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FROM BLACK-AND-WHITE TO SHADES OF GREY: RESEARCH OF CALL CENTRE EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

Call centres are a growing phenomenon worldwide. These have prompted extensive research especially from those concerned with the labour processes and employment practices used in these workplaces. Much of the call centre literature is based on comparative research, attempting to analyse the employment environment and making claims about call centre work in general. However, the classification of call centres is not simple and straightforward and the mainly comparative nature of the call centre research is problematic because of this complexity. Many of the comparative studies do not take in the wider perspectives of the organisation, the location, the sector or the division of labour. This paper presents findings from six New Zealand case studies chosen to represent the diversity of the New Zealand call centre sector. The analysis of the findings shows mixed evidence regarding employment outcomes but clearly demonstrates that work in call centres can be very positive for many of the women who work there.

Introduction

The world wide growth of call centres has attracted the attention of an impressive number of academic researchers who are largely critical of the labour process applied and the type of employment created in call centres. Most of the research tends to paint call centre work as either black or white, with analyses drawing on what has been termed positive-negative viewpoints (Hunt, 2004), or 'optimist-pessimist' perspectives (Thompson, forthcoming). Women make up around 70% of the call centre workforce in developed countries (Lamer, 2002; Singh and Pandey, 2005) but the international research demonstrates that there is limited evidence of women developing career paths. Instead it seems that traditional barriers prevent their progress.

Based on a case study methodological approach, this paper will present evidence of a different story. It shows that women *can* achieve significant career path

development in New Zealand call centres. Our different findings raise a key question: does the overwhelmingly negative research conducted elsewhere accurately depict the labour process? The paper addresses this question in a way that will inform those interested in the labour process of frontline service workers. Furthermore, the paper will provide an explanation as to why the prevailing categorisation of the call centre research is inherently problematic.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review notes the broad categorisation of the call centre literature as either negative or positive findings. The limited research on the position of women and gendered career paths is also noted. Second, a discussion of the role of technology and labour process theory describes the potential for call centre technology to both de-skill and up-skill. Third, it is shown how most comparative

analyses fail to take into account the context (locational, market or industry sector). Fourth, our New Zealand findings show that a range of employment outcomes is possible and, in particular, the paper highlights the positive employment outcomes. Finally, it is suggested that recent changes to HR practices in call centres are probably associated with contextual factors.

Negative Images Abound

Call centres have been defined in a number of ways but one definition that fits well with the New Zealand context is given by Australian researcher Russell (2006: 94): 'operations with five or more seats and utilising computer-driven call distribution systems'. Call centre work have stimulated significant levels of academic research, in part, because of the expansive growth in the number of call centres. In Australia, it is claimed that call centres employ more people than in mining, textiles, printing and publishing, food and beverage production or manufacture of cars (ABS 2004 Yearbook). In the UK, it was predicted by the Managing Director of Sitel that call centres would provide more work than the car manufacturing and mining industries put together (Demaret, Quinn, and Grumiau, 1999).¹ Some of the academic interest in call centres is generated because they represent a new technology application which impacts on employment, thereby changing labour processes and the ways companies interact with their customers (see below).

More recently, call centres have also started to feature in debates about globalisation as companies have located them in countries where the cost of labour is low, for example in India, Philippines, South Africa and Malaysia (Bathgate, 2006; de Jong, 2006; Heyman, Norman, Atlas, and Grossman, 2004; Munro, 2006; Sator, 2006). The growth of outsourcing to India has led to increased media attention and a whole range of issues - from financial scares to gender issues - have recently been cited in newspapers and on national television (Dhillon, 2006; Sezesny and Stahlberg, 2000; Smith and Morra, 1994).

Generally, the international research portrays call centres as being examples of 'bad jobs'. Negative metaphors or images are used to describe them. These range from: technically controlling (Edwards, 1979) 'panoptical prisons' or the 'new sweatshops of the future' (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998), controlling bureaucracies with conflicting relational and efficiency values (Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski, and Shire, 1998), 'assembly lines in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999), skilled and unskilled work (Batt, 2000), and places where normative values are used to develop and control the right attitude to service delivery (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; 2002). The latter study was supported by Houlihan (2000; 2001; 2004) who noted that the adoption of organisational culture and beliefs could lead to heavily socialised staff. Call centres have also been found as workplaces where the employees attempt to resist controls imposed by managerial regimes (Bain, Taylor, Gilbert, and Gall, 2004; Houlihan, 2004; van den Broek, 2004).

Research on gender and women in call centres demonstrates they have limited career paths despite women's numerical dominance of the sector (Belt, 2002; Belt, Richardson, and Webster, 2000; Belt, Richardson, and Webster, 2002; Belt, Richardson, Webster, Tijdens, and Klaveren, 2000). As the call centre approach seeks to move from a transactional to a relational management of the customer, Durbin (2006) has investigated the role women play in call centres. She notes that while call centres are not totally 'career less' environments, women are under-represented at the senior management levels of call centres. Durbin's data from four financial services call centres suggest that there are both structural and cultural reasons for women not progressing further. The structural reason is linked to a 'lack of women as role models in senior positions' and the cultural barriers included male managers holding 'stereotypical perceptions about the female workforce' (Durbin, 2006).

Positive Findings are Rare

Positive descriptions of call centre employment are less frequently found in the international research than the negative images. Research has highlighted the growth in regional employment through new call centre operations (Richardson and Marshall, 1996). The adoption of high commitment management approaches and regimes of fun has been described as a novel Human Resource development that benefits the staff working in call centres (Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell, 2000). There are numerous articles on how organisations have benefited from the call centre application to manage their marketing and customer interface. However, many of these are written from a marketing perspective and do not discuss the implications for employment processes and conditions (Anton, 2000; Beckett, 2004; Burgers, de Ruyter, Keen, and Streukens, 2000; Holland, Hunt, and Yamamoto, 1997; Pontes and O'Brien, 2000; Prabhaker, Sheehan, and Coppett, 1997; Richardson and Weill, 1999; Seligman, 2000).

Call Centre Technology and the Labour Process

The adoption of integrated communication technology has encouraged the modification of the labour process and employers have developed normative controls to ensure that new Customer Service Representatives (CSR's) adopt the espoused values of the organisational culture. These are often introduced at the induction programme and reinforced by daily routines and management practices. This can lead to conflicting pressures: to work under tightly controlled regimes, to 'smile down the phone' (Taylor and Bain, 1999) and to manage to be both customer relational and efficient (Kinnie *et al.* 2000). Imposed organisational cultures can easily lead to tension and high stress (Houlihan, 2000) and Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee (2000) have coined the term 'sacrificial HR'. These tensions can lead to increased staff turnover and many call centres have suffered from chronic turnover problems (ACA Research Pty Ltd., 2002; Bristow, Munday, and Gripaios, 2000; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh, 2002; Demaret, Quinn, and Grumiau, 1999; Income Data Services, 2005; KPMG, 2000; Merriden, 2003; Middleton, 2001; Pearson and

Thewlis, 2002; URCOT, 2000; van der Broek, 2004; Wilk and Moynihan, 2005; Wong 2006; Woudhuysen, 2006)

The development of call centre technology and its impact on work has some similarities to the so-called office 'transformation'. In his 1974 study, Braverman predicted that this would radically change the division of labour in offices as typist pools and the subdivision of tasks would destroy the social nature of the office. However, like the predictions about personal computers facilitating the paperless office, Braverman's prediction about the division of labour in offices has not entirely worked out. In much the same way, it is hard to make generalised claims about how technology will impact on call centre operations in the long term. This opens the way for a variety of management approaches and labour process 'experiments' regarding the application of technology in the individual call centre. As detailed below, in New Zealand, there is already evidence of change in how this technology is being used in the labour process.

In 1989, Thompson argued that the technological potential for de-skilling has often been stressed at the expense of a more considered analysis of the organisation and a host of other factors that may limit or shape the de-skilling potential (Thompson, 1989). In subsequent research on the development of the call centre sector, Thompson (2006: 7) adds that 'it is mistake to focus too much on technology as a driver of change'. Bearing these warnings in mind it can be noted that call centres are located strategically within the broader organisational structure and that they are central to a company's operation. This means that the technological development of call centres is likely to be very different from the development of the typist pool of yesteryear. The ability to locate call centres in different countries will also mean that different technological applications and types of employment regimes, labour processes and outcomes will emerge. Already, there is some suggestion that call centre employment opportunities are having a positive impact on the lives of Indian women (Basi, 2006; Pandian, 2006; Singh and Pandey, 2005).

The literature describes how call centres have adopted certain technological features and how these have dictated, to a large degree, the labour process. The widespread adoption of the technology and the application of Tayloristic principles to call centre work have been regarded as central features of call centre operations. For example, the use of a screen showing the script that call centre operators follow in their conversations with the caller. The use of automatic call distribution (ACD) allows skills based routing², while recording technology provides the ability to continuously monitor, measure and report the number of calls handled, the average handling time, calls abandoned and how well the CSR performed.

In some cases, it seems that the focus on the statistical and technological control in call centres could be seen as an example of new 'toys for the boys' with some measures taken, simply because the technology allows it. Cost and efficiency has also driven management to use

fixed-term or casual employment regimes, particularly in the early days of the Employment Contracts Act (1991). This allowed them to reduce staff as required. Management has also managed the labour process in a particular way: benchmarking practices have become rife, with call centres being compared against each other and measured against 'industry standards'. These practices have led to competition between call centres for annual awards and encouraged the adoption of the customer relational and normative values commonly seen in call centres.

New Zealand Research

There has been some research on New Zealand call centres and again it is important to stress that *mixed evidence has been reported*. One study of banking call centres suggested that call centres workers viewed technology very positively (Sayers, Barney and Page, 2003). Another study by Hannif (2004) focussed on whether call centre work was precarious, using the Department of Labour (DOL) framework (Tucker, 2002). She did find evidence of precariousness in two case studies despite a union presence at one call centre and the long tenures of some female staff.

In 2004, the DOL initiated a large study of precariousness across a range of sectors and this included 3 case studies of financial services call centres. Again, the results of this research show mixed evidence, with employees reporting that working in call centres was a good entry level job. They found the work acceptable because the hours, conditions and pay suited at that particular time. However, many did not see the work as a real job and stated that they expected that they would be there for the short term. Very few were motivated to seek changes in their conditions (Tucker, 2002).

A Government public service call centre was the site for research by Copas using ethnographic action research to explore the connection between work and life and the way front line workers made sense of their lives. Copas' story of work, life and research at the call centre looks at the 'camaraderie and subversion of working in a tightly monitored and time pressured environment, amidst changing conceptions of what constitutes public service in New Zealand (Copas, 2004: 2). This work draws attention to the changing context of public services post-1990 which in New Zealand currently comprise a third of the call centre sector.

Comparative Nature of Analysis

A number of categorisations of call centre research have been carried out (Bittneer, Schietinger, Schroth, and Weinkopf, 2002; Glucksmann, 2004; Holtgrewe, 2001; Holtgrewe and C. Kerst, 2002; U. Holtgrewe and Kerst, 2002; Holtgrewe, Kerst, and Shire, 2002; Thompson and Callaghan, 2002). Some have attempted to categorise call centre research and develop certain typologies of call centres and how their employment regimes vary. One of the first classifications was by Kinnie *et al.* (2000) who caution researchers about comparing national and international centres by first taking account of the sector,

market and call centre type (Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell, 2000; Purcell and Kinnie, 2000). This feature is highlighted by the different accounts in Korea, Germany and Sweden in the book by Burgess and Connell (2006) on call centres and their development. The need for more research based on empirical and theoretical reflection has also been raised by Holtigrew and Kerst (2002)

Miriam Glucksman calls for a 'shift of prism' in the analysis of call centre work and suggests that call centres should be contextualised in the overall configuration of production/distribution/exchange/consumption of which they are a part (Glucksmann, 2004). This would mean that call centres are recognised for the multiple roles within the different types of operation both at the organisation level and within the labour process. As call centres are used strategically, there is a need to view them from both a locational and a relational perspective as call centre operators and centres are linked with others mediating between the business and the client/consumers.

Glucksmann's 'new prism' for analysis reminds us of the need to examine employment in a broader context as it is subject to many influences. The dominant theme of monitoring and surveillance in call centres is discussed and the different age and gender characteristics of Indian and UK call centres are noted. In the UK the workforce is largely female with an average age of 30 while in India 60% of the workforce is male and the average age is 25 or younger. Such demographic differences will play out in a number of ways. In Glucksmann's 'close reading' of the empirical research she distinguishes five different types call centres. She uses this typology to position the call centre worker in the wider occupational centre and describes five configurations to show the diverse range of call centre transaction processes. How these play in relation to the wider organisation is a key question. The call centre typology suggested by Glucksmann does not fit with the New Zealand situation. Call centres form a 'part rather than a whole of an organisational ensemble' (Glucksmann, 2004: 808).

While commonalities may exist across call centre operators or labour processes, focusing on outward similarities (as is the focus of much research) can mask significant differences. As noted earlier, the classification of call centres is not simple and straightforward and the comparative analysis of call centre work is problematic because of this complexity. For the most part, the comparisons do not take into account the wider perspectives of the organisation, the sector, the location or the division of labour.

Methodology

Six case studies chosen to represent the diversity of the New Zealand call centre sector are analysed here to demonstrate that call centres research will often lead to

mixed findings regarding employment outcomes. Due to the widespread application of call centres across a diverse range of industries, case study methodology is appropriate for examining the work experiences of the women call centre workers. As Yin (1994) notes case study research is useful for explaining and exploring and this allows both an inductive and deductive approach to the research

In order to document the experience of those women who have developed career paths within the sampled New Zealand call centres, unstructured in-depth interviews were held with 32 women across six case studies. To triangulate data and gather information about HR practices the six most senior managers at each call centre were also interviewed. Data was collected from a total of forty Customer Service Representatives (CSR's) via focus groups, informal group interviews or via written surveys.

The empirical research presented has been part of on-going learning process: the first interviews were used to inform later interviews and papers were prepared for a number of conferences where feedback was used to refine the questions for subsequent interviews. The objective analysis involved an examination of the call centre industry and individual organisations by drawing on published industry reports such as benchmarking surveys and investment reports (ACA Research Pty Ltd., 2002, 2003; KPMG, 2000). The case studies chosen demonstrate therefore the diversity of the call centre application, and represent the shape of the New Zealand industry as depicted by these annual reports. The ACA Research which drew on responses from 161 call centres in 2003 shows that there are two aspects about the sector shape that are peculiar to New Zealand:

- The Government public service call centres have largest share of sector representing 33% of the total 12,000 industry seats estimated as the total seat capacity in New Zealand in 2003 (ACA Research Pty Ltd., 2003)
- Sixty per cent all call centres (measured in seat capacity) have less than 25 seats while a quarter of them have less than ten seats. The mean size of call centres in New Zealand is 51 seats.

This is very different from the UK and US context where the largest sectors are Financial Services and IT. The UK call centres featured in research in 1999 had a mean centre size of 248 and 73% of the call centres employed more than 150 staff (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Some call centres featured in the European research had up to 1200 staff (Belt, Richardson, and Webster, 2002). The case studies selected for the New Zealand research are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Case studies by industry and seat capacity.

Sector and Ownership	Case Study No.	Site Location	Seat Capacity and Number of Sites
Government Public Service	1	Auckland (2), Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch	450 seats (5 sites)
Outsourcer, Privately NZ Owned	2	Auckland	150 seats (1 site)
Food Manufacturer – In-House Call Centre Singapore Mne	3	Auckland	10 seats (1 site)
Market Research (Mne) London Based H/Office	4	Auckland	25 – 50 seats (1 site)
Primary Produce Exporter (NZ Cooperative)	5	Auckland	15 seats (1 site)
Bank (Mne) Australian Ho	6	Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington	391 seats (3 sites)

Findings

The findings of the research can be grouped in two main themes: positive labour market outcomes for women and changing employment and HR practices leading to a different ways of managing call centre employment.

The thirty-one women interviewed in the six New Zealand call centres have all had made career progress within the call centres and/or organisation of which they were a part. As detailed below, these are women who have benefited from working in call centres:

- Fifty-five per cent of the thirty-one women respondents were in call centre management or operational roles. One ran 6 call centres.
- Thirty per cent of the women interviewed were team leaders, two were project managers and one was employed as a Technical Engineer.
- The average age of the women was 33 years. Most of them had worked in call centres for at least two years.
- Salary levels ranged from \$40,000 to \$150,000.
- Only three of the women had University degrees. Some had other tertiary qualifications, such as teaching diplomas or chef training.

For the majority, their careers have been self directed, often fitting in with their work life balance needs. In some cases, this has meant women temporarily left the call centre while taking time off to have children or else they worked different hours following their return to work. Most of the women seem to have been empowered by their call centre work experience and have in many cases negotiated their own terms and conditions. They are assertive, confident and often talk about being passionate about their work in the call centre.

As CSR's in 1994, we were just casuals and we felt it wasn't fair so we worked with the union to create an employment contract. We helped write it and we talked to the manager about some ideas we had for training and we put together a training proposal, and in fact that training programme in different iterations is still in place we were pretty proud of ourselves, we had some sophisticated equipment there and we talked about how we could use that. So in the end a few people were put onto these permanent contracts (Call Centre Manager, Case Study 6)

There was a Team Leader role ... our manager wanted me to apply so I talked to my friend and I said I think we can do this as a job share and then look after each other's children....And so I outlined how we could do it and I went to the manager and told him, and he said do it. And we made it work, we really did. We developed teams, career paths and team leaders did not just take the most important call, we were there to lead people. This was the beginning of what has now become the norm in call centres (Veronica, Call Centre Manager Case Study 6, 2006).

Yeah, so I really stumbled into it. It was my first experience of call centre work. I was quite surprised. I absolutely loved it (Project Manager, Case Study 5, 2006).

She's brilliant, very high energy, very passionate, very driven, you know from a people point of view, very passionate about people (Danielle, CSR, speaking about the Call Centre Manager, Case Study 5, 2006)

I have always been very happy in the call centre environment; it has an energy and passion to it that I have not really seen elsewhere. I think it's because of that instant nature of what has to happen. You can't push something aside and say I will deal with it later; its happening right there, its both very motivating and I think really rewarding. Each day feels like you have run a marathon when you get to the end of it but you feel like you have done a really

good job (Project Manager, Case Study 5, 2006)

Generally the call centre is a woman's paradise if she wants to make a go of it in any way she likes. I love my job, In actual fact my main goal at the end of the day, which is why I have basically hung in here. This might sound ambitious but I'd like to take this call centre to the top (Call Centre Supervisor, Case Study 4, 2005).

Her best side is people, motivating people, passionate, (Team Leader describing Call Centre Manager Case Study, 3, 2004)

I really enjoy the challenges I haven't really sat still in a role very long even within an organization – I have always wanted to get out there and see what was going on. I guess that's where my passion first started and it hasn't ever ever waned! (Lisette, Call Centre Manager, Case Study 1, 2003).

The CSR's interviewed or surveyed were also very positive about the call centre work experience. It provided a low-to-medium paying entry level type of job: entry level full-time CSR's earned \$28,000 and hourly rates in the part time call centres were \$12-\$15 per hour. Most saw the work in the call centre as a means to transition to other jobs or to the wider organisation (that is, as 'a foot in the door'). Some were working part-time while studying at university or to supplement household income. All CSR's felt the call centre work experience would enhance their future career development although not necessarily in the call centre industry. Many new immigrants saw call centre work as a great way to get experience of New Zealand organisations and to improve their language skills. In case studies 4 and 6, around 50% of the CSR's were ethnic migrants and a large number of them were degree qualified. The latter created some problems in that these CSR's had higher expectations of making career progress within a relatively short period.

We have a lot of immigrants – probably around 65 to 70%. In the inbound teams, 50% of them are immigrants. Most of them have a degree and they see their role in the call centre as a stepping stone to a career with the bank. (Call Centre Manager, Case Study 6, 2006).

The call centre is a home away from home – it is been useful for developing my English skills (CSR, New Immigrant, Case Study 4, 2005).

Changing HR Practices

It seems that in order to retain staff, many of the call centres have accommodated some flexibility in their work practice. For example, one organisation (case study 2) actively targeted 'return-to-work mothers' offering them

subsidized part-time child care and hours that included accommodating school hours and holidays.

The market is very tight at the moment, the lowest level of unemployment which makes it quite challenging for us so we need to be a lot more creative in the strategies we use to attract people to come and work here. We know that November is a good time to attract students and we can switch them with mums so they have school holiday times. We are just learning as we go along, trying to use good practices (Call Centre Manager Case Study 2, 2004).

Call centre employers attempted to mitigate the negative aspects of the labour process by accommodating regular feedback and making changes to suit their call centre workers. Whether this was team work, fun days, allowing staff to job share or flexible working hours, there was real evidence of pro-active management of the call centre environment with the expressed purpose of retaining staff.

Climate Surveys are used proactively to meet organisational goal of developing a much closer relationship between the call centre and the rest of the business. We now have fun Monday Movie Madness (to reduce absenteeism on a Monday) and Casual Fridays which were introduced because CSR's wanted a more casual day on Friday (HR Manager, Case Study 2, 2004).

At many of the call centres, management actively encouraged staff to develop their own career plans. This seems to be a relatively successful retention strategy helping to increase the commitment of workers especially if they were having spells away from the centre environment. Some women had worked more than 10 years in the same call centre with intermittent spells while having children.

The Managing Director has been fantastic. He says to me: Rose you do whatever you want to do; tell us and we will help you get there so I create my own opportunities. I have just completed the DMA certificate... which really helped my understanding of the advertising world (Rose, Team Leader, Case Study 2, 2004)

I have a couple of young girls in here who hadn't really been given much of a chance in life and when they came for an interview I could see they had potential It's so rewarding to know that you have kick started their career and they are part of an award winning team I got into it for the people thing and it has just evolved (Juliana, Call Centre Manager, Case Study 3, 2005)

There was evidence that the use of the call centre technology and benchmarking processes to drive customer service satisfaction led dissatisfaction among some call centre managers. This use of 'ridiculous' controls was mentioned in two of the case studies (for example, in the bank case study, where CSR's needed to say the callers' name at least three times in each tele-conversation). At most recent interviews (case studies 5 and 6), there was evidence of call centres making changes with the way they use technology. Some of these changes appear to take account of the needs of the call centre workers.

We need to have skilled workers in the contact centre, one of my personal philosophy is that in a call centre you have two choices, either you have a business person running it using the technology or you have a technology expert running it delivering the service. I run it as a business and have empathy for the people, so people actually have a better HR experience under someone like me because of this. Rather than following someone who uses all the metrics, like adherence to schedule, (ATS) and quality scores... These are just manipulations used to fire people, they are all ways to punish and control call centre staff. We now have key slogan of 'Conversations NOT Confrontations. I am not interested in BLACK and WHITE; I want to listen to the rep who says, this is the way we should do this (Manager, Case Study 5, 2006).

I believe that call centres have gone overboard on measurement and they have created a poor place to work. So what I am doing here is that I have abandoned Average Handling Time (AHT) as a KPI and this year I have abandoned Adherence to Schedule because I actually don't care how long someone spends on the phone with my customer. I am measuring customer outcome (Female Senior Manager in Charge of Call Centres for Bank, Case Study 6, 2006).

Mixed Evidence Demonstrates Limitations

While there are a number of positive findings, it is also necessary to be cautious. At the market research call centre (case study 4), the employment could be defined as precarious as it depended on the supply and demand for market research conducted each night between 4 and 11pm. Staff would turn up for work and sometimes there was no job that night. At this call centre, there were also limited opportunities to advance and the two women who had progressed there had worked there for a total of 20 years. One of these women was still officially employed on a fixed-term, casual employment agreement.

When Hunt, the first author worked as a non-participant observer at case studies 4 and 5, she found ample

evidence of stress and tension, mainly associated with senior management action. The pay rates were poor at case study 4 entry level and it was debatable whether women were developing greater equity in these two workplaces.

I was very surprised that a woman was appointed to head of call centres. There is such a boy's brigade in place. Our first call centre manager was a woman but I was shocked when Wanda got the role. There is a horrible male culture at head office (Veronica, Call Centre Manager, Case Study 6, 2006).

It is also important to stress that this research found that women do not select call centre work as employment of choice. In the majority of cases, the interviewed women had taken a role in the call centres to fit in with their partners' careers or because of a change in personal circumstances. As noted in many previous research studies, women still choose their careers based on their partners and personal life circumstances, rather than their own needs (Dex, 1987; Purcell, 2005)

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper challenges the majority of the international research findings on call centre employment. It paints a more positive image of call centre work as being helpful for the women who work in the six researched case studies. It seems that women are benefiting from the rapid growth of the sector, low levels of unemployment and a shortage of call centre operators and this environment has created career opportunities for them in call centres. They are gaining good positions in these organisations, are often allowed flexible working patterns and, in rare cases, are very well compensated. More importantly, all the women interviewed felt they were in a position of strength in terms of their employment relationship and agreement.

Generally, Labour Process Theory says that call centre workers are controlled by norms established by management. These are exerted through team management and team leaders who monitor and measure call centre metrics. Workers have repetitive stressful work as they follow scripts talking to clients over the telephone. Our findings suggest that these call centre workers have more control over their careers and their work than is suggested by Labour Process Theory. In fact, it can be argued that the call centre workers have considerable control in the final interaction with the client or customer, despite the use of norms and scripts. Employers need to have a well functioning call centre to represent the face of the company. Together, these factors may give women call centre managers and team leaders' greater power than in traditionally feminised employment situations. It was also found that the women interviewed in this research have developed increased confidence as a result of their work and the daily practice of dealing with many customer types. This raises an interesting question: to what degree do they apply the skill of professionally

managing the customer interface, which can often be difficult and even harassing, when managing their own employment relationship?

Certainly, the evidence presented here does not support the predominantly negative portrayal of call centre work. While there is some mixed evidence – ‘shades of grey’ – the findings show that call centre employment cannot be couched in black-or-white images. As there are still considerable employment issues with some of the call centre practices, it is an open question whether call centres across the New Zealand economy will use technology more intelligently to focus on outcomes, utilise (and value) their female workforce’s communication and social skills. As examples of the new workplaces that are bound to become a dominant part of the employment landscape of the future, employment practices in call centres warrant more research.

Notes

- 1 Sitel is a US based multinational outsourcer call centre.
- 2 With inbound calls, this is when the technology ‘knows’ before the phone is answered what the caller is ringing about and directs the call to the call centre operator who has the competency to answer the question(s).

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