Towards Telework in Call Centres

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to provide a general overview of work in call centres.

Call centres are designed as 'operations in which a managed group of people spends most of their time doing business by phone, usually working in a computer-supported environment'.

The basic tenet is that work in call centres has to be conceptualised in terms of distributed knowledge. This means that only part of the knowledge needed to carry out any transaction is (or rather has to be) in the mind of the operator, and important knowledge may be distributed among colleagues in the organisation, available and accessible cognitive artefacts in the work environment, and clients.

Operators in call centres are knowledge workers, because they carry out any activity by manipulating internal and external knowledge.

The report first illustrates the evolution of technologies, functions and competencies.

There have been four phases in the evolution of call centres since the first one was opened.

The original call centre in the 1960s was a claims office with a toll-free phone line that answered standard requests. Agents had limited knowledge and basic communication skills.

Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, claim factories were served by Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems that handled a large number of mostly repetitive requests. Operators had limited, specialist knowledge and a few restricted communication skills; stress was high and the agent had to cope with a quantitative cognitive workload.

During the 1990s, the call centre became a communication node dedicated to customised interactions, in which the process of communication was dynamic and long-lasting, and whose objective was customer care and retention. Operators were supported by the integration of computer and telecommunication technologies (CTI), and had good communication skills.

The virtual call centre and selling node will be next: it combines previous ACD, CTI and new Interactive Voice Responder (IVR) technologies with web-based communication, and takes the form of a learning, marketing, negotiating and selling node. The Web-Enabled Call Centre (WECC) evolves in the virtual call centre, where customers are mainly web-site visitors, and incorporates access to agents via call-back, voice-over Internet protocol (VoIP) and text chat. It is predicted that by 2004, WECCs will be central to organisations (Intranet), across supply chains (Extranet), and with the online population (Internet).

The report then considers people in call centres.

Call centres are among the most rapidly growing forms of employment. In Europe, 1.3% of the total European workforce (i.e. 2m people) will be employed in the call centres by 2002. North European countries have the highest call centre
concentration with southern Europe falling far behind; the figures for eastern Asia and Australia are very similar, and in the USA, more than 5m of new jobs have been created in this sector since 1990. On average, call centres are growing at something like 30-35% per annum in terms of call volumes, and 20-25% per annum in terms of the number of agents. According to some estimates, 1 in 20 jobs in the USA nowadays are in call centres, and by the year 2005 that figure may have risen to 1 in 7.

However, the crucial point is not the number of people in call centres, but the fact that people are critical to their success.

Research and surveys alike confirm that human resources form the strategic factor that makes all the difference in managing the customer relationship. The customer-focused culture is the main asset when seeking competitiveness and getting the most out of the customer relation. Technology can support, but never replace, human resources skilled in communications, problem-solving and caring.

Although companies are aware of the central role of human resources, they seldom pay the necessary attention to the training, retention and career development of agents. All surveys of call centres in EU member states reveal symptoms of organisational disease including high turnover, workload and stress.

Notwithstanding suggestions for improving human resources management, some paradoxes are apparent:

- agents work alone in their relationship with clients, and technology and organisation do not adequately support the communication flow
- standards of education are usually high, but they are managed according to the paradigm of the traditional ‘blue collar’ industrial worker; moreover, agents do not possess an integrated view of the process: about the half of them do not even know the objective of the call centre they work for
- call centres themselves are isolated from the rest of the organisation, and there is little contact with the sales and marketing departments

There is a need for to integrate and develop the technology, organisation, performance, jobs and quality of work, and for people to be seen as the hub that allows the call centre to become a learning organisation.

This is followed by a report on data and trends on people and call centres in the EU: the report focuses on key features in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK. Reference is also made to the growth of pan-European multi-lingual call centres in some European countries.

The report also examines issues to be tackled in the near future:

- **Work organisation**: call centres are usually designed on the model of a factory. Given the evolution of call centres, work organisation should support
collaborative forms and tools including the development and sharing of organisational memories

- **Training**: call centres are the largest work group with no training programme. Training and retraining packages are both unusual and too general

- **Career development**: since call centres are 'flat' organisations, vocational development is rare, and has consisted so far of considerable horizontal mobility from one organisation to another. Such mobility masks the lack of a career development path, and of intra-organisational mobility

- **Health**: stress symptoms are frequent because people have no experience of the work, and no cognitive or emotional tools for coping with strains and tension

- **Monitoring and surveillance**: the technology in use is much the same throughout the world, and includes a facility for continuous monitoring of performance. The mechanisms of surveillance and monitoring contribute to stress, and there are also legal and ethical factors involved

- **Localisation**: call centres are usually located where a skilled workforce is available at low cost because of the rate of unemployment or the need to enter (students) or re-enter (women) the labour market. This may reduce flexibility in the medium term

- **Industrial relations**: concrete experience of developing a local and global framework for industrial relations has been building up over the last few years. Workers in the call centres all over the world raise identical issues of pay and benefits, stress, working time and workload, equal opportunities and training, harassment at work, poor working environment and equipment, respect and proper consultation, and social benefits

In conclusion, call centres and teleworking have reached a cross-over point. Since the former is now becoming 'virtual', it will now enter the phase of ‘networked distance labour’ and share the same socio-economic context. Steps must therefore be taken to open up a new phase of industrial relations in which more active attention is paid to individual workers.

For the trade unions, this means a sensitive approach to differences in individuals, areas and sectors, and a network-like organisational structure designed to capture both the few common features and the many unique, not to say personalised, dimensions of the workforce. For this purpose, the most useful tool will be a credible scenario with a few shared rules, and used as a concrete support to specify attainable objectives within the ‘eEurope 2002 Action Plan'.
1. INTRODUCTION

Call centres may be defined as 'physical or virtual operations in which a managed group of people spend most of their time doing business by telephone, usually working in a computer-automated environment' (Merchant, 1998).

People directly involved in these operations may be described in many ways, for example as telephone agents, telephone operators, telephone communicators, telephone sales representatives (TSRs), customer service representatives (CSRs), customer consultants, champions and assistants. They are usually simply called 'agents', that is to say 'people working within a call centre whose main job is to handle incoming and/or outgoing telephone calls'.

As we shall see, such definitions capture only some of the generic components of operations in call centres, and of agents' work. Other definitions exist, but they all reflect particular types of call centre. These days, it is most likely that call centres will be the organisational nodes controlling relationships with customers. Agents are knowledge workers who manipulate internal and external knowledge (this may be distributed among colleagues, it may be organisation itself, cognitive artefacts in the work environment, or clients) to solve often unexpected problems and control long-lasting dynamic relationships and processes.

However, when discussing call centres, there are key quantitative dimensions that immediately demand attention.

The statistics are impressive: the number of call centres is due to double in three years (from 9700 at the end of 1999 to 18,500 by the end of 2002) (Datamonitor, 1997).

Call centres constitute a vast economic phenomenon. Authoritative research estimates that the overall market for call centre technology and services will grow to about $30bn by 2004, from around $7.1bn at the end of 1999. If one includes infrastructure (for example, computer systems and buildings), the total forecast needs to be at least doubled (Bradshaw, Wood and Delaney, 1999). The overall European call centre market is growing at a rate of 40%.

Call centres are a vast social phenomenon. They constitute one of the most rapidly growing forms of employment: according to Datamonitor, about 1.3% of the total European workforce will be employed in call centres by around 2003, and the industry has accounted for as much as 37% net of all new jobs in Europe over the past three years. The figures in East Asia and Australia are very similar, and in the USA, more than 5m new jobs have been created in this sector since 1990. According to some estimates, 1 in 20 jobs in the USA are now in call centres; by the year 2005, that figure may have risen to 1 in 7.

Other sources give different figures, but there is no doubt that the number of call centres, and of the people employed in them, is increasing. On average, the number of call centres is increasing by approximately 30-35% per annum in terms of call volumes, and by 20-25% per annum in terms of the number of agents.
2. **EVOLUTION OF TECHNOLOGIES, FUNCTIONS AND COMPETENCIES**

The numbers are impressive, and they speak for themselves, but they conceal the fact that not all call centres are the same at the present time, even though they all belong to a complex technological, economic and social phenomenon that started in the 1960s. The phenomenon can be divided in phases according to the technology used, the functions carried out, the aims pursued, and the competencies required by people working in them.

The peculiar characteristics of the various phases in the evolutionary process of these systems of distant relationships with clients have not passed away. Indeed, the original phases of the evolution may still be found in many up-to-date call centres, and other call centres within a given area boast differential evolutionary characteristics.

It may be useful for descriptive purposes to single out the main phases in the evolution of call centres as a function of technologies used, aims pursued and competencies required.

2.1 **The claim office**

The first type of call centre was established in the late 1960s when a US Federal Judge ordered the Ford Motor Company to establish a 'free phone line' to facilitate the recall of faulty cars. To comply with this obligation, AT&T and Ford developed the '800' number. Since then, call centres have been concealed, invisible offices behind phone-based services designed to ease consumers' access to companies and public administration for claims, and, later on, for booking purposes.

This cost-saving solution was reached by centralising demands, and the specialisation of the replies focused on keeping calls simple and short.

The operators were asked to possess limited knowledge (usually about a specific product and fault), some communication skills (politeness and kindness were enough) and linguistic skills (to understand various regional variations). Their tasks were repetitive, and there was a need to address boredom and the ability to counter quantitative, cognitive overload. Workstations were designed to keep the operators protected from noise interference: the consequence was (and is) social seclusion.

Some present-day outsourced call centres share many of these features, as do many of their workers. Call centres that use Computer Aided Telephone Interview (CATI) techniques are very similar to original call centres in respect of operator competencies and the main technology and work environment. Computers in these centres register and quantify types of request and answer, and market research and opinion polls make considerable use of them.

An alternative is now already available. It is the IVR (Interactive Voice Responder), which automatises frequent standard requests and replies for low-premium customers.
2.2 The claim factory

During the 1970s, the hidden claims offices and the invisible workers inside them remained a rather small reality, despite the fact that dramatic changes in customers' behaviour began to emerge. Consumers tended to prefer personalised, rather than mass-market, goods and services, and people started to require assistance in using the products they had bought. Buying and selling were no longer seen as one-off activities: they had become long, lasting, dynamic and communication-based processes.

Changes in people's attitudes have modified the demands and requests coming into call centres. Claims still account for the overwhelming majority of calls, but they have become less common as new personalised products and services have come on the market. Operators in call centres (they are usually called 'customer representatives' or, in call centre jargon, 'reps') have to support clients through the whole life-cycle of products, and preserve and improve the relationship between the organisation and its clients by keeping track of the dynamics of questions and replies. Of course, this activity is possible when there are only a few clients and products, but even then the cognitive burden can be very high.

Call centres were designed to answer standard claims relating to a limited number of mass products and services, and cannot cope with the new situation. As a result, their performance rapidly deteriorates, and long queues and low-quality replies became a painful and daily experience for customers.

In the late 1980s, a technological solution, the integration of computers and digital telephones, came on stream and Automatic Call Distribution enabled queues to diminish and performance to improve.

The hidden service office became a visible service factory.

The operator's working conditions did not change very much, though. Measures to counter noise interference were stepped up, but despite the widespread use of open-plan working environments, social isolation was still the order of the day. Moreover, their skills did not change much either: the knowledge that was still needed was mostly in their heads; however, it was very limited in scope, communication skills remained at a very basic level, and it was acknowledged that they had to tolerate stress because of the monotonous tasks and boredom.

The high variation in peaks in calls during the day, week or season had been dealt with by employing staff as and when they are needed. This led to the introduction of the 'three thirds rule' whereby the workforce in a call centre consisted of one third full-time employees, one third part-timers, and one third temporary workers. The 'service factory' was seen as the solution, and Tayloristic design and practice followed.

Of course, stress responses, high absenteeism, high turnover (more than 20% per year), and difficulties in personnel recruitment, management and retention were very predictable outcomes. Indeed, as some authors (for example, Kjellerup, 2000) maintain, when a call centre only has ACD, it easily becomes an example of 'toxic
organisation: because of the heavy workload, it is often a place where people work in order to make money, and then they move on. 

2.3 The communication node
By the 1990s, the call centre had become a profit centre rather than a cost centre. It was clear that the process of communication with the customer was dynamic and long-lasting, and that it was vital to take care of, and retain, clients. A breakdown in communication meant a net loss of revenue.

The call centre was a place where the organisation found out about clients’ needs and their changing attitudes. The call centre had a proactive function, and it also had marketing, testing, promotion and sales objectives. The call centre became dedicated to customised interactions, and it focused on keeping track of, and making use of, all transactions.

In previously described types of call centre, the number of applications the operator had to handle during a conversation was usually very high. Access to stored knowledge was painstaking, and the quality of knowledge distribution between operator and artefacts was poor, but the integration of telecommunications and computer technology (ICT) made it possible to record, elaborate and extrapolate powerful artefacts, and use knowledge to make conversations easier and actively memorise them (in the Merchant survey [op.cit.], CTI technology was not as widely used as ACD technology [under 30%]).

The history of transactions with clients could be stored and retrieved during any call. In addition to the dynamics of claims, the recording and processing of transactions with clients made information about their desires and skills – not to mention their spending attitudes and opportunities – all possible. The service had become truly customer-oriented.

Operators were still required to have knowledge about the content of interactions, but their core competence involved understanding clients' requests, and finding, accessing and manipulating knowledge in the organisation and in the cognitive artefacts. Communication skills were at a high level: the competence was the ability to manage surprise and unforeseeable events. Stress came from tension in facing unpredictability rather than from repetition and boredom, and work had to be carried out in teams because of the complexity and value of the demands. It was important to adopt a distributed-knowledge approach and teamwork-based organisation. Unfortunately, the 'factory model' is still to be found.

2.4 Selling node
The scope of call centres is changing: far from being centralised claim-handling offices, they are now becoming business centres. They are profit-seeking nodes rather than costs to be scaled down. Communication is no longer initiated solely by clients,
as an increasing proportion are initiated from call centres for learning marketing, promotion, and selling purposes.

They combine old ACD and CTI, and new Interactive Voice Responder (IVR) technologies with the web-based communication. The core is still communication designed to keep and improve relationships with clients, but the possibility of adding 'show' to 'tell' multiplies commercial capacity. Currently, there are fewer and fewer calls, and more multi-channel asynchronous communication transactions.

Finally, the combination of high-speed digital telephone networks and the sophisticated software and switching technology that underpins modern computer telephony integration now make it possible to re-route calls and messages anywhere. Remotely based agents can be managed as if they were all geographically in the same place.

This is where call centres and telework merged. While consistent deployment of the web enabled call centre (WECC) is still some way off, there is ample evidence of a proliferation of innovative applications. It is forecast that during the period 2002-2004, WECCs will match the increasing uptake of web technologies within the organisation (Intranet), across the supply chain (Extranet) and with the on-line population (Internet).

A WECC can integrate the various media in the process of contacting the client or, as some recent cases suggest, it may follow a process of differentiation.

The two trends may specialise operators' competencies, and media integration will further develop the current trend in call centres towards knowledge manipulation and integration, collaboration and team working. Specialisation may also indicate a process towards call centres centred on one or more 'service products' in which the content rather than simply communication may be the core of the operator competence. In both cases, the focus will be on trust building and ongoing relationships.

When customers are mainly web site visitors who have access to human agents via call-back, voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) or text chat, the agent may come to resemble a real teleworker. Nowadays, such a situation is fairly unusual, and a transitional phase is now under way (in the Datamonitor report [op.cit.], call-back accounted for 2% of all calls).

The challenge is how to meet the needs of Internet users, who will grow from 121m at the beginning of 1999 to 339m in 2004.

In the meantime, the percentage of total communications through media other than the telephone is negligible (3% inbound and 31% outbound in 1998); functional integration is also quite low: only one third of call centres perform a combination of customer service, sales and marketing (Merchant, 1998).

Though the emergence of the web, the call centre is still an interface, that is to say a customer contact centre where the aim is still efficiency rather than efficacy. In order
to reduce costs, investment seeks to introduce 'self-service technologies' with a view to cutting human resource costs.

However, 'self-service technology' should be seen as complementary, rather than alternative, to human agents. Highly skilled, motivated people are essential if a call centre is to become proactive and successful: it is impossible to establish trust and long-lasting relationships, which are essential in selling services, by substituting human beings.
3. PEOPLE

In the average call centre – this is a combination of the four types identified above, but is usually very similar in terms of work organisation and managerial culture to the claim factory – agents can be differentiated by functions, tasks and communication skills (Prentice, 1999).

Currently, a small group (usually not represented in call centres where outsourced standard and repetitive tasks are carried out) of up to 10% (in the most advanced call centres) carries out complex, non-repetitive jobs. These are 'universal agents' in the sense that they can handle any communication with customers, and move easily and rapidly from one function to another (for example, from customer retention to activation) and between media and applications. Since vertical flexibility does not pay off (it is a waste to have them performing low-level activities), and because of the trends toward content and customers' target specialisation, the notion of universal agents is questionable.

Another small group (5-15%) is used as a flexible workforce to move around different media and float between functions from time to time to carry out complex activities, and a consistent group of people (20%) carries out a blend of repetitive, though rather complex, activities and occasionally moves among communication media. The two largest groups either carry out a restricted blend of simple activities or make use of a fixed type of communication media, or are dedicated to simple tasks and use a specific simple communications medium.

To summarise, people in an average call centre belong to three main, roughly equal groups: one works full-time and has wide experience and high level skills; one is made up of horizontal (not many hours a day) or vertical (a few days a week, usually peak days and weekends) part-timers with medium-level expertise and skills; and one comprises temporary workers who have basic skills and very little experience.

The evolution of call centre functions is making the skills and competencies of agents more relevant, but the above-described distribution of agents is still widespread. There is a clear contradiction between the aims to be pursued and the way people are treated. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that an overwhelming majority of call centre managers among Fortune 1000 Corporations cited 'people' as the most critical factor in the success of call centres (The Customer Connections Solution Team, 1999). Specifically, more than two thirds (79%) of them reported that people were the key critical issue. This attitude was consistent across different industrial sectors: people were the issue in telecoms (85%), insurance (82%), healthcare (80%), banking (77%), manufacturing (77%) and utilities (75%). Interestingly, the lowest level (68%) of people of crucial importance in call centres were those working in computer/software/electronics. The idea of automation as simply a substitution for human workers may have played a role in this outcome.

Similar indications emerge from a survey of 285 call centre managers and senior executives completed in 1999 by the Gallup Organisation. Participants were asked to give their top three management issues: again, personnel ranked high (42%) followed by customer satisfaction (29%); technology (20%) and finance (9%) were again seen as less important.
Such a widely shared view of the problem is rooted in the working conditions in the average call centre.

Indeed, although a call centre should be a locus of communication and relationship with the customer, and the agent (any agent) represents the whole company to its customers, agents conduct the relationship with the customer alone. They do not have a complete view of the process (data show that only half of all operators can quote their call centre objectives); there is a low level of technological integration (in more than two thirds of cases, agents have to switch between more than two applications during the same call); there is a lack of organisational integration; and communications between the call centre and other departments in a company are usually extremely poor. It is quite common for products to be heavily advertised and launched onto the market, and for the call centre to know little about it: this means overload and degradation in quality.

Moreover, agents are in charge of critical processes of communication, information diffusion and gathering, knowledge creation, and sharing: moreover, they possess knowledge about customers, products, services, processes, organisation and technologies. They are young (on average 23-25 years old), hold diplomas or university degrees, and in most cases this is their first work experience. However, for most of them, there is no clear path to the future: career development in call centres has not been made very attractive, and often it is completely unplanned. It is unclear what will happen next. Large-scale horizontal mobility (from one call centre to another new one) conceals the fact that there is little mobility within the company from the call centre to other departments: the call centre tends to be a sub-company within a company.

Moreover, there are no vocational training programmes. Call centre jobs are based on generic education, and the perceived image is that of a job that anyone can do. Needless to say, social and professional recognition is scarce. The number of names and definitions (each lasting some months and accepted within small, mostly company-wide communities) indicate that social and professional identities are very weak. This situation is also underlined by the figures for part-time and temporary recruitment. What is more, most of companies are start-ups, and they have their own weaknesses in identity and corporate culture.

In most cases, they are managed as disposable resources, and retention plans are rare. Although average turnover is high (20-30% a year), the cost of training is rising: new employees need about ten days' training and six days' retraining, and six days' tuition a year is considered the threshold level. Recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive, with the cost for any new agent estimated to be about €5,000. Absenteeism is also high: there is anecdotal evidence that some people do not even show up to get the money they have earned after one or two days' work. Stress is widespread.

Given this state of affairs in call centres, it is no surprise that people are generally considered to be of crucial importance.

People are the key issue in call centres.
The issue may be tackled from two angles: the first is well exemplified by solutions put forward by Glenn Phelps, Program Leader of Gallup Call Centre Management. It focuses on individuals: the measurement of performance shows that top performers obtain higher financial results, are less likely to change job, are safer and healthier (they are less likely to take sick leave), file fewer disability claims, require less training, produce little or no customer attrition, and are better at selling. A study of the practices of top performers identifies the best solutions for dissemination, thereby improving call centre performance, and an analysis of the profiles of top performers builds up a selection process that makes it possible to get the right people both as agents and managers.

Such an approach centred on individuals can be successful, but it does not address the aforementioned organisational paradoxes to be found in average call centres that may be technologically advanced, but still imbued with a Tayloristic culture.

An alternative approach is to recognise call centres as knowledge-based service organisations focused on creating value. Here, the distinction between universal knowledge workers and disposable under-skilled operators lies at the heart of human resource issues. Core knowledge is not restricted to supposedly universal agents. The basic unit is neither the individual front-line position, nor the operator-customer pairing, nor the universal agent, but a 'knowledge cell' where the operator is integrated within a team and shares cognitive artefacts and supporting technologies with colleagues, and even with the customer. The objective of the cell is not merely to provide customers with information and assist and support them, but also to acquire and transfer knowledge for the customer and for the company.

In the knowledge cell, knowledge is accumulated and distributed among people, teams, technologies and customers. The activities of the agents are then characterised by knowledge creation and manipulation, and job design is centred on enabling access to, and sharing knowledge with, all members of the cell. Taylorisation can improve the number of calls handled, and the average time needed to close a call, but it cannot improve the quality of communication or the development of the knowledge system for achieving effectiveness.
4. CALL CENTRES IN THE MEMBER STATES

As the MITEL report describes, statistics on call centres in Europe are far from reliable (Huws, Denbigh and O'Regan, 1999). They are often contradictory as well. By way of an overview of the distribution of call centres in Europe, this report will use data collected by an authoritative source (see Table 1). The figures are for the number of seats (in thousands; any seat corresponds to approximately 1.7 people) reported as a function of the country and of technological equipment: position equipped with computer telephone integration (CTI); web-enabled position; and networked, virtual position. Figures refer to the situation in 1999 and predictions for 2004.

Table 1: Growth in call centre seats (x1000) by country (Source: Ovum 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>CTI seats</th>
<th>Web seats</th>
<th>Virtual seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The figures show that more advanced call centres are still to come. Most call centres (not reported here) are served by more traditional technology, and are still at the claim factory phase. Virtual call centres, too, are a thing of the future. However, the rapidly increasing use of the Internet should already have accelerated the change toward web-enabled call centres. Further acceleration is likely to flow from the introduction of UMTS (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System, the standard for third generation mobile telecommunications).

Available data on age, gender, education, qualification and salaries are even more questionable. It is claimed that most staff are young, but there are also older workers as a result of call centres choosing to employ women who want to re-enter the labour market when their children have grown up. There are a lot of women employees. The standard of education is fairly high (although there has been a recommendation recently to recruit people with a lower standard of education), and salaries are generally rather low.

Some of these figures are officially available in certain countries, and many of these sources are available on the Euro-Telework project web site (www.euro-telework.org).
Some of the figures have also come from selected information supplied by newspapers and national co-ordinators of the Euro-Telework project, and through contacts with call centre agents and managers.

There now follows a brief country-by-country overview of the situation produced by the national co-ordinators, and dealing with merits and responsibilities.

4.1 Austria
The majority of call centres are located in cities, where students are available to work flexible hours. It is anticipated there will be 50,000 jobs in call centres by the end of 2002. More specifically, ten call centres have been opened since 1996 in Salzburg, whose Chamber of Labour recently made a study of working conditions (Boehm, Buchinger, Goedl & Geschwandtner, 1999). The results were as follows: 78% of people only have free employment contracts (freie Dienstverträge) with an average duration of 3.2 months, very low pay, and no paid holidays nor sick leave; it is a form of self employment. Women account for the 70% of employees and there is massive fluctuation. The situation in external call centres is worse than in in-house centres.

There are 3500 jobs in Vienna, and by the end of 2002 it is predicted that there will be another 3000-5000.

Generally speaking, there is a tendency to standardise work and performance control, although many agents are not aware of this problem. As for career development, agents in most call centres have no chance of getting jobs in another department of the firm, although there is some kind of retention policy. Monotony and stress are the main problems. With the help of some shop stewards in call centres, Eva Angerler wrote a negotiator's guide to organisation (Angerler, 1999): it deals with the new technology being used, work organisation, union and Works Council strategies, and a model collective agreement at enterprise level.

4.2 Belgium
Belgium has interesting conditions for agent selection, given the good basic knowledge of many languages that has flowed from historical immigration and the presence of international institutions. There are also very large call centres including Belgacom and Sitel. The latter is the Belgian division of the Sitel Corporation, a pan-European call centre agency with 77 call centres worldwide and 12,900 seats in total. Sitel Belgium has 310 seats in Diegem, and another 150 in a satellite centre in Anderlecht. It is interesting to note that seats are taken on a project basis (for different clients), and agents answer calls using various media. The market includes government departments, ICT suppliers, telephone carriers and financial institutions. Sitel was the first European call centre agency as a real multimedia contact centre to incorporate WECC facilities.

The Electrabel group (a company distributing gas, electricity and cable TV) is opening three call centres.
According to research in 1999 carried out by Belgacom and Interlabor, 85% of call centres in Belgium are in-house, 10% are external and 5% are both (MIS Project, 1999). Of the in-house centres, 88% have fewer than 20 agents, most of whom work normal hours; external centres are bigger (approximately 100-120 agents) and are more accessible (open 24 hours); staff work atypical hours. Temporary workers account for approximately 10% of agents. As for location, 50% of call centres in Belgium and 52% of workers are to be found in the 02 telephone area code zone (that is, Brussels, most of Flemish Brabant and some of Walloon Brabant); the next most common areas are the 03 area code zone (Antwerp: 12% of call centres and 16% of workers) and the 09 zone (Ghent: 5% of both call centres and workers). The telephone areas in Wallonia account for less than 13%. This priority of Brussels relies on a concentration of high-tech enterprises, particularly those located near Zaventem Airport.

4.3 Finland
The third type of call centre is based on CTI, and is the most common type in Finland; it is particularly found in banks, insurance companies and travel agencies. The next stage (customer self-service) is already appearing. Call centres are mainly located in city centres, and they form an essential part of company organisation. Nokia operates a major customer service call centre in the USA (Tampa and St. Louis). Agents assist customers who lose their phone manuals, or who have particular questions about programming phones, with the help of the company's wireless phones. Official statistics about the number of people involved are not available, but they are estimated to be in the region of 5000-10,000, that is to say less than 0.5% of the country's workforce. Most are women, and they have often previously worked in the same company in direct contact with customers. Collective agreements are in force, and trade unions are well represented.

4.4 France
In 1999, there were an estimated 130,000 agents with a 30% turnover; in 1997, they were 92,000 employed in 1500 call centres including 25% in banking and insurance, 24% in France Telecom, 23% in other telecoms companies, and 12% in public administrations. The structure of the call centre market is unusual because agents are not concentrated in large sites, but in small ones with around 50 people. Figures for 1997 show that only 8% of sites had 100-400 agents, whilst 1% had more than 400.

France Telecom's customer call centre has been operating since 1998, and experienced a substantial increase in the number of calls answered (without an increase in the number of agents) after introducing a virtual call centre service. This service is linked to an ACD call centre by pre-routing calls to the France Telecom network on the basis of pre-defined agent groups. As a result, each group may be made up of agents from several call centres and, consequently, each agent may belong to many groups.
The Pizza Hut food delivery chain can advertise a single phone number for customers to call, regardless of their location, because calls are automatically routed via a virtual call centre service to the nearest restaurant.

Pay varies considerably from company to company because different collective agreements may be applied. According to information supplied by the CFDT, agents at Lyonnaise Communication, Canal Plus and Cégétel have a better company level agreement.

4.5 Germany
At the end of 1998, Deutsche Direktmarketingverband estimated the number of call centres to be 1500, while Gemini Consulting calculated 80,000 seats with between 160,000 and 240,000 agents.

Call centres of the first type belong to companies (for example, banks) that mainly do simple, repetitive work such as orders and complaints. Call centres of the second type are real enterprises that work for different customers. Those of the third type belong to a company but use highly qualified agents. Virtual call centres are not yet widely known.

Initially, call centres were mainly built in rural areas where the workforce was cheaper and there were government funds to set up new firms, especially in eastern Germany. However, it was difficult to find skilled staff there, so the usual location nowadays is around big cities where there are pools of students and women available to work part-time.

As in other countries, average skills are low and turnover is high. There is a debate between the unions and the employment office (as well as within the unions) as to whether it is better to have people who are not highly skilled underemployed or unemployed, and whether it is a good idea to fund courses (lasting 3-12 weeks and concentrating only on basic needs) for agents, knowing that their work will be underpaid and mostly part-time. No clear 'yes' or 'no' has yet emerged.

Career development is also very uncertain: for instance, agents in bank call centres will never have a chance to work in the bank and enjoy the benefits of collective agreements. Standards and guidelines for working in call centres are set out in Leitbilder und Standards fuer Callcentre (www.multimediabuero.de); this came out of a conference organised by 'Multimediabuero', a joint project by three unions (HBV, IG Medien and DPG).

4.6 Greece
According to figures supplied by the Special Technical Teaching Staff of the Department of Economic Sciences, Section of Mathematics and Information Technology of the National and Capodistrian University of Athens, there are four call centres currently operating in Athens.
The most important is the 'Horizon Call Centre'; this is a pilot application and functions within the REMOTE 'Possibility of Research and Employment in Telework in Europe' programme, which is in turn mainly targeted at the development of teleworking structures in Greece and Europe. According to the programme, the pilot call centre functions as a business, and serves as an intermediary between enterprises that need specific services and specialists offering such services. It also provides both parties with telecommunications and computer channels for dispatching work. In addition, it offers services on a communications basis to a number of collaborators who work as freelancers and do not have the communications media they need, and a telecommunications base to enterprises that are a long way from the geographical area of the call centre and which are willing to employ staff in the call centre.

Teleworkers in the centre are either freelancers working with the call centre in the domain of their speciality, or employees who telework for employers through the call centre. The teleworkers' group in the call centre will have at their disposal the software, computers and communications media necessary for the services they are asked to offer. Some female teleworkers may work at home if they have a computer and other essential equipment at their disposal.

For the time being, there are 10 permanent collaborators at the call centre, all of them women, and 16 teleworkers, 3 of whom are men and 13 women.

4.7 Ireland
Low wages, corporate taxes and social costs, efficient telecommunications and amenable government bureaucracy and support are now encouraging new hi-tech employment; many multinational companies have therefore chosen to establish their call centres in Ireland. Berlitz International Inc, the Japanese-controlled language conglomerate, is located near Dublin and translates software and web sites for eastern and western Europe, using a 350-strong multilingual team, most of whom have temporary jobs.

Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, Dell, Oracle (with 90 agents near Dublin, 60% of whom are from other countries), UPS and AOL all have call centres with multilingual agents located in Dublin, responding to European customers who dial these companies' toll-free numbers.

Gateway 2000, a US-based global leader in direct personal computer sales, founded its Irish division in 1993 and today operates an assembly, sales and services centre employing 1400 people near Dublin. The call centre employs 300 non-Irish agents, most of whom are in their twenties. Irish telephone services are proving an increasingly growing sector of business and employment opportunities, with the help of government and flexible labour market regulations. Levels of workers' protection and wages are lower in comparison with European standards. For young people from continental Europe, it is an interesting opportunity for training and experience. The number of agents is expected to rise to 100,000 by 2001.
4.8 Italy

By the end of 1999, there were 61,000 agents; this figure is expected to rise to 63,000 by the end of 2000 (CMMC Club). Datamonitor estimates that there were 820 call centres by the end of 1999 (a 100% increase compared with 1997 figures), and predicts 1020 by the year 2000 and 1350 by the end of 2002.

As far as the setting up of call centres and their dissemination are concerned, Italy was a late starter compared with other European countries, but it is quickly catching up. There are a number of interesting cases and growing trends: Alitalia has located its flight information and tele-booking site in Palermo with 1400 operators; DHL has four sites in Milan, Venice, Turin and Rome, and employs 600 agents; the Pirelli Tyres call centre focuses on maintenance and tele-sales; and Telecom Italy has specific and constantly increasing customer care services for both business and private customers. Omnitel and Wind, two new major players in mobile phone and telecommunications services, also have large call centres: the former, in particular, has 4000 employees working in 8 call centres located in Ivrea, Milan, Padua, Bologna, Pisa, Rome, Naples and Catania; three quarters of the staff are long-term workers.

Public administration, too, offers customer care services, and frequently by outsourcing. One example is the Telerete Nordest call centre, and its Urp (office for relationships with citizens) service in the Province of Padua.

In March 2000, newly formed trade unions linked to the three main confederations for atypical workers signed an agreement with Telcos, the company for State lottery betting online. The Telcos call centre will employ 3200 young people, mainly in Centre-South Italy, by the end of 2001. This agreement looks upon agents as self-employed workers whom the company provides with workstations and lines, but no fixed working hours, although they do have some protection and salary guarantees. Similar features are written into the company agreement signed by the first Italian virtual call centre (Answers Company, Florence) in June 2000 by the afore-mentioned unions of atypical workers (see the full text on the Euro-Telework web site).

In June 2000, a national agreement was signed between the national confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and the national employers' association (Confindustria): it aims to provide newly-formed e-companies and established companies operating in new sectors (that is, telecommunication and internet-based services) with a general framework. Traditionally, workers doing the same work, but in different sectors (for example, the engineering industry, commerce and telecommunications), had different contracts. Since 1 July 2000, the same regulation has supported many new forms of flexibility including part-timers, call centres, teleworking and weekend contracts. This new feature will help to avoid a kind sort of social dumping among companies of the 'new economy' (see the Euro-Telework web site).

4.9 Luxembourg
Call centres have hitherto had no proper development, but the idea is beginning to interest banks and services, both internally and externally, and the distinction is already promoting discussion within trade unions about ways of having the same collective agreement for people working in a call centre and people working in the parent firm.

At all events, working conditions for agents (most of them women) are not good at the moment: the main problems concern working hours (for example, flexibility, and night and Sunday shifts), ergonomic conditions and privacy. Employers do not interpret the European directive on work with video terminals consistently.

4.10 Netherlands
The Netherlands has become a real call centre hub in continental Europe over the past ten years. Over 2000 US companies have now established operations in a country that also hosts 125 pan-European call centres. Datamonitor estimates that by the end of 2000, some 100,000 people will be working in centralised call centres, and that this figure might climb to about 160,000 by the end of 2003.

There are about 300 external call centres (with approximately 15,000 staff) and 2000-3000 internal call centres (with approximately 60,000 staff) altogether. The Netherlands is home to 25% of call centres located in Europe by multinational firms, and particularly in the south of the country in Maastricht, Tilburg and Eindhoven.

About 70% of all staff are women, but women do not represent the majority of employees in all types of call centres because of important differences between industrial sectors. Financial call centres employ most female staff, and computer services least. Three quarters of all agents are between 20 and 29 years old; 29% of agents (73% of them women) work part-time.

Students and women re-entering the labour market aged 45 and above form a consistent proportion of employed agents, and that is why call centres set up their businesses on the outskirts of areas with new housing and in big cities.

Internal call centres have an average capacity of 36 seats for 33 staff, and external centres have a capacity of 36 seats with 71 agents. Turnover is high: average call centres have 57 agents and attract 18 new ones, but 10 leave every year. Other sources give lower figures.

Educational standards are lower than might be expected: 74% of agents have medium level vocational training. Maastricht has an interesting local educational initiative named Educall: this is a cooperative venture involving the local authority, temporary agencies, employment agencies and training institutes (2).

4.11 Portugal
There are few call centres in Portugal, but it is interesting to note that Lisbon hosts one of Europe's top call centre technology suppliers, Easyphone, which also has offices in Belgium, Paris, Toronto, Tokyo and São Paulo.

4.12 Sweden

As part of a process of good call centre development in 1997, the Swedish national rail operator Statens Järnvägar set up five large sites, and soon began to use an interesting technical solution whereby calls were queued in the telecoms network instead of being routed by ACD. This technical solution was later adopted by other companies. The company's ticket sales staff operate in an unusual way in that they sell tickets when they have 'live' customers face to face, but spend the rest of their time dealing with other customers over the phone.

Other important call centres belong to the main banks, SLG (a holiday and leisure service provider) and ABB, an engineering company.

Generally speaking, 95% of the call centre market has a business-to-consumer function, but the growth of e-commerce and the importance of customer care are making business-to-business call centres a fast growing share of the call centre market.

A unique aspect of call centre development is concerned with the need to help communities survive, to retain populations, and to re-convert abandoned buildings like old houses, schools and hospitals. Thanks to support from the Public Administrations, many 'back offices' have been created for telephone, fax and e-mail communications with customers no matter where they might be. As a direct consequence, call centres have acquired concrete significance as a way of enabling small communities to survive. One example is the mental hospital at Furunaeset, a few kilometres from the centre of Piteå: it was emptied ten years ago following reforms in mental health care, but instead of demolishing the building, the local authority managed to attract companies for which distance was no problem, particularly those in the financial sector. Today it houses some 1000 workplaces: they include the Gallup Group, with some 100 employees working in a call centre.

According to ISA (Invest in Sweden Agency), there are currently 33,000 call centre jobs in Sweden, and this will break through the 100,000 barrier by 2004 at the latest.

Sweden seems to have all the prerequisites to become the biggest market for call centres in Scandinavia: both costs and language competence are more favourable than in neighbouring countries.

Virtual call centres are also making an appearance: these mainly take the form of home workstations, small telecottages or other very small workplaces linked by data networks.

4.13 United Kingdom
Figures on the number of call centres are estimated in different ways (3). Datamonitor reported 4,100 in 1998, MZA 9,700 in 1999 (with a predicted increase to 15,000 in 2004), and Fernie and Metcalfe estimate there are currently 7,000 call centres employing over 2m agents (Fernie & Metcalfe, 1999).

Others estimate that call centres will absorb 1 in 5 jobs by the end of 2000. Despite the general view that Scotland is the fastest-growing area in UK call centre location (this is also due to Scottish accents, which are reputed to be the best on the telephone), the biggest concentration is in the South East, with a total of 48%: London and Bristol have the highest number of call centres. The average age of agents is 27 and the national average staff turnover is 19%, although there are marked regional variations: the highest turnover is in Scotland (34%), but this is probably due to competition for staff in cities like Glasgow. Agents' salaries in London and the South East are 35-40% higher than the lowest, probably depending on type of work (Merchant Ltd., 1998).

An interesting case is Odeon Cinemas, one of the major UK chains. In 1998 it introduced a national enquiry and booking service, using natural speech recognition. Using a single phone number (with an application of the IVR system), callers could access information on any Odeon cinema in the UK.

Furthermore, 'decision makers' of strategies looking at the best location of call centres all around the world are also based in the UK. They take account of the best mix of convenience factors: for instance, 600 British Airways jobs in New York were transferred to Bombay in 1999. This transfer was criticised by the Machinists Union. The Company operating and handling the British Airways call centre in Bombay is known as World Network Services (WNS).

To summarise, the situation is very similar throughout Europe, with call centres having been set up earlier and better developed. The problems to be tackled and the characteristics of technologies and population are rather similar. This makes it easier to set up a European view and action plan.

Moreover, the European approach also reflects a growing phenomenon, flagged up by some national reports (for example, from the Netherlands and Belgium), of pan-European multi-lingual call centres. A typical pan-European multilingual call centre operates as follows: a Finnish software developer, for example, places an advertisement, and a potential customer in Milan calls the toll-free number provided; the call is switched to the company's centralised call centre, which could be located practically anywhere in Europe; the switch then identifies the call as originating in Italy and routes it to an Italian-speaking agent, who assists the customer. Service is prompt and professional, and the prospective customer never knows he/she is speaking to someone who may be half a continent away. From the caller's perspective, he believes he is calling someone in Italy; meanwhile, the company can provide a first-class service for customers throughout Europe at a fraction of the cost of having a presence in every country.

Again, this case illustrates the extent to which processes that relate to customers and services are nowadays integrated at European level, and how action to improve the
quality of working life and effectiveness must be undertaken at this level to match the issues to be faced (4).
5. MAIN ISSUES
The outcomes of recent studies show that call centres are increasing in number and efficiency, but losing in effectiveness. Customer satisfaction is falling, and many call centres do not even measure it. Technology is rapidly improving and changing, but still lagging behind needs in terms of usability and accessibility. Clients do not like over-automatic solutions like IVR, and often bypass them.

Turnover rates make it hard to develop, share and memorise best practices, and knowledge creation and management are therefore in jeopardy; what is more, organisational culture is weak and shared values hard to find. Indeed, some authors like N Kjellerup (editor and senior partner of Resource International, writing in *The Toxic Call Centre*) maintain that call centres are examples of 'toxic organisation'. High staff turnover and the 'sweat shop' mentality are the key symptoms, and are a direct consequence of bad management practices. People are managed as disposable resources, and call centres are often therefore places where people work to make some money, and then move on.

However, call centres are workplaces where huge numbers of people work. Many young people have their first work experience there, and see these jobs as an acceptable alternative to unemployment. Many women aged 35-45 also re-enter the labour market through call centres.

Altogether, call centres are opportunities, and there are issues around improving working conditions and effectiveness. The core theme is human resources, and all issues are related to it.

5.1 Work organisation
Work organisation is now designed according to the factory model of call centres. People are treated as if they had to perform simple and repetitive tasks, but in fact they are in charge of highly complex activities. Organisations are designed for individual tasks, but activities actually require team and collaboration, and people are not supported when doing their work either by technology or by the organisation. Technologies are difficult to access and to use. The organisation stops people building up organisational memories and sharing them; sharing knowledge is simply episodic. Call centres make it difficult to learn.

This calls for a change in organisational design, based on the notion and principles of distributed cognition and knowledge, and on teamwork-centred structure. A change in managerial culture is also much needed: it should be centred on the notion of motivating empowered people rather than commanding disposable human resources.

5.2 Training
Call centre agents are the largest without a training programme group of workers. Public education systems ignore the existence of call centres: some actions exist, it is true, but there is no real policy (5).
Furthermore, organisations recruit people with a high standard of education to perform apparently simple tasks. This behaviour saves money in the short term because these people need less training and are more flexible, but they become a cost problem in the medium term. Their preparation is too general, and retraining and refresher training is frequently needed to introduce agents to changes in demand, and to encourage them to undertake outbound, selling and trust-building activities.

5.3 Career development
Call centres are somewhat flat organisations. Vocational development plans are unusual in the factory model, and there is massive horizontal mobility from organisation to organisation. Career progression takes the form of moving from one call centre to another one: there is no mobility within the organisation to which call centre agents belong. Call centre jobs are the most flexible and, at the same time, the most rigid: people move within call centres among companies, never from a call centre to another department in the same company. Retention policies are still poorly managed as the paradigm of disposable resources undermines the search for quality.

5.4 Health
People in call centres live in an apparent contradiction: they are instructed and pressured to pursue quality in communications with the client, but they themselves work in stressful conditions. There is no consistency between work activities and work organisation: technologies are hard to use and tasks are repetitive in claim factories, and tension is widespread in the newer call centres; some working conditions are marked by isolation and seclusion; and in many small-size call centres, little attention is paid to ergonomic standards.

Stress symptoms are common because people have limited or no experience in the work they do: there is no fatigue culture, that is to say workers do not know and share cognitive and emotional tools to help them cope with the strain and tension; they have to compensate for the inadequacy of artefacts and organisation in handling surprise and workload, and in facing unexpected events, by using personal and often dysfunctional ad hoc solutions; they have to face situations they had never met before, and demands they have been never told might exist, by relying on personal experiences – which in most cases have nothing to do with what they are doing.

5.5 Surveillance and monitoring
The technology used is more or less the same that is all over the world, and it facilitates continuous monitoring of performance (Electronic Performance Monitoring - EPM); performance is also checked through internal and external customer satisfaction measurements. As Taylor and Bain have observed, 'there is no doubt that many workers do see the mechanisms of surveillance and monitoring as contributing to the pressures of the job.'
Indeed, monitoring is a factor of stress. According to the MITEL study, 'the degree of seriousness may be gauged by the fact that over three out of ten centres in our survey (31%) offer stress counselling to their staff, and 21% offer psychological counselling.'

There are also normative features: Bibby recalls that, 'the legal position regarding the actual recording of telephone calls may vary between countries. However, for instance, as the delivery of financial services by telephone has developed, there has been a growing tendency to maintain records of telephone conversations for security and auditing purposes (6). In some countries such as Austria and the Netherlands, trade unions have asked for automatic monitoring features to be removed from call centre software (7).

5.6 Localisation
According to Onno Ponfort (Area Director, The Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency), when evaluating the potential localisation for a call centre, the most important criteria are multilingual and highly skilled workforce, cost effective telecom infrastructure, call centre ready infrastructure, flexible rules and regulations (for example, labour laws allowing ‘7-24’ operations and part-time work) and outsourcing opportunities. In summary, the most crucial criterion is the workforce: it should be skilled, multilingual and, above all, flexible.

In fact, call centre sites are often near big cities where it is easy to find skilled people (for example, students, and women aged 35-45 re-entering the labour market) who have poor bargaining power and can be paid low salaries. Flexibility and low wages are also to be found in areas where unemployment is high.

Competitive factors for call centre localisation also include fiscal conditions, the availability of telecommunication services and tariffs (8).

The criteria vary. Rates of unemployment and fiscal conditions are often given much consideration, but this may turn into competition between disadvantaged areas and ‘wild’ flexibility where no rules are taken into account. A strategy is needed at European level.

5.7 Industrial relations
Magazines and newspapers often describe call centres as places where it is very difficult to have open discussions and negotiations between management and workers – or with trade union representatives, where they exist. To quote a young agent at the Lyonnaise Cable call centre, 'A trade union is seen by the management as a trouble factor' (Syndicalisme Hebdo, 23 March 2000).

The importance of the problem was underlined by the 'Call Centre Action Day' jointly organised on 4 November 1999 by two European Federations affiliated to the ETUC: FIET and Union Network International. A press conference was held to increase awareness, and discussions and leaflets were distributed on the Internet to be adapted for national specific use in Sweden, Ireland, UK, Germany, France and
Australia. The authors made concrete suggestions for action: 'Whilst you are speaking to customers on behalf of your employer, we can speak to your employer on behalf of you…. Across the world, workers in call centres raise the same kind of issues: health and safety; pay and benefits; stress, working time and workload; equal opportunities and training; harassment at work; poor working environment and equipment; respect and proper consultation; social benefits; child care facilities.' This was the biggest International action; other actions were organised at local level (9).

To conclude, the issues are clear, experience in unionisation is on the increase, and benefits are well documented (10), but there is still no local and global framework for industrial relations (11).
6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The onward march of technology will continue for the foreseeable future. Call centres will evolve toward multimedia contact centres, and there will be a cross-over in the development of call centres and teleworking: the former will become 'virtual', while the latter will turn into 'networked distance labour' in a shared socio-economic context.

However, the key focus will continue to be the close relationship between well-educated, motivated, client-focused agents and well-informed satisfied, loyal customers.

The future direction of call centres will depend on a set of integrated actions that confront the issues raised:

- Work organisation should be redesigned to overcome the contradiction of poorly motivated, inadequately supported, isolated agents who have to communicate in a friendly manner with clients to make them satisfied and collaborative.

- Call centres should become a locus of communication and trust-building with the customer: to achieve this objective, they have to become communicative and trustworthy towards, and among, the people working in them.

- Steps must be taken to promote changes in work organisation and in managerial culture and practices.

- It will not be possible to empower people in call centres if their social, professional and cognitive identities remain weak, and these weaknesses will remain if their knowledge relies on short-term ad hoc training courses. Planned, common training programmes should be organised as soon as possible. Too many young people are experiencing work as quick frustrating entrances and exits.

- Flexibility does not mean that people must move from one workplace to the next without any career improvement. At the moment, flexibility in the call centre sector seems to be characterised by the ability to perform the same duties in different places whenever needed. It is important to try and find a recognisable path in vocational development for individuals to enable them to combine their own value together with the value they contribute while improving the companies they sometimes work for. A path of this sort may be negotiated within companies, but because of flexibility it should be socially visible and recognisable.

- Call centres are also attracting attention at this time in an era of de-industrialisation. We no longer see thousands of people entering the same premises to do the same job, but we are still witnessing the construction of workplaces with the same characteristics. The use of open-plan offices makes call centres look like factories. The main difference between the two sets of working conditions is that the latter is much cleaner and safer; however, it should be noted that more than half the people are working in very small call
centres with very few seats, where working conditions are not comfortable. Ergonomic and environmental conditions are often very poor. It has to be remembered that one hidden criterion for localisation is the possibility of relaxing safety controls, for instance because staff come from areas of high unemployment and have little bargaining power.

- Furthermore, stress is endemic in call centres because of repetitiveness and tension, and people do not have enough experience and culture to cope. Health and safety must not be taken for granted.

- Call centres focus on communications, but the monitoring and surveillance of performance in call centres means controlling behaviour associated with freedom and privacy. Control means stress because it forces people to choose their words and attitudes according to an external set of rules and values; control means compliance with legal norms and ethical principles. Europe has a wide range of norms and accepted boundaries of privacy: it is a delicate area that needs shared and agreed solutions.

- Localisation is clearly a key issue. Over and above localisation itself, there is stiff competition to attract labour-intensive initiatives. Again, there is a need to find some common rules to make competition fair, and so as not to introduce distortions when balancing the criteria for selecting sites: for instance, exceptional fiscal conditions may be more important than the quality of the workforce.

These actions should be undertaken in a wholly integrated way. A new phase of industrial relations ('negotiating occupation') should be linked to 'employability' and 'adaptability', and a new balance has to be found between 'job policy' and 'employment policy' in which the latter should address the individual workers.

For trade unions, it means setting up a credible scenario so as to harmonise the actions needed to tackle the aforementioned empirical and affordable issues.

The scenario is that of a 'call centre towards telework' aimed at 'modernising work organisation in the digital workplace'. Such a scenario has been already shared with social partners by the EU Commission's Communication 'Strategies for job creation in the Information Society' (7 February 2000). As this document says, this objective should be supported by the 'coverage of telework collective agreements', in other words the specific task entrusted to the Euro-Telework project. Actions to cater for the issues identified in call centres may be integrated within this scenario: they enrich it with specific objectives.

These actions are also consistent with the eEurope 2002 Action Plan, which is linked to working in the knowledge-based economy (Feira European Council, 19-20 June 2000), when it talked of a need to 'support greater flexibility in the workplace, for example, teleworking and part-time working, where appropriate through agreements by Social Partners and backed up by Member States.'
7. REFERENCES

1) In fact, most call centres these days use this technology. A survey conducted by Merchant Ltd (*op.cit.*) of a group of 203 call centres in Australia, South-East Asia, Europe and South Africa showed that ACD is far and away (97%) the most widely used technology.

2) The figures and information are taken from the following:


*Work Opportunities for Women in the Information Society: Call centre teleworking (WOWIS)*, Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1999

*Rethink call centres: growth opportunities in Europe* (a 1999 event sponsored by the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency)

3) The spread of call centres in the UK has been studied and investigated several times over the last few years. Sources and outcomes include the following:

In 1999, the government's Health and Safety Executive analysed the motivations behind claims of high stress levels among call centre agents. It considered the possible effects of working under constant scrutiny and under pressure to meet targets (breaks, including visits to the toilet, are strictly controlled, and shift patterns, noise levels, humidity, seating arrangements and lighting were also taken into account). Comments from the social partners to this initiative were contradictory. An Assistant Secretary at the Scottish Trade Union Congress commented that 'One of the main areas of concern... is the way they are closely monitored by management', while the Executive Director of the Glasgow-based Call Centre Association (300 members nation-wide) made it clear that, 'Companies do their utmost to create the best possible working conditions because it is in our interests that agents feel happy in their work.' (Barry O' Shea, *Investigation to target "sweatshop" call centres*, *Scotland on Sunday*, 18 April 1999)

Fernie & Metcalfe, 1999. This book argues that the 'tyranny of the assembly line' is a Sunday school picnic compared with the control exercised in computer telephony (the advertising brochure for a popular call centre software package is titled 'Total control made easy')

MSF & Royal Sun Alliance, Royal Sun Alliance call centre annualised hours 1999. An agreement for all staff working in call centres to provide flexibility for workers, and also enable the company to have the right number of staff at work at the right time

Jones, Taylor & Bain, 1999. This publication focuses on the attitudes and experiences of trade union members working in financial sector call centres; six locations in Leeds, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Liverpool, and Coventry were
selected. The research represents the first systematic attempt to conduct a national survey of attitudes to work and trade unionism amongst call centre workers

Huws, Denbigh, & O'Regan, 1999. A study into virtual call centres and the opportunities and challenges for teleworkers and employers. The research includes: an Internet survey of 117 call centre managers; in-depth interviews and case studies of virtual call centres; a detailed analysis of the UK labour force survey; and an Internet survey of 261 potential teleworkers

Unison, 1998. A negotiator's guide to good employment practice in call centres. The booklet provides advice on good employment practices, and is based on information collected from surveys and visits by union officers to electricity, gas and multi-utility call centres, where discussions were held with employees, managers, supervisors and trade union representatives. Deregulation in both domestic gas (19m customers) and electricity (26m customers) markets means that commercial pressures are increasing significantly

Bibby, 2000. A report for UNI in three sections: possible approaches to recruitment and organisation, some issues for negotiation, and current and future trends. The report shows that there is a wealth of experience in trade unions around the world to be tapped

4) Indeed, the processes are sometimes integrated at world level: one example is Xerox Customer Service On-Line, whose in Rochester, New York State manages 13 call centres, and employs 800 agents worldwide to assist callers and on-line customers with questions about products including copiers, fax machines and printers.

Xerox's largest call centres operate out of Irving (Texas), St. John's (Canada) and Uxbridge (UK). Agents at Xerox's call centre in Irving answer calls from 7am to 7pm, Central time, Monday to Friday. The centre in St. John's is open weekdays from 8am to 5pm, Atlantic time, and Xerox's other call centres in North America are open weekdays from 8am to 5pm within their local time zones. Agents typically help customers with making their initial purchases, renewing service contracts, and trading old machines in for new machines.

All agents have four-year college degrees and previous sales experience. 'Agents need to have good business savvy, a high energy level and understand the environment,' says Mary Donato, a vice president who oversees Xerox's call centres. 'You do need top performers, people who can sell, but we also need people who can do it [over the Web] without meeting the client face to face.' Xerox call centres use ACD and IVR systems, and specific software for workforce management. In particular, to record and evaluate calls and on-line communication between agents and customers, the company uses a monitoring system from e-talk.

5) A good example is the Netherlands. The Dutch government has worked with temporary employment agencies and training institutes to develop special units that train call centre employees from agent up to supervisor. These job centres actively provide interested job-seekers with information, and aim to guarantee an influx of
high-quality employees. As a result, most job centres have a pool of agents who can be called upon at short notice (job on call).

6) The basic workers’ rights law in Italy (Law No 300 of 1970) bans remote surveillance using audio-visual equipment.

7) An interesting agreement has been signed by the Bell South Company and the Communications Workers of America to regulate call sampling: 'Individual call sampling will not be used to harass an individual or group of employees, nor will be used to create an atmosphere of pressure in the work environment…. When individual call sampling, defined as sampling which targets or is directed at a specific employee, takes place, employees will be given prior notification the day sampling occurs…. Feedback of all calls sampled will be provided to the employee by the end of the day in which the calls were observed…. Such feedback should be constructive, with emphasis on the positive aspects of the employee’s performance…. Employees will not be disciplined as a result of process call sampling on the first occurrence. If, within 18 months, subsequent incidents of gross customer abuse, fraud, or violation of secrecy of communications are observed and the employee can be identified, it will be formally documented and action taken if warranted.‘

8) For instance, Dublin has set up an International Financial Service Centre based on a low corporate tax system and wages that are 20% lower than in London.

9) There was a strike in a call centre near Strasbourg, France, in February 1998. The centre operated as an outsourced basis from France Telecom. After an eight-day strike, the hourly rate was increased from FF 46 to FF 49. Another national one-day strike was organised by British Telecom call centre staff in protest at their working conditions on 22 November 1999. According to the Communication Workers Union (CWU), the strike reflected the 'mounting frustration' at the way BT call centre staff were managed.

10) Recent research by Peter Bain of the University of Stirling contains interesting data on the relationship between the level of unionisation, median total pay and turnover rates in call centres in the USA. Despite some a priori fears, the research comes up with some positive links: 5.8% of turnover in unionised sites and 28.9% in non-unionised sites; and $39,000 median pay in unionised sites as against $21,000 in non-unionised sites.

11) Huws, U, Denbigh, A & O'Regan, S, 1999. This paper also includes an Internet survey of 117 call centre managers, a detailed analysis of the UK labour force, and an Internet survey of 216 potential teleworkers.
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