

# Telephone call centres expand worldwide

A correspondent  
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Recent statistics confirm an explosive growth in international telephone call centres. Millions of workers are now employed around the world in this new industry, which is based upon the most sophisticated and intrusive methods of exploitation. Workers are forced to take and make calls one after another, sitting in front of computer monitors for the entire length of their shift, as supervisors constantly monitor their performance electronically.

In the United States, estimates of the number of workers now vary from two to seven million, working in 70,000 call centres. In the UK, there are 160-200,000 workers. Companies in Germany employ 65,000 and in Australia the numbers have reached 60,000. The current expansion rate is 20-30 percent internationally, adding hundreds of thousands of workers each year.

Call centres emerged about 25 years ago, then forming an insignificant source of employment. However, since the early 1990s, and even more so in the last three years, call centres have expanded dramatically to become a multi-billion dollar industry. However, they are not so much an industry in their own right. Rather, they have been developed within other industries to lower costs. Areas such as telecommunications, banking, insurance, government departments, tourism and retailing continue to undergo major restructuring to shift transactions away from the office counter towards semi- and fully-automated telephone and computerised environments.

The financial savings to businesses are clear. One study of US banks found that it costs between \$2.50 and \$3 to process a transaction within a branch. Alternatively, transactions within a call centre cost between \$1.75 and \$2 and Internet transactions as little as 25c. The finance industry has become one of the most pronounced in shifting from public offices to call centres. In the US, the top 20 banks operate an average of 23 call centres each.

Transnational corporations have taken advantage of new communication technologies and the lowering costs of telephone calls to make their call centres not just centralised places for processing transactions servicing one country, but several. The UK has become the call

centre home of Europe. Half of all European call centres are located there, taking advantage of lower wages. In Scotland, the number of telephonists is predicted to more than double in the next 18 months from 16,000 to 37,000. Many operators take calls from all parts of Europe. In some cases the job requires knowledge of a second language.

Globally many call centres operate in regional and other areas ravaged by high unemployment where they can readily exploit an army of jobless workers. In Australia, Centrelink and Employment National, the government's semi-privatised welfare and job placement agencies, have shut down numerous offices, while opening up call centres. Centrelink now has 17 centres nationally, 14 of which are in country towns. People seeking assistance and advice often get no further than a remote telephonist.

Governments, both national and regional, are competing with one another to attract these centres, offering a range of tax concessions, industry grants and other benefits.

Outsourcing is heavily used in this industry. Professional call centre organisations often have contracts with several companies at the same time and have workers in the same room taking calls from people with inquiries about different businesses. Sitel, a US telecommunications company, operates 40 percent of Britain's call centres.

Educational institutions have recognised the massive size of this market. In Australia, Macquarie University is offering a Diploma in Call Centre Management, sponsored by Optus Communications. Those seeking work as operators can attend a technical college in Queensland to study 'call centre skills'. However, there is nothing in these jobs that requires a high-level of skill. It takes an average of only 3-4 weeks to train someone. Many operators receive far less training, often being employed as temporaries and casuals according to fluctuations in demand and the timing of various sales campaigns.

The jobs themselves are highly repetitive and monotonous. Dealing within a limited range of inquiries

and tasks, workers will take hundreds and sometimes thousands of calls every week. Just as in factories where workers can perform the same task day-in-day-out, so too do telephone operators. Unlike their counterparts in the factories however, workers in call centres are subject to an unprecedented level of surveillance by supervisors. With the aid of computers, call centres have fine-tuned the art of exploiting human labour. Nowhere else are employees' performance so highly regulated and strictly monitored.

Managers not only listen in on calls without the operator knowing, but also generate daily detailed reports of their performance, measuring how many calls they take, the average time on a call and how long they have been available to take them. Despite objective limitations on how many calls can be handled in one day, constant pressure is mounted on employees to lift productivity. Often they have quotas of hundreds of calls per shift.

Anyone working in a call centre for the first time is struck by the difference in the working atmosphere. Call centre workers must turn up exactly on time, every time. The first 'beep' that signals a call coming through prompts the worker to respond, yet again, with 'Thank you for calling ....., how can I help you?' At that point they must be constantly attentive and conscious of what the customer is saying. At the same time they must be recording the call through notes on a computer and simultaneously resolving the inquiry. This same process repeats itself every 5-10 minutes, every hour, every day.

When it comes to taking breaks, these are also monitored, from the time each operator logs off to the time they log back in again. Rules require them to be logged in and taking calls for a specified number of hours in a day. This prevents too many toilet and coffee breaks. And if they want to have a discussion with their co-workers, they have to watch out because the supervisors are quick to send instant messages via computer to anyone 'caught' being logged out or unavailable to take calls for more than a few minutes.

The continuous stress produced by never-ending demands by management, monotonous work, and having to deal regularly with angry and abusive customers, have given call centres one of the highest staff turnover rates of any industry--the average operator lasts about two years. The typical call centre worker is under 30 years of age. Faced with no prospects of obtaining a decent job in the profession or trade of their choice, many youth, including university graduates, are filling up these places. With high unemployment, employers and recruitment agencies are

using the most rigorous and humiliating selection techniques. Multiple interviews, role-plays, questionnaires and psychology tests are the stock-in-trade of every company.

The average pay for a call-centre worker internationally is around \$US20,000 a year, but most earn much less. A high-proportion of them are casual and part-time. Working hours are usually on a shift basis, staggered from early morning through to late at night, with 24-hour call centres becoming standard.

Contained within the phenomena of call centres is an enormous contradiction. The automation of transactions for a whole range of goods and services represents a potentially progressive development. It is obviously much easier and more efficient to pick up a phone and have a computer or operator tell you your bank balance, organise financial transfers, quote prices on products or conduct worldwide purchases over the telephone or Internet, than having to travel to stores and wait in queues.

The new communications technology could be utilised to eliminate the drudgery of mundane work. It could free up not only the time of the working population as a whole, but of the workers in these workplaces. If the wealth generated by the call centres were used to provide decent wages and conditions, if strict limits were placed on the lengths of shifts, if young workers in particular were protected from long and irregular hours, and if measures such as medical checks were taken to safeguard the health of operators, millions could benefit.

But instead these technological advances take place inside an industry organised around tremendous job destruction and exploitation of its workforce--all for the purpose of corporate profit. Both the operators and the consumers suffer, as over-stretched and harassed operators are obliged to cut short their calls, while the customers wait interminably for their inquiries to be handled. The gulf between the potential of this technology and the misery it is used to create, is a compelling case for a fundamental reorganisation of economic life.

See Also:

*Working conditions inside telephone call centres*  
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[18 December 1998]



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