

ABSENTEEISM FROM THE FRONTLINE: EXPLAINING EMPLOYEE STRESS AND WITHDRAWAL IN A CALL CENTRE

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study which investigated employees' views on why they find call centre work more stressful than other types of work and the reasons for high levels of absenteeism in their workplace. Data were collected from frontline employees ($n = 58$) of a telecommunications call centre during ten focus groups. Content analysis of the data identified nine major themes. Overall, the study suggests that employee stress results from managers' emphases on sales and efficiency demands, directed by specific targets and high levels of electronic monitoring. Additionally, employees vary in their ability to provide emotional labour and deal with the stress of customer interactions. Other themes focused on call centre support processes and structures, teams, insufficient rest time, inadequate communication systems and human resource management issues. All the themes contributed to accumulated stress. Absenteeism was explained in terms of the accumulated stress, the perceived hygiene of the centre, proximity to others and employees' lack of identity. Finally, decreased employee commitment and withdrawal were attributed to perceived inequities in the workplace. The paper concludes with a discussion of managerial applications.

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INTRODUCTION

Frontline employees work in unique environments in call centres. As well as constantly managing customer interactions, they are generally expected to adhere to strict targets, and are subjected to high levels of monitoring and control (Brown & Maxwell, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). Call centre work has been shown to result in high levels of employee stress (Knights & McCabe, 1998; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Wallace et al., 2000). The stress has generally been attributed to the pressure upon employees to meet productivity goals at the same time as managing customer interactions and delivering high levels of customer service (Gilmore, 2001; Kinnie et al., 2000). In call centres, authors discuss conflicts such as 'hard versus soft goals' (Taylor & Tyler, 2000), tangible and intangible measures of service quality (Gilmore & Moreland, 2000) and 'Taylorism versus tailorism' (Korczynski, 2001). These authors, and others, have contended that an emphasis on quantitative targets takes priority over customer service goals (Houlihan, 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Several empirical studies have demonstrated the precedence that employees place on targets when compared to service quality (Batt, 1999; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Singh, 2000). For example, Batt (1999) and Singh (2000) both found that, when faced with conflicting demands, frontline employees in call centres (telecommunications and financial services respectively), reduced the service quality delivered to customers in order to maintain their productivity. Similarly, Knights and McCabe (1998) found that employees, in a telephone banking call centre, sacrificed customer service to manage the stress associated with work intensity.

Call centre studies have shown that, to achieve targets, managers closely monitor productivity, and provide little opportunity for worker initiative, involvement or control (Callaghan & Thompson; 2001; Gilmore, 2001; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Taylor & Bain, 1999). However, theory about the relationship between control and quality in services is unclear. In a study of employee responses to quality management in six UK organisations, Edwards et al. (1998) found that favourable views of quality, as expressed by employees, were strongest where the monitoring of workers was most intense. In contrast, Gilmore (2001) found that frontline employees in call centres were aware of service quality problems and felt that the environment was too restrictive to allow them to answer customer queries effectively and efficiently. Other authors suggest a dilemma between control and surveillance, and empowering employees and encouraging their commitment (Kinnie et al., 2000; Taylor & Bain, 1999). Overall, scholars note that the technology of call centres is used to heavily monitor employee performance but the studies are inconclusive in establishing how high levels of monitoring and control affect employees and their service work.

Managing the demands caused by efficiency targets, high levels of control and electronic surveillance can cause role stress (Aiello & Kolb, 1995). In call centres, employees must simultaneously manage customer demands over the telephone. Service encounters require emotional labour, that is, the demonstration of appropriate feelings and responses, which can lead to stress and emotive dissonance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Sturdy, 1998). In general, high levels of stress, caused by dealing directly and constantly with customers, is exacerbated because managers urge frontline employees to treat customers as though they are always right (Bitner et al., 1994). Call centre studies report high employee stress levels, purported to be due to contradictory goals of efficiency and customer service. For example, in their study of an insurance provider in the Netherlands, de Ruyter et al. (2001) found that employee empowerment in the form of autonomy was inversely related to role stress. One Australian study, using four cases, found that organisational efficiency goals were pursued at the expense of employee stress and well-being (Wallace et al., 2000). However, and in contrast to a purely Foucaultian approach, Beirne et al (2004: 102) argue that personal perception of self and interaction with others are informed by notions of decency and civility that find expression within the labour process yet not produced solely within its boundary lines.

Scholars have found that call centre work leads to stress and emotional exhaustion (Deery et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2000). However, call centre stress is complex and experienced differently by frontline staff (Armistead et al. 2002). For this reason, Beirne et al (2004) prefer the term emotional engagement rather than emotional labour emphasizing that emotional labour is as much about the expression of feelings as their exploitation. The relationship between stress, exhaustion and withdrawal is not straightforward. Derry et al (2002: 488-491) sum up current thinking when they suggest that the main component of burnout is emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is then taken as the first stage of the burnout process. This can emanate for a number of factors including rude and aggressive customers exacerbated by a rigid code on self-presentation. The emphasis on speed and customer throughput created anxiety, although this was mitigated as the time spent on each call increased. Line management demonstrating a concern for staff welfare was also believed to make a difference to employee emotional well being. Job tenure was important as the longer that an employee was exposed to front line service work; the greater were the negative emotional consequences. Finally and unsurprisingly, employee withdrawal was positively associated with emotional exhaustion and the factors listed above that contribute to it.

A neglected factor in Call Centre research and one which, as we shall see, can contribute to stress and withdrawal is occupational health and safety. Taylor et al (2003) argue that the character of work organisation and job design in call centres contribute to occupational ill health which elicits a contrasting response from employees. Specifically the operation of targets allied to punitive sickness absence policies was problematic. If management acceded to requests to legitimate current absences would be to admit that current work practices and sickness policies were part of the underlying problem. Therefore, absence in this sense can be the composite outcome of the way in which a number of sub optimal factors intersect with each other.

In this paper we concentrate simply on stress and withdrawal (absence). This is of vital importance both to the industry and the workforce, as, according to van den Broek (2004: 277) call centre staff in Australia took 8.74 days of sick leave per annum compared to the national workforce average of 5.2. Furthermore, over one third of CSRs in the industry admitted to taking time off from work due to stress. The paper is part of a larger body of work on Call Centres in Less Favoured Regions. Elsewhere we have examined questions of stress and local employment factors (Dean & Rainnie 2004), the impact of locality on HRM (Paulet 2004) and unionization and resistance (Rainnie & Drummond 2004). Our approach stresses the importance of linking product market with labour market considerations, the customer with the employee (Dean 2004).

METHOD

In a preliminary study involving frontline employees (n=145) of a call centre outsourced by an Australian telecommunications provider, we found that the majority of employees considered their work to be more stressful, or much more stressful, than previous positions they had held (Dean & Rainnie, 2004). The factor of outsourcing is important as Deery & Walsh(nd: 17) suggest that employees in outsourced organisations report significantly less organisational commitment and a greater intention to leave the organisation than their counterparts in in-house centres. Since the survey, managers in the call centre have expressed their concern about high levels of sick leave and unpaid absenteeism. Consequently, a follow on study was conducted to determine the reasons behind employee stress and withdrawal from the workplace. Findings from two major research questions form the basis of the discussion in this paper. The questions were framed as follows:

1. In the recent employee survey, 54% of respondents said that they found it more stressful working in the call centre than in their previous employment. What makes it more stressful?
2. Managers in the call centre are very concerned about high levels of sick leave and absenteeism. What are the reasons behind this situation?

The call centre used in the study meets the definition of Taylor and Bain (1999), in that it is a dedicated customer service operation and employs integrated telephone and computer technologies. Employees are expected to make new or further sales, an extension of the concept of 'customer service' into 'customer solutions' (Armistead et al., 2002; Sturdy, 2000). The call centre is relatively new and been operating for only two years at the time of data collection. The recent establishment of the call centre was important because many employees were able to compare their call centre work to other types of work, or to their experiences in other call centres, facilitating their identification of the specific factors that affect them in the current context.

Frontline employees perform integrated telephone and computer work, in response to inbound customer calls. They work 6-8 hour shifts, in irregular weekly patterns. Employees take incoming calls for service enquiries (such as billing questions, product information and contract options) and, in finding customer 'solutions', they are expected to make sales (transfers to higher value or new contracts, and additional products). Employees are organised into teams on the floor and each team has a leader who is responsible for supporting and mentoring team members.

Employees are individually measured, daily, according to their performance on 'sales', 'talk time', 'wrap time' and 'adherence' targets. They are expected to average no more than 300 seconds total handling time per call (talk time plus 'wrap' or follow up time). The quality of service they provide is anonymously assessed, twice weekly, by a quality assurance (QA) officer who records and evaluates their interactions with customers. Employees receive feedback by email and sometimes it is discussed with them. Team performance is also assessed daily and results for all teams are displayed on a white board on the call centre floor.

Data collection involved ten focus groups with frontline employees ($n=58$). Focus group interviews were considered well suited to the study because they are a means of stimulating discussion and getting closer to participants' understandings and perspectives of particular issues (Brewerton and Millward, 2001). The focus groups were conducted on-site, with participants being recruited by an employee in charge of replacement staff. Times were designed to capture a balance of morning and afternoon shifts and day of the week. Discussions ranged in length from one, to one and a half hours. The participants were predominantly female (64%), had an average age of 29.3 years, and most had no previous call centre experience (78%).

Data were analysed by using the procedure recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, content analysis was performed by two independent researchers. The process produced topics and themes that showed what was talked about. Next, data were interpreted to establish what was actually said about the topics in the themes, and to provide analytical insights in the context of the call centre.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nine major themes were identified from the focus group interviews. The most prominent themes are concerned with managerial attitudes and practices, including the sales orientation of the call centre, efficiency demands and performance monitoring, factors which contribute directly to employee stress. These themes are discussed first, followed by themes that are concerned with employees' abilities to manage call centre work, namely service encounters, lack of support structures and human resource management (HRM) issues. Employee selection and the resultant employee-job fit are of particular importance with respect to HRM and employee stress levels. Finally, several themes specifically related to absenteeism are discussed, including the perceived hygiene of the call centre environment, employees' lack of identity in the centre, their perceptions of inequity and the implications for their feelings of commitment.

Management Emphasis on Sales and Efficiency Demands

Frontline employees in the call centre receive only inbound customer calls but, wherever possible, employees are expected to turn those calls into sales. Management's primary emphasis on sales was mentioned by every group, and more than any other single topic. Employees are required to find 'solutions' for customers where a solution encompasses responding to the customer call for service and offering alternative, higher value, telecommunications products. The consistent pressure to meet ever-increasing sales targets was considered a major stressor:

"It's a lot more high pressure environment. You're promoted and you're expected to make high sales, as part of your work, as part of your key performance indicator. That's expected of you. Little did we know that to start with, but that's now expected of all of us that work here. It puts a lot of pressure on you. I found that it is a lot more stressful, as opposed to other jobs." (Group 4)

The focus on sales was seen to have a higher priority than service quality and forced employees to compromise service to achieve sales targets, so that would not be reprimanded. For example:

"Quite often if the pressure's on because your sales are down, quite often it can interfere with the sort of customer care that you can give... because you've got to try and push, help the customer out the best you can... but on the other hand you've got no sales, and then they get on you because you spent too much time with the customers helping them out and not making sales." (Group 3)

Although afforded much priority, sales targets are just one of the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in the call centre. Other KPIs reflect the efficiency demands of the intense monitoring practices used, presumably, to facilitate them. Efficiency demands were expressed most often in terms of time pressures, and the nexus between productivity demands and service quality delivery. As well as sales, KPIs are concerned with 'talk time', 'wrap time' (after call work) and 'adherence' ('not ready' time and breaks). Individual measures are reported daily and team measures are reported on a whiteboard in the centre. Employees stated that such precise and public demands caused them to become stressed, worked against their desire to provide customer service and made them less able to deal with customer interactions.

"I got really stressed when mine [KPIs] went up because look I'm comfortable with that, leave me at that, I'm more than meeting my targets but now you want me to exceed... And it gives you that stress again because there's days when you can meet it and days when you can't." (Group 6)

Similarly,

"..you think 'oh God, my talk time is going to be so high I've got to get this customer off the phone as soon as I can because I had a really long call before'. You've got to sort of think like that and it really stresses you out." (Group 2)

Focus group participants were critical of measurement that uses productivity statistics. When faced with conflict between productivity and service quality, the groups generally agreed that they would adhere to productivity targets because of their visibility and significance to management. For example:

"Yeah customer service is really important, but as she said, we've got to focus on ourselves as well because we have to. We lose our job otherwise." (Group 7)

Participants also noted that productivity targets and monitoring place pressure on them and contribute markedly to their feelings of stress, burnout and exhaustion. To manage the pressure,

nine of the ten focus groups discussed the need for more breaks and rest time to assist them to balance the demands of their work. For example,

“..a lot of times you think, oh, I wish I could have just a 5 minute breather after that call just to re-centre myself again to prepare myself for the next call. But you can't do that because you're only allowed a certain number of seconds before the next call comes in. .. the stress builds up, and builds up, and by the end of the day you're wired.” (Group 9)

Two other aspects of performance monitoring and feedback were mentioned often by the groups. First, they indicated a tendency for management to focus on negative aspects, rather than positive achievements:

“.. with my KPI's for my QA's [quality assurance measures], my KPI's 100%. So if I get less than 100, in the eyes of my Team Leader I've failed. I got a 95 and she made me feel like I've done something wrong.” (Group 5)

Targets, in effect become minima. Second, participants in five of the focus groups commented on the potential of customer feedback to motivate them but that it is under-utilised. They stated that positive feedback from customer 'call-backs' is important because “it's really satisfying” (Group 1), “makes you feel good” (Group 10) and helps to alleviate negative feelings. However, individuals in the other five groups were not aware of QA processes whereby customers are called back and had never had any indirect customer feedback about the quality of service that they were providing. Consequently it appears that managers in the call centre use performance monitoring predominantly for checking and controlling rather than endeavouring to take advantage of its wider potential.

Service Encounters and Managing Customers

The next two themes are concerned with stress arising from service encounters and inappropriate employee-job fit. Service encounter stress arises from the difficulty in repeatedly managing customer interactions. It includes the emotional demands of the job, and the negative effects of dealing with customers who are angry or upset, rude or threatening. Employees stated that their ability to manage service encounters was impeded by lack of flexibility in the quality assurance processes, no scope to manage their own time, and no formal opportunity to discuss their feelings and responses with others in the organisation. For example,

“I was a Chef prior to here, self-employed. And although it was stressful running the restaurant, it is more stressful here. Day-to-day dealing with constant difference in customer attitude on the phone. Quite often they could have had a bad experience on a previous call, we pick it up, we have to deal with it, and we have to learn to either be able to cope with that, or shut it out. It does get very stressful, and so does dealing with the customer.” (Group 3)

The theme, employee-job fit, was mentioned by all focus groups. Participants agreed that stress levels were very high amongst those who were not suited for call centre work and that the 'right' people need to be hired. The right people were described as those who are “courteous, polite people – people who are sort of trying to be helpful by nature” (Group 5) and “self-assured, confident people who can handle it and don't take anything personally” (Group 6). Participants agreed that call centre employees need to be easy going, able to cope with stress, and adaptable. One member summed it up as follows:

“We're looking for flexible people: flexible emotionally, flexible intellectually, and flexible with their time. So, someone who's generally flexible and who's able to go with the flow, and, you know, adapt!” (Group 4)

Employee-job fit was also seen to be important for service quality in terms of skills that frontline staff need to possess. The skills nominated included a 'natural sales orientation', the ability to perform several tasks simultaneously, to solve problems, and to develop solutions and act positively, even when feeling very negative and flat.

"You've got to be able to read a screen, look at other parts on the computer, make sure you're talking to the customer, listening to what they're saying.. And some people just can't do that." (Group 3)

Focus group participants agreed that if employees are suited to call centre work, they find it satisfying. Others, who "are highly strung and just can't cope with the job at all" (Group 3) find it enormously draining and difficult. These employees "have a few bad calls and they can't handle the situation let alone any customers" (Group 8). Other points about employee suitability and stress included the need to sit at a desk all day, without being able to move about, and the lack of personal interaction with others, except for customer contact on the telephone.

All focus groups highlighted their need to have managers recognize the taxing nature of the work and to provide avenues to assist them to maintain a calm and positive approach. Expressed in a number of ways, participants made the point that, "if you want to do the job properly, you have to maintain a pretty positive emotional equilibrium. And that's pretty hard to do if you're having a bad day" (Group 4). A typical comment was:

"But I think, you shouldn't have to go up to them and say, well, look, I need time out. They should actually say to you, like, if you've had a difficult call, there should be someone in the centre you can actually go and sit down and talk with. Not, sort of say, oh, go and have 5 minutes." (Group 5)

While some employees become stressed by management controls, others engage in means of resistance. Because breaks from the phone are not readily available in the call centre, several individuals in different groups adopted a defiant approach to taking breaks and finding their own way of recovering from difficult service encounters. For example:

"What I do in my team, if I have a really really bad call.. I just put myself in 'not ready,' which you are not allowed to do, but I do anyway, and I talk.. I've got a few funny people in our team.. you just end up laughing, so that'll get you happy again." (Group 7)

Similarly, employee frustration with time constraints leads to resentment about management not being prepared to give them the preparatory time they need to service customers well.

"We have to use our own time to read emails and daily musters, do our e-learns. We are meant to do it between calls but that's not possible. I am not going to do it in my own time [so I don't do it]!" (Group 1)

Call Centre Structures and Support

A broad theme emerged in relation to call centre structures and support. Employees feel that there is little clarity in relation to management's role, and a lack of communication systems for their contributions. They particularly noted their lack of opportunity for input into decisions that affect how they do their jobs. Thus, they are not able to contribute to discussions about how they could make their roles less stressful and more satisfying.

"There is a big gap between the management and the people on the floor, and I don't feel like I'm supported by them because I don't really understand their role or functions."

"But one of the things that I've noticed that they could actually do to improve morale around the place... there's no consultative committee for the people on the floor. There's nothing."

We're getting filtered down all this information. Well how about we have the opportunity to feed some information back up?" (Group 5)

The most important element in the theme about structures was undoubtedly the role of teams. This theme was discussed positively and emerged as the key factor assisting employees to deal with stressors. Both team leaders and team members were mentioned by every group as a means of technical, emotional and social support. The team provides the operational framework for the call centre but, more importantly, it provides the social support structure that facilitates employees in their work. The team structure is critical because it addresses two issues of particular importance in call centres: employee isolation and immediate access to support. With respect to isolation, employees work in isolation and participants noted that, unless they had previous friendships before joining the centre, they need the team structure to gain a feeling of belonging:

"You could come into this place, you could sit down, do your job in front of the terminal and leave and if you didn't say anything to anyone else, no one would even know you were here. Lack of recognition as a person. You're not really an individual. Oh no." (Group 9)

The second critical aspect of teams was that they are the first (and major) source of employee support and practical help. Telephone interactions mean that problems are concealed, unless they are extreme, and employees do not get the practical and personal support that they would probably receive in face-to-face encounters. Further, if employees are inclined to seek help, they usually do not do so because they are under intense time pressures. Team leaders have an assigned role in supporting their team members but unless the effects of a call are extreme, such as a service consultant bursting into tears, employees do not get team leader or team member attention. One group commented on needing support but not getting it because what happens during calls is not seen or heard by others:

"In an office situation – I worked for customer services before – if an irate customer come in, everybody knew about it, and when that customer left you got the support from everybody else who was in that store." (Group 5)

The team support and structure can provide a buffer against isolation and it can foster positive outcomes for both team members and customers:

"It [team feeling] is really helpful because it gives you that camaraderie, it gives you that good feeling that if you're having a problem that you can go to other team members and they're not going to scorn you or turn their back. That they'll do their best to help you, even if it means it's going to put them out a bit, as far as their statistics.. two heads working on the problem is better than one." (Group 3)

However, support is an intra group mechanism rather than one promoting the competition that will lead to more successful achievement of kpi's. Indeed in this sense the camaraderie and support engendered works despite and against targets not because of them.

Human Resource Management Issues

Human resource management (HRM) issues have already been identified in terms of performance management and employee-job fit. Other HRM factors that caused stress included rosters, a lack of recognition and rewards, and job security. Training was seen as helpful but not readily available.

The management of rosters was also the basis of considerable discussion and also a cause of discontent that, it was claimed, had allowed for unionisation (Rainnie & Drummond 2004). Participants noted the need for two consecutive days off to regain the "emotional equilibrium lost during call centre work" (Group 4). Apparently many had experienced problems with achieving two

days off in a row and this causes a build-up of stress because there is insufficient time for them to 'wind down' and they cannot plan adequately for family activities.

"It is a draining job in a mentally draining sense. I mean physically draining when you go home at the end of the day sometimes. I mean you can do manual work and that's draining but mentally draining is always harder than a physical job. I've done mowing jobs and I've done this. I've had days when I've been exhausted from lugging timber around and that, and cutting wood, doing whatever. But there's been days here you go home you're so drained. You get home and you just can't be bothered the next day."

"I think no matter what job you work in you get to a point sometimes where you just need that time out, you have to have it, both physically and emotionally to be able to hop back up again."

"You're fairly lucky to get two consecutive days off in a roster. Usually it's like I always get say a Tuesday and a Saturday off. A Wednesday and a Sunday. You never get two days off in a row." (Group 3)

Similarly, employees in every focus group mentioned the need for recognition and rewards for their performance as a stimulus for accepting work pressures and on-going performance. Current rewards were seen as trivial and meaningless. For example:

"Incentives and honest rewards.. – real rewards. Instead of saying 'if you can do this, you'll get this' and then turn around and say 'here's a chocolate'". "Something tangible that you can really look forward to." "An hour off the phone would be perfect." (Group 2)

Employees expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries in the outsourced call centre when compared to other call centres and previous work. They suggested that their pay was insufficient as an incentive to produce sustained effort in the call centre environment.

"I was previously a Marketing Supervisor for the [XYZ Company] where I had daily deadlines, monthly and weekly deadlines and whatnot. I just think there are too many regulations in place for this particular company and the expectations are too high for what they are paying you. That's what it really comes down to. At the end of the fortnight it is nice to know that OK, well I've worked hard and I am stressed, but look at my pay packet. At the moment you open your pay packet now it's just, it's not viable for what you do." (Group 6)

Participants considered training to be important, but inadequate, in areas that affect their ability to manage their work and to deliver a high level of service quality to customers. Specific areas included analytical and process skills for problem solving, managing customer interactions, and sustaining a positive attitude under stress. Further, participants agreed that they need more opportunity to practice their skills, especially when dealing with customers, and more opportunity to observe and learn from their colleagues.

"Oh, I did a dealing with a difficult customer session here, it was probably 6 months ago and it was great, that helped so much." "Yeah, they just went through scenarios and how to compose yourself and stuff like that, so yeah, it really, really helped a lot." (Group 7)

Five of the focus groups referred to anxiety about job security when discussing the emphasis on sales, the efficiency demands of their work and having to make a choice between service quality and productivity. Fear of negative consequences appeared to be an important stressor and the basis of employees' decisions about their work.

In summary, six themes emerged that appear to underlie the high levels of stress reported by frontline employees in our preliminary study (Dean & Rainnie, 2004). These themes have been

discussed above in terms of an emphasis on sales, efficiency demands and performance monitoring, service encounters and managing customers, employee-job fit, support structures, and HRM issues. When asked about the reasons for absenteeism, focus group participants emphasized their stress levels and the themes already discussed.

“I’ve worked in kitchens before and kitchens can be pretty stressful because there’s lots of things happening at once. The thing that’s most stressful about working in a call centre for me is because there’s no release for the stress. In a kitchen you can run around and you can sing and you can do things to kind of take your mind off it. But when you’ve had a bad call that call sticks with you for the rest of the day. And the next. And there’s not a lot you can do to get rid of it here.” (Group 5)

Additionally, three further themes emerged: the hygiene of the workplace, the lack of personal identity in their work and perceived inequities which result in low levels of organizational commitment. These final three themes are now considered.

Hygiene in the Workplace

In initial discussions about absenteeism, employees commented on the perceived lack of cleanliness in the call centre. They emphasised sickness arising from inadequate cleaning, especially of computers and desk tops in an environment where they do not retain a dedicated work space. Other comments focussed on the large number of staff (approximately 500) in one centre, working in close proximity to one another. Typical comments included:

“Because we work with 400 other people, and when one person gets sick it gets in the air-conditioning, everybody gets sick. That’s probably got something to do with it as well.”

“The flu went through here like the plague about a month ago.”

“You’re working in close contact with people and you’re sitting at the same computers, you’re touching their germs and it’s in the air-conditioning system – you’re gonna get sick if there’s a sickness going around.”

“Everyone gets sick, I was sick three times with colds and flu.” (Group 3)

Lack of Identity in the Call Centre

During the focus group discussions, the lack of individual identity as the consequence of “not being missed if you don’t turn up” emerged as a contributing factor to absenteeism. Employees commented about the loneliness and incongruity of their work in that they talk all day, but feel isolated and lack a sense of identity. In particular, they noted that telephone encounters can provide a barrier with difficult customers but that they detract from individuality, exacerbated by not having one’s own desk, and not being permitted to use one’s full name or to call customers back. Consequently, employees noted that it is “much easier” to take time off because no-one knows what you are doing or where you are in the centre. For example:

“And I’m in a situation where here there’s 300 people or more whereas my wife’s a school teacher. She’s got a classroom of 28 kids she’s got to look after. So .. it’s better for me to take that time off.”

Perceived Inequities and their Effects

A number of perceived inequities contributed to stress and absenteeism. HRM issues with rosters, pay levels and recognition have already been noted and their contribution to absenteeism is clear. For example, when employees cannot swap a shift or have a very difficult roster, they simply do not attend work. Other HRM factors identified in the study include a relatively small number of annual sick leave days (five), a lack of recognition for achievements and no real incentives. The

combined effect of the factors appears to be a decreased level of commitment amongst employees in that many said they do not feel a sense of involvement with the organisation and would not remain working there if something better presented itself.

Call centre studies have identified relationships between specific organisational factors and employee attitudes. In particular, Deery et al. (2002) found that managing customers and role stress were related to employee burnout. In Singh's (2000) study, role stress was directly related to employee commitment and in de Ruyter et al.'s (2001) study it was indirectly related via job satisfaction. The same studies demonstrated an inverse relationship between employee commitment and turnover intentions in call centres (de Ruyter et al., 2001; Singh, 2000). Hence, the findings in the current project appear to be consistent with previous work and they illustrate some of the reasons underlying the statistical links.

CONCLUSION

The reality of call centre work is that employees work in isolation, they have to manage customer interactions constantly, and their day is driven by targets which are monitored electronically. Each of these realities contributes to employee stress, potentially decreases commitment, increases absenteeism, and decreases the quality of service delivered to customers. Hence, policy and practice that reduces employee stress is likely to result in a better working environment for employees and better quality outcomes for customers. Comments in this section consider sales and efficiency targets, employee monitoring, relief from telephone work, and human resource management.

Sales and efficiency targets, and the associated high levels of monitoring, are a major implication of the study for managers. Employees stated that current KPIs cause them great stress and do not reflect service goals. Hence, less emphasis could be placed on absolute numbers and more on achieving a balance between all desirable outcomes, namely sales targets, productivity measures, and service quality measures. Overall, the study suggests that managers may wish to give priority to reviewing measurement systems and priorities to reduce their perceived preoccupation with KPIs, to reduce employee stress, to account for customer service and satisfaction, and to provide employees with more perceived control over their work. Also, less emphasis on quantitative targets should help issues of defiance and negativity arising from a perceived culture of control, in which the focus is on checking for deficient performance.

The next major implication concerns relief time from telephone encounters. Managers need to acknowledge the intensity of frontline work and provide employees with structures that facilitate formal personal support. Focus group participants repeatedly emphasised their need for the flexibility to take short breaks when they feel such breaks are essential to retain their emotional equilibrium. More access to breaks and opportunities for de-briefing should reduce employees' needs to defy rules by engendering their own relief tactics in the call centre. Other structures that may help reduce stressors are mechanisms for improving customer feedback to assist in keeping employees motivated, and two-way communication systems to enable employees to provide feedback to managers about issues affecting them.

Other practical applications arising from the study relate to the role of human resource management. Appropriate human resource management may assist in reducing employee stress and absenteeism. First, recruitment and selection processes are important in ensuring employee-job fit. Employees consistently noted that possessing certain attributes (such as adaptability, inherent customer-orientation, ability to multi-task) makes their work easier, and researchers have questioned the appropriateness of call centre recruitment practices (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). Second, systems need to be developed to provide employees with recognition and rewards for achievements, especially in dealing with difficult customers. Employees felt that external parity with respect to remuneration would help them to manage the demands of their work because they would feel that they were being paid to do so. Other human resource management concerns

involved rosters and training. Employees said that they need two day breaks at regular intervals to assist them to recover from the potential burnout arising from emotional labour. The study suggests that inadequate rosters result in unnecessarily high levels of employee absenteeism. As well as product knowledge, training needs to include analytical skills such as information processing and problem-solving, and skills for managing customers, and provides the opportunity to develop a positive service culture (Sturdy, 2000). The isolation and time-intensive nature of call centre work means that employees do not have opportunities to observe role models or learn collaboratively. Unlike other stressors such as customer interactions, training is under the control of managers. Taking advantage of its potential benefits for employees appears to be a worthwhile strategy.

However, the evidence from Taylor et al (2003) as we have seen is that management are reluctant to abandon the work practices and management structures that apparently cause so many of their own problems. In the final analysis, it may be that, as Beirne et al (2004: 108) conclude:

‘Our abiding sensewas not of success or failure, control or change in job structures, but of ongoing struggles marked by frustrations, tensions and dilemmas that could take their toll on people at various levels.’

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