RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Making, re-making, Managing and Controlling Customer Service Agents: Brownfield and Greenfield Call Centre Sites

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ABSTRACT

Taking a page from historical studies, where it has been argued that occupations are socially constructed through material practices, this article examines the making of customer service agents in contemporary call centres, where HRM plays a particularly important role in the process. Call centres present important differences from the work environments that have been examined by classical industrial sociology and other disciplines. As an information industry, they are much more mobile than traditional work sites; they can be located just about anywhere that fibre optic cable can reach. Some call centres are transformed processing centres where workforces have had to be re-trained as customer service representatives, (CSRs), while other call centres are totally new ' greenfield sites'. This article analyses the implications of transforming a previously existing service centre into a call centre as compared to constructing a new ' green field' facility, using a comparative study of two call centre branches. The main focus is on the reception that HR initiatives are accorded in a brownfield and greenfield call centre site by the CSRs who staff the phones and computers.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, call centres were a rarity. Few people had heard of them, or would have even recognised the term. Now, call centre customer service representatives (CSRs) embody one of the fastest growing occupations in the service/information economy. In Australia, practically one half of all new private sector job creation in 1999 was accounted for by call centre CSRs, (ACTU, n.d.), while it is estimated that somewhere between 80,000 and 160,000 Australian workers are employed as call centre phone agents, (Meredith, 1999; URCOT, 2000). Growth elsewhere has been every bit as spectacular. In Sweden, a country known for its ' high performance work practices', 35,000 CSRs are currently employed, with government predictions of 100,000 employees in call centre operations by 2003, (Norling, 2001). Current estimates of 100,000 call centre workers have been made for Germany (Michel, 2001), while for Europe as a whole it is

thought that half a million customer service agents are currently working, of which 250,000 are located in the UK alone, (Richardson et al, 2000). These numbers are estimated to expand to 1.8 million call centre employees across Europe by sometime in 2002, (Taylor & Bain, 2001). While the rate of this employment growth will inevitably slow down in specific national economies, it is also the case that new regions are just beginning to develop a significant, global call centre industry, (e.g. India) and we can expect to see both new investment and the relocation of some existing facilities.

Up to now, research on call centres has principally focused on the work processes, as well as attendant forms of supervision. Opinion is divided between those who have seen in call centres a 'panoptic' nightmare, (Fernie & Metcalf, 1998; Menzies, 1996), a post-bureaucratic opportunity (Frenkel et al, 1998, 1999), or an extension of Tayloristic labour processes to a reorganised service industry (Taylor & Bain, 1999, 2000, 2001; Callaghan & Thompson, 2001). These debates represent a fruitful first step in identifying what kind of organisations call centres are - a new departure in employment relationships or an extension of past patterns to new domains.

This paper takes a somewhat different approach, centring on the construction, or making of CSRs. As detailed below, call centres are not only information rich workplaces they are also HR intensive job sites in, which HR managerial practices assume a major role in the construction of this new occupational category - the CSR. This paper sets out to analyse this process in greater detail, examining both current HR practices in call centres, and just as critically, the meanings that CSRs attach to them. It also explores two options that are open to managers in the construction of call centres, those being the transformation of existing work sites and their labour forces into call centres and CSRs, or the creation of entirely new facilities and workforces.

Readers may detect an affinity between part of the title chosen for this paper and a work set in a different time, with perhaps unfamiliar referents. The parallel is intentional. The text referred to is Edward Thompson's much-celebrated Making of the English Working Class and a subsequent paper that specifically examined the growth of time discipline amongst an emergent class of wage earners (Thompson, 1966, 1967). In the first paragraph of his work, Thompson explains his own choice of title;

> Making, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. … it is an historical phenomenon. (Thompson, 1966:p.9).

Subsequently, Thompson goes on to relate the tale of this *making*. Part of the story, which is explicitly picked up in his ensuing article examines one aspect of the evolution of modern management, the instilling of a sense of time discipline amongst those who are being managed. The displacement of an independent and autonomous task orientation towards work with a managed time orientation, is one of the great transformations of modern history, effected by those who managed and who just happened to have a "greater sense of time thrift", but not without some appeal to the managed, (Thompson, 1967:69-70, 78, 80). "The stress of the transition falls upon the whole culture: resistance to change and assent to change arise from the whole culture." (Thompson:80). We are given sense of what this new discipline of time is like in Thompson's description of the appointment of a monitor of time accounts at one iron working manufactory in central England:

> The Monitor and Warden of the Mill were ordered to keep for each day employee a time-sheet, entered to the minute, with 'Come' and 'Run'. … The Warden of the Mill was ordered to keep the watch "so locked up that it may not be in the power of any person to alter the same." … His book of the account of time was to be delivered in every Tuesday (Thompson, 1967:82)

Parallels to contemporary time accounting in call centres, with their individual call handling data may readily come to mind, but that is to get ahead of ourselves. The point here is Thompson's

emphasis on the gradual inurement of workforces to the new discipline of manufacturing time through a combination of;

- supervision ... fines; bells and clocks; money incentives;
- preaching' s and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and
- sports. (ibid:90).

The literal analogy here should not, however, be overemphasised, as in modem call centres the " fires" are gone, the " supervision" remains " preaching" has become the more secular culture, and management may actively promote a fun and games atmosphere. Another historian of British capitalism reminds us that such makings are never and can never be one off events, that indeed classes, occupations, and work groups are continually being re-made and on occasion unmade, (Hobsbawm, 1971, 1989). Thus, even as a wage-earning workforce was being created, it was continually being stratified into elite new occupations, into semiskilled machine operatives and into displaced, impoverished strata.

Today, with the information revolution, we again witness the unmaking of older occupations and the making of new. Customer service representatives who staff telephones and computers are one such occupation. There are important novelties, however. As implied above, call centres are highly mobile operations, much less fixed to place than Thompson' s iron manufactory. Not only do locational decisions loom large in the establishment of call centres, but managers are often confronted with the decision of whether to transform an existing service operation into a call centre, or begin anew with the establishment of a ' greenfield' site. Such a decision is intimately connected to strategies of making as opposed to re-making a workforce. Also related to this is the replacement of Thompson' s ' monitor of time' with today' s HR manager. While still principally concerned with the efficient deployment of resources, contemporary HR practice goes far beyond employee time accountability. In other words, much less is left to chance in either the making or remaking of a CSR.

The remainder of this paper examines these issues in greater detail. After outlining the work environment of the call centre setting, an investigation at one call centre with two sites is undertaken. One of these facilities is a converted " brownfield" operation; the other is a new " greenfield" facility. The results of a study that entailed extensive field observation by the author, as well as responses to an employee survey are reported. The main interest lies in observing how two workforces, one that includes a seasoned work crew and the other, a new work force, responded to the working environment and HR initiatives of a contemporary call centre. This ought to shed new light on both the making and remaking strategies that contemporary HR call centre managers are engaged in.

Contemporary Call Centers

A number of novel features underline call centre growth. First, call centres represent an effort to streamline service delivery and marketing activity in a globalising economy. Thus, instead of operators answering phones and directing calls to specific functional areas for responses, queries or calls are automatically distributed to waiting CSRs who are expected to provide a broad reference service. Call centres are thus a prime example of so-called organisational flattening, whereby functional departmental silos are replaced with multi-skilled, networked teams, (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994; Castells, 1996). In turn, call centres themselves are exceedingly flat organisations, usually with only three or four occupational or job categories.

In addition to responding to inbound telephone queries, some call centres feature outbound marketing capabilities. In some of the more advanced examples, automatic or predictive dialling technologies are used to perform the same functions as the automatic call distribution systems of the inbound centres — delivering potential calls and clients to the CSRs as quickly as possible. Such outbound telemarketing centres may exist as stand alone operations or may be combined with

inbound service activity either in separate work teams, or in ʻblendedʼ work. In the latter case, CSRs are ʻmultiskilledʼ to perform both inbound and outbound activities. Priority is given to responding to inbound queries, but when traffic volume is less than peak, unoccupied CSRs are automatically switched over to outbound, telemarketing functions. Currently inbound centres constitute the mainstay of call centre activity in Australia and elsewhere (ACTU, n.d:8).

As alluded to in the preceding paragraph, call centres are not based upon a single technological innovation, but rather make use of a number of old and new technologies. This has been described this as a marriage of silicon and glass, personal computer and fibre optic cable, (Russell, 2001). Added to this list are automatic call distribution systems (ACDs), computer monitoring and display capabilities and in some outbound centres, predictive dialling technology. ACD technology automatically distributes calls to available agents who are logged into the system but not already on a call. Personal lights on the telephones, and overhead neon displays inform CSRs that a call is waiting to be answered. Computer generated data provides real time information on agent performance, (and motivation to respond to waiting calls), including statistics on availability, (time logged into the system), numbers of calls taken, average length of call, and total call handling time.

Typically in call centres, incoming calls are distributed to available agents who mediate flows of information with the public through their access to online sources of data. This may take the form of relaying information to callers in response to inbound queries, or in more complex relationships, simultaneously creating or adding new information about callers to data files. The same suite of technology then is not only an information tool that is used by CSRs in responding to incoming queries, but also a source of information about agent work effort and a manufactured database that can be ʻminedʼ by CSRs as part of their work routine. In theory at least, this technology could deliver a winning ʻtrifectaʼ for employers, a tool that provides real time information for CSRs, *on* CSRs and on consumers. In this respect, the capacities of call centre technology potentially fulfil one of Thompsonʼs dimensions of greater time accountability — namely supervision. Generating real time data on agent call handling times, their availability for work and such components of call handling as ʻprepʼ time, ʻtalk timeʼ and ʻwrapʼ time, continuous electronic monitoring supplements the necessarily ad hoc nature of human supervision.

The third novel element of call centre work environments coincides with their HR intensive activities. Cultural formation is now led by HR aligned practice. Recall that for Thompson, the making of a new wage earning class not only entailed "money incentives; preaching and schooling", but also "the suppression of fairs and sports" or anything else that was judged to distract from the formation of a work time orientation. In the contemporary call centre, games, competitions and other social events are not only encouraged, but are even promoted through HR inspired programmes that entail turning the workplace into a venue for the organisation of ʻfun and gamesʼ, alongside the expenditure of work-effort (Alferoff & Knights, 2001). No longer are workplace cultures left to arise organically within work groups, but rather their creation has become a major component of managerial activity (Russell, 2002). Thus, call centres often present a unique social life, featuring elaborate rewards and recognition programs, theme days, individual and team based games and contests, and finally industry wide olympic-style competitions and awards.

If these features are aggregated — the flat organisational structures of call centres that both promote and mirror broader de-layering tendencies in work organisation, the informatting technologies of fibre optic telephony and computing, and the vigorous HR activity that is aimed at manufacturing a culture of consent — a fourth notable characteristic emerges — the potential and real geographic mobility of call centre work sites. Given an adequate telephone infrastructure, something that can now be taken for granted in many societies, there is seemingly no ʻlogicalʼ locale for the production of call centre services. For example, in cases where local dialects or customer preference differs from the customer base, CSRs may be given specific voice and cultural training to mask these differences. Unlike much service provision, distance between the provider and the consumer is no longer an obstacle. As a result, there is growing competition amongst cities and regions within national states and between national economies for call centre employment

(Richardson et al, 2000; Richardson & Belt, 2001).

Of course, in one sense there is nothing terribly new in this. Urban systems, regions, and states have long competed for employment generating investment, domestically and from afar. When investment that represents new technologies, innovative organisational design, or a combination of the two is being placed, managers often have to decide whether to upgrade existing production facilities, or start afresh. We have seen this, for example, in the automobile industry and the transitions from Fordist to lean production regimes. In some instances, as old plant was being 'mothballed', new 'greenfield' production sites were being established, by the same companies, different enterprises, or joint ventures that involved both. Such processes entail the making of a new industry and industrial operations. In other cases, 'brownfield' sites are converted over to the new production regime, in the event of which an existing workforce is remade, with the intention of introducing new compatibilities with the reinvented organisation, (Katz, 1985; Fucini & Fucini, 1990; Kenney & Florida, 1993; Milkman, 1997; Womack et al, 1990). Even in older industries though, such as automotive manufacturing, we know little about the dynamics of making versus remaking strategies. Authors have reported upon successful outcomes in both instances, but this has been in mature industries that have been characterised by considerable employment uncertainty, conditions that are very different to those faced by call centres.

Owing to their size, recent growth and very real potential for mobility, call centres exaggerate these features of market driven industry. Yet the implications of making as opposed to remaking a customer service workforce have not really been explored. The following study considers these issues in greater detail by comparing call centre operation at License Bureau Brown and License Bureau Green, two call centre sites of one integrated operation.

License Bureau is the fictitious name given to the call centre that forms the basis of this study. It was one of a number of centres that agreed to take part in a larger and ongoing comparative study of employment practices in call. Although unique in a number of respects that will be discussed below, License Bureau presented one immediate feature of note that set it apart from other centres; dual work sites of equal size that did exactly the same work, but one housed in a brownfleld facility and the other in a newly designed greenfleld site.

The original site, designated License Bureau Brown (LBB) was set up as a call centre in 1996. Prior to that it had existed as the main site for state motor vehicle registration and driver licensing, located a short walk away from the CBD of a large Australian city. In that guise, LBB assumed the form of a processing centre dealing primarily with written correspondence. Telephone transactions were not the main order of business, and what telephone demand there was would have been routed through a central switchboard to individual departments. When the old processing centre was converted into a call centre, a certain number of staff 'came over' to the revamped operation.

Despite the novel technology of the automated call distribution system, and dedicated telephone agents, LBB had a 'history' and part of that was carried over and indeed magnified under the new conditions. Without putting too fine a point on it, LB had a reputation for poor service and it wasn't long before the new operation had garnered the reputation of being "possibly the worst call centre in Australia" (Interview 16 May 2001). This apparently referred to the absence of such HR protocols as the use of performance indicators, training plans, work teams, or call monitoring (Interview 20 March 2001). Rostering was also judged to be haphazard, bearing little relation to the volume of call demand. For example, a failure to make use of adequate rostering software meant that most of the CSR workforce would leave for lunch and tea breaks together, leaving phones unattended and very long queues of frustrated inbound callers. According to the current manager this led to a vicious spiral of poor service, ever present abuse from the public, demoralisadon, and finally, high (44 percent) turnover rates. In an interesting twist, according to the Manager of Operations, "the organisation had failed its workers" (Interview 22 May 2001).

Licensing Bureau Green (LBG) was first established a year after LBB in 1997 in a small regional town, better known for its coal mines and agricultural industry than for new information

employment. At start-up this centre only employed 11 CSRs. Two years later, the centre was moved to a new, showpiece building as employment levels continued to grow. At present each centre employs approximately the same number of CSRs — between 40 and 50 for a total workforce of close to one hundred. The employment status of workers at both centres is identical. Most (80 to 83 percent) work full time, and casual employment does not exist at either centre. This latter point in particular distinguishes LB from numerous other call centres that have normalised insecure, casual employment contracts in call centre work.

Apart from the same contractual basis for employment, the workforces who took part in a self-administered survey at the two sites exhibit (20 at LBB and 13 at LBG) some interesting differences. A greater proportion of LBG's workforce is made up of female CSRs than is the case at the urban LBB (75 percent), and a higher proportion of these workers are married, often to partners who are employed in the region's primary industries. Workers at LBG are generally younger, have worked with LB for a shorter period of time, and are much less likely to have had previous CSR experience than employees at LBB, as might be expected in a greenfield location. Somewhat atypically for call centres, union densities at both sites are quite high as 80 percent of the respondents at LBB and 75 percent at LBG indicated that they were currently union members.

Both centres deal only with inbound call traffic. Calls typically involve such matters as receiving and inputting changes of address for drivers, remedying lost vehicle registration forms, answering questions about registration and license fees, as well as recording changes in vehicle ownership registration and insurance details, and responding to queries about driver penalty (de-merit) points. Agents operate a software package that makes use of vehicle registration numbers to bring drivers' files up on their PCs. From there, information is relayed to the caller and requisite changes are made to the caller's file. Agents at LBB and LBG are both logged into the identical system operating in real time. Whether one connects with an agent at one centre or the other is, from the caller's perspective, simply a matter of chance. The automatic call distribution system that connects the two centres simply delivers calls to available agents whether they are at the greenfield or brownfield site.

Two full days were spent at LBG and several days at LBB and during part of this time, the researcher was 'double-jacked' with CSRs, listening to incoming calls and observing how they were handled. The agents did not define these periods as particularly busy, yet the pace of calls coming in was very steady on each of these occasions. Consequently, agents did not appear to be spending much time in 'waiting mode' before the next call was received. Serving as a constant reminder of the workflow are neon display boards that hang overhead the clusters of workstations. They provide continuous real time data for both centres on the number of agents currently logged into the system and available to take calls, the number of calls waiting, and the length of the longest call waiting.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT LICENSE BUREAU

Senior management at LB has given itself the mandate of 'professionalising' customer service at the centre. Providing better service is calculated to reduce the number of complaints and a less confrontational work environment is viewed as a healthier one. To achieve these goals the current management team has introduced the following features, which will be discussed in turn:

- Team based forms of work organisation
- Systematic training
- Call monitoring, coaching and appraisals
- Benchmarked targets
- Rewards and recognition

Readers will recognise many of the hallmarks of what passes for current HR best practice thinking

in these initiatives. As previously indicated, when LBB was first established, work teams were not commonplace. This was soon to change with the creation of specialised teams that corresponded to the three functional areas that the centre administered: vehicle registration, driver licensing and marine licensing. This structure, however, created new problems. Call volumes could fluctuate wildly between the teams, with the result that some agents would be continuously busy while others would often have time on their hands (Interview LBT Team Leader 22 May 2001). Apparently, vehicle registration enquiries outweighed driver licence queries by around five to one. Putting more staff on certain teams would not address a problem that was essentially one of 'line balance'. Additionally, if a caller had more than one question, lengthy transfers to other teams would have to be effected. In other words, in the first iteration work teams were merely appended onto an existing functional division of labour.

To resolve these issues, a new structure of 'multiskilled', non-specialist teams was introduced in 1999. Following an internal audit of staff strengths and weaknesses, all CSRs received several weeks of additional training to bring them up to proficiency in all areas of activity. At the same time, rapid response groups were created to deal with especially difficult calls, and product quizzes were made a part of weekly team activities. As a result, there is no longer a functional division of labour within the call centre; agents are expected to field all queries that come their way whether they are related to property registration or personal licensing. Team meetings are now held fortnightly and are chaired by rotating (non managerial) team captains that are nominated for three month stints by their co workers.

> These alterations lend the characteristically flat organisation structure to LB. Team leaders whose main roles include performance management and rostering, senior management consultants who are in charge of call monitoring and coaching and the CSR agents who staff the telephones, constitute the main occupational levels.

A consequence of the reconfigured, non-specialist work teams is the extensive training agenda that is in place at LB. All staff does advanced level community college call centre education on-site. In addition to standard type modules on telephone technique and directing conversation, agents receive training in such areas as dealing with stress, change management, cultural awareness, harassment, bullying and conflict resolution and new legislation that has a bearing on registration and licensing. Interviewees at both sites indicated that the greatest amount of training they received was classroom as opposed to on the job instruction and that a designated trainer rather than a 'buddy' most frequently provided it. Specific product knowledge was by far the most important topic covered. Respondents at the greenfleld site reported longer training periods than the brownfield workforce, with a modal figure of one month at the former, compared with two weeks at the latter. Additional, post intake training is recorded by almost the entire workforce at both greenfield and brownfield centres, and once again this is principally classroom based, trainer guided instruction. Workers at LBB continued to rate product knowledge as the most important aspect of their ongoing training, while LBG were evenly divided between viewing product knowledge and developing requisite social skills as the most important area covered by post induction training.

Part of the reform of work processes at LB involved the introduction of key performance indicators and the development of an infrastructure to give them potency. This is commonplace at most call centres, where agents time is subdivided and allotted between call preparation time (for outbound calls), 'talk time' and 'wrap' time, which is given over to post call customer file maintenance and other follow-up work that may be required to complete the telephone transaction (e.g. mailing or faxing forms). Bach of these components of total call handling time, plus login and agent availability time is plotted meticulously by the call centre's software and is available for worker and supervisory review. At the same time, however, LB differs from other centres in so far as it represents a 'cost centre' rather than a 'profit centre' for the state department of which it is a part. As a result, LB handles the whole issue of key performance indicators (KPIs) somewhat differently than is customary in the call centre industry. There are, for example, no specific call

handling time targets at LB (Interviews 16 May 2001, 10 August 2001). In this sense, quality of service is given priority over the quantity of calls taken per agent. Nonetheless, CSRs are expected to be logged in and available for 85 percent of their scheduled hours, leaving a remaining 15 percent of available time for wrap-up work (Interview LBB Team Leaders 5 April 2001). This equates to a minimum of 14 calls taken per hour, or 85 calls per day with a variance of approximately 5 calls per day. Thus, restructuring at the call centre entailed the introduction of KPIs that previously had been absent, but by industry standards, such targets could be viewed as somewhat ' softer' than the norm.

Targets, ' soft' or otherwise, are backed up both by individual agent' s ' production' statistics and by the monitoring of telephone calls. The former provides evidence that the CSR is doing their job, (i.e. is logged into the system and prepared to accept calls), while call monitoring is principally about quality control. As suggested elsewhere, although the surveillance of the computer is impressive, it is not infallible, (Russell, 2001, 2002; Knights & McCabe, 1998). Thus, in ongoing attempts to improve performance at LB, team leaders hold fortnightly, one-on-one sessions with their team members. On these occasions, staff KPIs is reviewed and if necessary performance improvement plans are instituted (Interview LBB Team Leader 1 May 2001).

Monitoring in call centres may assume two forms. First, side-by-side, (i.e. overt) monitoring may be used, where a supervisor ' double-jacks' with a CSR, and provides feedback on the call. Alternatively, remote or silent monitoring may be effected. In this instance, the agent may be unaware that her call is being listened to. Again, calls are evaluated against desired characteristics and feedback is provided to the employee. Prior to 1999, monitoring at LB was noteworthy by virtue of its absence. In other words, monitoring of neither type was practised. The union that represents a majority of the workforce at LB was opposed to it and remains firmly entrenched against the practice of silent monitoring. Owing to this steadfastness, management at LB has instituted a program of choice. While monitoring is non-negotiable, employees are given a choice as to whether they wish to be subject to visible, side-by-side, or to silent monitoring. This is the only call centre that I have encountered that offers its employees some voice into how their performance will be evaluated. This, however, is the result of a notable union presence at LB that preceded the founding of the call centre. Management at the centre is split on this issue. While some have become advocates of employee choice over the mode of monitoring, others, including the senior consultants who are responsible for monitoring, are less sanguine. In private, they expressed a preference for remote monitoring and a desire to bring it in, " one step at a time" (Interview Client Relations Consultant 1 May 2001).

In call centres the other side of the monitoring coin is the rewards and recognition program. At LB Rewards & Recognition, is defined as being " primarily designed as a coaching/training strategy ... rather than individual performance management" (Rewash and Recognition Programme, LB Call Centre). In turn this lends the whole discourse around coaching a facilitative, rather than a disciplinary ambience. Four teams at LBB and two at LBG compete for points that are awarded, (in order of importance), for meeting KPIs, obtaining call quality evaluation targets (same weight as KPI attainment), and correctly answering product knowledge quizzes. Recognition takes the form of inexpensive awards, (e.g. certificates of merit, coffee mugs, t-shirts, gift vouchers, and one hour go home early or come in late passes). Attached to this are quarterly refreshment and annual dinner celebrations. Clearly, these events are intended to produce results, such as less agent time in not ready mode and better quality service. The object is to benchmark against both best past performance and external industry standards. In terms of the former, as minimum KPIs are attained they are ratcheted up, (the " ladder effect"), until they conform to industry standards. Such benchmarking is also reinforced through entry into the annual industry awards for call centres. LB management was quite active on this score, putting the centre up in the designated areas of best call centre of over 50 employees and best new call centre of the year. In addition to providing benchmarks, participation in industry competitions was thought to serve an important team building function in its own right by providing common goals and a source of pride in the centre.

In addition to organising team competitions and entering into industry awards, social events were also a regular feature of working life at LB. High on the agenda here was the constitution of a ‘fun’/events committee and the delegation of organising ‘theme days’ to the different teams. The rationale for staging such events is laid out by management as follows:

> Given the constant nature of telephone work, industry research suggests that well planned motivational events can improve the overall Call Centre performance and provide a ‘fun’ and enjoyable workplace environment (Rewards and Recognition Programme).

The "manufacture" of fun, however, could itself be quite prescriptive. For example, at LB it was suggested that special events be held at least six times per year, (preferably bimonthly) and that "Photographs of each event should be taken to capture and record the ‘fun’ from the event and shared with both sites" (Ibid:9).

In summary, along a host of criteria, from the possibilities of computer and remote monitoring, to the ‘fun and games’ cultural programmes, call centres introduce a number of novel features to the study of the workplace that are absent from the more traditional research of labour historians and industrial sociologists. LB and its two branches, LBB and LBG, incorporate many of these dimensions and in so doing provide an instructive exemplar of current call centre work. But, there is still little information on how those who are inducted into this anthropologically strange environment view it. Having reviewed the management and human resource management functions at LB, the next section examines the responses of staff at LBB and LBG to their work environments. Similarities and differences in the experiences of greenfield and brownfield staff provide a specific focal point.

The implications of making versus remaking a CSR workforce

It is worth bearing in mind that in one sense we are dealing with one workforce in this study. CSRs, whether at LBB or LBG, receive identical training, cover the same agendas in team meetings, compete in the same rewards and recognition program and field the same queries as part of providing an inbound public service. In another sense though, two quite distinctive work groups staff the phones at LB. As previewed in the previous section, the workforces differ demographically, and more importantly they diverge in terms of either having a previous history with the employer or being novices at a new facility. As a result, different meanings may come to be attached to the common experiences that the two workforces share.

When it comes to evaluating customer service work at LB, both groups of workers in our survey reach similar conclusions. Both groups overwhelming find the work to be of a routine, repetitive nature. While the work pace is judged reasonable by majorities at both sites (58 percent and 61.5 percent at LBB and LBG respectively), it is also the case that approximately two thirds feel that they cannot vary the pace at which they work, and comparatively few (23-30 percent), feel that they have the autonomy to pace their own work. Evaluations of the objective features of the job then are quite similar at the greenfield and brownfield sites.

Corresponding to the constraining features of the work, few workers at either site consider their current positions to be the most skilled jobs that they have held, or believe that the work makes full use of their education or previous work experience. A greater proportion of the LBG greenfield workforce, however, appear to be satisfied with the opportunities that the work provides to use skills that have been acquired. Given that both the jobs and career mobility structures of the work sites are the same, this may owe more to the absence of alternative employment opportunities, especially for women, in the regional locale of LBG.

If perceptions of the actual work vary little at the two sites, responses to the HR culture and practices of call centre work evoke some intriguing differences. For example, their evaluation of training practices and their adequacy was split at LBB, with over a third (37 percent) of

respondents expressing the view that training was not adequate to carry out job expectations. At LBG there was unanimity that training was adequate to conduct the job. Thus, although training formats were identical between the two sites, oddly, the more experienced workforce was more critical of the training program and expected more.

LBB staff are also considerably more sceptical about the opportunities that team meetings offer to voice their opinion on workplace governance. At the brownfield site 39 percent of the respondents agreed that team meetings offer opportunities for genuine input, while almost two thirds, (61 percent) disagreed. These figures were almost opposite at LBG where 61.5 percent considered team meetings to be an important venue for expressing staff points of view, and 31 percent disagreed.

What makes these evaluations of team meetings all the more curious is that they are somewhat at variance with the field observations that were made at the two call centres by the researcher. Rotating team captains are supposed to chair the meetings. At LBB the senior consultants who are responsible for monitoring, training and staff development also assumed a major role in conducting the team meetings. Nevertheless, sessions appeared to be characterised by open discussion over health and safety issues, levels of technical support, prize preferences in the team competitions, preferred forms of monitoring and the rostering of work (LBB Team Meeting 1 May 2001). The latter two issues in particular generated open discussion at meetings and team members discussed options and managers appeared to listen attentively. In the context of these meetings for example, it was apparent that management realised that the existing rosters that changed each week and produced different TOIL days (Time Off In Lieu) were unsatisfactory from the staff perspective. Meanwhile, management's efforts to come up with a more satisfactory rostering schedule had not met with approval. As a result, the teams were charged with putting forward new alternative rosters that would be voted upon across the two call centre sites to resolve the issue.

What is instructive about this is that when the same rostering issue was raised at team meetings at LBG, there was no discussion or debate and the team leader simply announced that a new three month roster would be posted and staff should consult it (LBG Team Meeting 1 May 2001). The different handling of the rostering issue at LBB and LBG was more generally symptomatic of the different ' feel' that team meetings had at the two sites. At LBG, the meetings were ' run' by the team leader and were occupied by items that focused, first and foremost, on ' the needs of the business', followed by information pertaining to decisions that the team leader had already taken (e.g. expenditure of discretionary funds) and activities that boosted the centre's culture, (e.g. review of dress code and team values). Nevertheless, a greater proportion of CSRs at LBG considered that team meetings were more consultative than did their counterparts at LBB.

Perhaps this variance is best explained by two factors that were mentioned in passing during the fieldwork phase of the study. First, workers at LBB were initially not receptive to moving into a team based organisational format (Interview, Director Service Delivery 20 March 2001). Work teams were something that had to be ' sold' to the staff at LBB and were initially met with scepticism. This was not the case at LBG, where work teams were part of the operation from day one. Secondly, the team leader at LBG had been there since the centre opened. The researcher was reminded on several occasions that a ' high' trust environment revolved around her leadership. But this also seemed to lend a more ' paternal' style to local management issues at LBG.

These issues are more starkly revealed around employee attitudes towards silent call monitoring. Close to half of the respondent workforce at LBB (45 percent) indicated that they were bothered by the practice of silent monitoring, while another 20 percent were uncertain how they felt about it. Just over one third of the LBB respondents indicated an indifference towards the practice. At LBG, on the other hand, two thirds of respondents said they were unconcerned with remote monitoring and only a quarter expressed a concern with the practice. This time survey results were dramatically reinforced in team meeting discussions. CSRs at LBG preferred remote monitoring to side-by-side observations, and as a result there was far less of the latter being conducted at LBG. At LBB on the other hand, employees in large numbers remained steadfastly opposed to silent monitoring, and consequently most call observation was conducted by means of ' double jacking' at this facility. Two reasons were given for this preference. First, it was stated that

feedback from the senior consultants was often much more timely when ' double jacking' was in effect in call assessments. Secondly, as CSRs confided, with remote monitoring one could never be sure of who was conducting the assessment. Obviously, this was an issue for LBB workers, whereas it was not a point of concern at LBG.

Different perceptions of HR initiatives filter into other aspects of working at LB. As we have seen, LB has followed other call centres in creating team based competitions for nominal awards and prizes. At this centre both teams and individuals are eligible to win such recognition. Opinion on these practices is divided at the greenfield centre — 42 percent of survey respondents indicated that they viewed such exercises positively, one third did not like them, and the remaining 25 percent were indifferent to managerially organised competitions. This was still far more positive than the reception accorded these practices at LBB. There, not a single respondent found such practices to be conducive to making the workplace more fun and enjoyable. Rather opinion was split exactly down the middle (44 and 44 percent) between dislike and indifference.

Hostility to turning work into a competition was also manifested in other venues at LBB. Interestingly, at a training session on workplace bullying and harassment the topic was raised by staff; who noted that Rewards and Recognition competitions could set workers against one another (Training Seminar 16 May 2001). Similar sentiments were presented to management by the centre's shop steward in a joint union/management committee meeting (30 July 2001). There it was reported that some workers viewed the Rewards and Recognition Program as ' childish', while the union's position was that jobs ought to be rewarded in full, without recourse to individual and team rewards. Managers were uncomprehending of these viewpoints, instead arguing that such activities promoted motivation to attain existing benchmarks. More cynically, it was also suggested that LBG teams were perennial winners in the call centre competitions and that this may have prejudiced LBB staff against them. If true, this observation provides an interesting bit of anecdotal information on performance at the two sites.

The same outlook applied to call centre activities more generally. Overwhelmingly, LBB workers did not consider the social aspect of the call centre an important feature of their work. Only one in nine respondents rated managerially organised social events such as theme days, as important to them, a far cry from the 50 percent at LBG who stated that they were an important aspect of working life at the centre.

The pool of respondents at LBB and LBG is not large enough to draw statistically significant conclusions in a formal sense. All the same, such results as we have, in tandem with the field observations, point in a consistent direction. To the extent that differences between the two LB workforces are manifest, a greater proportion of CSRs at the greenfield site express satisfaction with the HR agenda and are willing to play along with it. Workers at LBG appear to be willing to extend management a ' trust credit' and as long as this is not broken, they approach the employment relationship with a fair amount of altruism. From the research findings it is apparent that the greenfield agents are more likely to attach importance to customer satisfaction and positive acknowledgement from managers as sources of job satisfaction. They are more likely to consult with their team leaders for assistance on the job. And reportedly, they are more likely to derive (small) benefits from the team competitions that are supposed to foster an ethic of public service. Finally, the survey reveals that LBG employees would be mote inclined to extend extra work effort to help the operation out in periods of extraordinary demand, for example by agreeing to work extra hours without receiving overtime pay.

Workers at LBB, on the other hand, are more critical of the new order. Many of them have seen poor managers come and go and even rise up the corporate ladder. They are more likely to cast a sceptical eye towards the new HR climate of games and participation. They are also more likely to attach greater importance to relations with co workers vis-à-vis management, and to value ' voice' and participation through their union and in team meetings. In short, the brownfield staff exhibits greater reluctance to " buy" into the new HR order that is associated with call centre management.

Given this, we should not over state the differences. As previously noted, workers at both LBB and LBG evaluate the objective features of call centre work in very similar ways. Workers in about equally large proportions (90-100 percent) expressed a willingness to share their knowledge of best practices with management. In almost identical proportions they attached the same levels of middle range importance to their individual call statistics. And overwhelming, coaching was defined as an adjunct to training rather than a disciplinary event at both centres.

CONCLUSIONS

Customer service agents at LBB and LBG not only share a good deal in common, but respond to the challenges of call centre employment in similar fashion. What differences there are though do seem to constitute a pattern that should not be minimised. Employees at the brownfleld site are less likely to take for granted the new HR practices associated with the call centre industry. Our results indicate that they are more likely to find silent monitoring and the continuous display of real time ' production' data on neon boards stress inducing. They are less likely to find gratification in the social life that manager's construct around call centre work. Finally, and importantly, the brownfleld workers in this study may be somewhat less inclined to extend extra work effort to help the operation out.

One implication of this paper is that call centres such as LB aim for the creation of a strong management guided culture in order to bolster the norms of total customer care. Necessarily, this is an open ideal. Ongoing disquiet at LB regarding the amounts of time CSRs spend in ' not available mode', or concerns pertaining to the time taken to complete post call ' wrap-up' work serve to underscore this point, as does the continuous benchmarking of KPIs. Nevertheless, managers may consider that instituting a unitary HR culture is more efficiently executed at a greenfleld site, especially in cases such as this where both union densities and employment security are comparably high. Results such as the ones discussed in this paper go some way in explaining preferences for establishing new regional greenfield sites in the burgeoning call centre industry. Making a CSR workforce and making it accountable for the expenditure of time, may, in the short run, appear a less daunting challenge than making over or remaking a more seasoned service workforce.

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