to be trained by him, but instead of teaching her about the services provided by the call centre he had shown her various 'time-wasting techniques' of which she gave no details. She suggested that employee behaviour at the call centre was generally subdued, with enthusiasm generated only 'when a call comes through from a customer with a humorous surname'.

8.3 The nature and experience of call centre work

Here I use data gathered during the period of my own covert participant observation together with some of my interview data to describe the nature and experience of call centre employment. The section is divided into subsections, which relate to particular aspects of call centre employment. Each subsection begins with description of the physical nature of an aspect before exploring individual experiences of it. Where appropriate, data have been tabulated for ease of comparison. Blank cells indicate where comparative data are unavailable.

The participant observation was carried out over a period of 14 weeks between March 1998 and June 1998. This includes two weeks of initial training but does not include the processes of application and selection for the position, which have already been discussed in the previous chapter, or the induction session held the week before training started. Table 8.1 provides details of the call centre employment of the interviewees whose experiences are also discussed in this chapter. Whilst there were only seven interviewees, several had worked in more than one call centre. Data are therefore available on eleven different call centres. Three interviewees had experienced full time call centre employment, two of them on a permanent basis. Five interviewees

had experienced part time call centre employment, one on a permanent basis. The data suggests that full time call centre employment tends to be permanent whereas part time call centre employment tends to be on a temporary basis, but the sample is too small for meaningful statistical analysis.

Table 8.1 Participant observation and interviewees' call centre employment dates and durations

	Call centre	Centre function	Approximate numbers of employees	Year started	Duration of Employment
Participant Observation	TelCo	Inbound Telecomms	100	1998	14 weeks
Interviewees					
Stewart	OutsourceCo	Inbound Financial		1998	3 weeks
Catriona	SatCo	Inbound Entertainment	200	1996	3 years
Sharon	ABankCo	Outbound Financial	175	1992	3 years
	BBankCo	Outbound Financial	35	1995	3 years
	AssuranceCo	Inbound Financial	7	1998	12 months*
Julie	TimeshareCo	Outbound Leisure	40	2000	2 days
Mike	TelCo	Outbound Telecomms	800	1997	6 months
	TelCo	Inbound Telecomms	35	1997	18 months
Rob	Thirdparty	In/Out Assorted		1994	3 months + 3 months
Ginny	AssuranceCo	Inbound Financial	7	1997	3 years*

* Still in this employment at the time of interview

8.3.1 Terms and conditions of employment

This section explores the terms and conditions of employment found in call centres, and examines what these mean for employees. Chapter 2 identified a number of work-related trends in advanced industrial societies. These included; the increasing incidence of non-manual employment, shorter and more frequently interrupted working lives, increasing job instability rising use of non-standard forms of employment, and shorter working weeks but longer working days, with overtime

frequently required or expected but less likely to be paid than in the past. This section will provide evidence on the extent to which call centre employment reflects these trends.

The nature of call centre terms and conditions

I was employed by AgencyCo to work at TelCo's call centre on a temporary contract with a maximum term of two years. My job title was 'operator' and under the terms of my contract of employment I was required to work for 20.5 hours per week. The call centre operated from 7.30am to 11pm weekdays and Sundays, and until 1am Friday and Saturday nights. Working hours were evenly spread over five evenings each week, with each shift being of either four or 4.25 hours. Shifts could commence at any time after 4pm. I was entitled to one paid 15-minute break, usually scheduled for approximately midway through the shift. The days worked each week and daily starting times varied and were assigned by TelCo. The time during each shift at which the 15-minute break had to be taken also varied and was also scheduled by TelCo. They provided employees with weekly details of shift rotas for two out of every three weeks for three months in advance. Shift details for the third week in each three were only released at the end of the week preceding it.

Table 8.2 contains data on my own and the interviewees' shift arrangements. Shift patterns took various forms. The participant observation had the greatest variation, with changes in both days to be worked and starting times each week. Mike was obliged to rotate earlier and later shifts on a weekly basis, and Sharon's time at ABankCo was spent working a split week comprising two earlier and three slightly later shifts. There would not appear from this data to be any link between either shift variability and part time or temporary employment status or variability and the employment sector of the call centre concerned. However, it is possible that such patterns might be visible in a larger dataset.

At TelCo at that time the rate of pay for AgencyCo employees during the two-week full time training period was £3.00 per hour. The standard rate of pay following that was £4.05 per hour, but premium rates applied at specified times. A rate of 1.25 times basic rate was paid for work between 8pm and 6am Monday to Friday and for any hours worked on Saturday. Sundays attracted a premium of 1.5 times basic rate with bank and public holidays earning an hourly rate of twice the

basic rate. There was an increase of £0.45 per hour to a new basic rate of £4.50 effective from 28 May 1998. Overtime was possible, but for AgencyCo employees it was paid at the standard rates for the shift to be covered.

Table 8.2 Participant observation and interviewees' shift details

	Call Centre	Employment status	Full time or part time	Days worked	Shift length (hours)	Shift times	Breaks (minutes)
Participant Observation	TelCo	Temporary	PT	Variable 5 from 7	4 x 3 4.25 x 2	Variable, starting after 4pm	1 x 15
Interviewees							
Stewart	OutsourceCo	Temporary	PT				
Catriona	SatCo	Permanent	PT	W/ends	5	5pm-10pm	1 x 15
Sharon	ABankCo	Permanent	FT	Mon-Fri	8 x 2 8.5 x 3	10am-6pm/ 12pm-8.30pm	
	BBankCo	Permanent	FT	Mon-Fri			
	AssuranceCo	Permanent	FT	Mon-Fri	7.5	8.30am-5pm	2 x 10 1 x 60
Julie	TimeshareCo	Temporary	PT	Mon-Fri	5	5pm-10pm	
Mike	TelCo	Temporary	PT	Mon-Fri	5	9.15am-2.45pm/ 2.45pm-8.15pm	1 x 30
	TelCo	Temporary	FT	Mon-Fri		9am-5.30pm	1 x 30
Rob	Thirdparty	Temporary	PT	Variable			
Ginny	AssuranceCo	Permanent	FT	Mon-Fri	7.5	8.30am-5pm	2 x 10 1 x 60

Comparisons of the available data on remuneration are not particularly useful because of the different dates at which interviewees were employed. However, several of the interviewees made comments that put their rates of pay into perspective. Catriona, a permanent SatCo employee, said that 'the money wasn't bad for the type of job it was you know, for casual employment the money probably wasn't too bad'. This is similar to the comment made by Karen, a fellow AgencyCo employee at TelCo, who said that the pay was not as bad as some jobs that she had done. Ginny, a permanent AssuranceCo employee, explained that when she first started in the call centre she was 'on about under eight thousand a year. So I was on about seven-eight. Then - I stayed and thought I really liked it in the call centre. But the money was really poor so I left. I got another job somewhere else. Then I went back three months later because they offered me more money. They

offered me ten and a half. They gave me a promotion. And then I went back to the call centre' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000). Differing personal circumstances may provide a possible explanation for these different perceptions of call centre pay. Ginny's salary was her only source of income whereas Catriona's wages were a second and not the main income for her household. It may be that what is considered an acceptable rate of pay varies, amongst other things, with whether it is a main or a second income for the household, with lower rates being seen as acceptable in the latter case. Mike had been working for an agency handing out leaflets at a supermarket immediately before his first call centre job. Asked how the money for each compared he answered:

'It was five pounds an hour doing the Sainsbury's job.... [T]his job was four fifty an hour. It was three eighty-five when I started, so I worked my way down the pay scale. I was quite impressed with that. So it was four fifty an hour and it was a twenty-five hour week, and we got a bonus on top of that which was actually worth quite a bit, depending on how well you were doing' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

There were variations in the way in which remuneration packages were made up. Inbound call centres tended to pay a basic rate, sometimes enhanced by shift and overtime premia. Of his second, inbound period of employment with Thirdparty Rob said that the overtime rates were 'very good. It was literally double time, bank holidays triple time. Which was quite unheard of, generally. Most places it was time and a half, something like that, when I worked for anyone else, like go-kart companies or anything. I worked for a few go-kart tracks in London, quite a lot of go-kart tracks in London' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

Employment in outbound call centres tended to attract basic rates plus performance bonuses. Julie, working for a call centre involved in selling timeshares earned a basic rate of £4.00 per hour for telephoning members of the public and trying to get them to agree to attend a presentation but 'you did get commission if people turned up for the day you'd arranged. If they turned up you'd get, um - I can't remember how much it was - seven pounds or something for a week night and, say, five pounds if they turned up at the weekend, because obviously its more difficult to get them during the week, you know?' (Interview with Julie, 24 April 2000). Sharon did not get financial bonuses at ABankCo but said that they were being introduced when she left for BBankCo, part of the same group of companies, where there were bonus incentives but not financial ones. Rob's first period of employment at Thirdparty involved outbound work, trying to persuade the client's customers to upgrade their credit cards. Asked if there were bonuses attaching to that campaign, he replied 'Not for me at that time, but for some people, yes. Some people were on - because I was temporary and I

was getting an hourly wage there was not, but for the full-time employees they were on a basic plus performance-related payment system' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000). This provides an example of the different treatment of temporary and permanent employees doing the same job, an issue explored in more depth later in this subsection.

In addition some call centres have provided further incentives to help retain employees. In the TelCo centre, a number of telephones were provided for the use of staff allowing them to make calls to UK landlines without charge. Catriona was provided with free satellite television services, including hardware. She said they were 'a big perk, because it was a lot of money. I had forty-five pounds-worth of channels per month on my card. Didn't watch most of them (laughs) but they were there if you wanted them, you know?' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000). At ABankCo Sharon was given a company car. She explained that 'in the call centres if you were there for six months and you managed to get past your training, then after six months you got a company car. Only a basic one, but it got you from A to B and they paid all the insurance and serviced it. All you had to do was put the petrol in' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999). At BBankCo you had to have been with the company for three years to qualify for a company car, but Sharon managed to keep the car because she had by then been with the parent company for that long. Ginny said that AssuranceCo she was eligible for a non-contributory pension, BUPA membership but 'you have to pay tax on it' and, after a three-year qualifying period, a mortgage allowance of £1,300 on top of her basic salary.

An unofficial 'perk' of the job at the TelCo call centre in Centraltown was the call centre's car parking facilities. A number of employees admitted to using the call centre car park when they came in to the town centre. This was seen as a perk of the job, although strictly speaking access to the car park was only permitted when coming in to work. This 'abuse' happened most frequently at week-ends. Although, as discussed below, the requirement to lock the car park gates on entry was in general ignored, employees seemed agreed that they were far more likely to lock the gates when their own car was not legitimately parked. This, they said, was because people who had no connection with the call centre had become wise to the fact that the gates were rarely locked and were also starting to use it as a free car park. They wanted to discourage this practice.

As an AgencyCo employee at TelCo I was entitled, after the qualifying period, to paid holidays of 20 days accrued on a calendar monthly basis. After a differently worded but similar qualifying period I was also entitled to public holidays of eight days per year. I was told when I was released from my contract that time spent in training did not count towards these qualifying periods, and that I had not worked in the call centre for long enough to qualify for holiday pay. The same qualifying criteria applied to AgencyCo's sick pay scheme. During my time at the call centre I was able to book leave, but the time off was unpaid.

During her interview, Catriona talked about holiday entitlement and how in some cases it was extended:

'Q: And did you have paid holidays?

Yes, on my shift you got - now how many did you get a year? Eight. You got eight nights off a year, which wasn't a lot. When you used to - because I used to go on holiday in the summer for two weeks that was four, so that was half your holidays. But again, we only worked, officially, ten hours so I don't think they really had to give you paid holidays or paid sick leave. You were allowed four sick nights a year without them docking your wages for it.

Q: Did you have four sick nights a year?

Yes, most years I did (laughs). It was usually when the kids were ill actually. Yes, I think most people took - in fact a lot of people took more than that and just said 'Oh well, I'll not get paid for it but I need the night off because its awful'.
(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Experiences of call centre terms and conditions of employment

In some forms of employment, the time at which you 'start work' does not necessarily coincide with the time at which full work effort is first applied. For example, in previous employment as a local government officer I 'clocked in' every morning by punching a clock-card in a machine situated near the entrance to the building. I then walked to my office, took off any outdoor clothing, sat down at my desk and started to work. Similarly, in the evening I would cease work, ready myself to go home and, as I left the building, clock out. The length of my working day was calculated from the times shown on the clock-card, but that was greater than the time that I actually spent working. Call centres are different. In most call centres the time you 'start' for the purposes of payment is the point at which you make yourself available to take or make calls. At TelCo I was told during training that I should arrive at the building 5-10 minutes early for my shift so that I

could be in position and logging on to the system the minute my shift was scheduled to start. Mike said that his shift started at 9.15am 'so you were supposed to be there before that to make sure that you were ready to start calling people up at nine fifteen'. The same is true following any breaks during shifts. Catriona noted that 'if you were one minute over the fifteen minutes going back then, you know, you got picked up on it: 'You were late back from your coffee break''(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Logging off at the end of a shift is similarly not allowed until the appointed moment had been reached. If you were engaged on a call at that point, you were not allowed to log off until you had completed the call. The type of customer enquiries that I was handling at TelCo meant that the length of 'unpaid overtime' at the end of a shift was rarely more than a couple of minutes. Working at the SatCo call centre Catriona's unpaid overtime was often longer:

'You had to wait until someone shouted 'That's night service' before you could turn your telephone off. And if there was a lot of calls coming through - they were supposed to shout on the stroke of ten - if there was a lot of calls coming through some nights it'd be five, ten past ten but you weren't allowed to turn your telephone off until they shouted that.

Q: Did you get paid extra for that?

No, no. Again, the same if you were just getting caught up in a call just as they were shouting it at ten and that call took half an hour you didn't get paid extra for that. That was just part of the job. You were dealing with a customer you had to wait and, you know, finish it up'.

(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

When I had applied to AgencyCo for employment at the TelCo call centre in Centraltown, both part time and full time positions had been available. The part time positions had been for evenings only. The full time ones were only for working the back shift, that is to say 8 hours shifts starting at or after 2pm. But not all AgencyCo employees worked later shifts. Michelle, an AgencyCo employee on day shifts that I met during training, said that until about 6 months previously, all agency employees at the exchange had been on 'mixed' shifts. This meant that they could, and did, get any shift allocation that was open to them, day or back shift. Michelle said that she had found herself on almost continual back shifts right the way through December because some employees were not turning up for back shifts and there was insufficient cover. So AgencyCo had asked its employees to nominate which shift they would prefer to take, and had tied everyone to a particular shift. She added that most TelCo people were on days, with just a few on permanent back shifts.

Working evenings had definite drawbacks for me, some of which were more immediately obvious than others. The first thing that I noticed was the disruption to my normal routine:

‘Today was my second 7 to 11 pm in a row. I have noticed that the later starts actually cause more disruption to my personal life than the earlier ones. The reason for this is dinner. We are used to having our evening meal around 8 pm. James is rarely home from work before 6 pm, and preparations do not usually get underway until we have had a cup of tea and ‘chilled out’ for a while. Early shifts are OK. James will usually prepare something for us to eat and have it more or less ready for when I return at about 9.30 pm. Later shifts are causing more difficulty. The latest weekday shift starts at 7 pm, which is what I have had for the last two days. I have to leave the house at 6.30 pm to make sure that I am in work on time. There is no opportunity to eat dinner before I go. Since there is only a 15-minute break, I cannot take my dinner with me to eat at break time. I have tried it with instant meals, pot noodles, microwave meals, etc. But 15 minutes is not long enough to prepare and eat comfortably. Perhaps it would be if it was a cold meal that required no preparation, but even then it would be hurried. That means that the evening meal is delayed until my return from work, which has been about 11.20 pm. I do not feel happy about eating at this time, and I know it is not good for me to eat and then go to bed’ (Diary, 22 April 1998).

After around two months’ employment in the call centre it occurred to me that working in the evenings was going to become increasingly more difficult for me to cope with, partly because of the lighter nights and better weather but also because I anticipated changes in the customer make-up. In my diary entry for 3 May 1998 I commented that in my view it was ‘less of a loss to spend nights that are cold miserable and dark in the warm surroundings of the call centre. But with the warmer nights, the thought of spending time in the exchange becomes a lot less attractive, especially as the proportion of calls from children in telephone boxes in the evening increases, and the point at which such calls tail off starts to extend later and later’ (Diary, 3 May 1998).

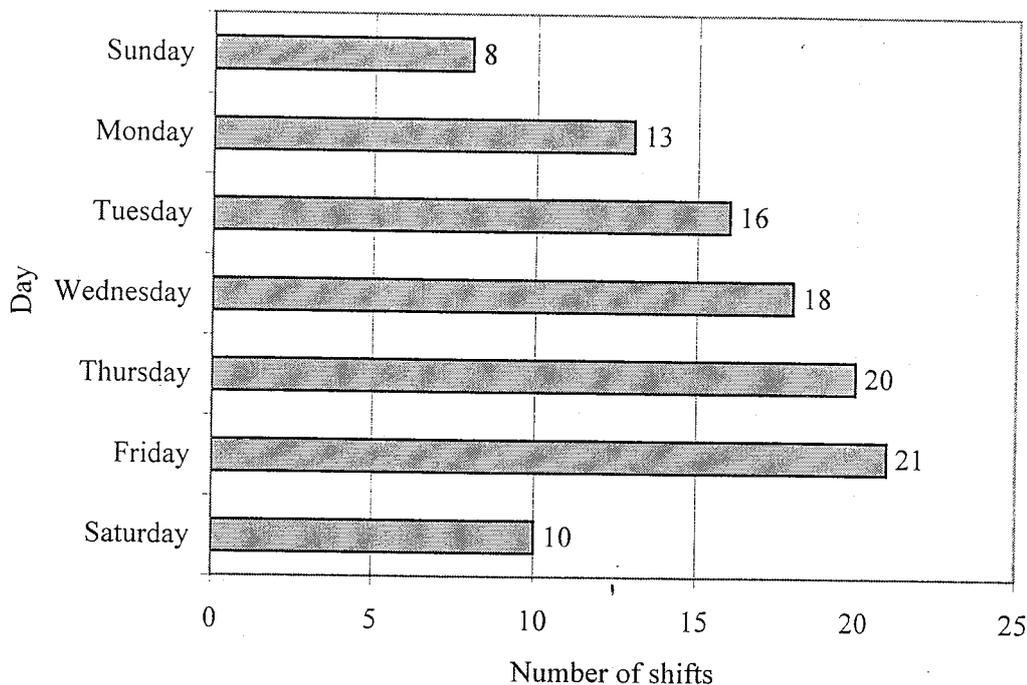
Catriona had a different view of working evening shifts in the winter. Drawing on personal experience she described a scenario to illustrate some potential problems:

‘You would maybe arrive about 5 o’clock and it’d be snowing and you’d be a bit anxious because its in Othertown and a really awful road to get home. You’d be a bit anxious about whether you were going to get home, and the supervisors would actually close the blinds. There was only one set of windows at the front, and they would close the blinds so you couldn’t see what the weather was doing. So you’d go out at 11 o’clock or 10 o’clock at night and there’d be snowdrifts and you’d say ‘Oh my God!’’ (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

I was scheduled to work five evenings each week. The days to be worked and the two rest days varied from week to week. I found that it was more difficult to relax when my two rest days were not consecutive and I did not feel that I gained as much benefit or felt as rested as when they followed each other. At the AgencyCo interview I had been warned that there was no guarantee

that days off would be together or that they would be weekends. What I was not told was that days would not be equally scheduled and that Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays would be over-represented. Figure 8.2 shows the distribution of scheduled working days for the duration of my employment at the TelCo call centre.

Figure 8.2 Shift allocations by day for 22 weeks (Five shifts per week for 18 weeks, 4 shifts per week for 4 weeks)



Early in my period of participant observation I overheard a conversation in which two women employed by AgencyCo on back shifts were complaining that neither of them had had a Friday night off in nearly a year. Following that I had asked Barbara, my Team Leader, how the shift schedules were drawn up, explaining that my 14-week shift schedule seemed a bit Friday-heavy. She said that she wasn't exactly sure how it was all worked out, but that the shift rotas were all produced at TelCo's regional offices and shipped across to Centertown. She looked incredulous when I repeated what I had heard regarding the Friday nights and said that of course a number of things had to be taken into consideration, such as the anticipated volume of traffic and the need for the regional service as a whole to be fully staffed and the different operating times of each TelCo call centre. 'Hadn't Shona, the AgencyCo representative, explained to me what my hours would be?' She asked. I said yes, but that didn't explain the concentration of shifts on certain nights. Barbara said that she did not have an explanation for that but she was sure that it was all done by

the TelCo regional office in as fair a manner as possible. Near the end of my period of participant observation Wendy, a TelCo employee working back shifts, told me that she could not remember the last time she had been scheduled to have a Friday night off.

As time went on, the evening shifts became more of a burden. I found that I was frequently unable to attend social engagements. Although a formal system existed for 'swapping' shifts with other employees, it was often not easy to do. Each week a list appeared on the board in the night rest room with details of which days each person employed in the call centre was scheduled to work. It was possible to go through the list, to find out who might be available to swap and to approach them personally. The alternative was to put a notice up on the board and hope that someone would respond to it. All intended swaps had to be entered in a register kept in the rest room at least 24 hours in advance in order to be effective. I overheard conversations relating to proposed shift changes that involved as many as four separate swaps in order to achieve the desired objectives and phrases like 'Oh, why don't you ask so-and-so, he's off that day and he's so nice he never says no'.

Another negative aspect to working evenings was the possibility that one might be the last person to leave the call centre car park. The last person out had to lock the gates. In theory anyone entering or leaving the car park after 4 pm when the security guard went off duty should have locked the gates. In practice, they only seemed to get locked at the end of the working day. The car park and its access road were not well lit. Being located in the centre of town, the call centre was close to several busy public houses. Many of the female employees found the task of locking the gates intimidating and unpleasant. When the subject came up during a feedback session several women recounted their experiences. One woman recalled an instance when, at about 11 pm at night, she had been leaving the compound and had seen four young men walk into the compound. She said that she had not recognised them and had not believed that they had any legitimate business going into the compound, but had felt too intimidated by the circumstances to challenge them. Another of the operators said that at 1pm in the morning she felt disinclined to get out of her car and lock the gates because she did not feel safe doing so. It was generally agreed that the area was poorly lit, eerily quiet, and very 'creepy' late at night. One of the women said that her partner had told her that he was unhappy that she should be asked to do this late at night. One employee asked why TelCo could not fit an automatic barrier and remove the need for anyone to get out of his or her car.

The trainer said that the suggestion had been put forward on a number of occasions, but had always been rebuffed with the answer that it cost too much.

One consequence of the combination of evening shifts and variable scheduling was that I was unable to spend the same amount of time with my partner. Because of the evening shifts he and I would barely meet on some days. His job required him to take weekends as rest days, and because frequently I would be working one or other day our time together became more limited. Mike, who was required to alternate weeks of daytime and evening shifts, said that he preferred the earlier shift because it entailed 'less disruption' to the rest of his life. He did however point out that 'there was a feeling that you tended to sell more on the afternoon/evening session because you get more people in later on. Which may have been true, but it made little difference to my statistics, especially towards the end' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

The scheduling of Mike's 30-minute break each day occasionally caused him difficulties. Employees breaks were staggered throughout the shift, so on a shift from 9.15 am to 2.45 pm he could be required to take his break as early as 10.30 am or as late as 1.30 pm. He was therefore required on some days to be on the telephone for almost four hours without a formal break. He suggested that the Team Leaders actively discouraged people from taking informal breaks, saying:

'They weren't too keen - they didn't actually stop you from going to the toilet or anything, but they tried. They didn't want you to go too often. And they might sort of try and persuade you not to go, say 'Well, you've not been doing...' - I never got that particularly, but some other people would have a bit of a banter when they tried to persuade them by saying 'Well, you could stay on for a bit longer, can't you?' But if it was a four-hour day I'd like to go and get a coffee. We had coffee machines as well, so. We had a sort of rest room on one floor, where you could go and get a coffee, and you could bring that back to your desk' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

8.3.2 .Buildings and contents

This subsection looks at call centre locations, the interior layout of call centres and the facilities provided for employees. The location of a call centre has consequences both for the call centre operator and for those who are employed there. Table 8.3 gives data on locations of and travel to the call centres discussed in this chapter.

Table 8.3 Location of and travel to participant observation and interviewees call centres

	Call center	Purpose-built call centre?	Location	Distance from home to work	Was car parking provided ?	Transport to and from work
Participant observation	TelCo	No	Urban centre	6 miles	Yes	Car
Interviewees						
Stewart	OutsourceCo	No	Urban centre	40 miles	No	Car
Catriona	SatCo	Yes	Industrial estate	10 miles	Yes	Car share
Sharon	AbankCo	Yes	Out of town	60 miles	Yes	Car
	BbankCo	No	Urban centre	5 miles	No	Car
	AssuranceCo	No	Out of town	3 miles	Yes	Car
Julie	TimeshareCo	No	Industrial estate	3 miles	Yes	Bus
Ginny	AssuranceCo	No	Out of town	3 miles	Yes	Car
Mike	TelCo	No	Urban centre	1 mile	No	Bus/ walked
	TelCo	No	Urban centre	1 mile	No	Bus/ walked
Rob	Thirdparty	No	Urban centre	2 miles	No	Bus/ Walked

Richardson and Belt (2001) suggested that key factors taken into account by operators' assessing potential call centre locations included the telecommunications infrastructure, labour and property availability, eligibility for financial incentives, access to support from local agencies and the public transport infrastructure. The location of a call centre, the transport infrastructure, and terms of employment will all affect how employees get to work. Location has a bearing on what facilities it is desirable to provide for employees. Property type strongly influences the facilities that are in fact made available.

The nature of call centre workplaces

The TelCo call centre used for my participant observation study was located in the middle of Centraltown. The building had been in use for many years and had not been built specifically to

house a call centre. There was a single entrance through heavy metal gates to an enclosed car parking area in front of the building. The main entrance to the building led to a reception area from which other parts could be entered. The main entrance door was unlocked during the day whilst a security guard was on duty at reception. Everyone entering the building was required to sign in and out and to wear a security badge for the duration of their visit. When the security guard went off duty the door was locked and access was either via a swipe-card system or by using an intercom that activated a buzzer in the call centre operating area.

The building contained rooms on a number of levels and a lift with manually operated doors ran between floors. Some parts of the building had restricted access. As an employee it was necessary to use rooms on different floors. Metal lockers were provided in a general cloakroom area for coats and personal effects and to stow headsets outside of working hours. The room housing the operators' work stations, which I intend to refer to hereafter as 'the call centre', was on a different floor to both the cloakrooms and the toilet facilities. Adjacent to the call centre was a rest room with chairs and tables, a microwave oven, refrigerator and drinks making facilities, and two vending machines. In addition to this there was a ladies rest room on a different floor furnished with comfortable chairs and a television set. A room was provided for smokers. At the beginning of the period of participant observation there was a heavily subsidized staff restaurant. This closed at about 1.30 pm and was therefore not available to evening-shift employees. During the participant observation period, a notice appeared in the rest room telling employees of the 'complete closure of the restaurant' after which future services would 'be limited to vending machines'.

The call centre itself was a large room with a high ceiling. There were double rows of desks going across the room, with a central aisle down the middle. Each row of desks had monitors and keyboards facing towards its double, but with a low partition running between them so that when they were seated operators were not visible to their direct opposites. There seemed to be about 50 operator positions, but not all of these were in use when we arrived. At the front of the room to the right of the entrance were several desks facing down the room. These were the desks of the Team Leaders. To Julie, the TimeshareCo call centre was 'thirty or forty [employees] in a single room'.

Catriona described her call centre, which housed 200 employees, as:

'A huge big hall, and it was all in rows and there was a 'D' side and an 'E' side. Why it wasn't A and B I don't know, it was D and E. And there was just like rows and rows and rows, all the way up. But each line... Maybe the first three lines... We were all customer service, but the first three lines would be trained in [a particular service] because there was only maybe half a dozen operators in a different room for that but if their calls got really busy those first three lines would be tripped to that. And the next three lines would be tripped to maybe installation, and the next three lines tripped to technical, but only at really busy times. But yes, it was.... Actually, the noise level was really low considering it was all these people' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Sharon's AssuranceCo call centre was somewhat different. As she explained, it was 'in an area where there's about thirty-five people. Um, thirty of them deal with servicing work, which is basically all the different endorsements, and the five of us are at the top end of the office, doing the calls... There's four of us that's in a block. You know, sort of like, trying to describe it, you know, ... imagine four tables put together, and there's partitions within the four tables like that (makes a cross with her hands) so there's one on each side. And then there's another one sat behind' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

Experiences of call centre workplaces

At the time of the participant observation I lived about six miles from the call centre and drove my car to work. Although other people working in the call centre lived in my village, the changing days and staggered individual starting times of the shift system made car sharing infeasible. Catriona had had a car-share arrangement with friends. Asked if there had been any other way to get to the call centre, she replied 'Not from where we stay. If you lived in Othertown town centre I imagine you could. Mind you, I don't even know if you would get a bus back at that time of night. No, probably a car is about the only way' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

As well as myself, four out of the seven interviewees used cars to get to their respective call centres. The availability of parking was an issue. It might be expected that call centres located in urban centres would be less likely to provide parking facilities for employees. They are more frequently located in older buildings that do not have access to dedicated employee parking space. Also, any available space in urban centres is frequently at a premium and so the provision of parking could be prohibitively expensive. By contrast, it might be anticipated that call centres located outside of urban centres were to be more likely to provide adequate car parking for employees. Because these are generally newer buildings, built after the point when mass car

ownership became a reality, the need for employee parking space is more likely to have been anticipated and incorporated into the site design. Also, in less central developments land is likely to be cheaper than in urban centres and so the cost to employers of providing parking may be less prohibitive. However, that was not our experience. I was issued a pass for the car park of TelCo's Centraltown call centre. The instructions that had accompanied the pass had stated 'N.B. This does not give you the automatic right to a parking space', but I was always able to find a space when I arrived for my shift. Catriona had far more difficulty parking at the purpose-built SatCo call centre situated on an industrial estate:

'The car park was totally inadequate and you would very often arrive and drive round and round and round and you couldn't find a space. You'd have to end up parking on the road miles away so you would be five minutes late and then get your name taken and put in the late book like at school (laughs). If your name was in that book three times then you were in trouble.

Q: So what happened if your name was in the book three times?

I don't know! I don't actually know of anybody who ever had it. I think mine was taken once. You had to give a reason why you were late, and I said 'Well, I couldn't find a parking space'. But if you did park out in the street the police would often phone later on in the night and say 'You need to get these people to move their cars'. Of course, they weren't insured if you were on the street and not in the car park. So very often if you did do that your tea-break was spent moving your car into the car park.

Q: Oh I see. So they didn't actually let you go and move the car?

No, your tea-break was used. It was at your tea-break you needed to move the car. And some nights actually in the winter when it was pitch black and you were away down, fields all round, you'd think 'God, I don't fancy walking all the way down there to move the car!' but you had to do it.

(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000)

Sometimes, even when facilities were made available it was not possible to use them. Catering facilities are an example. Catriona said that there 'was a canteen, but by the time you got there, you stood in the queue, you got something to eat, you never had any time to eat it, you know. And you didn't get any longer if you were going for a proper meal. So I always used to have something to eat before I went out and I'd just have a coffee at tea break' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000). At TelCo, I was unable to use the canteen once my two-week training period had finished. Fifteen minutes was insufficient time to leave the call centre and get refreshments or, as explained earlier, to have a proper meal. The vending machines provided by the service contractor to TelCo had limited choices. They also got used throughout the day and were re-stocked each morning. This put evening employees at a disadvantage, as the following diary extracts for three consecutive warm days show:

'This evening was warmer... at 6.45 pm four out of the six chilled can drink choices had been emptied, leaving only Fanta Orange, diet and ordinary. There was still chilled water though. Also, I noticed, the confectionary vending machine downstairs had been completely emptied' (Diary, 22 April 1998).

'I took my break. I was incensed to see that in the chilled cans vending machine, the diet Coke had been replaced by diet Irn-Bru. Why? I did not know and had no way of finding out. But it made me angry' (Diary, 23 April 1998).

'There is still no diet Coke in the can machine and nothing at all in the downstairs vending machine (Diary, 24 April 1998).

One evening at the TelCo call centre I was talking to a couple of the other employees and I said that I had noticed that the call centre got very stuffy sometimes. Maureen said that different people had different ideas about what was stuffy, what was too hot, what was too cold. Anne said that there was an air conditioning system, but some employees complained that when it was switched on it was too noisy, and it gave them headaches. Also, she said, people would open the windows at the same time anyway, which defeated the object of an air conditioning system. Maureen said that there was a 'hot end' and a 'cold end' in the call centre anyway. The convention was that the end nearest the door was the cool end, and people who preferred a cooler working environment could gather up that end, where it was accepted that you could open a window if you so desired. The far end, down by the electronic wall-mounted display was considered the warm end. I had not noticed a difference in temperature myself. What I had noticed was that the older employees tended to sit together at the 'cool end' with the younger, experienced employees at the 'hot end'. However, during warmer weather a large electric fan appeared at the hot end and was frequently in use.

Factors such as heating, lighting and ventilation can all affect employees' experiences of call centres. In large call centres it is unlikely that there will be individual control over environmental conditions. How call centre employers control these variables and how they act in the event that control is lost can influence employees' perceptions of them. At AssuranceCo Sharon had little control over her surroundings. She said that she was 'sat near a window, so I've got plenty of natural light coming in' but that she was 'not in direct sunlight' and had in any case got 'access to a blind' if necessary, so she had some control over lighting. But she had no control over the air conditioning. Generally conditions were satisfactory for her, but one day the air conditioning failed. She said of AssuranceCo:

'They did everything they could. Like they got us fans as quickly as possible, they gave us ice-lollies, they had the windows open, the blinds pulled down.

Q: Ice-lollies?

Oh aye, its great fun! While you're on the phone 'Excuse me, I'm eating an ice-lolly. Oops, that's a bit of chocolate just dropped. Damned Magnums!' (Laughs). No. But, no, they did try their best'

(Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

The comparison between the call centre and other working environments can also influence the individual's perception of the call centre working environment. Rob commented:

'I worked for a few go-kart tracks in London, quite a lot of go-kart tracks in London. But again the atmosphere wasn't very good - a lot of fumes on these indoor tracks and stuff. And, quite surprisingly, even though the work's a lot less interesting in a call centre, the environment was, you know, they make it quite a pleasant environment.

Q: In what way pleasant?

It's a comfortable office environment. They have all the facilities. It was a non-smoking building. Even though I smoke, that didn't really bother me. They had air conditioning. You know - just a clean atmosphere. Which in London is quite desirable sometimes' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

8.3.3 Call centre organization

This section examines and discusses data on the formal organization structures adopted by call centres. These are important from an employee perspective in that they determine the possible opportunities for advancement in call centres.

The nature of call centre organization structures

The TelCo call centre in which I did my participant observation was run by a call centre manager. He was responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre and he reported to superiors in the TelCo regional hierarchy. Reporting to the centre manager were five team leaders (TLs), all TelCo employees. The TLs each looked after teams of around twenty operator-level employees. From the lists of employees' schedules for the coming week placed in the rest room I was able to determine that as of April 1998 the call centre had 107 employees at 'operator' level. Table 8.4 details other workforce characteristics.

TLs had a number of duties in relation to 'operators'. TLs were supposed to have a 'one-to-one session' with each employee on a monthly basis. TLs were expected to be 'remoting' employees, that is to say listen in to them without their knowledge, on a quarterly basis. They were responsible

for ensuring that health and safety requirements were met, for scheduling people in terms of moving people around, and for either coaching you or referring you to one of the training team if you had any problems. TLs were all TelCo employees. There were five TLs and they reported to the centre manager.

Table 8.4 Operator-level workforce characteristics for TelCo call centre, CentraLtown, as at April 1998

Characteristic	Number of Employees	Percentage of workforce (%)
Employer		
TelCo employees	46	43.0
AgencyCo employees	61	57.0
Gender*		
Male employees	19	17.8
Female Employees	84	78.5

*Four employees could not be identified in terms of gender as they were listed by initial rather than first name

There was an additional position of 'chargehand'. Chargeship, as it was called, was not a permanent position but was offered to people for the duration of a shift. Chargehands were AgencyCo employees. Agreeing to be the chargehand for a shift attracted an additional £1.00 per hour on top of the appropriate rate for the shift. Chargeship seemed to encompass many of the responsibilities of a duty TL, but without the training that accompanies promotion to that grade. The chargehand sat at a computer terminal at the far end of the call centre. Although they still answered calls, they were the person to whom any problems should be referred if there was no TL available in the call centre either because the duty TL was elsewhere or because there was no TL on duty at that time.

There were other grades of personnel in the call centre building, for example Mary, who took the two-week training, was on a TelCo grade equivalent in rank to TL but involving more administrative duties. There was an administration section, but as an employee working in the call centre I never saw it. TelCo had outsourced catering, cleaning and security services in the call centre building, so that catering staff, security guards and cleaners were all employed by contractors. Shona, the AgencyCo representative, had an office in the building but was not there on a full time basis.

In explaining the way in which the SatCo call centre was organized, Catriona made reference to 'management', a monitoring and assessment department, supervisors, and three operator-level grades, known as operator, experienced operator, and senior operator. All the operators were grouped together at 'big long, big long desks, um maybe eight people, no more than that, maybe ten people to one desk. And there was ten - there'd be five operators and then you had your, if I can remember what they're called now, EO, which was your experienced operator. And then your SO, which was your senior operator, sitting in the middle, and then another five operators. Supervisors did not sit with the operator-level employees: 'there was a desk along the front of the hall where people sat and that was, like, the supervisors sat there, and they monitored, and they could tell what everybody's phone was doing' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000). The 'management' team was based elsewhere in the call centre building.

SatCo seems to have operated strictly hierarchical lines of communication. Managers communicated only with supervisors. They in turn fed information from managers or the monitoring department to SOs who acted as a conduit for communication to and from base-level employees. Catriona said:

'They were big on going through the proper channels if you were stuck with anything. You had to go to the EO first, then the SO, then they could transfer the call elsewhere. But you could never just go to management - you weren't allowed to do that. Unless you'd spoken to your EO or your SO. And if you phoned management and they said 'Are you an SO?' and you said 'No' then they would just terminate the call - they wouldn't take it from you' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Employees at the TelCo's outbound call centre where Mike was employed were also divided into teams. There were between twelve and twenty employees in each team, and team members all sat together at desks arranged in 'islands'. Each team had a manager and a supervisor. The latter spent much of their time on the telephones selling but also acted as the managers' deputies. The team managers and supervisors were all TelCo employees. Mike said that employees 'moved around a bit, but [sat] more or less the same place. They might move you around. Usually it was the same, you were allotted the same desk to work at, but they might move people around if they thought somebody was being a bad influence, a bit like being at school. It was very much like being at school, actually' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Team managers reported to the centre manager. According to Mike, the person in charge of TelCo's outbound call centre was a 'guy who'd sold coca-cola in Saudi Arabia who'd been brought in and was running this call centre'. Mike described the centre manager's leadership style, saying 'his approach was that he knew where everyone was coming from in the call centre and he was on their side, kind of thing. And you were supposed to do it for him, so managers and that would say "Do it for this guy"...He would come and he would speak to everybody, to the things where everybody was called together, and so you saw him around, but I personally never had a conversation with him. My manager was about as high up as I got in the organization in terms of interacting with anyone' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

There were no teams at the TimeshareCo call centre. Jackie suggested that the base-level employees sat at desks, each with a telephone. They were supervised by 'a row of people down the front sitting watching, who were in charge and stuff'. In addition to the supervisors 'there'd be a guy that'd walk round... And he was, like, the big boss man, and he was like - oh I don't know - you can imagine him being - oh I shouldn't say! Anyway (laughs) he's walking about and he's saying 'Come on, come on! Try and get more appointments for Wednesday night!' um, 'Try - we've still got Sunday to fill up!' and 'How many appointments have you got now?' And he'd go round collecting the appointment sheets off the tables. So, you know, he was sort of like, you know, trying to get them, goading them - not goading them but trying to get - whip up - some enthusiasm, you know? Getting them to get on with it' (Interview with Jackie, 24 April 2000).

Ginny's call centre at AssuranceCo was small, being made up of a single 'team'. At the time of the interview Ginny was the deputy team leader. She and the team manager had charge of five employees. She called them call handlers, but added 'Different call centre have different names for them - operatives or Customer Service Reps, or...complaint handlers'. She said that AssuranceCo had nine separate call centres on the same premises, but that they intended to merge them into 'three or four big contact centres to try and make points of contact easy for customers'. Before her promotion six months earlier Ginny had worked in another AssuranceCo call centre with the same structure but thirteen call handlers. After moving to AssuranceCo Sharon worked in a call centre with only four others but, she said, they performed a specialist function and other AssuranceCo call centres had as many as sixty call handlers. Her call centre also had a deputy team leader and a team manager.

Experiences of call centre organization structures

Teams seem to have been a feature of several of the interviewees' call centres. But some employees were sceptical about their use. During the last week of training at TelCo I had a lunchtime conversation with two established employees in the ladies-only rest room. They asked what team I was in. Some teams were looked upon more favourably than others, with the degree of favour apparently based on employees' assessments of the strictness or otherwise of the TL. I said I was in Barbara's team. Barbara's team was not looked on as one of the best because she was regarded as probably the strictest of the TLs. I asked which one was 'best' and whether some teams had a better social life than others. It was suggested that none of the teams had much in the way of a social life, and in fact you rarely got to meet most of your other team members, so organizing social events was difficult. One of the women said 'I don't know why we have teams. I can see that it's useful so that everybody is assigned a team manager, but other than that there does not seem to be any reason for having them'.

The absence of any organized social activities in Barbara's team during the participant observation period supported this view of teams at TelCo. That having been said, I did periodically observe notices on the board in the rest room relating to social events. It is difficult to tell where the impetus for these social events was coming from. They tended to be either for leaving parties or for team nights out for other teams. So there may have been social activity outside work for some teams. However, all teams had around twenty members but none of the notices that I saw had more than about half a dozen signatures expressing an interest.

Mike expressed scepticism about the use of teams at TelCo's outbound call centre. The following comment was made in the course of discussing the way in which both individual and team performances were made public:

'You were told on a very regular basis how your team was performing against other teams. But since your bonus was on an individual basis it didn't really matter how well the rest of your, - you were divided up into teams but, er, nothing you were paid depended on how the rest of your team did, so...

Q: What do you think the function of the team was?

It was, er, just a small enough unit so they could have a manager attached to it. You know, sort of not too many people for the manager to, er, make sure that no-one was slacking or taking too long on their toilet break' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

That having been said, there was evidence to suggest that in the six months that he worked in the call centre, Mike had begun to think of himself as a team member:

‘Every three months they sort of had a big, er, sort of evangelical session in a local hotel where they told you what you were going to be selling for the next three months and how the bonus scheme was going to work... I quite liked my team because they were er, um, - other people would get very enthusiastic and worked up about it all, but our team was told off sometimes for not, er, well, I was told that people noticed they hadn’t sort of applauded a lot and made lots of noise and cheered and so on’ (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Some interviewees did feel that they and their call centre colleagues functioned as a team. Ginny observed that ‘you really have to work more as a team in a call centre I think than you do in any other sort of back office environment’. Sharon, speaking of her time at the BBank call centre, suggested that in her opinion the high rate of employee turnover in the company as a whole had been due to the imposition of productivity targets that were difficult to meet. She saw this as demotivating employees, both because it was personally unsatisfying not to meet performance targets and because bonuses depended on meeting targets and so employees’ incomes were adversely affected. Because of the failure of the company to take the idiosyncrasies of different geographical areas into account, those employees allocated particular areas found themselves missing their targets more often. They, according to Sharon, were the most demotivated. When asked whether it was those employees in particular who were leaving the call centre, Sharon replied:

‘It didn’t really matter which [area they were allocated]. I think in general it’s, like, [those leaving] thought ‘Well, now we’ve had enough’. That was the general atmosphere throughout the call centre. If one person’s down you’re going to bring the next person down with you. And it does work that way, because you work in quite a close, you know, environment, because you’re all trying to achieve the same thing. All the teamwork comes out, and you battle on for each other’ (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

8.3.4 Tasks

Several researchers (Taylor and Bain, 2001; Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee, 2000) have noted how call centres provide a varied range of services and fulfill a number of different business functions. This might lead to an expectation that the nature of the tasks performed by employees in different call centres would also be very different and would lead to a wide variation in employees’ experiences. In this subsection the validity of that assumption is explored.

The nature of call centre tasks

Table 8.5 sets out data on the nature of participant observation and interviewees' call centre tasks. The degree of routinisation provides an indication of the extent to which the demands of tasks on employees' knowledge remained static, despite differences in the detail of individual calls. The nature of tasks is also dictated to some extent by the presence or absence of routine monitoring of quantity-related and/or quality-related performance variables. These vary the demands made by tasks on employees, for example in terms of levels of concentration or the performance of emotional labour. Monitoring is discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Table 8.5 Nature of participant observation and interviewees' call centre work tasks

	Call centre function	Work Tasks	Degree of routinisation
Participant observation	Inbound telecomms	Answering customer queries	High
Interviewees			
Stewart	Inbound Financial	Conducting share-dealing transactions	Medium
Catriona	Inbound entertainment	Answering customer queries, problem-solving	Medium
Sharon	Outbound financial	Selling financial products to existing customers	High
	Outbound financial	Arranging for company representatives to visit business customers	High
	Inbound financial	Providing technical advice on policies to internal and external customers	Medium-Low
Julie	Outbound leisure	Persuading members of the public to attend presentations	High
Mike	Outbound telecomms	Selling new products or services to existing customers	High
	Inbound telecomms	Dealing with billing enquiries from business customers*	Medium
Rob	Outbound outsourced	Selling financial product upgrades to existing customers	High
	Inbound outsourced	Answering queries and problem-solving for customers of a mobile telephone Co.	Medium-Low
Ginny	Inbound financial	Advising callers about the benefits of, and where to seek, financial advice	High

*This was the work task for call handlers. Mike's position involved off-line clerical duties

Experiences of call centre tasks

During participant observation my first experience of the work task was at the 'induction session' about a week before starting training. As part of the induction trainees were issued with headsets,

taken up to the call centre and partnered with an experienced TelCo employee. The headset enabled me to listen in to the calls being taken by Donna, a TelCo employee with 11 years' experience in the job. The following passage from my fieldwork notes indicates my surprise at certain elements of the experience.

'Donna dealt with a considerable number of calls in the 15 minutes or so that I was sitting with her. She tried to point out to me the different types of calls she was receiving and how she dealt with each of them. She indicated various operations of the database system. The keyboard that she was using had a number of dedicated keys for use with the system. She indicated on several occasions that I should do part of the operation by typing in numbers as they were given to me by the caller and then by showing me which keys to press in order to carry out the necessary function.

I was surprised at how quiet the call centre actually was. I had expected it to be difficult to hear and to think, but the noise level appeared quite low when we entered the room, and once I had plugged in to the system with Donna I was unaware of background noise. I was also surprised at how fast the time with Donna went. I assume that this is part of the fascination with new experiences, and a sensation that would wear off in time. In a short break between calls Donna said that I would find it exciting for the first few months but that it would soon wear off. I was impressed with the way in which Donna was able to negotiate her way through the various parts of the database system' (Diary, Induction).

This excerpt is significant in several ways. First, it was the first time that I had been inside a call centre and my surprise is indicative of preconceptions that I had formed, possibly as a result of prior reading on the subject, but was not consciously aware of. Second, since these are data obtained purely by observation comparison of it with data on the same phenomena obtained by employing participant observation may bring to light interesting differences in data on the same phenomena gathered using alternative research methods. A comparison can be made with the observations made during my first experience of taking live calls. This occurred late in the afternoon on the first day of training. In a reversal of the system used during the induction session, I was going to be 'live' but an experienced employee was allocated to sit beside me. She would listen in and, if necessary, take over any enquiry that for whatever reason I was unable to answer.

In my diary entry for that day I wrote:

'I was a bit taken aback by the whole experience of being in the call centre. I was not keen to press the button which would put my workstation on line and open me up to calls from the public at large. I found out afterwards by looking at the information that appeared on the terminal's screen as I removed my headphone jack from its socket that I was actually logged onto the system for 15 minutes. In that time I took 16 calls, in an average of 57 seconds, and a downtime (when I was logged on to the system but not in "ready" mode) of 37 seconds. It had been suggested earlier in the day by Mary [the trainer] that an experienced operator could deal with the simplest of enquiries in a matter of 9 seconds per enquiry, and Shona [the AgencyCo representative] had said last week that the average call time in Centraltown call centre was 28 seconds.

Some things I found difficult to start with. Firstly because you are taking calls from all over the country it is difficult to tune in to particular regional accents straight away, and that problem is compounded sometimes when people speak relatively softly. There is a mechanism for increasing the volume of what comes through your headset, but Mary hadn't told us that. I asked my help operator Anne, and she increased the volume, but it wasn't necessarily helpful. I found it difficult to catch what people said the first time they said it. I assume that that is something that comes with practice.

I also didn't remember to do those things that in the training room in practice and not under pressure to get sorted and out of the way had seemed simple and easily managed. I was live for approximately 16 minutes, and in that 16 minutes I felt very, very stressed indeed. I felt that I was under intense pressure, which caused me to make mistakes that I hadn't made in the training room. It was suggested by Anne that with experience comes confidence, and with experience and confidence would come the technique, and you would stop concerning yourself with these things. But it did worry me a great deal!' (Diary, Training Day 1)

There were three others on my training course. On returning to the training room after our time in the call centre on the first day of training the others were all of the opinion that it had been a much more stressful job than they had previously imagined. On the second day of training we spent nearly an hour and a half logged on to the system taking live calls. I noted that, in addition to the problems recalling and using my limited knowledge of the system and not understanding callers' accents:

'It is distracting that the headset has only one earphone for listening. Today when we went up to the call centre it was very busy. Virtually all the operator positions had been filled, or were being filled at that point. One certainly felt pressure to be answering phone calls continuously. In the time that I was on the system I dealt with 87 calls at an average time of 54 seconds a call. This was an improvement on yesterday's average of 57 seconds a call. One or two of the calls lasted quite a long time' (Diary, Training Day 2).

In only a few days my perception of the call centre had changed from surprisingly quiet to distractingly noisy. I do not think that in reality the noise levels were substantially different for each of the days. I believe that what altered my perception was the change in my position from observer to participant. The former had not required me to hear the caller with the same degree of accuracy and had allowed me to adopt the same interpretation as Donna. The latter had forced me to make my own decision about what the caller had said. Noise was also a problem in other call centres. Ginny commented that it was sometimes difficult for employees in her AssuranceCo call centre to hear because of background noise. The answer, I discovered, was not as simple as adjusting the volume coming via the headset because this tended to make listening uncomfortable and led to distortion of the caller's voice.

In the same period, my perception of the passage of time had also been completely reversed. On returning from the call centre to the training room on the second day of training Mary, the trainer, asked us all how we felt the session had gone. I had felt that time had expanded and that the 1.5 hours that we had been taking calls that day had seemed far longer. This is in contrast to the induction session where, as an observer, I had noted how fast the time had seemed to go. Perceptions of the passage of time were not the same for all the trainees. Two of the others, Bill and Michael, said that that time had gone much faster for them and had seemed much shorter than 1.5 hours.

I looked for evidence of how other employees were experiencing employment at the TelCo call centre. On the eighth day of training I made the following observation:

‘This afternoon as we were going into the call centre, I looked around at the faces of all the operators who were already plugged into the system at that point. There was not a single person in the 40 or so I could see who was smiling. This is in stark contrast to the public image that is being portrayed through the likes of television commercials, which without fail show individual operators and, sometimes, whole call centres full of people happily grinning away. For example, Scottish Gas service centres, Direct Line insurance operators. These people have rows of gleaming pearly white teeth that are conspicuously absent at the Centraltown call centre’ (Diary, Training Day 8).

Some of the longer-serving employees suggested why this might be. Anne, the experienced employee who had been assigned to look after me in the call centre during training, had been in the job for four years. She suggested that after a while things become automatic to the extent that you were ‘part of the machinery rather than an actual person’, doing things on autopilot. On the second day of training, talking to a couple of employees in the rest room taking their breaks, I was told that ‘nerves’ were inevitable when one first got on to the system, but that this wore off after a couple of months. They also suggested that once one became adept at using the system, the work stopped being interesting and became boring. After seven days of training I observed that:

‘Even something approaching the whole day logged on to the database has been hard going for me, quite mentally exhausting. The suggestion from most of the operators is that at some point everything will ‘click into place’ and that everything will become clear to you and any confusion will end. Also, when the system clicks into place for you mentally, at that point you are on autopilot in that keying strategies, choice of files and so on will be automatic, not requiring conscious thought on the part of the operator’ (Diary, Training Day 7).

In 14 weeks of participant observation I never became so adept as to be able to function on autopilot. Right to the end I had to think about, and was still making mistakes with, keying

strategies and routine call handling procedures. The assertion of some employees at the TelCo call centre in Centraaltown, that it was possible to switch off mentally whilst taking calls, was in contrast to Mike's experiences at the TelCo outbound call centre. He described the work there as:

'Quite intense really, sort of, because you've got to, you are focused. Its not something you can sort of, - there are some jobs where you can do where you can think about other things while you're doing it, but you can't do that. You can't sort of switch off for a while but still carry on in a mechanical way. There are some sort of clerical jobs, like filing or whatever, where you don't have to be all there. But if you are actually speaking to people then you can't sort of let your mind drift. So you're fairly focused on it (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Ginny was a deputy team leader at the time of the interview. She agreed with the longer-serving employees at the TelCo call centre about the on-set of boredom, but she also raised another issue regarding the work-related experiences of call centre employees. She said:

'I've had enough of the call handling now I have to admit. I couldn't go back to taking all those calls a day, because I think that after I'd been there a couple of years I was bored. I knew everything. I could answer all my calls myself. Um, I wasn't learning anything new. In the first couple of years it's fun because you're learning all the time. And you are. You basically take all the calls that come in... And I liked it because occasionally, well, it was quite diverse. But I do think that after a couple of years there I was just bored. I couldn't be bothered with it any more. And you do get lots of shitty phone calls.

Q: What sort of shitty phone calls?

Oh just, you know, angry people. And I think that you can only take so much of getting grief. After a couple of years you're like 'No, I don't want this grief any more. I can't be bothered with it'

(Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

In all call centres an important part of the nature of the work task is that it is conducted by telephone. This has repercussions for the employee because there appear to be different perceptions of the acceptability of certain types of conduct or behaviour depending on whether the interaction is face-to-face or remote, as in telephone calls. Abusive or angry callers feature in most call centre employees' experiences of work. For example, Sharon suggested that in the course of her work some callers would 'scream and shout'. She said:

'I don't think that people are blaming me personally, they're shouting at the company. But that's probably -.... I am the voice. But, no, we're probably conditioned through years and years of working in this that you don't, um, you get, you may get shouted at, but it's not at you. And I've actually had people shout at me and say "I'm sorry I don't mean to shout at you personally, I'm just so frustrated. I know that you're trying to do the best but, anyway, you know, I don't care" (Laughs). I feel like saying "Oh, thanks!" (sarcastic). So, but you do, you know, get people just complaining about anything and everything, but that's the sort of person they are. And you get other people who are really nice and friendly and helpful, and say "Yes, fine, but can you just make sure its done" type of thing, you know. And, you know, you accept that a lot more. (Pause) But there's only so much you can do and only so much you can take and every now and again you just want to go and scream.

Q: What do you do then?

Go and scream'.
(Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999)

She suggested that people were ruder over the telephone than they would be in person because 'they don't have to look at you in the eye and say whatever they are going to say. In general people tend to be a lot nicer on a face-to-face basis. They're less likely to say "no" to you. They're more likely to accept what you are saying rather than over a phone. [They think] "Its not a person, its an implement of my work, its a piece of plastic. I can shout at this if I want. I don't have to feel guilty for shouting". And I think guilt is a big thing' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

Sometimes the difficulties experienced by call centre employees result as much from call centres' procedures as from the calls themselves. For example, Catriona had occasionally experienced abuse from callers to the SatCo call centre. Some of the calls were from people who were, in Catriona's opinion, justifiably angry or upset but others were 'obviously just for fun'. When asked about the procedure for dealing with rude or abusive callers, Catriona explained that:

'We weren't... we had to take it basically. You weren't allowed to disconnect a call. You could threaten to do it, but you weren't allowed to do it. You had to sit quietly until the customer had finished yelling his head off at you, and then try and deal with it.

Q: Did you ever disconnect anyone?

Um,...No, I don't think I did. I don't think I did. I used to - you weren't allowed to offer them a manager, you had to wait until they asked. You weren't allowed to offer them a senior operator or a supervisor unless they asked you. But often I used to. I knew I couldn't do anything but I knew a manager could do something and often I would say, at the risk of being monitored, "I can't help you here but if you ask me for a manager I can put you through to a manager" and the they'd say "Well put me through to a manager!" and then you did it. But I shouldn't really have done that. You know, you're just supposed to wait on the customer' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

The rules were slightly different at the TelCo call centre where I carried out participant observation, although they still required the employee to allow the caller to behave in an otherwise unacceptable manner in some circumstances. It was acceptable for the employee to terminate calls immediately when sexually explicit language was being used. In cases where callers were swearing and using foul language the appropriate procedure was to ask the caller to desist from using such language or you would have to terminate the call. If they persisted you might give them a further warning that you would terminate the call if they did not tone down their language. If they carried

on swearing at you, you were then entitled to terminate the call. In relation to juvenile callers the TelCo view was that children were future customers, and that you should do your best to be polite and professional as regards calls from them even if it appeared that the children were not trying to make a genuine enquiry.

Some, but not all, call centres provide employees with training on this aspect of the job. Ginny said that at AssuranceCo employees got 'taught how to handle difficult customers' although she added that 'whether or not you can actually do it or not is another question'. The training included aptitude training, call handling and control techniques including the use of positive language and defusing skills for difficult calls. She explained that she had 'been taught, been on courses and things like that on how to do it and I think it's basically being as nice as possible even though they're giving - and understanding - even though they're giving you all of this you've just got to ignore it'. She felt that she had to a great extent mastered the art of dealing with angry or abusive callers, although there was one type of call she still found difficult: 'Arrogant people probably get me - get my back up - more than someone who's angry. Someone who's angry is usually upset. At least you can say "Well, hang on". I mean, once they've got it all out you can start to sort it out. But someone who's sarcastic and arrogant the whole time you're on the phone - I can't stand it. I really have to bite my tongue to be polite. But I think that what I am getting better at is actually holding my tongue and saying OK'. When asked about whether dealing with difficult callers had ever upset her, she replied:

'Not ever to the state of tears. I've seen people in tears before but its never driven me to tears, but it does upset me. When I get off the phone I'm like (clenches fists, frowns darkly and growls). (Laughs).

Q: So what do you do to sort of calm down when that happens?

Nothing really. Just get on with it.

Q: You don't decide that's time for a bathroom break, or go away for a few minutes?

No. I mean I ...not really, I just get on with it. I think - yes - you don't really often have a choice in the matter.

Q: You mean you can't walk away if there are phone calls waiting?

I'm probably giving you mixed information here, because I'm talking about when I used to do it all the time, and what I would do then. I mean we did have support in that if there was someone really terrible on the phone you could say 'Oh hang on, let me get my supervisor to call you back'. But of course I am that woman now, so... (Laughs). I deal with them more and more but I think by the time they speak to me they're not as angry as they were. Because its usually the call handler that takes the beating, and by the time they get up to

the manager you're like "Oh were they OK? Were they OK?" and the manager says "Oh they seemed fine actually". That really annoys me. It really annoys me when you've taken all that abuse and then they go and speak to your manager and they're as nice as pie. (Laughs)'.
(Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000)

Although difficult calls had never reduced Ginny to tears, that experience is not uncommon amongst call centre employees. Catriona suggested that 'when you're an operator you get one complaint after another on the telephone. A lot of young people ended up running to the toilet in floods of tears because some customer had been really giving them a really hard time'. In the second of his periods of call centre employment Mike had worked in centre dealing with billing for business customers. He observed that employees 'would sort of, um, women particularly, burst into tears occasionally'. He also witnessed some employees developing behaviour to help them cope with the stresses of the situation:

'There was quite a lot of tension I suppose, in business billing, between the staff and the customers. In any kind of situation like that you tend to get, er, where people are coming up against angry customers and some are pretty unreasonable I think, they, er, some people develop the kind of attitude that they hate all of the people out there. You know, and you got quite a range of, you got some quite bad attitudes, I think. Listening in to people, sometimes they got pretty curt with people and, er, sort of, er... They'd get pretty annoyed, even though they wouldn't swear at people or start shouting at them they'd sort of, you could tell why the customers might be getting annoyed because of the, er, because of the kind of response they were getting from the people on the phones. There was a bit of racism there as well. You could tell, I think, when Asian customers were calling up because you got a sort of colder kind of approach from people. Some people were worse than others (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

During the participant observation I was reduced to tears on several occasions. These tended to be nearer the beginning than the end of the 14 weeks. I had received no specific training on dealing with difficult calls and I found it quite hard, as an extract from my diary reveals:

'After coming home from the shift, James provided me with a cup of tea and as we sat in the lounge asked me how my shift had been. I launched into a tirade against people who were rude on the telephone, people whose diction and/or manners were so abysmal that I felt like slamming the phone down on them. People who were rude, obnoxious or creepy. People who argued, told you that you couldn't be doing your job properly, sighed, grunted, whistled or belched whilst you were searching for [information] for them. Arrogant people. Ignorant people. People who didn't understand that you were under any kind of pressure to complete their call and move on to the next one as soon as possible. People who insisted on telling you their problem despite knowing that you could do nothing about it apart from offer them another number, another ear to cry into. This may be a reaction to the job that also disappears as the work process becomes hardwired. If you are not there then you cannot be affected by the calls that you take.

Just as in training it was suggested that you must be able to leave your emotional baggage at the door when you come in to work, perhaps it is eventually the case that you should also be able to leave the accumulated mental and emotional stresses of the shift in the locker before you go home at night' (Diary, 17 March 1998).

For me the work process never became 'hardwired' to the extent that I could switch off completely. But I did harden to certain types of call as this extract, written eight weeks into the participant observation period and five weeks after the extract above and detailing my response to a particularly difficult call, illustrates. The woman would telephone the enquiry service on a regular basis, and was well known to the more experienced employees at the call centre. I had taken my first call from her shortly after starting evening shifts, following which I had been told about her calling habits. Looking at the excerpt now I feel embarrassed and ashamed. At the time of writing it, the pressures of working in the centre had contorted my perspective to the extent that I felt fully justified in my anger:

'The call takes the best part of five to six minutes. By the end of it I feel emotionally shredded and close to tears. I feel guilt at the fact that I was unable to help. I feel guilt that the system seems to leave an old woman in a state like that, where she cannot look after herself and she cannot get anyone to help her. These feelings were identical to the last time I spoke to [this caller]. But in addition to that, this time I felt anger welling up inside of me. As we spoke, I felt more and more angry that she was not listening to me, that I had told her, and indeed she must know by now that we cannot help her. That despite this she was continuing to use me as a scapegoat for her problems. But worse, she was destroying my average wrap time for this session. When I had worked so hard, she was destroying it only minutes from the safety of my scheduled break. This was barely contained ire. As I fought to control it, I became more and more desperate to be rid of [the caller]. In the last seconds of her call, her problems paled into insignificance beside the injustice of what she was doing to me' (Diary, 23 April 1998).

8.3.5 Rules and regulation

The experience of employment of any kind can be either enhanced or degraded by employees' perceptions of the working environment and of the ways in which their behaviour in the work context is controlled and managed (Warr, 1996). This subsection examines aspects of the formal regulation of the working environment and of employee behaviour in call centres. It explores the extent to which formal rules were enforced and the way in which regulation affected employees' experiences of call centre employment. The nature of this aspect of employment is reflected in the selected data on formal call centre rules and regulations detailed in Table 8.6.

Experiences of rules and regulation

During the induction Shona, the AgencyCo representative, had said that the call centre's dress code was 'smart casual' and that most people tended to wear 'slacks and a shirt or jumper', although she

qualified this by saying that 'some of the girls like to dress up for work'. This information was widely interpreted within the training group. On the first day of training George wore a shirt and tie, Michael a lumberjack style shirt and jeans and Bill and I smart trousers and open-necked shirts. On the fourth day of training George, who had maintained formal business dress up to that point, commented 'I think I'm a bit over-dressed for this place'. That did seem to be the case. 'Smart casual' is an arbitrary description, and not necessarily one that could be universally agreed upon. Whilst I might have classed the majority of employees at working in the call centre during the day as conforming to the 'smart casual' requirement, there were one or two in business dress and one or two that I would have classed as not reaching the dress requirement.

Table 8.6 Selected formal call centre rules and regulations

	Call centre function	Dress code	Building Security	Behaviour in call centre
Participant Observation	Inbound telecomms	Smart casual	Pass to be worn at all times	Talking not allowed other than for work-related purposes No non-work reading materials
Interviewees				
Stewart	Inbound financial	Business dress	Pass to be worn at all times	
Catriona	Inbound entertainment	'Dress for the office'		Talking not allowed other than for work-related purposes No non-work reading materials
Sharon	Outbound financial	Business dress		
	Outbound financial	Business dress		
	Inbound financial	'Smart attire'		
Julie	Outbound leisure	None		
Ginny	Inbound financial	Business dress		
Mike	Outbound telecomms	'Shirt and tie'		
	Inbound telecomms			
Rob	Outbound outsourced	'Smart clothes and shoes'	Swipe-card to access appropriate sections of building	No non-work reading materials
	Inbound outsourced			

There were mixed views from interviewees on the relevance of more formal dress codes operating in call centres. The data suggested differences could be attributed to the type of call centre, with those who had worked in outbound call centres more likely to support dress requirements. Catriona felt that the insistence on smart appearance was unnecessary:

‘Oh, they were big on dress rules. Yes. You had to go dressed for the office. You weren’t allowed jeans or, um, like canvas trousers or anything. You had to dress - you were only allowed trousers if they were dressy trousers, but they preferred skirts and blouses, and the men had to wear ties, and trousers and jackets. They were big on dress codes, yes.

Q: What did you think about that?

I thought it was rather stupid considering nobody could see you (laughs). I mean, if you were comfortable then you were more likely to be more relaxed on the telephone. Often if you did the pay-per-view, like the big fight nights and things, they would say “As a special favour” to you staying on ‘til two in the morning you could wear your jeans. And this was supposed to be a big treat! And then you’d have to put a pound in a box for a local charity, which nobody minded doing. But that would only be the very occasional nights they’d let you do that. And I don’t think the standard of customer service dropped any because we were wearing jeans you know. I thought it was rather silly.

Q: Why do you think they insisted on it, then?

I really don’t know. And it wasn’t the kind of place that ever got visitors, you know, coming round. I really don’t know. I think it was just because they had rules on everything. They were big on rules, and it just seemed like a natural progression, you know?’ (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000)

Mike provided an example of how, when the reason for the imposition of a rule is either not clear or is not felt to be justified by employees, ways can sometimes be found to protest against it in some small measure (see Houlihan, 2000). He said that at the TelCo call centre employees ‘were supposed to wear a shirt and tie...I wore all kinds of shirts with my ties. Not actually white business shirts but all kinds of other, scruffy-looking shirts. (Laughs). That was a shirt and tie’ (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Both Sharon and Rob felt from their own experiences that there were good reasons for having a dress code. Sharon felt that the point of the dress code at the AssuranceCo call centre was to ‘create a more professional impression within your mind so you actually can promote it over the phone’. Asked whether she believed that this was in fact the case she replied ‘Yeah, I do actually. No, I do, seriously - in the sales side particularly. In the previous job we had dress-down days. If you turned up in a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt the production was actually a lot less than it was if you were in suit and tie’. She attributed differences in productivity to feeling more relaxed and

'less proactive' when dressed in casual clothing. Rob also felt that dressing more formally increased his productivity:

Q: 'Was there a dress code of any sort?

Yes there was. Smart clothes and shoes.

Q: Even at peculiar times of the night?

Yes. Yes. They considered it portrayed a professional image and also got you thinking professionally. They considered, they believed in the belief, or um, - if you'll excuse me, my English isn't very good today! - they believed in the ethics of if you are smartly presented, you'll talk smartly, you'll present yourself well on the phone.

Q: Do you believe that?

Um, I guess I do - I've never questioned it. I've never considered whether, um, whether that is true, but I think so, yes. Like I say, I can conduct myself dressed absolutely anyhow very professionally, and as a fish farmer I often do absolutely covered in mud head to tail, or, you know, being very dirty. But, um, there is certainly something to it. You know, to make the effort, to present yourself well, you - for some strange reason it does come more easily, more naturally. You seem to be less lazy' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

In many call centres employees have access to business-sensitive or confidential information held by the call centre employer. It is not surprising, therefore, that in addition to password-protected system log-on procedures many call centre buildings have security measures in place to prevent unauthorized access to systems and information. Stewart was required to sign in to his call centre building each morning and be issued with a pass before he could proceed to work. A similar system operated at the TelCo call centre in Centraletown during the day, but a swipe-card was required for unassisted entry to the building after the security guard on reception had finished for the day. Rob's call centre building also used a swipe-card system and his comments illustrate a slight unease about his employer's ability to track his movements so precisely:

'I had a, an if you like, a pass, an electronic tag, which I would use to let myself out of the call centre room, you know, go through the door. So whenever I wandered anywhere the people would know where I was, which was kind of clever, but also....(sentence not completed).

For example, you walk into the reception and just to get into the rest of the building you had to go through one. If you wanted to use the bathrooms, rest rooms you could just wander in off corridors but each different corridor would have its own clearance and my badge was obviously loaded with the correct access permissions for where I was required to go. There was a lot of confidentiality with this company, especially dealing with CreditCardCo' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

In many call centres employees are prohibited from talking to each other or reading personal material in between calls. For example, Mike suggested that team managers sat with each team and

'could see what you were doing, so um, if someone was chatting to someone else they'd tell them to get back on the phones kind of thing'. In some instances there is no possibility of talking or reading. During participant observation I noticed that during the day there were always calls queuing on the system and the automatic call distributor ensured that employees rarely experienced pauses between calls. Catriona similarly noted that call volumes were such that 'you never got a minute between them! There must have been two hundred people in customer service answering calls and at any one time there would be like a hundred and odd calls banking'. In many instances there is not the same volume of call traffic later at night. I observed that on most evenings after 10 pm gaps would occur between calls. Catriona suggested that pauses would eventually appear between calls if 'you stayed on. You got the chance of staying on 'til two in the morning on a Saturday night if you wanted to. I mean, I never did, but if you did stay on apparently about one it got quiet'.

In my experience the regulation of behaviour in the call centre tended to become more flexible later in the evening shift. I noted on several occasions that the rules were not always strictly adhered to in this respect:

"Do you have a favourite seat?" I asked [my 'buddy' Carol, an experienced operator who was to sit beside me for the first two weeks of my evening shifts] as we sauntered down the room's central aisle. "No, but we have to find two together" was her reply. I noticed however that her choice was not quite as arbitrary as her words had suggested it might be. We came to rest at terminals that faced the row in which her friend was sitting. Terminals that were within note-passing or paper-throwing distance of her friend and next to Nigel, a young man in his mid-twenties, who it transpired was also to be a part of the paper-based conversation.

The paper conversation was mainly carried out in the first half of the session, when Carol asked me to pass scribbled notes to Nigel, who in turn passed them and his own to Carol's friend opposite. This carried on for several notes, amid stifled giggles from Caroline's friend, until Caroline signalled the approach of the duty TL. It was very reminiscent of classroom behaviour at school. I feel sure that the TL was aware of what was going on but allowed it to ride until she stopped things with a walk-past.

If the slowing down of time was visible in the first part of the shift, it became glaringly obvious in the early stages of the second half. The pauses between customers became more pronounced. At the same time, conversations between employees switched from being covert paper-mediated exercises to being not just overt but also audible. So audible in fact that it seemed to me that the call centre was noisier in that last period, with less than a quarter of the terminals occupied, than it had been during our day shifts when virtually every available position was filled. So noisy that it was impossible to filter it from my conscious in the same way that I had been increasingly able to do with the daytime background hum.

Facilitating [conversation] was the move to one end of the call centre. Caroline explained that after a certain time only certain of the terminals in the call centre were in service. After

the break we had unplugged and moved to positions opposite Charles and another 20-something man. Caroline conversed happily with Charles at the same time that she was answering calls. I was impressed. It was taking all my concentration just to do the calls, and Caroline was keying and dispatching at lightning speed' (Diary, 17 March 1998).

'Time in the call centre goes by quite slowly for me when there are gaps in between answering calls. I think this is because in order to alleviate the boredom that sets in during the slower moments people turn to talking to each other. To do this requires you to have the confidence to talk, sometimes swiveling to face the person with whom you are conversing. It also requires you to have some tie-in to a conversation (Diary, 20 March 1998).

'Quiet evening in the call centre - only a dozen or so employees in, with this number falling towards the end of the evening. Signs were that this evening was particularly lax, with one group of four employees talking amongst themselves and passing around a magazine or catalogue. Another employee was quite openly reading a book at her position (Diary, 11 April 1998).

In the TelCo call centre a number of rules that were strictly enforced during the day tended to be relaxed at night. For example, I noticed that employees working evening shifts tended to dress down much more. Jeans, trainers, and very casual but not particularly smart clothing were not uncommon. I never saw or heard of anyone ever being challenged about what they had worn to work. Part of this may have been due to the higher percentage of temporary AgencyCo employees working at night. Another reason may have been that there often seemed to be no TL on duty later in the evening, leaving the chargehand in control of the call centre. As a position in the call centre hierarchy, chargehand seemed to be closer to operator-level employee than team leader, the lowest position in the TelCo management structure. Chargehands were arguably more likely to identify with the ongoing experiences of other employees and perhaps more likely to allow behaviour that might mitigate the unpleasantness of certain aspects of that experience.

Rob found that Thirdparty also adopted a different attitude towards employees working later shifts. Asked about whether he preferred his outbound or inbound duties during the CreditCardCo campaign, he replied:

'I actually preferred the incoming, as soon as I realised I could use my time more sensibly, more valuably. I used to take bits of work in. You know, stuff I had to read and what have you, so...

Q: And were they happy for you to do that?

Yes and no. I used to work strange hours, so people didn't used to see me. Then again, there was, you know, there was a leeway allowed me to, um, I wasn't really pushing the system at all, but then again its kind of give and take. They could see that I was performing well, and they were happy that my work wasn't detracting from what they were paying me for.

Q: But strictly speaking that wasn't allowed?

No. Yes, correct.

Q: Do you think you would have been allowed to get away with that if you'd have been working, say, normal day-time hours?

No. Definitely not'
(Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000)

Elsewhere he noted that 'the dress code was relaxed in the evenings. But that was for the same reasons of people not being around. We were supposed to be dressed smartly twenty-four hours a day'. Answering a question about whether the call centre was 'more relaxed in the evenings' he enthused 'Fantastically so! Amazingly so!' Again, the perceptibly more relaxed management of evening employees might have been a recognition of the higher proportion of temporary employees whose attachment to the employment was on the whole less stable than that of their permanent counterparts. Rob estimated that sixty percent of Thirdparty employees working daytime shifts were on permanent full-time contracts and that forty percent were on part-time temporary contracts. For evening shifts the proportion of part-time temporary employees rose to between sixty and eighty percent.

Both Catriona and Mike found that the call centres in which they were employed took the action of moving employees around in an attempt to prevent rules about appropriate employee behaviour from being broken. Catriona observed:

'They used to change you around a lot, so that you never really formed relationships with people. They didn't want you forming a relationship with the person sitting beside you. And they used, it was quite...

Q: Why not, do you think?

I don't know. I think it was because they thought you might have a tendency to chat to them in between calls....You weren't allowed to chat to your next door neighbour. You could read - as long as it was the manual or SatCo guide, but you couldn't read any other material, it had to be something to do with SatCo.'
(Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000)

Mike noted that:

'During the six months [of my employment] [the team] moved around a bit, but more or less the same place. They might move you around. Usually it was the same - you were allotted the same desk to work at - but they might move people around if they thought somebody was being a bad influence - a bit like being at school. It was very much like being at school, actually' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

8.3.6 Monitoring and assessment

This section examines the nature of different call centre monitoring and assessment regimes and the ways in which employees experience them. A number of authors have discussed the likely effects of the ability of call centre technologies to allow remote electronic performance monitoring. Fernie (1998) suggested that those abilities were 'amazing to behold' and drew comparison with Bentham's Panopticon. Houlihan (2000) argued that management control was less than complete and saw strict monitoring and assessment practices as creating low trust environments in which employees were 'likely to behave predictably untrustworthily' (2000: 237).

The nature of call centre monitoring and assessment

Performance monitoring is a facet of call centre employment that has attracted considerable attention. The data illustrate the range of monitoring regimes operated by call centres. Electronic performance monitoring was a frequent but by no means the only element of most regimes. In some instances, for example at SatCo, the electronic performance monitoring was carried out by company employees working outside the call centre, with the results then being passed down to employees for discussion with their line managers. In the majority of cases the physical surveillance of employees played an integral part in the call centre's monitoring regime. Team managers or supervisors were stationed either with or in close proximity to the employees whom they were to monitor. At AssuranceCo, as at many call centres, managers were able to supplement visual and aural inspection with real-time performance data provided by the call centre's computer systems.

Assessment took a number of forms and was of varying significance to employees. Performance targets are part of virtually all call centres' assessment regimes. Most inbound call centre managements viewed the average length of calls as the most critical employee performance variable. Employees at outbound call centres tended not to have targets imposed relating to call duration, but were subject to performance targets in relation to volume of sales, numbers of appointments made and so forth. Many call centres assessed quality-related aspects of employees' performance, and in one case the award of sales bonus payments were dependent on satisfactory performance in this respect. Table 8.6 displays data on participant observation and interviewees' experiences of monitoring and assessment regimes.

Table 8.6 Monitoring and assessment regimes at different call centres

	Call centre function	Monitoring/assessment frequency	Quantity-related call variables assessed	Quality-related call variables assessed
Participant Observation	Inbound Telecomms	Monthly monitoring. 40 consecutive calls assessed	Length of calls	Correctness of information Politeness Legal compliance
Interviewees				
Stewart	Inbound Financial			
Catriona	Inbound Entertainment		None	Politeness Vocal qualities
Sharon	Outbound Financial		Number of calls	
	Outbound Financial		Number of calls	
	Inbound Financial	100% of calls recorded. Monthly assessment of 10 recorded calls picked at random	None	Politeness Call structure
Julie	Outbound Leisure		None	None
Mike	Outbound Telecomms	Weekly monitoring. 3 consecutive calls assessed	None	Script adherence Vocal qualities Persuasiveness
	Inbound Telecomms		Length of calls	
Rob	Outbound Outsourced	100% of calls recorded.	None	
	Inbound Outsourced	Assessment of calls picked at random. Monthly feedback		
Ginny	Inbound Financial	100% of calls recorded. Monthly assessment of 10 recorded calls picked at random	None	Politeness Call Structure

Experiences of call centre monitoring and assessment

There was evidence to suggest that call centre monitoring and assessment regimes and performance targets tended to become stricter over time. The degree of control that managements try to exert

using such regimes may be linked to the acquisition of more advanced monitoring capabilities. It may also be associated with a perceived need to pursue competitive advantage by reducing costs wherever possible. Whatever the reason, the following two excerpts would suggest that employees prefer more relaxed regimes:

‘When I first started in the call centre it was a new thing for AssuranceCo as well. I mean, they hadn’t really - it was like their first call centre as well. It was really good. It was much better than it is today, you know. (Laughs).

Q: In what sense?

In the sense that we didn’t get call-assessed. Um, we had a fairly easy service level to achieve. Er. You know, call assessing and all that came in gradually, but in the beginning we didn’t have any of that. It was good.

Q: It was kind of a bit less rigorous, a bit less managed then?

Yes. It was well managed but, but not so much, you know, you’ve got to sit at your seat and stay there. There was a certain extent of that. You know, watch to make sure there’s people ready and all that, but it wasn’t so much bums on seats at that time.
(Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000)

‘Margery had said how they had thought that things were tough in the old days, but they had not realised how much tougher it could get. In those days, she said, you really could read a book in the evening. She and another employee had become so bored one evening that they had invented a ‘Customer with the nicest voice’ competition which they tried to persuade callers was being held that evening. They managed to convince one young gentleman to ring back the next morning, Margery said, because they told him that there was not a supervisor available that night to judge the quality of his voice. They gave him the direct number of the telephone in the ladies powder room, and sure enough he telephoned the next morning at about 8.45 am and tried to explain to the bemused employees in the ladies powder room why he was calling, much to everyone’s amusement’
(Diary, 29 April 1998).

The monitoring of employee behaviour in call centres is generally more intensive than in many other work environments. This is because the physical presence of supervisory staff is generally supplemented by the ability of technologies employed in call centres to provide remote, real-time information on employees’ interactions with the system. Ginny, a deputy team leader at AssuranceCo, said that as well as having to answer calls and assess other employees a major part of her job was as to ‘kind of just watch. You know - watch the board. Watch the calls. Kind of make sure people are there when they should be there’. The monitoring regime at the TelCo outbound call centre described by Mike was typical of those operating in most call centres:

‘Not only did they measure how much of each product you sold, but they could tell how long you’d been on the phone, how long you’d been off the phone in total during the course of the day, all those kinds of statistics. And they were actually there. They could see what you were doing, so um, if someone was chatting to someone else they’d tell them to get back on the phones kind of thing. So it was er, it was sort of, they had their computer

which was monitoring, or they had a system which monitored those statistics which they could get from the usage of the phone and, er, but they also had someone who was physically present during those five hours, watching what we were doing' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

In most call centres it is possible at any given moment in time to remotely access information on individual employees. By interrogating the computer systems it is possible to find out if the employee is logged onto the system, whether or not they are engaged on a call, whether or not they have temporarily suspended the distribution of calls to them and why. For example, the regime at SatCo included monitoring the length of time an employee spent away from their workstation and the reasons for absence. To facilitate this, employees were required to input information about any absence:

'When you went off the phone you had to, there was numbers you had to punch in, I think 'XXX' was a coffee break, and as soon as you did that there was a desk along the front of the hall where people sat and that was, like, the supervisors sat there, and they monitored, and they could tell what everybody's phone was doing. And if you were one minute over the fifteen minutes going back then, you know, you got picked up on it: 'You were late back from your coffee break'. Again, if you want to go to the loo you had to put a code in to your phone, and I think they allowed you something like two minutes at the loo and then you had to explain what you were doing at the toilet that took longer than two minutes. (Laughs)' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Although the ability to monitor employees' actions was broadly similar, the data suggest that inbound call centres tended more than outbound call centres to try and use information gained from the electronic component of their monitoring systems as a means of controlling employee behaviour. The amount of time spent away from the work station was more rigorously monitored and employees were more frequently called to account for absences. The reason for this is likely to be the salience of such behaviour to the call centre's ability to meet its performance targets. Performance targets for outbound call centres are generally specified in terms of their function, for example achieving a given volume of sales or number of appointments and so on. Performance targets for inbound call centres are likely to be specified in terms of service levels irrespective of their function. So whether the function is to handle complaints, to solve problems or to provide information the performance target is likely to be specified in terms of answering a given percentage of calls within a set time. Any time that an employee spends away from their work station is time for which they are unavailable to take and process calls. The absence of an individual therefore has the potential to affect directly whether or not overall performance targets set for call centres are met.

Comments made by Ginny regarding whether or not her call centre was subject to service level targets serve not only to illustrate a perceived link between the performance targets set for her call centre and the behaviour of members of her team, but also to show the way in which electronic monitoring information is used to call employees to account for their time:

'We weren't but we are now. We are now driven by the service level, which has gone up. So we've now got to answer ninety percent of the calls within fifteen seconds. That's a team thing obviously. You've got to answer, well, where I used to work - we don't really have stats in my team because we take so few calls that you can't say 'You must take ten calls an hour' because they're not going to get ten calls an hour. I mean we do look and we do check as see 'Right, you took forty calls today. It took you so long. You had so much time when you weren't sitting on - you weren't doing anything. Tell me, what were you doing? Don't tell me you were busy because I can see you've had three hours off the phones'. And so we do look at it in that sense, but not as strict as when it all merges. It's going to be ten to twelve calls per hour. Twelve calls in busy and peak times. Ninety percent service levels. You must have a 'not ready' time of under fifteen percent, I think. So that's an average monthly 'not ready' time of under fifteen.

Q: Do people go into 'not ready' time so that they can go to the bathroom or whatever?

Yes. They get breaks. Um they get a ten-minute break in the morning and a ten-minute break in the afternoon and an hour break for lunch. So you can go for a cigarette in the morning, or a coffee, and one in the afternoon. Um. I suppose you should go to the loo then, but I mean no-one's bothered if you go to the loo. But you go 'not ready' to do that. Or to go to the fax machine and the photocopier. When I first started there we didn't have very strict stats at all but they've gradually brought it all in' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

Call centre technologies allow 'not ready' time' to be measured and monitored. Possibly because of the importance of this variable to the attainment of service level targets, inbound call centres tend to set employees target values for it. Ginny suggested that at AssuranceCo employees were required to have 'an average monthly 'not ready' time' of less than fifteen percent. It was suggested that at the TelCo call centre the target figure was less than five percent, although higher percentages seemed to be tolerated. From a management perspective, a possible negative consequence of specifying a ceiling value is that employees may perceive such a figure as indicative of the minimum acceptable work effort. Evidence that this might be the case was provided by Sharon, who had monthly meetings with her team leader 'just to go over performance, um any problems we might have, any grievances'. She was also shown her performance statistics, including 'things like the length of time on the 'phone, how many calls we've answered, how much time we've been on the not ready button, and things like that' on a daily basis. On the question of whether she thought that statistics were necessary, Sharon's answer seemed to suggest that she saw the target amount for the amount of time spent in 'not ready' state as an indicator of the extent to which she could avoid being on the telephone:

'I think [statistics] help to guide you where you're going. The difficulty at the moment is that I don't know what my targets are - what I'm supposed to be doing, how long I'm supposed to be on the phone, how long I can get away with not being on the phone and not being logged in, so to speak. So it's all guidance.

Q: 'Get away with'? What do you mean 'get away with'?

(Laughs)

Q: Explain 'get away with'.

Get away with - I was actually doing - there has to be an amount of time during the day where, you know, you'll have a certain percentage of the day that is allocated that you can, basically be on not ready for, say, half an hour in the day, and that's when you'd be running around doing things; looking for cases, looking for, oh I don't know, um additional information, going to the shop, going to the coffee machine, that sort of thing. You've got probably a certain time, but I don't know how long. Its like I've heard the manager say 'Your 'not ready' time is a bit too high, why is that?' But not to me, to [another operator]. But I'm just thinking 'I wonder how much it is?'

Q: Why do you want to know exactly how much?

Because I like to keep an eye on my own, so I'm not over that, you know, that level' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

Having experienced both an outbound and an inbound call centre, Mike noted differences in the way in which employees were encouraged to manage their time:

'[In the inbound call centre] you didn't actually get a - apart from that half hour you didn't get an official break, although you were told to er, if you got stressed, to sort of go to the toilet or whatever, or get a coffee, and go back to work with a coffee. But at the same time they kept stats on how long you were on the phone and everything, how long you spent on each call and all that kind of thing. So there they were trying to turn calls around as fast as possible, where in sales it tended to be the other way around - they were trying to get you to go through the whole script, and, er, to spend, to try and get, you know, to try and make the sale. I don't know. Sort of giving up and deciding a particular customer wasn't worth the effort, you weren't going to make a sale there and trying to move quickly on to somewhere you were going to make sales, which is what the bonus incentivised you to do, but every 'phone call they were sort of listening in and trying to get you to spend the same amount of time on each customer in sales. With business billing all the stats, the measurements which were taken, were trying to persuade you to, er, spend as little time on each call as possible. To turn that call around as fast as possible' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

During participant observation I saw numerous examples of how, of all the variables monitored, the speed at which calls were turned over, known as the average wrap time or AWT, was considered by the TelCo call centre management to be the most critical. Both in training and afterwards, continued employment depended on it. An AWT was calculated for the centre as a whole. Trainees were required to be within set percentages of the centre AWT at pre-determined points in their training. After the two-week training period employees were supposed to have a personal AWT of

less than twice the centre AWT. After eight weeks of working in the call centre, employees were required to have a personal AWT of less than 1.1 times the centre AWT. The following extracts illustrate how early suggestions that quality-related variables might have equal importance gave way to an acknowledgement that, in the end, speed mattered most. Shortly after the date of the last extract my employment at the call centre was terminated. My AWT for the final week, considered unacceptable, had been around 37.5 seconds:

‘Barbara [my team leader] did not however wish me to dwell on the statistics, and kept emphasising that what was being sought was an overall performance, not speed alone’ (Diary, 19 March 1998).

‘The main outcome from the headset coaching session with Marianne was that I seem to be following most of the procedures correctly, but I need to focus on those things which will help to bring my average wrap time down. At the end of the day, Marianne said, this would be all that anybody would be interested in at the end of my 8 weeks. They would neither know nor care how polite or helpful I had been. Their only interest would be in whether I was within 10% of the centre average for that month, and if not why not. She suggested that they were quite strict about whether or not you would come within the times. She said that if in any particular session I had any specially long calls I should note the length of the call and why it took so long, so I could explain my poor stats if asked’ (Diary, 9 April 1998).

‘[Barbara] said that I should be aware that when the time came for [the call centre manager] to make a decision on my future, he obviously had to take into account that although the reports on my performance were consistently high in terms of quality, they were consistently low in terms of time. He had to consider the full effects on his centre, and his job was to strike a balance between quality and efficiency that best served the centre's objectives’ (Diary, 28 May 1998).

At the SatCo call centre Catriona did not have targets for average wrap times. She believed that this was due to the wide range of queries or problems that could be presented by callers, some of which took longer to deal with than others. She felt that in such circumstances it was not possible for SatCo to calculate a sensible target figure. There was, however, still pressure from management to dispatch calls expeditiously. She found that this presented problems on occasion because callers who were being guided through lengthy problems would often want to make conversation. She said that ‘if you got chatty with the customer you got picked up for that as well. You weren’t really allowed to chat. You had to get as many calls through as you could... They didn’t actually stipulate a time but if they thought you were wasting too much time chit-chatting then they would come and say “No. You don’t chat with customers, you just deal with the problem”’ (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

But the emphasis in inbound call centres is not always on dealing with the highest possible number of calls. Rob explained that when he was working for Thirdparty taking inbound calls from CreditCardCo customers 'we would have to give as invaluable and a correct advice as possible... There was no pressure to do anything, to get as much done as possible. The impetus was on the quality of the work and, really, keeping the customers happy.... the ambition was to leave the customer as happy and as fulfilled, as far as their enquiry goes, as possible' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000). However, the emphasis on quality and customer satisfaction over quantity of calls answered may have been due to the client rather than to Thirdparty's own philosophy. Rob had observed that the two different contracts on which he had worked 'were run in different styles. The CreditCardCo contract was a lot more polite, civil, professional, whatever you like to consider it... It was a more ruthless environment doing the MobilePhoneCo campaign'.

The assessment regimes adopted by call centres depend to an extent on the technology available, but also on the people available to carry out the work. For example, AssuranceCo and Thirdparty had the technology available to record, and therefore potentially to assess, all of their employees' calls. But in practice this would be too labour-intensive. When asked how many of his calls were monitored, Rob suggested that 'it was actually a hundred percent' but as regards assessment the majority of calls 'wouldn't get listened to because they didn't have the personnel.... So they would do one hundred percent recording and their own spot sampling if you like of the calls' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

Ginny, a deputy team manager at AssuranceCo, represented the management view on the necessity for and importance of regular assessments. Her response suggested that some employees were able to use assessments to their advantage:

'I've heard people on the phones that haven't had any training or assessments and they're terrible! They've got no idea... We've got five new people who've never worked in a call centre before, and they've spent all their time working in a back office so they've got no idea whatsoever. And they've just literally all been put on the phones... And they've just started being assessed. Just casually at the moment, because we haven't got the equipment for them yet. But they've just started, and they're amazed at how terrible they sound on the phone when they listen to themselves. They're like 'Oh God, that's awful!' And then they've all started, you know, really trying to improve and everything. They've been listening to themselves. They've all been making an effort to do what they're supposed to, you know, to improve. And you can hear that when you listen to them again after they've had feedback' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

But that does not mean that employees' experiences of assessment were positive. In the following excerpt, asked whether she found that call handlers responded positively to being assessed, Ginny began by explaining how she felt that the employees in her call centre saw assessment under the AssuranceCo regime as a positive and beneficial experience that allowed them to improve themselves. As her answer developed she revealed a suspicion that the positive responses to assessment that she had observed might have been more strongly linked to the potential benefits of receiving high assessments than to the perceived benefits of the procedure itself. Her belief that employees in her team 'like being assessed' contrasts with her own early experience of the process:

'We've got a great team and they all like being assessed. Because they realise how important it is for their career development and they can see because most of them have improved so much. I think it's a lot to do with the way you give feedback as well, as to not to de-motivate them even if they've been really bad. You can still do it in a way to say 'Well, OK, this is how you could have done it' and stuff like that. And they usually go away and really, really try hard to get their score up and to improve on the things they're not good at. So its, but that's lucky. I mean, its really, really good. I think its because they've been stressing that this is for a pay rise this year. 'Do it well, and we'll see how much' - you know. And basically we give them opportunities as well. So if they do well and improve themselves, working right, they'll be given *better* things to do. They won't be stuck on the phones all the time because we'll take them off... Even if it's a job that just takes them away for half an hour'.

Q: Did you like being assessed?

Not at first because I was bad at it. I was quite defensive I think. I think that's one of the main problems you come across, especially when I'm giving feedback, is trying to break down that defence. Because, and I am like that, or I was. And then one day - it was when I left and I came back - it all sort of fell into place. It sort of clicked and I thought "Oh - *that's* how you do it!" And it was amazing. It was literally I just seemed to get confidence from nowhere and thought "This is how you do it" and then I was OK at being assessed because I got good marks instead of bad marks, so...(sentence not finished)' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

For a variety of reasons, employees' experiences of assessment seem to have been mostly negative and unpleasant. Catriona's comments on the assessment procedure adopted by SatCo illustrate very clearly her frustration with the circuitous nature of the procedure and with certain of the assessment criteria and her irritation at being burdened with test calls that she perceived as being of little or no value:

'There was a department upstairs where everything that was done on the computer gets sort of, you know, they would download it upstairs. There was a whole department who would look at it and decide if they thought it was.... I mean they would even come back with things like "You said too many 'ers' or 'ums' in that call" or "You didn't use the customer's name often enough". I mean, really silly things. And then they would decide what they thought should come back to you. They would then hand it to the supervisor, who would give it to the SO, who would then take it to the operator.

...You'd be sent this report back saying "You said XY and Z, and that wasn't right" you know. And you had to sign a wee thing saying, um - there was different categories - "No, I disagree with that decision" or "OK, I did that and I won't do it again" or (Laughs)... You had to like tick a wee box and sign it.

...They would give you test calls as well. The management department had a few of them and they would be something that was maybe in the brief that night. And they would phone up and they would pretend to be a customer to see how you dealt with it. And then they would go "Oh, this was a test call and that was atrocious" or "That was a test call and, okay, you did OK". You know, but, that's the thing, you know, as if you've nothing better to do with your time!' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Catriona said that she had found the thought of having her calls remotely monitored and assessed 'quite scary at the beginning, but that after 'you'd been on the phone for a while you'd tend to forget' until you were sent a bad call report. She was, however, uncomfortable with not knowing who was assessing her calls or when she was being assessed, saying:

'I didn't like it. I really didn't like it at all. I thought even if they, I mean I can understand they need to monitor calls, but even if they'd said 'Right. Tonight your row's going to be monitored' then at least you would know. You know. I suppose their argument for that is that if you knew you were being monitored then you would do everything by the book when you wouldn't necessarily be doing that. Anyway, but, I don't know, you had the two experienced operators in the middle of the row who were supposed to be, sort of, keeping an ear open to what you were saying anyway, so... I found it quite off-putting to think of' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

The experience of assessment tended to be more negative when the outcome of assessment had direct employment-related consequences, for example affecting remuneration. Each week his team manager assessed certain qualitative elements of Mike's performance by listening to and assessing three consecutive calls. Mike explained that:

'...When they listened in to these three calls you got marked for those, and you had to get at least eighty percent on that to get your full bonus. If you fell below that then they started deducting bits off your bonus. You could end up with losing your bonus altogether if you, er, failed those assessments.

...They would check whether you kept to the script. Er, the extent to which you didn't take 'no' for an answer, and that's what I was picked up on repeatedly for. For saying "OK, that's fine. I can understand how you feel." kind of approach which I tended to take. I was supposed to sort of come back to them with arguments why they shouldn't, why they actually needed the product and why they ought to take it. And, um, and the tones, what sort of tone you adopted and all that, how cheerful you were' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000)

Mike admitted to having lost part of his monthly bonus 'a couple of times' but said that 'by the stage that happened my bonus was so low anyway that I don't think it made a hell of a lot of difference'. The problem, he felt, was that when he had been doing well and achieving high sales it was because he was departing from the call script, which he described as being 'a complete waste

of time'. Towards the end of his three months on that particular sales campaign, all the members of his team were told that they could not deviate but had to stick to the script 'word for word'. He said:

'I wasn't sort of cheating in any way, I just thought the script sounded a bit stilted. And they sort of demanded that you go on repeatedly. If someone wasn't taking something you were supposed to carry on trying to persuade them, which generally I found was a waste of time... What we were told is most sales take place after the fifth refusal, so people would say "no" five times but you carry on and eventually they'll say yes. But er, I have never been persuaded of that, at least as far as my calls were concerned' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Performance criteria can influence the ways in which work is done. Requirements to include specific elements in a pre-defined call structure could limit employees' scope for creativity in the performance of tasks and thereby have a negative effect on the experience of employment. Ginny suggested that in some circumstances call monitoring and assessment could lead, in a similar fashion to call-scripting, to stilted and unnatural-sounding employee responses:

'It's kind of made it into a more robotic, a more robotic way of handling calls. Um, Because they *have* do this and they *have* to ask, you know, they have to say 'Is there anything else I can help you with?' They have to thank you for your call and its not, and even if its - they get assessed on these calls - so even if its somebody from another department that perhaps you could be more relaxed with, you still lose marks for not saying 'Is there anything else I can help you with?' and 'Thank you for your call' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

8.4 Summary

This chapter sought to explore the nature and experience of work in telephone call centres. It began by reviewing articles in the 'subjective experience' subcategory of the content analysis of selected newspaper articles carried out as part of this study. There was an average of more than 50 such articles per quarter-year in 2000, the final year of the period analysed. For the purposes of the review I further sub-categorized the articles as either non-observational or observational articles. The former subcategory was divided into reports of events or actions related to call centre employment and descriptions of facets of call centre work. The latter subcategory was split into articles that relied on accounts of call centre work given by persons other than the author, those that detailed their authors' own observations and comments thereon, and those that described the experiences of authors when they were undertaking participant observation in call centres.

The review provided illustrations of the nature of call-centre related information disseminated by the newspapers included in the analysis, the ways in which that information was gathered and the manner in which it was presented. There were substantially more non-observational than observational articles. In the former subcategory, later articles on call centre-related actions or events show increasing union involvement in call centre matters. Where facets of call centre work were described, the topics most frequently discussed tended to be physical work environments and elements of managerial control strategies. In the observational subsections of this category of articles, third party accounts tended to be either very positive or, more usually, almost entirely negative in their portrayal of the experience of call centre employment. The more positive accounts tended to form parts of articles promoting call centres as accessible and acceptable potential employment for all parts of the community. There were relatively few articles involving the authors' own observations of, or participant observation in, call centres, but these tended to be more balanced and less overtly judgmental than those reporting the experiences of others.

In the section that followed I used data gathered during a period of covert participant observation together with interview data to describe the nature and experience of call centre employment. Subsections related to different aspects of call centre employment and began with description of the physical nature of an aspect before exploring individual experiences of it. The first subsection looked at terms and conditions of employment. The cases discussed represented various permutations of temporary or permanent, full-time or part-time employment. In the majority of those considered the hours worked were non-standard, with evening shifts being common. Whilst this had a positive aspect in that in some cases it was a key factor in enabling people to take up the employment in the first place, it also had a number of negative aspects. These included disruptions to home life, more hazardous travelling conditions and increased feelings of vulnerability on leaving at the ends of shifts. There were differences in the perception of remuneration, with positive perceptions associated with part-time employment and negative perceptions with full-time employment. These may reflect whether the work provides the main or a secondary source of household income and the referent other employments used by interviewees. Variations were apparent in the composition of remuneration packages in terms of bonus payments, overtime premia, additional 'perks' such as satellite television services or mortgage subsidies and so on. There were clear differences in the financial and other entitlements of permanent and temporary call centre employees carrying out identical tasks. Temporary employees were frequently employed

not by the call centre operator but by an employment agency. Their hourly rates of pay tended to be lower, they normally had no entitlement to any company-specific 'perks', and they were often barred from promotions.

In the second subsection call centre locations, their interior layouts and the facilities provided for employees were examined. In more than half of the cases in this study the call centre building was situated in an urban centre within a radius of 10 miles from the employees' homes. Call centres in urban centres were less likely to provide employees with parking facilities than those in industrial estate or out of town locations, but even for the latter two parking provision was not always adequate. The call centres themselves tended to be large, open plan-spaces with workstations arranged either in rows or in clusters. This generally ensured that individual control over environmental conditions such as heating, lighting and ventilation was not possible, but this was not generally perceived as problematic. Refreshment facilities were usually provided in the form of beverage dispensers and vending machines. Where catering facilities were on-site these were often effectively unavailable to part-time call centre employees because of shift patterns or insufficient break times.

The third subsection examined the formal organizational structure of call centres. Although the nomenclature differed across call centres, the majority of cases in this study followed a similar pattern with entry-level employees organized into teams, each with a team manager or leader and frequently a deputy team leader or manager. The sizes of teams varied between five and thirty. The use of teams was generally, but not exclusively, perceived as a device of managerial convenience and team membership had little meaning for employees. The hierarchical organizational structure was rigidly enforced in some cases, with communication between entry-level employees and higher management only permissible via the appropriate chain of command. There was structural differentiation between employees in that team leader or manager positions appeared in all cases to be open exclusively to permanent employees of the call centre operator and not to temporary and agency employees.

The fourth subsection looked at call centre work tasks. Although the specific nature of tasks differed in each of the cases in this study, in all except two of the cases it could be categorized as involving a high or medium degree of routinisation, an indication of the degree of process

repetition involved. Certain experiences were common to employees across call centres. Many employees saw boredom as an occupational hazard. A typical response to this seemed to be to 'switch to auto-pilot', although this was more prevalent in inbound positions with a high degree of routinization. Another experience common to most of the cases in this study was abuse from callers or call recipients. The probability of abuse was perceived in all cases as higher for telephone than for face-to-face interaction. Specific training in how to deal with difficult calls was not given in most cases, and even experienced employees were not immune from their effects. Emotional responses such as anger or distress were common across all call centres. In a number of the cases in this study, employees perceived that the rules imposed by managements for dealing with abuse left them vulnerable to and relatively defenceless against verbal attacks.

The fifth subsection considered some of the regulations and rules of behaviour imposed by call centre managements. In particular it looked at dress codes, building security and the regulation of behaviour in call centres. With the exception of one case, in all the call centres considered there was a formal requirement to wear smart or 'business' dress. Call centre building security tended to be tight, with access and egress usually monitored and recorded. In most cases during shifts in the call centre employees were either discouraged or prohibited from talking to fellow employees, leaving work stations or reading non-work literature. A variety of mechanisms were commonly used to encourage employees to follow these rules, including direct supervision, the use of computerized monitoring systems and the production and use of statistical information on employee output. Whilst in some cases employees perceived there to be some value in the imposition of dress codes, the strict exercise of rules relating to call centre behaviour was generally seen as unnecessary and demeaning, with several interviewees suggesting that they felt they had been treated like schoolchildren. In a number of cases it was noted that some or all of the rules imposed by management tended to be relaxed later at night.

In the final subsection the subject of employee monitoring and surveillance was addressed. Regular performance monitoring, assessment and feedback sessions were conducted in most of the cases. In most call centres electronic performance monitoring supplemented personal supervision. Where real-time electronic monitoring took place it was generally agreed that it was not possible for an employee to tell at any given time whether or not they were being monitored. Employees at inbound call centres were more likely than those in outbound ones to be subjected to the

monitoring of variables relating to call quantity, with variables relating to call quality routinely monitored in both types of call centre. Interviewees tended to perceive performance monitoring and assessment as degrading the experience of call centre employment by increasing work-related pressure whilst decreasing employee discretion. In one case it was suggested that employees saw assessment and feedback as beneficial in helping them to improve their performance, but no support from other data was evident for this contention.

In this chapter the nature and experience of call centre employment has been examined and compared across eleven different cases. Whilst employees' experiences are not identical, the picture that has emerged is one of common experiences across varying sectoral and employment circumstances. This provides justification for consideration of call centre employment in aggregate in particular contexts. In the next chapter the issue of turnover in call centres is examined more closely in order to determine whether or not there are also experiences related to organization exit that are common to most call centre employment.

Chapter 9

The issue of employee turnover

9.1 Introduction

The issue of employee turnover in call centres is the subject of this chapter. Employee turnover is high in many call centres. A series of international call centre benchmarking studies (Willmott, 2001; The Merchants Group, 1999) found average employee turnover rates of 32 percent per annum in 2000, 22 percent in 1999, 19.3 percent in 1998 and 14.3 percent in 1997. A recent study of UK call centres (IDS, 2001) suggested that more than half of the call centres surveyed had reported problems with employee retention and that staff turnover in responding call centres averaged 23 percent per annum. In many cases employees quit within a short time of entering employment. This is a problem for call centre employers. There are ongoing recruitment and selection costs, and the expense of training employees who subsequently quit is not generally recouped in terms of organizational benefit. Blue Sky Consulting (2001) argued that the costs of losing call centre employees, including 'the consequent loss in productivity and the knock on reduction in profit as new staff are brought up to speed', averaged '£21,500 in the case of sales staff and £4,400 for those in the service sector'. Manpower planning to meet anticipated demand becomes more difficult where there is high employee turnover, but, as noted in chapter 3, the call centre literature suggests that some call centres have adopted deliberately 'sacrificial' human resource management strategies.

By examining interview data on the experiences of ex-call centre employees it may be possible to gain insights into their reasons for leaving. If the reasons why and the processes by which call centre employees decide to leave are understood more fully, it may be possible to suggest ways in which the 'problem' of 'excessive' voluntary employee turnover may be ameliorated. The study features a relatively small number of cases, but represents many different permutations of gender, temporary/permanent and full-time/part-time variables.

Whilst many employers, including those with call centres, routinely perform exit research, it may be that extensive interviews, such as those conducted as part of this study, tease out information that might be missed by more cursory data collection methods such as exit questionnaires. Ex-employees may also be more willing to divulge information on sensitive aspects of their experiences to third parties than they would be to their former employers. Also, because the interviews did not focus on organizational exit specifically but sought to examine individual call

centre employment-related experiences more generally, it is possible to consider comments on the former in the context of what was said about the latter.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the arguments and evidence on employee turnover. Interview data are then presented and discussed in the context of the recruitment source effects and job satisfaction aspects of the literature. Three recent models of the processes of employee turnover, each representing a different approach and drawing on different theoretical underpinnings, are then considered in depth and data on individual decisions to quit are examined to evaluate the extent to which they confirm or reveal weaknesses in the models. The chapter ends with a summary.

9.2 Arguments and evidence on employee turnover

It has been argued that employee turnover can have both positive and negative consequences for organizations. Hom and Griffeth (1995) suggested that turnover has an adverse influence on organizational effectiveness. Others have argued that attrition may be beneficial in some cases to employers. Losing employees who perceive their abilities and the demands of their employment to be poorly matched can save on investment in training returns and employee turnover provides firms with opportunities to replace more highly paid employees with cheaper alternatives (Dalton, Krackhardt and Porter, 1981). Also, it has been argued that a degree of attrition can stop the workplace from becoming 'a sterile and entrenched environment, devoid of 'fresh blood' or new ideas' (Ainsley, 2001).

Turnover has been studied at both macro and micro levels. In the former case, the focus has been on identifying and explicating the relationships between organizational characteristics, workforce variables or environmental factors and employee turnover. For example, in an attempt to provide insights into the part played by external factors in employee turnover Bennett, Blum, Long and Roman (1993) examined relationships between variables previously linked to turnover by micro-level research and industry turnover rates as revealed by macro-level research. They grouped relevant variables under the headings of firm characteristics, firm setting, that is to say factors related to the geographic location of the firm, workforce characteristics and benefit practices in terms of rates of pay and the provision of fringe benefits. The firm characteristics examined were

firm size, industrial sector and unionization. In relation to firm setting they looked at local unemployment rates and rural versus urban location. Workforce characteristics considered included consideration of the average ages, gender and racial composition of employees. Under the heading of benefit practices the study examined levels of pay and the provision of non-monetary benefits. They considered the former three sets of variables to be essentially fixed, with only the latter group open to organizational control. They found that core-periphery distinctions, the proportion of female employees and the proportion of coloured employees were the best predictors of turnover rates in firms.

In another example of a macro level analysis, Greenhalgh and Mavrotas (1996) investigated relationships between training and employee turnover, including the roles of sectoral technology characteristics in influencing patterns of training and inter-organizational mobility. They argued that many employers finance workplace vocational training, either wholly or in part. Returns on this investment in training are then lost if, once trained, employees move to other organizations. The authors examined incidences of training and job-to-job mobility for a large sample of British employees in 1984 and 1989. They found that the probabilities of obtaining vocational training were higher in 1989, a time of relative economic prosperity when employers faced skills shortages, than in 1984 when economic conditions had been less favourable, but that in 1989 there 'was also a sharp increase in the propensity of workers to change employees in response to expanding job opportunities, leaving employers to face higher attrition losses for training investments'.

They found that for male employees propensities to change employers decreased with age but rose with qualifications, pointing to the conclusion that employers who trained young and well-qualified entrants were more likely not to get a reasonable return on training investments, with those subsequently appointing trained applicants reaping that reward. They found that employees in smaller firms were more likely to change employers than those in larger firms, and that part-time employees demonstrated greater mobility than their full-time counterparts. Job changes were made most frequently in sales and services occupations and least frequently in public sector employment. Both similarities and differences were evident in the training and job mobility patterns for female as opposed to male employees. Women part-time employees had also been more mobile than their full-time equivalents and job mobility was highest in least-skilled occupations. Greenhalgh and Mavrotas found that female job movers were more likely to be in training than men. There was

more mobility of female than male employees of small firms in 1989, but no difference was apparent in 1984. They found that, in innovation-using industries, female employees were more likely than males to receive training, 'indicating a female bias in the relative demand shift towards skilled workers arising from new technology' which, they speculated, might 'arise from the need for basic keyboard skills in many information technology applications, which women possessed more often than men as a result of past clerical employment, making them cheaper to train' (1996: 140).

Table 9.1 summarises findings on the influence of a number of organizational and environmental variables on employee attrition. Whilst most of the variables described in Table 9.1 are effectively beyond the control of employers, it has been suggested that there are, nonetheless, actions that can be taken to reduce employee attrition. These tend to centre on recruitment and selection procedures. For example, research has suggested that there might be a relationship between recruitment sources and organizational outcomes such as employee performance and turnover. In general formal recruiting sources have been found to generate inferior personnel and lower selection rates than informal recruitment sources (Rynes, 1991; Kirnan, Farley, and Geisinger, 1989). However, Williams, Labig Jr. and Stone (1993) found that recruitment source did not predict either voluntary employee turnover or performance. They did find that recruitment source was related to applicants' knowledge and experience before appointment, that levels of prior knowledge and experience could predict voluntary turnover and employee performance. Such studies have underlined the need to identify variables mediating the effect of recruiting sources on variables such as performance and turnover.

Two of the most frequently advanced explanations for recruitment source effects are known as the 'individual differences' and 'realism' hypotheses respectively. The former suggests that different recruitment sources draw applicants from different populations in terms of personality, ability, motivation, intelligence or other attributes. The latter postulates that particular recruiting sources act as realistic job previews, providing potential employees with extensive and accurate knowledge of the job and the potential employers. As a result, new employees from such sources have a better understanding of what the job might hold, are less prone to 'reality shock' and are likely to have a better person-job fit because of a superior self-selection process. However, a study by Griffeth,

Hom, Fink and Cohen found that 'individual differences and realism did not completely mediate the influence of recruiting sources on workplace outcomes' (1997: 31).

Table 9.1 Relationships between employee turnover and selected employing organization, workforce and environmental variables.

Variable	Effect on turnover
Employing organization size	Size is positively correlated both with increased task and functional differentiation in organizations and with number of hierarchical levels. Two hypotheses have been suggested. The first is that larger employer size leads to greater opportunities for intra-firm advancement and as a result relatively lower rates of attrition. The second, alternative, hypothesis is that greater organization size creates increased employee 'alienation' and that this leads to relatively higher levels of turnover (Terborg and Lee, 1984)
Employment sector	Where a distinction is made between oligopolistic (core) and competitive (periphery) industrial sectors, core sectors have been found to have lower turnover (Bennett, Blum Long and Roman, 1993), possibly because of their ability to support longer-term employment relationships (Bluestone, Murphy and Stevenson, 1973)
Unionization	Tends to lower organizational turnover rates. It has been argued that this is because unions promote particular human resource practices, namely those that increase the proportion of pay that is deferred, thereby stabilizing workforces (Freeman and Medoff, 1979). Alternative or complementary explanations are that unions offer employees an alternative route to quitting in order to voice dissatisfaction (Freeman, 1980), and that they provide both employers and employees with less drastic forms of dispute resolution (Pfeffer, 1983). It has been suggested that in partially unionized workplaces turnover is still lower than in non-unionised organizations because of 'spillover' effects to non-union employees.
Unemployment rates	Many studies have found a consistent, strong and negative relationship between unemployment and voluntary turnover (Hulin, Roznowski and Hachiya, 1985) with turnover also higher during periods of economic uncertainty (OECD, 1993). Local demand for labour has been positively related to organizational turnover rates (Bluedorn, 1982) although it has been suggested to be a weak predictor of turnover (Bennett, Blum Long and Roman, 1993).
Average employee age	Turnover rates have consistently been found to be higher in younger workforces (Terborg and Lee, 1984; Schein, 1978; Parsons, 1977). One possible explanation is that younger employees are likely to have fewer personal constraints and therefore to perceive more alternative employment opportunities.
Gender	Turnover has been found to be higher in firms with a higher proportion of female employees (Bennett, Blum Long and Roman, 1993) It has been suggested that men are more likely to be employed in core positions where pay is generally higher and women in peripheral posts where pay is lower and turnover higher.

Sommerville (1996) analysed recruitment sources and employee turnover in Scottish construction organizations. He focused on five organizations, each in a different location, with different organizational structure and performing different tasks. Examining historical human resources data he found that each organization had a preferred source for securing employees, but that in each case the preferred source was not the best recruitment source when measured in terms of employee

service length or quit rate. He discovered that for each organization the preferred, superior (in terms of employee length of service) and worst recruitment sources were different, but also that the superior source varied across organizations. Although unable to identify a universally superior recruitment source, he asserted that 'a proportion of turnover can be reduced through the judicious use and analysis of recruitment sources' (1996: 152).

Other employer interventions that have been argued to reduce turnover include realistic job previews (RJPs) and coping orientation for new employees. A realistic job preview is the provision to applicants before acceptance of a job offer of 'accurate and complete information about the job, with both the positive and the negative elements being shown' (Pitt and Ramaseshan, 1995: 30). Modes of realistic job information delivery vary. It has been suggested (Colarelli, 1984) that person-to-person communication has a superior effect to written communication, and that the quality of the information provided in terms of its relevance, depth and accuracy is more important than the volume of information provided (Pitt and Ramaseshan, 1995). A number of studies (for example, Pitt and Ramaseshan, 1995; Reilly, Brown, Blood and Malatesta, 1981; Wanous, 1977, 1980) provide support for the contention that RJPs tend to reduce turnover and have a positive effect on job attitudes. Meglino and DeNisi (1987) suggested a number of explanations for the beneficial effects of RJPs, including better applicant self-selection, increased commitment to job choice following on from greater perceptions of employer honesty and individual freedom of choice, reduced inflation of applicant expectations and increased applicant ability to cope with job-related difficulties.

The latter explanation for the effects of RJPs is similar to that suggested for the organizationally beneficial effects attributed to coping orientations (Waung, 1995; Meglino, DeNisi, Youngblood and Williams, 1988; Horner, Mobley and Meglino, 1979). Coping orientations consist of the provision, after applicant acceptance but prior to new employees starting work tasks, of information that amongst other things warns the newcomer of any potential negative job-related experiences, and suggests ways of coping. It has been suggested (Wanous, 1993) that combining RJPs and coping orientation may produce negative effects, in that coping orientation using realistic job information may reduce new hire self-efficacy and desire to perform the job, resulting in early turnover following appointment. Both Meglino *et al* (1988) and Waung (1995) recorded what the former called a 'shark repellent effect', that is to say early turnover following coping orientations

using realistic job information that they suggested could be attributable to 'increased apprehension in the same way that providing shark repellent could increase a swimmer's apprehension about shark attacks' (1988: 265).

Research at the level of the individual has also been designed to explore possible relationships between personal variables and turnover. McBey and Karakowsky (2001) suggested that most research on influences on turnover could be placed in one of 'four broad categories' which they identified as work-related attitudes or 'push factors', external environmental factors or 'pull factors', individual characteristic factors and job performance factors respectively. They argue that there are aspects of employment 'associated with the nature of organizational life itself' that have been suggested to 'push' employees into quitting voluntarily. Push factors that have been suggested or identified by research include job satisfaction, satisfaction with financial rewards, performance-reward contingencies, mood or affective state (George, 1989). 'Pull' factors identified in the research, that is to say factors that could act to encourage quitting voluntarily, included personal and household income levels, earner status in the household, family commitments and the existence of acceptable job alternatives. Individual or demographic factors commonly examined in turnover studies were said to include education, age, job tenure and marital status. In relation to job performance factors, they suggested that both subjective and objective job performance had been seen as having an influence on turnover.

Although research on understanding behaviour and antecedents has mostly been focused on the individual level, there has also been some turnover research conducted at the group level. For example, George and Bettenhausen (1990) attempted to understand the causes and correlates of prosocial behaviour, that is to say, either role prescribed or extra-role helpful behaviour, and voluntary turnover using group level analysis. They tried to identify key group characteristics associated with incidences of such behaviour. Relying on Schneider's (1987) attraction, selection, attrition framework, which suggests that similar people will be attracted to, selected by and retained in a work setting, they reasoned that group members would display similar behaviour in given setting. Antecedents of voluntary turnover found at a group level might be different to those found at the individual level because the former might be expected to depend on group disposition as dictated by ambient and discretionary stimuli. Previous research by O'Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett (1989) had found group social integration (includes group cohesiveness) to be significantly

negatively related to group voluntary turnover. George and Bettenhausen found that group cohesiveness, the leader's positive mood and socialization emphasis were all significant positive antecedents of prosocial behavior. In addition the group leader's positive mood was a significant negative antecedent of turnover, and group cohesiveness was negatively related to turnover but not at statistically significant levels.

9.3 Observations on call centre employee turnover

Employee turnover was high at the call centre in which I conducted my participant observation. Of my training group of four, I was the last to leave the call centre when I was dismissed after 14 weeks. The other three quit voluntarily, one after two days of training, the second after about six weeks and the third after twelve weeks' employment. I was not able to determine the exact level of employee attrition, but I would estimate it to be well in excess of 50 percent per annum. This estimate is based on knowledge that the call centre had had just over one hundred employees near the beginning of my employment and on observations such as the one below, which suggests more than 20 new trainees had been taken in the 14 weeks of participant observation:

'Whilst she was logging on to the system I asked [my coach]: 'Is it just my imagination, or are there a lot of new trainees coming through at the moment?' She said that there had been considerable training activity recently because we had lost 'quite a few' people recently. She said that some people had got new jobs elsewhere, and other people had been students who had now finished their terms and disappeared away home for the summer. She said that she had been training for the last 10 weeks. This must mean that there should have been 20 new faces up in the call centre if all of the people she had trained had made it to that stage. Some could not have done. One of the newer people told me the other week that they had been training two groups consecutively when she had been training' (Diary, 4 June 98).

Employee turnover was a normal feature of life at most of call centres at which the interviewees worked. Catriona described the rate of attrition at the SatCo call centre as 'massive... I would say that out of two hundred maybe fifty people had been there sort of long term' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000). When she first joined AssuranceCo, Ginny had worked in a call centre with thirteen other call handlers. When asked about employee turnover, she commented: 'I just work round the corner now, and when I walk past I don't recognise anyone. I mean, from when I first started in 1997 there is only two people there that were there originally. The rest have all gone from when I started' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000). Sharon suggested that employee turnover was 'very high' in both ABank and BBank call centres.

Table 9.2. Participant observation and interviewees' recruitment sources and reasons for leaving employment

	Call centre	Recruitment source	Duration of Employment	Reason for leaving
Participant Observation	TelCo	Informal – friend working at call centre	14 weeks	Not voluntary – failure to meet performance targets
Interviewees				
Stewart	OutsourceCo	Formal – local newspaper advertisement	3 weeks	Not voluntary – shift no longer available
Catriona	SatCo	Informal – friend working at call centre	3 years	Unavailability of childcare
Sharon	ABankCo	Formal – employment agency	3 years	Commuting Distance
	BBankCo	Formal – intra-organizational vacancy listing	3 years	Terms and conditions compared poorly with previous position
	AssuranceCo	Formal – local newspaper advertisement	12 months	N.A.
Julie	TimeshareCo	Informal – friend applying to work at call centre	2 days	Disliked task
Mike	TelCo	Formal – employment agency	6 months	Anticipated being sacked
	TelCo	Formal – employment agency	18 months	Bored with job and was offered place on IT course
Rob	Thirdparty	Informal – friends working at call centre	3 months + 3 months	University Summer break and change in priorities
Ginny	AssuranceCo	Formal – speculative letter to company	3 years	Promotion opportunity

Table 9.2 displays data on the recruitment sources used by the interviewees in this study and their stated reasons for ceasing employment at each call centre. In seven of the eleven cases examined the call centre employment had already ended through voluntary termination. Two cases involved employers terminating the employment. In the remaining two cases employment was ongoing at the time of interview although notice had been given in one instance.

9.4 Recruitment source effects

In seven of the cases detailed in Table 9.2 formal recruitment sources were used to find out about call centre vacancies. It is interesting to note that in three of those cases there was no active effort

on the part of the individual concerned to obtain this type of employment. It was secured after signing up with an employment agency. Five of the people in question used informal recruitment sources to find out about vacancies, and in three of these cases the source was a friend or acquaintance already working at the call centre. As noted earlier, researchers have suggested that use of informal recruitment sources leads to longer organizational tenure. Because of the number of cases and the wide disparity of types of employment in terms of activity sector and terms and conditions of employment it is impossible to comment on this aspect. It is, however, possible to compare individual experiences with one of the theoretical explanations advanced for the superiority of informal recruitment sources, the realism hypotheses. This theory holds that the information available from some recruiting sources is equivalent to a realistic job preview, providing potential employees with accurate knowledge of jobs and potential employers and thereby allowing unsuitable applicants to self-select out of the recruitment process.

In the participant observation case my recruitment source was aware that I was looking for call centre employment and advised me that employees were being sought at the TelCo call centre. Very little was provided in the way of additional information regarding the nature of employment and work at the call centre or the employer, but this may have been because the person advising me assumed that I already had all relevant information. Thus this case provides no support for the realism theory but perhaps it is atypical.

Rob learned of the employment opportunities at Thirdparty through 'colleagues at college. Students' and he summed up what he had been told as 'lucrative money, strange hours'. Catriona also found out about job opportunities at the SatCo call centre through a friend. When asked how she had heard about her job she explained:

'Um, my friend worked there. She... now she started in the July and I started in the September. I think we both got to the stage where we were totally skint and we were looking for, you know, just something just part-time that fitted in with the kids. And her next-door neighbour worked there and she said to her 'You know SatCo are recruiting at the moment - why don't you come along?' So Rhona had sent in her c.v. and all the rest of it. She got an interview and got started. It was at the time there was a massive recruitment drive going on. And Rhona sussed out the fact that if you went through an agency you got less money, and if you sent your c.v. to them directly then it was a lot better. Conditions as well, if you were a permanent employee. So she said 'Why don't you send in your c.v.?' So that's what I did' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Neither Rob's nor Catriona's experiences seem to lend much support to the realism explanation offered for differences in post-hire outcomes across recruitment sources. From Catriona's comments it would appear that the start of her friend Rhona's employment at the SatCo call centre pre-dated her own by less than three months. This would not have given Rhona very much time, especially considering that she also worked the weekend-evenings shift, in which to get enough experience to provide Catriona with the level of job detail that seems to be envisaged by the realism hypothesis. The interviews did not cover this question in great detail, and both interviewees' recollections might have been different had the subject been broached specifically and had the interviews taken place closer to the start of their respective employments.

Both recalled being told about particular, positive aspects such as the pay and the hours that had attracted their friends to that employment. In both cases those aspects were related to the terms of employment rather than to the work task or any experience of it. It may be that Rob and Catriona's decisions to apply for call centre positions were informed not just by what was said at the time they were told of those opportunities, but also by their recollections of relevant conversations with their friends prior to that. These may cumulatively have 'added up' to a realistic job preview in the sense of providing a fund of both positive and negative job-related information, but without further data this interpretation is purely speculative.

9.5 Likes and dislikes about call centres

Job satisfaction has always been construed as important as regards employee turnover, especially that which consists of voluntary quits. For example, Price (2001) developed a causal model of turnover that identified a number of environmental, structural and individual variables thought to influence job satisfaction. An examination of the particular likes and dislikes of individual call centre employees might reveal specific issues that are common to this type of working environment and that provoke affective responses. Those that give rise to positive affective responses are likely to increase job satisfaction and those that lead to negative affective responses might be expected to increase job dissatisfaction. The identification of such issues might allow call centre operators to take steps to reduce, ameliorate or promote their effects as appropriate.

Five of the interviewees were asked to give the three things they liked most and the three things they disliked most about their call centre employment. Although she had worked in three separate call centres, Sharon offered only one set of data on likes and dislikes. Ginny provided separate responses for her positions as call handler and deputy team leader respectively. Stewart and Julie were not asked to provide such data because their employment tenure was not considered sufficient to have allowed them to evaluate all facets of the job. The data are displayed in Table 9.3.

In some instances the interviewees expanded on why they liked or disliked a particular facet of the employment. For example, Rob suggested that he liked the 'social life'. During the period of participant observation I had noted that social interaction between employees at the TelCo call centre was minimal. I was therefore prompted to ask what he had meant by this. Rob explained:

'I was studying at University and I had, you know, a set group of colleagues that I'd study with and what have you and we'd go out for drinks and what have you, but because, you know, you're there at University for a set period of time you know all the same people. I was in working with Thirdparty and there's a much higher turnover of people than Uni. You meet more people - its very interesting. I learn strictly by experience, good or bad. Usually bad. And, um, the opportunity was there to hear a lot of people's stories, which was very interesting' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

Catriona had also suggested that her time at the SatCo call centre had been good for making friends. Again, this did not accord with my experience during participant observation. She explained that she would get to know female employees 'because you'd go in [to the rest room] for a coffee and you'd say, oh you know, 'I had a phone call like this' and you would compare bad calls, and you did, you made some quite good friends through it' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000). This act of sharing and comparing the experiences of unpleasant calls had in fact happened a number of times during the participant observation, but had not resulted in the formation of friendships in my case.

This may be explained by personal differences, but it might also stem from differences in shift arrangements coupled with Catriona's length of tenure at SatCo. My shifts were variable from week to week in terms of both days worked and start times, whereas Catriona worked the same weekend evening shift each week. She was therefore more likely to see the same members of that longer-term core of employees that she described both prior to and at the end of her shift and therefore had greater opportunity to strike up friendships.

Table 9.3. Three things that interviewees most liked and disliked about their employment

Interviewee	Things most liked	Things most disliked
Rob	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'Women in their smart suits!' 2) 'The social life' 3) 'The money' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'The lack of smoking at my desk' 2) 'Working day-times' 3) 'Stroppy management'
Ginny: as a call handler	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'Team environment' 2) 'The fact that I was fairly independent' 3) 'Some of the chat that I had on the phone with people' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'The bad calls' 2) 'Sometimes the lack of support if you were stuck' 3) 'That it was boring after a couple of years' 4) 'Maybe the money'
Ginny: as a deputy team leader	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'I can do what I want' 2) 'I've got loads of pride' 3) 'I like having the responsibility of people coming to me' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'Sometimes it can be quite boring' 2) 'Call assessing'
Sharon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'Not knowing what's going to happen next' 2) 'The people you speak to' 3) 'Dealing with a difficult customer and turning them round to your way of thinking' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'Being stuck to your desk' 2) 'Not being able to speak to someone else on the phone when you're looking for help'
Catriona	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'I used to like when you could help the customers' 2) 'It was quite good, um, friendship-wise' 3) 'The money wasn't bad for the type of job it was' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'The fact that we never knew anything' 2) 'When we were told to lie to customers' 3) 'The whole bureaucracy of it'
Mike: re the TelCo outbound call centre	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'The fact that I had a job and was being paid money' 2) 'I didn't actually mind being on the phones' 3) 'The hours I suppose. Just five hours' 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 'The pressure to sell these products' 2) 'The evening shift' 3) 'This whole hoopla thing'

This may have relevance to the issue of turnover. It has been suggested (Karasek and Theorell, 1990) that social support may act to moderate work stress, which has in turn been linked to job satisfaction and thereby indirectly to turnover (Price, 2001). In addition some studies (for example, George and Bettenhausen, 1990; O'Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett, 1989) have found group social integration to be negatively related to group voluntary turnover. The ability of call centre employees to form social ties and integrate with co-workers may therefore affect turnover, and this ability may be enhanced or hampered by call centres' use of different shift arrangements.

Rob mentioned that he disliked 'having stroppy management'. He felt that on occasion Thirdparty's managers were 'unreasonable' although he acknowledged that they had 'got pressures

on them'. He noticed the difference in management styles between day and night shifts, suggesting that if managers 'had adapted their style, their treatment of people in the day-time, to the right management it would have probably made a lot, a great difference to a lot of people. But, as far as it goes, um, everyone could usually complain in some respects about their supervisors and their attitudes' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000). Rob's comments imply a perceived lack of supervisory and managerial support. A perceived lack of support might also be construed from Catriona's complaint of a lack of information dissemination to lower level employees and Ginny and Sharon's problems accessing support and information during times of difficulty.

Price (2001) has suggested that perceptions of supervisory support may have effects both on job satisfaction and on organizational commitment. Aquino, Griffeth, Allen and Hom (1997) found that the strength of the relationship between supervisor satisfaction and withdrawal cognitions in their referent cognitions model of employee turnover was almost three times as great as that between outcome satisfaction and withdrawal cognitions. The comments of interviewees confirm the salience of perceived supervisory support to their experience of call centre employment. They also suggest starting points in the practical process of improving employees' perceptions of support.

Three interviewees listed remuneration as a positive aspect of their call centre employment and one described it as a negative experience. An examination of differences between the interviewees suggests a number of implications for call centre employee turnover. The latter interviewee was the only one of the four to be employed on a full-time basis. As was suggested in chapter 8, differing personal circumstances may provide a possible explanation for these different perceptions of call centre pay. It may be that what is considered an acceptable rate of pay varies, amongst other things, with whether it is a main or a second income for the household, with lower rates being seen as acceptable in the latter case. The following excerpt from my participant observation diary, concerning a male full-time AgencyCo employee at the TelCo call centre, supports this contention:

'I asked what had happened to George, one of my co-trainees, because I hadn't seen him for a while now. Marianne [my coach that evening] said that he hadn't turned up for shift one day and that was the last they had heard from him. She thought that perhaps he had found another job 'because the money isn't really very good for men'. The implication behind this suggestion is that it is not very good for men because it is not sufficient as a single or main income, and that the likely earner of a wage of that status would be a man. Because the wages were relatively poor, it was good enough for a second, or 'woman's' wage' (Diary, 29 April 1998).

It is possible to conclude that, all other things being equal, one way to reduce employee turnover in a call centre would be to seek to employ only those people for whom the level of remuneration will be acceptable. From the analysis above, this would mean offering predominantly part-time employment, where the evidence suggests that the acceptability threshold for remuneration is lower. However, as the data in the following section suggests, such a strategy is not without problems of its own because of the likely backgrounds and characteristics of part-time employees.

9.6 Modelling the turnover process

There has been considerable emphasis on the part of researchers on understanding the mechanisms or processes that lead to voluntary turnover. A number of models of the process have been suggested. March and Simon's (1958) early model of the attrition process suggested that decisions to terminate employment were a function of perceptions of the ease of and desirability of termination. In the model the desirability of terminating current employment is negatively related to both job satisfaction and the perceived possibilities of intra-organizational transfer. Ease of withdrawal is conceptualized as a function of the perceived number of extra-organizational alternatives, with those perceptions related to factors such as business activity level, the number of other organizations in the immediate environment and the personal characteristics of individuals. When the desirability of termination and the ease of withdrawal are both high, individuals are more likely to quit voluntarily.

Mobley (1977) developed a model similar to that of March and Simon in that turnover is seen as the result of job dissatisfaction and the evaluation of alternative job opportunities. In Mobley's model the focus was on the process by which individuals arrive at decisions to quit. The model incorporated a number of intermediate steps in the felt dissatisfaction-turnover process, including thinking of quitting, evaluating the expected utility of a job search, intentions to search, intentions to quit and finally behaviour terminating employment. At the same time Price (1977) was suggesting a model in which dissatisfaction with the job leads to quitting, but in his model job opportunities affected the strength of dissatisfaction-turnover relationship. Price's model gave a detailed specification of the organizational context of the antecedents of job satisfaction, but not of the decision-making process as such.

In general, models of employee withdrawal have not actively considered the importance of time in voluntary turnover processes. Dickter, Roznowski and Harrison (1996) did, however, argue that 'the actual event of quitting is merely the final act following some series of mechanisms that leads to an intent and decision to resign' and there are 'probably multiple decision paths leading to turnover' in which case 'it is appropriate to place time in models of turnover to show how affect, cognitions, behaviours and work situations may interact with time as they influence the decision process'. They found that the effects of certain variables on turnover risk diminished over time. They concluded that individuals who are initially highly satisfied with jobs are less likely to voluntarily quit but, over time, initial job satisfaction becomes less important in quitting decisions and other variables may become more important. They noted that higher job aptitude was associated with lower turnover propensity, but that the association between cognitive ability and turnover decreases as time accrues in organization and speculated that prior job history might also be important predictor of quitting.

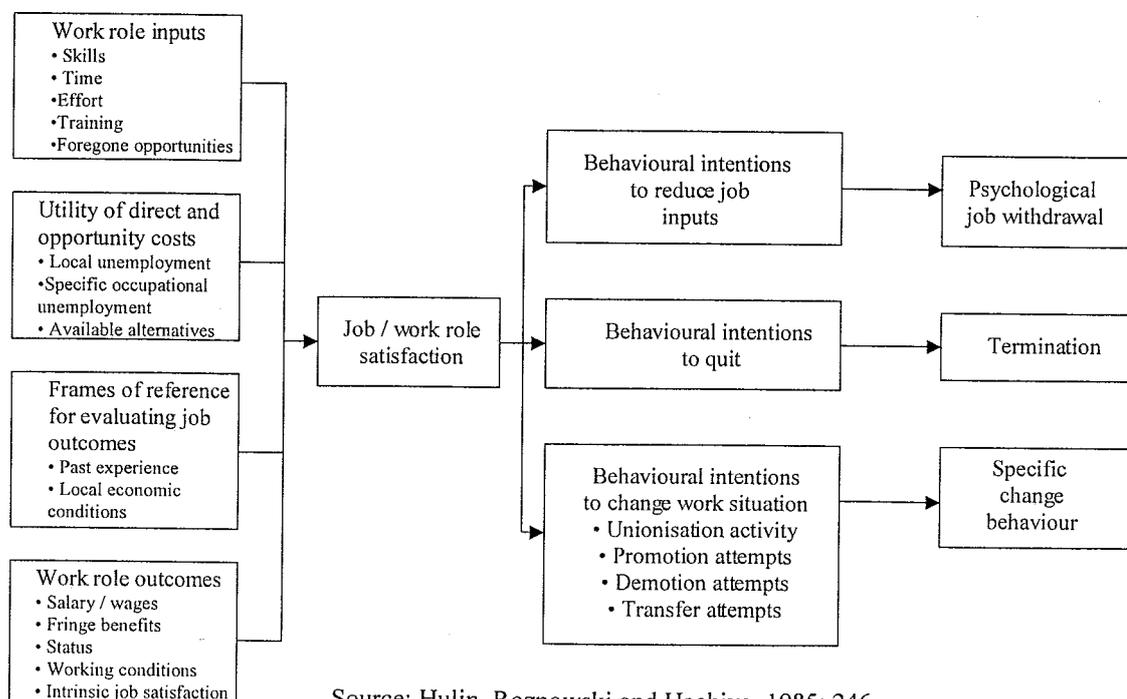
Hulin, Roznowski and Hachiya (1985) found that the results of studies of turnover conducted at an individual level of analysis differed from those obtained from macro-level analyses of employee attrition. Their review of the literature suggested that aggregated labour market studies consistently showed strong negative correlations between unemployment levels and employee attrition, but that studies of individual decisions showed only a modest influence of labour market conditions on voluntary turnover. They argued that a correlation between unemployment and employee attrition rates across time or area did not necessarily mean that individual employees were increasingly likely to quit as unemployment decreases, and that various explanations could be offered for the discrepancies between micro-level and macro-level analyses.

The discrepancies noted could not however be explained by the existing models of individual turnover processes. Hulin *et al* argued that this was due to a combination of weaknesses in terms of the assumptions underlying and the data collected to support or help form most models. They suggested that the majority of models explaining organizational turnover assumed relatively homogeneous workforces and defined the comparison alternatives as 'regular', that is to say permanent and full-time, positions in other organizations. They drew specific attention to the heterogeneity of a workforce that was composed not only of 'regular' employees, but also contained marginal employees such as casual and temporary workers, drifters, and individuals with

'Hobo tendencies' (Ghiselli, 1974; Hartman and Yrle, 1996). They argued that sampling protocols for studies testing other models tended to exclude part-time, temporary, new hire, probationary or casual employees from the sample population. Such assumptions and omissions led to the formation of models that were not applicable to the labour force as a whole. They therefore proposed a model of individual turnover decisions that they argued was 'consistent with labour market influences on turnover, the empirical results of analyses of antecedents of individual turnover decisions, and theoretical models of attitude formation' (1985: 245).

Hulin *et al*'s model, illustrated in Figure 9.1, incorporated three of the four elements in a sequence of events conventionally conceptualized as constituting the turnover process, that is to say job dissatisfaction–job search–intention to quit–turnover. There have however been concerns about over-reliance on work-related variables in turnover research (Mobley, 1982) and calls for more attention to non-work variables, especially those affecting work-family issues (Mobley, 1982; Morita, Lee and Mowday, 1993). A more recent causal model of turnover suggested by Price (2001) appears to take such concerns into account, incorporating both exogenous environmental, individual and structural variables and endogenous intervening variables as possible probabilistic determinants of turnover.

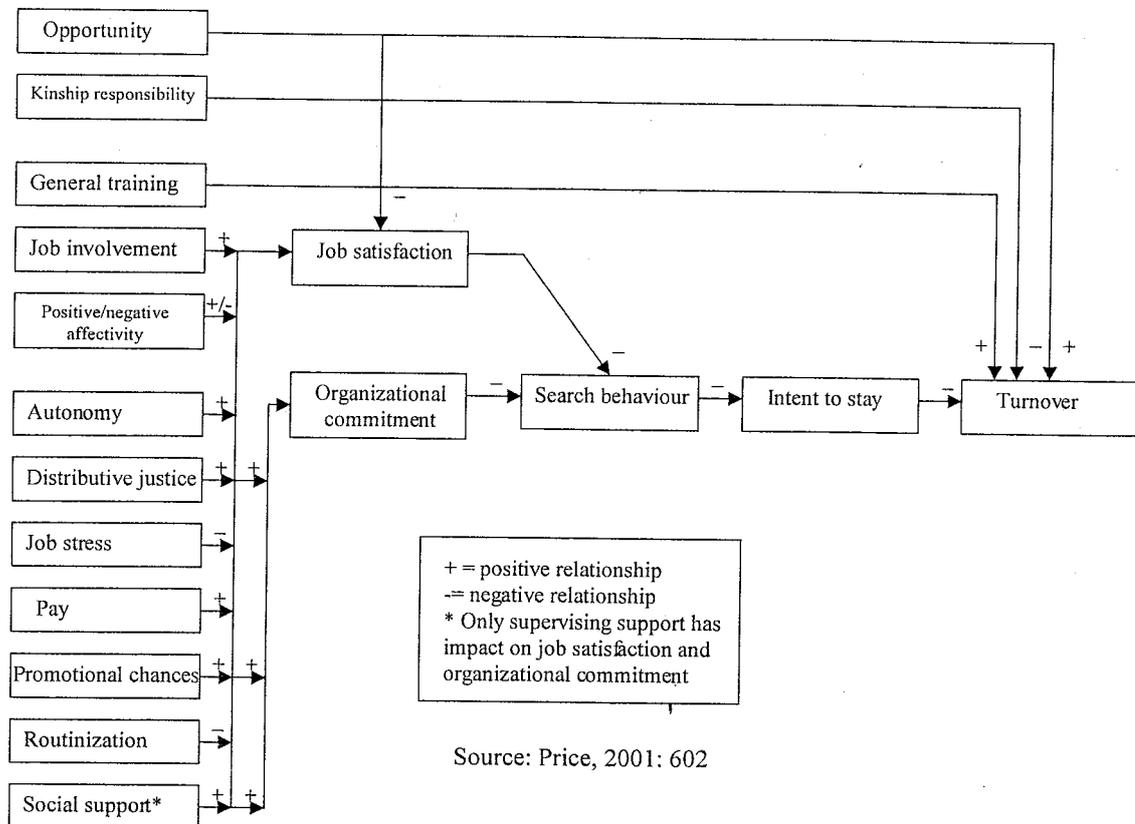
Figure 9.1 Heuristic model of affect/intention/withdrawal behaviour



Source: Hulin, Roznowski and Hachiya, 1985: 246

Price's (2001) model, shown in Figure 9.2, still incorporates the accepted sequence of turnover events but in a far more sophisticated framework. Lee Mitchell, Wise and Fireman (1996) point out that conventionally conceptualized models shed no light on the processes involved in turnover that is not affect-induced, that is to say when non-attitudinal forces prompt employees to quit.

Figure 9.2 Causal model of turnover



Source: Price, 2001: 602

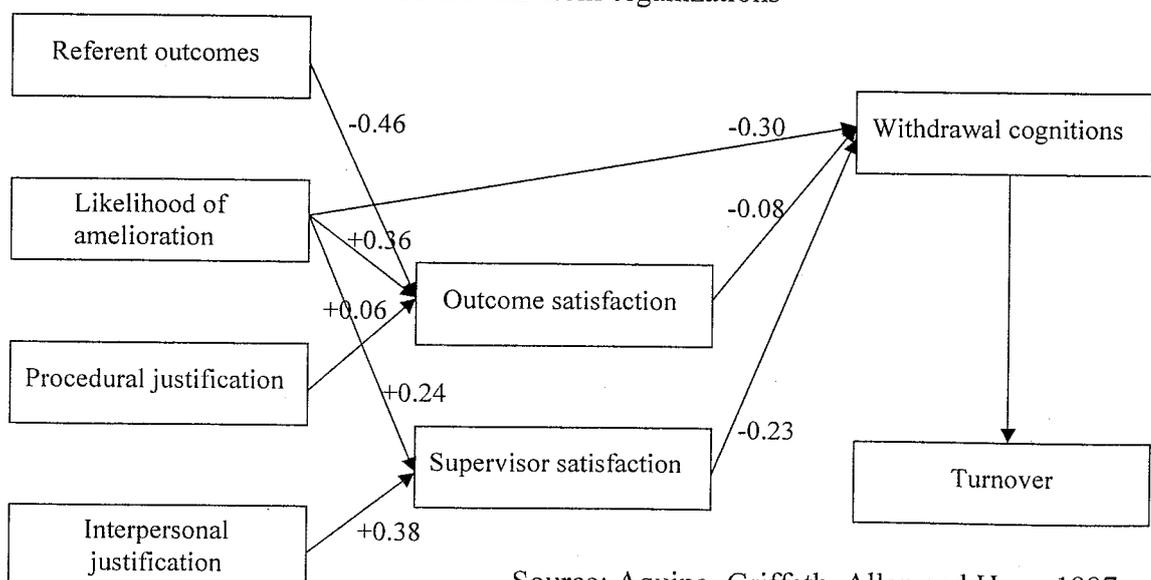
In response to the latter criticism more recent approaches to explaining the process of organizational withdrawal have focused on the decision-making element of the process, previously depicted as an ordered and rational process of evaluating alternatives and adjusting expectations based on labour market conditions. For example, Lee and Mitchell's (1994) 'unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover' uses image theory and scripts to explain the many different forms of turnover including instances when an employee quits without due consideration of any alternatives.

More established turnover theories have tended to suggest a three-component process in which job dissatisfaction triggers a search for alternatives that are evaluated using a subjective expected utility model prior to turnover. Image theory allows for the possibility that factors other than affect can initiate the withdrawal process, that there may not be examination of alternatives, and that compatibility judgments might replace subjective expected utility evaluations. 'Shocks to the

system', that is to say catalytic events that initiate the psychological decision processes involved in quitting, the degree of psychological analysis preceding a decision to quit and the act of quitting itself are all components in Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model. In the model four decision paths describe the possible combinations of shock and subsequent cognitive activity and their consequences for turnover. Following empirical testing of the Lee and Mitchell model, Lee *et al* (1996) reported that their data 'generally supported the theory' although some results had 'revealed ambiguities in the model and therefore opportunities for improvement'.

In another recent attempt to elaborate the turnover process Aquino, Griffeth, Allen and Hom (1997) suggested a model that draws on referent cognitions theory (RCT) to explain employees' voluntary withdrawals from organizations as illustrated in Figure 9.3. They contended that RCT provided an advantage over previous formulations of the voluntary quitting process in that it accounted for how different types of justice perceptions might relate to turnover. A range of psychological and behavioural effects in organizations, including dissatisfaction, stress, and absenteeism, have been attributed to felt deprivation (Martin, 1981). The authors argued that RCT 'extends traditional turnover models that implicate outcome or procedural unfairness as undermining morale and retention by elaborating the psychological processes that generate dissatisfaction. Specifically, referent cognitions theory explains how dissatisfaction arises when a person compares existing reality to a more favourable alternative' (1997: 1210).

Figure 9.3 A referent cognitions theory (RCT) model of employees' voluntary withdrawals from organizations



Source: Aquino, Griffeth, Allen and Hom, 1997

According to RCT people perform three mental simulations, involving referent cognitions, justifications, and the likelihood of amelioration respectively. Referent cognitions are alternative imaginable circumstances different to the individual's own. Dissatisfaction is most likely to arise when the imaginable is more attractive than the existing. An awareness of alternatives develops as a person discovers the rewards received by others. Existing outcomes and referent outcomes are compared, as are the procedures that produced them. Critical in this process of comparison is the underlying question of whether referent procedures are more justifiable than those that produced the existing outcomes. If referent procedures are adjudged to be morally superior to existing ones, the justification for existing outcomes is lowered. If they are judged to be morally inferior, a higher justification for existing outcomes results. If the rationale for existing procedures is less convincing or appropriate than that for referent procedures, the result is dissatisfaction. When the rationale for existing procedures is seen as appropriate and convincing and therefore justifiable, dissatisfaction with existing outcomes may decrease as a result. Additionally, existing outcomes may be seen as temporary, and satisfaction may be influenced by what the person expects to receive in the future.

The model presents mental simulations of possible future outcomes as beliefs regarding the likelihood of amelioration. Beliefs concerning the likelihood of amelioration are influenced by the individual's perception of possibilities for change and, in turn, influence felt dissatisfaction. A strong belief in the likelihood of amelioration may alter the effect of perceived inferior existing outcomes from increased dissatisfaction to constructive attempts at improvement. Where belief in the likelihood of amelioration is weak, the perception of inferior existing outcomes may in addition to increasing dissatisfaction produce negative responses, either directed inward such as stress and depression, or directed outwards such as absenteeism, poor performance, and resignations.

Price has argued for the organizational importance of an understanding of the process of voluntary turnover, asserting that '[Manpower] planners must have knowledge of the conditions which prompt employees to voluntarily leave their employers. [Such knowledge] will enable the planners to help implement courses of action which will minimize the cost of unwanted quits, thereby making available the human resources necessary to promote effectiveness' (2001: 601). In order to be of practical help to organizations in general, any model of the process must be able to explain the majority of, if not all, instances of voluntary termination experienced by them. In the next section interview data are used to compare the explanatory powers of the Lee and Mitchell (1994),

Aquino *et al* (1997) and Price (2001) models of the voluntary turnover process in the cases of individual call centre employees.

9.7 Reasons for leaving

The reasons for leaving given in the seven cases where voluntary termination of employment had already occurred and the one case where it was in progress at the time of the interview varied considerably. As previously discussed, the turnover process has conventionally been conceptualized as a sequence of events in the order job dissatisfaction–job search–intention to quit–turnover. An examination of the reasons given for quitting in the cases looked at by this study shows that not all voluntary quits follow that pathway. For example, whilst studying at University Rob had two separate three-month periods of employment at the Thirdparty call centre. It is clear from Rob's interview that he always intended that his time with Thirdparty would be on his terms:

'My first period of working there was probably from about February-March time until about April-May. Literally just for a couple of months on this CreditCardCo campaign. Then I took the summer off, doing some personal work on the fish farm and what have you. And I returned in the September and naturally picked it up again. Instead of working on the CreditCardCo campaign, I worked with the MobileCo campaign. I did the training and I literally worked there for another couple of months 'til Christmas, 'til the workload built up again, and personal commitments dictated, you know, my priorities changed' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

The issue of affect has no relevance to the first decision to quit made by Rob and in the context it is safe to assume that a definite intention to quit at that time existed even prior to the commencement of employment. Models that provide conceptualization of turnover processes exclusively in terms of affect without providing non-affect driven pathways (for example Price, 2001; Aquino *et al*, 1997) may therefore be considered incomplete. Equally, Rob's second decision to terminate employment would seem not to necessarily have involved changes in job satisfaction or search behaviour as such, but changes outside the work environment with subsequent modification to the perceived opportunity cost of paid employment.

It is possible to explain both decisions to quit using the Lee and Mitchell (1994) unfolding model of turnover. The first is an example of what the authors called decision path one. The end of term provides the 'shock to the system', the script may have been experience of what Rob had done the previous summer or his mental plan of what he proposed to do when the summer came and the

decision to quit was the enactment of the matching script. The second instance of quitting fits Lee and Mitchell's decision path two. The shock is less clear but may have been related to Rob's University workload. This caused him to reassess his commitment to Thirdparty by judging his situation against his value, trajectory and strategic images. From this he perceived there to be a poor fit between the current job situation and his trajectory and strategic images, that is to say that his employment was hindering the attainment of his goal of obtaining a good degree classification, leading him to quit.

Of greater relevance to call centre operators is the possibility that Rob's turnover decisions follow a pattern common to students more generally. Many students have part-time employment at the same time as studying. Julie mentioned that she had been working prior to her brief time at a call centre: 'I had been working in [a large local hotel], so I had. Um, I mean everybody in our flat was working in [the large local hotel]! (laughs). And then it got refurbished so we were basically all unemployed. So we were all looking for jobs in various ways, you know, jobcentres and stuff' (Interview with Julie, 24 April 2000). Student labour provides call centres with a dilemma. On the one hand they provide an intelligent and increasingly computer-literate pool of potential employees for many of whom part-time evening and weekend shifts are likely to be not only a viable but also the preferred employment option. On the other hand the majority of students are likely to have different domiciles during and outside of term times, making it likely that their employment tenure will be either short or interrupted and student workloads do fluctuate over the course of a term, prompting reappraisals of the opportunity costs of extra-curricular employment.

Rob perceived his relationship with Thirdparty to be one of convenience for both parties. Catriona's comments that a 'lot of students used [the SatCo call centre] as sort of seasonal employment' but that the agencies contracted to supply temporary staff to the centre 'only took students on really when it was chaos. It was always really busy at Christmas, as you can imagine, so a lot of students got employed then' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000) provide further evidence of a pattern of mutual convenience. Rob explained why he thought Thirdparty entered into such relationships, what benefits they derived from it, and the circumstances under which the relative bargaining strengths of the parties might change:

'Thirdparty as a group, they were aiming to get some cheap call centre staff. They weren't necessarily - you know, they were interested in professionalism, they were interested in doing the jobs as efficiently as possible...

I was totally expendable, if that's the correct word. Um... Sorry about the break. Sorry about the pause.... No. I had no ambitions to further myself as far as progressing myself within the company went, and they could, you know, and that was obvious. I mean you can, as far as campaigns went, you can do some quite valuable training to the company and they will look after you. You can turn round to the guys and say 'Look, I want to leave' or even just ignore them and turn round and try to leave and they will turn round and say 'Hey, please, come on. Sit down and give it a think. Sit down and have a think about it'. And even if you turn round and say: 'No. Sorry. Game over', they might even offer you like two pounds an hour extra, or something like that. So there were some campaigns like that. One of them particularly was the ComputerCo helpdesk campaign, which was just a valuable contract for Thirdparty. And it was an extreme amount of training, so it was in their best interests, if you like, to reduce their training costs' (Interview with Rob, 28 April 2000).

The excerpt below gives Ginny's account of her decision to leave the AssuranceCo call centre. It serves to illustrate the difficulty in isolating the antecedents of a decision to quit. References to many of the determinant variables suggested in Price's (2001) causal model of turnover, such as opportunity, general training, autonomy, promotional chances, routinization, distributive justice and pay, are evident:

'My job kind of ceases to exist, so, I was going to say that my new role is kind of a training role, but I'm leaving. I just handed in my notice today because I've got a job in [the city] for a call centre manager for HolidayCo. So, you know, that kind of,... I'm not sticking around, because I want to go into management I don't want to go into training. And my job ceased to exist and I was going to get pushed because I do assessing and I do a fair bit of training as well - you know technical training, not just calls - I was going to get pushed into a kind of training role. Which I don't mind doing for maybe forty-five percent of the time, but not when it's all day every day and you're assessing and just listening to calls all the time. It's really quite tedious. It gets boring after a while, listening to call after call after call.

Q: So, would you have been stopping with AssuranceCo if they'd have said 'Well, look, when we get our new contact centres you'll be a deputy team manager for a team within the contact centre', or do you think that this new opportunity is a lot more sort of exciting or more interesting?

It's more exciting and it's a good opportunity for me because it gives me the chance to put in all the skills I've learned. Whereas I'm practically doing a management job at the moment, I'm not getting paid for it, I've not got the title for it. Um, and they're not going to give me that. I mean, they offered me more money to stay, but it was nothing like what I'm being paid. I mean, I'm getting eighteen thousand at HolidayCo, and they kind of, well, the most that AssuranceCo could offer me was up to fourteen and a half, and even then they can't guarantee me a management position. I mean, deputy's OK, but you find that you do most of the work for the manager and not get any credit for it.

I like call centres. I do think the money's poor.
(Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000)

Ginny's experience tends to fit the job dissatisfaction–job search–intention to quit–turnover sequence of events. Her comments tend to suggest that she had increasingly experienced perceptions of low pay and distributive injustice in her current position. She also perceived that

following the proposed changes in AssuranceCo's organizational structure her promotional opportunities would be reduced and her new role would be less autonomous and more routinized. According to Price's model all these perceptions would act to decrease job satisfaction and/or organizational commitment, making search behaviour increasingly likely. This in turn is thought to lower the intention to stay with a resulting increase in turnover propensity. The ready availability of positions in other call centres and Ginny's high levels of general or transferable training in the call centre context are hypothesized in Price's model to influence the probability of turnover directly and positively. So, according to the Price model, many factors acted in concert to make Ginny's decision to leave more likely.

In Ginny's case the decision to quit can equally be explained by the RCT model of turnover proposed by Aquino *et al* (1997). There is clear evidence that Ginny became increasingly dissatisfied by comparison of referent outcomes to existing outcomes, particularly when those existing outcomes incorporated the future changes as a result of organizational restructuring. Her assertion that she was going to 'get pushed' into the new role suggests that her perception of the procedural justification for the changes to her work role was low. These two factors decrease overall outcome satisfaction. Her perception of the likelihood of amelioration, evidenced by her belief that she had for some time carried out the function of a manager without any formal recognition, was also low. This also significantly decreases outcome satisfaction but, more importantly, increases withdrawal cognitions, a construct representing a combination of quitting intentions and cognitions. Increased withdrawal cognitions produced an increased probability of turnover.

It is also possible to understand Ginny's decision to quit in the context of the Lee and Mitchell (1994) turnover model as an example of decision path three. The shock initiating the psychological processes was the organizational restructuring at AssuranceCo. This prompted an assessment of Ginny's attachment to her employer in which she judged her current situation including its future changes against her value, trajectory and strategic images. Trajectory image violation occurred: she wanted to go into management not training. This caused disaffection rather than an immediate decision to quit as per decision path two and was the catalyst for an evaluation of possible alternatives. One or more of those alternatives was congruent with her value, trajectory and

strategic images and in the rational analysis of acceptable alternatives that followed Ginny deemed the position of call centre manager for HolidayCo to offer the greatest subjectively expected utility.

The catalyst for Catriona's decision to quit was a change in her personal circumstances. This event, a 'shock to the system', brings the Lee and Mitchell model immediately to mind. Her quitting the SatCo call centre can be seen as another example of decision path one, in which a shock precipitates a search for matching scripts which, if found, are then enacted:

'It was horrendous. There was no - it was chaotic. And it was not long after that I actually left. Nobody knew what they were doing.

Q: Did you leave because it had become so horrendous?

I didn't actually. I didn't actually see - I was desperate to get out but I couldn't actually see how I could afford it. I left when my husband died because I couldn't work the Saturday / Sunday shift any more, you know, at night - I needed somebody there for the kids, so.... But if that hadn't happened I'd probably still be there. I think it's the case that once you have that, the extra money coming in, you're quite scared to, you know, let it go. I don't know if I'd still be there. My friend left. So she was still there when I left but she left last October I think because she just got to the point where she couldn't stand it any longer' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Considering the situation with reference to either the Price (2001) or the Aquino, Griffeth, Allen and Hom (1997) models would lead to the conclusion that Catriona had a high probability of quitting, because her words indicate very low job or outcome satisfaction and low organizational commitment. The Price model suggests that this probability is decreased by perceptions of low numbers of alternative opportunities. Whilst Catriona does not specifically make reference to alternatives, the paucity of opportunities could be said to be implicit in her reference to being unable to afford to quit. But whilst the two models might suggest that Catriona was likely to quit, her decision was not based on affective criteria so they are not useful models of the process in this case.

Mike's voluntary termination decisions could be interpreted as examples of the fourth decision path in Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model of employee turnover. This decision path involves no shock as such, but a gradual realization that image violation has occurred, leading to a state of disaffection. This is consistent with Mike's description of his experiences. In the second half of his time in the outbound TelCo call centre, Mike's sales performance started to deteriorate. The products he was employed to sell changed on a three-monthly basis, and following a change he had found persuading customers to take the new products far more difficult. As a result the bonus

component of his wages decreased. Further cuts were made to his bonus payments as a result of his failure to achieve appropriate scores in his performance assessments. He suggested however, that this had not concerned him all that much:

I was a bit, I was sort of semi-, I felt semi-detached, so I wasn't that sort of... I didn't anticipate, at that stage anyway, that I'd be in this job indefinitely I suppose, so to that extent I didn't feel... People were persuaded in that job to look at it as a career for one thing - so they were saying when you were in the training thing' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

The initial career progression at TelCo outbound centre was from temporary agency employee to permanent TelCo employee. This could be achieved through outstanding sales performance.

Although he perceived some employees as having been motivated by this, Mike declared that:

'About the last thing I wanted was a permanent contract with TelCo, because I didn't, no way did I want to spend a huge amount of time in this. Because I didn't see myself as a sales person and I didn't particularly like or respect the organization, so...(sentence not completed)' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

That he did not 'see' himself as a sales person is evidence of the situation-images evaluation proposed by the Lee and Mitchell model. Not seeing himself as a salesman points to perceived incongruity between his call centre employment and his strategic image, but his depiction of events suggests multiple image violations. For example, references to not liking or respecting TelCo are consistent with value image violation, and comments regarding TelCo's required sales techniques also suggest this. His trajectory image, reflecting his goals, appears to include having what he perceives as 'a career'. He was told in training that the TelCo position could provide one, but subsequently decided that it could not, leading to a violation of this image also:

'They said they were, it was a 'University,' if you like, - I mean that's the actual phrase which was used - and that people were being provided with a career ladder. But I don't think that was the case for the vast majority of people there. So the reality didn't match the hype' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

At this point the Lee and Mitchell model suggests two sub-paths. Mike's decision process seems to have followed the first of these, in which the level of dissatisfaction experienced leads the employee to quit without regard to the presence or absence of alternatives. Whilst it is likely that Mike had been involved in job search behaviour, at the time of his decision he did not have any offers in hand. In fact after alerting a number of employment agencies that he was available for work he waited for several weeks before being offered another position. Mike suggested that what finally precipitated his leaving the call centre was the possibility that the decision might be taken out of his hands:

'It was my decision, but I thought I was on the verge of being sacked, so I thought it was best to leave rather than be told to go, so... Actually, the manager was getting really uptight about the whole team's performance, and she was almost having a nervous breakdown, so I just, er, and, well, you had what the other people called remedial class, but it had some other name - training team or whatever, where you could be sent for two weeks and they'd, er, try and fix any problems which you had. I sort of thought I'd been there for six months and it didn't seem to be going particularly well, and the manager was tearing her hair out and was sort of hinting I wasn't going to be there for much longer unless things changed, and I didn't see - there was no way I was going to, er, do what I think they wanted you to do, which was, er, if someone says no, they don't want the product, to really come back strong, time and time again, at the customer which is what you had to do to try and sell the product....

And so, anyway, so I thought I was probably going to be sacked. I'd made a decision that, at the end of the week - that week - I'd leave, or I'd give in my week's notice or whatever. And they said, but then, instead of being sacked, they said they were going to offer me this remedial unit for a couple of weeks. But I said no, I didn't think it was worth it, because I didn't think I was going to do anything different to what I had been doing, I'd just leave' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

This poses difficulties for explaining Mike's decision processes using the Lee and Mitchell model because the anticipation of being sacked would appear to be type of event constituting a shock to the system. Decision path four does not allow for the possibility of a shock following the individual's recognition that the current situation causes image violation, and no alternative decision path is posited in which image evaluation and violation precurses a shock. In empirically testing the Lee and Mitchell (1994) model Lee, Mitchell, Wise and Fireman (1996) looked at the cases of 44 nurses who had voluntarily quit their employment and found two cases of individuals 'switching paths'. This may be another such case. Alternatively and given that Mike did not quit before the point at which he had anticipated being sacked but resigned his position after that threat had been dissipated, at least temporarily, it might be argued that the effect of being offered 'remedial' training was to increase Mike's job dissatisfaction to a level that precipitated a decision to quit consistent with decision path 4a of the Lee and Mitchell model.

The second of Mike's voluntary turnover decisions came after about a year and a half in TelCo's inbound call centre. Asked why he had left, Mike replied:

'Because I got the, er, - I was quite keen to leave because I did get really bored towards the end of it. I was bored with the job, and I got onto this IT conversion course which I've been doing. I saw that advertised in the [local newspaper] and applied for that, which was funded, so... But I'd got to get out of what I was doing there, so that was a way out' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

There is no suggestion of a shock to the system, so if the Lee and Mitchell model is to offer an explanation of the quitting process in this case it must be via decision path 4. As previously

discussed this starts with a gradual realization that image violation has occurred. Mike's assertion that he had 'got to get out' of the position is suggestive of a violation of his strategic image, that is to say a realization that the job he was doing was not going to help him to attain his goals. According to the Lee and Mitchell model, this leads to a degree of dissatisfaction, and this is evident in his repetition of how bored he had become. On decision path 4b dissatisfaction leads, in sequence, 'to lower organizational commitment, job search activity, perception of the feasibility of mobility, an intention to leave, and a higher likelihood of quitting' (Lee *et al*, 1996: 8). Mike's explanation of why he left the call centre reveals that he followed exactly that process.

Price's (2001) causal model might equally describe the processes involved in Mike's decisions to quit. In the first instance, low levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment were evident. Whilst he had no offer in hand at the time he left, his suggestion that he had for some time felt 'semi-detached' from the job implies that there had possibly been some search behaviour, although he did not say this explicitly as he did about his second call centre job. Mike also commented on a possible causal factor of turnover not considered in the Price model, that of recent employment history:

'I think the fact that I'd been out of work for quite a long time before starting there made me generate more of a psychological preparedness to put up with things. I think if I had gone straight from doing the job I was doing before to doing that I would have told them to stuff it in the first week, but, er, by that stage I was probably prepared to put up with more' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

9.8 Summary

This chapter has examined the issue of employee turnover in call centres. It began by briefly reviewing prior research on the subject generally. This review revealed that considerable work had been done at both micro and macro-levels of analysis to identify factors or variables that might influence an employee's decision to quit. There was evidence to suggest that a number of external variables effectively outwith the control of the employer affected individuals' propensities to quit, including firm size and industrial sector, union presence and local unemployment rates. The literature suggested that at an organizational level it was possible to influence employee retention through the make-up of remuneration packages, through using superior recruitment sources and via the use of realistic job information. The latter was said to be effective in reducing voluntary turnover when used either prior to acceptance of an offer of employment, for example as a realistic

job preview, or following the start of work when incorporated into an orientation program. In addition to external and organizational causal contributors, the research suggested that the decision to leave employment could be influenced by attitude-related variables. Those previously suggested or identified included job satisfaction, satisfaction with financial rewards, performance-reward contingencies and mood or affective state.

Data from the study were then presented which suggested that there was high turnover in their call centres during the periods in which the interviewees were employed. Recent call centre surveys (for example, IDS, 2001; Blue Sky Consulting, 2001) suggest that call centre employee turnover has increased, and that employers perceive employee retention as a major problem. The interviewees' organizational tenures ranged from two days to three years, and various reasons were given for the termination of that employment. In eight of the eleven cases examined voluntary termination had occurred or was in the process of occurring, showing this to be the major source of turnover.

The literature had suggested that recruitment sources had been found to influence subsequent voluntary employee turnover. Because of the number of cases and the wide disparity between them in the type of employment in terms of sector and terms and conditions it was not possible to comment on this, but individual experiences were evaluated in the context of the realism hypothesis, one of the theoretical explanations advanced for the superiority of informal recruitment sources. No *prima facie* support was found for the hypothesis. It was suggested that an individual's recollections of conversations with their recruitment source might provide a fund of both positive and negative job-related information, cumulatively 'adding up' to a realistic job preview. In such cases, such variables as the length of tenure and current employment status of the informal recruitment source could be critical to determining whether the effect observed stems from the realistic job information provided by the source or from the applicant's perception that if they are successful they will already have a degree of workplace social support.

Data were presented on the interviewees' perceptions of the most positive and negative aspects of their call centre employment. In much of the literature reviewed, job satisfaction was conceptualized as playing a central part in the turnover process. It was thought that an examination of the particular likes and dislikes of individual call centre employees might reveal specific issues

common to that type of working environment. Comments by interviewees on their enjoyment of social aspects of their employment led to the conclusion that shift arrangements might have relevance to the issue of turnover. It was suggested that employees who have the same shift start and finish times have more opportunities to strike up friendships than those on more individual shift patterns, leading to faster and stronger perceptions of social support and group cohesiveness. Amongst negative aspects, several interviewees cited perceived managerial problems, indicating a perceived lack of supervisory support. This may be another fruitful area to address for call centre operators seeking to lower voluntary turnover rates. Several interviewees mentioned remuneration, although this was only a negative aspect for one, a full-time, permanent employee. It was suggested that perceptions of the adequacy of pay varied according to whether the individual had part-time or full-time employment with the former more likely to see rates as acceptable but that, as a strategy for reducing employee turnover, a policy of targeting potential part-time rather than full-time employees might have its own problems.

A number of theoretical models explaining the withdrawal and quitting process have been used in the literature on voluntary employee turnover. The more influential of these were reviewed briefly before three more recent models were discussed. In order to be of practical help to employers, any model of the process must be able to explain most, if not all, instances of voluntary termination. Interview data were used to evaluate the relative explanatory powers of the Lee and Mitchell (1994), Aquino *et al* (1997) and Price (2001) models of the turnover process in the eight cases of voluntary quitting by call centre employees. It was found that only the Lee and Mitchell model provided any explanation for the two turnover decisions that were not based on affect, and that in general the cases considered confirmed the model. One case suggested possible 'path-switching' not envisaged in the model but noted in subsequent empirical testing.

The Lee and Mitchell model might be usefully used as a starting point by call centre operators concerned to reduce turnover. Three of Lee and Mitchell's proposed decision paths involve image matching, a psychological process in which the employee compares their perceptions of the current situation with images of their own values, ambitions and perceived means of achieving them. Negative organizational consequences follow when employees perceive image violations or incongruities between the two sets of images. Whilst in theory it would be possible to avoid image violations to suit the individual, this may not be feasible in practice. It is unlikely that the operator

of a call centre carrying out routine service transactions will be able to change sufficiently to match a trajectory image incorporating a picture of the individual employed in a job with relatively high variety and autonomy. But it might be possible with appropriately constructed instruments to screen out call centre applicants whose value, trajectory or strategic images do not closely match the employment on offer.

Chapter 10

Discussion

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter I relate the findings detailed in the previous four chapters to debates, theories and evidence discussed earlier and offer possible explanations for the findings presented. The chapter has six sections followed by a summary. In the first section an explanation is offered for the peak and subsequent decline in the monthly volumes of call centre-related newspaper articles noted in the five-year review. In the next the significance of findings from the employment agencies' survey is considered: those were that telephone interviewing was predominant and considered to be the most critical element in call centre employment selection processes. In the third section the findings on terms and conditions of employment in call centres are compared with those from other studies of call centre employment, and the relevance to employees and employers of all these findings is discussed. The following section considers employees' experiences of call centres with some degree of focus on such issues as their susceptibility to psychological burnout, and the stresses associated with emotional labour. In the penultimate section a possible explanation for the high rates of voluntary employee turnover experienced in most call centres is put forward in the contexts of applicants' prior knowledge and call centre employees' orientations to work. In the final section the 'evolution' of call centres into contact centres is considered and an appraisal of what current developments might mean for the future experience of call centre employment is offered.

10.2 Call centres and media interest

The review of call centre related newspaper articles for the five-year period to the end of December 2000 revealed a surge in media interest that reached a peak in 1999 and fell off slightly thereafter. In 1996 there were on average under 22 articles per month, but by 2000 an average of nearly 395 newspaper articles containing references to call centres was being published each month. Increasing public exposure might be thought to mirror the growth in UK call centre numbers and employment, but this does not explain the low numbers of articles in 1996, the first year of the survey, when there were already 130,000 people working as call centre agents (Datamonitor, 1997). One possible explanation for the increased media interest in call centres observed later in the survey period is that it reflects increasing cross-sectoral proliferation rather than growth in the number and size of call centres.

The newspaper article review appeared to reflect the spread of call centre use over the survey period from retail financial services to other commercial and public sector services. Public acceptance of the telephone as a means for conducting personal business, evidenced by the success of early call centre adopters such as Direct Line in motor vehicle insurance and First Direct in personal banking services, encouraged others to see call centres as offering possibilities for comparatively low-cost entry into markets where expense had been perceived as a major barrier to entry. Personal banking services provide a clear example of this. Latterly, they have been seen as a vehicle for the provision of novel consumer services (for example, centralized restaurant food delivery services, corporate whistle-blowing information collection services) and as a cost-effective means of providing or complementing existing public service provision (for example, NHS Direct, and heart telemonitoring services).

Whilst the growth in call centre use and employment was for the most part confined to specific financial services and replicated familiar patterns of interaction in these contexts, call centres received minimal attention, mainly because most people were unaware that they were using them. It seems that awareness was triggered and media attention stimulated when telephone interaction started to depart from the familiar. This happened, for example, when people at the other end of telephones mysteriously appeared to know all about callers (Bray, 1997; Nelson, 1996), or when callers were given automated instructions to press keys rather than immediately speaking to another human being (Partridge, 1996).

If the interruption of previously established patterns of telephone interaction was the catalyst for increased media attention, it would seem that the new patterns very quickly became commonplace and unremarkable. In the review a peak of 589 occurred in the monthly number of articles published in November 1999. Since then there has been a gradual but noticeable trend of declining monthly numbers of articles mentioning or related to call centres, despite continued growth in the number of UK call centres and the extent of UK call centre employment. The increase in perceptions of public familiarity with call centres has been demonstrated by their use as a setting for literary, theatrical and artistic works (for example, Johnson, 1999; Morris, 2000; Spiers, 2000; Ward, 1999b, Russell, 2000; and Brown, 1999).

There are of course other possibilities. For example, the increasing numbers of call centre-related articles might be related levels of government 'spin' on job creation and assistance to areas of high unemployment. Further investigation would be required before the patterns of articles numbers could be confidently attributed to any particular cause(s).

10.3 Employee selection in call centres

The general literature on recruitment and selection was reviewed and it was found that the so-called 'classic trio' of selection techniques, that is to say face-to-face interviews, application forms and references, were used in most employment settings. However, the survey of employment agencies showed that they favoured a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews and competence testing. Of these selection methods, the telephone interview was considered to be the most critical.

The widespread use of telephone interviews for call centre employee selection has implications for applicants and selectors. Research has shown that visual cues can affect our perceptions of others. It has been shown, for example, that subjects generally find those with similar demographic characteristics to their own more attractive (McGrath, 1984). In the employment context there is considerable evidence that interviewers' judgments are influenced by factors such as physical and demographic characteristics unrelated to job performance (for example Roehling, 1999; Raza & Carpenter, 1987). Physical attractiveness has been shown to be particularly influential in perceptions of others, with physically attractive people consistently perceived as more intelligent and with superior social skills compared to physically less attractive people (Feingold, 1992). Attractive people are, perhaps for these reasons, generally preferred in selection decisions (Marlowe, Schneider & Nelson, 1996; Gilmore, Beehr & Love, 1986; Cann, Siegfried & Pearce, 1981). Telephone interviews do not allow interviewers to evaluate or to be swayed by visual characteristics. Equally, interviewers cannot assess and applicants cannot demonstrate presentation skills incorporating nonverbal behaviour (NVB) over the telephone. Applicant NVB has been shown to influence interviewer ratings (Anderson, Silvester, Cunningham-Snell and Haddleton, 1999; Howard and Ferris, 1996; Gifford, Ng and Wilkinson, 1985). Silvester, Anderson, Haddleton, Cunningham-Snell and Gibb (2000) argued that the absence in telephone interviews of nonverbal cues such as eye contact, body posture, facial expression and gestures can result in

increased psychological distance between interviewee and interviewer, prompting harsher interviewer ratings.

Silvester *et al* (2000) found that graduate applicants received significantly worse ratings following telephone interviews than after face-to-face interviews. Also, candidates who experienced telephone interviews followed by face-to-face ones significantly improved their performances in the latter. They also found that in general candidates 'did not like the telephone interview', and felt that it provided less opportunity to learn about the relevant organizations. They also perceived themselves to be disadvantaged by the lack of nonverbal cues from interviewers. Interviewers taking part in the study felt that many candidates had not been comfortable with the telephone, and suggested that the more formal setting of a face-to-face interview produced an adrenaline response that telephone interviews apparently did not.

Straus, Miles and Levesque (2001) found an opposite effect, with interviewers evaluating applicants more favourably in telephone as opposed to face-to-face interviews. They suggest that their findings were consistent with those of an earlier study of different communication channels by McGovern, Jones, Warwick and Jackson (1981) suggesting that the negative visual cues and characteristics leading to lower ratings in face-to-face interviews could be suppressed by telephone interviews. Straus *et al* did find, contrary to expectations raised by previous studies, that greater attractiveness did not provide an advantage for face-to-face applicants in their study. They suggested two possible explanations for their observations regarding the more favourable evaluation of applicants following telephone interviews. The first was that applicants had tried to sound more enthusiastic to compensate for a lack of nonverbal cues (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright & Amsel, 1992), thus providing interviewers with substantially different vocal cues between interview settings. Vocal cues have been found to affect perceptions of others (Zuckerman, Miyake & Elkin, 1995). This explanation was consistent with applicants reported concern with how they sounded over the telephone. The alternative explanation, consistent with applicants' evaluations of their levels of self-consciousness during different interviews, was that telephone interaction imposes lower cognitive workloads. Because applicants were aware that they needed neither to control their own NVB nor to interpret that of the interviewer, they may have been able to focus more fully on the quality of their answers to interview questions.

Straus *et al* found, again in contrast to Silvester *et al* (2000), that interviewer perceptions of telephone interviews were largely positive and that applicant perceptions were similar to those held regarding face-to-face interviews. The authors concluded that using the telephone for employment interviews offered 'positive first-level (cost and efficiency) effects without incurring harmful second-level (social) effects' and further that telephone interviews seemed 'particularly appropriate for selection in light of the growth of call centers and electronic commerce, in which employees interact with customers largely by telephone'.

Silvester *et al* (2000: 17) argued that 'a possible advantage of telephone interviews might well be to reduce any unfair discrimination resulting from physical appearance'. In a similar vein Straus *et al* suggested that 'by reducing emphasis on behaviors and cues associated with demographic traits and culture....the telephone may decrease effects of interviewer biases and foster the selection of a more diverse workforce' (2001: 379). Neither set of authors seems to have addressed the possibility that vocal qualities and accent may invoke stereotypical images that lead to equal or greater discrimination by interviewers, given that a telephone interview does not allow for visual cues that might act to counter or dispel those images.

There is considerable evidence for the differential perception of speakers with different accents. In studies examining the nature of regional dialect-cued stereotypes and their effect on the formation of impressions of an unknown other Delia (1972) found that dialect was used as a cue to assessing, among other things, the speaker's status, social role and expected attitudes and values. Evaluations based on regional stereotypes were relatively easily altered in light of subsequent information about or knowledge of the speaker, but the effects of stereotype persisted in shaping the form and content of impressions of the speaker. A study by Edwards (1977) on secondary school students' perceptions of regional Irish accents revealed significant differences in the ratings received by different accents on traits such as competence and social attractiveness. Giles and Sassoon (1983) found that the stereotypically low status rating accorded by listeners to accented speakers of non-standard English was not attenuated by knowledge of the speaker's social class or by the style of speech delivery. Ladegaard (1992) has noted that more standardized spoken English tends to be associated with high status and competence whereas regional accented variations are often seen as reflecting greater integrity and attractiveness, with socially conditioned non-standard speech receiving the most negative evaluations. In the USA, advertising messages in Standard-accented

English have been found to create higher purchase intentions than those delivered in foreign-accented English (DeShields, Kara and Kaynak, 1996).

Kolsti (2000) reported the results of research in the USA by Cukor-Avila and Markley (unpublished). They had presented recruitment professionals with recordings of speakers with identifiable accents from ten different US locations and asked them to identify the accent, to assess the speakers in terms of certain personal attributes, and to select from four options a category of job likely to suit the speaker. The researchers found that interviewers rated speakers with less identifiable accents more favourably in terms of personal variables including education, intelligence, extroversion and assertiveness. The highest ratings were for speakers with Californian and Minnesotan accents, correctly identified by less than 30 percent of the 56 respondents. The lowest rating was for a New Jersey accent, correctly identified by 59 percent of respondents. When asked to select appropriate employment for each of the speakers, more than half of the respondents suggested that the speakers with the highest ratings were suited to jobs requiring a high level of public or customer contact, whereas only 5 percent would selected the New Jersey-accented speaker for this position. 64 percent said that this person would be suited to positions requiring little technical expertise and little-to-no customer contact. Cukor-Avila and Markley concluded that, on the basis of their study, more than half of all job applicants with identifiable regional accents might face discrimination.

Telephone interviewing has face validity in the context of call centre employment, because intelligibility and the ability to communicate effectively by telephone are a necessary part of the person specification for this type of employment and telephone interviews provide a means of assessing these qualities in individuals. But the use of this technique as a primary filter of applicants presents a danger of inadvertent discrimination by the interviewer on the basis of accent. Regional accent stereotypes may lead to suitable applicants being rejected. More seriously, there are linguistic characteristics associated with race, and it is possible that the rejection of applicants with distinguishable ethnic accents might leave the recruiter open to accusations of unlawful racial discrimination. Certainly it is a topic that requires further examination.

10.4 Terms and conditions of employment in call centres

The survey of Scottish recruitment agencies carried out as part of this study found, in common with other studies of Scottish and UK call centres (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Belt, Richardson, Webster, Tijdens and van Klaveren, 2000; IDS, 1997), that temporary employment via an agency was a common experience in call centres. The proportion of temporary employees reported in Scottish and UK call centres is generally higher than for the British workforce as a whole, where about 7 percent of males and 10 percent of females are employed on temporary contracts (Booth, Francesconi, and Frank, 2000). Belt *et al* (2000) reported that 67 percent of all call centre temporary employees were women. Interview and participant observation data revealed that temporary call centre employees, whether employed by the call centre operator or by an employment agency, tended to be paid less than their permanently employed colleagues. This mirrors findings about the remuneration of temporary employees more generally (Booth *et al*, 2000).

The significant use of temporary, agency-recruited employees in call centres may be a factor in problems with employee retention. There is general agreement in the employee turnover literature (for example, McBey and Karakowsky, 2001; Price,¹ 2001) that job satisfaction is related to employee voluntary turnover. Booth, Francesconi and Frank (2000) have found that on average temporary employees experience lower job satisfaction than their permanent counterparts. Temporary employees might therefore be expected, all other things being equal, to have a higher propensity to leave than permanent employees in the same job. It has also been suggested (Griffeth, Hom, Fink and Cohen, 1997; Rynes, 1991; Kirnan, Farley, and Geisinger, 1989) that recruitment sources may affect voluntary turnover, with the use of formal sources such as recruitment agencies more likely than the use of informal sources to lead to voluntary exit behaviour. Thus it might be anticipated that temporary, agency-recruited employees would have a particularly high propensity to quit.

Interview data from employment agency representatives suggested that most call centre positions handled by their agencies were for non-standard working hours, with a significant proportion being part-time positions. This finding seems to be far higher than Taylor and Bain (1999), who found that in 1997 33.5 percent of the Scottish call centre workforce was employed on a basis other than

full-time and Belt *et al* (2000), who suggested that 27 percent of the UK call centre workforce was employed on a part-time basis. The survey findings would suggest that significant numbers of call centre employees are engaged on a temporary, part-time basis.

Non-standard working hours are no longer uncommon in the UK. An examination of data on a large representative sample of employees from the British Household Panel Survey (Booth and Francesconi, 2001) showed that 22 percent of employees worked less than 29 hours per week, with 9 percent working less than 16 hours. In addition, 30 percent worked outside of standard day shifts. However, the reported proportions of part-time employees in some call centres are far higher than might commonly be found in many employment settings, and there are suggestions (for example, Datamonitor, 1999) that the average proportion of part-time employees in call centres will rise. They estimated that by 2000 the proportion of part-time call centre employees would rise to 46 percent whilst the proportion of full-time employees fell to 41 percent. Datamonitor (1999) suggested that call centres with higher proportions of full-time agents reported higher levels of difficulty with recruitment and retention than those with fewer full-time employees.

10.5 The experience of call centre employment

Marx believed that degrading the labour process by fundamentally altering the nature of tasks would lead to a situation where '[the worker] does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.... [Work] is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague' (Marx, 1969: 99-100).

Whilst Marx could not have envisaged call centres when he made such comments, the study suggests that the picture he describes would not feel unfamiliar to many call centre employees. In most of the cases featured in this study tasks could be classified as having high or medium degrees of routinisation. One consequence of this seems to have been that after time call centre employees became bored with their work. A typical reaction to the onset of boredom was according to some employees to operate on 'autopilot'. The time that it took for this to happen varied between individuals, but seemed to be consistent across longer-serving call centre employees.

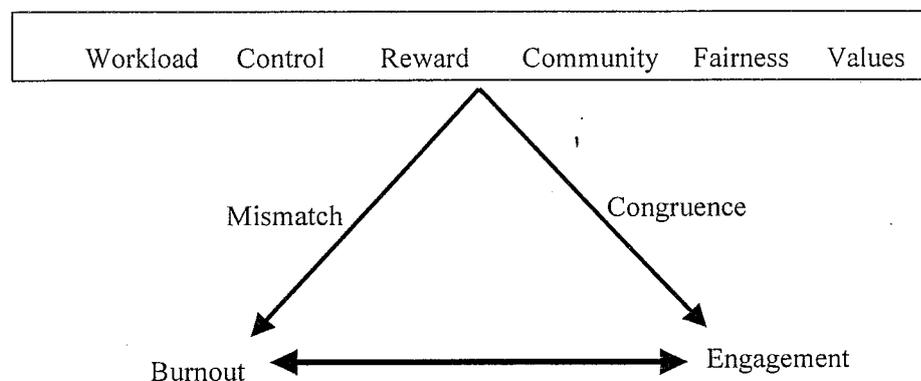
It has been suggested (Warr, 1996) that there are characteristics of tasks that might be expected to influence job-related well-being. These are reproduced and assessed in relation to call centre employment in Table 10.1. Whilst accepting that the cases in this study do not represent the full spectrum of call centre employment and that differences in specific characteristics exist, I would argue that the assessment of call centre characteristics in Table 10.1 is likely to be the experience of the majority of call centre employees in the UK. As a result, it is likely that these employees experience relatively low levels of job-related well-being. This would be consistent with Singh, Goolsby and Rhoads' (1994) study of burnout in customer service representatives (CSRs) in which they found that CSRs experienced higher mean values of emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment and depersonalization than those reported for a range of other occupations including teachers (Jackson, Schwab and Schuler, 1986), nurses (Leiter and Maslach, 1988) and lawyers (Jackson, Turner and Brief, 1987).

Maslach (1998) described recent extensions to the theoretical conceptualization of burnout. The first posits burnout, characterized by exhaustion, cynicism and perceived ineffectiveness, as one end of a continuum in the relationship that individuals form with their employment. At the other end of the continuum is a contrasting state, job engagement, characterized by high energy, strong job involvement and a sense of efficacy. Job engagement is distinct from constructs such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job involvement due to its focus on the work itself and the individual's relationship with it. Maslach argued that job engagement is not a neutral state but a positive state of fulfillment in contrast to burnout, a negative state of distress arising from enduring work-related problems. According to Maslach 'the concept of a burnout-to-engagement continuum enhances our understanding of how the organizational context of work can affect workers' well-being' by recognizing the variety of employee reactions to the work environment.

The second extension to the theoretical conceptualization of burnout involves recognition of the relevance of job-person fit. It has long been suggested that job stress is the result of a misfit between the person and the job (French and Kahn, 1962). More recently, attention has been drawn to the importance of both individual and contextual factors (for example, Cable and Judge, 1996; Kahn and Byosiere, 1992).

Maslach and Leiter (1997) have suggested that burnout is largely a product of organizational context expressed at an individual level. They propose a model, illustrated in Figure 10.1, in which the likelihood of burnout is positively related to the extent of the ‘gap’ or ‘mismatch’ between person and job. Person-job fit is framed in terms of constructs, such as values or expectations, that allow comparison between the individual and the organization and burnout is seen as a mediator of the causal link between person-job fit and outcomes such as performance, commitment, satisfaction and job tenure. It is possible to see overlaps between the constructs included in Maslach and Leiter’s model and the models of voluntary turnover discussed in the previous chapter. For example, the fairness construct covers similar conceptual ground to Aquino, Griffeth, Allen and Hom’s (1997) referent cognitions theory-based model of turnover, and the values construct seems to draw inspiration from the same source as the image theory used in Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) ‘unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover’.

Figure 10.1 The job-person fit model of burnout.



Source: Maslach, 1998: 75

Mismatch can occur in any or all of the person-job fit constructs. The mismatch condition of workload would be sustained work overload, a situation in which the individual has too much to do, with inadequate resources and too little time to do it. Lack of control, the mismatch control condition, occurs when ‘people have little control over the work they do, either because of rigid policies and tight monitoring, or because of chaotic job conditions’ (Maslach, 1998: 75). There is a mismatch when inadequate extrinsic and/or intrinsic rewards are offered by the job. Lack of recognition is seen to devalue both the employee and the work. The breakdown of workplace community, a state in which employees have no sense of a positive connection with others in the workplace, is seen as the mismatch condition of this construct. The mismatch condition in relation

to fairness is absence of fairness, perceived lacks of distributive or outcome and/or procedural justice and lack of voice. Value conflict, the mismatch condition of the value construct, occurs when there is incongruity between the requirements of the job and the employee's personal principles. This could for example be the result of a job requirement to act unethically, or of incongruities between the employing organization's stated aims and practices, or of organizational change.

The findings of this study suggest that the specific characteristics of call centre employment may result in mismatches in the four context dependent person-job constructs used in the Maslach and Leiter person-job fit model of burnout. This study has found, consistent with other studies of call centre employment, that due in part to the use of automating technologies call centre work is generally experienced as intensive. It is characterized by the imposition of both quantity- and quality-related performance targets that employees may find difficult to either reach or sustain. Employees regularly experience difficult or demanding calls, and sometimes feel that they have not received adequate training or do not receive adequate support in dealing with such calls. Call centre employment would therefore seem to encourage perceptions of work overload.

The study has noted that call centre employees generally have very little control over the pace or content of their work or over the way in which their working day is structured. Lack of control would seem to be a constituting feature of call centre employment. It has been suggested (Baldry, Bunzel, Hyman and Marks, 2000) that call centre employees tend not to have an occupation-specific self-image, and are more likely to identify themselves with the industrial sector of the employing organization. Additionally, the experiences reported in this study suggest that call centre employees feel little attachment to work teams, perceiving them to be a device employed for administrative convenience, and tend not to socialize with other employees outside of the workplace. These findings would suggest a breakdown in community as envisaged by Maslach. Finally, data from this study suggests that call centre employee frequently suffer value conflict in terms of a conflict between the organizationally espoused importance of customer service quality and the reality of quantitative performance targets.

An experience found by this study to be common to the majority of call centre employees was abuse either from callers in the case of inbound call centres or from those who had been called

where call centres performed outbound functions. In common with other studies (Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Tracy and Tracy, 1998) my research found that employees felt constrained by policies imposed by call centre managements that tended to both prescribe and proscribe the ways in which they dealt with such calls. These policies may be thought of as examples of the requirement common to all call centre employees to perform emotional labour.

The term emotional labour was conceived by Arlie Hochschild to describe the commercialisation of the feelings of airline flight attendants. She defined the term to mean 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' to be 'sold for a wage' (1983: 7). The two main elements of this definition are first the need for emotion management to be performed as paid labour, and second the implication that the managed emotion is part of a commodity. Other authors have since sought to alter and extend Hochschild's definition to emphasise particular aspects of jobs that involve emotional labour. For example, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993: 90) by defining it as 'the display of expected emotions' stressed that it was a behaviour adopted by the employee and downplayed Hochschild's reference to the personal management of emotion. James (1989: 15), in applying the concept to her study of nurses, emphasized the interactive nature of emotional labour by defining it as 'labour involved in dealing with other people's feelings'. One of the most extensive and detailed definitions of emotional labour has been that proposed by Noon and Blyton, who define emotional labour as 'those (increasingly common) situations where service employees are required, as part of their job, to display specific sets of emotions (by verbal and/or non-verbal means) with the aim, in turn, of inducing particular feelings and responses among those for whom the service is being provided' (1997: 124).

Tracy and Tracy (1998) advance descriptions of two 'types' of emotional labour that they observed in the context of a 911 emergency call centre in the USA and which they believed to have been poorly acknowledged in studies of emotion work. The first type they termed 'double-faced emotion management'. In this type of emotion work the employee has to simultaneously manage the emotions of two parties. They suggest that whilst this type of emotion management is common in many 'customer-facing' occupations, it is of particular importance in the context of specific jobs where the employee-client interaction is likely to be highly emotionally charged. The second type of emotion work identified by Tracy and Tracy is the emotional labour necessary to achieve and maintain the appearance of emotional neutrality, requiring emotion suppression by the employee.

They argued that although this type of emotion work did not sit easily within the definition of emotion-as-commodity advanced by Hochschild, it was nonetheless relevant to a number of different occupational groups and deserving of greater attention.

The concept of emotional labour has been applied to studies of work and working experiences in a variety of different occupational contexts, for example airline cabin crews (Hochschild, 1983; Williams, 1988; Taylor and Tyler, 2000), supermarket checkout staff (Tolich, 1993; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987), restaurant waiting staff (Spradley and Mann, 1975; Mars and Nicod, 1984; Hall, 1993), workers at a Walt Disney theme park (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989), nurses (James, 1989) banking and health service employees (Wharton, 1993); emergency call operators (Tracy and Tracy, 1998); telephone sales agents (Taylor and Tyler, 2000), cosmetics sales agents (Ash, 1984); debt collectors (Sutton, 1991); and police officers (Stenross and Kleinman, 1989).

Much of the research on emotional labour has tended to focus on those contexts in which the explicit purpose of the emotional labour is to either induce or reinforce positive feelings in the customer. According to Rafaeli and Sutton (1987: 33) emotional labour in such situations typically consists of 'a complex combination of facial expression, body language, spoken words and tone of voice'. In some instances, the employing organisation may also place particular importance on non-verbal aspects of emotional labour, such as personal appearance (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989). Noon and Blyton (1997) have suggested that the processes of selection, training and monitoring of employee behaviour all help to secure the competent performance of emotional labour.

Noon and Blyton (1997) identified two main reasons as to why this type of labour had attracted sustained academic interest over the last two decades. They pointed first to the growing proportion of 'customer-facing' jobs (i.e. jobs which require direct contact with consumers) in society, primarily as a result of the expansion of employment in services. They also suggested that even in those jobs that are not directly customer-facing, importance had increasingly been placed on contact with customers and outside suppliers. Second, they highlighted the emergence of 'customer relations' as a recognized tool for organizational competitiveness. The increasing importance ascribed to customer relationship management (CRM) had led to organizations placing

greater emphasis on the emotional performance of employees who are in direct contact with customers.

One of the key features of emotional labour, implied but not made explicit by the definitions above, is that the emotions that the employee is asked to display are not necessarily genuine. In many cases, the display is merely a 'performance' and the emotional labourer an 'actor' with a role to play and a script to follow. The performance metaphor has been used by some commentators (for example, Goffman, 1969) to provide a 'dramaturgical' perspective on social life generally, in which social life is envisaged as a series of scripted exchanges in which individuals act out roles consistent with the image of self that they wish to project. Individuals switch roles and perform different scripts in different social circumstances in an attempt at 'impression management'. Although emotional labour can be seen from the dramaturgical perspective as a variant of what occurs in most other social contexts, that is to say the playing out of a script where displays of emotion may equally be inauthentic, the primary differentiation between emotional labour and other social contexts is the requirement for the emotional labourer to follow 'display rules' (Ekman, 1973; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) prescribed by the employer. In circumstances where the ways in which an employee is to act are prescribed, the individual's 'discretion over the nature and choice of displayed feelings is removed or reduced, and the emotional performance forms part of the effort-wage bargain in the same way that physical performance does' (Noon and Blyton, 1997: 125).

Hochschild (1983) suggested that flight attendants were able to accomplish their emotional labour because they had been trained in techniques of 'deep acting'. Deep acting requires people to change their emotional expression by altering their internal feelings. One of the consequences of deep acting is that it becomes possible for the employee, as actor, to deceive both others and themselves with regard to their true emotional state. She argued that when this occurred it becomes impossible for the employee to distinguish the act of emotional labour from their 'true' self. According to Hochschild the alternative to deep acting was 'surface acting'. This characteristically involved changing outward expressions so as to affect but not to actually experience a feeling or emotion. Thus the 'fixed smile' (or the 'chirpy voice' in the context of a call centre) might be the outward expression designed to convey the suggestion of particular inner emotions by the actor.

Employees required to perform frequent repetitions of emotional displays or to perform emotional labour over prolonged periods frequently resort to coping strategies (Noon and Blyton, 1997). Coping strategies identified in the literature include retiring to private areas in order to vent frustrations without public scrutiny (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990), limiting the information provided or deliberately misinforming difficult customers (Taylor and Tyler, 2000), engaging in covert activities whilst maintaining the emotional display (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989), switching to 'autopilot' (Filby, 1992) and committing minor infringements of management directives (Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Tracy and Tracy (1998) identified seven categories of coping behaviour practiced by call-takers at an American 911 emergency call centre. They observed the use of non-verbal expressions including 'making faces, rolling their eyes, sticking out their tongues, plugging their noses and throwing up their hands (or other objects) to express an emotion that they were not supposed to express in their voice' (1998: 402). Giving the caller advice and upgrading the priority of calls were seen as strategies used to combat call takers' feelings of powerlessness and lack of control over call outcomes. Self-talk, in which call takers tried to sympathise with callers' emotional states by imagining how they would feel in the caller's place or reminding themselves that caller's remarks were not personal, was a strategy which helped call takers to avoid either depersonalizing the caller or suffering from emotional contagion. Evaluative talk, which occurred outside of calls and which the authors observed to be mainly critical, was seen as helping call takers to '(re)appraise the appropriate emotion to be felt in certain situations' and express their feelings in an institutionally acceptable form. Tracy and Tracy believed that such evaluations also acted as scripts that would influence the ways in which other call takers experienced and dealt with similar situations in the future. Joking and experience-sharing or storytelling were viewed as strategies through which call takers could make sense of emotionally disturbing parts of their job, enabling them to empathise with callers whilst appraising the content of calls and emotionally distancing themselves from it.

Ginny provided an example of the coping behaviour that Tracy and Tracy (1998) described as a nonverbal expression of emotion. When asked whether receiving phone calls from people who were really angry or abusive or who appeared to be blaming her for their problems ever upset her, she replied:

'Not ever to the state of tears. I've seen people in tears before but its never driven me to tears, but it does upset me. When I get off the phone I'm like (clenches fists, frowns darkly and growls). (Laughs)' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

The following excerpt shows that coping strategies do not have to be mutually exclusive. Self-talk, evaluative talk and experience-sharing may all occur in quick succession. Talking about difficult and abusive calls, Sharon said that she had been 'conditioned through years and years of working in [call centres] that you don't, um, you get, you may get shouted at, but it's not at you'. But Sharon found that this response, an example of Tracy and Tracy's self-talk, was not always sufficient:

'There's only so much you can do and only so much you can take and every now and again you just want to go and scream.

Q: What do you do then?

Go and scream.

Q: Where do you go?

Oh, probably to the toilet, or go for a walk around the building, or go and speak to the manager. Or all of them! (Laughs)' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

Believing it to be more appropriate to the ideal of customer service, at the risk of personal censure Catriona often used an information-providing strategy to overcome her and the customer's frustrations at being constrained in their interaction:

'I used to, you weren't allowed to offer them a manager, you had to wait until they asked. You weren't allowed to offer them a senior operator or a supervisor unless they asked you. But often I used to, I knew I couldn't do anything but I knew a manager could do something and often I would say, at the risk of being monitored 'I can't help you here but if you ask me for a manager I can put you through to a manager' and then they'd say 'Well put me through to a manager!' and then you did it. But I shouldn't really have done that. You know, you're just supposed to wait on the customer' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

Hochschild found that in some cases of surface acting the actor felt guilt at their lack of sincerity. This incongruity between outward expression and inner feeling was experienced as 'emotive dissonance' and could, according to Hochschild, lead to psychological discomfort, burnout, and alienation. Rafaeli and Sutton challenged Hochschild's conclusions as to the harmful effects of emotional deception. They suggested that such faking could be done in 'good faith or bad faith', and that emotive dissonance was more prevalent in those employees who had not internalized the organization's display norms: 'If employees believe that offering false emotions should not be part of the job then they are *faking in bad faith*. But if employees offer false emotions and believe

offering them should be part of their job, then they are *faking in good faith*. We contend that emotional dissonance will be most strongly related to strain among people who fake in bad faith since their level of psychological discomfort will be much higher than people who fake in good faith' (1989: 37). Tracy and Tracy (1998) summarised previous research to suggest a three-tier picture of the possible harmful effects of the performance of emotional labour, detailed in Table 10.2.

Table 10.2 Levels of potential harm in the performance of emotional labour

Level of potential harm	Associated emotional labour performance requirement
Highest	Organisational rule which mandates internal feelings
Intermediate	Organisational expression rule performed 'in bad faith'
Lowest	Organisational expression rule performed 'in good faith'

Source: After Tracy and Tracy, 1998.

It has been suggested that, whilst some employees are unaffected by the performance of emotional labour and others employ coping strategies that help to mitigate possible harm, a proportion of employees will experience detrimental effects as a result of being required to perform emotional labour. Hochschild (1983) suggested that employees could experience emotive dissonance. It has been suggested that a sense of inauthenticity experienced as a result of emotional labour could lead to poor self-esteem, depression, cynicism and alienation from work (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). There is also the potential for the negative effects of emotive dissonance to spill over into home life, where the ongoing requirement for emotion management may lead to 'emotion overload' (Wharton and Erickson, 1993; Hochschild, 1989).

Noon and Blyton (1997) argued that whilst emotional labour could in theory have a deleterious effect on employees, there was little evidence to suggest that it did so in practice. A study of banking and health service employees by Wharton (1993) found no simple relationship between requirements to perform emotional labour and either emotional exhaustion or job satisfaction, but noted that the effects of emotional labour were influenced by the conditions under which it was performed. Noon and Blyton suggested that 'there are individuals who strongly identify with their work roles, and for whom the job, and the emotional display rules entailed in that job, are fully

consistent with their personal values and identity' (1997: 135), and for these individuals the performance of emotional labour may enhance rather than degrade their experiences of work with consequent improvement to their psychological well-being. That having been said, over-identification with a role may strip the individual of the protection afforded by the perception of emotional labour as acting, leading to a situation where customers' actions are taken personally and resulting eventually in the losses of self-management and control associated with psychological 'burnout'.

Wouters (1989) argued that in evaluating emotional labour any costs need to be weighed against positive elements of jobs involving emotion displays, including the satisfaction that some employees may derive from serving customers and receiving positive responses to their efforts. Tolich (1993) identified what he termed 'the duality of emotion at work'. He noted the 'pattern of contradictory emotions' that described supermarket clerks' performance of customer service, arguing that it was in fact a synthesis of two intertwined subpatterns. Customers were simultaneously viewed as sources of both stress and satisfaction, and the emotion management performed by clerks was simultaneously regulated and autonomous. The latter was attributed partly to the clerks' desire to cultivate customer loyalty and partly to their desire to express something of themselves or their personality and to make the otherwise monotonous work task more enjoyable. Tolich concluded that: 'The performance of customer service can alienate a clerk, but the performance of customer service can also alleviate a clerk's alienation' (1993: 378).

The following extracts from the interview with Ginny support Tolich's suggestion that customers could be the cause of both stress and satisfaction. In identifying the three things she had most liked and disliked about being a call handler, Ginny had said that one of her three likes was 'probably some of the chat that I had on the phone with people. Because you had,...you know, it was good fun. Sometimes you had, you know, every single day probably, you'd speak to them and you'd have, you know, a phone call that would make you feel good'. In terms of dislikes she identified 'the bad calls' and

'sometimes the lack of support if you were stuck. Um, I mean I'm talking when, back before I knew, you couldn't often get people to help you if you didn't know because everybody'd be just panicking because you had this question and you wouldn't have a clue. And you might not necessarily be trained as well, because I didn't get training for ages on how to handle a call where you didn't actually know the answer' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

Similarly, Sharon's identification of positive and negative aspects of her job shows that she found customer interactions a source of both satisfaction and stress. The first quote suggests an element of what Tolich called autonomous emotion management:

'[I like] dealing with a difficult customer and turning them round to your way of thinking. It's the most satisfying thing, on the phone, to be able to do. Where you've got an angry customer screaming and shouting, and you get them phoning up and speaking to your manager and saying 'I was really impressed with Sharon, she was great'....

'[I dislike] not being able to speak to someone else on the phone when you're looking for help, where someone more experienced would have more information and you need that information and you're having to hold on to someone and you can hear them getting impatient on the phone' (Interview with Sharon, 28 July 1999).

Some authors (for example, Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee, 2000) would suggest that call centres have tended to select employees on the basis of 'natural' customer orientation. That is to say that they have made a deliberate effort to recruit they type of person whose personal values 'fit' with their perceived demands of customer service employment. The findings of this study suggest that many call centre employees perceive an apparent emphasis on quantity over quality of interaction that constrains their ability to fully act out their beliefs in what constitutes appropriate or in some cases adequate customer service. Schneider (1980) found that bank employees with the highest levels of customer service orientation felt frustrated by managerial emphases on efficiency that they perceived to be at the expense of the customer. It may be that call centres are selecting the wrong applicants. Applicants who are adjudged to be less customer oriented might perceive less incongruity, and so be better able to accommodate inconsistencies, between the quality-focused rhetoric and quantity-oriented management practices found to operate in call centres.

10.6 Call centre employee turnover

The high rate of employee turnover in many call centres is well documented. In this study most call centre employee losses could be attributed to voluntary turnover. The causes and correlates of employees' voluntary quitting decisions have been the subject of sustained academic scrutiny. It is possible that high levels of call centre employee turnover result in part from the relative novelty of this form of employment combined with the way that call centres have been represented through the medium of television. A recent survey of employees in two Scottish call centres (Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer and Scholarios, 2000) found that less than a quarter had had previous experience

of call centre employment but that nearly half had previous service or sales experience. It has been suggested in the employee turnover literature that the volume of voluntary quits can be reduced by the provision of realistic job information either prior to or immediately following the start of employment. Additionally, recruitment source effects have been hypothesized to operate through processes in which informal sources provide job applicants with realistic information, thereby allowing unsuitable applicants to self-select out of the recruitment process. Realistic employment information is therefore seen as playing a key role in applicant and employee decision-making processes.

Call centres are a relatively new type of workplace, offering a type of employment that is significantly different to other occupations, for example different forms of clerical work, data entry or 'traditional' telephone switchboard work, it might on first sight be thought to resemble. Where an occupation has been established over a relatively long period, perceptions of it coalesce into occupational stereotypes. Occupational stereotypes are malleable images that give structure to and help individuals to understand and make sense of large amounts of often-contradictory employment-related information. Information about jobs and occupations processed by individuals may be gleaned from many sources, including first or third person accounts of the particular job or of work and employment more generally, fictionalized accounts, descriptions or images of the job or occupations in written, aural or visual media. Stereotypes may incorporate notions of what that job involves, what it may mean to an individual in terms of relative inputs and outputs, what society accords to and expects from those who do that job, the personal qualities the job-holder can be anticipated to have, and so on.

When asked to describe a particular occupation, individuals will tend to refer to a mental image or stereotype of a typical incumbent. Some images may be clearer and more detailed than others because a greater volume of information has been available to construct the stereotype. Since there are many different jobs and occupations, it is likely that people's stereotypical images of incumbents are often constructed from information presented in the media rather than personal experience. For example, the stereotypical image of a fireman is likely to be more detailed for most people than their corresponding image of an ophthalmologist. Most people will have had no more personal contact with a fireman than with an ophthalmologist, but images of firemen appear far

more frequently in visual media such as television and cinema, providing information that helps to create and maintain a stereotype.

Over time individuals can be expected to accumulate a body of information about different jobs and occupations. Personal testimonies from those previously or currently in particular types of employment might be expected to contribute significantly to individuals' perceptions of that employment. Call centres have only been a significant form of employment in the UK in the last ten years. It could be that there is as yet an insufficient accumulation of knowledge about call centre employment. Sharon, one of the interviewees, landed her first call centre job in 1992 via an agency. She said 'I was just out of college. I didn't have a job to go to. [I thought] Oh that'll do. That'll do as a stop-gap'. When asked if she could recollect whether she knew much about call centres then, she replied 'I knew nothing about call centres at that time' (interview with Sharon, 28 July 99). Similarly, asked about whether he had known anything about call centres before his first call centre job, Mike replied 'I knew nothing about them at all. Or about sales' (Interview with Mike, 22 April 2000).

Baldry, Bunzel, Hyman and Marks (2000) found that employees at a financial services call centre tended not to have a self-image of themselves as call centre employees. In addition to not identifying with call centre employment as an occupation, Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer and Scholarios (2000) noted that employees 'tended to dissociate themselves from call centre work' and that this was 'rationalized with references to the negative public perception of call centre work' (2000: 19). Thus it may be that even as experience of call centre employment begins to accumulate in the labour force, much of the work-related information that emerges is not explicitly linked to it as an occupation. Individuals, and particularly those entering or having recently entered the labour market, have to make call centre employment choices without recourse to the same fund of accumulated knowledge that might be used to inform their decisions in relation to other types of employment. What they do have access to is an accumulated knowledge of types of employment that might be thought similar to call centre employment and a stereotype of call centre employment based on media images.

Unfortunately, both these sources are likely to provide information that does not match the reality of call centre employment. This study's data indicate that the characteristics of call centre work

differ from those of many common forms of clerical employment in a number of important respects. The two types of employment are compared in relation to selected characteristics in Table 10.3. In addition, images of call centres based on media images are likely to mislead, causing inappropriate applicants to fail to self-select out of the call centre recruitment process. Although call centre settings have formed a backdrop for several dramatic and literary works in the recent past, the presentation of call centres to mass audiences in the UK remains primarily through newspaper articles and television advertising. This study found that in the case of newspaper articles relatively few presented what might be considered realistic employment information.

Table 10.3 Summary of differences found between selected characteristics of call centre work and many forms of clerical work

Call centre employment	Clerical employment
Shift patterns frequently involve working outside of 'normal working hours'	Requirements to work outside of 'normal working hours' are less likely
Shift patterns and start times rigidly defined	Flexible working times with core hours requirements increasingly common
Employees are required to be on premises prior to 'start' of shift.	Normal for employees to consider 'start' of shift as the time employee arrived on work premises
Payment is only for periods of work effort.	Payment probably for hours specified by contract. There may be delays between arriving at work and commencing work effort.
Break times are usually rigidly defined and scheduled to fit in with organizational work-flow estimates	There may be more flexibility over break times and lengths
Most of the working day is spent communicating with external customers	Contact with external customers less likely to occupy a majority of the working day
Communication with proximate co-workers during shifts is normally proscribed and /or kept to a minimum	Communication with proximate co-workers during working hours is frequently unrestricted
There is little personal control over work rates	There may be greater control over work rates
There is little personal control over ordering of work tasks	Employees may have greater control over ordering of work tasks

In relation to television advertising, I noted during participant observation how the affective behaviour of employees at my call centre was in 'stark contrast to the public image that is being portrayed through the likes of television commercials, which without fail show individual operators, and sometimes whole call centres full of people, happily grinning away'. The image of call centre employees presented by television advertising, almost universally one of apparently cheerful, contented employees, does not accord with the findings of this study. A current television advertisement in which two female call centre employees are seen laughing and playing a game

that involves rolling chocolate-covered sweets from one work station to another other before eating them provides a recent example of the distorted presentation of call centre employment by advertisers. It suggests that eating at the work station is normal and acceptable, where the findings of this case suggest otherwise. It suggests that call centre employees either do not or have no need to concentrate on calls in progress, again contrary to the findings of this study.

It is possible to suggest that the idealized representations of call centres used in television advertising create an unrealistic stereotype of call centre employment that acts to attract applicants who perceive a higher degree of person-job fit than is actually the case. A lack of readily available, specific and realistic job information from current or previous labour market participants means that the image presented by television is not challenged and that unsuitable applicants do not to self-select out of the call centre recruitment process. A comment made by Ginny, one of the interviewees, when discussing suitability for call centre employment seems to suggest a lack of basic job understanding on some appointees' parts: 'It is hard work and I think that people have to appreciate that it's not a walk in the park and I think some people have that impression. They start and when they go in they think 'Oh, this is a doddle! I've just got to put my headset on and answer people's questions' and it's really not like that at all' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

The individual's perception of person-job fit falls rapidly after the start of employment as they discover the nature of the job through experience. Employees' perceptions of person-job fit have been found to be significantly and positively related to job satisfaction, and significantly and negatively related to turnover intentions (Cable and Judge, 1996). The combination of an unrealistic stereotype and the lack of realistic job information to counter it may thus account for a proportion of the voluntary turnover experienced by call centres.

When considering questions of voluntary turnover, it is relevant to look at employee motivation. Not all employees will have the same motives for working or the same expectations of their employment. A number of attempts have been made to classify different orientations to work. For example, Etzioni (1961, 1975) developed the notion of involvement, which he defined as 'the cathetic-evaluative orientation of an actor to an object, characterized in terms of intensity and direction' (1975: 9). Etzioni conceptualized involvement as a continuum stretching from high positive involvement through to high negative involvement. He identified three levels of

involvement, said to represent zones on that continuum: moral, calculative and alienative involvement. In a work context moral involvement is characterized by intense positive orientations toward the employing organization, identification with and belief in its goals. Alienative involvement is the antithesis of moral involvement, a state of intense negative orientation toward the organization and its aims. Calculative involvement suggests a low intensity orientation, either positive or negative, toward the employer. Etzioni saw his classification of orientations as being applicable to 'actors in all social units and to all kinds of objects' rather than limited to describing individuals' orientations to organizations.

Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz (1997) looked at employees' perceptions of their work as jobs, careers or callings, a tripartite set of relations to work suggested by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985). The latter authors had suggested that individuals tended to have one of three distinct relations to work, described in Table 10.4, defining how they saw their employment as relating to their lives more generally and their expectations in terms of outcomes. Wrzesniewski *et al* found that both across different occupations and across a particular occupation (administrative assistant) the majority of employees identified clearly with one of the three categories.

They found that in lower level occupations, employees were likely to see themselves as having either jobs or careers. Employees who saw their employment as offering careers tended to be six years younger on average than those who perceived it as jobs, but they were otherwise demographically similar. Those who perceived their employment as callings were significantly better paid, and better educated and had occupations with higher self-perceived status and objective prestige levels than the other two groups. Those in the calling category reported the best health and the highest life, health, and job satisfaction, with those in the job category reporting the lowest. They also reported missing significantly fewer days' work than those in the job or career categories.

It may not be possible to generalize the findings of the Wrzesniewski *et al* (1997) study to call centre employment because the study's sample population was composed exclusively of full time employees. Tenure was not mentioned specifically, but details of the survey sites suggested that most of the sample population were also likely to be employed permanently. Research looking at

the motivational factors and personal priorities of call centre employees identified four general types, labelled the 'careerist', the 'passer through', the 'foot soldier' and the 'bill payer' respectively (Ainsley, 2001; Call Centre College, 1999). Although these categories were derived from data obtained from a telephone survey of 160 entry level call centre employees 'representing a cross section of industry sectors' the working hours or tenure of respondents is not stated. There were clear overlaps between these categories and the relations to work suggested by Bellah *et al.*

Table 10.4 Characteristics of the three categories of relations to work suggested by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985)

Employment perceived as:	Job	Career	Calling
Characteristics of this type of relation to work	<p>1) Employee is exclusively interested in the material benefits from work and does not seek or receive any other type of reward from work</p> <p>2) Employee views work as a means to an end and not an end in itself</p> <p>3) Employee's main interests and ambitions are not expressed through work</p>	<p>1) Employee has a deeper personal investment in work than those who see work as a job</p> <p>2) Employee measures achievement in terms of both monetary gain and advancement within the occupational structure</p> <p>3) Employee sees promotion as enhancing social standing and increasing self-esteem</p>	<p>1) Employee's primary motivation is not monetary reward or advancement but the personal fulfillment provided by work</p> <p>2) Employee sees work as socially valuable</p> <p>3) Employee views work as an end in itself</p>

The careerist, said to account for 28 percent of call centre employees, is similar to the 'career' category in that promotion and training opportunities are most valued. The remaining three types suggested by Ainsley all appear to be variants of the job category of relations to work. The passer through, an employee who values pay and training but only plans to stay for the short term, is said to be representative of 22 percent of call centre employees. 30 percent of employees conform to the foot soldier type, described as an employee planning on long term commitment but not motivated by promotion opportunities, and the remaining 20 percent are bill payers, defined as employees motivated by financial needs and family commitments and for whom training and promotion are not significant factors (all percentages from Call Centre College, 1999, and reproduced in Ainsley, 2001). The findings reported by Ainsley are consistent with Wrzesniewski *et al.*'s conclusion that

employees in lower level occupations were likely to see themselves as having jobs or careers rather than callings.

Wrzesniewski *et al* also concluded, from the similarity between results for the sample population and the single occupation subgroup, that satisfaction with life and with work might depend more on how employees perceive their employment in terms of offering jobs, careers or callings than on income or occupational prestige. Interview data suggest that, using Ainsley's (2001) classifications, Rob, Stewart, Julie and Mike were all passers through, Ginny was a careerist, Catriona a bill payer and Sharon a foot soldier. Under the Bellah *et al* (1985) classifications, all the interviewees except Ginny would be classified as having 'job' relations to work.

Watson *et al* (2000) looked at the notion of career in the call centre context, gathering data from two contrasting call centre operations. The first, 'M', they described as 'a medium-sized operation within an established financial institution'. The second call centre, 'T', was 'a large outsourced centre providing telephone and customer services to a range of client businesses, across a range of business sectors'. Responses from temporary and agency employees, who made up about 15 percent of the workforce in each call centre, were included in their analysis. They found that both within and across the two call centres employees adopted a range of orientations to their work and careers. They 'tentatively' identified two 'clusters' of employees differentiated by 'their aspirations to career and [the] strategies they pursue'. The first cluster held clearer career aspirations and pursued more explicit strategies towards social mobility than the second, composed of individuals who seemed 'to 'drift' among a number of jobs during their employment life with neither a clear sense of direction nor concrete aspirations to progress within particular companies or occupations' (2000: 23). These clusters might be said to generally resemble Bellah *et al*'s job/career differentiation. A parallel is also visible with the classifications used by Ainsley (2001), where the first cluster represents careerists and the second cluster is a collapsed form of the other three categories. Table 10.5 displays the findings of the study in relation to employees' reasons for taking their current position, how they perceive that position and what employment they expect to have in the future.

Nearly 64 percent of the call centre employees responding to Watson *et al*'s (2000) survey were aged 30 or under, with an additional 24 percent aged between 31 and 40. This is similar to call

centre workforce age distributions found by other authors (for example, Belt *et al*, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Hook, 1998). Wrzesniewski *et al* (1997) found that younger employees tended to express career orientations to work. They suggested two competing interpretations of their finding that career identification might be a function of age. It could mean either that ‘younger employees may be willing to work harder than their older counterparts in order to advance within their organizations’ or that there is ‘an expectation held by younger employees that they will eventually move on to better positions’. Studies specific to call centres suggest the latter.

Table 10.5 Call centre employees’ attitudes and intentions towards current employment

	Overall percentage	Percentage in call centre M	Percentage in call centre T
<i>Reasons for job choice</i>			
Lack of choice	4.2	3.0	4.7
Career decision	45.8	59.6	39.4
Convenience	36.2	27.3	40.4
First available	15.1	11.1	16.9
<i>Think of current job as:</i>			
Long term job	21.2	24.3	8.2
Career within company	52.4	42.7	29.5
Career with another company	15.8	17.5	27.7
Will leave job soon	10.6	14.6	26.8
<i>Expected future jobs:</i>			
Different occupation/industry	45.6	27.6	55.2
Same/related	9.6	20.4	3.8
Same industry, not call centres	7.5	18.4	1.6
Same/related, call centre management	26.7	28.6	25.7
Same/related, skills/elsewhere	9.3	4.1	12.0

Source: Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer and Scholarios, 2000: 27

Both the Watson *et al* (2000) and Call Centre College (1999) studies suggest that significant proportions of predominantly young call centre employees have a career orientation to work, with the former finding that more than a quarter saw a career in call centre management as a possibility. There is clearly tension between the paucity of promotional opportunities provided by call centres and the expectations of future promotion common to a significant proportion of call centre employees. This is likely to lead, as in the case of Ginny whose decision to quit was discussed in the previous chapter, to employee frustration and voluntary terminations of employment.

In addition to the limited opportunities provided by flattened organizational structures, management practices in some call centres may also act to thwart employees' career ambitions.

Catriona explained the promotion system operated at that time by SatCo:

'The interesting thing about it I always thought was you weren't allowed to apply for a job. You couldn't apply to be an EO or an SO. You had to wait until the management approached you. Because they monitored your calls and if they thought you were worthy of, you know, being upgraded, then they would approach you. So you didn't really... I wasn't ambitious when I was there because it was only a part-time job for me, but there were a lot of people who, either on that shift - its the Saturday/Sunday evening shift I was on - and, er, there was a lot of people that, you know, were really quite ambitious to climb. But they couldn't - you couldn't do anything about it. You had to wait to be approached, which was a bit strange (Laughs)' (Interview with Catriona, 5 April 2000).

10.7 From call centre to contact centre

When the review of newspaper articles in the company news subcategory was undertaken it was seen that by 1999 companies were choosing to call their facilities customer service centres or contact centres rather than call centres (Calder, 1999). It was suggested that such changes both avoided the negative images associated with call centres and reflected the greater sophistication of newer facilities. The former seems more credible than the latter. Anton (2000) forecast the metamorphosis of call centres into what he termed 'customer access centres' as companies were driven by competitive forces to provide access via new channels of communication as they became available, and a survey by Calvert (2001) found that 36 percent of call centre operators expected more than 40 percent of their call centre communications to be via e-mail, internet or interactive television by 2005. However, a report by Datamonitor (1999) estimated that in mid-1999 there were 'less than 30 call centres in the UK with Internet functionality'. This would suggest that increasing technical sophistication might not have been the underlying reason for changes in nomenclature at that time. At an employee level of analysis Watson *et al* (2000) noted a tendency for individuals to 'dissociate themselves from call centre work' and to rationalize their acts 'with references to the negative public perception of call centre work' (2000: 19). It would thus seem that perceptions of a poor occupational image have pervaded call centre employment at both individual and organizational levels.

The findings of this study are generally unlikely to improve that image. In the cases examined in this study the call centres generally operated flattened organizational structures, with teams of between five and thirty employees supervised by team leaders and occasionally deputies and few

positions available after team leader. In addition many call centres used a proportion of temporary employees who were generally barred from promotion to deputy/team leader. In the majority of cases examined by this study the work task could be classified as having a high or medium degree of routinisation. This tended to lead to employees quickly becoming disinterested in the labour process. Abuse from callers was a common experience, and employees frequently perceived that they were restrained in responses to abuse by call centre policies.

During shifts in the call centre, employees were actively either discouraged or prohibited from talking to fellow employees, leaving the workstation or reading non-work literature. Various mechanisms were commonly used to encourage employees to follow these rules, including direct supervision, the use of computerized monitoring systems and the production and use of statistical information on employee productivity. Several interviewees felt they were being treated like schoolchildren. In addition to direct supervision, most call centre employees experienced 'remote' electronic monitoring of their performance and were generally unable to tell when this was taking place. Employees at inbound call centres were more likely than those in outbound call centres to be subjected to the monitoring of variables relating to call quantity, with variables relating to call quality routinely monitored in both types of call centre. Interviewees in this study tended to perceive performance monitoring and assessment as degrading the experience of call centre employment by increasing work-related pressure whilst decreasing employee discretion.

Although Calder's (1999) suggestion of greater technological sophistication as the reason for the change from 'call centre' to 'contact centre' was arguably premature, it is clear that call centre operators are increasingly incorporating new channels of communication. There is debate as to how this is likely to affect the experience of call centre employment. The spectrum of opinion terminates at one end in the optimistic forecasts of Calvert (2001) and at the other in the pessimism of Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor and Gall (2001). Calvert has suggested (2001: 175) that 'the shift from call to contact centre will affect all organizations' strategy, processes, technologies and, most importantly, people'. She anticipated that the 'relatively low skill agent closely managed by supervisors', the employment form currently predominant in call centres, would be replaced in contact centres by 'highly skilled and empowered agents'. Although Calvert does not specify what the nature of the changes in entry-level call centre employees' roles might be, it does seem likely that a significant shift in the relative use of different channels of communication between

organizations and consumers might result in corresponding changes in the nature of demands on and skills required by call centre employees. Bain *et al* acknowledged the integration of new channels of communication into call centres and the formation of 'multi-media customer contact centres' but argued that 'whilst the functions and tasks carried out in call centres will ensure that some of the jobs will require high levels of skill, knowledge and experience, for most call centre workers the future appears likely to continue to be characterized by target-setting and Taylorism' (2001: 18).

Which of the two contrasting views of the future of call centre employment turns out to be correct depends critically on the extent to which the labour processes and forms of work organization currently employed in the majority of call centres can be expected to change. Bain *et al* have asserted that despite 'commonalities in terms of the integration of computer and telephony, given the diversity in sectoral spread and the variety of activities carried out within them, any concept of a 'typical' call centre is difficult to sustain' (2001: 4). This is clearly the case, but this study has shown that despite differences in the sectoral location of the employer and the activities performed, there are aspects of the experience of call centre work that are shared by the majority which can therefore be appropriately described as 'typical'. Bain *et al* explicitly acknowledge the possibility of shared experience by referring to factors that characterize employment 'for most call centre workers'. Taylor, Mulvey, Hyman and Bain (2002) have also concluded that in call centres 'routinisation, repetitiveness and a general absence of control are the dominant, although not universal, features of work organization'.

For a minority of current call centre employees the task demands the exercise of higher levels of skill, knowledge and experience (Bain *et al*, 2001; Batt, 2000). This minority would seem to resemble Calvert's 'highly skilled and empowered agents' of the future. Taylor *et al* (2002) suggested that the spectrum of different forms of work organization and labour processes in call centres could be defined in terms of the relative priorities given to quantity and quality in task execution. They suggested characteristics that might define the extremes of this spectrum. These are reproduced in Table 10.6. It is clear that the minority experience of current call centre employees is firmly located close to the 'quality' end of this spectrum. In order for Calvert's vision of future employment to materialize, there would need to be, concurrent with the change from call centre to contact centre, a wholesale shift towards the quality end of Taylor *et al*'s continuum.

Table 10.6 Ideal characteristics of quantity and quality focused forms of work organization and labour processes in call centres

Quantity-focused forms	Quality-focused forms
Simple customer interaction	Complex customer interaction
Routinization	Individualisation/customization
Targets hard	Targets soft
Strict script adherence	Flexible or no script
Tight call handling times	Relaxed call handling times
Tight 'wrap-up times'	Customer satisfaction a priority
High percentage of time on phone/ready	Possibility of off-phone task completion
Statistics driven	Statistics modified by quality criteria
Task cycle time short	Task cycle times long
High call volumes	Low call volumes
Low value of calls	High value of calls
Low level of operator discretion	High level of operator discretion
Nature of call- simple	Nature of call – complex
Mass service delivery	Customization

Source: Taylor, Mulvey, Hyman and Bain, 2002

At best there is limited evidence of such a shift. Some organizations are moving towards multi-skilling call centre employees. In this study, Ginny alluded to changes taking place in AssuranceCo that would allow separate call centre workforces on the AssuranceCo site to be merged. She suggested that nine of the call centres on site would be collapsed into three or four. She believed that AssuranceCo was taking this step because it 'wanted to make it easier for our customers to do business with us.... So there'll be four phone numbers and they will be able to deal with everything'. Following the planned changes employees' call repertoires would be considerably expanded, providing greater task variety and requiring employees to have a wider knowledge base. All of AssuranceCo's call centre employees were receiving additional training 'because everybody needs to be multi-skilled. So, you know, all three hundred and fifty call handlers need to be multi-skilled so that they can answer calls that come in for every department' (Interview with Ginny, 26 June 2000).

But there was also a suggestion that concurrent with apparently enriching the jobs of many of its call centre employees, AssuranceCo was taking the opportunity to update its technology, possibly allowing for increases in work intensification: 'There is so much happening at the moment in the company with changing. You know, we're getting all new technology, and brand new call recording equipment, and - no, we've got new call recording equipment but we're getting a brand new ACD system'. Bain *et al*, reporting on a study that encompassed four sectorally disparate call

centres, noted that in each case the parent companies operated multiple call centres and all had 'moved towards reconfiguring their UK call centre operations into a 'virtual operation, in which customer transactions could be switched to whatever centre was adjudged best able to handle the calls at any point in time' (2001: 17). From an organizational viewpoint the multi-skilling of employees and the establishment of virtual call centres across geographically distant sites have benefits in that both enable organizations to cope better with fluctuating demands for individual services and to use available staff more effectively. From an employee point of view multi-skilling may provide benefits such as greater task variety, leading to broader workplace experience and possibly the opportunity to gain and use additional skills. But it also has potential costs. It may result in work intensification because it will enable the employer to direct any waiting call to any available employee, thereby removing the respite previously provided by 'slack' in the system as a result of manning levels that are occasionally sub-optimal from a management perspective.

There is another, and I would argue more likely, route by which more quality-focused forms of work organization and labour process might become the future norm for call centre employment. Changes may come about not primarily as the result of changes in work organization and task complexity as such, but as a result of a contraction of employment at the quantitative end of Taylor *et al's* (2002) continuum such that the jobs that remained would be predominantly located nearer the quality extreme. It would not therefore be consistent with Calvert's vision of the future because the 'relatively low skill agent closely managed by supervisors' would not be transformed but rendered obsolete. The contraction in call centre employment would come via the replacement of employees responding to simple, highly routinized, low value customer interactions with automated systems able to provide the same service. This possible managerial response to economic imperatives becomes increasingly plausible as automated systems become more sophisticated and more affordable and as call centre labour costs rise.

Call centre operators and consumers are both concerned with cost. Consumers want services that match their expectations in terms of accessibility, quality, speed and efficiency. Call, or contact, centre operators want to minimise costs whilst meeting customer expectations. Labour represents a high proportion of call centre running costs. Employee turnover is far higher in call centres where the task is simple and repetitive and the labour process is quantity driven. Thus labour costs tend to be proportionately higher for this type of call centre. However, these are the tasks most amenable to

automation. Automating these tasks will save on labour costs and increase profit per transaction for the call centre employer.

There is no suggestion that human agents need to be phased out immediately. It would be possible and desirable for organizations to offer consumers the choice of using automated or manned service delivery systems with a tiered pricing system that reflected the different costs of each type of service provision. Some Internet banking concerns already operate such a system. Internet banking is provided at advantageous rates, reflecting the lower costs of providing this service over more established personal banking delivery channels whilst still generating profits for providers. The internet banking provider also maintains call centre facilities in case the customer requires to speak to a representative of the organization on any matter, but calls made to the facility are charged at premium rates, reflecting the higher cost of providing this service and encouraging the customer to use automated service delivery channels where possible.

Pearson (2001), commenting on future computer and artificial intelligence development, has suggested that by 2010 replacing simple interaction with automated voice interaction will have 'decimated' call centres. There may be concern that consumers will resist the introduction of automated systems. Time is the key. Most consumers can recount frustrating personal experiences of seemingly endless calls in which they attempted in vain to navigate through multiple touch-tone activated menus. But as interactive voice response (IVR) systems increasingly incorporate computer abilities to parse ordinary speech, that is to say to analyse and make sense of sentences as well as recognising individual words or phrases, read-out menus will become a thing of the past and telephone 'self-service' will speed up. ASR systems will also eliminate the need for callers to be held in queuing systems, cited by 44 percent of people as the greatest cause of anger or frustration in daily life in a 1997 survey (Fielding and Hook, 1998). Pearson (2000) has argued that 'being able to get an almost instant response for routine enquiries enabled by IVR will make people more likely to use call centres'.

The provision in the UK of directory enquiries (DQ) services can be seen as a possible example of contraction in call centre employment via the replacement of employees responding to simple, highly routinized, low value customer interactions with automated systems able to provide the same service. In a statement issued in September 2001, the Director General of

Telecommunications stated that 'UK consumers are only able to access the DQ service provided by their network operator, generally by dialling 192. There are few value-added services, variable quality of service and, in practice, no real price competition....Of tel has concluded that the best way to deliver increased quality, choice and value for money is to withdraw the existing national and international DQ codes which tie consumers to one provider. In future, Of tel will allocate five digit numbers beginning with 118 to individual DQ service providers who wish to provide a paid for national and/or international DQ service' (Of tel, 2001b). Of tel anticipated that creating a competitive environment for the provision of these services would give rise to a number of benefits, including the provision of 'a wide range of innovative new services for UK consumers' and 'increased quality of service and price competition'.

Before the announcement in September 2001 of the Director General's decision to expose the provision of DQ services to competition, Of tel had included questions on residential consumers' use of directory enquiry services in its quarterly research. The research was conducted in November 2000 and published in February 2001 (Of tel, 2001a). The survey results indicate a marked ambiguity in attitude towards current provision. When consultees were asked if they would prefer to keep 192 or see a new number range 118XX(X) with alternative services, 59% said they would prefer to keep 192. However, when asked how concerned they would be if 192 was withdrawn, 65% said that they would be either satisfied or unconcerned. Moreover, only 25% of consumers regarded the existing service as providing good value for money. Of tel believed (2001b) that UK consumers were generally 'unaware of the potential the range and ease of access to new services which are enjoyed by consumers in other countries which have fully liberalised the provision of DQ services'. Additionally, on the basis of their research findings they concluded 'that the lack of concern consumers would appear to have about the withdrawal of 192, suggests that any change should not prove too problematic for consumers and that moves to introduce a truly competitive environment, based on the experience of consumers in other countries, are fully justified' (2001b: para 1.12).

The announcement of the liberalization of UK provision of DQ services provoked a number of responses. Kendall (2001) suggested that German firm Telegate had signalled its intention to provide DQ services from a call centre in Dumfries 'within hours' of the Of tel announcement, intending to capture up to 20 percent of the market 'within three to five years'. Barry (2001)

reported that '118UK', a joint venture from Dublin-based Conduit plc and Sonera Corporation of Finland and 'one of the world's fastest growing providers of directory inquiry information services' was to expand the workforce at its Cardiff-based contact centre 'to meet the requirements of new business and in readiness for the deregulation of the UK's '192' directory inquiry market'. 118UK's managing director was quoted as saying: 'We are the new face of directory inquiries and information services in the UK and our goal is to provide telephone listing information in a friendly, helpful and efficient way, using the latest technology to enhance our services. Our intention is to be the UK's leading source of information and the preferred provider of UK information services over the phone, on the mobile Internet and on the worldwide web. We believe that excellent customer service is the key to business success, and our challenge is in combining the best of people, information and technology to deliver the services which will fuel the information age in the UK'.

At the same time that new entrants to the DQ services market were being announced BT, which had previously held a historic near monopoly in voice-based directory inquiry services, was starting to restructure its service provision. BT had a workforce of 16,000 (Doughty, 2002) employed in 150 call centres across the UK providing DQ, fault reporting, accounts and operator services and dealing with 2.3 million calls every day. Budden (2002) reported that this figure was a drop in call volume from 18 months ago when BT was receiving about 2.7 million calls daily, and that the declining numbers reflecting greater use of automated telephone services and growing inquiries directed via the Internet. In relation to DQ it has been suggested that even before the decision to liberalise DQ service provision calls to '192' had dropped significantly 'due to competition such as websites and CD-ROMs' (Portlock, 2002), with Thomson (2002) quoting a BT spokeswoman as saying there had been a '15% drop in 192 directory inquiry calls'. The continuing decline in call volume had already prompted the loss of 2,000 jobs in BT call centres in the 12 months to February 2002 (Budden, 2002). In January 2002 BT announced the imminent closure of DQ call centres in Durham, Leamington Spa, Hemel Hempstead, Truro, Irvine and Glasgow. In the previous two years BT had announced DQ call centre closures in York, Stoke-on-Trent, Belfast, Gateshead, Stirling (UK Business Park, 2002), Plymouth, Aberdeen, Darlington, Medway and the Potteries (Connect, 2001). Continuing this trend of contraction, on 14 February 2002 BT announced a two-year strategy to streamline its remaining call centres into 'a network of state-of-the-art multi-function customer contact centres' (BT, 2002).

The plan involved turning BT's current service-specific high-volume call centres into multi-function facilities able to provide a range of services to residential and small business customers. BT was committed to spending £100 million on training, working environments and 'the best cutting-edge technology' to deliver the kinds of service that customers wanted, but had calculated that the associated savings of the strategy would give a two-year payback. Pierre Danon, chief executive of BT Retail, acknowledged that the proposals would 'inevitably' mean the closure of some existing sites, but argued that it was 'the only way forward if we are to keep our call centre operations in-house and make dramatic improvements to the quality of customer service' (BT, 2002). Although reports suggested that BT's call centre workforce would be reduced over the two years of the project by 1,000 employees (Doughty, 2002), BT stated that any reduction in headcount had already been included in earlier announcements of 13,000 job reductions across BT Retail as a whole. The company said that contraction of BT's call centre workforce would not require any compulsory redundancies 'for our people' as employee turnover across BT of around 10 percent annually would help with redeployment of those whose call centres were closed. Thomson (2002) in an article about the planned closure of Glasgow and Irvine DQ call centres said that BT had insisted that all their own staff would be offered the chance to move to other call centres, but admitted that only some of the combined total of 94 agency staff would be offered new contracts elsewhere.

Doughty (2002) asserted that BT's current call centre rationalization strategy was 'a prelude to computerising directory enquiries' He quoted Pierre Danon as saying "Within five years, people calling directory enquiries could be dealing with a computerised system' which, if successful, 'would certainly help to reduce contact with the public'. Doughty suggested that an automated system capable of recognising voices and word patterns had already been tested in an area near BT's research HQ at Martlesham, Suffolk. Callers were met with a recorded female voice that welcomed them to 'the automated directory inquiry service for the Ipswich area' before asking, in a script identical to that followed by human operators, for the name of the town or the village, followed by a request to say and spell the name of the person or company whose number was required. A final piece of information, the name of the road, was requested before automated system searched its database. The voice then offered a name and address, asking if it was the right one before giving a number. Doughty asserted that whilst the cost-savings benefits to BT were 'obvious', the service would not be much help to those who had only vague information about the

address of the person whose number they were trying to find. This is likely to be similar to customers' experiences of human directory assistance operators, who are discouraged from looking for numbers on the strength of 'vague information' and instructed to tell customers in such circumstances that there is insufficient information to conduct a search.

10.8 Summary

The aims of this chapter were to relate the findings detailed in the previous four chapters to broader issues and to changes in society, and to offer possible explanations for or interpretations of relevant phenomena. The discussion was structured around six sections that replicated the order of presentation of the study data and addressed aspects of call centre employment and issues raised by the study's findings.

In section 10.2 the results of the five-year review of newspaper articles were discussed. An explanation was advanced for the shape of the curve found when the monthly volumes of call centre-related newspaper articles were plotted over time. The curve described rose sharply to peak in 1999, the fourth year of the review period, and declined slowly thereafter. It was argued that the curve reflected the way in which call centres had developed in the UK at that time. It was suggested that low article volumes early in the review period despite, considerable call centre employment, reflected both the sectorally-confined nature of earlier UK call centre growth and the way in which lack of apparent change in the nature of telephone interaction rendered the introduction of call centres opaque from the customer perspective. The number of articles increased as changes in the nature of telephone interaction became apparent, due to the introduction of technologies such as call queuing and automated response systems, on the basis that what is novel is newsworthy. The subsequent decline in numbers of articles in the last year of the review period was argued to be the result of public familiarity with call centres, due in part to their cross-sectoral proliferation and evidenced by their use as a backdrop to literary and dramatic works.

In section 10.3 the significance of findings from the survey of employment agencies was dealt with. It was seen that in the context of call centre employment the so-called 'classic trio' of selection techniques had been usurped by a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews and competence testing, of which the first was considered to be the most critical. The advantages

and disadvantages of telephone interviewing for both interviewer and interviewee were considered, partly by drawing on literature on the effects of physical attractiveness and nonverbal behaviour in face-to-face interviews. Recent studies comparing face-to-face and telephone interviews (Straus *et al*, 2001; Silvester *et al*, 2000) were reviewed. It was noted that the issue of discrimination on the basis of vocal qualities and accent had not been explored by these studies. A number of studies support the notion of accent-related discrimination (Delia, 1972; Edwards, 1977; Giles and Sassoon, 1983; Ladegaard, 1992; DeShields *et al*, 1996; Kolsti, 2000). It was argued that whilst telephone interviewing has face validity in the context of call centre employment, in using this technique as a primary filter of applicants there is a danger of inadvertent discrimination by the interviewer on the basis of regional or racial accent or linguistic characteristics and that this issue required further examination.

In section 10.4 findings of this study about call centre terms and conditions of employment were compared to those of other research. Data on the incidence of temporary call centre employment via employment agencies were found to be consistent with other studies of call centre employment (Belt *et al*, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999; IDS, 1997), and it was noted that such employment tended to account for a higher proportion of call centre workforces than for the UK workforce as a whole. A finding that temporary employees experienced generally less favourable terms and conditions than permanently employed counterparts performing the same job mirrored that of a more general study (Booth *et al*, 2000) of temporary employment. Arguments and evidence concerning employee turnover and recruitment source effects were used to justify a suggestion that disproportionate use of temporary agency employees might contribute to the high levels of voluntary turnover in call centres because the evidence suggested that temporary, agency-recruited employees would have a particularly high propensity to quit. The incidence of non-standard working hours for call centre positions dealt with by employment agencies and the proportion of call centre positions handled by them that were part-time were both higher than those reported by other call centre studies and for the UK workforce as a whole.

Section 10.5 opened with an assessment of the likely job-related well-being of call centre employees. The findings of the study in relation to the general experience of call centre employment were considered within a framework provided by Warr's (1996) identification of main groups of job characteristics affecting job-related well-being. On the basis of an assessment of

these characteristics as presented by call centre employment it was suggested that call centre employees were likely to experience relatively low levels of job-related well-being. This is consistent with the findings of Singh *et al's* (1994) study of burnout in customer service representatives (CSRs). Findings on common aspects of the experience of call centre employment were also considered in light of recent extensions to the theoretical conceptualization of burnout described by Maslach. In Maslach's (1998) model, burnout is seen as being one extreme on a continuum that describes employees' reactions to work environments. A given employee's position on that continuum is mainly determined by the extent or lack of person-job fit, described in the model in terms of degrees of mismatch or congruity with six employment-related constructs. The findings of the study were used to suggest that call centre practices in relation to work organization and labour process combine to produce likely mismatches in relation to four of Maslach's proposed six constructs, again suggesting that most experiences of call centre employment are likely to be located towards the burnout extreme of reactions to work environments, characterized by increasing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and decreasing feelings of personal accomplishment.

The issue of emotional labour in call centres was also discussed in section 10.5. Examination of this topic was triggered by findings that, in dealing with difficult or abusive callers or customers, employees felt constrained by policies imposed by call centre managements that tended to both prescribe and proscribe the ways in which they dealt with such calls. Reviews of literature on the nature, contexts, coping behaviour associated with and the consequences of emotional labour were integrated with examples drawn from the study data to demonstrate both the importance of this phenomenon, and the difficulties experienced by employees when positive and negative aspects of the experience of employment derive from the same source. The section ends with a suggestion that current call centre recruitment and selection practices that focus on employing those applicants with a 'natural' customer orientation may promote the experience of emotional dissonance. It is argued that less customer-oriented applicants might perceive less incongruity, and so be better able to accommodate inconsistencies, between quality-focused rhetoric and quantity-oriented call centre management practices. As a result these applicants might be expected to experience less emotional dissonance.

In section 10.6 the findings of the study and the review of voluntary turnover literature in the previous chapter are used to begin developing an explanation for the high levels of employee turnover in call centres. It is argued, derived from the 'better informed applicant' explanation for recruitment source effects and the efficacy of realistic job information, that call centre employment is disadvantaged relative to more established occupations or jobs. Its novelty means that there is not a residual 'accumulated knowledge' of such employment that applicants can tap into. It has been theorized that recruitment source and organizationally provided realistic job information allows less suitable applicants to self-select out of the recruitment process. The explanation presented here is that because of the paucity of such information, such applicants tend not to do so. Additionally, potential applicants are exposed to inaccurate media-generated images providing unrealistic job information. Individuals with poor person-job fits might be encouraged to apply as the result of such information. Imperfections in selection processes are likely to result in the appointment of a proportion of individuals poorly qualified in terms of person-job fit and therefore likely to quit voluntarily.

This section also considered the question of employee motivation in terms of orientations to work, looking at general (Wrzesniewski *et al*, 1997) and at call centre-specific (Ainsley, 2001; Call Centre College, 1999) classifications of employee orientations to work. The relevance of age to orientation to work was discussed, as was its implications for call centres in light of the findings of this study that call centres offered limited career opportunities and those of other studies that most call centre employees tend to be under 30.

In the final section, 10.7, there is speculation about the nature and experience of call centre work in the future. Although it is argued that it was not initially the driver for change, it is conceded that the increasing technical sophistication of call centres and their incorporation of more channels of communication such as e-mail and the Internet is now beginning to justify the alternative description of 'contact centres'. Two contrasting views of the future of call centre employment are presented. Calvert's (2001) optimism about the upskilling and empowering of currently relatively low skilled and highly supervised call centre employees stands a world apart from Taylor *et al*'s (2002) view that for most call centre employees nothing changes and the future, like the present, is 'characterized by target-setting and Taylorism'. I then proceed to suggest a third possibility, in which the future experience of the majority of call centre employees is one of a job that is complex,

highly skilled and rewarding. This would not be because routinised and intensive call centres will have transformed their work organization and labour processes, but because this type of employment may be replaced by technology leading to a contraction in the call centre labour force that turns the current minority positive experience into the majority one of the future. In support of this proposition changes in the provision of directory enquiry services in the UK are explored, showing how the development of new channels of communication, changes to the competitive climate and new technologies have combined and may well continue to act to shrink the numbers involved in the delivery of this service by call centres.

In the final chapter I examine the extent to which this study has met the aims and objectives set out in Chapter 1. I draw together my findings and subsequent discussions so as to present the conclusions. Limitations in the applicability or generalisability of these conclusions are identified. Taking those limitations into account I explore the contribution made by the study to current and future research on call centres and the practical implications of its findings for call centre employers and their employees.

Chapter 11

Conclusions and recommendations

11.1 Introduction

This final chapter first examines the extent to which this study has met the overall aim and specific objectives set out in Chapter 1. In the second section, possible limitations in the extent to which the findings of the study may safely be generalized and in the degree of confidence that may be expressed with respect to the conclusions are discussed. This is followed by an overview of the main findings of chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 and the conclusions drawn from subsequent discussion of them. The third section explores the contributions made by the study to current understandings of call centre employment and identifies possible research directions. In the final section there is discussion of the practical implications of the study for call centre employers and their employees.

11.2 Aims and objectives reconsidered

The purpose of this section is to examine the extent to which the study has met its stated aims and objectives. Because of the way in which the objectives were expressed this is a question that, ultimately, only the reader can answer. However, providing a brief restatement of the aims and objectives and noting what information has been offered in fulfillment of these may assist in any evaluation. In chapter 1 it was stated that the main purpose of this study was 'to describe and examine the nature of work in telephone call centres'. The choice of data gathering methods used in this study was made in pursuance of this aim. The research strategy was designed so that the data gathered would enable the presentation of both broad overviews and richly detailed, textured descriptions of particular aspects of call centre employment.

Three more specific objectives were formulated in addition to the overall aim of the study. The first was to provide sufficient information to allow readers who might be unfamiliar with call centre work to locate it within a cognitive framework by comparing its features with other types of work. It was argued that this could be achieved by describing 'objective' features of call centre employment such as the physical environments in which it takes place, reward and remuneration systems, patterns of hours worked, and so on. The sparse literature relating to these areas was discussed in chapters 3 and 4, and new data arising from this study were provided in chapter 8. These data were also used in chapter 10 section 10.6, in the context of a possible explanation for

high levels of call centre voluntary turnover, to make explicit comparisons between call centre employment and forms of clerical employment.

The second specific objective was to provide the reader with descriptions of the subjective elements of call centre employment. It was suggested in chapter 1 that such information would '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 interview and participant observation data provided and discussed in chapters 7, 8 and 9 offer rich depictions of individuals' subjective experiences of facets of this type of work. In each of the chapters these were carefully integrated with data on 'objective' features of the work in order to 'flesh out' the detail further. In addition, a substantial part of chapter 10 was devoted to the discussion of elements of call centre employment, such as emotional labour, in which individuals' subjective experiences are central.

The last of the specific objectives identified in chapter 1 was to extract from the data the defining or characterizing elements of call centre work. The process of characterization began in chapter 1, with a proposed definition of a call centre that made explicit and implicit suggestions about what might characterize call centre employment. Those characteristics identified by other studies were discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 7 identified elements of recruitment and selection processes associated specifically with call centres and began to explore aspects of terms and conditions of employment. These were developed further in chapter 8, along with an exploration of subjective experiences that might be said to be characteristic of call centre work. The findings of the study in relation to the characteristics that define call centre employment were brought together and discussed in chapter 10, section 10.5 and summarized in Table 10.1.

11.3 Conclusions and limitations

Before restating the main findings and conclusions of this study, this section discusses issues relating to generalization of its findings and levels of confidence in its conclusions. These are seen to arise from the completeness, interpretation and numerical adequacy of datasets. Following on from these discussions, there is a summary of the findings of chapters 6 to 9, each of which dealt

with a different aspect of the study data. For convenience the findings are arranged in the orders suggested by chapter structures. Finally, the four main conclusions of the study are identified.

As with all research, there are aspects of this study that might be argued to limit the degree to which any findings may be generalized and the confidence that can be placed in any conclusions. The inherent strengths and weaknesses of the research methods employed were discussed in chapter 5. It should be recalled that survey, interview and participant observation methods all require researchers to make decisions as to what data are relevant and to be gathered and therefore which potentially relevant data are to be discarded. The 'completeness' of datasets may thus be thought to be an issue. The use of multiple methods over an extended period allows this issue to be addressed to some extent by enabling researchers to iteratively review data gathered and to revise and refine decisions on what data is to be collected subsequently.

Once data has been gathered, issues of interpretation become relevant. Many factors affect the sense that researchers make of their data. These range from the personality and biography of the individual researcher through to the linguistic idiosyncrasies of subjects and the modes of data capture. By definition qualitative data are more ambiguous than quantitative data and therefore require careful interpretation. More encompassing modes of data capture give researchers additional tools with which to interpret data. For example, the recording of interviews for subsequent transcription allows for the capture of qualities of speech such as tone, stress and inflexion in addition to what is said. Such additional information aids, and increases confidence in, the interpretation of meaning.

Finally, there are issues of quantity of data. From a positivist research perspective, quantity is at the heart of the ability to extrapolate findings from a sample to a population and to have confidence in any conclusions. From such a perspective most of the findings of this study are based on numerically inadequate datasets providing little statistical confidence and not allowing for generalization. Naturalist research perspectives are based on ontological assumptions of the inability of enquiry to converge on any single reality, and attach less importance to numerical issues than to the ability of the data to facilitate *verstehen*. From such a perspective attempts to generalize are equally flawed but for different reasons. This study was approached from a realist perspective that looked to combine quantitative and qualitative elements. It was not felt necessary

to have statistical confidence in the findings because the study was designed to be primarily exploratory in nature, suggesting possible connections or associations on the basis of data gathered that might later be empirically investigated. To use a legal analogy, the study operated on the basis that the weight of evidence required to have confidence in findings of possible relationships was the balance of probabilities rather than beyond all reasonable doubt. As such it seems reasonable to suggest inferences confidently, for example, from a relatively small number of interviews, when statistical confidence in what has been inferred would require a far larger sample.

Chapter 6 used secondary sources and content analyses and reviews of call centre related newspaper articles to examine and review the development, scale and scope of call centre employment in the UK, and the technologies commonly employed in them. Three main findings were drawn from the data presented in this chapter. First, that call centres form a significant and expanding new area of employment in the UK. Second, that computers and automating technologies have played and continue to play a major part in the development of call centres. Third, that in the UK public awareness of call centres, measured indirectly through numbers of related newspaper articles, did not mirror the use and spread of call centres indicated by other sources but that it can nevertheless be considered widespread.

In exploring issues of recruitment and selection in call centres, Chapter 7 combined data from a survey of Scottish recruitment and employment agencies, interviews with employment agency representatives, participant observation and interviews with current and former call centre employees. An examination of the data suggested three main findings. First, that a significant proportion of Scottish employment agencies, estimated to be between 10 and 33 percent, have some involvement with the supply of employees to call centres. Second, that based on the first conclusion and evidence from other studies, employment or recruitment agencies provide a common route into call centre employment. Third, that the selection processes used by agencies for call centre placements differ significantly from the 'classic trio' of face-to-face interview, application form and references used in selection processes more generally. Agencies tended to favour a combination of telephone interview, face-to-face interview and competence testing.

Chapter 8 sought to explore the nature and experience of work in telephone call centres using data from a review of articles in the 'subjective experience' subcategory of the content analysis of

selected newspaper articles, participant observation and interviews. Analysis of the data revealed seven main findings about the nature and experience of this type of employment. First, that call centre employment tends to involve working non-standard hours, with evening shifts being common. Second, that there were clear differences in the financial and other entitlements of permanent and temporary call centre employees carrying out identical tasks. Third, that call centre organization structures tend to follow a pattern in which entry-level employees are organized into teams, with a deputy team manager or supervisor and team manager, the latter reporting directly to senior management. Fourth, that most call centre employment involves a relatively high degree of task repetition. Fifth, that most call centre employees will experience abusive, aggressive or otherwise difficult interactions, irrespective of the nature of the service they provide. Sixth, that call centre work environments tend to be highly regulated, particularly in terms of opportunities for workplace socializing. Finally, that call centres tend to employ both electronic performance monitoring and direct personal supervision.

Chapter 9 examined the issue of employee turnover in call centres, employing data from participant observation and interviews. The findings were four-fold. First, that most call centres suffer from high levels of employee turnover, and in the majority of cases turnover is voluntary. Second, that the study provided no support for the realism hypothesis, one of the theoretical explanations advanced for the superiority of informal recruitment sources. Third, that shift arrangements may have relevance to employee turnover, in that employees who have the same shift start and finish times have more opportunities to strike up friendships than those on more individual shift patterns, leading to faster and stronger perceptions of social support and group cohesiveness. Fourth, that the Lee and Mitchell (1994) unfolding model of voluntary turnover might be usefully used as a starting point by call centre operators concerned to reduce turnover.

The main findings for each chapter were discussed in chapter 10. From these discussions four main conclusions have been drawn. The first of these is that it is possible to distinguish call centre employment from other types of employment according to a number of criteria. The recruitment and selection processes are likely to be different. Call centre employment is likely to be precursed by telephone as well as the more familiar face-to-face interviews and by competence testing. The skills demanded are likely to be different. Relatively few other occupations require the same combinations of communication and interaction management skills, and fewer still require these

skills to be performed constantly and without the assistance of non-verbal cues. The working environment is likely to be different. Performance monitoring, supervision and the regulation of workplace behaviour are all likely to be experienced as more intense than that in white-collar occupations more generally.

The second is that the specific characteristics of call centre employment may predispose employees to low levels of job-related well-being and to burnout, a negative state of distress arising from enduring work-related problems (Maslach, 1998). The study found that task characteristics common to most call centre employment were likely to have negative influences on job-related well-being (see Table 10.1, above). The findings of this study similarly suggested that specific characteristics of most call centre employment may result in mismatches in the four context-dependent person-job constructs used in the Maslach and Leiter (1997) person-job fit model of burnout, that is to say the workload, control, community and values constructs.

The third is that voluntary employee turnover in call centres may in part be linked to its relative novelty as an occupation. This study found, in common with others (for example, Watson *et al*, 2000) that relatively few call centre employees have had previous experience of call centre work. It has been suggested that realistic employment information plays a key role in applicant and employee decision-making processes. Over time individuals accumulate information about different jobs and occupations. Call centres have only been a significant form of employment in the UK in the last ten years or so. Because of this, the sources of call centre-related information from which job applicants can draw have been limited, and applications have been made on the basis of little or no knowledge of what is entailed. One of the more prominent possible sources of occupational information, television advertising, has consistently portrayed images of call centre work that are not supported by the findings of this study. As a result, individuals who might otherwise have self-selected out of the process may make decisions to apply for call centre employment based on inaccurate occupational information. In either case, the nature of call centre employment will become clear after starting work. Perceptions of a poor person-job fit may then lead to early organizational exit.

Finally, this study has concluded that the nature and as a result the experience of call centre employment is beginning to change and that this change is likely to become more pronounced over

time such that characteristics presently common to a small minority of call centre jobs will become the norm. This change will be primarily as a result of the replacement of employees responding to simple, highly routinized, low value customer interactions with automated systems able to provide the same service. Automation will be the dominant organizational response to economic imperatives as competitive pressures increase, as automated systems become more sophisticated and more affordable and as labour costs rise. Contractions in lower-grade, quantity-focused call centre employment are likely to be ameliorated by growth in more demanding and rewarding quality-focused call centre work, but the extent to which the latter will offset the former is difficult to assess. As well as indicating the spread of call centre use across sectors and industries, the newspaper article analysis that formed part of this study found many examples of call centres being used to provide new services. It may be that as call centres begin to incorporate other communications media further opportunities for novel applications will present themselves.

11.4 Contributions to research

Previous studies related to aspects of call centre employment were reviewed in chapters 3 and 4. This study adds to that body of research by providing an account that combines qualitative and quantitative data to describe and discuss the nature and experience of call centre employment. Two of the research methods used, a content analysis of newspaper articles and covert participant observation, do not appear to have been used previously in this research setting. Both add substantially to the depth and credibility of the study. The content analysis and review of newspaper articles provides a more detailed account of the development of call centres in the UK than that generally found in call centre studies, where call centre development is often not addressed and, implicitly, knowledge of it is assumed. The relative paucity of research on call centres would suggest that such an assumption is invalid. The ethical and pragmatic arguments for the use of covert methods were explored in the study. These contribute to wider debates on the acceptability of different research methods in particular settings. The use of covert participant observation made a number of important contributions to the study. It revealed and removed the preconceptions of the author in a way that other research methods would not have been able to do. It provided an invaluable familiarity with call centre environments and tasks that informed and gave credibility to the author's subsequent interpretations of the experiences of others. It helped to uncover aspects of the experience of call centre employment such as the depersonalization of

callers in the pursuit of quantitative performance targets that might not have been revealed by other data gathering methods.

This study looks at aspects of call centre employment from recruitment through to organizational exit. In retrospect this was perhaps an ambitious project and some aspects, for example issues of performance monitoring and employee surveillance, have not received sustained attention. Particular contributions have, however, been made to the understanding of other aspects. For example, questions of call centre recruitment and selection practices seem not to have been explored extensively prior to this study. Further research would be required to confirm that the same methods are used by call centre employers recruiting directly, but the finding of this study that employment agencies generally use combinations of telephone and face-to-face interviews and competence testing to select applicants for call centre vacancies is significant. This combination of selection techniques serves to differentiate call centre work from other forms of employment in a way not suggested in other published studies. Relatively few studies have investigated telephone interviewing as an employee selection method, and this finding suggests a need for further research in this area, particularly in terms of possible vocal discrimination issues since these do not seem to have been addressed as yet.

There is an extensive body of work on voluntary employee turnover generally, and a number of studies have discussed such turnover in relation to call centre employment. The contribution of this study is two-fold. First, it provides a comparative analysis of the ability of different individual level models of the turnover process to explain a small sample of cases of call centre voluntary employee turnover. One model, the Lee and Mitchell (1994) unfolding model of voluntary turnover, was found by this preliminary analysis to offer possibilities for understanding turnover at the individual level, and further research was recommended. The second contribution of this study to turnover research is to offer a novel explanation for voluntary employee turnover specific to call centres and premised on a lack of realistic job information available to applicants. Further work is required to validate aspects of the application, which may offer insights on how to reduce future call centre employee turnover.

Finally, this study contributes to debates about the nature of call centre work in the future. Unlike other studies, the study refers to the specific example of UK directory enquiries as evidence of the

trend suggested. Whilst one swallow does not make a summer, the inferences drawn from this example will stimulate further debate on the likely directions of future developments in call centre employment.

11.5 Practical implications

Particular findings and conclusions of this study have important implications for call centre employers and for their employees. Looking first at the implications for employers, the finding detailed in chapter 7 that employment agencies, through which many call centre employees are recruited, tend to rely on telephone interviews as a primary selection filter may adversely affect recruitment. There is evidence to suggest that many candidates perform less well in telephone interviews than in face-to-face situations, possibly due to a lack of familiarity with this method. Otherwise suitable applicants are possibly being rejected as a result. The use of this technique also presents a danger of inadvertent discrimination by the interviewer on the basis of accent. Regional accent stereotypes may lead to suitable applicants being rejected. More seriously, there are linguistic characteristics associated with race, and it is possible that the rejection of applicants with distinguishable ethnic accents might leave the recruiter open to accusations of unlawful racial discrimination.

Two further recruitment-related points are suggested by the study. First, taking together the results of studies on job satisfaction of temporary employees and recruitment source effects it was suggested in section 10.4 that temporary, agency-recruited call centre employees would have a particularly high propensity to quit. Call centre employers concerned to reduce levels of voluntary employee turnover might wish to consider the extent to which they make use of such employees. Second, in chapter 8 it was suggested that many call centre employees perceive an apparent emphasis on quantity over quality of interaction that constrains their ability to fully act out their beliefs in what constitutes appropriate or in some cases adequate customer service. Other research suggests that call centre employers have policies of recruiting applicants with the highest levels of customer service orientation (Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Wallace *et al*, 2000). These however are the individuals most likely to feel frustrated by managerial emphases on efficiency that they perceived to be at the expense of the customer (Schneider, 1980). It may be that call centres are selecting the wrong applicants. Applicants who are adjudged to be less customer-oriented might perceive less

incongruity, and so be better able to accommodate cognitive inconsistencies generated as a result of the efforts of call centre managements to balance competing demands of quality and quantity of service.

Related to both turnover and recruitment, the study offered a possible explanation for voluntary call centre employee turnover based on the availability of realistic job information. Employers will be able to do little about the stereotypes of call centre employment generated by sources such as television advertising. They are however able to exercise far greater control over the provision of job-related information to applicants. The conclusion of this study is that increasing the provision of realistic job information would cause less well suited applicants to self-select out of the recruitment process, leaving a pool of more suited applicants in terms of person-job fit and as a result less likely to quit their employment.

The findings of this study in relation to the nature and experience of call centre employment will come as no great surprise to current call centre employees. It is possible that they will help to raise awareness of the particular skills demanded by call centre jobs. It might be that in differentiating it from other types of employment whilst identifying common ground in the ways in which it is experienced, the study stimulates what Baldry *et al* (2000) consider to be undeveloped perceptions of occupational community among call centre employees. These findings are less significant to employees than the possibility that their jobs are under threat from automating technologies. This will be of less concern to the passers through and bill payers who make up over 40 percent of call centre workforces (Ainsley, 2001) than to the remaining careerists and foot soldiers. For some, such as Catriona whose story is one of those told in this study, it may even be a relief, a way out of employment from which she had felt unable to liberate herself because of a perceived dependency on the income it provided. But for those who see their longer-term job and career prospects bound up in call centres, automation ought to be a concern. The nature of the call centre employment that remains will be different, and those who wish to remain in it will need to consider what those differences will mean in terms of the skills that will be demanded. More complex and demanding tasks may command higher pay, but these changes might also attract a wider pool of applicants against whom present call centre employees would have to compete.

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