Psychological contract and job security among call centre agents: Preliminary evidence

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ABSTRACT

This study explored call centre agents perceived psychological contract and job security in a South African call centre setting. We interviewed a purposive sample of 12 call centre agents (females = 8eight and male = 4, blacks = 10, colored =2, permanent employees = 12; mean period of service = 3 years). The agents responded to semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data yielded the call centre agents to perceive their psychological contracts with the employer to influence their job security over and above their legal contracts. Call centre agent perceptions of unmet psychological expectations and obligations contributed to their workplace demotivation and disengagement. We propose a preliminary conceptual model for studying psychological contract and job security among call centre agents.

Keywords: Psychological contract, job security, expectations, obligations, call centre

Introduction

Over the past decade, call centres have become mainstream among commercial industry entiies (Huws, 2009) and particularly for maintaing and managing customer care (Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Call centre agents work under pressure (Latha & Panchanatham, 2010) and from the fact that advances in technology may result in a reduced workforce as organisations tend to retrench employees and restructure their remaining staff complement (Andrew, 2014). As a result, call centre employees may become insecure in their role, which undermines their commitment to the organisation (Adebayo, 2006; De Witte, Vander Elst & De Cuyper, 2015; Dhanpat, 2017). We sought to explore call centre agent perceptions of their psychological contract and job security in a South African call centre within a financial service sector setting.

A psychological contract refers to perceptions that the employee may have about the organisation, both before and during their experience with the organisation (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). It is grounded in processes such as i) pre-employment negotiation, which is the foundation of the psychological contract, ii) redefining a psychological contract, ensuring that there is a clear line of communication between the employee and employer regarding expectations, and iii) a fair, balanced and dynamic relationship which does not lead to a psychological contract breach by the employer (Burch, Batchelor, Burch & Haller, 2015). A psychological contract influences organisational citizenship behaviour in an organisation (Anggraeni, Dwiatmadja & Yuniawan, 2017). When an employee perceives a psychological contract breach, they may perceive a threat to his or her sense of job security (Ning & Zhaoyi, 2017), and as may be the case with being overworked with no recognition by the employer (Ning & Zhaoyi, 2017). Conversely, an employer may perceive a psychological contract breach when an employer is performing only the barest of functions (Conway, Guest & Trenberth, 2011) or is not trustworthy (Ning & Zhaoyi, 2017). Employees who perceive a breach in the psychological contract are likely to engage in deviant workplace behaviour (Balogun, Oluyemi; Afolabi, 2018).

Job security is about job tenure continuity (Yousef, 1998). It implies retaining one's job as well as the maintenance of certain aspects and features of the job important to the employee (Rosenblatt & Ruvio, 1991). It has both cognitive and affective components. Cognitive job insecurity is defined as an awareness of the possibility of job loss (Cheng & Chan, 2008). Affective job insecurity refers to fears or emotional experiences associated with losing one's job (Borg & Elizur, 1992). Both cognitive and affective , job security are linked to the intention to stay within the organisation (McPhail & Fisher, 2008; Steel & Lounsbury, 2009). We aimed to explore how call centre agents perceived arrangements of their psychological contract to ensure job security.

Method

Research approach and design

This study is utilized a qualitative inductive approach to understand call centre agents perceptions of their psychological contract and job security. A qualitative approach is suited to the goal to understand social phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2010) and shared meanings on their workplace realities (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

Participants and setting

Data was collected from a purposive sample of 12 call centre agents within a financial services organisation in Johannesburg, South Africa. The participants included eight females; ten were African and two were Coloured. They ranged from 23 to 34 years old.

Data collection and analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants on their general expectations about their employer, obligations and sense of job security. We thematically analyzed the data according to the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): i) familiarise themselves with the data, ii) formulate initial codes, iii) explore data for themes, iv) re-examine themes, v) label and define themes and vi) produce a written report.

Findings

The major themes from the thematic analysis related to i) general expectations of employer expectations; met and unmet and ii) employee expectations and obligations that ensure job security.

Theme 1: General expectations: met and unmet

Combined themes relating to general expectations relate to compensation and reward, fair treatment and work practices. Met expectations and obligations and their impact on job security relate to enhanced work performance and adherence to terms and conditions of employment. Unmet expectations and obligations and their effect on job security relate to job dissatisfaction, seeking alternative employment and disciplinary action. When expectations and obligations are not met, employees will experience job dissatisfaction or possibly leave the organisation. The following statements are illustrative:

Met General expectations

Compensation

> *"I expect my employer to pay me on time (laughs)...like ok I work 45 hours per week so I would expect my employer to pay me on my time when it comes to pay dates."* (Participant E, 22, Black, Male).

> *"Well generally what I'm expect from my employer is to ensure that my salary is paid on time, overtime is paid on time..."* (Participant H, 27, Black, Female).

> *"I expect that my employer will remunerate me for the work that I actually do."* (Participant K, 25, Coloured, Male).

> *"Well you know what my perception here, I think because I've been here for 3 years or more, it's come to the point where I perceive it as I have to do my job and my employer has to pay me."* (Participant F, 25, Black, Female)

> *"They need to pay me. They need to pay me on time, it needs to be the right amount, no mess ups which usually happen."* (Participant D, 30, Black, Female)

> *"Provide me with benefits, provident fund benefit, I still expect that cause I take that as a job security and if they said every year this is what the company will give you as a bonus, performance bonus I still expect that as an employee cause this what the employer promised me."* (Participant I, 34, Black, Female)

Fair treatment

> *"I expect the management not to treat people as slaves, I expect a lot of things... I expect people to be treated like people."* (Participant G, 34, Black, Male)

> *"But most of it... respect and being treated fairly.*" (Participant C, 33, Black, Female)

Work practices

> *"I expect them to know what they are doing in terms of human resources."* (Participant G, 34, Black, Male)

> *"I expect the support from my managers and senior managers and any other department that has to be involved in terms of the acceleration processes that we might have because it doesn't seem like our managers are included and all other people.*" (Participant H, 27, Black, Female)

Performance

> *"Just meet your targets, make sure that you're not late, because people get fired for unnecessary things."* (Participant G, 34, Black, Female)

> *"I would not expect my employer to not pay me because automatically that would affect my performance it would affect my time keeping and it would basically bring negative affirmation towards my work."* (Participant H, 27, Black, Female)

> *"If you meet your targets, and if you meet the expectations, that means, you're off the hook, no firing and resigning right, so yes."* (Participant G, 34, Black, Female).

> *"So, if you don't perform chances are you will be fired"* (Participant K, 25, Coloured, Male)

> *"Be effective on my job on my daily targets and also meet monthly targets."* (Participant I, 34, Black, Female)

> *"We have to take calls, even though we don't have sufficient information."* (Participant H, 27, Black, Female)

> *"I must be at work. I must take calls, I can't be doing my own thing at any time."* (Participant J, 23, Coloured, Male)

Work schedule

> *"The most common thing I'd say here is the hours, some people live far way so if you get put on a shift that ends at 22:00 and I don't have a car and an Uber ride home cost me R 400.00 that would mean that eventually I'm not going to be here, I'm going to be sick on this shift and it's going to bring up issues of why you always not here for these specific shifts eventually you going to get dismissed or resign because you think well, I'm just not able to do this anymore."* (Participant J, 23, Coloured, Male)

Enhanced work performance

A participant noted that met expectations have an impact on job security:

Job dissatisfaction

> *"There is a lot of negativity on the floor. Negativity is brought about by unhappiness. There are a lot of people who are very unhappy."* (Participant A, 33, Black, Female)

> *"When you need an explanation of why the amount is like this and they refer you to your team leader, and your team leader, that guy doesn't know jack about remuneration or HR processes, that's why they have to consult with HR, that's my story, but still they refer you to those people."* (Participant G, 34, Black, Male)

> *"If the employer is not able to provide those kind of things for us as agents, then it becomes a problem, we look for other jobs, which is not easy to find, so you would want to leave, you're not*

fully focused on what you're doing because now, whilst you're on a call, your typing out your CV and try to see if anyone else is hiring." (Participant D, 30, Black, Female)

Disciplinary action

"*You could be dismissed but what they do first, they coach you, you are going to go through coaching.*" (Participant C, 33, Black, Female)

"*The effects are you are going to be fired, you will be in disciplinary hearings if you continue with the same behaviour you will definitely be fired*" (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

"*The first step would be their manager would find out what's been happening, why they didn't achieve what they were supposed to. If it persists, chances are it will lead to a dismissal.*" (Participant K, 25, Coloured, Male)

Workplace demotivation

"*You just not doing it properly because you are demotivated.*" (Participant J, 23, Coloured, Male)

"*I won't be as good at my job because I am basically having a low morale I am not motivated to do anything.*" (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

"*First of all, they will be demotivated and then performance it won't be as supposed to be.*" (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

Employee dissatisfaction

"*We actually stood up and said we are not going to sign it we said we are not going to sign it.*" (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

The findings reveal that employees expect adequate compensation and reward, fair treatment and efficient work practices. The psychological contract is characterised by general expectations that are formed during employment (Lotko, Razgale & Vilka, 2015). There is a significant and direct relationship between employees' expectations and their organisations in meeting these expectations (Dhanpat & Parumasur, 2014). For organisations to achieve competitive advantage, they need to attain and retain great human capital by managing their rewards and compensation strategies (Milgo, Namusonge, Kanali & Makokha, 2014). Agents provide the service and skills to the organisation and in return, they expect to be compensated and rewarded on time. As proposed by Gupta and Shaw (2014), workers are more satisfied when they perceive they have been fairly rewarded for their genuine contribution to the organisation. There is a need to be treated fairly by management and their fellow colleagues. In this study, call centre agents perceived that they were treated by management like machines and not people, like numbers and not human beings (Visser & Rothmann, 2009). Call centre management, including HR, has to decide on effective work practices that will meet organisational expectations while ensuring employee wellbeing and customer satisfaction (Banks &

Roodt, 2011). Participants suggested that their employer and the human resource department take into account their needs when making decisions.

Perceived employer expectations

Changes are common within call centre environments and hence employees are constantly confronted with employers who require them to meet new expectations (Zwane, Du Plessis & Slabbert, 2014). Obligations to accept reviewed departmental changes relating in particular to shifts and work schedules are common in call centres. Adherence to policies and procedures is linked to perceived employer expectations. Although the work environment is driven by routine, call centre agents are still required to have a detailed understanding of all policies and procedures in order to handle their day to day tasks and duties (Holman & Axtell, 2016). It is essential for agents to have branch level knowledge, and following guidelines is imperative as this would conform with what the employer would be expect from them as agents. Call centres have client care departments to achieve client satisfaction; call centres are an integral and ubiquitous component of service delivery and client service excellence is therefore vital (Bank & Roodt, 2001).

Theme 2: Employee expectations and obligations that ensure job security

Employee expectations and obligations that ensure job security are related adhering to policies and procedures and levels of engagement.

Adhering to policies and procedures

> *"Remember if you make a mistake you get penalised for it. If I am late there is times that I have to be late you get given, chances. An opportunity to do right like for example it is like 3 strikes. Well there is still, to be honest with you, they follow the book. They make sure even if a team leader it happens that they do not follow book the team leader will get into trouble."* (Participant A, 33, Black, Female).

> *"It will definitely ensure job security because if someone gives you that you should follow A B C and you do exactly that your job would be secured but if you don't necessarily follow what is being set out for you then the employer does have or like to stand on to actually fire you because you are not following what being uhm set out for you by the company".* (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

> *"These are the things that you need to say on a call and in order to get your 100 to ensure that you have given the client the service that they suppose to".* (Participant C, 33, Black, Female)

> *"I need to know branch level knowledge and I need to also be well informed about X Bank policies and procedures, the latest communications. I need to be well aware of that so that should any branch call come in at any time and ask or need to verify anything I need to actually assist."* (Participant E, 22, Black, Male)

> *"There is certain guidelines that we should be following so the employer would look at you as the employee, that you need to follow those specific guidelines, certain processes that you would need to follow so you are obligated to actually follow them".* (Participant B, 30, Black, Female)

Fulfilment of job requirements

> *"Company reputation does have a direct effect on our jobs, because if they have bad reputation no one wants to bank with them and invest with them, which then means that it affects me so do I stay do I go, what will they do at that point. They can't keep people her just because, it is a business and at the end of the day, they have to see whose viable and who's not. You're that broken branch that needs to be cut out."* (Participant D, 30, Black, Female)

Levels of engagement

> *"If they make sure that they adhere to what they obliged to then it makes sure that I am happy and that won't ensure that I am unhappy and looking for somewhere else to work or looking to resign or retire."* (Participant L, 26, Black, Female)

> *"I will be more enthusiastic and do what is expected of me."* (Participant H, 27, Black, Female)

> *"As a call centre agent I would say that the expectation the employer has on me is to deliver services, adhere to time, and adhere to my schedules".* (Participant I, 34, Black, Female)

> *"I'm obligated to take shifts, even though I don't need to take that shift".* (Participant G, 34, Black, Male)

> *"He would expect me to complete the duties that have been assigned to me. To do my work to the best of my abilities."* (Participant K, 25, Coloured, Male)

> *"I am obliged to taking those calls, assisting with a smile on my face."* (Participant L, 26, Black, Female)

> *"Also be effective on my job or on my daily tasks and also meet monthly targets."* (Participant I, 34, Black, Female)

> *"My employer expects me to services branches in a unique way. Give branches a unique service experience and would like me to provide assistance because as help desk agents we are required to do work and we don't work with clients directly."* (Participant E, 22, Black, Male)

Client care

Participants noted their general understanding of client care and the type of behaviours and mannerisms expected from an agent when interacting with clients. Participants expressed the importance of providing quality customer services when speaking to clients.

> *"There's a certain way of speaking when it comes to help desk, you need to be polite at all times because when client services you need to have the experience."* (Participant E, 22, Black, Male)

> *"Clients comes first so that is the only thing we making sure that we do not matter what happens so we have to do that and at the same time make sure that we provide the good service."* (Participant C, 33, Black, Female)

> *"To obviously give 100% with the service we give to our clients"* and *"make this place like work friendly and at the same time improve the service that we give to our clients."* (Participant C, 33, Black, Female)

Flexible work schedules

> "*Remember you are here 6 days a week, I'll give you an example. You are here 6 days a week and then on that 6 days a week they will change the schedule and say no over the weekend you no-longer get a half day, you're doing a full day, right, you hardly see your family and they do that without even acknowledging that people have to know this before.*" (Participant G, 34, Black, Male).

> "*I don't think that they take into consideration the amount of hours that we work, and the amount of time off that we have.*" (Participant J, 23, Coloured, Male)

Organisational citizenship behaviour

> "*To be respectful within the work environment, it's not only the way I speak, but the way I carry myself, the manner in which I dress as-well.*" (Participant K, 25, Coloured, Male)

> "*I'm obligated to treat my fellow colleagues in a respectful manner. I'm obligated to assist my team members and be a helpful hand.*" (Participant I, 34, Black, Female)

Discussion

The objective of the study was to identify how call centre agents perceive the arrangements of their psychological contract to ensure job security in terms of expectations and obligations. Qualitative comments of the participants were interspersed with the reporting of the findings.

General expectations

An obligation is a contractual agreement between the employer and employee. This was confirmed by participants who showed a general understanding of the nature of obligations by mentioning that a promise to obey rules was made to the employer at the beginning of the employment agreement (Ghandi & Lin, 2011). Responding to calls is a crucial task that is conducted by agents as it is part of their duties. Employees are obligated to adhere to work schedules.

Organisational citizenship behaviour is associated with employee behaviours that reflect determination and the effort to go beyond what is expected of them (Coyle-Shapiro, Kessler & Purcell, 2004). Employees might feel obligated to do more than the call of duty, in an attempt to enhance organisational goals and objectives, for example, assisting a fellow colleague or treating each other with respect.

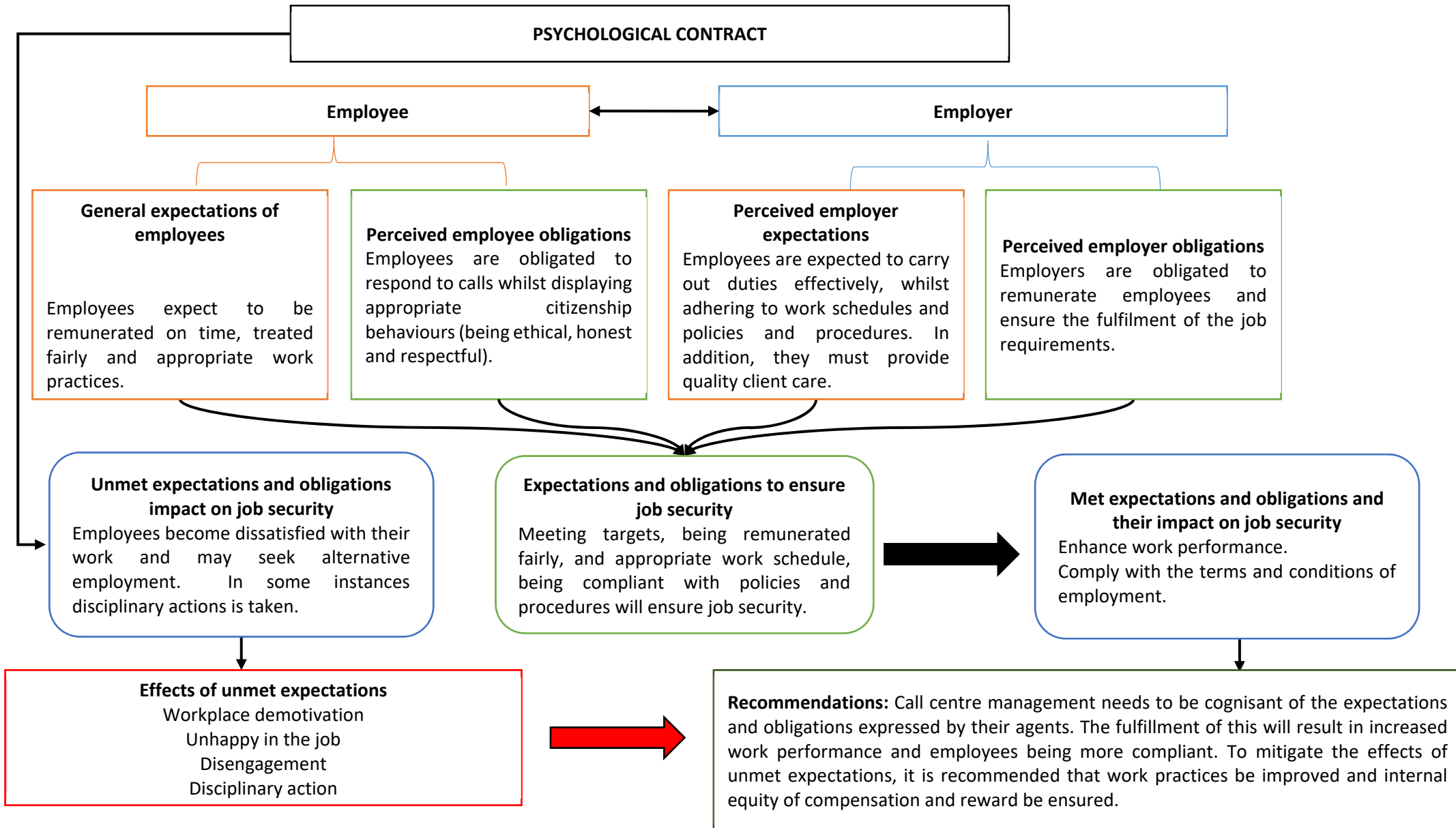*Implications for work place practices*

Employee expectations and obligations that ensure job security are related to performance, compensation and reward, work schedule, adhering to policies and procedures and levels of

engagement. Expectations are defined as the basic building unit of a psychological contract (Csoka, 1995). When employees' expectations are being met, they feel secure in their employment. The general expectations and obligations of employees were explored in this study to determine the effects of met and unmet expectations and obligations on job security. Each employee has an obligation to follow reasonable rules in the work place to ensure that a set of tasks is performed. Employees are people who carry out tasks in various capacities for a company following a set of rules and regulations (Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui & Chen, 2011).

When employees meet expectations of the employer it is likely to enhance work performance and employees will adhere to the terms and conditions of employment. When employees know that their expectations are being met, they usually feel happy and passionate at work, they are committed and put in an extra effort when going about their duties (Hoxsey, 2010). Employees will generally be productive when they know that their employer ensures that they receive what was promised and in due time. They will perform and feel safe and secure in their jobs. Adherence to the terms and conditions of employment set out by the employer is likely to ensure job security as employees are likely to stay on longer with the organisation.

Halushchak and Halushchak (2016) indicate that employees can be easily demotivated when they perceive unfairness in processes and procedures which leads to disengagement. Figure 1 presents our preliminary model for perceived employer and employee expectations and obligations and their influence on job security.

Figure 1: Preliminary model for perceived employer and employee expectations and obligations and their influence on job security

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

Employee ↔ **Employer**

General expectations of employees

Employees expect to be remunerated on time, treated fairly and appropriate work practices.

Perceived employee obligations
Employees are obligated to respond to calls whilst displaying appropriate citizenship behaviours (being ethical, honest and respectful).

Perceived employer expectations
Employees are expected to carry out duties effectively, whilst adhering to work schedules and policies and procedures. In addition, they must provide quality client care.

Perceived employer obligations
Employers are obligated to remunerate employees and ensure the fulfilment of the job requirements.

Unmet expectations and obligations impact on job security
Employees become dissatisfied with their work and may seek alternative employment. In some instances disciplinary actions is taken.

Expectations and obligations to ensure job security
Meeting targets, being remunerated fairly, and appropriate work schedule, being compliant with policies and procedures will ensure job security.

Met expectations and obligations and their impact on job security
Enhance work performance.
Comply with the terms and conditions of employment.

Effects of unmet expectations
Workplace demotivation
Unhappy in the job
Disengagement
Disciplinary action

Recommendations: Call centre management needs to be cognisant of the expectations and obligations expressed by their agents. The fulfillment of this will result in increased work performance and employees being more compliant. To mitigate the effects of unmet expectations, it is recommended that work practices be improved and internal equity of compensation and reward be ensured.

Limitations and recommendations

While this study provided insights into how call centre agents' perceive job security in terms of expectations and obligations, the information obtained was based on agents' perceptions only and void of employer expectations and obligations. The study was conducted in one organisation only, which means that the findings must be generalised with caution. It is suggested that future research involve more than one call centre or department. Further qualitative insights could also be gained from an employer's perspective. In light of this, a quantitative study is also recommended in order to validate the conclusions and findings of this study.

Conclusion

The objective of the study was to identify how call centre agents perceived the arrangements of their psychological contract to ensure job security, in terms of expectations and obligations. The findings reveal the impact of met and unmet employer and employee expectations and obligations. Met expectations result in employees improving their work performance and complying with the terms and conditions of employment. Unmet employee expectations have a negative impact on the working environment, as employees felt disengaged from their jobs. This leads to high levels of job dissatisfaction as employees are grapple with feelings of wanting to leave and seek alternative employment. It is imperative that employers make attempts to identify employee expectations. Failure to do so inevitably leads to employees not being committed to the organisation and a decrease in job security.

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