

Working conditions inside telephone call centres

"They will monitor anything we do on that phone"

A correspondent
18 December 1998

The following interview is with two workers employed in the technical support call centre of an Australian internet service provider. Call centres are one of the fastest growing industries worldwide, employing millions of workers, mostly young. Andrew McCallum and Jim Rogers (both pseudonyms) describe their working conditions, discuss why they entered the industry, and relate the impact of constant management surveillance.

WSWS: What is it like to work in a call centre?

JR: I think it's intimidating. Customers call in with the same sort of thing, like 'I can't connect' and so on. Basically all we do is parrot out solutions, one call after the next. It's a monotonous job. It's pretty boring and uninspiring.

AM: I think to a degree that's correct in that we're given a formula, we're given a standard. In this way call centres can become very repetitive. But I also think there is room for creativity and there's room for a bit of imagination. An individual in a call centre can really do something a bit different for anyone who's got a particular problem. Call centres can become very robotic, though, and it's up to each individual person to break past what's been set for them to do. Other than that though, 89 percent of it is all the same stuff.

WSWS: How many calls would you take each shift?

AM: It's difficult to say. Probably around 40 calls. Even on night shift. That's not usual however.

JR: We can do that though, when things aren't working properly.

WSWS: What happens when things aren't working properly? How does it affect you?

JR: It affects the queue times of people waiting, which increases the amount of irate callers, which increases the stress we feel working that shift. It decreases any enthusiasm that we actually have.

AM: When that kind of thing happens [a system malfunction], the queue goes to Pluto. We just have to work like hell to get the queue down and to explain to the customers quickly that, 'Yes, there's a problem at our end and yes, we're working on it, etc.' In essence a lot of the time we end up lying to the customers by saying that 'Yes, there's a problem and it will be fixed within 5-10 minutes.' Then, 'See you later. Bye bye.' We have to get rid of them so we can get onto the next customer.

WSWS: To try to get the queue down?

AM: Yes. Basically that's our main goal. Because we've got statistics behind us saying that we've got this many people in the queue. We've got to make every effort to get the queue down. It detracts from any real sort of customer service, so to speak. We're more concerned about our stats in a situation like that.

JR: It is very much a numbers game, and we have the board up on the wall flashing at us, telling us how many calls are waiting and how long they've been waiting.

WSWS: What kind of statistics does the management use?

AM: Number of calls taken. The average time on a call. The average time available on a shift. The amount of time we spend on an outbound call. The time logged in. They will monitor just about anything we do on that phone and they will invent a way to have some kind of statistical analysis of that.

WSWS: What breaks do you get between calls?

AM: None. We get to go on 'Not Ready' just to finish up call notes. That really isn't a break because they're monitoring that too. In some cases, especially if it's an irate call or a particularly complicated issue where we've got to concentrate, we don't have time to take detailed notes during the call. We just can't concentrate on that and think. I can't. It's too difficult for me. So that means I would have to go on 'Not Ready,' which would prevent any incoming call until I finish the call notes. So theoretically we're not on any break, we're just changing our task between one call and the next.

WSWS: Do managers listen in on calls?

AM: Yes. They listen in at random.

JR: Its called 'Quality Assurance'.

WSWS: Do you know they're listening in?

AM: We can't tell that they're doing it. I've had a couple of calls that have been monitored and the team leader has come up to me at the end of the call and said, 'I was just monitoring you'. There was no way I could have known that he was monitoring the call. And at the end of that I felt quite nervous about the fact that they can actually do that, and not only from the call centre. I've been told of instances where calls can be listened to from a remote department. They could be listening from another floor, for all we know. The technology certainly exists for them to do that. I haven't heard officially that is what they do, but there is always the possibility.

WSWS: Do managers send instant messages to your computer monitor?

AM: I've had several saying, 'You've been on that call for so many minutes--is there a problem with it?' The moment the call hits 20 minutes we can expect an automatic message from the manager. Sometimes I get a message saying, 'Please see me after this call.' That drops in the middle of your call and you immediately think there's a problem. So you have difficulty keeping any sort of composure that you might have, if it's an irate caller or difficult customer. So I dislike it, I really do.

JR: I've gotten a few of the same. What I find is that it is out of concern about the amount of time a call is taking, but I think that we should be trusted to come forward if we are having problems on a call.

WSWS: What's the stress level among workers?

AM: It can rocket. I've seen it get tense, especially on the day shift when there's a lot of people in the room. I've seen a few altercations in the call centre.

JR: I've seen a few office chairs damaged--a few kung-fu style kicks to

the back of the chair. I guess there are quite a few things that contribute to it, but generally speaking an irate caller usually tips it off.

WSWS: Do you get many irate callers?

JR: You might get two or three people a shift who aren't exactly happy, but of those who are really shouting and swearing, maybe one or two a week.

WSWS: What's the staff morale like?

AM: Everyone does a lot to try to make things relatively happy. It's a pretty friendly atmosphere mostly--people get along well together. There's a lot of fun and games. I think that in itself shows the need that people have for relaxation or something because of the stress that the calls give and the way we have to work. Generally speaking morale is usually pretty good. When something does go down and we get a huge amount of calls, people will rise to the task. But then there is also another side to things where you'll find reps just doing things for their own benefit and not giving so much thought to the other employees there.

WSWS: Why do think that is?

JR: I think it comes down to just an individual attitude towards the job.

AM: I can probably shed a bit of light on that. When I am outside on a break I get the chance to put my finger on the pulse of the way a lot of the customer support guys are feeling. Most of them don't like the Gestapo-style policing that they experience in that call centre and a lot of it comes out in what they say outside. I feel that the general sentiment of the call centre is one of, 'we've got a job to do and we know what to do but we can do without the heavy-handed pressure that we feel to constantly revise out stats upwards and get some kind of statistical analysis at the end of the week.' That seems to be the most common angst.

JR: The workers stats are compared within the teams. So within each team competitiveness is encouraged. Now it is always declared as being 'friendly competitiveness' but when we've got the results posted up each week, with which technician had the best result and which tech had the worst, I don't see that as friendly competitiveness.

AM: What they say and what we perceive are two completely different things. I mean, we've got a personal statistic up there for all to see, so whether it's good or bad, it's almost as if it is a race. Why else would they put it up there? They say it's for our benefit, but against everybody else? It's a drive really for, I guess, higher production based on the fear of conformity.

JR: We get extremely little, if at all, feedback on how good our customer service was--whether we are serving the customers well or not. When I started the position, I saw my job to be to help customers--that's how I've always approached it. I've never had any feedback as to the information and service I provide. It's always, 'have I taken enough calls?', 'have I kept my average call time down,' that sort of thing.

AM: What Jim just said is spot-on. I think we're almost driven away from what the real goal of a call centre is all about.

WSWS: How would you organise a call centre?

JR: My approach would be, quite simply, how people are approaching their calls. At the moment it is a very statistical-oriented; numbers are the key. I think I'd be changing that system. If people really want to see their stats they can do so, but stats would not be posted anywhere. Someone would be monitoring the stats, but only to see if the call centre's number of calls is at the level that is desired.

WSWS: Would you consider joining a union?

AM: If I had the opportunity to join a union I would leap at it. We're not going to get very far with just one person. At the moment, without a union, there doesn't seem to be any strength or support to draw upon.

JR: Personally I don't think unions are the way to go. I think that for one thing the turnover in a call centre is very high. If a representative has been on the queue for a year they're treated as a hero.

WSWS: Why is that?

JR: They've been there for a year! That's a rare feat! No one's actually

survived there for that long.

WSWS: So you wouldn't consider a career in a call centre?

AM: Oh, god no!

JR: I've known some people that have done so. It is possible, but the general sentiment in the call centre has got to improve before that can happen. I think it is up to management to pull up their socks and do something themselves. If they don't do that they're going to continue to have a high turnover, with unhappy staff and unhappy customers. So I think it is up to management to do that.

WSWS: Why did you apply for the job originally?

AM: I came here basically because there was no work in my chosen field, which is science. I took this job on basically as an interim to get work in my real field, which is what I want to do. It never was a career move.

WSWS: How long have you been looking for work in science?

AM: For the better part of a year, and it's still ongoing.

JR: It is something that will give me certain experience in the area I want to work in, which is the internet.

WSWS: In some companies, the call centre you dial can be located in another country. Do you think that unions would be limited in doing anything because they're nationally-based?

AM: Yeah, you're right. Whilst I say, perhaps, that a union would be a good idea, looking at it in those terms of course it would be unworkable. Then you're faced with the question: how would you affect such change?

Just one person can't say much. Just one group of people, in light of what you just said, probably wouldn't be able to say much either. They can always employ more people who are out of work in a flash, and sack the lot of you. It's going take lots of people drawing together, but it has to be on such a grand scale for it to effect any change.

JR: It's going to come down to the agenda that the corporation has. We can have a united front and protest against it, but if the corporations think a certain way then that's the way it's going to be.

AM: What people have got to understand is that the present system, society at this moment, is against the individual. It's set up in such a way that we have companies in control of the lives of so many thousand workers. So I guess it's a case of a complete turn-around in that situation. Now I don't know if that can ever happen, but it seems to be one of the only ways that it could ever effectively change.

WSWS: What did you think of the *World Socialist Web Site* article on call centres?

AM: It struck a chord. It really did. I had a good think about it and the real thing that got to me was management's ability to control and monitor our every move. I mean, you're right, we are monitored from the minute we log in to our phones to the minute we log out. Everything we say or do can be watched and listened to and they can find some weak point to pick us up on.

What it made me think about was that it's a look into everyday life--it doesn't just happen in a call centre, it happens *en masse* everywhere. It really made me stop and think because, at first, we're more or less ignorant about that until it's actually pointed out. It actually got me a little bit worried. It's so easy to fall into that situation without even realising it. A lot of people working in the call centre don't really understand the forces that work upon them. It also applies to anybody in the population today.

See Also:

Telephone call centres expand worldwide
[9 December 1998]



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