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Call centres represent important new forms of work; both in terms of the actual and forecast number of employees and through the nature of the labour process. It is estimated that 2-3% of the UK's working population will be employed in call centres by 2002 (Datamonitor, 1996; Financial Times 1997; Guardian, 1998).

Understandably, therefore, call centres are attracting an increasing amount of academic attention. Equally unsurprisingly the work process and its attendant control and employment relations has been the primary focus of debate (Frenkel et al, 1998). Given that these employees will be working in an environment where job tasks are often highly scripted and performance is closely monitored, some authors have pointed to the similarities of this work to assembly line production (P. Taylor and Bain, 1998). In contrast Frenkel et al (1998, 958) characterise typical call centre work as having the characteristics of mass customised bureaucracy capable of combining standardised processes and customised products. For others, the widely-used term 'electronic sweatshop' combines Marxian and Foucauldian themes and is sufficiently provocative to attract media, as well as academic interest (Fernie and Metcalf, 1997). This is an important debate and one we hope to contribute to at a later stage.

Researchers do of course recognise the important differences from classic manual and white collar factories. Most significantly the labour and product of call centre work is relatively intangible. Though this is not exclusive of factory work, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the quality of communication. Empathy, energy and enthusiasm – sometimes summed up in the term emotional labour - is combined with product knowledge in order to maximise the quality and quantity of output, often measured in terms of customer satisfaction (S. Taylor, 1998).

So far little attention has been paid to recruitment, selection and training by critical researchers. Certainly the studies mentioned above only have token paragraphs. Frenkel et al assign recruitment and training to the employment relationship sphere, along with other 'HRM issues' such as career structure and reward system (1998, 959-960). While such issues have traditionally been the domain of mainstream HRM or OB. it not only leave an obvious gap, in this case it is a gap that actually matters. Though the complexity and characteristics of the services and therefore labour requirements varies considerably across and even within companies, all contributors point to the increasing significance of social skills and competencies to call centre and indeed customer service work more generally. But little attention has been paid to the role of recruitment and training in identifying and shaping them.

There *are* things to be learnt from the recruitment and selection literature in HRM/OB. As

a number of studies (Iles and Salaman, 1993; Lawler, 1994) argue, there has been a shift away from job-centred approaches which assume a relatively stable set of tasks to which individuals are matched, often using psychometric testing. The focus is, instead, person-centred and geared towards identifying the underlying characteristics of the individual, including cognitive abilities, their tacit knowledge and capacity for change. Methods deployed are more likely to be self-assessment, criteria-based and behavioural event interviews. This social process perspective treats the interview or other mechanisms as a process of interaction and mutual negotiation. The growth of assessment centres is seen as a signal that recruitment and selection have become more strategic HRM levers to cope with a more dynamic organisational environment.

Though the focus on behavioural competencies for new types of work is helpful, for our purposes the problem is that the analysis is based overwhelmingly on the expectations and experiences of managers and graduates. As a consequence the assumption is that the competencies arise from requirements to cope with varied, autonomous work; entrepreneurial and other leadership qualities; and personal career development within fast-changing portfolio careers. Iles and Salaman (1993, 210) argue that 'There has been a shift to employee autonomy, self-monitoring and devolved decision-making in a less stable, more uncertain and more dynamic environment. This has led to greater emphasis on such skills and qualities as teamwork, openness, adaptability, broader vision, tolerance of ambiguity, self-confidence, a positive orientation to change, an ability to see multiple perspectives, a desire to improve, develop and take on responsibility, and a wish to seek out and act on performance feedback'. Whatever else is happening in most call centre work, it clearly isn't this.

Nevertheless, our argument is that because of the centrality of social skills and competencies to the nature of the tasks and services, recruitment and training plays a more significant role and therefore is central to work as well as employment relations. Traditionally, manual or routine service workers have been identified through formal and informal channels and selected using the interview as the dominant recruitment filter (Windolf, 1988). This emphasis on interviews was also found in a more recent study into recruitment by the Institute of Personnel and Development who report that, despite a growing emphasis on customer care across industries and job types, the most frequently used selection tool remains the individual interview (IPD, 1998).

Training has often been perfunctory, focusing on achieving work targets, or learning from other employees. The indeterminacy of labour was tackled in the labour process itself, through work rules and control structures. While there has been a shift towards 'extra-functional' skills in the labour process within some 'strong culture' companies (McKinlay and Taylor, 1998), or as part of a shift to teamwork (Thompson and Wallace, 1996), it is either a strategic choice of particular employers or a dimension of a wider set of required competencies. In customer service work, it is the core characteristic. The potential 'performance gap' associated with the indeterminacy of labour is addressed to a increased degree outside the labour process itself. Suitable employees are screened in rather than unsuitable ones screened out. Then these competencies are shaped and directed through the training process.

Methodology

The research for this paper therefore tracks the recruitment, selection and training processes in one call centre. This paper will build on the analysis of Thompson and Warhurst (1998, 1999) concerning the real nature of knowledgability in work to examine how productive employees have to be identified, assessed and trained. In particular it will look at the way in which the attributes are recognised and valued by management, and the mechanisms by which they are selected and shaped, before tracking progress to the 'paddling pool' where employees proceed after they have negotiated those barriers.

Figure 1
The production of routine workplace knowledge

antecedents		knowledgeability	knowledge work	
	c		a	
	a	u	b	
	p	t	s	
	a	i	t	
competencies	c	l	r	
	i	i	a	high road
	t	t	c	learning
	y	y	t	
qualifications			i	
			o	
			n	low road
				regulation
identity		formalise	systematise	

(from Thompson and Warhurst, 1999)

Though our analysis is not concerned explicitly with interrogating knowledge work categories, the above framework is useful in that it indicates the broad processes involved in identifying and utilising new forms of competency among employees involved in routine work. The model assumes that though management can draw on antecedent qualifications or competencies, there is a shift towards the latter. For our purposes the recruitment and selection process identifies the capacities of useful labour and then seeks to formalise them through training and actual work relations; focusing on deeper utilisation of the social and tacit knowledgability of employees. Systematisation only into higher level knowledge work could then take place either through extending what is tacit into access to higher order knowledge or by the 'low road' of assessing and evaluating social competencies as part of a strengthened managerial control. We will seek to show that it is the latter in this case.

Most of the data is drawn from case study research in a telephone banking centre (Telebank). The material on recruitment includes interviews with recruitment managers, non-participant observation of the recruitment process and analysis of recruitment literature. Data on training is from detailed non-participation of Telebank's six week

training programme and from interviews with training managers. Given that we have not yet reached the stage of the research where we interview employees in a work context, any understanding of how far management have progressed in their agenda must remain partial.

Research was conducted at a single telephone banking call centre, where five hundred customer service representatives (CSR's) deal with around twenty thousand incoming calls a day. Eighty per cent of these CSR's are full time, working 35 hrs a week within the bank opening hours of 8.00 a.m. - 10. 00 p.m., Monday to Sunday. The full time shift pattern involves 6.5 hrs of work per day, with one hour for lunch and two 15 minute breaks (although both the rest periods can be exchanged for overtime). The remaining twenty per cent of staff are described as 'key-time' (part time) employees, working a variety of shifts.

Data collection took two main forms: taped semi structured interviews and detailed non-participant observation of recruitment and training. Interviewees included all levels of management, focusing on recruitment and training managers, some of whom were interviewed more than once. In addition, each stage of the recruitment process was observed, including the decision making post-interview discussions between recruiters. Similarly, time was spent observing the six weekly training programme. Finally a research diary was kept, containing additional observations and contextual comments.

The recruitment and training sections, where data gathering took place, are located on the ground floor, and contain two dedicated interview rooms and three training rooms. In addition, part of the 'live' call area on this floor is given over to training. This is known as the 'paddling pool', where trainees learn to take live calls.

Work relations at Telebank

It is important to recognise from the outset that there is considerable variety in call centre work. The major determinants of that variety are the extent to which calls are inbound or outbound and therefore responding to requests for information and action or concerned with telesales and marketing; the complexity and variability of the product, and the depth of the knowledge required to handle the service interactions and the extent to which theta knowledge is contextually-bound. As Taylor and Bain (1999) note, despite these variations there are substantial commonalities in the call centre labour process based on the integration of telephone and computer technologies and the entering and retrieval of data to manage the service interaction.

In Telebank, the call centre office, described in recruitment literature as a 'brand new building set in excellent, landscaped surroundings', is functional in both interior and exterior design, and forms part of a growing industrial park. The workplace is split into open-plan sections where CSR's work in teams of 12. Workers are segregated into rows by having partitions in front, but have some space at either side. This is said to cut noise levels while minimising the feeling of containment. Each team has control over the visual appearance of surrounding work space, and they are encouraged to design a colour scheme for 'their' area.

Within this environment CSR's take around 120 calls per day. Each call lasts around 3 min 30 secs and is split into three elements: talk time (160 seconds); post call or 'wrap up' time (20 sec) and time between calls - described by one manager as 'white space' - (4 sec). Each of these categories is electronically recorded and measured. Eighty per cent of these calls are dealt with by CSR's, with the remaining twenty per cent being passed immediately on to another area of the bank. Of this eighty per cent some two thirds relate to requests for straight account information (such as balances) and requests for simple actions (such as transfers between accounts) and are handled completely by CSR's. The remaining third are partially dealt with by CSR's before being passed on two colleagues for further action. The emphasis, then, is on short and simple calls.

Figure 2
Work Relations at Telebank

CONTROL	TASK	REWARD
Technical	**Variety**	**Perks**
Monitoring	80% on 3 tasks	subsidised mortgages
data collection	account info	
machine pacing	account action	
	charge queries	
	20% passed on	**Performance related**
Normative		6 month appraisal, up to 10%
self-regulation		of salary as one-off payment
teams		status rewards
	None	
		Basic Pay
Bureaucratic	**Depth of knowledge**	3 steps by experience
limited scripts	limited, cookery	£10500, 90% and 80% of
feedback and appraisal	cards & added	
on core standards	ingredients	
	Complexity of	**Progression**
	knowledge	flat structure
	limited	internal labour market
		3 categories: CSR, TC, TL

The labour process at Telebank is, then, structured to control and organise relatively routine tasks, though as Taylor and Bain (1999) observe, management has to balance the demands of quantity and quality, control and commitment. Our argument is that though the labour process drives much of the nature of the recruitment and selection process, this 'balance' of competing requirements is also addressed in and through that process.

Recruitment and selection

Telebank's recruitment process is thorough: a job and person specification are designed; appropriate recruitment channels selected; application forms collected and analysed; telephone interviews given; role plays assessed; two person structured interviews undertaken; references and credit checks collected and, finally, job offers made. In a recent analysis the recruiters find that from 231 initial responses only 7 applicants got through. This, of course, includes people who decided not to complete the application form, but for every 100 who do, only 10 are offered a training place.

The question is - why create such a structured process of systematic selection for a job with modest pay (£10,500 per year), a flat promotion structure and where workers last less than two years? As stated earlier perhaps the answer lies in the mix of skills required - not just basic technical abilities (such as keyboard skills) but also social competencies which are more difficult to identify yet crucial to Telebank's labour process. This section investigates how the recruitment process is used to assess such social and technical characteristics and competencies.

As Figure 3 [see appendix 1] shows Telebank's recruitment process is designed to assess applicants in three areas: personality traits; communication (especially verbal) skills and, with less emphasis, technical skills. There is some overlap between personality and communication skills, most obviously between energy and enthusiasm, but it was felt that the differences which exist make separate clusters conceptually useful.

It will also be argued that personality and communication are used to evaluate a worker's ability to act. This, as comments made by management about the nature of work at Telebank illustrate, is an important ability:

> ... it can be a very mundane job. When the customer asks you for the 70th time on a Friday, can I have my balance, it's a special kind of person who can say, 'Certainly' [emphasis] and off they go again. (Manager 8)

> At the end of the day, a call centre job is boring, it's call after call, day after day, week after week, month after month. There is very little variety. Now for someone to be able to cope with that, the challenge there is, each customer is different and therefore you have to treat each customer differently, that's where the challenge comes. You have to be tenacious and you've got to have energy, and that energy has got to last if you're a full-timer say from 9–5pm at the same constant level of energy. You have a passionate belief in customer service and all that entails. (Manager 6)

These quotes demonstrate the relationship between the labour and recruitment processes. The work demands that CSR's must be continually energetic and enthusiastic and the selection process aims to identify suitable workers. This need to produce and present a particular image resembles what Hochschild describes as emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). In her analysis of flight attendants Hochschild argues that certain types of work, particularly in the service sector, demand the regulation and management of feelings, and that this amounts to a demand for a new commodity - emotional labour. 'All in all, we can

think of emotion as a covert resource, like money, or knowledge, or physical labour, which companies need to get the job done'. (Hochschild, 1993: xiii)

This is exactly the kind of resource required in Telebank. CSR's must obviously be able to operate computers and know how to work through systems, but in addition they must be able to communicate effectively with customers. The relevance of emotional labour to service sector work has also been found by other researchers, including James's work into hospice nurses (James, 1989); Filby's research into the role of sexuality in the off-course betting industry (Filby, 1992) and Taylor's work into the telephone sales operation of a major British airline (S. Taylor, 1998).

Characteristics and competencies

On technical skill, Telebank managers look for keyboard skills, basic numeracy and the ability to move around a system. The application form assesses the first two through questions on previous experience and education while the third, described by Frenkel et al. (1998) as navigational competencies, are measured through role playing. In these the candidate is a travel agent and has to navigate through a paper system containing information on holiday destinations, flight times and prices in order to answer a call and complete enquiry and booking forms.

Testing for such technical skills, however, forms only a small part of the selection process. More time and thought is put into assessing social characteristics and competencies. As Figure 3 illustrates Telebank management are looking for certain personality traits, one of which is a 'positive attitude':
Extracts from discussions on necessary skills and abilities:

> Customer Service. That's not a skill. That's in you. It's the attitude towards customer service. Alertness, ability to use the keyboard and understand the software and understand the products... A positive attitude towards working. Because the customers' calls coming through are work. A positive attitude, and enjoy what you do. (Manager 5)

> Some people are maybe not as fast round a keyboard, so they may struggle in achieving peer group average handling time for calls. But we can do something about that, we can use team coaches or leaders or training teams when available to develop that individual in those areas. It's very difficult to change somebody's attitude. (Manager 2)

> They've got to have customer awareness. Business Development, not everyone would necessarily see that they develop the business, so we would use our skills to talk them round. Things like that, that's perhaps something that someone can learn to do. Verbal communication and customer service, that's coming down to actual ability there is an attitudinal factor in here. There is a belief factor that we need to establish. (Manager 4)

Personality is given priority in this recruitment process. To management good customer service requires positivity and, importantly, this cannot be taught, it is part of someone's personality. Manager five does not see a 'positive attitude' as a learned ability, it is simply 'in you' while managers two and four are less concerned with technical competencies, where training can be given, than with possessing the correct attitude or belief. When probed further management linked attitude to energy and enthusiasm:

> To fit into the category you need to be first of all, very, very enthusiastic. You need to really want to do it, because it's a tough 6 weeks training. You need to be positive, the whole company is geared towards a positive attitude, again a can-do approach, not I've never done that before, but yes, let's give it a bash, let's try it. (Manager 4)

> The recruitment process does involve a telephone conversation. You can tell with a conversation with somebody whether they're going to be warm on the phone. We teach pitch and energy as part of the initial weeks training. However, you will know just by sitting across the desk and listening to them on the phone. We know the job is boring and you don't know whether the next call is going to be Mr Angry or Mrs Nice. Normally, 95% of the time the call is fine. On occasion you have to put up with some guy having a real go for no reason. They are going to have a go at you because you are Telebank at that time. You can judge if a person is going to be good... But we recruit attitude. You can tell by talking to someone during interview whether they smile, whether their eyes smile. If you smile during your interview and you are enthusiastic, you'll be okay. (Manager 1)

The first extract above, from manager four, associates positive attitude with enthusiasm. While this manager sees enthusiasm and positivity as pre-requisites for the training programme, manager one goes further, stating that the call centre labour process requires warmth and enthusiasm and describing how telephone and face to face interviews are used to evaluate these qualities. Other interviews revealed a requirement for enthusiasm as part of 'people skills' and, again, separates these characteristics from technical skills, such as using a computer, which can be taught.

The other characteristic which emerged during research was a sense of humour. Prospective CSR's are told in the information provided with the initial application form that a sense of humour is one of the necessary 'attitudes', and this also arose during discussions with managers who gave examples of how humour has been used by CSR's :

> If a customer phones up you obviously know that they have to go through security so we can give them information about their account. And a typical question here, as in most organisations, is what is your date of birth. And you'll get the reply 'I don't have a date of birth, I was reincarnated'. At which point the CSR turned round and said 'Will you give me the date that you were reincarnated then, please' And it worked. (Manager 7)

> It depends on the customers, the more experience they have the best they can judge the type of customer they've got on line. For example, one of my girls who was reminding a customer when they went to collect their draft to

take ID, the customer said, 'Oh, will a mask and a gun be good enough'. And once the customer has given you that lead in, that was it. The conversation just deteriorated into hysterics. But people do try and bring their personality into their conversations, because that's the person you're speaking to, the customer. (Manager 8)

These quotes show that not only is it advantageous for CSR's to possess a sense of humour, it is equally important that they know when to employ this humour. They have to 'read' the conversation and decide when it is appropriate to engage in banter. This combination of humour, positivity and attitude are seen by the overall call centre manager as being crucial to competition:

I think the communication skills are the most important, very important. The difference between what they do and what the people on the phones in other banks do, is down to their personality, their communication skills. That is the only substantive differentiator between the banks - the personality of the individuals on the telephone. That's the highest skills. Their guys know all about banking products, my guys know all about banking products. Their guys will have to know about systems, my guys will have to know about systems. That's all roughly the same. The differentiator is how they communicate with that customer. It is the overriding skill that they've got to have. (Manager 6)

The priorities of recruitment emerge strongly from this quote. Product and systems knowledge are pre-requisites for the job; personality and communication skills the crucial differentiating qualities. The comments made by the head of Telebank are strikingly similar to those made by an insurance company manager quoted by Fuller and Smith in their work into customer/worker interactions in service firms:

Customer service is one of the top important factors in our competitive position. The survivors in the insurance industry are determined more by their service than by their product. The products are the same, with a few exceptions. Once there's a product innovation by one company, it's not long before everyone has it. People will pay more for good service; it's the cutting edge. It will determine who makes the cut and who does not. (Fuller and Smith, 1991: 7)

Personality is clearly seen as adding value in financial service customer interactions. But it is not enough to simply possess 'personality', CSR's must know how to communicate this personality. Communication competencies include verbal tone, pitch, fluency and energy and enthusiasm. These last two link the personality and communication clusters in figure 3. Extracts from comments relating to communication include:

Basically the telephone interview is a fairly standard script of areas we want to cover. Looking at their general attitude, their experience and their vocal qualities, basic English, grammar, phone pitch. How they come across on the telephone. Is this a voice we could do something with? (Manager 4)

What I'm trying to tap into is what's going on inside them, and what tells me most about what's going on inside them is their body language in particular, their language and the way they use their voice. Now most people say dress, that's going to be the first thing that you look at. Not necessarily so... what I really am looking for is fluency, how well are they talking... If I'm not hearing energy and enthusiasm, what I'm looking for is energy drop. Energy drop is where you've got someone who's started a sentence, sounded quite bright, and then it drops off. And also looking for sentence shape, are they melodic, are they using good pitch, or are they monotonous, have they got the one tone they always speak at. Are they too musical, do they give a little squeak at the end of the sentence?

These quotes demonstrate the way recruiters assess how the vocal qualities of tone, pitch and warmth combine with energy and enthusiasm to produce fluency and rapport. The connection with personality is revealed in the comments of manager seven who uses verbal clues at face to face interview to assess 'what's going on inside them'. This extract also hints at another important competency - consciousness of one's abilities - which was apparent in earlier material on humour, but here is related to knowledge of one's energy levels. This is where the relevance of acting comes in. A good CSR is someone who has an awareness of tone and pitch, someone who consciously uses their voice as a tool to shape and control conversational mood. The worries that managers have with potential employees who suffered 'energy drop' during interviews are part of a wider set of concerns about telephone skills.

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)

In discussion about telephone interviews:

They have to have some interest in the conversation you're having with them, you can link it to enthusiasm to some extent. They have to want to partake in that discussion with you. You are looking for some agreement, some acknowledgement when you speak. You want to know that there's someone at the end of that telephone, somebody who's quite happy to chat to you, quite open. Obviously you can establish rapport quite easily face to face, or you know if it's not there, face to face. On the telephone, it's a case of them acknowledging you, tuning in to what you're asking them, and, again it's something that you can see very definitely if it's not there. Some people are particularly good at developing rapport on the telephone, so you know straight away that all of a sudden it's a good conversation and it rolls very easily. (Manager 4)

What managers appear to be doing is evaluating the potential of candidates to consciously manipulate their individual characteristics and competencies in order to produce convincing customer service. Candidates need to be able to 'make' conversations and 'build' rapport, to adapt and change depending on the type of conversation. CSR's must be able to act, to manage and regulate their feelings.

The Telebank labourer process involves providing banking information to customers in a pleasant and responsive manner. This labour process is clearly reflected in the recruitment and selection process, where candidates are assessed on basic technical skills (keyboard, numeracy); personality (positive and pleasant); communication (clear and confident, friendly and fluent) and, crucially, their ability to consciously combine these in the production of customer service. The next section moves on to look at how these initial abilities are systematised through training.

Training

There is a constant stream of basic training at Telebank, with teams of around 16 new employees undergoing a training programme every six weeks. This training covers communication skills and products and systems. For four weeks the trainees are in a dedicated training room while the final two weeks are spent in the paddling pool. Given the thrust of this paper, this section concentrates on training in communication.

Turning briefly, however, to products and systems, trainees are given a reference folder which specifies what they can and cannot do. In addition they receive an alphabetical index containing details of procedures (known as 'cookery cards') and a reference file for more complex procedures (known as 'added ingredients'). This reference material is complemented with classroom based training, where they are taken through the bank' s computing systems. Trainees are taught how to navigate through these systems (Frenkel et al, 1998), for example moving from a screen with account details to one with standing order details, and about the main banking products. The emphasis, however, is on the limited amount of control they have over a customers account. Instead CSR's are trained in passing on information, either to customers or colleagues elsewhere in the bank.

Figure 4 (see Appendix 2) illustrates that the training in products and systems is complemented by training in communication. We have split this into two parts - managing a conversation (techniques of conversational control) and managing yourself (control over one's energy and enthusiasm). Together these begin to give trainees an awareness and influence over the regulation and management of feelings - categorised as acting.

They are taught two techniques to control conversation: the conversation cycle and the eight elements of conversation. The training manager gave the following comments on the first of these, which is worth quoting in full:

> We also use some training models where they, it's called a conversation cycle but basically it's a model to help build rapport with people. What you say is that you need to inform the customer what you're doing. If you don't

inform the customer they become very unsure. So the cycle starts off with 'inform'... So you just listen very clearly to the other individual and on the back of it you will write them into the conversation by asking a question. The second stage of the conversation cycle is 'invite' and it would be when someone answers a telephone call here, they say something like 'Good morning, it's Trish from Customer Services Centre, how can I help you?'. So you've got your very simple idea, and on the back of it you've got a question. Once you've asked the question you have to adjust your mind to what you need to do, and what you need to do at this point is to listen. Listening on the phone is very difficult... when you're on the phone and can't see someone's face, that makes it a little bit harder... you've got to listen so carefully to what they're saying and pick up on everything they're saying... So you then listen to the customer and after you've got the response you need to do the final bit of the cycle, which is to acknowledge what they've said, and this is where you start to build empathy. At that point you need to be saying, thank you, or I'm sorry, some kind of acknowledgement of what they've said. If someone says I want to order some money, I'm going to Australia to see my daughter, 'Oh, wonderful'. They then need to retain that information so at the end of the call they say, 'Have a really good time'... It's about using the elements of your voice and using that to control the conversation to help build rapport. (Manager 7)

Here the trainees are taught to be active during a conversation: they must 'adjust their mind', 'build empathy' and 'control the conversation'. So in contrast to the training in products and systems, where they have limited autonomy, during conversations with customers they are encouraged to be proactive and are taught creative techniques. The other procedure is known as the eight elements of conversation:

... also what we do within training and to a degree you're looking at this when talking to them at interview, if you have a successful conversation with someone, eight things would be happening naturally. First thing that should be happening is that ideas are being exchanged, and the ideas should always be simple and clear. The next one down is the personal... It's like using I rather than the royal 'we' because you are representing the company, so it should be I. Using the customer's name and your own name... Talking on that kind of level, making the person feel they are an individual rather than an account number, that creates the impression that you're being professional. You've then got this thing called 'intention'. That is, how do you sound, so that you match what you're saying? So it's a different thing saying 'I'm really sorry to hear about that' [emphasis], or 'I'm sorry' [monotone]... The one after that is 'attention' in terms of how do you keep someone's attention and if you think you're losing it, how do you get it back? There's a number of techniques here you can use, use the name, ask questions...

Those are the first 4 of eight and they're usually associated with the sender of the idea. The next 4 are to do with the receiver. So the next one down is duplication. - literally repeating the idea word for word, without making any

kind of interpretation at that stage... That's when you can go in and think what's my understanding of this and you can check your understanding of questions, summarise what you think you've heard, put it into your own words and just get some kind of recognition from the sender. After understanding, acknowledgement needs to go in there, giving the person an idea, the other person's received it, they've understood it. That's your empathy bit coming in. The last bit is space. Space is really important in conversation, you don't talk over one another, you give people the opportunity to say what they want, On the telephone, space is very important in terms of, has my customer got this. It's just a form of respect. (Manager 7)

This technique is another tool enabling trainees to manipulate the conversation in order to create empathy and rapport. The need for conscious awareness which emerged from the data on recruitment is also apparent here - to use these conversational control tools successfully CSR's need continual concentration. One practical use of such techniques is to pacify irate customers:

... if a customer is angry and shouting at them, they are taught not to respond by shouting back, but they are told that it may be appropriate to raise what we call their intention. This is more to do with projection and speaking more clearly and it's really so that they're heard and they are demonstrating that they're assertive rather than being aggressive or submissive to it... Just let them have their say, use the cycle to bring the conversation back to you being in control of it... It is a case of thinking, what can you do with your voice and language, use the conversation cycle and you'll gain control... (Manager 7)

The skill here is not to take customer comments as personal, rather to distance oneself from any anger and use specific procedures to calm the situation and regain control. As the second quote shows this involves using positive words in a positive way. The link between knowing the techniques for controlling a conversation and doing so effectively is managing oneself. And here managers again emphasise energy and enthusiasm:

We also do a rapport session. We talk about rapport to start with, if you are in or out of rapport. Then what happens is we get them to talk to each other on a subject, one has to disagree with the other one totally, they don't like the subject at all, really think it's disgusting. What happens there is we will come round the room and review them, and take notes. Then we get them to be in rapport with someone and go round the room again. It's amazing when you turn and say to them when you're in rapport you do similar characteristics, so if someone does that the other one will do it. We actually get a couple of them out walking round as well. And that's how we get them to think about it. And by being enthusiastic you gain rapport with that person. (Manager 3)

And later

> So as far as energy and enthusiasm go what we do as trainers, we will come into the room at one stage, just walk in totally fed up and bored, and talk to them that way and you see the whole room suddenly change, the atmosphere. And we will keep that going for 20 minutes and they're not sure whether you're really acting or being serious. And then we say to them 'How are you feeling?' We do operate an open and honest culture here so they have to tell us how they're feeling and we put it on the flip chart. We leave that as it is and then come back all chirpy and enthusiastic and you see them think 'What's happened now?' Then we talk to them again, 'How are you feeling' and we go back and say 'This is how you were feeling when I came into the room'. We do little sessions like that to show them. (Manager 3)

Here trainees are being shown the power of pretence. In the rapport session the trainers emphasise how much trainees enjoy seeing people copy each other's physical gestures; the trick, they are told, is to establish similar rapport over the phone. The second quote describes a situation where acting is used. The trainers deliberately vary their voice and actions in order to produce particular feelings; trainees are then shown how the eight elements of conversation can be similarly used to influence the emotional context of a conversation.

Once on the floor Telebank management ensure the quality of such performances through call coaching:

> 5 and 6 is our paddling pool area. Once they've taken a live call on the Friday of week 4, Monday of week 5 they then go on the phones and take live calls from the customers. Then on the Tuesday we call coach. The way to do that is we listen to some of their calls from a distance and they don't know we're listening to them, and we also tape their calls. What the coach will do is then write up notes on how they handled the call. The coach is listening for communication, for energy, enthusiasm in the voice. When it dips, what sort of things can they do.. (Manager 3)

> When joining a team the coaching process is continuous, they will then say, how can I work on this energy? You sometimes get naturals, you get somebody who comes in and they're just a natural. You have to work at it and, say, by trying to inject a bit of energy this is what could come out of it. (Manager 10)

While call coaching obviously has a strong monitoring and control element it is also used for training purposes, and there is a dedicated training room (known as the 'learning centre' and containing computers with CD-ROM's and VCR's) where under-performing CSR's are sent to improve their skills. During a conversation with one such CSR we were told that he had been taken off the phones to work on his tone, which went down when he didn't know the answer to the customer's question. This CSR was working through an interactive CD-ROM and said that during the early part of this programme he was told to leave his problems at the door and be energetic and enthusiastic with every customer - that people are not interested in a CSR's non-work life. The promotion of 'performance' is,

then, constant, being taught during initial training and continually checked during call coaching.

Conclusion and evaluation: the contradictions of acting natural?

We have demonstrated, in contrast to the dominant perspective in HRM literature (Pearn and Kandola, 1988; Lawler, 1994), that there can be a reliance on broader social competencies in a more intensive recruitment process without that being associated with employee autonomy, devolved decision-making and flexible, open task structures. Call centre work has a stable set of tasks, limited discretion and little or no career development, yet company investment in rigorous procedures and assessment techniques is strong. Telebank is far from unique in this respect.

Yet, there are a number of contradictory tendencies revealed in this case study of how a particular company identifies and develops social competencies. They centre on the tensions between acting and acting naturally. On the one hand there is a continual reference to the capacity of employees to mobilise their own distinctive personality and social attributes in pursuit of quality service. Telebank employees, like those described by Richardson and Marshall (1996) in their work into telephone call centres in Tyne and Wear, are required by management to be able to continually 'smile down the phone'. Indeed the selection process is ostensibly geared to identifying such individuals. In the recruitment process management value personality; candidates with a positive attitude: sense of humour, warmth and enthusiasm are given high scores at each stage of selection.

But it is as if Telebank management don't trust their own process or judgements about individuals in that new employees are clearly and continually trained to act, both in respect to conformity to scripts and techniques of conversational control and to consciously manage their own feelings. The circle can in one sense be squared through the concept of 'deep acting', where trainees are encouraged to change their underlying feelings and values so as to make the interaction more 'genuine' (Hochschild, 1983). Evidence for the existence of deep acting was also found by Taylor (1998) who, in his research into a telephone sales operation of a British airline, commented: '.. service sector employers are increasingly demanding that employees deep act - actively work on and change their feeling to match the display required by the labour process...' (Taylor, 1998: 98).

In Telebank this can be illustrated in the following:

> They are having to make a conscious effort, and this is where it comes down to choice if you like. If you work too hard at it, it won't happen. The model we use, I'll write it all down and explain it to you. What we're saying basically is if you have a really clear purpose of what you want or want to do, you know what it's going to take for you to do it. So what you then do is get yourself into a state of mind to do it. Having got yourself into the state of mind that you want to do it, the best example we're talking about building rapport, creating the right impression with the customer, you need to get yourself into the state of mind to build rapport. To a certain degree initially that might be as you say there's a degree of consciousness

about it. It might sound a bit techniquey, but once you start to build it, quickly that thought goes and you're there. If you then build rapport with an individual, they get a really good impression of who you are, what you do. If they get the right impression about you, they'll listen to you. (Manager 7)

From non-participant observation

'Tone gives away just about everything that's going on in your mind... if a customer is stupid you need to become quite clever in your acting abilities...enthusiasm and tone give away your mood, if you are five minutes from the end of a shift, or having a bad day... you'll have to fight these reactions, shut them out, push them out. The good thing is if you can do this eventually you will be able to change yourself. Or on the 'bad days' unless it is very serious put up with it.'

'Building rapport' is central. Even in relatively routine interactions it is functional to efficient and satisfying customer service. Yet it is exactly that – built through techniques. So, for example, trainees are encouraged to make the necessary changes to their 'state of mind', by consciously working on levels of enthusiasm you can change yourself. They are told that sufficient concentration will improve sincerity - once rapport is built 'you're there'. It is possible to describe this contradiction as between surface and deep acting, but it is by no means clear that such a distinction is meaningful in theory or practice. Further research with CSRs themselves will enable us to further engage with and clarify these issues.

The second contradiction is between the private and public selves. Management is very clear about not allowing 'external' considerations to influence energy and enthusiasm levels:

What we would also say is, if possible would you try to leave your personal life at the door, but if you do find during the day you need to make calls make us aware of it and we'll try to accommodate you as much as we can. Also, if someone is losing their energy you have to speak to them. Is it something in the job, someone you're sitting beside, is it a clash with your team leader. I've not seen it because I'm not in line, I'm only with them for 6 weeks. Then we've two weeks in the paddling pool, if they're not happy with the coach – we encourage them to speak to their coach first – then their training manager would step in. (Manager 10)

From non-participant observation:

Trainees are told that what is important is to 'give a good service, have a good frame of mind, be positive. The essence of good service has to come from people themselves... Remember your voice tells a million details, concentrate on your work, leave problems at home'.

And later: 'If you have an off day that has to be forgotten the minute you are all on the phone.'

These requirements to 'leave personal lives at the door' show the clear limitations to management utilisation of the 'real person' – it is case of be yourself, but not if that gets in the way of who we need you to be. It also falls into what Hochschild (1983) has described as emotional labour, where workers pretend to feel in a certain way that appears genuine to others but which they know to be false. Such a managerial strategy was also found by Ogbonna and Wilkinson (1990) in their work on the customer ethos found in supermarkets. They report one company who put posters at each entrance onto the shop floor which read 'smile, you're on stage' and quote one checkout operator:

> ... sometimes I feel like I could kick them ... why should I smile at them ... they don't know the problems I have at home... but at the end of the day it's the customer that pays the wage... when this (smile campaign) first came about I had a few arguments about it because you can't always be happy all the time... I might not be smiling but it doesn't mean that I'm unhappy ... at the beginning I never thought I could walk around with my face full of smile but now I can go on smiling at customers. (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990: 12)

How can we explain these tensions and contradictions within the rhetoric and between words and deeds? In part management are trapped within the dominant industry self-perception. Recruitment and selection is framed in terms of spotting 'personality' and 'naturals', and emphasises the importance of these for maintaining competitive advantage. Yet every one of their competitors is doing the same thing. If Telebank's training can take applicants and turn them into good CSR's then so can their competitors, making one wonder how distinctive communication and personality really are

More importantly there is a real tension in the labour process between the mobilisation of employee attributes and the deliberate moulding and standardisation of social competencies. This, in turn, is reproduced in the contradictory and confusing rhetoric of management in selection and training, as well as the uncertainty of the industry in how to deal with its problems of work organisation, recruitment and retention. In essence this tension is the service interaction equivalent of the control-commitment dilemma of management in more conventional manufacturing settings.

The care taken over recruiting individuals pre-disposed by ability or orientation to work in the prescribed manner may not be as misplaced as it appears. This is highly demanding, repetitive work. Management and Telebank know it and they were not shy in letting employees know as well. Earlier we quoted a manager as saying that it is important that employees can 'put up with it' on 'bad days'. The rigour of recruitment and selection may also have something to do with identifying people with survival skills, not least those who have the guts and guile to get through 120 repetitive calls a day while being observed and scrutinised. This orientation is consistent with our preliminary argument that call centre companies may use recruitment and training as a way of seeking to address the indeterminacy of labour in a manner particularly appropriate to this sector. Such strategic choices are unlikely to be static or permanent. The continued high turnover of staff at Telebank and elsewhere may push management into looking at other options, notably automating routine transactions. But at the moment, it is still a case of proceeding to the paddling pool.

Acknowledgements

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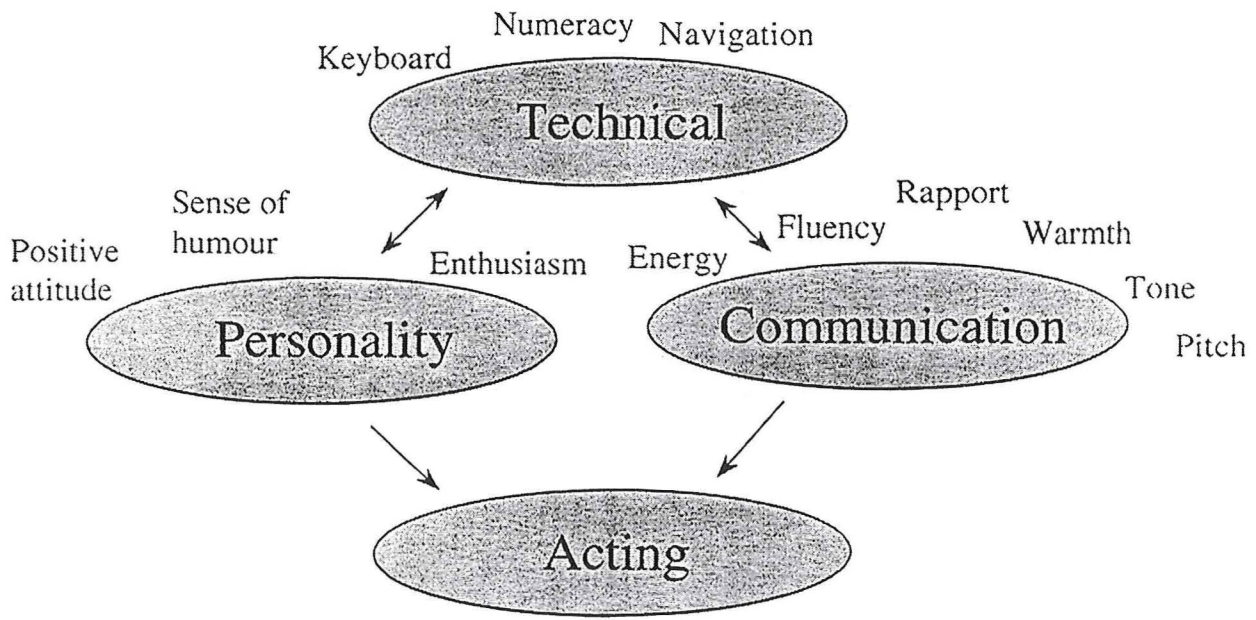
Figure 3: Characteristics and competencies

Numeracy   Navigation

Keyboard

Technical

Sense of
humour   Rapport

Positive   Fluency   Warmth
attitude   Enthusiasm   Energy   Tone

Personality   **Communication**   Pitch

Acting

Figure 4: Training mechanisms

Banking products

Systems

Technical knowledge

8 elements of conversation

Energy

Enthusiasm

Conversational cycle

Managing a conversation

Managing yourself
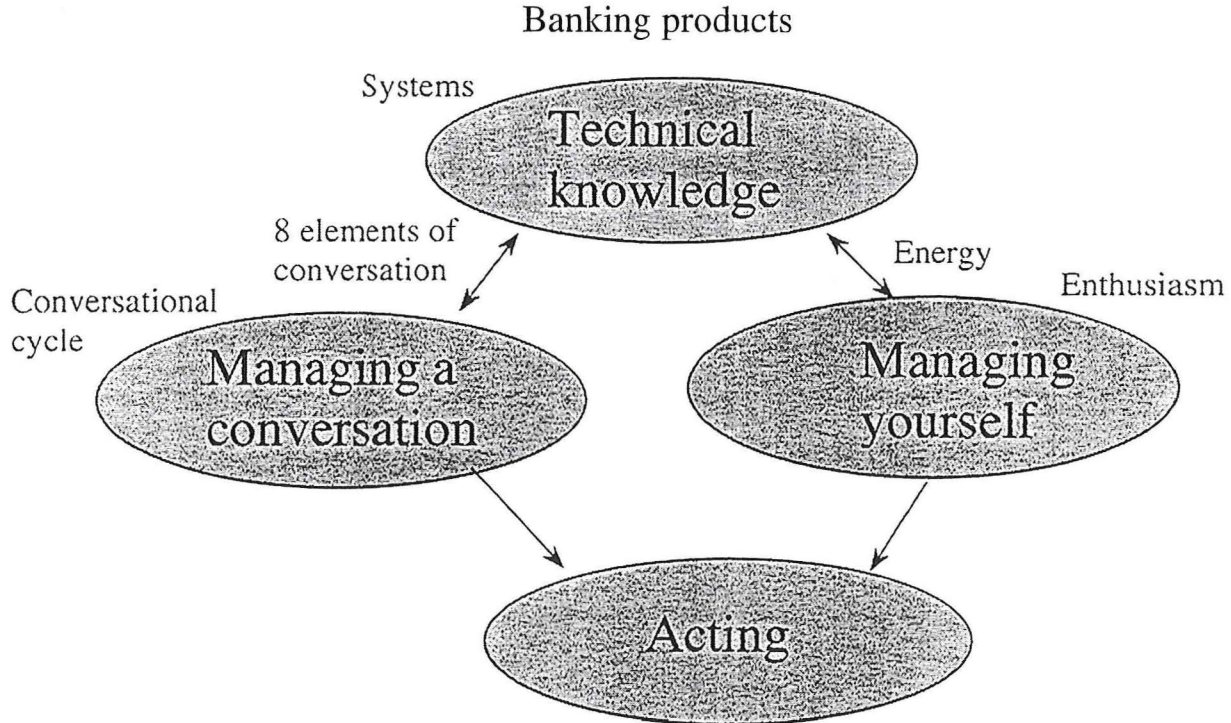
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