HEALTH ISSUE LEADS TO EMPLOYEE ATTRITION IN CHENNAI BASED CALL CENTER INDUSTRY

G. Sri Devi*

Dr. N. Panchanatham**

ABSTRACT:

The international research on call centre employment presents mainly negative view of the nature of this work. A more positive portrayal of call centre work has been demonstrated in some international research, highlighting the problem of generalizing across different contexts. Previous Indian research has also found variation in terms of employment outcomes, job satisfaction and career opportunities across various industries, type and size of call centre and different management approaches. This paper continues to explore the work experiences of call centre workers and is based on research conducted in Chennai based call centers. Insights from focus groups of trade union delegates informed the development of a survey which was circulated across 22 organization, drawing responses from 845 call centre workers. The findings show that over half of the workers consider their call centre work is enjoyable most of the time, their work is strategically important and there are a number benefits. The benefits include career enhancements, new skills and developing social capital. However, despite the positives described in open ended survey questions and the ranking of attributes important to call centre workers, almost half of the respondents have health concerns about the nature of their work or the call centre workplace. It is this particular finding that is the focus of the paper. It illustrates the need for an occupational health focus to be extended to call centre employment in Chennai.

Key Words: Occupational Health, Job satisfaction, Occupational Overuse Syndrome, Stress Employee Attrition.

* Associate Professor, Department of Management Studies, A.V.C.College of Engineering, Mayiladuthurai.

** Professor & Head, Department of Business Administration, Annamalai University,Chidambaram.

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.

International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

210

Introduction:

Call centers are a relatively recent phenomenon made possible by the dissemination of telecommunications and information technologies. The technology enables telephone service representatives to deal quickly and remotely with customer needs by connecting the representative to the customer's account information on his/her computer as the call is relayed to the headset. As call centers can be centralized in locations far from the customers of a business, they allow firms to cut costs by reducing the number of local service outlets.

There has been considerable research on call centers with much academic interest focused on the labour process used in call centre employment and a common theme of the international research has been the criticism of the call centre workplace and the practices used within it. Many studies demonstrate that stress and the nature of call centre jobs leads to the high levels of staff attrition, sickness and/or health problems (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001, 2002; Holman, Batt, & ltgrewe, 2007; Taylor & Bain, 1999; van den Broek, 2004).

Review of Literature:

Internationally the occupational health problems in call centers were first noted as early as 1999 when a study was initiated by London School of Economics and International Federation of Commercial, Professional and Technical Employees (FIET). The British affiliate in the banking sector, BIFU at this time had drawn attention to the increased risk of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) to which telephone operators are exposed because of their constant use of the computer. The union had also detected that operators in the call centers were losing their voices, with the worst affected being part time employees who could work up to five hours without a break (Demaret, Quinn, & Grumiau, 1999). While many studies on call centre work have noted the stressful nature of the job, the concern about health issues in call centers was not systematically researched until Taylor et al. (2003) investigated a former public utility in Central Scotland. Their work explored the physical and social work environment of the call centre using a combination of qualitative and quantitative method. This included responses (n=634) to a self completed questionnaire to gain information from call handlers (74% of respondents) and noncustomer facing respondents about frequency of health complaints and reports on their levels

of discretion and control. They also sought information on physical working conditions and their findings highlight the importance of having a framework that management and workers agree to work within. While they question whether *"one can generalize from a single case study to call centers more broadly"* they suggest that unless radical change in work organization in call centers is instituted, widespread work related ill health will be persistent within the call centre environment (Taylor, Baldry, Bain, & Ellis, 2003). In their paper on occupational safety and health in the New Zealand call centers, Hannif and Lamm (2005) note too, a *"muted discussion"* on the impact of call centre practices on the health of the workers.

Purpose and period of Research:

This study was initiated by a trade union seeking to measure quality of work life, as it gathered Evidence about how workers felt about call centre employment. Questions about what attributes of the call centre job are enjoyed, what aspects of the job are important and key worker concerns, were included in the research. More importantly the study asked workers what they would like to change if they could. Initiated in 2009 and completed in 2010, using mixed methods of focus groups and responses to a self completed email questionnaire, the study gathered responses from call centre representatives (n= 345) and union delegates (n=45). Respondents worked in 52 call centers operated by the private sector which represents the largest segment of call centre employment in Chennai.

Methodology of the Study:

Qualitative insights about the issues facing public services call centre workers were first gained by holding focus groups with trade union delegates. Three focus groups attracted around 45 delegates from across Chennai and their discussions and concerns about call centre work were recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were analyzed and used to develop the questionnaire that had been used in earlier surveys of call centre workers (see Hunt 2008). An internet based Questionnaire link was emailed to delegates across 52 call centers, and members were encouraged to complete the survey. At most of the call centers, management supported the survey being completed during work time, which probably assisted in 345 surveys being

returned. Most of the respondents were entry level workers from 17 different call centers. The findings from the survey are presented below, using a combination of statistical software SPSS.

Data Analysis:

The questionnaire was designed to seek to understand the attributes of the call centre job that were important to workers. Employees were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements as to what was important in the job using a scale of 1 to 5 where **1** was *strongly agree* and **5** was *strongly disagree*. The strongest positive response was a mean of 2.00 to the statement that *"call centre work is strategically important"*. This was followed by *"the supervisor is helpful"* (mean of 2.05). The strongest negative reaction (disagree) was 4.02 recorded against the statement that *"being time efficient is more important than fully addressing the customer query"*.

The results indicated that the call centre workers consider their work *is important;* that they have some control and discretion over their jobs; and that they learn technical skills. A neutral response to **"monitoring is meaningful"** contrasts many of the international studies on this aspect. (See for example, Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Demaret et al., 1999;

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics -   Gender (N=345)

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	208	60
Female	137	40
Total	345	100
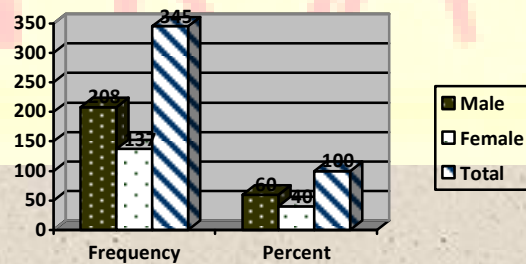
Table 2: Position in the Organization

Position	Frequency	Percent
Call center Agents	175	50
Professional / Technical Cadre	41	12
Team Leaders	52	15
Call Center HR Managers	52	15
Help Desk Representatives	25	08
Total	345	100
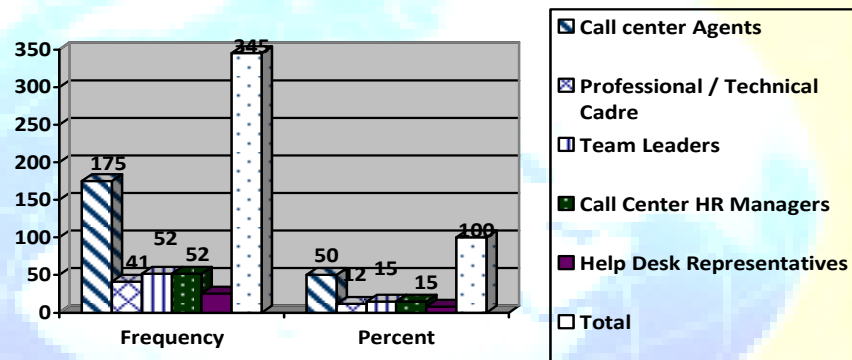
Why Work in a Call Centre?

Much of the international research which deplores call centre employment has not established why workers continue to seek jobs at call centers. To understand more about this motivation, respondents were asked to rank a number of statements about what had attracted them to work in their current call centre. The four reasons ranked most important or important (1 or 2). While hourly rate of pay was noted by half of the respondents, just over 60% ranked **_enhancing their careers_** as most important, with the need to learn skills ranked as number three. This finding contradicts the international research findings which demonstrate career development opportunities are not consistent with working in call centers

Key Benefits of Call Centre Work:

To understand more about what call centre employees found positive about their work, an open ended question asked respondents to describe the key benefits of their job in their particular

call centre. This generated a total of 256 written responses (88% of all respondents), results shows that **no need for higher studies** followed by **No need for certificate** *and* then **College like Atmosphere** are important to workers. The latter includes many references to flexible hours and hours that suit individual workers.

Health Concerns in Call Centers:

Following concerns raised by union delegates about health issues in call centers in the focus groups, an open ended question was included in the survey with respondents being asked if they had any health concerns. If they replied yes they were asked to describe them.

The single largest response was OOS (occupational overuse syndrome) with 109 references made to OOS in the open ended responses. The text coverage is slightly misleading as many responses were simply OOS. Some of the quotes below speak about: *"Overuse (sore back, over use of hands, sore eyes, and sore tailbone), RSI in the wrists and arms, having to sit all day at a desk, hunching over all the time as well as eyesight deterioration from using keyboard and VDU all day."*

The physical working environment is the next most frequently mentioned concern with 89 references, and the most frequently mentioned one being the air conditioning.

Stress and mental health concerns are a frequently described health issue, and there are 67 coded references to this. The references to stress are mainly noted as different aspects of the job, for example, "constant noise in the ear", *"constant call after call"*, *"system failures"* and *"dealing with difficult calls and managing relationships with team leaders"*. The physical working environment is also included in mentions of stress. One quote, *"being treated more as a labor unit rather than an individual"*, draws attention to the factory like organization of a call centre operation.

Contrasting the earlier neutral responses to a question on monitoring and supervision, *''monitoring practices and team leaders''* are noted as the cause of a stress and *"intimidation"*. An often repeated quote mentions that management do not recognize the stress that customer service operators are under as attested by the following quote: ***"the managers here don't fully understand the stress that our call centre staff are under from their customers"***.

What Should Change:

One of the last questions in the questionnaire asked respondents to describe what they would just change if they could change just *one* thing at their current call centre workplace. This question generated a total of 199 responses which were also analyzed and sorted into nodes using the SPSS. The most commonly recorded response was around the *"conditions of work".* This included *"pay"*, *"flexitime"* and *"hours of work"*, with the latter being noted more frequently than pay. Management practices, the nature of work and the use of KPI's are another aspect that call centre workers would like to change. There are 31 mentions of the environment and team work, while health concerns are only raised 11 times. This is somewhat surprising given that so many respondents described concerns about health issues in the previous question. **V***ariety of work* and *"upskilling opportunities"* are mentioned confirming the desire to seek job variation given the repetitive nature of the work.

Discussion:

Given the international evidence on call centre employment, findings that suggest there are health concerns in call centers operated in Chennai should not be surprising. The problems of stress, repetitive strain injury or occupational overuse syndrome as described above are similar to findings reported elsewhere.

Apart from the exploratory study by Hannif and Lamm (2005), health issues in call centers were not detected in other research. Hunt's research over four years found some evidence of concern from management about healthy food snacks because staff tended to be overweight which could be attributable to stress and the sedentary nature of the work (Hunt, 2008).

The research finds contradictory evidence about the quality of the call centre work occupation. Workers, despite stated concerns about the occupational health of their jobs, seem to enjoy working in call centers. They find that the employment experience is useful for enhancing their career prospects. This suggests other attributes of the job outweigh the concern workers may have about the health risks associated with the job.

The responses to questions about what workers enjoy and why they choose to work in call centers provides some clue as to attributes considered important to workers. Flexible work practices accommodating some work life balance, opportunities to meet and interact with people and work experience helping to gain employment elsewhere provide rational explanation as to

why employees work in a call centre. What the research does not show is how long call centre workers stay at such workplaces and whether the turnover associated with the job helps manage the health issue or at least keeps it under wraps. Perhaps turnover helps to maintain the health of workers and is a necessary part of call centre employment?

Conclusion:

It is clear that workers have mixed reactions to their employment in these call centers. Many enjoy the social and interactive nature of their work and claim that one key benefit is the job satisfaction they derive from assisting people over the phone. Some suggest they learn new skills and can enhance their career prospects by recording such a work experience on their CV's.

Almost half of the respondents, however, feel that there are health concerns in their call centre job, with the key ones being Occupational Overuse Syndrome and stress. Surprisingly, when asked about the changes workers would introduce if they could, *"addressing the health concerns"* was not mentioned frequently. The physical environment, however, is noted as problematic with a key complaint being the operation of the air conditioning, not least for its role in the spread of sickness. The research does not provide insights as to why workers who have health concerns about their employment would continue to work in the call centre. Further research needs to ascertain the choices workers have regarding other employment opportunities and establish whether call centre work is a job of last resort or a temporal solution to employment for a limited period.

The research should seek to measure the impact of the health concerns on both the workers and the organization. Answering such questions may be helpful for deciding whether this type of employment represents decent work. Under the current occupational health and safety regime in India, it is evident that management is not taking responsibility for the health of their workers in the featured call centers. This could be taken up more proactively by the union delegates but with India currently experiencing rising levels of unemployment, it seems that job security may be a more important attribute than healthy employment.

References:

- Callaghan, G., & Thompson, P. (2001). Edwards revisited: Technical control and call centres. *Economic & Industrial Democracy, 22*(1), 1337.

- Callaghan, G., & Thompson, P. (2002). 'We recruit attitude': The selection and shaping of routine call centre labour. *Journal of Management Studies, 39*(2), 233254.

- Taylor, P., Baldry, C., Bain, P., & Ellis, V. (2003). 'A unique working environment': health, sickness and absence management in UK call centres. *Work Employment and Society, 17*(3), 435458.

- Holman, D., Batt, R., & Holtgrewe, U. (2007). *The Global Call Centre Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*. New York: Cornell University.

- Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (1999). An assembly line in the head: work employee relations in the call centre. *Industrial Relations Journal, 30*(2), 101117.

- Van den Broek, D. (2004). Monitoring and Surveillance in Call Centres : Some Responses from Australian Workers. *Labour and Industry, 12* (3).

- Demaret, L., Quinn, P., & Grumiau, S. (1999, 27 Feb 2006). Call Centres The New Assembly Lines. Retrieved 10th March 2006,

- Hunt, V. (2008). *Call Centre Work Careers for Women Exploring the Work Experience of Women Working In New Zealand call centres.* Unpublished Doctorate, University of Auckland, Auckland.

- Deery, S., Iverson, R., & Walsh, J. (2002). Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal. *Journal of Management Studies, 39*(4), 471496.

- Hannif, Z., & Lamm, F. (2005). Occupation Health and Safety in the New Zealand Call Centre Industry *ESC Working Paper No 2005/8* Retrieved 3rd March, 2006,

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

218