Occupation health and safety in the New Zealand call centre industry

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been a great deal written on the poor working conditions within the call centre industry, there has been muted discussion on the impact that such conditions have on the health and safety of the workers. There is, nevertheless, increasing recognition that the deficient working conditions in call centres impacts on the health of the workers. Despite this evidence there is still little known about the occupation health and safety (OHS) policies and practices used in these workplaces. There has also been scant research on the health and safety experiences of call centre workers. This paper aims to address these gaps by examining whether the tasks performed and the OHS policies and practices in call centres make the job dangerous or unhealthy for workers. A case study methodology is applied to explore these questions in two call centres, selected to essentially epitomise the amount of diversity that exists in the industry. Key findings based on interviews with case study participants and key stakeholders indicate that the OHS policies and practices in these call centres represent various risks. A number of policy concerns are raised through the data, particularly where negative OHS outcomes can be associated with the lack of organisational compliance with employment legislation.

Introduction

Whilst NZ based research on call centres remains limited, a common theme in the international literature concerns the poor working conditions that exist within these workplaces. Overseas researchers have associated call centre employment with 'production lines' and have identified a range of negative outcomes associated with employment in these contexts. The health and safety of call centre employees emerges as one key concern (see Taylor & Bain, 1999; Bain, Bunzel, Mulvey, Hyman & Taylor, 2000; Gilmore & Moreland, 2000; Richardson, Belt & Marshall, 2000; Union Research Centre For Organisation & Technology [URCOT], 2000; Batt & Moynihan 2002; Deery & Kinnie, 2002). Much of the existing research, however, merely draws attention to the OHS risks prevalent in these workplaces. There is little in the way of research that specifically evaluates the OHS policies, practices and outcomes in these contexts. This paper aims to address these gaps in literature by determining whether the tasks performed and the OHS policies and practices in call centre workplaces make the job dangerous or unhealthy. In setting the context for this paper, literature pertaining to the health and safety of call centre workers will be reviewed. The case study research design will subsequently be outlined, followed by an overview of the key findings, and a discussion on the potential implications these represent.

The extent of the problem

The call centre industry is frequently described in the literature as engaging in low-profit activities, utilising non-standard employment practices in which wages and conditions are poor and workers are disposable, and where Taylorist principles are ingrained (Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee, 2000; Paul & Huws, 2002). The call centre industry is also characterised by its high staff turnover. Although there is little consensus on precise figures, European figures are estimated at 20 to 30% per annum (Crome 1998; Richardson *et al.,* 2000); Australian figures at 18% - although as high as 40% in Sydney and Melbourne (URCOT 2000); and New Zealand at 18% (ACA, 2000). Emerging studies are beginning to make linkages between the type of work in call centres, poor employment practices and a high rate of staff turnover and certain OHS problems, such as stress, fatigue and occupational over-use injuries (Richardson 1998; URCOT 2000).

Furthermore, expenditure on employee related issues are considered costs rather than investments, resulting in poor health and safety (Wallace *et al*, 2000; Paul & Huws, 2002). Paul and Huws (2002) also suggest that call centre employers often fail to take adequate steps to protect their employees' health and safety because as white-collar workplaces, the potential hazards within these workplaces are not outwardly obvious. The risks "tend to involve cumulative stresses and strains resulting from a combination of causes rather than a single traumatic event" (p.37) making it impossible to pinpoint any one, or rather, any precise combination of factors likely to have caused the harm. Researchers also suggest that the repetitiveness of tasks and the simultaneous use of computers and telephony represent a number of physical hazards for employees' (see Richardson, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Paul & Huws, 2002). These include: back/postural problems; repetitive strain injury; voice loss; acoustic shock/hearing problems; eyesight problems; lack of air-conditioning and ventilation; hygiene (germs spread through sharing phones, etc); fatigue and stress (particularly from abusive customers); and headaches. According to URCOT (2000), the poor quality computers and audio-visual equipment and the use of non-ergonomic chairs and desks contribute significantly to these physical health issues.

Stress is the most commonly noted OHS issue in the call centre literature (see Australian Communications Association [ACA], 1998; Richardson & Marshall, 1999; Richardson *et al*, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Wallace *et al*, 2000; Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Holman 2002; Paul & Huws 2002; Shire, Holtgrewe & Kerst 2002). Studies indicate that stress is caused by the intensive nature of call centre work, and in particular, the constant demands placed on agents to meet overly stringent and unrealistic productivity targets (ACA 1998; Richardson & Marshall, 1999; URCOT, 2000; Paul & Huws, 2002). Stress has also been attributed to the "inconvenience of being literally wired to the desk"; unpredictable traffic peaks; speed-up of job cycles and the high levels of monitoring often present in these workplaces (ACA, 1998; Richardson & Marshall, 1999; URCOT, 2000; Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Paul & Huws, 2002). The pressure of dealing with customers on a continuous basis is another cause of strain, particularly when employees are subject to abuse and harassment from clients with no time to recuperate (Crome, 1998; Richardson & Marshall, 1999; Wallace *et al*, 2000; Deery & Kinnie, 2002).

There is also evidence to indicate that stress may be associated with the use of non-standard employment arrangements in these organisations (Burgess 1997; Kramar, 1998; Houseman 1999; Tucker, 2002; Quinlan, 2003, 2003a). Quinlan (2003, 2003a) states strong links can be established between non-standard employment and the absence of job security, and higher rates of injury, greater exposure to hazards and a higher incidence of disease and work related stress. Furthermore, Christensen (1998) suggests that some non-standard workers have reported "feeling like second class corporate citizens", feelings that can easily translate into a diminished sense of self-worth.

Research design

A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate for this research given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on *individual* experiences. As part of a case study methodology, two call centres were selected to facilitate a comparative approach. The selected case studies exemplified the homogenous nature of the call centre industry, and allowed the researcher to determine the extent to which employee's experiences with OHS converged or differed on the basis of intrinsic organisational factors.

Five data collection tools and five sources of information were used as part of a triangulated approach (see Table 1); the use of multiple perspectives allowing the researcher to "overcome the intrinsic bias" associated with single method studies (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1981: 137). As the primary data collection tool, interviews were conducted with 50 case study participants, and 9 key stakeholders using a semi-structured approach. Case study participants were asked about OHS training and policies in their organisations; their experiences with OHS policies and examples of any adverse impacts of the work. Stakeholders (which included an OSH Service advisor, a union organiser and three delegates from the Service and Food Workers Union, a union organiser from the Finance and Information Workers Union, a publications editor from the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, a training advisor from the Electro-technology industry training organisation

and a labour market analyst from the Labour Market Policy Group) were questioned about the extent to which OHS is an issue in call centre workplaces; how managers should address these issues, and the challenges unions and organisations face in promoting greater awareness of OHS in these workplaces.

TABLE 1

Matrix of method & data triangulation

	No.	*Semi-Structured Interviews*	*Email*	*Document Analysis*	*Archival Analysis*	*Observations*
CC Workers	40	√	√	√	√	√
Supervisors	5	√				√
Managers	2	√		√	√	√
Stakeholders	9	√	√	√	√	

Findings

As stated above, the two call centres involved in this study differed significantly from one another. Table 2 compares the two case studies in terms of their general structure and design, work design; and employment practices and places them in context relative to call centres in the NZ call centre industry . In summary, TELI is the larger, more established of the two case studies. This organisation is the customer service division of a large company with multiple independent branches throughout NZ and Australia. The second case study, MESO, has been operating in Australia and NZ as a division of a large multinational market research organisation for the past 14 years.

Work within TELI is inbound. Workers experience heavy inflows of calls during certain hours and seasonal periods, although the industry in which TELI operates is relatively stable. As an outbound outsourcer, respective clients provide MESO with scripts (read verbatim) for each campaign. The nature of the market dictates that campaigns change regularly, although work functions remain constant.

TELI recruits workers annually, preferring tertiary students and middle-aged women for call centre positions, although a high concentration of workers are over 50. Workers are employed as either part-timers or casuals, although these are labelled core and non-core respectively. Union presence is relatively strong in this organisation, with almost 60% of the staff represented by the SFWU.

Four large recruitment intakes occur annually within MESO, although employees are also hired sporadically as the need arises. MESO relies exclusively on casual call centre operators, and the majority of its employees are secondary/tertiary students. Turnover rates for this organisation are significant (estimated at 60-70%) and are identified as the most pertinent and costly issue facing the call centre.

TABLE 2

Comparison of MESO and TELI's organisational features

Organisational Structure	TELI			MESO		NZ Industry Data
Industry Sector	Sports			Market research		Majority Govt & IT&T
Nature of the industry	Stable, little competitive pressure			Very erratic, competitive		N/A
Structure	In-house			Outsourcer		Growing # of outsourcers
Age	38 years			14 years		No data available
Size	160 Seats/ pool of 177 workers			34 Seats/ pool of 132 workers		Average: 32 Seats
Work Design						
Work Function	Customer service			Market Research		Customer Service: 47% Market Research: 1%
Types of calls Handled	Consumer			Business & Consumer		Consumer: 28%
Employment Features						
Employment Arrangements	Core (part-timers): 32% of workforce (57) Non-core (casuals): 68% of workforce (120)			Casuals: 100% of workforce		Casuals & Part-time employed by 81% of call centres. Average: 11 casuals/ part-timers employed per call centre.
Gender Ratios		Core	Non-core	Total		Casuals	
	M	8(14%)	30(25%)	38(22%)	M	49(37 %)	
	F	49(86%)	90(75%)	139(78%)	F	83(63%)	
Union Presence	105 staff members (59%) unionised by Service & Food Workers Union			No union presence on site		40% of call centres have unionised staff; Average industry unionisation rate: 13% 3 major unions represent Call Centre's in NZ: FINSEC, PSA & SFWU
		Core	Non-core	Total			
	M	7	10	17(16%)			
	F	32	56	188(84%)			
Tenure	Core: 5 - 38 years; Non-Core: 3 weeks - 7.5 years			3 weeks – 4 years		No data available
Turnover	Turnover under control, Non-Core more transient.			Estimated: 60 - 70% pa.		Overall average turnover: 18%, Average part-time turnover: 10%

The effects of call centre work on heath and safety of its workers

Employees from both organisations indicated their physical and/or psychological health had been negatively affected by working in the call centre environment (see Table 3).

FATIGUE: Although fatigue was not a predominant issue for TELI employees, it was a significant problem for most of the casual employees from MESO. MESO workers drew a strong association between the unconventional working hours and long shifts, and negative OHS outcomes such as tiredness and fatigue. Employees indicated that extended hours are often demanded when the organisation is involved in multiple local or Australian campaigns. Hours regularly stretch beyond midnight, although peak times often feature shifts that run back to back from 5pm to 2am. These late night shifts were identified as a source of dissatisfaction amongst employees and supervisors alike. Some MESO employees stated that the eight-hour day shifts were also too long, particularly given the monotony associated with the work.

EMOTIONAL STRESS: Employees from both organisations indicated they had experienced emotional stress on the job because of abusive customers. All the TELI employees interviewed stated they encountered disgruntled customers over the phone once every two or three shifts, experiences that often negatively affected their morale. Non-core employees were more likely to be emotionally affected by the abuse, possibly because of their inexperience.

TABLE 3

Effects of call centre work on employees' health

	Fatigue	*Emotional stress*	*Muscular strain/ fatigue*	*No effect*
TELI: Core		XXXXXXXXXX	XXXXXXXXXXXX	XXXXX
Non Core		XXXXXXXXX	XXXXXX	XX
MESO:	XXXXXX	XXXX	XXXXXXX	XX

Negative feelings were, therefore, often internalised, spilling out into non-work hours.

> 'You're not a person you're just a voice on the phone for customers to vent their frustrations on'.

> 'When someone starts swearing at you, you can't help being affected by it, it really messes with your emotions'.

Another cause of emotional strain was associated with how employees perceived their work. All the call centre employees interviewed described the work as 'boring', 'monotonous' or 'repetitive' and most indicated their only reason for being in the job was the lack of opportunities elsewhere. Older, core workers from TELI in particular, indicated they felt undervalued in the organisation, and had very low levels of morale.

> 'We are not the great of the great; we're the last off the ship'.

> 'We're the peasants and they (the management) are the landowners'.

The non-standard nature of employment in these two organisations could also contribute, in part, to the stress and fatigue felt by most of the interviewees. Employees were dissatisfied about having to work unsocial hours without added penal rates. Furthermore, these employees were unhappy that they were treated as 'part-timers' when the nature of their employment and the number of hours they worked were far more akin to permanent full-time work. Most worked hours equivalent to full-time work (spread over five week days and a compulsory Saturday) and the majority had served the organisation for over 10 years (38 years recorded as longest tenure) and indicated intentions of remaining in the organisation indefinitely/until retirement. Furthermore, most of the core workers relied on the job as a main source of income despite the relatively low wage rates, suggesting levels of commitment comparable to those on permanent fulltime agreements (Rosenberg & Lapidus, 1999; Horwitz, Allan & Brosnan, 2000; Smithson & Lewis, 2000; Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003).

The non-standard arrangements in MESO also created stress for employees. Despite the casual nature of employment, there are a number of employees who have a relatively strong financial reliance on the work. These employees are first to be called in when campaigns commence; have the longest tenures; and have an implicit contract for ongoing employment. The irregular/uncertain nature of employment affects these employees hardest, creating limitations in terms of financial planning and ongoing anxiety.

MUSCLE FATIGUE: A significant number of employees reported experiencing strain, fatigue and pain in their fingers, hands, arms, backs, and necks as a result of using the keyboard and remaining seated for long periods of time. Employees blamed the highly repetitive nature of the work, and the absence of ergonomically designed workstations for their muscle strain and discomfort. When questioned about workstations, the field manager and supervisors at MESO acknowledged that their call centre "only has the basics" in terms of equipment, however, the equipment was still considered adequate "for getting the job done". Management dismissed the notion that the working environment could play any part in diminishing the health of employees, stating that shifts are too short and irregular for employees to be disadvantaged. The manager also stated that few employees had complained about workstations, an indication that the 'one-size-fits-all' equipment was "sufficient".

On the other hand, management and supervisors from TELI stated they were aware of a few cases of Occupation Overuse Syndrome in the organisation but felt they had good OHS practices in place. They did, however, acknowledge that the workstations were outdated and needed improvement. Independent of this study, this call centre was upgraded with ergonomically designed workstations in February 2004. Employees reacted positively to these changes, claiming the new equipment increased the level of adjustability, support and comfort.

Discussion

The both literature reviewed and the case study data analysed suggest that the tasks performed as well as the limited OHS policies and practices evident in call centre workplaces may put the health and safety of employees at risk for a number of reasons:

- Non-standard work practices
- Nature of the work (physically intensive; emotional labour, etc)
- Non-compliance with employment legislation.

The use of *non-standard employment practices* in these, and most call centres, also requires attention. Within MESO, long-term casuals reported experiencing anxiety because of the irregular/uncertain nature of employment. The literature (e.g. URCOT, 2000; Paul & Huw, 2002; Hunt, 2004) not only confirms an increasing number of call centre workers being employed on a non-standard basis, but researchers (such as Brosnan, 1995; Quinlan, 2003a, 2003b) and the HASIE Act have associated negative OHS outcomes with the diminished sense of security experienced by non-standard workers. With the inclusion of stress and fatigue in the amended HASIE legislation, employers are under greater obligation to assess working time issues on a consistent basis. More attention needs to be paid to the needs of employees; in particular, it is unreasonable for organisations to expect employees to make working time sacrifices that surpass those of full-time employees if workers are excluded from the benefits full-timers enjoy. The emotional implications of these issues on employees requires immediate attention, more so given the demographic backgrounds of the majority of workers (older; unqualified).

The stakeholders and employees interviewed noted the employers in the unionised call centre offered employees comparatively better protection than the non-unionised case study, indicating that union representation plays an important role in determining OHS outcomes (also see Weil, 1991; Quinlan, Mayhew & Bohle, 2000a; Walters, 2002). There is a need, therefore, for trade unions put pressure on employers to maintain a good standard of health and safety on those call centres involved in low-profit activities and where lower scale non-standard workers are often involved (Lipsig-Mumme, 1998; Quinlan *et al.*, 2000a, 2000b; URCOT, 2000; Quinlan, 2003a, 2003b). The role of the ERA in improving union access must also be reviewed and strengthened, particularly where it concerns the more contingent workforce.

Researchers (e.g. Richardson, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Paul & Huws, 2002) and interviews with case study participants confirm that *the nature of the work* in call centres can result in a wide range of health problems (e.g. muscle strain, fatigue). This issue was also found to be more significant within MESO, where employees repeatedly made the connection between sitting for long hours at poorly designed workstations and the increased muscular strain and fatigue they experience. Despite the risks posed by the working environment, the call centre employers have made little effort to minimise/remedy these problems. Management also fails to acknowledge the health risks inherent in the nature of the work.

This was also the case in terms of the working hours in MESO. Management insisted that shifts were too short to have any negative impacts on employees. Employees and direct site observations, however, not only confirmed that the employees were required to work long and unconventional hours, but also there was a strong correlation between the long working hours and fatigue. These findings suggest a serious misalignment between how management thinks employees experience their working environment and how employees actually experience it. The absence of formal hazard reporting and management systems in the organisation may play a key factor in this misalignment. Employees and supervisors are unaware of how to go about reporting hazards in the workplace; complaints about such issues may, therefore, not reach management leading them to conclude that these problems do not exist.

Key stakeholders, the literature (see ACA, 1998; Richardson & Marshall, 1999; Kinnie *et al.*, 2000; Richardson *et al.*, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Wallace *et al.*, 2000; Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Holman, 2002; Mulholland, 2002) and case study participants emphasise the issue of stress in terms of three key factors: having to deal with abusive customers; lack of stimulation from the job; and the non-standard nature of employment. The OSH Service (2003a: 15) also highlights the significance of these issues in light of recent changes to the New Zealand HASIE Act. Nevertheless, neither MESO nor TELI have recognised their obligations as employers in these respects. This is a concern given how often workers are required to deal with difficult callers. From the managerial perspective, these calls can hinder an employee's performance, and lead to greater absenteeism and turnover (Wallace *et al.*, 2000; Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Paul & Huws, 2002). The impacts on the individual workers may however, be more significant. It is therefore, imperative that policies be put in place to minimise the psychological consequences of these calls. One important strategy identified by employees is that of time-out, a coping mechanism that FINSEC is also calling for in order to minimise the development of more severe stress symptoms. De-briefing sessions are another possibility, although a remedial rather than preventative strategy.

Employees from both call centres also had low morale because of the highly monotonous, and repetitive nature of the work, factors that Christensen (1998) and the OSH Service (2003a: 15) have strongly correlated with stress. ACA (1998) indicates that the repetitiveness and monotony associated with call centre work needs immediate attention, particularly given the difficulties call centres face in retaining employees. Their research on Australian call centres highlights three specific areas in need for improvement where employee morale is concerned; job variety, performance rewards and recognition and career promotion opportunities (ACA, 1998: 31). Although some measures may not be feasible within this call centre, simple reward systems and incentive programs may go a long way in improving employee's workplace experiences.

Finally, *the lack of compliance* with OHS and other employment law was apparent in both case studies, particularly within MESO, where both employees and employers had little or no awareness of their legal rights and obligations. The low level of non-compliance by the MESO's employers can be explained in part by the smallness of the business (MESO employs approximately 34 people), its actives, managerial incompetence, lack of resources and the use of exploitative work practices (see Lamm, 2002).

The employers of MESO and to a lesser extent TELI, not only breached the HASIE Act (eg not providing safe and healthy working environments and not providing on-going training, etc), but also contravened the ERA in terms of they way they employed their long-term casual workers and part-time staff on a semi-permanent and full-time basis – who incidentally, are more likely to have extensive exposure to OHS risks than the 'true' casuals.

However, given the shortage of OHS inspectors in NZ (Lamm, 2002), the notoriously low level of compliance in the call centre industry (ACA, 2002), and the projected growth of the out-sourcing sector, the health and safety of the call centre workers will continue to be compromised.

Discussion

Although this study has resulted in the emergence of a number of important themes, it is not without limitations. In particular, assertions made in this paper are based on findings from a small sample, thus the study is limited in terms of generalisability. Nonetheless, findings indicate that the combination of non-standard work practices, the nature of the work and non-compliance with employment legislation can lead to illness and injuries for workers in the two call centres. Employees from the two organisations also identified three specific OHS outcomes of call centre work, namely fatigue, emotional stress; and muscular fatigue.

Given the projected growth of the call centre industry, policy makers need to be mindful of the OHS issues that characterise these workplaces. In particular, regulatory agencies need to take steps to ensure issues associated with stress and fatigue are managed more stringently in call centres, particularly with its recent inclusion in the HASIE Act. Greater attention also needs to be paid to regulating the use of non-standard arrangements in this industry. While the current legislation extends some protection to workers of a non-standard status, lack of compliance leaves these protective mechanisms redundant. Therefore, as shown in the past, rigorous enforcement of employment regulations is essential when combating poor working conditions. Finally, although there is ample research that shows that trade unions play an important role in protecting employees from unhealthy working conditions within call centres, the barriers they experience in gaining access to workers in these workplaces drastically diminishes the amount of influence they can have. The forthcoming reforms that improve trade union access to workplace must therefore also be supported.

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