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Edwards Revised: Technical Control and Call Centres

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Edwards Revisited

Technical Control and Call Centres

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¹ There, have, of course, been other positions and issues raised in the debate. Frenkel *et al* (1998) have undertaken cross-national comparisons, developing a 'middle ground' argument that characterizes call centres as 'mass customized bureaucracies'. Steve Taylor (1998) has emphasized the role of emotional labour, a theme also emphasized in our own work alongside issues of recruitment, selection and training.

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Call centres, broadly defined as workplaces that integrate telephone and computer technologies, represent a new strategy by capital to create controlled and cost-efficient environments that can restructure and expand the provision of services to the customer. While this strategy has been applied to a number of different types of provision, it has been particularly prominent in financial services, and in dealing with routine interactive service encounters. One recent call centre paper, for example, cited a study which showed that for every 100p spent on over the counter transactions in a bank branch the same work could be done in a call centre for 80p (Knights *et al.*, 1999). The reality of such potential savings is shown by the almost weekly openings of new call centres.

Academic studies have grown from early work into call centres in peripheral areas and branchless retail banking (Richardson and Marshall, 1996), to a growing number of case studies that focus largely on classic labour process issues of control and the division of labour. A key dividing line in this debate has been between purveyors of a Foucauldian perspective of call centres as 'electronic sweatshops' and a more traditional labour process approach that stresses greater continuity in patterns of control and resistance (Taylor, P. and Bain, 1999, Bain and Taylor, P., 2000; Mulholland, 1999). Fernie and Metcalf (1998) see call centres as the 'epitome' of the operation of Foucault's panoptic power. Surveillance technology gives management 'ultimate' or 'total' power. Workers are never sure which call is being listened into by management, with the result that 'the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault, 1977, 201). The extent and unobtrusive nature of surveillance, leads to their well-known formulation that a 'frictionless' workplace regime is established in which direct supervisory power is redundant: 'In call centres the agents are constantly visible and supervisor's power has indeed been 'rendered perfect' – via the computer monitoring screen – and therefore its actual use unnecessary'.(Fernie and Metcalf,1998, 2.9).

Though others sympathetic to Foucault have criticized Fernie and Metcalf's interpretation as overly deterministic (Knights *et al.*, 1999), their argument is not out-of-line with other 'new modes of control' perspectives. The emphasis on 'new' is important, as can be seen in the contribution of Sewell (1998). Sewell claims to have identified a new model of labour process control that counters the optimistic gloss of the empowerment and team work literatures, whilst moving beyond the confines of traditional labour process theory (LPT). 'Chimerical control' augments existing practices through 'the constant and supportive interaction of electronic surveillance and the peer group scrutiny of teams' (1998, p.28). The implication of the argument is that such a combination solves the 'control-engage' dilemma identified by LPT and suffered in different ways by generations of managers. While, as we shall demonstrate later, teams are not a feature of work organization in call centres, Sewell's description of the nature and effects of panoptic power closely resembles Fernie and Metcalf. Though occasional gaps in the rationalizing gaze are mentioned, neither form of managerial or self-surveillance 'has been challenged in any way' at Sewell's case study site of Kay electronics.

While this is not the place to engage in a direct critique of Sewell, we have made reference to it in order to emphasize that this is not just a ‘localized’ dispute about call centres. To return to that territory, it will come as no surprise to find that we endorse Bain and Taylor’s judgement that, ‘the omnipotent ‘electronic panopticon’ appears as a simplistic, lazy and mistaken formulation’ (2000, p.15). In this paper we give additional empirical support to their argument that both supervisory power and work resistance are present in call centres. However, our contribution seeks to go a step further by more explicitly critiquing the idea of a ‘new mode of control’. To do so we develop an alternative framework that utilizes and extends Richard Edward’s (1979) model of structural control. Interestingly, Sewell admits that the new practices are extensions of Edward’s technical control, but asserts that electronic surveillance overcomes its limits by moving beyond the coercive, personalized and non-rational elements of such arrangements, as well as being more intensive, powerful and unobtrusive. Examples of this panoptic discipline include the collection and display of performance data, notably about quality and error identification, which is traceable to individuals.

Edward’s conceptualization of control was one of the most widely used contributions to second wave labour process theory, but in more recent times has been gathering dust. The advantage of the framework is that it can explain technical control and surveillance in call centres without recourse to the over-extended imagery of panoptic and total control. Indeed, worker agency and resistance is central to such second wave theorisation. We are, of course aware of the criticisms made of Edwards, notable of linear models of control that fall prey to the panacea fallacy (Littler and Salaman, 1982). To take account of this, we argue that management has developed forms of structural control that combine technical and bureaucratic elements. Contrary to Edwards such dimensions are complementary rather than distinct, so the paper extends what has been previously a largely theoretical critique onto new empirical territory. It also extends the framework by introducing an emphasis on normative control, primarily through a discussion of evidence concerning the contested utilization of emotional labour.

This emphasis on contestation was an important theme in the work of Edwards, and is maintained here. The paper seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the debate by drawing on qualitative case study evidence to demonstrate that extent and character of worker ‘negotiation’ and resistance. Customer service representatives are shown as active agents, using their own emotional skills, tacit knowledge, humour, and willingness to exit employment as means to challenge control structures and bend work norms. Call centres represent an innovative socio-technical system, but capital’s struggle to transform labour power into profitable labour remains and is reproduced in distinctive ways.

Workplace and methodology

There are many different types of call centre, with the differentiating factors being whether calls are inbound or outbound, the degree of product complexity and variability, and the depth of knowledge required to deal with the service interaction. Bain and Taylor (1998) found that 47.3% of Scottish call centres deal only with inbound calls and Telebank, the case study research site, is one of these, dealing with 20,000 incoming calls a day.

Telebank is one of four integrated call centres throughout the UK (although all four are part of the same bank for the purposes of this paper Telebank will refer only to the Scottish call

centre). The Telebank building is functional in both interior and exterior design, and forms part of a growing industrial park on the outskirts of a large city. It is three storeys high, with a central stairway separating two working spaces on each level. Workers operate on open plan floors, making direct supervision easier. These workers receive incoming calls to the bank. Customers still dial the number of their local branch but all calls come to a central bank and are then routed through to one of the four call centres. In total these call centres employ 2,000 people 500 of whom work (in teams of 12) in the case study call centre. The majority (80%) of these workers are full-time and work a 35 hour week within the opening hours of 8.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m., Monday to Sunday. The full-time shift pattern involves 6.5 hours of work each day, with one hour for lunch and two 15 minute breaks. The wages, at £10,500, are just below the industry average for but are supplemented by the possibility of yearly bonuses.

Data collection took the form of taped semi-structured interviews with 24 customer service representatives (CSRs) from two teams and 14 managers. In addition there was non-participant observation of recruitment, training and the labour process. Repeat visits were made to the research site over a period of nine months. Finally the research diary was kept, containing additional observations and contextual comments. The object of using such a case study form, is to use the analysis of microdata to investigate, inform, expand and explain more general theories (Yin, 1984).

The work

In common with many call centres Telebank uses an automated call distribution system (ACD). These systems receive inbound calls, automatically allocate them to CSRs, place calls in a queue and (in conjunction with other software) offer sophisticated management information gathering packages. The more developed systems, such as the one used at Telebank, operate over a number of sites, creating a virtual 'super group' of CSRs within which calls are spread. While the buildings within which CSRs work are geographically distant each employee is part of the same system – the next call in the queue could be directed to the next floor or a call centre hundreds of miles away. Within such a system CSRs take on average 120 calls a day. Each call lasts around 180 seconds and is split into two main parts: talk time (160 seconds) and post call wrapped up time (20 seconds). The time between calls is also measured and, reflecting its nonproductive nature, is known by management as 'white space'.

CSRs deal with 80% of all incoming calls, with the remaining 20% being passed on to branches or other areas of the bank. Of the calls dealt with by CSRs two-thirds relate to requests for specific account information (such as balances), requests for simple actions (moving money between accounts) and charge queries. Most of the calls are similar and simple. CSRs have limited power over customer accounts, with scripts and screens determining what they can see and do.

The application and development of technical control

In his discussion of control systems Edwards identifies three necessary elements: the pacing and direction of work; the monitoring and evaluation of performance and the reward and discipline of workers. The first of these is most commonly associated with technical control, with the

supervisory powers of the immediate boss to control the direction and speed of work being replaced by the production line.

While many of the early examples of technical control involved continuous flow production in manufacturing the concept can also be applied to call centres, although in a different way. Figure 1 charts Telebank's production process and shows that 80% of calls are dealt with by individual CSRs – this implies single unit production. Unlike assembly line production CSRs do not simply modify a product worked on further down the line, rather they complete one production cycle after another. It is slightly different for nonroutine calls, which have to be routed through branches or other areas of the bank, but the aim of the call centre is to minimize these maximize the number of calls dealt with by CSRs. Technology in such call centres, therefore, tends to control speed not through running the line at a constant rate but rather through ensuring CSRs know queue numbers and average waiting times. In Telebank constantly changing figures on LCD panels hanging from the ceiling act as a weight upon workers, a pressure that puts a priority on speed. As Taylor and Bain (1999) point out technology plays a similar role in outbound call centres, where power dialling software ensure a constant stream of customers.

By adapting the power of a technical control system to (continual) single unit production management overcome one of the difficulties with continuous flow technical control identified by Edwards. He argues that while technical control creates a common pace and pattern of work it links together the plant's workforce and means that if one worker stops working the whole plant is a threatened. This cannot happen in call centres – if one customer service representative (CSR) stops working production is only marginally reduced.

As summarized in figure 2, in addition to physically directing calls to workers, technology is also designed to direct specific work tasks within calls. The power of such technology emerges from the comments of workers and managers:

They've got very little discretion. That was deliberate. In the early days, for instance, giving a customer a balance, what I found was that in a branch there were 8 different systems you could go to give a customer a balance. For a call centre, I had to prescribe one way, call centres are about improved service to the customers, but they're also about improved productivity of the organization. We mustn't kid ourselves, there's a cost reason in the background here. If you as a person had the discretion to go to one of eight systems, you'd go to the one that you found easiest. Now that might not be the best one from the customer point of view, but you've still got to make that decision, and that delays things. So by prescribing the way you would do it, you cut down time. (Manager 1)

I was surprised, it's like a concentration camp sometimes. You've got to be on the phone, be happy and cheery all the time, I didn't realize you had to take so many calls. (CSR 7)

Second wave LPT developed in a period when there was considerable emphasis on the social construction of technology (eg. Noble, 1979). Edwards refers to mechanization as 'the result of the particular [capitalist] design of the technology and not as an inherent characteristic of the machinery in general' (1977, p.122, emphasis in original). While social constructionist

arguments were sometimes overstretched, call centres are a good example of how companies have developed and utilised technology to monitor and evaluate white collar work. Extracts from the marketing literature associated with call centre systems illustrate this:

Ericsson Dynamic Network Administration, Call Centre Manager (CCM) 2.0:

The supervisor can be in full control of the daily business within the call centre by closely monitoring all activities through real time windows. Call Centre performance statistics, presented in report format, provide valuable input for short and long-term planning. Business plans based on reliable and accurate information on call centre performance result in better planning, better control and better business... CCM allows the user to define thresholds and set alarms to signal when these thresholds have been exceeded. The call centre manager will be alerted by the change in colour of the threshold value on the real-time display, a written message and optionally, an alarm will sound and a red bell icon will blink.

Management deliberately choose of a technology that has been designed to limit worker autonomy and are conscious of the power of the call queue in maximizing production pace – the workers are almost seen as part of the machine – of a technology which continuously ‘fires’ calls at them.

Workers are also painfully aware of the power of technology and struggle under its pressure. The similarity of call centre work to assembly line manufacturing was supported during non-participant observation, when a CSR recently made redundant from her job manufacturing TVs commented that ‘really you are kind of doing the same thing all the time, same as at Mitsubishi.’

Technology is used to control the pace and direction of work in call centres such as Telebank in much the same way as assembly line production. Such ACD technology systemizes control, with the power to push and pace work flowing not from a boss or supervisor but from the technology. This system of control is strongly embedded in the physical fabric of production and is therefore less obtrusive. This was an argument made by Edwards in respect of technical control, and develops themes about the appearance of the removal of human agency and the objectification of control well before the current generation of Foucauldian-inspired research got there. For example, he argues that the assembly line eliminated close supervision and that by vesting the power in the line itself, power relations are made more invisible (1979, 125–6). However, the parallels are not exact. Edwards worked within a conventional control-resistance model and though the contours of conflict between workers and management may be softened, they are ‘displaced’ rather than eliminated. Neither is supervisory power rendered superfluous or wholly unobtrusive. We will return to both these issues later.

To return to call centres – they go further than pacing and directing work, by assisting management in the monitoring of work. Edwards wrote in 1979, ‘Computers have begun subjecting to technical control the second element of a control system, the monitoring and evaluation of work performed’ (1979, p.125).

That such tools are consciously developed and chosen by call centre managers is evident from Telebank interviews:

The ACD allows you to have any size team you like and on the screens you can actually see right down to the person on the phone, you can see it in teams, in management groups, and so on. You can produce macros every day of the different levels of management, either down at rep level to site level. So you can if you want to, compare the performance of teams across the sites, site against site or individual against individual. (Manager 1)

There's almost too much information and you have to manage by exception, so you look at the norm, who's outside of the norm and then work on the exception... so for example comfort breaks. If you've got the average percentage as 0.9% but you've got some people in your team at 3% you've got to ask why they are 3% when the bulk of the centre is 0.9%... Everybody's comfort break is measured, so you've got to know your individuals. If you've got a pregnant lady you'd expect her to go to the toilet more often, for example. If it's hot weather, you'd expect people to be getting up for a drink more often. What you have to do is look at who is out of the norm. You've got your centre average, who are the people above that centre average? There's got to be a reason why they're above. If it's not a medical or known reason, then I'd expect the managers or team leaders to challenge the individual and say 'Well, you're really out of line with everyone in the Centre, is there a problem?' (Manager 6)

These extracts demonstrate how the structural nature of technical control in call centres is made more powerful by the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation as part of the system of production. It is important to note that the managerial hand is still visible. The 'research team' analyses statistics that evaluates CSRs, but they are assisted and to an extent driven by the sheer volume and sophistication of management information available to them. Much of this information is also given automatically to CSRs each day and the walls adjacent to different teams often have tables comparing CSRs within teams and between each team in the call centre. Such comparisons pressurize not just individual CSRs, but also team leaders who have to compete against each other. Interviews with CSRs illustrate their awareness of the presence and power of statistics:

They measure everything. I just saw someone getting picked up for having 2 toilet breaks, it's a ludicrous situation. If you disappear to the toilet, say you take an average 6 minutes a day, you get pulled for it. She just got pulled for 2 x 2.5 minutes... We get our stats the next day for the night before and they can tell you everything you've done and how long you've been logged on. Everything is measured. (CSR17)

Although conflict over productivity ultimately involves manager – worker confrontation the systematic preparation and presentation of statistics helps displace conflict. This confirms Edward's argument that technical control distracts from direct confrontation. With CSRs inhabiting a workplace heavy with statistics, not only are they more likely to exercise self-control over their output, when confrontation does take place the power of a major evaluation tool is recognized and largely, but not always accepted. This is shown in the comments of manager 6 where, as opposed to simple direct control, a worker seen as under-achieving is not 'out of line' with him personally, but with the centre, with the system. The social choice of technology produces a seemingly 'objective' control mechanism.

The automatic production and processing of such statistical information is aimed at assessing quantity; the technology also forces and facilitates quality checking. In Telebank this comes in two main forms: the automatic recording and retention (for between three and six months) of each call and weekly call coaching. The reason given for the first of these is to ensure the security of the bank and to protect the CSR (although in practice these tapes are used in quality checks), while the second is described as part of staff development:

Every call is recorded for security purposes and quality purposes. So for security purposes we are dealing in financial transactions so if there is a dispute we need to have a record, but also we give feedback on performance on a call, so to do that we need to listen back to that call. (Manager 6)

We have to do at least five calls a week on each person, so the team leaders actually do all the call coaching themselves to their team and they will monitor them. The team leaders sometimes will sit beside them, they don't have to tell them beforehand, they'll just go and sit beside them, or they'll do call monitoring from a distance so they don't know who's being monitored... (Manager 3)

The supervisory function is more visible here. Team leaders deal directly with CSRs, giving advice on conversational technique, how to develop rapport etc. Technology still plays a physical role, through offering the potential to store many thousands of calls and through the facility of remote listening. But its continual presence does facilitate intensive surveillance and monitoring, in turn encouraging and enforcing self discipline. Comments from Telebank CSRs offer some support:

All the calls are recorded. I thought that would bother me much more than it does. The first few calls I got I worried, but now it doesn't bother me. They say it's for our safety as well as the customers. I don't even think about it now at all. (CSR19)

It's got its good and its bad. It's good because you're getting picked up on what you're doing wrong and it helps next time. But there is a lot of pressure because if you think they might be listening in, you really have to do well, which adds to the pressure. (CSR 9)

The third element of a control system – reward/discipline – is present in technical control, through the self discipline of surveillance and the public sharing of individual performance statistics, but it's real power is felt when the management information it produces is used in the formal appraisals associated with the bureaucratic control. In developing and explanation in which the configuration of elements within the call centre control system combines technical, bureaucratic and other dimensions, we are seeking to explicitly move beyond Edwards. He, in fact, had a confused position on 'combinations' of control. Sometimes he did acknowledge that, for example, jointly administered employment rules supplemented 'pure' technical control in highly unionized parts of manufacturing (1979, p.130). On most occasions, however, different types of control would appear contemporaneously only in different sectors: 'each form of control corresponds to a definite stage of the development of the most important or representative firms' (1979, p.145). In the next section we seek to demonstrate that call centres

such as Telebank, use bureaucratic control to complement the technical dimension, primarily through the specification of core performance standards.

Bureaucratic control

For Edwards the main weakness of technical control was its tendency to homogenize the labour force, creating a largely demotivated, but potentially powerful opposition to capital. A search by leading companies for new methods, led towards bureaucratic control. This system moves even further away from direct control and command by focusing on more 'objective' work and employment rules, while providing positive incentives through career ladders, rewards for seniority and other features of internal labour markets. Taken together, this operated to erode the bases for worker resistance. As Figure 3 shows, bureaucratic control at Telebank operates mainly by instilling behavioural patterns, specifying performance standards and developing written definitions of skills. While such systems do not result in the fine differentiation between jobs or the development of career ladders identified by Edwards, they do institutionalize values and give supervisors (and workers themselves) specific criteria against which to evaluate workers.

Telebank has 19 core standards of behaviour, inherited from the traditional banking structure, and these play an important role in the organizational structure. The emphasis is on having the right 'attitude', both in terms of respecting hierarchy and the existing power structure and delivering customer service. For example 'maintaining appropriate standards of behaviour, dress and appearance'; 'pleasant and enthusiastic with customers'; 'welcoming feedback and apologizing when mistakes have been made' and 'acting in an open and honest way' and 'recognizing that personal conduct reflects on the bank'. Not only are these core standards continually present throughout training (with each of the 19 printed on laminated cards and pasted to the walls and doors of the training room), they are often used in the workplace.

While these core standards (together with performance standards) have an indirect influence on the pacing and direction of work – you must comply with the speed and demands of the system – the impact of monitoring/evaluation and reward/discipline is more obvious. Agreed performance standards and skills profiles are used in appraisal meetings to evaluate work, decide upon additional payment or to discipline workers. At appraisal meetings the skills of each CSR are measured on a seven point scale. The skill categories are: business awareness; business development; communication – verbal; communication – written; customer service; decision making; initiative; numeracy; planning and organization; teamwork and leadership; use of systems and work standards. Each of these categories is accompanied by a series of definitions detailing what would qualify for a low or high score. For example to get a seven (the lowest score) under the category of customer service a CSR must 'show a friendly, approachable and attentive manner when dealing with customers' while to get a one they must 'show empathy in a wide range of customer situations. Inspire confidence and take ownership of resulting actions. Retain goodwill in adverse circumstances'. There are also agreed performance standards, which include ensuring that 'an acceptable volume of inquiries/calls are handled contributing to the achievement of the units/departments performance targets' and that 'records/databases are maintained and updated accurately within agreed time skills'.

Under bureaucratic control, then, management specifies values, beliefs and standards. At one end of the spectrum, 'attitude' shifts from being important in work to being the work itself; with people being recruited and trained in part to produce 'units' of attitude which meet customer service criteria. However, it is not obvious that bureaucratic control is sufficient in itself to handle the complexities of the process. We argue that Hochschild's (1983, 1993) concept of emotional labour is a useful addition, bringing a dimension of normative control into the picture. As has been shown in other contexts (Leidner, 1993), interactive service work depends on feelings rules in order to deliver consistent 'high-quality' customer service. Employees are encouraged to manage their emotions in pursuit of this objective. In call centres, this is manifested primarily through training employees to 'build rapport' with the customer.

You're looking for self-motivated individuals who are prepared to be themselves at work, who really do want to talk to people. You need people who can make conversations, and build rapport and think about what they need to change in themselves in order to build rapport with people. (Manager 7)

Managers use the recruitment and selection process to identify individuals that have the perceived social competencies appropriate to produce effective customer service; and training mechanisms to inculcate the feelings rules themselves. These take two main forms: techniques to manage conversations with customers (conversational control) and techniques to manage yourself (control over one's energy and enthusiasm). Both are supported by a broad framework of scripted interactions.

As we have demonstrated, bureaucratic control institutionalises values and standards of attainment and assessment in a number of inter-related areas. These are powerfully combined with information provided by the technical system (see figure 4). At the end of the year CSRs will receive a classification for their performance that range from U which is Unsatisfactory, IR Improvement Required; G which is Good; H which is High Achiever; and O which is Outstanding.

Now if you are anything below a G, if you're U or IR, then you actually don't get any salary increment or a bonus paid for that year... There are three key areas that we look at in terms of performance for clerical staff. They are productivity, quality, and what we call core standards, that's your attitudinal, do you have respect for your colleagues and customers, do you regularly participate in social events and team activities, do you arrive in time for work. You never come to work stinking of beer or hung over, things like that... Productivity is very much the MI that we get off the systems, it's your wrap time, your talk time, your average handling time, the time you log on in the morning. Quality comes from the coaching sessions that the team leaders have with CSRs. (Manager 2)

I hate the stats. When I went for my 6 month appraisal, I wasn't aware I was getting marked down for my stats until I went for my appraisal. When I was on my action plan it was, concentrate on product and knowledge and forget your stats. I got marked down for stats. Had I known at the time I would have worked on them as well. I lost out on a bit of money and I wasn't very happy. (CSR24)

I've just had my three monthly report and it's quite a good one. Two months ago, I would have said different, because I had difficulties adjusting to this particular environment. I had to change my attitude towards it. You get 7 calls per week and 3 grades of calls. RA, AD and Good. RA is a risk to customer service. AD is not a risk, but it could result if not checked on in becoming an RA. Obviously G is for good. There are 2 RAs for every thousand calls. Now I took 1700 calls last month, which is above average. And I got nine (RAs). (CSR 3)

The practical process of integrating bureaucratic and technical control systems emerges from these data – 'objective' statistical information is combined with 'objective' bureaucratic standards to evaluate and reward work. If Edwards, and in a different way Foucauldian commentators, are right, then this should diffuse conflict and workers will direct their frustrations at 'the stats', rather than management. There is a partial truth in such observations. Surveillance data do constitute a source of managerial power that is seemingly more independent and more difficult to confront on a collective level. Yet, Edwards did recognize that bureaucratic control could not handle everything through rule of law rather than command: 'Some situations or problems always arise which need to be handled in an *ad hoc*, particularistic way, and so supervisors can never be content merely to evaluate and never to instigate' (1977, p.131). The situation in call centres is equally complex. When employees say they 'hate the stats', we should not be misled by the language. They are aware of the human agency that designs and enforces the system, with, as we shall see later, hostile references to the Research Team prominent in interviews. CSRs also distinguish between the use of surveillance data to control and to coach.

It's really good having a one to one with someone who's listened to your calls. You never just get negative feedback. I might be a bit biased that way, because I left McDonalds because we didn't get any feedback. It was just 'you did that wrong'. (CSR 5)

Management is also aware that surveillance is a double-edged sword. It provides information to track performance and productivity, but it can have decidedly mixed results in motivating the workforce. In the search for additional ways to develop an apparatus of reward, call centre management at Telebank and elsewhere tend to rely on the organization of CSRs into teams. Given the individually designed work process, teams are not part of the technical division of labour. Instead management introduces them for a dual purpose: to offset that individualism through some element of sociability, and to introduce competitive mechanisms for boosting productivity. With respect to the first, as we show in the next section, they have some success. Though there is no evidence for strong team identities, CSRs do engage in some forms of social interaction and bonding in a collective context. However, in interviews with CSRs we could find no evidence at all that team-based competition was effective as motivation or control.

For these and other reasons, while it may be the aim of management to remove conflict over control from such systems, they have only partly succeeded. As Edwards argues, the conflict at the heart of the labour process is merely displaced. The next section investigates the response of CSRs to structural control and explores the resulting alienation and agency.

Conflict and agency

Given the sophistication of the technical, bureaucratic and normative controls that structure the operation of call centres, it is indeed tempting to believe that the system eliminates dissent and gives supervisors overwhelming control (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). The nature of the indeterminacy of labour, however, makes this outcome impossible. Workers, even under the most difficult conditions, retain and articulate agency, both individually and collectively. In call centre research some authors (Knights *et al.*, 1999) suggest this is done through workers positively identifying with high-quality customer service, while others (S. Taylor, 1998; Bain and Taylor, 2000) argue agency is most obvious through individual and collective resistance to management controls.

Data gathered during interviews with Telebank CSRs describes a workforce that does not passively accept the constraints associated with technical and bureaucratic control. Rather, as figure 5 illustrates, they actively engage with each element of control. On the pace of work CSRs feel the pressure of continual calls but know if they want to avoid a call they can key a code into the computer. As the following extracts show, this creates an opportunity for workers to use their initiative:

Some things you learn with experience. I can bang in 661 which means I'm doing a memo, and I might not be doing a memo. More experienced staff will do that, you've got to do it. Or you bang into other codes, 922 is a secondment code, it means you're helping out with something. I do a lot of amendments... Some days I won't have any to do but I'll bang in 922 and just sit there and chill. If anyone comes over I say I was just doing an amendment sheet. (CSR17)

Such comments illustrate that workers can identify 'blind spots' in the system and use them to influence the pace at which they work. As CSR 17 points out these techniques come with experience and more recent recruits are less likely to use such strategies. Workers know comfort breaks and all the other codes are monitored, the talent is knowing when to use which code and for how long. Evidence for such behaviour is supported by Taylor and Bain (2000, p.15) who found individual workers 'giving the impression of being engaged on a telephone call when, in fact, no interaction was taking place' and others who 'reported being able, albeit to be limited extent, to disengage from the waiting queue calls'.

The direction of tasks comes not only through the limited manipulation of customer accounts but also through instructions of what to say and when to say it.

I know when I'm not into it. We have set lines, they take you through training and that is how you always start. It's script. Now their script has gone out of the window with me, I use my own script. If I speak to Sir Reginald then I'll put a posher voice on. But if I speak to a guy who says 'How're you doing mate, can I have a balance?' I say 'Yeah, nae problem pal'. I shouldn't be doing that, but that's the only way I keep myself going. I don't think you can do the same thing all the time, the same lines over and over. (CSR17)

As the previous section showed, one of the ways management ensure quality is through remote listening. But CSRs appear to know when this was happening. Typical comments include 'You

can also hear when somebody comes into your call and goes out of your call. There's an echo on the line. (CSR 3); You get an echo on the phone sometimes and you think, they're listening to the calls. (CSR 7)'. Generally, however, CSRs are not concerned by remote listening and recording. Perhaps one reason for this is that they are used to putting on an emotional display, to acting. Given management's aim of providing a consistent and convincing high quality customer service the possibility of CSRs not being (or sounding) genuine is a threat to product quality. Management demands warmth, sincerity, rapport and efficiency; this is not what they always get:

I think you have to (act), especially when it's quiet and you're having a wee bit of a conversation with the person next to you. You're obviously more interested in what they've got to say than the person on the phone interrupting your chat... (CSR19)

If it gets too monotonous for me I go into a wee world of my own and get on with it till the end of the day. (CSR 21)

We get a lot of people who are on their own, they're pensioners. They ask for a balance, and then they will want a chat, what's the weather like. I'm quite happy to chat to them, but it's always in the back of your mind, got to watch my average handling time. (CSR 21)

Agency is thus demonstrated in different ways: pretence, boredom or sympathetic dialogue. CSRs, like other employees, have to learn to be active and skilled emotion managers in their own right (Bolton, 2000). This was also found by Lammont, (1999) and S. Taylor (1998) who cites one Telephone Sales Agent (TSA) at a major British airline as commenting:

'When I know she [the supervisor] is not listening, I can't help but change my accent, what I actually say and the words I use... I had one really ignorant git on the phone once, I was seething, but I knew she was listening so I had to contain it... When I am positive she is not listening, I have been really short with bad customers, it's a great feeling.' (Taylor, 1998, p.94)

This is one way, then, in which workers still retain power over their labour. Work is organized so they have little autonomy – they remain stationary, calls come automatically, the tasks they perform are technically constrained and they are taught conversational control techniques and particular scripts. But despite the ability of the system to coerce and bribe, the emotional content of each service encounter is ultimately controlled by individual CSRs. Workers at Telebank also demonstrate agency through negotiations with the Customer Service Team, whose random checks, analysis and complaint investigations are used to reward and discipline:

There's a team downstairs which do customer research, listen to calls. It's a completely separate thing from your own team leader, the team leader does 7 calls a week and this customer research downstairs do a separate thing, take a call at random and give research back on it. Now all the researches I've had back, I got a couple of RAs back. I actually questioned them, saying, that is not the case, and they came back AD. So the quality of their monitoring is in doubt as well...Some people don't like it (monitoring), I think it's great, it's really beneficial. You can actually look back. I question every one of mine. (CSR 3)

I check everything, I take it away and check it, I don't just sign it, I go back into the system. You can actually remember a bit of things when you go back in and see the name. I know that people have had arguments with Research. (CSR 10)

So CSRs engage and challenge the system, using the sophisticated recording potential for their own ends. Such responses however, like many at Telebank, are individual. Given the isolated nature of the work this is not surprising, and indeed limiting communication between workers was seen by Edwards as an advantage of introducing technical control. But despite the atomistic nature of this labour process CSRs still find ways to communicate with each other, often using humour to overcome boredom, frustration and irritation:

They can't see us so we can actually take the mickey out of them while they're trying to speak to us (obscene hand gestures are made to colleagues about particular callers). (CSR 1)

You just have a carry on and a joke with your team, when you can get away with it... We just have a laugh, have Mexican waves. We have signs for it (awkward customers). Just between the team. (CSR 7)

The customer maybe says something to you and you pick it up and laugh along with them, or slagging off your team leader, you just laugh it off, or you have a joke. It does pick you up. (CSR 22)

In a sense this represents a collective response – workers share experiences, stories and entertain each other; but at Telebank there is no formal, focused and organized bargaining over the labour process. CSRs use the loose framework of 'teams' or other collective contexts to create and reproduce the same kind of informal group dynamics and mutual support found in previous generations of industries. Nor is collectivism of a more organized kind off the agenda. Though Telebank is not unionized, some trade unions are active and have been influential in shaping new 'best practices' (Bain and Taylor, 1999).

Finally, employees are 'externalizing' their dissatisfaction by leaving Telebank and other call centres in large numbers, up to 35% in some studies (Welsh, 1997; Call Centre Association, 1998; IDS, 1999). While the condition of local and national labour markets are clearly factors, there is little doubt that 'push' factors are a strong influence on labour turnover. This is illustrated by the very typical responses from our interviewees:

A lot of people are pissed off with it. Not everybody is a high achiever... they (CSRs) are all different personalities, but they're trying to mould them into a Telebank person. Like robots, and they're always pushing, pushing, and if they keep pushing, I'll be out of the door soon. (CSR 13)

Call centres have the worst rate of sickness and non-attendance due to stress. You don't want people shouting at you all day. Your line is active at all times. That, I believe, is more strenuous than physical activity. (CSR 3)

Management at local and national level in the sector has mixed attitudes towards the relation between work conditions and turnover.

To me attrition is very healthy in a call centre, very costly, but very healthy. Because of the stressful nature of the job and because you want these people to keep constant energy and enthusiasm, it does the organization some good if you can pump in some fresh blood. (Manager 6)

Some managers have said that two years is the maximum return on investment they can expect. Such attitudes coincide with those found by Wallace in Australia, where a senior manager is quoted as saying, 'I don't want an agent working for me longer than 18 months. By that time they are burnt out and not effective' (1999, p.16). Edwards believed that under technical control, employers had the incentive and means to make workers interchangeable and substitutable, so perhaps such views reflect that strategy. They are not, however, the official view of the industry. Not only are companies expending considerable resources on recruitment, selection and training of 'suitable' workers, a 'revolving door' approach is only viable if there is a continual supply of the kind of labour force the industry wants. Given the geographical clustering and huge expansion of firms, such conditions are unlikely to be met.

Conclusion

This paper has taken Edward's conceptions of technical and bureaucratic control and shown how these can be developed and combined to provide an explanatory framework of structural control within call centres. Management in these workplaces rely most heavily on technology not just to pace and direct work but also to monitor and evaluate work. Control is institutionalised through technology and this is strengthened and deepened by the use of bureaucratic control in shaping the social and organizational structure of the workplace. The combined system of structural control is formidable and represents a clear example of capital's continuing attempts to convert labour power into profitable labour. Nevertheless, the space for worker resistance and misbehaviour remains even with a high surveillance context.

Edward's perspectives had serious drawbacks (see Thompson, 1989, pp.144–50). Neither technical nor other systems of control are self-contained. Though he tried to produce a framework to account for combinations of control, he was not able to demonstrate how different dimensions of control are configured together at the same time and place. Despite his admirable model of the dialectic of control and resistance, Edwards also had an over-simplified notion of singular strategies and responses, whose explanatory power was diminished by the

belief that each successive stage of control was more successful in displacing conflict from the heart of the labour process.²

The irony is that ‘electronic panopticon’ accounts of call centres and the contemporary workplace have none of the strengths of Edwards and second wave LPT. In essence the panacea fallacy is repeated. Edward’s argument that systems of control become dominant because they correspond to stages of capitalist development is paralleled by claims that panoptic or chimerical control are the new solutions for contemporary firms. It is merely moved on a ‘stage’. To make matters worse, what Edwards described as tendencies – the removal of managerial agency and uncontested objectification of knowledge – are presented as finished and unproblematic. Whatever the flaws of *Contested Terrain*, it represented a rigorous theorization developed from impressive empirical work. The ‘electronic sweatshop’ is good newspaper copy, but is a long way from the still-contested reality of the contemporary call centre.

² For example, while the determination of Edwards to examine the continual dialectic of control and resistance is admirable, the actual content of his argument with respect to bureaucratic control was, at least in part, wrong. In *Contested Terrain* he wrote that the response of American workers to ‘vast discontent, resentment, frustration and boredom with their work’ (1977, 138), but that given the difficulties of mounting a collective response, the opposition appears as a demand for workplace democracy. While such an argument had some tenability in the 1970s, with its labour movement and intellectual emphasis on issues on industrial democracy, the example he gives say more about capital’s attempts to respond to the limits of bureaucratic control through QWL and work humanization schemes, than it does about what labour was doing on the shop and office floor. In fact, that same decade was marked by sharp conflicts over employer attempts to break the traditional post-war bargain over joint regulation of work and employment.

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