

## Improvisational choreography in teleservice work\*

### ABSTRACT

This naturalistic study of the ordinary work practice of sales representatives employed by the call centre of a large office-equipment company focuses on the actions of those sales reps during their calls with customers. We show how this work performance is organized through an improvisational choreography of action involving not only the turn-by-turn interchange with customers on the telephone but also the concurrent utilization of a variety of tools and artefacts. While 'improvise' and 'choreograph' may appear to be conceptually incongruent, our analysis demonstrates that even though these teleservice workers recurrently fabricate their actions out of materials and means that are conveniently on hand, the convenience is often carefully arranged to afford such extemporaneous composition. Finally, we conclude from this analysis that the traditional topics of 'work routines' and 'routinization' need to be respecified in order to take into account how any 'routine' is a contingently produced result (and in this centre, a craft-like performance).

**KEYWORDS:** Work; labour; ethnomethodology; technology; computers

While it is now commonplace to observe that an increasing number of people work at jobs where they do not manufacture products but rather provide services to others, it is perhaps less appreciated that a great deal of this service work is carried out over the telephone rather than in face-to-face encounters with customers or clients. Customers are being encouraged to telephone businesses with their complaints, orders, and the like rather than turn up in person. As a result, a burgeoning teleservice industry has developed over the past two decades. Even among those corporations whose main business is making things, there is a growing reliance on toll free phone numbers and extensive call centre or help desk operations to provide or administer a wide variety of services for their customers.

Moreover, the precipitate emergence of e-commerce and online customer support over the last three or four years hasn't significantly

dampened the growth of teleservice business (see especially Gladwell 1999). Often located in rural areas and small cities for reasons largely to do with lower labour and land costs, these new call centres have become – in the words of one economist – the ‘post-industrial analogue to the mill economy’, replacing the ‘rubber boot jobs’ of the textile, apparel and shoe mills with ‘telephone-headset jobs’ (quoted in Goldberg 1998). One market research group (Datamonitor 1998, 1999) estimates that call centres currently employ 3 per cent of the active work force in the USA, with some 75,000 centres creating five million new jobs since 1990. Similarly, call centres in Britain have been described as a ‘boom industry, employing . . . more than the combined workforces of the coal, steel, and car-making industries’ (Sussex 2000: 12). And the European call centre market is also experiencing especially rapid growth, with an annual rate of close to 30 per cent, creating over 100,000 new ‘call centre rep’ positions each year. It is estimated that by 2002, 1.3 per cent of Europe’s working population will be employed in a call centre, thus outnumbering both teachers and farmers (Datamonitor 1998).

While these developments have generated more than a few newspaper reports and commentaries in both Europe and North America, social scientific studies of this new and plainly important type of service work have been restricted in both number and scope. Nevertheless, when the call centre phenomenon has received some attention in the press or the academy, the industry’s stunning expansion is not the only theme. Commentators and researchers have been particularly concerned with the nature of the labour process and work organization in the teleservice industry; specifically, the degree to which call centre work is markedly controlled and monitored through advanced technology and a Taylorist *modus operandi*. Indeed, some have argued that call centres represent a new type of sweatshop, relying now on an electronic rather than mechanical apparatus, and that possibilities for the unremitting surveillance of employees in this sort of environment make Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* (or ‘all seeing place’) ‘truly the [call centre] vision of the future’ (Ferne and Metcalf 1998: 2). But even where the judgment is less harsh, the predominate view of call centres amongst both journalists and researchers is that the work is very tightly prescribed, routinized, scripted and monitored.

Unfortunately, this conclusion is not based on detailed, naturalistic investigations of what call centre employees actually do when they are working. Stated plainly, writings on call centre work have overwhelmingly been *about* rather than *of* the work (cf. Sharrock and Anderson 1986: 85). Consequently, while many of these accounts provide colourful sketches of work processes and requirements, this is customarily presented as introductory or background material rather than the focal point for sociological analysis. In these writings, topics like employment relations and management practices in the new information economy, or the use of technology to consolidate power and curtail privacy in the workplace, regularly occupy centre stage (see, for example, Knights and McCabe 1998; Taylor and Bain

1999; Bain and Taylor 2000). As a result the work practice of call centre employees is rarely on stage in any guise, and the particulars of how something is done, *in situ*, is thus beclouded by a conceptually stipulated rather than empirically discovered ordering of action. This is especially regrettable because ordinary work practice is one of the main materials out of which 'social facts' like employment relations and technology utilization are fashioned, and any adequate understanding of these phenomena requires a detailed understanding of that material base.

In an attempt to help redress this absence, we have initiated a series of naturalistic field studies of the endogenous, real-time ordering of call centre work activities in a variety of businesses. In this paper, we systematically describe certain endogenous practices that appear customary for one of these, order taking and sales, by focusing on the work of sales representatives employed in the call centre of a major office-equipment company. Our analysis of their work concentrates on the 'routine' actions of sales reps during their calls with customers. These actions are oriented to produce what sounds, to those customers (as well as to co-workers and managers), like a steady, efficient and thus *heavily competent* call. We show how this work performance is organized through an improvisational choreography of action involving not only the turn-by-turn interchange with customers on the telephone but also the concurrent – and markedly artful – utilization of a variety of tools and artefacts. As these artefacts, tools, and means of action are quite different with respect to their mutability, we also show that the use of any particular means or tool has different consequences, and may create different kinds of problems for the necessarily situated accomplishment of work activities.

We recognize that by describing this organization as 'improvisational choreography', we are joining together two concepts that appear to be incongruent. To improvise means to compose extemporaneously or fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand, while choreographed action is commonly understood to mean a carefully arranged or directed sequence of steps and movements, and thus actions that follow a pre-determined structure. However, we will show that this apparent incongruity can be resolved through an appreciation of how workspaces, technologies, and other resources can be carefully arranged to afford what must necessarily be a somewhat extemporaneous composition. In this way, we also suggest that standard conceptions about work routines fail to take account of crucial aspects of the phenomenon.

We begin with a brief description of the setting where we conducted our research, and review the data and methods we have employed. We follow this with an initial characterization of the practical problems that sales reps regularly encounter in their work as they interact with customers: 'members' problems' that have to be solved on a regular basis in order to successfully carry out that work. This is followed in turn by a detailed analysis of the improvisational choreography of their work activity as a methodical solution to these same problems.

## STUDYING THE SUPPLY ORDER CENTRE

The particular teleservice centre where we did our research is operated, as noted above, by a large international corporation, henceforth 'MMR', that designs and manufactures office products, principally document machines: copiers, printers, fax machines, and multifunctional devices that combine these document-processing functions. This centre sells supplies for these machines (such as toner, fuser oil, ink cartridges, and of course paper), and we will refer to it as the 'Supply Order Centre' or SOC. The SOC is located in a large, modern facility in the southwest of the USA.

SOC reps receive salaries, but they also are compensated with commissions that are based largely on team performance. They work out of standard office cubicles, set up as call centre workstations. Generally, a five-foot partition with an overhead cabinet attached separates each cubicle on one side. Open spaces and lower partitions on flanking sides afforded regular interaction with co-workers. Each cubicle contains various items of call centre equipment and many kinds of documents.

We used a combination of approaches to data gathering and analysis. We first gained familiarity with the work of the SOC by sitting with sales representatives and listening in on their conversations with customers; this also allowed us to learn about the history, customization, and use of numerous artefacts found there. In addition, we attended on-site corporate training classes with these employees in order to develop a member's knowledge of the technical aspects of the systems used and products sold.

Most important for our study was making video records of sales reps as they handled customer calls. The video data allowed us to capture fleeting moments of interaction as reps moved through multiple, rapidly changing screens while engaged in telephone interaction with customers (see Whalen 1995). This provided a means for examining actions-in-context, giving us the opportunity to investigate simultaneously occurring components of the work. Videotape also provided a resource for gathering more detailed data from sales reps by the use of co-viewing sessions during which the reps and we reviewed and discussed the taped activities. The real-time action on video could be stopped for the kind of extended deliberation or clarification that would have been too intrusive an activity to do in the operational context of the centre.

The present analysis is based on an investigation of the work of five different reps, and draws on a single, sales rep/customer telephone interaction to elucidate our argument. By focusing on a single case, the locally organized, interactionally grounded use of improvisational choreography can be directly observed in context.

DATA ANALYSIS

*The Production Of A Most Ordinary Call*

We begin our analysis by presenting a transcript for the first ninety seconds or so of the ten-minute call that serves as its foundation (see Transcript 1). We do this to direct attention first to the talk, and to that talk as work. Indeed, in so far as the work of sales reps is accessible to customer callers, it is in most cases accessible only in and through the talk. By starting with this transcript fragment, we aim to put the reader in the position of the caller with respect to having only conversation as evidence of both competency and ‘routineness’.

TRANSCRIPT 1

- 1 SR: MMR supplies; this's R:ob, may I help you?  
 2 C: yes my name is Bill Minga ↑relli I'm calling from the  
 3 New Hope City .hh Board of Education School in  
 4 Staten Island New York?  
 5 SR: ↑Yes sir: .  
 6 C: And I need some pricing information please?=  
 7 SR: =O::kay, Bill do you have either a serial number  
 8 or customer number I could reference.  
 9 (1.0)  
 10 C: .h uh:: hh°hh (.) tst I just have a contract number  
 11 SR: o:kay let me just pull up a ah: generic customer  
 12 number to get your pricing?  
 13 (.)  
 14 C: .hh[hh  
 15 SR: [what are you needing pricing on sir?  
 16 C: would be on: uh dry ink an:d .hhh uh copy  
 17 cartridges, hh  
 18 SR: for which model machine?  
 19 C: uh we have two machines here, we have a five  
 20 three eight five?  
 21 SR: ok[ay  
 22 C: [and we have a five zero three four.  
 23 (.)  
 24 SR: o::kay? .hh your five zero three four uses  
 25 dry ink, (.) reorder number six, R as in  
 26 Richard  
 27 (0.8)  
 28 SR: two four four  
 29 C: right  
 30 SR: they're packaged two in the ↑bo:x .hh single

31 box price is one hundred eight do:llars?  
 32 (1.3)  
 33 C: that's a hundred and eight[dollars fo::r two:=  
 34 SR: [ye-  
 35 C: =cartridges.  
 36 SR: yes sir (.) and thuh- c- the box will yield you  
 37 approximately twenty tho:usand copies, that's based  
 38 on a 6 per cent area coverage which is your  
 39 normal business or legal do:cument.  
 40 C: ° ( ) twenty thousand copies okay°  
 41 SR: okay? again at three boxes the price drops to  
 42 ninety eight? dollars  
 43 (0.9)  
 44 .hh you're next break would be at fi:ve?, would  
 45 drop it down to ninety four: dollars?  
 46 (1.3)  
 47 the next break is at ten drops it down to eighty  
 48 dollars.  
 49 C: oh↓kay

We want to first observe that this utterly ordinary, apparently routine exchange nevertheless involves, very early on, the sales rep (designated SR in the transcript) quickly resolving a potential problem in obtaining certain information from the customer (designated C) before shifting the conversation immediately to the business of providing the requested pricing information. This business requires the incorporation of considerable detail, which is delivered in a very steady, 'in charge' yet genial and unhurried manner (pausing occasionally so that the caller can mark down the figures, for example) that plainly contributes to the call's 'smooth' character.

These initial and general observations point to a basic, crucial question about this kind of work, and this particular instance of it: Just how is this possible? How is the sales rep able to readily accomplish this information-providing work, resolving any problems and supplying the customer with all this detail, in such a facile manner?

We will answer this questions through a detailed examination of what the rep is actually doing, when he is on the phone with the customer, with his voice – in terms of the pacing and parsing of talk – and, conjointly, with various artefacts and tools in his workstation. Surely, the actions of the sales rep represent a kind of 'performance' (Goffman 1959); as such, they are shared by the sales rep work community, methodical in character and grounded in the exigencies of their work. Our task is to provide a systematic description of these methods.

*A Practical Problem: How To Be Hearably Competent*

We can commence this description by recalling our prior statement that sales representative work practice is organized around certain practical concerns and problems reps recurrently face, the ‘organizationally supplied “priorities of relevances”’ that are ‘part and parcel of the day’s work’ (Garfinkel 1984 [1967]: 13).

An especially relevant priority in this regard is completing calls quickly and efficiently; within three or four minutes (on the average). A prominent reason for this concern is their expressed desire to take as many calls as possible in order to increase sales volume, which would then contribute to their team’s total and the compensation for team members. Additionally, they do not want to keep other customers waiting on hold in the call queue for long periods, which would likely not be good for sales. As one rep succinctly stated, ‘I’ve got to get them on and off as quickly as possible, and move on to my next call’.

Certainly, there is some pressure from supervisory management to maintain this standard. However, our observations led us to conclude that there is no rigid enforcement of a rule here or even an intensive focus on each rep’s average talk time (the numbers on average sale per call and total sales per month is of more interest to the SOC); rather, both SOC reps and their supervisors appear to try to follow the simple guideline, ‘customers shouldn’t be kept waiting’.

At the same time, sales reps also stress that calls cannot simply be rushed through, and that the work is ‘not just taking orders’. For example, reps may find it necessary to devote time on a call for an activity other than selling, as when customers need information about product prices and availability. Even though there is no actual revenue being generated during these encounters, sales reps treat them as important. They are commonly a first step in a sale, with the price information used to prepare a purchase order that will then be faxed to the SOC, as is in fact the case with the call we are examining.

This problem of efficiency points to a closely related concern for sales reps, namely, having their calls go smoothly by minimizing as much as is possible any awkward moments. One kind of awkwardness identified by reps is what we can call a temporary halt in the conversation. They describe this phenomenon experientially: they do not have the information on their computer screen, or in some document that is readily visible, and they need to use it at that very moment in the conversation with the customer. They thus find themselves unable to immediately respond to a customer’s query or follow-up on some prior line of talk.

Of course, remedial actions like ‘Hold on just a moment while I get this up on my screen’ (a refrain all too familiar to anyone who does business on the phone) are regularly employed to minimize actual gaps by accounting for the silence that will follow and putting the customer in a type of conversational hold. Sales reps say, however, that these remedies are

themselves awkward, and may reflect badly on their capabilities as well as increase their time on any given call. They recognize that a customer's *only* access to their work is what the customer *hears* during the conversation. For SOC sales reps, then, what is at stake here is nothing less than *displaying professional competence in and through interactional proficiency*.

### *Some Material Issues In Achieving Hearable Competency*

The possibility of achieving this interactional proficiency depends on the rep's employment of various artefacts in concert with their conversational actions. For example, certain technologies provide access to the pricing information that is so fluently passed on by the rep to the customer in the call we are examining. Any solution to the problem of displaying professional competence thus requires mastery of these technologies and artefacts and their artful use. For SOC reps, the most important of these are

- Telephone headset;
- PC with a keyboard and mouse;
- Software applications installed on the PC and the company network for entering all supply orders and retrieving information from the company's product and customer data bases;
- Paper documents of various formats and types that also contain information on products, customers, work processes, company policies, important company phone numbers, and the like;
- Paper and pen for writing notes.

Note that each of these technologies implicates different means or modes of action, often in combination: talking; typing; writing; reading; lifting and turning or otherwise handling. In summary, then, what we find in the SOC are certain shared methods of conduct – ways of achieving a hearably competent performance – organized around a closely inter-related set of practical concerns, which requires an improvisational choreography of various means of action using different technologies and artefacts to carry off that performance.

It is important to emphasize that these technologies and means of action are quite different with respect to their organizational character and mutability. That is to say, they differ, often strikingly, in the manner in which they are materially structured and the degree to which that structure is flexible. The use of any particular means or tool will therefore have different consequences, and may create different kinds of problems for reps in their accomplishment of work activities in a timely, hearably competent fashion.

To illustrate, the computer system software used to enter and retrieve data is designed to *ordain* specific courses of action through the way its digital forms and records are arranged, as well as through its software-enforced rules for accessing data and, especially, entering orders by typing text into different fields. This is a common design feature of the electronic



business form, and one of the potential affordances of digital document inscription. The SOC's software is thus relatively immutable as a medium for action: the constraints on its use are considerable regarding what a rep can do and how this can be done.

Paper provides a contrasting example: whether blank or in printed-document form, paper and pen are more mutable as technologies, with many more possibilities for adapting, rearranging, modifying, and hastily creating. In addition, access to, and writing on, paper is not 'software-rule governed' in the way the retrieval and use of digital documents are governed. Consider, for instance, that quick access can be facilitated by placing documents precisely where they can be read almost at a glance, and this placement is entirely under the control of each individual sales rep. This is one of the most significant affordances of paper (see especially Henderson 1998).

Moreover, consider the activity of conversation, which is plainly an essential medium of action for sales rep work. The fact that conversation is fundamentally *interactional* in character, with its organization a collaborative, local achievement, obviously sets certain parameters on the action. For example, the issue of what happens next isn't under the complete control of one party (and the customer is thus an active participant, a collaborator of sorts, in sales rep's 'performance'). Nevertheless, its flexibility is rather striking, considering how talk can be employed to accomplish different actions.

Finally, we have the positioning and movement of the body itself, which can be an extraordinarily flexible physical instrument for action. As we shall see below, its relative mutability in terms of movement, together with the flexibility of talk as action, can compensate for the immutability of other artefacts.

Having made these initial observations about the common concerns of sales reps that serve to organize their conduct when on the phone with customers, as well as the technologies and means of action available to them for doing their work and dealing with such concerns, we are now in a position to identify the methodical features of improvisational choreography. To date, we have identified four features.

#### *Arranging Objects In A Work Space; Positioning The Body In And For That Arrangement*

The first feature that we will describe is the arrangement or positioning of objects and artefacts in a workspace, and the positioning of the body in and for that particular arrangement.

Plate I shows the sales rep in his workstation as he is handling our customer call. In this picture, certain important artefacts are labelled. We can see that just to the right of the rep's computer monitor, standing almost against the front wall of his cubicle, is a list of all the customers in his territory and, most importantly, their customer account numbers. This list was

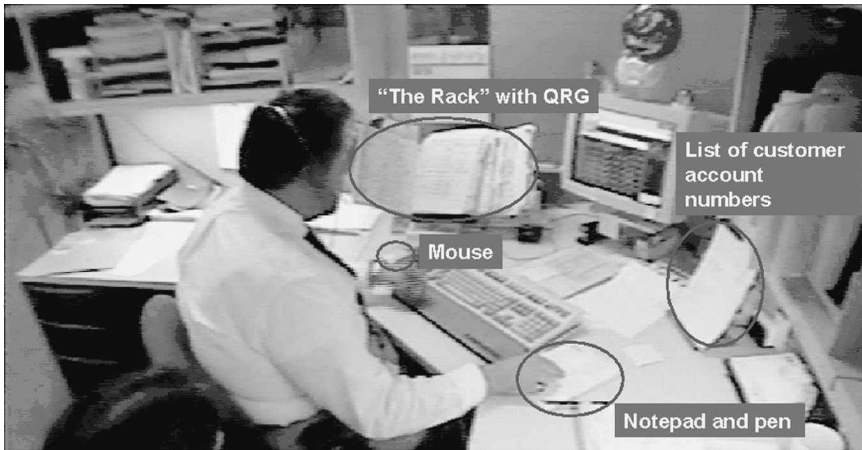


PLATE I: *Sales rep at his workstation*

essential for resolving the small problem we noted early in our call, when the customer didn't know his account number, as it allowed the rep to pull a number off the list in order to bring up price data that would be the same ('generic') for any Board of Education customer.

In addition, a small notepad and pen have been placed off to the right side of the keyboard, where they can be used very quickly by simply moving the right hand off the keyboard (the notepad also figures importantly in our call, and in many other calls we recorded). We can also see in this picture that a large flip-file of paper documents is positioned just off to his left. Reps refer to this flip-file as 'the rack'. One document of particular importance for doing the supplies ordering and selling work is called the 'Quick Reference Guide' or QRG, and in this picture the rep's rack of documents is opened to a page in the Guide.

Figure I is a page from the Quick Reference Guide. Sales reps themselves devised this document to provide information in a format and media that would be most useful for their work. Note that it is structured in grid-like format, listing various document machines and supply products they use, identified by their reorder number. To access pricing information on any product, and to place an order, you need to enter this number into the computer system. Although this Guide is available online, all sales reps we observed *accessed it only in its paper form*, and kept a copy of it very close at hand, either in the front of their rack, as is the case here, or posted page-by-page on the walls of their cubicle.

The QRG's grid-like format, organized as a table, is an ideal document for this work, facilitating ease of use with respect to locating information quickly and affording comprehension 'at-a-glance', with multiple entry points. By placing his rack *there*, just off to the left side, this rep. has made that 'at a glance' reading possible. This is simply not possible with the

MACHINE MODEL	SERIAL NUMBER PREFIX	TONER (units /box) YIELD	DEVELOPER / COPY CARTRIDGE YIELD	FUSER YIELD	STAPLES WASTE SUMPS
5343C/5352C <u>COLOR:</u>	/9HM RED BLUE GREEN BROWN	6R396(2C) 45K 6R365(1C) 6R366(1C) 6R367(1C) 6R368(1C) 1.6K	5R311 320K 5R206 5R207 5R208 5R209 10K	—	8R4023/FIN 25K 8R2253/CON 25.2K
5345/5355	2EY/3T8	6R726(2) 60K	5R140 220K	8R111 (1 TUBE) 40K	8R4023 FOR BOTH FIN AND CONV STAPLER 25K
5365	6W6	6R229(5C) 80K	5R318 300K	8R4077 (1B) 125K	8R4023/CON 25K 8R2253/FIN 25.2K
5380	87Y RED BLUE GREEN BROWN	6R382(4) 100K 6R355(3C) 6R356(3C) 6R357(3C) 6R358(3C) 11.2K	5R195 750K 5R196(25K) 5R197(50K) 5R198(50K) 5R199(50K) 10K	JOB MEMORY CARD 8R3901 10 JOBS	8R4023 25K
5385	88Y RED BLUE GREEN BROWN	6R382(4) 100K 6R355(3C) 6R356(3C) 6R357(3C) 6R358(3C) 11.2K	5R195 750K 5R196(25K) 5R197(50K) 5R198(50K) 5R199(50K) 10K	JOB MEMORY CARD 8R3901 10 JOBS	8R4023 25K
5388	3ET	6R301 135K	5R302 500K	8R983 (2 TUBES) 140K	8R1174 1 REEL/32K 8R4023/CON 25,000

FIGURE I: Page from QRG

online copy of the document. That particular placement of the rack also allows the rep to efficiently reach documents in the rack with his left hand and turn the pages or otherwise manipulate them without having to shift his chair or significantly change his body position by, for example, turning sideways. Most important, it facilitates simultaneous use of the paper Guide with digital documents available through the computer.

These observations should not, in and of themselves, be surprising; we are all familiar with the practice of arranging things on our own desks to facilitate our work. What is of particular analytic significance here is

recognizing that this ordering, as well as the practical design philosophy embodied in the QRG, is absolutely crucial to the closely-timed choreography by which all of the objects, artefacts, tools, and means of action available to the rep are marshalled for dealing with the routine, practical dilemmas of their work.

The importance of this point is emphasized by observing how the rep positioned his body in relationship to the arrangement of objects, tools, and so forth. The body and its positioning is part of this ‘arranging of objects in space’ conduct. To explain, note that our sales rep has positioned the mouse on the left side of the keyboard. Regarding our discussion above on the flexibility of the body, we now want to point out that while this rep is right-handed, and would thus normally have his mouse off to the right side where it can be manipulated by his right hand, he has trained himself to use his left hand to manipulate the mouse. This is because he wants to be able to keep his right hand free for touch-typing numbers on the numerical keypad area of his keyboard, which is located on its far right, and for writing on his notepad, also placed to the right. These artefacts and his body have thus both been ordered and adapted for the choreography of action.

*Counteracting Problems Generated By The Immutable Organization Of The Software*

Continuing with our description of the methods by which SOC reps manage their work during customer calls to achieve a hearably competent performance, we can now identify a second feature of improvisational choreography: counteracting problems generated by the relatively immutable organization of the software for the timely accomplishment of the work. And by shifting our attention to this feature, we can now begin to explicate the choreography as it is organized in motion.

There are a number of instances of this particular kind of methodic conduct in the first minutes of our customer call. Here we only have space to explicate one, an occasion where the rep has to compensate for the software’s insensitivity to the social organization of talk-in-interaction. This nicely choreographed compensation takes advantage of the greater flexibility of another means of action and a different technology: writing on paper.

Looking back to the transcript (see lines 1–4 of Transcript 1), note that the sales rep’s opening turn is delivered as an organizational identification + self-identification, finishing with an open-ended offer. The customer’s response is closely fitted, through its organization, to those actions: the customer, like the rep, identifies himself by name and adds his organizational identification.

The sales rep now faces a dilemma. The caller’s name, most especially his first name, is an important piece of information and is something that should now, having been given, prove useful for conducting a

conversation; more specifically, for doing sales work with customers. However, even though providing names in call openings is extremely common, the computer software does not provide any way of immediately recording that information; the system is insensitive to that basic social fact. Its design does not allow a rep to record *any* information on their screen, including recording the caller's name, until a customer account number or machine serial number is first entered.

In order to preserve the customer's name for later use and to thus, in a sense, preserve important dimensions of the social interaction, the rep has to find some other means of recording it. He uses his notepad and pen (conveniently at hand, due to their careful placement) as that other means. This requires, once again, a close choreography of action. He begins to move his right hand and to shift his gaze away from the screen and keyboard toward the notepad at the precise instant the caller says 'my name . . .', and then quickly writes down the customer's first name (space limitations preclude illustrating these actions with pictures from the video record). This handwritten note becomes useful several minutes later in the call, when the rep glances down at it in order to recover, and then address, the customer by name.

### *Anticipating Events*

We have pointed to an 'immediate recognition' phenomenon at several places in the call. Recognition of this sort is naturally enhanced by the tacit knowledge reps accumulate through experience and then regularly draw on to get their work done in a seemingly effortless fashion. But, this extensive practical knowledge also provides for the possibility of *anticipating* events that will likely occur and actions that will likely be needed well before their occurrence or need, which further contributes to the 'effortless' fashion by which an experienced sales rep handles a call. An expertise in anticipating events is thus the third feature of improvisational choreography that we can identify.

One especially striking instance of this anticipating activity can be observed in the segment of the call (drawing from the transcript shown earlier) that runs from the sales rep's turn in line 24 ('your five zero three four . . .'), to his turn at lines 41–42 ('at three boxes the price drops . . .'). This part of the conversation takes place shortly after the initial segment that we have been analysing. Here the rep is delivering information to the customer, where before he was soliciting it. That information comes from two different media: the paper-based Quick Reference Guide (the source for re-order numbers and copy cartridge yields), and the SOC database then visible on the rep's computer screen (the source for quantity pricing data). The rep is carefully parsing his information delivery into coherent chunks, and pausing between these chunks, which gives the customer time to write down the pricing information. However, that parsing and pacing of his delivery is also organized so as to give the rep time to locate

information on his computer, using his keyboard and mouse, *before* it has to be actually read and then ‘placed’ into his turn-at-talk.

This is not simply a matter of directly reading something off a computer screen or page of paper. In this case, both the digital and paper documents consist of columns and rows of numbers and some very cryptic text, not a scripted talk-track. The rep’s extended turn-at-talk, delivered as a kind of product information list, is organized completely in and through his necessarily local work with these technologies. In this instance, then, the rep is closely co-ordinating the use of multiple means of action (reading, talking with the customer, typing) with multiple tools and artefacts (a paper QRG page and a digital document, the keyboard and mouse) in a thoroughly endogenous fashion. In general, the ideal for SOC sales reps in making use of these materials appears to be something like – as one rep put it – ‘not running out of words before I get to what is needed for what I have to say next’.

#### *Close Co-ordination Of Multiple Means And Tools*

Our fourth and final feature of improvised choreography – *closely co-ordinating multiple means of action with multiple tools* – involves the rep in once again making use of both his computer screen to access information as he speaks with the customer, and the paper QRG in his rack. In this case, the shift from screen to paper is embedded in an extended sequence that combines talk, the manipulation of documents, and reading from both screen and paper.

This instance begins rather later in the call we have been examining, with the rep now looking at the screen as he accesses the final price data he needs for products for one of the customer’s two machines, the model 5034. Although this rep knows by heart the re-order numbers needed to access pricing information on the 5034 supply products, he is less familiar with the second machine, the 5385, and before he can provide that data to the customer, he has to again obtain certain information from the most readily available and most quickly accessed source, the QRG, and then enter the appropriate numbers into the SOC computer system to bring up prices for those products. But he has to get the information from the QRG, and then from the SOC computer system, *before* he finishes his multi-part turn about the 5034 prices – pricing information that he is reading at that moment off his computer screen – if he is to be able to immediately move on, without any hitch or gap in the interaction, to pricing for the second machine.

We will use pictures taken from the video record with the associated utterances by the sales rep and customer to illustrate our observations. The action begins some four minutes into the call, with the rep now delivering the price for Board of Education customers when they order two boxes of dry ink for the 5034. As he delivers this price information, he starts to move his left hand toward the rack and thus the QRG, and with that, his gaze also

shifted in that direction. This behaviour and the related utterance are shown in Plate II.

As soon as the rep's hand reaches the rack, though, he immediately shifts his gaze back to the screen. After all, the model 5034 price information he is providing, at that very moment, is available only from that screen. The 5385 re-order number data the rep is looking for is not on the page to which the rack is currently open, though. As he completes his 'at two it drops . . .' utterance and then again during the pause that follows (not shown in the picture), the rep shifts his gaze back and forth between screen and rack to turn the page twice, returning his gaze to the screen just in time to read the data on the price for four boxes (the next quantity-price break). However, as shown in the Plate III sequence, during the utterance in which that 'four box' data is delivered, the rep glances down at his notepad. Earlier in the call, he used that pad in a fashion similar to what we observed with the customer's name, and for the same reason: to write down the model numbers for this customer's two machines because the software allows for recording only one number. He now apparently wants to be absolutely sure about what model number he is seeking.

Once more, while he is telling the customer about the next quantity-price break for an order of ten boxes and during a pause that follows (not shown), the rep steals another glance at his notepad. Finally, as shown in Plate IV, he moves his right hand off the keyboard to locate, on that pad, the place where he wrote the model number just a few minutes earlier, and then puts his finger on the pad, right after he says 'two fifty six' and as the customer starts to respond with 'okay' (line 82), to hold that place.

This allows him to quite literally bind, with his body, that handwritten number with the same model number printed on the Quick Reference Guide page. He can therefore confirm that he is indeed looking at the right page, and then read the re-order number for toner (the first product column on the QRG) for the 5385 off that page. The rep is now prepared to provide the customer with the same number and with the related information about 5385 toner available on the QRG, as well as to type that re-order number into the computer to get the first piece of pricing data up on his screen for 5385 supplies. And this is what then occurs: the rep



77 SR: .hh at two it drops to three twenty one



79 SR: Four drops to: (1.0)  
two eighty eight

PLATE III

smoothly shifts his talk from the topical focus from model 5034 information to 5385 information, and the conversation continues.

Let us now offer some appreciation of the overall effect of all these actions. If we had access only to the audio track for this call, with no access to the video and thus no *visual* access to the rep’s actions that we have just described, we would be in the same position as the customer, and would then perhaps be specially alert to the degree to which all these actions (the reaching and looking and reading and typing) are transparent to that customer, the audience for this performance. The result is a sales rep who is *hearably* in complete command of the information needed for the task at hand, with the crux of that performance – the actions needed to find, read, and fluently put that information into words – cloaked from view by both the limitations of the telephone channel and the rep’s corporeal skills.





81 SR: ten drops to two fifty si::x

PLATE IV

SALES REP WORK ROUTINES

At the outset of this paper, we argued that standard conceptions about work routines fail to take account of crucial aspects of the phenomenon. Our analysis of the work of SOC sales reps reveals one such aspect is the degree to which work that appears to be uncomplicatedly ‘routine’ or even scripted may in reality require – when inspected closely and without pre-conception – considerable adroitness, with an organization that is conspicuously intricate. And, if this is often the case, it suggests that the conventional (and recognizably vernacular) division in our discipline between ‘routine’ work and other, presumably more demanding and cognitively challenging kinds of work needs to be respecified. The offhand acceptance of this simple division has allowed researchers of work sites and occupations to avoid close analysis and appreciation of the specific requirements, exigencies, and possibilities that the work actually presents (cf. Suchman 2000: 44).

But we have taken the analysis of work routines a step further, investigating how their apparent ‘routineness’ can indeed be so discernible or evident that an observer could defensibly describe it as such. We recognize, then, that ‘routineness’ can be (and often is) a perceptible feature of work activity, but propose that this phenomenon should be further respecified to take account of its contingently *produced* nature; that is, how it could come to be perceptible, and a ‘social fact,’ in the first place.

Considering how the openings of ordinary telephone conversations are organized can draw a useful comparison. ‘In the way in which this sort of [opening] talk “runs off”’, Schegloff (1986: 112) remarks, ‘it often fosters

the impression that is “ritual” or even “merely ritual”; that it is “virtually automatic” or “(pre)scripted,” that is “routine,” indeed that it constitutes “a routine”. Although this sense of ‘routineness and virtual automaticity’ is not completely groundless (op. cit. 113), ‘it is strategically misleading’. It is misleading because these conversational routines are distinctly local achievements. The parties themselves endogenously organize their activity, on each and every occasion, out of ‘structured sets of alternative courses or directions which the talk and the interaction can take’ (op. cit. 114). Most important for our interests, Schegloff then generalizes this point, arguing that for the operation of *any* routine, students of human behaviour need to discover ‘the range of contingencies open at various points in the development of the activity, the better to understand both what sort of achievement an ‘uneventful’ joint production of the episode is, and *how a sense of its routine character is fostered*’ (op. cit. 148; emphasis added).

Although extended strips of telephone-supported sales work activity, like the one we have been examining, warrant attention to features not addressed by Schegloff in his analysis of the (typically) brief exchanges by which ordinary telephone conversations are opened – we have been focusing on the embodied actions of one party that are not visually available to the other party, even as they help organize a quite hearable effect (but see Schegloff 1986: 112) – there are important parallels between the two activities with respect to their apparent routineness or script-like qualities. And, similar to Schegloff’s analysis of telephone call openings, our investigation of the call management practices of SOC sales reps has shown that such appearances are misleading.

If the concepts ‘routine’ and, it follows, ‘routinization’ have to therefore be used with caution when describing the work of SOC sales reps – and conceivably many other varieties of call centre work, with the scope of the argument being an empirical question – then what sort of characterization would in fact be accurate and scientifically useful when applied to this activity? At a number of points, we have used the term ‘artful’ when referring to the improvised choreography of sales reps. Is there a warrant, then, for arguing that improvisational choreography, as a set of practical methods shared among members of this work community, involves a considerable measure of *craft*? If we define ‘craftsmanship’ as work where the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the worker exercises as she/he works, and further, that the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process (see especially Pye 1968: 12–13), then we believe that the case can be made.

This not to argue that successfully completing a sales order or providing pricing information in an efficient manner is easily comparable to, say, crafting Shaker furniture by hand. We are not asserting that the work and the craftsmanship required are equivalent, or that the risks of discernibly ‘spoil[ing] the job . . . at almost any minute’ are the same, to use Pye’s (1968: 13) apt turn of phrase concerning the decisive issue. But like craft workers, who may, for example, employ a device like a jig when making

furniture to reduce their risk, sales reps make many efforts toward limiting their distinct kind of risk, which is basically any manifestation of ineptitude. This is largely what their improvisational choreography is designed to address.

In making this case, though, we are not claiming that the SOC is comparable to all other teleservice centres; as we have stated, this remains to be empirically demonstrated. We recognize that for at least some teleservice settings, the work may include significant assembly-line features (cf. Taylor and Bain 1999), where the actions of the phone reps are more closely monitored and controlled by certain technologies, and where the management objective in every respect is thus to enforce what is plainly the opposite of craft, a 'workmanship of certainty' (Pye 1968: 13). Still, to make the key point once again, even though these technologies may be designed to increase certainty, they have to be used during singular encounters that are locally organized and thus necessarily contingent. So even here the outcome may be more ambiguous, and there should now be no doubt that the naturalistic study of work practice in teleservice settings may reveal serious problems in applying the standard model of 'routine' to this work, and may uncover significant craft-like, improvisationally choreographed activities that help make possible the appearance of any 'routineness' and so accomplish its social facticity.

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