THE TALK SHOP AND SHOP TALK: EMPLOYMENT AND WORK IN A CALL CENTRE

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*C*all centres represent a blend of old and new employment features that are only partially grasped by existing theoretical alternatives. Labour process theory suggests that call centres are best depicted as new electronic assembly lines of fragmented, low skill service labour. Second-wave post-industrial theory represents call centres as a significant foray into the information/knowledge economy. On the basis of a case study that combines both survey results and on-site observation, the author argues that the sophisticated information technologies that have captured the awe of other investigators have delivered less than total managerial control. Less frequently studied are the novel cultures of employment management that have accompanied the development of call centres and have incorporated information technology into their functioning. These cultures and employee responses to them represent an important, if under-analysed, aspect of call centre operation.

INTRODUCTION

Three major, inter-related changes have impacted upon the contemporary workplace. First, many enterprises have re-defined their focus towards the market and the customer. This has led to a blurring between the production of goods and the provision of services, so that numerous manufacturing firms now define core elements of their business activity as service supply, while the service sector proper is increasingly subject to the same production norming as manufacturing activity, (Cohen & Zysman 1987).[1] Secondly, information technologies have been incorporated in a central fashion into all forms of economic activity, (Hirschhorn 1984; Zuboff 1988; Castells 1996). These powerful tools can simultaneously provide information about productive processes, consumer behaviour, and employee performance in a truly iterative fashion. Thirdly, employment relationships have been subject to re-engineering, with many firms moving to adopt new human relations strategies. Paradigms such as Total Quality Management, Continuous Improvement, High Performance Work Systems and Business Process Re-engineering have attempted to refashion the employment relationship around the new market-service focus, using the informating technologies alluded to above, (Kenney & Florida 1993; Appelbaum & Batt

1994; Cappelli *et al.* 1997). Often such strategic shifts have been accompanied by new principles of work design such as team orientation and broader work responsibilities, as well as new supporting structures, including payment for knowledge systems, gainsharing, and Employee Share Ownership (ESO) packages.

The implications of these changes have sparked renewed interest and debate around the nature of contemporary work and the meanings that front line workers attach to their experiences of work. This study goes to a site where a strong service orientation, the centrality of information technology and a carefully articulated regime of human resource management are in effect a call centre in the financial services/superannuation sector. As is well known, call centre employment has been growing exponentially both domestically and globally. Recent figures (1999) for Australia estimate that about 160 000 workers are employed in 4000 different call centres around the country, (Meredith 1999), while employment growth is calculated to be in the order of 25 per cent per annum domestically and 40 per cent globally, (URCOT 2000: 4). Given these trends, call centre employment has become a significant factor in recent job growth. Examination of call centre work has the potential to shed further light on what is unique (and what isn't) in the contemporary employment relationship.

KNOWLEDGE WORK OR POST-INDUSTRIAL PROLETARIAT?

Two broad theoretical traditions have tried to make sense out of the deployment of informating tools of production in the workplace and accompanying human resource and customer-focused employment strategies. For convenience, we may refer to critical labour process theory and post-industrial theory.

Following from the development of a critical labour process perspective in the 1970s (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979; Littler 1982; Noble 1986; Knights & Willmott 1990), such an approach has been used to analyse the new workplaces of an informationalised capitalism.[2] Although the tools of production and strategies for managing the work effort bargain have changed, the underlying rationale of employing waged labour, according to this approach, has remained constant and ultimately determinative of employment relationships. At bottom, an efficient, economising approach to labour utilisation prevails as a key component of managerial prerogative. This entails correctly matching labour skills with the demands for any given task, while at the same time, setting in train processes that will diminish the overall skill requirements for work and thus the total labour bill. Intelligence gathering with respect to the way that work is performed, redesigning work in such a manner as to simplify well defined, discrete tasks, engineering new technologies that articulate with and promote these tendencies, and constructing human relations structures that inure workers to such a system, remain the defining features of an informational capitalism.

Each of these aspects of the labour process has been identified and accorded different levels of significance in the work of different authors. Braverman gave priority to the pioneering work of Taylor and his advocacy of systematic job study, and the differential piece rate (Braverman 1974). Edwards stressed the

importance of managerial controls that were embedded in physical technologies, as did Noble and Shaiken, (Edwards 1979; Shaiken 1984; Noble 1986), while the adoption of social structures, such as internal labour markets and bureaucratic employment designs that bolstered managerial control, were the object of further analysis by Edwards and others (Jacoby 1985). Overall, such practices were viewed as hastening a loss of skill on the part of workforces, as craft workers were systematically replaced by the ranks of semi-skilled operatives. Job fragmentation, work intensification and, as the sub-title to Braverman's book vividly implies, 'the degradation of labour' were the inevitable outcomes of such discursive practices.[3]

Such trends were not restricted to manufacturing industry alone. As Braverman and others writing from a similar perspective have attempted to show, the fundamental principles of Taylorism, along with the outcomes associated with it, have been applied to all manner of business activity, including both the service sector, and more specifically knowledge work itself (Braverman 1974: 329–30, 338; Kraft 1977, 1979; Beirne *et al.* 1998). Some studies of call centres have highlighted similar features that make for a routine and intensely stress laden work environment. Menzies relates a tale of closely monitored, low skill service workers, the 'human servo-mechanisms' for the new technologies, such as automated call distribution systems, which control them. As she argues, 'As the context for their work is digitized, people are systematically stripped of their capacity for human involvement and judgement. Machine intelligence and logic take over.' (Menzies 1996: 36).

In a less apocalyptic manner, others have described the impact that information technology combined with telephony has had on the work of customer service representatives (CSRs) in industries such as airline transportation (Shalla 1997; Taylor 1998) and banking and finance (Knights & McCabe 1998; Callaghan & Thompson 2001). Deregulation and intensified competition have led to insatiable demands for enhanced productivity, while the formation of call centres has permitted both a spatial centralisation and the growth of a detailed division of labour in customer service work. Importantly, more and more knowledge that is associated with customer service work is embedded within the software (Shalla 1997; Callaghan & Thompson 2000). This, and the pervasiveness of electronic monitoring which information technology has built into it, leads inexorably towards the standardisation of customer service functions, a consequent deskilling of the work and ultimately its de-humanisation. Thus, in spite of counteracting tendencies such as the continuous introduction of new products, fares and tariffs, and changing industry regulations, we find:

> individual output devoid of conceptual content, job dissatisfaction and tight physical and technological surveillance. Closer to Taylor than Hawthorne, the configuration of work, atmosphere and level of surveillance is more akin to a light manufacturing assembly plant than to conventional images of office work (Baldry *et al.* 1998: 175).

While something less than the realisation of an electronic panopticon (Sewell & Wilkinson 1992; Knights & McCabe 1998: 182), images of 'an assembly line

in the head' and 'team Taylorism' have been deemed appropriate metaphors for contemporary call centres (Baldry *et al*. 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999), while others have suggested that the informating capabilities of call centre IT represent recharged forms of technological control (Callaghan & Thompson 2000), along the lines first identified by Edwards (1979). Accordingly, it is the continuities with industrial production that are most important in the labour process of call centres. In this respect, it can be argued that call centre workers are following a contemporary trajectory first traversed by telephonists. What commenced as multi-faceted, autonomous work was quickly routinised under the sway of corporate training programs, standardised scripts and rigid operating procedures and supervision (Martin 1991; Belt 2000). Such a working hypothesis is bolstered by many of the industrial side effects and employment issues that have been reported as being associated with working in a call centre. These include stress, and stress related illnesses, industrial injuries (repetitive motion strains, eye and voice strain), claims over the inadequacy of break time, the frequent use of unpaid overtime work, and embarrassingly high levels of staff turnover (URCOT 2000).

From a critical labour process approach, new occupations and technologies still remain in the hire of capital and it is this social relationship that remains determinative of work place trends. Undoubtedly, there are new twists, new management fads, and new combinations and applications of previous managerial 'solutions' to the problem of maximising the work-effort bargain (Baldamus 1961; Edwards 1986). Nevertheless, the social relationships that are entailed in the valorisation of capital prevent a transcendence of the employment relationships that characterise it. This gives even new jobs in emergent industries a familiar quality as is the case with call centres in the information age. Owing to this, it is argued that call centre work can be understood using the same concepts that have been deployed to analyse the organisation of work in manufacturing industry.

This type of formulation, however, leaves certain issues unresolved. Do workers see things in the manner that has been portrayed above or have informating technologies in combination with new human resource approaches produced new workplaces? Much of the labour process literature has followed Braverman in concentrating upon the so-called objective features of the workplace, while giving short shrift to employee experience in them (Braverman 1974: 26–7; Burawoy 1985: ch.1). Yet, if workers do not experience the social relations of work in the manner depicted by labour process theory, then at best only a partial picture is being served up.

A radically different picture of work in new workplaces such as call centres emerges from what can be termed second wave post-industrial theory. While the early post-industrial themes of industrial sociology were either principally concerned with the impacts of automation on work experience (Blauner 1964; Woodward 1965), or were globalising and speculative in nature, (Bell 1973), later work emerging from this genre has had the benefits of a first hand acquaintance with the deployment of information technologies in the workplace. Such technologies, in the words of one analyst, 'makes both Taylorism and its critique increasingly irrelevant' (Hirschhorn 1984: 66). Instead, working with information technologies invites reorganisation around problem solving work teams. Employees in such an environment of necessity take on broader work

roles, and greater levels of responsibility. The nature of skill changes as non-discursive, tactile knowledge is supplanted with new intellective skills that embrace diagnostic abilities, problem solving skills and social/mediating competencies (Zuboff 1988). As Castells, a foremost convert to post-industrialism, succinctly sums up:

> . . . one fundamental idea emerges: automation, which received its full meaning only with the deployment of information technology, increases dramatically the importance of human brain input into the work process . . . the broader and deeper the diffusion of advanced information technology in factories and offices, the greater the need for an autonomous, educated worker able and willing to program and decide entire sequences of work (Castells 1996: 241).

Empirical investigation of both specific occupations and broader labour force trends purport to support such generalisations. While the initial use of main frame computers in office workplaces is acknowledged to have led to the type of deskilling described in labour process theory, the advent of personal computers and work stations reverses this dynamic by reducing the amount of lower level clerical work. Secretaries are replaced by the administrative officers and CSRs, who assume tasks that were previously associated with middle management and the more routine aspects of professional work (Appelbaum 1987; Baran & Teegarden 1987; Greenbaum 1998; Herzenberg *et al.* 1998). This results in a reintegration of work tasks, expanded ranges of work activity and a general upgrading of formerly clerical jobs, which now often require some form of higher education.

Turning explicitly to call centres, it has been suggested that the new informating technologies are responsible for substantial modifications to the bureaucratic organisation of work model. Variously described as 'customer-oriented bureaucracies' (Korczynski 2001), 'mass customised bureaucracies' (Frenkel *et al.* 1998) and 'attenuated bureaucracies' (Frenkel *et al.* 1999), it is argued that CSRs constitute a semi-professional stratum. While subject to info-normative control (electronic surveillance plus HRM cultures of facilitation and coaching), workers accept these evaluation schemes as fair and unbiased. Offsetting such controls, CSRs enjoy greater levels of work autonomy and the ability to utilise lower and higher order contextual knowledge in their jobs. Overall, '. . . work tasks are less routine and more challenging. . . . workers' discretion has been enlarged', in conditions that are more often associated with knowledge intensive work environments and optimistic forecasts than with the dulling effects of traditional, Taylorised, bureaucratic organisations (Frenkel *et al.* 1998: 961). As a result, employee work satisfaction remains higher in the mass customised bureaucracies of contemporary call centres than in predecessor business organisations, while discretionary work effort also remains in greater evidence. Furthermore, as call centres increasingly mesh with sales activity, the knowledge/skill base of this workforce is expected to increase in the near run.

Organisations, units of capital and work designs move on quickly in the information age. For Frenkel *et al.*, customer service work in attenuated bureaucracies represent a significant departure from the forms of work that were available in the 'old economy' (Frenkel *et al.* 1998). This argument would be more

convincing if old style bureaucratic organisations had actually been included as part of a comparative case study analysis of front line employment. Moreover, entrepreneurial work flows (sales work) and knowledge intensive work represent further moves down the post-industrial road (Frenkel *et al.* 1999). What then should we make of so-called blended call centres which incorporate both customer service and sales/telemarketing work teams, or of workers who are rapidly switched back and forth between the two functions with the aid of automatic switching and dialing technologies? Do sales workers in this context still coincide with the notion of entrepreneurial forms of work organisation as typified by Frenkel *et al.*, or does this represent a significant change in the nature of this type of work? Are entrepreneurial workers losing autonomy and control; are CSRs being upskilled; or if both trends are in evidence, which is the predominating tendency? Along similar lines are CSRs, who deploy interpretative skills, still part of the semi-autonomous workforce, as suggested by Herzenberg *et al.* (1998), once they have become the object of electronic information gathering and remote eavesdropping, or are they the vanguard of a new post-industrial proletariat? In a similar vein, what are we to make of the combinations of above average levels of job satisfaction among CSRs, as reported by Frenkel *et al.* (1999) and rates of labour market churning that are more characteristic of low skill service sector employment or the industrial employment of an earlier era? (Meyer 1981; Frenkel *et al.* 1999).

While it is beyond the scope of one article to provide definitive answers to each of these questions, just raising them provides an indication of the complexity that new occupations and work settings pose for the received theoretical categories that we have. Clearly, existing perspectives need to be measured against the new work place realities such as are exemplified in call centres, which appear to blend occupational and industrial traits, as well as the gender and age profiles of the staff who work in them. The case study which is reported on below was explicitly framed with these broader points in mind. While acknowledging the importance and distinctiveness of service provision in the form of the employee/customer encounter over and against the production of physical commodities (Hockschild 1983, Taylor 1998), attention in this paper is focused on the employment relationship and the *production* of specific outcomes that involve an *immediate* public, such as a number of calls handled per day, successful customer retentions and 'win-backs'.[4] And rather than posing vague questions around levels of work satisfaction, the meaning of which has always posed interpretive difficulties for researchers (Rinehart 1978), the present study is mainly concerned with how workers experience the concrete conditions that are posed by going to work in a call centre. For contemporary CSRs, does working in a call centre entail a move towards a new work paradigm, a ramp into the post-industrial, knowledge based economy that we hear so much about, or perhaps an intensification of trends that have previously been identified with the industrial world?

WORKING AT AUSCALL[5]

Auscall is a stand-alone call centre business. It is a subsidiary of a large Australian bank, operating within the superannuation field. The company administers

superannuation funds for some of the largest private pension carriers and occupational groups in Australia. Auscall operates three national call centres, and employs on average between 115 and 130 workers (depending upon the reporting season) across the three centres. Administration of pension funds is tendered out on contract by the different plans, which cover groups as diverse as nurses and food processing workers. Auscall bids competitively on such tenders, which normally run for a three-year period. Each call centre is responsible for the administration of specific funds on a nation-wide basis. Thus calls come in and go out across Australia. It is one of the larger firms in the superannuation administration business.

The Auscall centre which forms the basis of this study, Auscall-Q is a comparatively new facility. Established as an inbound call centre in 1997, outbound calls were added to business activities two years later. Approximately a year after the addition of the outbound section, in mid 2000, the author was granted access to the centre to carry out a research project on training, skill acquisition, job characteristics and HRM strategies. For the next six months, I made numerous site visits to the Auscall-Q centre. This work entailed numerous open-ended interviews, chiefly with the team leader of in-bound services, who was filling in as Acting Call Centre Manager during part of the research, and took a special interest in the project. Shorter open-ended interviews were conducted with other team leaders as well. These interviews provided context for the design of a self-administered survey at the centre and later helped in the interpretation of responses. Additional context was supplied through spending time in side-by-side listening to both inbound and outbound calls in order to acquire a sense of the types of queries and transactions that formed part of daily working life at the centre. I was also granted permission to sit in on both team meetings and numerous training sessions at the work site. These observational experiences provided greater insight into the structure and administration of HR management at Auscall-Q, around training functions (e.g. types of material covered in training and typical modes of delivery), as well as glimpses of team operation and culture. Further background information was provided in the form of extensive documentary evidence on the current continuous improvement program that the centre had initiated, termed 'Simply Better', as well as samples of the electronic data that was daily collected on employee performance. More informal, but no less valuable time, was spent with workers in the centre's lunchroom and at social functions that Auscall organised for its employees, such as noontime picnics. Here, I would use such opportunities to further query employees about the nature of the calls that they were receiving or making and the type of information that they were being asked to disseminate.

This ethnographic work also served both as input and follow-up to the construction of a self-administered survey that was conducted as part of the study at Auscall-Q. Following pre-testing at another call centre, workers were asked to complete a survey that included responses to 105 questions that were designed by the author specifically for call centre CSRs. Out of a then-current workforce of close to 40 non-managerial employees, 35 completed surveys were returned. Just over two-thirds of the sample (68.6 per cent) were female employees. The age profile of the responding workforce was spread out remarkably evenly, with

54 per cent falling in the 18 to 34 year-old range and the remaining 46 per cent composed of 35 to 55 year-olds. Most workers (92 per cent) were employed full-time at Auscall-Q, but a significant proportion were on casual work contracts (44 per cent). The use of full-time casual labour is thus quite considerable at this centre. It dovetails with the uncertainty of client demand that is part of an on-going competitive tendering process and the attendant strategy of minimising redundancy pay-outs when staff are laid off.

Indicative of the novelty of call centre employment, 59 per cent of the sample indicated this was their first experience in such a work setting, while exactly half of the sample had been employed at this centre for no more than 12 months. The specific nature of this labour market is partially revealed in the way in which employment at Auscall-Q was acquired. A large majority (71.4 per cent) obtained their position either through a temporary work agency or through referral from an employment agency. Relatively little hiring takes place through either general job applications, or educational placements.

The workforce blending that seems to be occurring in call centre employment is also evident from the educational profile of the sample. Just under a quarter (23.5 per cent) of the sample had either some secondary education, or had finished high school, while exactly the same proportion had graduated from a university. Altogether, just over a third of the sample had acquired some university education or had graduated from a university, while exactly the same number had either attended or completed TAFE training.[6] Finally, 20 per cent of the sample indicated that they were currently members of a trade union. In all instances this was the Financial Services Union.

It needs to be emphasised that the total sample size in this study is not large enough to establish definitive relationships at an acceptable level of statistical significance. Nevertheless, research on call centres is still in its infancy and a case study approach such as the one employed here is capable of producing highly suggestive descriptive results. These can have an important bearing upon the important theoretical issues raised in the previous section and help to craft future research.

Organisational structure at Auscall revolves around in-bound customer service teams that are dedicated to specific superannuation funds. At the time of the study twenty CSRs were dedicated to the largest fund that Auscall-Q serviced, while another six were responsible for a number of smaller funds. In addition, one team, composed of five members, was responsible for providing 'customer care', a euphemism for retaining corporate and small business clients for specific funds through the placement of outbound calls, and one team of four agents was in charge of written correspondence, faxes and emails. Employment at the centre could range from about 25 staff to up to 40 workers, depending upon the timing of statement periods and the associated levels of call volume demand. As previously mentioned, at the time of interviewing the total work-force size approximated the latter figure.

As might be imagined, the call centre receives a variety of inquiries both from employers, who, since 1987, must establish superannuation accounts for each employee, and from workers who have questions pertaining to their own

Table 1 *Indication of job autonomy and skill (per cent [n = 35])*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My job here is mainly routine; it involves doing the same things over and over again	14.3 (5)	62.9 (22)	–	22.9 (8)	–
This is the most skilled job that I have ever held	2.9 (1)	20.0 (7)	5.7 (2)	51.4 (18)	20.0 (7)
This job makes full use of my education and experience	– (0)	31.4 (11)	8.6 (3)	37.1 (13)	22.9 (8)
I am satisfied with the opportunities that this job gives me to make use of my skills	– (0)	50.0 (17)	14.7 (5)	29.4 (10)	5.9 (2)

individual accounts. Typical calls, that the author was party to while 'double jacked' into CSR telephones included such items as the following:

- requests from employers to have employees removed from the employer's account after they had left their jobs
- questions about tracking down employer contributions that had gone astray
- notifications of changes of address from employees
- questions about accessing individual employee accounts during periods of unemployment[7]

Agents are expected to provide or track down the information the client is requesting through the use of computer records and make any changes to the client's file that are required. In other words, conversing with a stranger over business details, accessing computer files, and inputting new information into those files and providing clients with the services they require are all part of one nearly seamless job action.

Despite this, most agents do not consider that their work offers much variety. Figures from the survey speak for themselves: 77 per cent strongly agreed/agreed that their jobs were mainly routine—'doing the same things over and over again' (see Table 1). Only a quarter of the sample thought that their work generated a lot of variety, while two-thirds indicated that it was not possible to vary their own personal work effort (working harder for some periods and easier for others). While slightly over half (51 per cent) stated that the employer's expectations regarding the pace of work were reasonable and large numbers attested to occasionally (i.e. a few times per week) having to respond to difficult or tricky client queries, initial impressions are of routine work that is lacking in significant task variation or self determined variance.

These results are all the more telling in so far as Auscall-Q did not use scripting in its customer service functions. In other forms of service work (e.g. fast food, door-to-door sales), the argument has been advanced that workers may actually prefer scripting (Leidner 1993). Rather than increasing work alienation, close scripting may render work tasks easier and more efficient and thus is preferred on these grounds. This thesis may have some validity in face-to-face employee/client interactions, but there is little support for it in a call centre setting. When asked about scripting, an overwhelming majority of Auscall-Q respondents (93.5 per cent) stated they were against the introduction of scripted telephone exchanges. Most likely the use of scripts was correctly identified with a loss of the form of job control that agents still exercise (see below).

This impression of routine and rationalised work is strengthened when workers are asked about the training and skills associated with CSR work. Call centres, like other information-based settings, have a reputation for having institutionalised a culture of training. Virtually all workers, whether they had previous call centre experience or tertiary level (e.g. community college/TAFE training) in call centre work, received training at Auscall. However, initially most workers did not receive any more than two weeks of training which was nearly equally divided between classroom based and on the job learning. For most, the critical area covered by this training had to do with specific product knowledge

(i.e. information about a specific superannuation fund, as well as the legislative environment that regulated the product), followed by the acquisition of software know-how pertaining to the systems in use at Auscall.[8]

It is also the case that practically all workers undergo additional training after they have been in their jobs with Auscall and it is perhaps this factor which gives rise to the notion of training cultures in a knowledge economy. The centre employs a dedicated, full-time trainer, training sessions are intense, fast paced affairs and workers are clearly concerned with their results on post-training tests, as witnessed by the anxieties that certain employees manifested in the researchers' presence.[9] As with in-take training, however, further instruction is mainly measured in hours rather than days or weeks, while the focus remains on updating product and directly related legislative knowledge. Most commonly, workers reported ten further training sessions, with typical durations of one to two hours each. Although definitely more than was typical for previous generations of manufacturing workers, a mean of between 10 and 20 hours of additional training could hardly be considered constitutive of a new knowledge based economy.

In assessing the skills that are associated with new occupations like CSRs there are dual dangers. Critical labour process theory could be charged with fixating upon an inflexible notion of skill (Russell 1999: ch.5), namely the types of skill that have traditionally been exercised by male craft workers (Jenson 1989). Using this as a benchmark, it is likely that other forms of labour will be viewed as de-skilled. This could possibly lead to a denigration of more contemporary forms of work or ignoring the emergence of new skill demands. On the other hand, post-industrial enthusiasts may inflate their judgements of what is actually required in new occupations by simply equating skill with required levels of educational attainment for job entrance (Livingstone 1999). In this instance, skills are conflated with the credentialism of gate keeping functions, while the latter may not have a great deal to do with actual work demands. Furthermore, as we have already seen, there is no apparent educational benchmark at this workplace. Levels of educational attainment vary from less than secondary school completion to university graduation in similar proportions. It is for these reasons that we have decided to let workers speak for themselves on the issue of skill in call centres.

Elaborating on why (s)he does not plan to stay at Auscall for any length of time, one employee states: '[this is] not a real job—makes no difference to the world, I can achieve so much more'.

Although few workers provided as frank an assessment of their situation, many concurred with these sentiments. In fact, 71 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their current CSR job at Auscall was the most skilled job that they had held in their work history (Table 1). Nearly as many (60 per cent) strongly/disagreed that their current job was making full use of their education and experience, although there was greater variability as to whether employment at Auscall-Q provided satisfaction, with opportunities to use skills (also Table 1).

More than likely, these evaluations of their work had something to do with a majority of Auscall-Q workers (53 per cent) not planning to remain with the

company for more than three years. Pursuing further education in the hope of finding better work, the routine and boring nature of the job, the lack of employment security and an absence of opportunities for advancement were all important reasons that were cited by those who foresaw exiting their employment with the company in the near term (Table 2). With the exception of the precarious employment/job security issue that is inherent in the outsourced work that the centre performs on behalf of its clients, the other reasons most frequently mentioned all relate to the absence of future challenging career paths and additional skill enhancement. Interestingly, current wage levels do not seem to be as much of a factor in disenchantment, although they can hardly said to be high.[10]

The evidence reported on here, whether on employee evaluations of different aspects of their jobs, or on assessments of the overall demands and skills that the positions require, do not confirm the optimistic forecasts and hopes of post-industrial treatments. Rather, the results so far point to the saliency of labour process theory as a descriptor of call centre employment. Call centre jobs, at least at Auscall, would appear to offer less than pundits of the informationalised knowledge economy would allow for.

MANAGING A CALL CENTRE: SOCIABILITY AND INDIVIDUATION

Given the now mandatory nature of superannuation funds, and the thousands of employer subscribers (over 50 000 employers in the largest fund that Auscall administered), the potential volume of calls from both employers and employees could be immense. Indeed, this is the main challenge facing management in the call centre work environment: the balancing of staff to call volume. The management challenge, as we can term it, entails different dimensions. First, an adequate number of staff has to be available to cover for elastic call volumes. As previously noted, this occasions the use of considerable amounts of casual labour. Secondly, those workers who are available have to be sufficiently motivated to provide what management deems as satisfactory levels of service. In one sense this is similar to management's role in any continuous process or mechanised

Table 2 *Reasons for not undertaking a long term employment commitment with the company (per cent [n = 35])*

	Most important	Second most important	Third most important
Dissatisfaction with wages	5.7 (2)	2.9 (1)	14.3 (5)
Routine/boring nature of job	14.3 (5)	14.3 (5)	2.9 (1)
Lack of employment security	22.8 (8)	2.9 (1)	2.9 (1)
Lack of opportunities for advancement	–	14.3 (5)	2.9 (1)
Unfair treatment by management	–	2.9 (1)	–
Stressful nature of job	–	–	5.7 (2)
Pursue further education	5.7 (2)	–	–
Other	2.9 (1)	–	–

process—obtaining and paying for just the right amount of labour to get the requisite work done, or what is known as line balance.

However, the issue is rendered more complex in the call centre setting by virtue of the fact that individual workers are responsible for whole units of production (i.e. complete call transactions). As a result, the assembly line image of call centre work (Taylor & Bain 1999) and references to full technological control (Callaghan & Thompson 2000) are misleading. While call centres have 'production' targets, for instance a call handling time of three to four minutes at Auscall-Q, as well as response rates that see 80 per cent of all in-bound calls answered in under 40 seconds[11] ultimately it is individual workers who determine the pace of each job cycle. The automatic call distribution system simply parcels the work out to available (i.e. unoccupied) agents. This is precisely where the analogy with assembly line systems of production breaks down. Although work is delivered by the equivalent of an assembly line, once in the hands of the employee, considerable time discretion is exercised in completing the job. Indeed, once one call has been processed the agent must signal that they are available for another job by switching the phone back to the ready mode. This specific mode of working, where jobs are automatically delivered to CSRs, who then exercise control over the duration of the job and provide a cue for the line to deliver the next job, explains what at first sight seems like a strange paradox. That is, agents both admit to having little or no ability to modulate their work over the working day, yet in large numbers report a reasonable pace of work and an ability to exercise some control over that pace. As previously noted, two-thirds of respondents said it was not possible to vary work intensity. Still, 43 per cent of the sample indicated that they 'sometimes' chose the speed at which they worked, while 46 per cent said they 'usually' or 'always' decided on work pace. Overall, 63 per cent of respondents reported on expectations regarding the pace of work to be either 'reasonable' or 'undemanding'. We can make sense of these apparently conflicting responses by acknowledging two aspects of the work. First, CSRs must be available to receive or make calls by being logged on to the system at all times (excluding breaks). They are quite literally tied to the phones and have little discretion over this situation. This is the locus of managerial control. However, once an inbound call is answered or an outbound call is made, considerable control is displayed over the task and its duration. This is the domain of employee autonomy. Together, the locus of managerial control and the domain of employee autonomy sit, ambiguously, side-by-side.

Thus, although it is the case that management has work targets, whether they are fulfilled or not is a matter of some contingency that supervisors try their utmost to bring under control. In this effort overhead neon call display boards provide immediate and continuous real time data on target fulfillment, including data on agent availability, agents logged off the phones, number of calls waiting, and the length of the oldest call. Each corporate fund team has such information displayed overhead in their open work areas. Most workers consider such displays to be informative and useful (61 per cent), rather than stress inducing (4 per cent), a further indication that CSRs do exert some control over their labour. In addition to the overhead neon displays, inbound CSRs at Auscall-Q have red

reminder lights attached to their telephones. These are activated and begin flashing whenever call queues reach a certain length (three or more calls waiting in the queue). Interestingly, staff find these devices to be more stress inducing, (perhaps because they are more personalised) than the overhead displays. In one display of personal aggrievement that was reported, a worker found the device to be annoying enough to put a piece of tape permanently over it so that she could not see it.

Custom reports are generated on the overall level of service performance on an on-going basis. The technology allows for the tracking of customer complaints regarding alleged rudeness, the giving out of incorrect information, or other customer generated criticisms. Information technology also provides encompassing detail on the work performance of each individual CSR. Thus daily agent statement reports record, to the second, total 'talk time', availability time (time spent waiting for incoming calls), average calls taken/made per hour, and average talk and work handling (i.e. post-call, wrap up time).[12] Spreadsheets are also produced on a daily basis that provide data on call volumes and individual worker availability for each half-hour of the working day.[13] A quick glance indicates who is working at any given time, and whether there is a surplus or deficit of labour-power given the level of call volume.

Outbound 'care' workers also have work targets ascribed to them as do the written correspondence team. For the former, this is defined as a certain benchmark of daily calls completed. For the correspondence team, benchmarks have been established for turnaround times for emails (1 day), faxes (2 days), and postal correspondence (5 days).[14] Outbound work involves two inter-related dimensions: disseminating information to employer policyholders; and information gathering from clients. Informing corporate clients of new products, changes to superannuation legislation, new processing options such as e-commerce, and new rates and tariffs defines part of the outbound agent's job. Just as importantly though, workers are expected to engage in 'intelligence operations' for Auscall in regard to levels of client satisfaction with the plan they belong to, their willingness to use new, paperless systems of record keeping and assorted other matters. During my observations, as part of their 'wrap up work' (post-call work completion), each agent completed a short (4 question) survey regarding the client's use of new on-line services that Auscall was offering.[15] Thus 'intelligence gathering' through the probing of clients and organisation of this information in useful ways is an important aspect of outbound work. Owing to this dimension of the job, as well as the variability of inbound customer inquiries, the work cannot be scripted. Rather, workers are expected to use their interpretative skills in providing both advice to clients and accurate consumer feedback to management. Furthermore, it is anticipated that with changes to the relevant pension legislation, this aspect of call centre work will grow in complexity. For example, the introduction of 'investor's choice' type schemes will allow individual employees to direct their employer funded policies to specific plans of their own selection.

The work of a CSR is thus divided into a number of discrete tasks that constitute a job cycle. For outbound workers, some degree of preparation is required before the call is placed, such as acquaintance with the client's file, and up-to-

date knowledge of current Auscall product campaigns. Actual talk time is viewed by management as the most important component of the work. While not necessarily wanting to maximise talk time for individual calls, the goal is to have workers available and engaged for as much of the day as possible. Finally, 'wrap time' includes whatever follow-up work is required in the aftermath of the call, such as adding new information, or deleting stale information from customer files, as well as sending information and required forms out to clients. The drive at Auscall, and other call centres, is to minimise both preparation time and wrap time. Some centres, although not Auscall, have installed automatic dialing technologies in order to reduce the time that outbound agents are off the phone in preparation mode.[16] These systems randomly place calls to clients and bring their files up on to the computer screen for the agent, so that as one call is being completed another is being automatically prepared.

Dealing with wrap time poses more of a problem for management. While workers are conducting wrap up work their phones are switched off and they are unavailable to take calls. During this period, valuable information may be added to client files that can add substantially to better service and future savings. CSRs report on the advantages of creating and maintaining informative and accurate client files.[17] The problem, however, is that management has no way of knowing whether service enhancing labour is being performed during this time. In attempting to reduce wrap time by getting workers to combine it with talk time, supervisors are trying to diminish a potential 'fiddle' that even the automated call distribution system cannot put a stop to. Thus, even the fine art of measurement that call centres have developed to near perfection, has its apparent limits. Given that, the interesting question is: how do workers respond to such systems of electronic performance management?

The largest proportion of workers at Auscall-Q (46 per cent) considered that their individual performance statistics were 'somewhat' important to them. Just over a third (37 per cent) noted that this data was very important to them, while 14 per cent did not consider it to be important (Table 3). A considerable component of the work force (63 per cent) experiences conflict between providing high levels of customer service and meeting the volume of call demands, an experience that is apparently common both in other call centres and other domains of service oriented work (White 1990; Leidner 1993; Frenkel *et al.* 1999). However, contrary to the goals of management, this conflict is not being resolved through significant reductions in post-talk follow-up time. Rather, agents mainly look at reducing their talk time with individual customers, a strategy that would probably not be the first option for managers.

It is possible then to concur with those who have noted that while electronic performance evaluation is an impressive tool (especially on paper!), it is not a sufficiently encompassing managerial strategy in its own right, let alone a panoptic ideal. The largest proportion of Auscall workers attach only some importance to their individual call statistics, while asserting some discretion over the pace at which they handle individual calls. Supervisors, meanwhile, have their suspicions that clever employees have found holes in the system of electronic monitoring, and through such practices as covering for one another, are able to

Table 3 *Technological control and HRM strategies: employee responses (per cent [n = 35])*

Technological control

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not applicable
1. Importance of daily/weekly work statistics to you	37.1 (13)	45.7 (16)	14.3 (5)	2.9 (1)
	Upsetting	**Indifferent**	**Unsure**	**Not applicable**
2. Responses to silent monitoring	11.4 (4)	85.7 (30)	2.9 (1)	–

HRM strategies

	Helpful	Disciplinary	Other	Not applicable
1. Responses to coaching	71.4 (25)	20.0 (7)	–	8.6 (3)
	Fun/enjoyable	**Indifferent**	**Don't like**	**Other**
2. Responses to management organised competitions	51.7 (15)	37.9 (11)	3.3 (1)	6.9 (2)
	Important	**Not important**		
3. Importance of management organised social activities	53.1 (17)	46.9 (15)		
	Very important	**Somewhat important**	**Not very important**	
4. Importance of other employees for own work	55.9 (19)	32.4 (11)	11.8 (4)	
	Keep knowledge to self	**Show supervisor**	**Unsure**	
5. If I discovered a way to do my job more efficiently would:	8.8 (3)	76.5 (26)	14.7 (5)	

Table 3 *Continued*

HRM strategies

	If needed by employer	If convenient	Would not agree
6. Willingness to work longer hours at ordinary rates of pay	47.1 (16)	41.2 (14)	11.8 (4)
	Normal job expectation	**Inconvenience**	**Being taken advantage of**
7. Feelings about staying after work to finish a job	78.2 (18)	21.7 (5)	– (0)

take non-sanctioned breaks that go unrecorded on individual performance records. It is for these reasons that call centre culture attains an additional significance in its own right. Indeed, informating technologies have become an embedded feature of this culture.

Consider, for example, the agent who is not meeting the targets as bench-marked. In the first instance, the employee will likely receive, in the parlance of the job, 'coaching' from a supervisor. While the critical social scientist may have serious reservations about this technique, viewing it as part of the social appar-atuses of control, only 20 per cent of the Auscall respondents viewed coaching as a disciplinary device; a large majority (71 per cent) took it as a measure of employer helpfulness (Table 3). The practice of silent or remote monitoring (surveillance) which is also used in employee coaching, garners very similar reactions. This practice is rendered possible by the informating technology, but it has been incorporated into the social/HR apparatus of control. In this case, supervisors covertly tap into agents' calls and then complete a call monitoring document.[18] Silent monitoring techniques are used both to periodically 'measure' quality, while recorded calls may later be critically reviewed by super-visors and agents in one-on-one sessions. When questioned about their responses to silent monitoring only 11 per cent of the respondents stated they were bothered by the practice; an overwhelming 86 per cent were indifferent towards it (Table 3).

If we were to regard these various techniques of evaluation and monitoring to be the information age's equivalent to the time and motion studies of industrialism, then the important distinction is to be found *not in the objective conditions of work, but in the responses to them*. It is an intriguing question as to why workers view the new technologies of control so benignly.[19]

One feature of new workplaces, as epitomised by Auscall, is the attention that goes into the construction of what can be termed the *sociable workplace* (Kinnie *et al*. 2000). The importance that workers attach to the social and convivial aspect of working life has long been recognised (Mayo 1933). Outside of early examples of employer paternalism, however (Edwards 1979: ch.2), this has long been left as a zone of suzerainty for workers (Burawoy 1979). A rich sub-text to the formal rules and regulations of the workplace is created by informal work group cultures that employees create autonomously for them-selves. These have been shown to provide both recognition and validation in working life (Roy 1952, 1954).

At Auscall, this is changing. Managers put considerable effort into the construction of games, competitions, awards etc., all in an effort to make the workplace 'fun'. On most visits, the Auscall-Q centre would be festooned with balloons, happy faces, and streamers. Events were regularly produced and staged as part of these initiatives—sloppy dress days, best dress-up photo competitions and the like. Stars and chocolates were awarded each day to the workers with the best call statistics (e.g. the highest call volumes minus call handling time), which in turn translated into rewards such as gift vouchers and cinema tickets. While researchers may look askance at such practices, finding the idea of giving 'stars' and 'happy faces' to adults demeaning, workers themselves are

more divided over such strategies. While participation in such events remained voluntary, over half of the workforce at Auscall (53 per cent) considered such activities to be an important aspect of their jobs, while just about the same proportion agreed that they made the work more 'fun and enjoyable' (Table 3).[20] Overall, recognition and positive acknowledgment from management was cited most frequently as the second most important factor in making Auscall a reasonable place to work.[21] These aspects of call centre work would seem to take us away from either bureaucratic or mass customised bureaucratic models of work organisation that have been referenced in both labour process and post-industrial analysis (Frenkel *et al*. 1998, 1999; Callaghan & Thompson 2000; Korczynski 2001). Rather, it can be argued that *manufactured sociability* represents something quite different, a unique development that appears to be associated not only with Auscall, but with call centre culture more generally in what one manager has aptly referred to as the 'fun factor'. At Auscall, just over half of respondents stated that such activities constituted an important component in how they perceived their work. That such a management strategy is not defined as trivialising, as it might have been in other work settings, is significant. Also important though is the recognition that management would like these figures to be even higher and will no doubt act accordingly to invent future, additional activities with the intention of increasing interest in the job. Perhaps the advent of manufactured sociability can be viewed as compensation for the absence of many of the features normally associated with bureaucratic strategies of control. In other words, in the absence of long term job commitments from employers and the associated internal labour markets and life time career paths that accompany such commitments, the contrived sociability of the modern workplace may serve as something of a palliative for optimistic managers. Such measures would definitely seem to dovetail with larger cultural shifts that celebrate impermanence, the present, and the fun event (Sennett 1999).

A critical manifestation of the sociable workplace phenomenon involves the deployment of team organisation in call centres. Once again, their main role does not revolve around the technical organisation of work, which is highly individualised, but rather around the construction of a specific workplace culture. An indication of the effectiveness of work team culture was forthcoming when employees were queried about what they would do if they discovered a way of performing their job more efficiently. Over three-quarters of the interviewees indicated that they would have no hesitation in informing their supervisor; 9 per cent of the sample said they would keep the knowledge to themselves and 15 per cent were unsure as to how they would proceed (Table 3). Probed further as to why they would be willing to share such information with supervisors, aiding other members of their work teams was the most frequently cited response. Rationales such as the following were common:

- So that the whole team could benefit from my input
- Share the knowledge with co-workers; all other members of the team could benefit from it

- If I felt that it was a major issue that affects the organisation everyone will benefit
- To try to make fellow team members' jobs easier
- To improve every staff member's workload efficiency
- It benefits others and myself; also gives me a good name

Testaments such as these reflect just what a powerful unifier an ethos of team culture is at Auscall. It is from this angle that the so-called 'fun factor' should be viewed, that is as a social support for a form of team-based organisation that is not required by the technology in use.

The roots that a team-based discourse have sunk in this workplace are also manifested in other respects. For example, when queried about the importance of other workers (i.e. team members) to their own work, 56 per cent rated co-workers as very important, while 12 per cent said they were not very important. It is also the case that when workers are experiencing difficulty with particular information requests, their first port of call is most likely to be a team member (37.5 per cent) as opposed to a supervisor (25 per cent).

The construction of a team ethos and the encouragement of discretionary work effort may work in other ways that rebound to the benefit of the company. For example, many employees occasionally (once or twice per month) have to stay after quitting time in order to complete work tasks. At Auscall-Q they mainly do this without receiving extra pay. Most (two-thirds) consider this to be a 'normal job expectation'. The largest proportion (47 per cent) would also agree to work longer hours at regular rates of remuneration (i.e. without receiving over-time payment), or would make other sacrifices to help management out under special circumstances, such as end of year rushes, or during abnormally high periods of customer demand. These are certainly indicators that the new HR approaches have had important influences in this work setting. Although far from totally winning 'hearts and minds', work teams that operate within a culture of manufactured sociability have proceeded to move beyond 'grudging compliance' in the work effort bargain (Scott 1994; Edwards *et al*. 1998). Many workers are less than enamoured with call centre work—and consequently intend leaving—however, while employed at Auscall they engage with the structures that managers have devised, intent on making the best of it.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study has shown that call centre work involves both important components of industrial labour and new dimensions that require rethinking and further analysis. It is precisely this blending of old and new that renders call centres challenging, contradictory sites to study. In terms of the actual conditions of work—required skills, training, job cycles and the nature of the work—we are still a long way away from the knowledge based economy that post-industrial theory postulates. Call centre work, as described by those who do it, more closely approximates the fragmented world that critical labour process theory depicts. While it is undoubtedly the case that jobs are more holistic than the extremes of the manufacturing assembly line, and that CSRs exercise more control over

these jobs, work remains routine, and the 'training culture' is minimalist rather than non-existent.

What does appear to have changed in important ways is managerial strategies for inuring a more diverse workforce to these conditions and the outcome of such efforts. These information workers are far more indifferent to the new forms of monitoring and evaluation than previous generations of industrial workers seem to have been. In the absence of a strong trade union presence, collective identities, to the extent they exist, are created around corporate teams to serve corporate ends. Resistance has not been banished from this workplace; individual fiddles that are practised by a few and intentions to exit on the part of many, dispel myths of total harmony and fun. It is equally apposite, however, to recognise the deep roots that team cultures, manufactured sociability and temporisation have sunk into the operation of the contemporary call centre.

NOTES

1. A particularly vivid example of this is a potash mining company that the author had previously studied. Potash is the main ingredient in commercial fertilisers. At the time, this company was in the process of re-defining itself as an agro-industrial service firm (Russell 1999: 92, 99).

2. It needs to be recognised that labour process theory does not stand for one unitary position, but rather embodies a complex and rich debate on the nature of the capitalist labour process (Knights & Willmott 1990). For the purposes of this paper though, critical labour process theory is treated as a paradigm, in so far as subscribers do share common positions on a number of key items, including a rejection of the technological determinism that had characterised early post-industrial theory, a focus on the social purposes attached to production (the valorisation of capital) and an emphasis on the over-riding importance of managerial control in realising the objectives of production.

3. Where scientific management was slower to be adopted, such as in Britain, where a long tradition of 'unscientific management' (Edwards *et al.* 1998) held sway, labour process theorists have given greater emphasis to both the role of worker resistance to managerial designs on the labour process and, correspondingly, to alternative and more pluralistic modes of regulating the labour process (Trist *et al.* 1963; Friedman 1977, 1990; Littler 1982, 1990; Burawoy 1985; Edwards 1986; Lazonick 1990).

4. This is the term that is frequently encountered in call centres that refers to the work of actively winning former customers back from competitors.

5. Auscall is a fictitious name given by the author to the call centre that forms the basis of this study.

6. TAFE stands for Technical and Further Education. These institutions are similar in nature to community colleges or technical institutes. Programs in call centre operations are currently offered at one local TAFE.

7. Site visit, 20 June 2000.

8. The modal figure for the number of software programs used by CSRs at Auscall was three.

9. Auscall-Q training session, 23 October 2000.

10. Average salary figures for Australian call centres were pegged at $US17 000 in 1998. That same year, CSR labour costs in the urban area in which this study was conducted were recorded at $A25 000 to $A27 000 per annum (Hays 1998). More recent figures give a salary range of from $A27 500 to $A36 000 for CSRs based on a market survey of salaries conducted in 2000–1 across Australia (ACTUa,b).

11. Interview, Auscall-Q Acting Manager, 20 June 2000.

12. Auscall-Q Queue Report, 26 May 2000; Agent Statement Report, 19 June 2000. Similar data are also generated at the team level, Auscall-Q Team Report, 19 June 2000.

13. Auscall-Q, 22 June 2000.

14. Interview, Auscall Outbound Team Leader, 5 July 2000.

15. Site visit, 20 June 2000.

16. The outbound team at Auscall was too small to warrant investment in automatic dialing technology.

17. Interview with in-bound worker, 20 June 2000.

18. Calls were not tape recorded at Auscall-Q, although at other call centres that the author is familiar with, phone calls are unobtrusively taped and temporarily archived.

19. For example, neither at Auscall-Q, nor in any of the other call centre studies reviewed does it appear that group production norms have been tacitly created by work groups as in the classical studies of industrial sociology (Roy 1952, 1954; Burawoy 1979).

20. Strategies for introducing fun into work included not forcing workers to have fun. Such games were also staggered over the work week in attempts to keep absenteeism down. At Auscall, participation in such activities had no bearing on pay outcomes.

21. Customer appreciation was cited most frequently as the most important factor in providing job satisfaction.

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