

Knowledge at Work: Tensions in transforming people into data in Call Centres

Catrina Alferoff

David Knights

Keele University Department of Management,
Keele, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG

Tel: 01782 583089

Fax 01782 584272

c.alfieroff@keele.ac.uk

d.knights@keele.ac.uk

Abstract

Call centres are the fastest growing mode of work organisation in contemporary Western society. In the UK alone, the call centre industry now employs more people than the coal, steel and automotive sectors combined. Between 1997 and 2002 Datamonitor (1998) predicted a growth of approximately 120,000 agent positions in the UK call centre market¹. Increasingly, managing the call centre's activities through forms of 'mass customisation' (Frenkel et.al. 2000) has been superseded by attempts to develop quasi-intimate relations with the customer as a corporate goal. This revival of personalised customer service is supported by a new generation of technology which has the capacity to generate knowledge that overcomes the problem of bridging the gap between the mass and the single individual – as it pertains both to customers and call centre workers (Alferoff & Knights 2001). On the management wish list for the successful implementation of successful customer relationship management (CRM) is the need for better trained staff who are capable of delivering a high quality of service (Ecsoft & Chordiant 1999). The problem for the organisation is that of a tension between technology and the human factor in the provision of knowledge. This lies in the possibility that the deployment of increased technology will automate the agent/customer interaction and rob the communication process of its personality (ibid).

Note

The organisations reported in this paper deployed CRM to varying degrees of sophistication. However, in their endeavours to deliver measurable performance they pursued seemingly incompatible goals; structuring calls so as to normalise (Foucault 1979) the interaction whilst, at the same time, relying implicitly on the know-how of call centre workers to personalise the encounter and guarantee both sales and customer satisfaction. It is ever the concern of managers that staff in call centres may have knowledge of customers that is not being put to use in a fully visible form (Alferoff & Knights 2001) and this is a central topic in the emerging body of literature on the learning organisation (see for example Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, Van Krogh 2000). Generally this is seen to involve dualistic interpretations on the nature of such knowledge into categories of tacit and explicit, whether generated by individuals or groups (Cook & Seely Brown 1999). We argue that companies carry on their activities without any clear knowledge of the constituent, detailed know-how of their members (Polanyi 1962) since know-how cannot be so easily separated into formal or explicit and tacit or informal elements. Attempts to measure and systemise the ‘unmeasurable’, as was attempted in our case study organisations, was often self-defeating destructive as it led both to confusion and division on the part of managers and dissatisfaction and resistance from call centre staff engaged in customer service.

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¹ The data on call centre growth is due to become more reliable and up to date when it is distinguished as a specific mode of labour in the government’s blue book at the end of 2001.

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