# Work Dysfunctions and their consequences as experienced by call centre agents

An Exploratory Study

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: ………………………   **Date: ………………………..**

ABSTRACT

Overview of previous work: Previous research on call centres has identified the inherent stressful nature of the call centre agent job. In fact researchers have gone so far as to name call centres 'sweatshops of the new millennium', (Crome, 1998; Fernie, 1998). Comparative studies between human service work and burnout have often featured in current literature as have studies concerning the correlations between call centre work and job satisfaction, the effects of shift work, and stress in the call centre environment.

Purpose: However, the purpose of this study, avoiding a comparative approach, is to focus on one organisation in particular, in order to assess the varied work dysfunctions present in its call centre. The study is particularly important in the light of the proposed development of the call centre industry in South Africa at this time. A more comprehensive understanding therefore, of the pitfalls of call centre work, would be beneficial to those currently running call centres as well as those planning their implementation. At the outset, stress was considered a pivotal dysfunction within the call centre, from which other maladies often ensued such as substance abuse, depression and eating pattern disruptions. Work challenges too, manifest in the field data, namely insufficient training and managerial / system problems. The research therefore includes the exploration of these factors serving to highlight both the more socio-cultural and emotional issues, as well as on-the-job grievances encountered by call centre agents.

Design / methodology / approach: Owing to the exploratory nature of the study, a focus group methodology was used, allowing for in-depth qualitative research which catered for a far reaching and comprehensive understanding of current work issues. As the study concerns only call centre agents, the roles of supervisors and managers were not included. The sample comprised four different groups, of randomly selected call centre agents, with a total of 27 participants. Demographics revealed male and female participants of differing marital status, educational qualifications, but with tenure at a call centre between 2 and 6 years, and aged between 20 and 40 years.

Findings: Support was found for the following dysfunctions in the process, with stress as primary harbinger of other dysfunctions, many exacerbated by the stressful nature of shift work, and the resultant work-life imbalance. Stresses encountered due to ineffective systems,

training processes, and call centre management were also significant. On a positive note, of interest was the unanimous agreement that within this particular field study, workspace ergonomic considerations were thought not to add to call centre dysfunction.

Research limitations / implications: Even though four groups from two different call centres were observed, they were part of the same organisation, in Cape Town in the Western Cape. In this way commonalities in terms of reactions to systems, policies etc were thought likely to be similar, however owing to the shift work nature of call centres through out South Africa, it is believed that significant correlations could be determined, in any organisation. A comparative study across various differing organisations and locations therefore could be investigated.

Originality / value: Owing to the very stressful nature of call centre work, the focus groups revealed themselves to be cathartic in nature as participants thoroughly embraced the process, and personal experiences were often disclosed by participants which facilitated realistic discussions. In this way, meaningful qualitative data was collected, and can be used to ameliorate current call centre conditions, and to allow better planning for future implementation. Furthermore, the research has exposed a number of further study options, as e.g. owing to their significance, each dysfunction could be investigated further and covered individually in separate research papers, as could the role in management, and training within the call centre milieu.

OPSOMMING

Oorsig van vorige navorsing: Navorsing wat binne oproepsentrums gedoen is het die stresvolle aard van die oproepsentrumomgewing geïdentifiseer en daar is al na oproepsentrums verwys as nuwe millennium werksplase (Crome, 1998; Fernie, 1998). Studies wat die verwantskap tussen kliëntedienswerk en uitbranding, oproepsentrum werk en werksbevrediging, en die effek van skofwerk en stres binne die oproepsentrum milieu bestudeer verskyn gereeld in die literatuur.

Doel: Hierdie studie was nie vergelykend van aard nie, maar het eerder gefokus op een organisasie in besonder. Die doel van die studie was om verskeie abnormale werksfunksies teenwoordig binne die organisasie se oproepsentrums, te assesseer. Die studie is veral belangrik in die lig van die vinnig groeiendde oproepsentrumbedryf in SA. 'n Ondersoek na die slaggate van oproepsentrum werk sal dus voordelig wees vir diegene wat tans oproepsentrums bestuur, sowel as díe wat verantwoordelik is vir die ontwikkeling en implementering van oproepsentrums.

Stres is vanuit die staanspoor oorweeg as 'n vername wanfunksie binne die oproepsentrum. Daar word geglo dat ander kwale gereeld voortspruit uit stres, soos bv. dwelm misbruik, depressie en eetversteurings. Werksuitdagings soos onvoldoende opleiding, bestuurs- en sisteem probleme, is ook in die veld data geopenbaar. Die navorsing sluit dus die ondersoek van hierdie faktore in om die meer sosio-kulturele en emosionele aspekte te beklemtoon. Werksgriewe, soos ervaar deur oproepsentrum agente, word ook beklemtoon deur navorsing van hierdie faktore.

Ontwerp/Metodologie/Benadering: 'n Fokusgroep metodologie is gevolg en 'n in-diepte kwalitatiewe ondersoek is geloods om die huidige werksituasies binne oproepsentrums te bestudeer en om hierdie omgewing beter te probeer verstaan. Aangesien die studie slegs oproepsentrum agente betrek, is die rol van toesighouers en bestuurders uitgesluit. Die steekproef het uit vier ewekansig verkiesde groepe oproepsentrum agente bestaan, met 'n total van 27 deelnemers. Demografiese inligting het manlike en vroulike deelnemers met verskeie huweliksstatusse en opvoedkundige kwalifikasies geopenbaar. Deelnemers het ampstermyne van 2 – 6 jaar by die oproepsentrums voltooi en was tussen 20 – 40 jaar oud.

Bevindings: Stres is gevind om die primêre voorloper te wees van die ander wanfunksies. Baie van die wanfunksies is verder vererger a.g.v. die stresvolle geaarheid van skofwerk en die gebrek aan werk-leef balans. Beduidende stres is ook ervaar as gevolg van onvoldoende sisteme, opleidingsprosedures en oproepsentrumbestuur. Van belang, en op 'n meer positiewe noot, was die eenparige ooreenstemming dat binne díe spesifieke studieveld, ergonomiese werkspasie oorwegings nie oorwegend bygedra het tot oproepsentrum wanfunksie nie.

Navorsingsbeperkings/Implikasies: Die vier fokus groepe het gekom van twee verskillende oproepsentrums wat deel is van dieselfde organisasie in Kaapstad. Nieteenstaande die gemeenskaplikhede in terme van reaksies tot sisteme, beleide ens., wat betreklik dieselfde kan wees, word dit geglo dat betekenisvolle korrelasies bepaal kan word gegewe die skofwerk karakter van oproepsentrums regdeur SA. 'n Vergelykende studie regoor verskeie organisasies en plekbepalings kan dus ondersoek word.

Oorspronklihkheid/Waarde: Die fokusgroepe het die geleentheid om hulle persoonlike ervarings te deel met ope arms aangeneem. Dit het bygedra tot realistiese besprekings oor die stresvolle aard van werk binne oproepsentrums. Betekenisvolle kwalitatiewe data is vergader en kan gebruik word om die huidige oproepsentrum omgewing te verbeter en sal 'n positiewe impak hê op toekomstige implementering. Die navorsing het verder verskeie geleenthede vir toekomstige studies ontbloot waarby individuele wanfunksies verder ondersoek kan word. Hulle kan individueel gedek word in navorsingsreferate. Die rol van bestuursopleiding binne die oproepsentrum milieu is nog 'n terrein wat verder ondersoek moet word.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| Abbreviation	Explanation
CC	Call Centre
CCA	Call Centre Agent
ACD	Automatic Call Distribution
BPO	Business Processing Operation
CHD	Coronary Heart Disease
CSS	Customer-related Social Stressors
COR	Conservation-of-Resources Theory
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
OCP	Organisational Customer Perceptions
ISI	ISI Emerging Markets
VANS	Value Added Network Licences
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
IOTF	International Obesity Task Force
CHD	Coronary Heart Disease
MRC	Medical Research Council
CTDCC	Cape Town Drug Counselling Centre
EI	Emotional Intelligence

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As globalisation continues to entrench itself in the strategic core of South African business, many organisations are cornered into service provision, 24/7. The inception of call centres in South Africa has served to meet some of these service-related needs, and more and more companies are turning to such work arrangements in order to keep even with industrial growth and development. Although some companies, through their implementation of call centres might have benefited financially, many organisations, however have implemented call centres as a means of survival, struggle with resultant costs, and battle to strike even, let alone profit from the venture. However, it would appear that inherent in such a vital organisational need, are seemingly endless measures of discord relating to human resource functioning, and resulting in stress and work dysfunction.

Hence this complex and interesting phenomenon piques further enquiry, and it is the aim of this thesis to explore these trends further. Therefore this chapter includes a discussion of the inception and development of call centres, based on economic and global drivers. In addition, owing to the fact that the field study has taken place in a particular sector of the South African economy, specific South African considerations and development too have been noted. Furthermore the design of call centres is reflected in the following discussion, especially with regard to the re-introduction of the seemingly anachronous concept of Taylorism. The effects and consequences of this style of management on the call centre environment as a whole are also included in this initial chapter, thus providing a comprehensive impression of the milieu in which call centres operate.

1.2 THE CALL CENTRE MILIEU

South Africa, and the Western Cape in particular have been party to the expansion of the call centre industry to both local and international organisations. This is due to existing favourable conditions, namely, low price of labour, a rich cultural diversity allowing for increased communication in various languages, relatively stable working conditions and technological efficiency, and of course a burgeoning unemployment rate (26.5 %) (Labour Force Survey, 2005) which begs job creation. Thus being, such call centres meet an

economical and financial need. In the process, however, it could appear that social, cultural and health aspects are seemingly ignored, so much so that they have been termed by some researchers as the 'Sweatshops of the New Millennium', (Taylor & Bain, 1999).

But are they the sweatshops that they are purported to be? When considering the widely reported South American sweatshops, despite humanitarian alarm and outcry, many consider them to be the 'best thing that's happened to the third world in decades' (Williams, 2004), in that despite the sometimes appalling conditions, people are still able to earn a livelihood, support families and avoid resorting to begging or prostitution. In a sense then although the situation is certainly in many cases far from ideal, such factories never-the-less are able 'to provide the greatest good for the greatest number' and such action 'produces the greatest benefits at the lowest net cost for society as a whole' (Williams, 2004). This argument is known as the Utilitarian Approach, (Williams, 2004) and can and is paralleled with call centres in that, despite the often onerous task of the call centre agent and increasing levels of stress, resulting in all manner of work dysfunctions, the call centre industry has provided, and continues to provide sustained employment for thousands of people, in South Africa particularly, where over a quarter of the work force is unemployed. Furthermore, such job creation has significant impact, not only in terms of Herzberg's more 'hygienic' needs, but on a psychological level too, advancing mental health as Jahoda, (cited in Furnham, 2000, p. 248) states below:
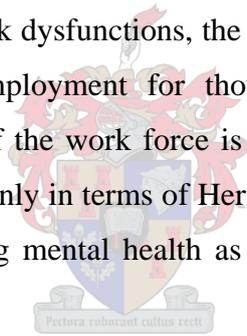
"Work is a source of identity, as well as of creativity and mastery. Work provides many opportunities for social interaction; it structures time and gives a sense of purpose; it keeps people active and keeps them feeling important members of society". In addition it keeps at bay the deprivation that is associated with psychological distress among the unemployed. Freud (1930/1961, cited in Lowman, 1993, p.1) too, has the following to say: "No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community. The possibility it offers of displacing a large amount of libidinal component, where narcissistic, aggressive or even erotic, on to professional work and on to the human relations connected with it lend it a value by no means second to what it enjoys as some thing indispensable to the preservation and justification of existence in society"

Certainly, employed call centre agents can claim (either subconsciously or otherwise), the psychological benefits cited by both Freud and Johada, but in addition to this, most agents are well remunerated, receive incentive bonuses, obtain special awards for good performance, are given cellular phones, and work in functional offices which are ergonomically designed for increased efficiency. (J Roberts, Personal communication 15 May 2006) So where's the rub? What are the factors that earn call centres such notoriety?

Indeed, such an often unfavourable response could hinge on call centres' initial conception, their design and the consequences of their structure and operation.

It has been stated that call centres have come about reactively based on urgent economic drivers (Houlihan, 2000), rather than being systematically planned institutions, developed over time with specialist contributions paving the way for optimum working conditions for both the organisation and the agent. Their design too is relevant to the problem, as in a sense call centres appear to be anachronistic institutions in the modern world, their systems and procedures being more akin to Taylorism rather than self-empowerment and actualisation. Such rigidity, 'systematic soldiering' (Pruitj, 2000) and 'scientific management' (Warr & Wall, 1975) seem to chafe against the modern technological age, where agents expect and desire self-empowerment, fulfilment, and in a sense, immediacy.
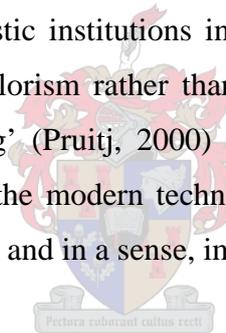
Understandably therefore this operational dichotomy manifests stress and tension, and this coupled with the fluctuating organisational structures at the mercy of environmental and economic drivers, is sufficient to engender multiple work dysfunctions in call centre agents.

While, inception, design and consequences will be explored in this chapter, an explanation of the resultant work dysfunction appears in Chapter Two. At the outset, however, it is important to create a context for the field study and, as such to define call centres.

1.3   DEFINING CALL CENTRES

Zapf et al., (2003) believe that the needs of the customers are the pivotal drivers of any organisation and they state that there is no prospering without them. Hence inventing new ways of service is vital for organisational survival. The call centre is one such invention, which Henn, Kruse and Strawe, (cited in Zapf et al., 2003, p.312) describe as " tools for organising communication with customers … with the help of telecommunications". Gilmore,

(2001, p. 153) defines a call centre as "a physical or virtual operation within an organisation in which a managed group of people spend most of the time doing business by telephone, usually working in a computer-automated environment". Richardson et al., (2000, p. 359) describe them thus: "Call centres are offices established by organisations to deliver services remotely over the phone and thus replace the need for face-to-face interactions with customers. Or more simply put, according to CCMA's National Call Centre Brief (Parbhoo, 2002): call centres deliver a variety of services to customers through the use of the telephones and agents. They may be described as a set of functions or actions that can be carried out a number of ways using multiple delivery channels. Call centres merge information and telecommunications technology, allowing clients to talk to knowledgeable representatives who have speedy access to information. State of the art technology is involved, but call centres rely on people to act as intermediaries between the information in the databases and the servicing of the clients. The three components of a call centre are therefore people, technology and work processes.

It is clear that call centres can provide a series of business advantages such as efficiency, a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, reduced dependence on employee skills and substantial cost savings. (Houlihan, 2000). Zapf et al., (2003) agree that from companies' points of view, the advantages are manifold, especially contributing to more satisfied customers as ideally the call centre can be contacted 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

Houlihan (2000) continues to detail the factors which make this environment unique, namely the information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure which forms the basis of how work is carried out. This takes the form of information databases, transaction terminals, and the automatic call distribution system (ACD). In addition, because of such a technological structure, monitoring and control of the system and the call centre agents is far reaching, and such processes include the creation of textualised records of activity, the use of automatic script prompts and call blueprints. Houlihan (2000, p.234) furthers her discussion by stating that textualising the script allows for organisational interface which is fed through the agent. Hence the agent is largely constructed as a mouth-piece or conduit "rather than as a brain". And even though agent work can be a complex blend of knowing, sensing and rule applying, agents are cast as having restricted skills, the implication being that that they are required not to think beyond a programmed level. Certainly according to Rajan, and Stanworth, (cited in Houlihan, 2000, p. 234), call centres rely on deskilled labour and they

reflect the "creation of a peripheral, disposable workforce." Other critics of call centres have called them the "dark satanic mills" (Armistead et al., 2002, p. 247) and have likened them to 'battery farming' (Crome, 1998; Fernie, 1998) with distinctive elements of Taylorism (Arkin, cited in Armistead et al., 2002). In defence however, Richardson et al., (2000) state paradoxically, that evidence indicates that the environmental and ergonomical conditions provided for the majority of call-centre employees is far in advance of those in many traditional offices.

1.4   THE DRIVING FORCES BEHIND CALL CENTRE INCEPTION

Hyman et al., (2003) talk of the 21st century as the 'information society' or the 'knowledge economy', where economic value is found in the intangibles, namely creative ideology, innovative thought, software, services and relationships. The very notion of the quest for such abstraction yields unrelenting industrial competition and necessitates survival strategies which ensure that the potential for such knowledge acquisition is available 24/7. And hence, in a nutshell, the inception of call centres, which indeed are described as "socio-technical systems in which a range of information and communication technologies are used …in order to maximise efficiency," (Belt et al., cited in Hyman et al., 2003, p. 217).

Previously, economic value was perhaps located in the duration of hours worked and strict adherence to the norms of the day. Indeed, a 19th century factory inspector, commenting on the "petty pilfering of minutes " (Marx, cited in Heiler, 1998, p. 266) advised that "moments are the elements of profit". Certainly, under the Taylorised work regimes, as exemplified by the Goldthorpe et al., studies (Hyman et al., 2003), the ideal worker was expected to "rigidly carry out managerially prescribed task behaviour, within a factory regime based on the principles of punctuality, reliability and obedience", (Hyman et al., 2003, p.218). Modern workplaces are certainly flexible in terms of the hours, and work practices, but one could argue that while the Taylorist ideology seemed demanding on a physical level, and work was measured by concrete output, could the modern day worker be trading workplace flexibility for his soul? Indeed, Simpson (1998) stresses that perceived insecurity, coupled with increasing workloads among professional, technical and managerial occupations, has exacerbated tendencies for people to demonstrate their organisational 'commitment' by their continual presence at the workplace. Flecker and Hofbauer (cited in Hyman et al., 2003) believe that this 'commitment' is more about a holistic embracing of work, than mere longer

5

hours on the job. In their 'new model worker' design, (Flecker & Hofbauer, cited in Hyman et al., 2003, p.216), workers are supposed to "surrender their subjectivity and harness it to the goals of organisation" under the banner of the new psychological contract of 'empowerment'. In addition, workers are often expected to exercise thoughts, feelings and initiative in attaining organisational goals, performing above and beyond contractual terms of employment if necessary. (Cunningham et al., 1996). Could logic then rule that in an attempt to embrace this 'new model worker', customers' desire for 'knowledge' and 'information' creates the demand for continuous service delivery, and hence encourages the inception of an instrument which would meet this ever challenging need, namely the call centre? Perhaps so, and certainly McGreevy (2003) believes that organisations are steered by such drivers of change. He referred to these catalysts of change as PEST, viz., political, economic, social and technological drivers. His thoughts are demonstrated in the diagram below, which reveals that even though the drivers are fairly constant, the issue for every organisation is how best to adapt to them in order to compete for support in the future.
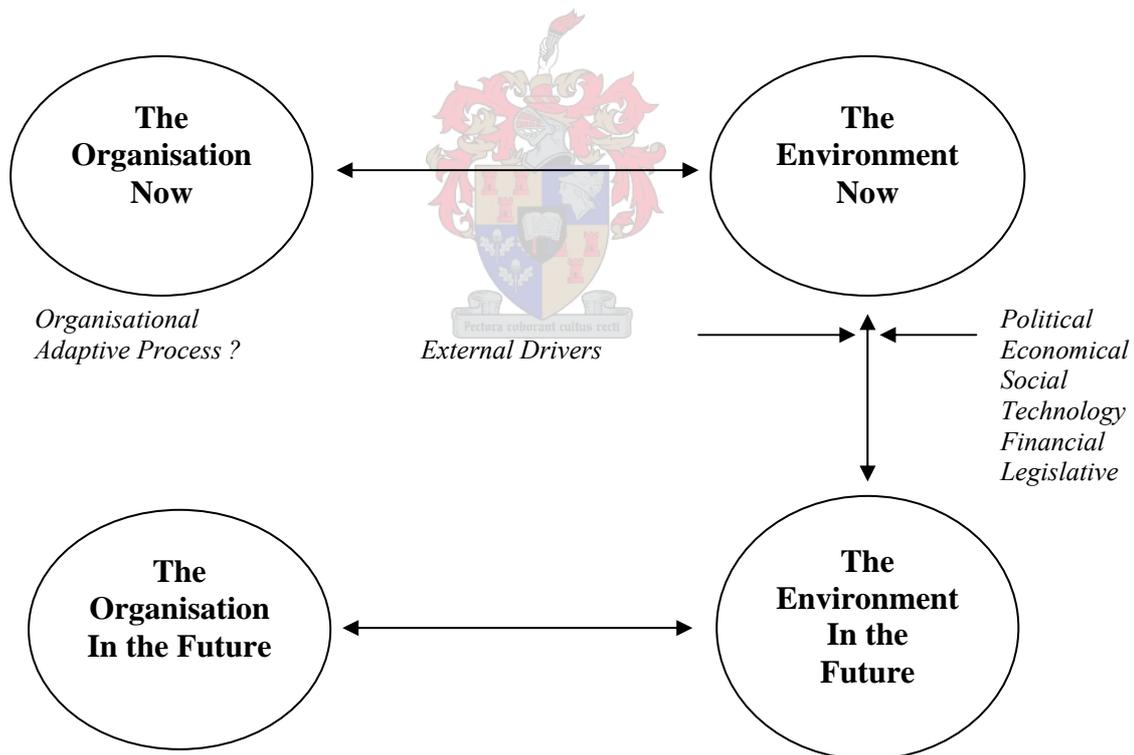
Model of the Adaptive Process - *Malcolm McGreevy (The Changing Nature of Work, 2003)*

Rabey (cited in McGreevy, 2003) builds on his work and has suggested that the following environmental drivers bear impact on the organisation and labour practices therein:

❖ Globalisation of manufacturing and marketing;

- ❖ Emerging new technology;
- ❖ Current and stock market fluctuations;
- ❖ Changing product life cycles;
- ❖ Significant financial failures;
- ❖ Mergers and acquisitions or alliances-organisations in transition;
- ❖ Interactions of political and economic issues and power realignments;
- ❖ Ethnic and environmental issues.

Based on the above, one could deduce that from a cellular industry perspective, drivers such as emerging new technology especially regarding telephony and data transmission, and the ever existent product development have predominantly been the catalysts for a redefinition and redirection of organisations and have necessitated the demand for alternative methods of work. Cartwright (2003, pp.121-122) corroborates this and states that "contemporary organizations face increasing pressures to achieve higher and higher levels of performance in a fast paced and competitive global market". She adds that "the traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical models of work organizations have been heavily criticised as being too inflexible to deliver goods and services at the high level of speed and quality required by today's market". Therefore, successful organisations are increasingly reconsidering adopting the potential offered by modern technology, in order to change the work environment. Parker and Wall, (cited in Grebner, et al., 2003) believe that call centres represent a new form of work organisation, which have been designed 'from scratch', simply as the need arose, and have developed around the existing technical and organisational solutions. Houlihan (2000) concludes that call centre development is situated at the intersection of rapidly expanding information and communication technologies, reengineering business processes, a changing (or changed) profile of customer needs and expectations and a prevailing culture of occupational restructuring. It could be understood then that this is the organisational milieu from which call centres are driven to emerge. The particular factors, however, unique to South African call centre emergence are discussed below:

1.5   SOUTH AFRICAN CALL CENTRE INCEPTION

Armistead (1998) reported that by the late 1990's about 200,000 people were working in approximately 7,000 centres in the UK and, according to estimates made in 1998, half-a-million people (2.2 per cent of the workforce of the UK) were expected to be working in

telephone call centres by the early years of the twenty-first century. Crome (1998) too estimated that one in 50 Britons will be employed in the call centre industry, during the first few years of this century. In addition 3 % of the working population in the United States of America are currently located in this form of employment and it has been estimated that up to1.3 % of the European workforce will be employed in call centres by the year 2002 (Datamonitor, 1998). In Australia employment is said to be expanding at a rate of 20 % per annum (Barker, cited in Deary (2002). As discussed previously, and substantiated by (Fenke, cited in Deary et al., 2002), this is due to the general shift in economic activity from a more product driven basis to service provision. It is further stated that service work now accounts for more than 70 % of employment in most advanced economies.

South Africa, too, in her need to follow suite and compete in the international market has seen a major growth in call centre creation. Financial Services accounted for one third of South African Call centre sites at the end of 1997, (Cornelius, 2000). Carrol (2002) states that the local call centre industry is growing at an estimated rate of 20 % per year, with some call centres growing at a rate of more than 50 %, particularly in the financial and telecommunications sectors. (Business Day, Financial Times, May 2001). Certainly by the close of 2000, approximately 400 call centres were operational in South Africa. (Wray, 2003). In total, however the survey for the Calling Cape / Deloitte Indicator Report for 2004 has revealed 105 contact centres or BPO (Business Processing Operations) operated by 83 companies, accounting for 9 784 agent seats, 8 245 agents and a total staff complement of 11 276 employees. The average operation has 93 seats, employs 79 agents and 107 staff in total. (It is believed that these figures are accurate within about 5 %). Furthermore, based on the most recent survey data, it is believed that around 6 500 agents were employed at the time of the last survey in 2003, and that this number has since risen to 8 245 agents. The per annum growth in agents is thus approximately 25 % compared to 10 % per annum for many of the past 15 years. (Deloitte KIR, 2004). In an article cited in a new data monitor report, "South Africa in Relation to Global Offshore Destinations", predictions are made that offshore call centre agent positions in the area will total 6 200 in three years, a 34 % year-on-year increase from 2003 levels, (Beasty, 2005).

1.5.1   Designs on South Africa as Call Centre Destination

In 2004, one of the UK's most progressive insurance companies, the Budget Group, announced that they were to spend R100 million in setting up a call centre in Cape Town. (British Firm calls on Cape Town, 2004)   The same article states that currently over 70 companies run 160 call centres in Cape Town, and as a result employ 7000 people directly, but with thousands more jobs created due to the support industries. It is believed that South Africa is attractive to international markets due to "world class service levels of call centre staff, time-zone compatibility with Europe, high rates of fluency in English, a (still) favourable exchange rate and an advanced telecommunications industry," (Omar, 2001, p.46). Furthermore, in an interview conducted in February 2001, Zunga, Managing Director of Global Telesales, (cited in Omar, 2001, p.52) said that South Africa and Cape Town were assessed favourably in relation to several criteria, namely "vital capacities, the availability of multi-lingual speaking sales representatives, suitable telecommunication infrastructure and experienced system integrators who could provide the hardware and software solutions needed for call centre operation". According to Niels Kjellerup, editor and publisher of The Call Centre Managers Forum, (2001) a key advantage, in his view, is the large unemployed work force. Indeed, the South African government originally boosted the industry at the beginning of 2003, at least in principle, when President Mbeki singled out outsourced call centres and business process outsourcing as a main driver to reduce the country's massive unemployment, which is currently at approximately 26 %, (Labour Force Survey, July 2005). Kjellerup cited further advantages in the agents' capacity to speak some European languages, such as German and possibly Dutch, a strong telecommunications backbone, and the existence of new technologies (ranging from internet services to software applications such as customer relationship management software). It is believed that offshore outsourcing is a key driver of growth, with 55 % of outsourcers' revenue coming from international clients. Furthermore such out-sourcing is expecting growth of 141 % in the next two years. (Deloitte KIR, 2004).

In addition, the BPO and contact centre industry in the Western Cape and Cape Town in particular, is well-established, with a broad base of management and service provider expertise, and the industry is already one of the city's top ten employers, with over 11 000 employees.   The number of agents employed in the industry grew by an estimated 25 %

during 2003; and growth expectations for the next two years average 40 %. (Deloitte KIR, 2004).

South Africa became an even more attractive location to set up these businesses when a second undersea fibre-optic telephone link with Europe, along the east coast of Africa, was established last year. Another fibre-optic link runs along Africa's west coast. (British firm calls on Cape Town, 2004).

Furthering the praise for South Africa as an ideal call centre business partner the article, (SA rivals India for Offshore, 2004), revealed that South Africa's outsourcing market could grow by 57 % to 5.2bn dollars by 2007 according to research firm Gartner, and this obviously highlights the country's potential as an offshore services location serving both the US and European corporate clients.

This assumption is based on the main drivers which encourage growth, those being, the country's current stable political and economic environment, European time zones, and a large English-speaking population. More companies outsourced to South Africa in August 2003 than during the whole of 2002, with top names such as Barclays Bank and Virgin leading the way. (SA Rivals India for Offshore, 2004).
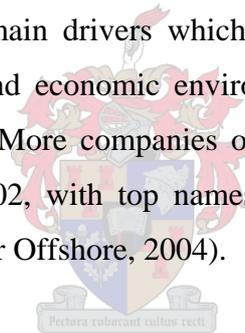
Researchers believe that India's race for the competitive edge has run neck and neck with the South African market and is also a desired call centre location. (SA Rivals India for Offshore, 2004). However, it would seem that local call centres pip the post, in terms of lesser attrition figures. Furthermore the current churn being faced by Indian BPO outsourcers, is anything between 30 % and 70 %. In contrast attrition rates in South Africa are understood to be considerably lower at around 6 %, according to Mark Spendlove, Marketing Director of Dialogue Group, a call centre outsourcing providers with offices in Cape Town, and London. Spendlove continues to explain that the reason for these lower levels of attrition are varied, but include the time zone, which enables staff to work only partial night shifts rather than all night, and the fact that most Indian call centre workers are well educated graduates with higher career expectations, as apposed to their lesser skilled South African counterparts. However, South African call centre workers are still more expensive per hour than the Indian call centre agents. E.g. a local call centre agent may cost around 8.50 pounds an hour,

compared to the 4.00 pounds an hour for an Indian employee, but the cheaper costs per employee in India are eroded by the costs of retraining staff through the large attrition.

But, South Africa needs to keep an eye on developments within Africa, as competition could well be seen from the North, in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Clearly sub-Saharan African markets, continue to gain momentum, and Botswana and Kenya, are also players in developing offshore markets, (Beasty, 2005).

Such is the potential that South Africa has to offer in terms of Call Centre location that it is about to embark on its biggest training and job creation push yet, based on findings in the McKinsey report. (Sunday Independent, 2005). It is predicted that South Africa can create 150 000 jobs in the next three years, if it does what is necessary to lure foreign outsourcers, and it aims at training 40 0000 agents per year.

1.5.2   *Local Demand and Development*

President Thabo Mbeki in his State of the Nation address in February 2003, stated that the Call Centre Industry was to receive specific Government attention. (Kjellerup, 2001). This translated into the Department of Trade and Industry's main objective of identifying and eliminating the obstacles to growth (cited in Deloitte, KIR, 2004). On a more provincial level, Premier of the Western Cape, Ebrahim Rasool, (Deloitte, KIR, 2004) prioritised the contact centre industry as one of five key growth sectors which will assist in employment creation in the province. Furthermore, he set a target of 5,000 new jobs in this sector by 2008. (Deloitte, KIR, 2004). (See table below).

BPO and Contact Centre Operations

BPO and contact operations in Cape Town	105
Number of Companies	83
Average number of seats per Company	97
Average number of agents Employed per seat	0.8
Outsourcers as a proportion of the total	30 %
Proportion of outsourcer revenue derived from inter-National clients	55 %
Share of financial services and Insurance operations in the sector	50 %

Growth Prospects

Estimated employment growth in the past two years	25 %
Expected employment growth in the next two years	40 %
Expected employment growth in the next 12 months among outsourcers	141 %
Estimated number of agents that could be added per year without straining available resources	10, 000
Ranking of skills availability among growth enablers	2
Ranking of industry sophistication among growth enablers	3

Economy

South Africa's GDP	$160bn
Services Contribution to GDP	60 %
Estimated GDP growth in 2004	3 %
Total Population	43 million
Western Cape Population	4.3 million
Cape Town Population	2.1.million

Source: Deloitte Key Indicator Report, 2004

Labour Market Indicators, March 2004 to March 2005 (official definition of unemployed)*
(*Reference: Statistics, South Africa, Labour Force Survey, March 2005, Statistical Release PO210*)

	Labour Market Category	March 2004	September 2004	March 2005
		Thousand	*Thousand*	*Thousand*
a)	Employed	11 392	11 643	11 907
b)	Unemployed (official definition.)*	4 415	4 135	4 283
c)	Total Economically active = a + b	15 807	15 778	16 190
d)	Not economically active	13 324	13 527	13 334
e)	Total aged 15 – 65 years = c + d	29 131	29 305	29 524
		%	*%*	*%*
f)	**Unemployment rate**	**27.9**	**26.2**	**26.5**

*(This is referred to as the official definition of unemployment)

i.*e. The Unemployed are those people within the economically active population who*
  a) did not work during the seven days prior to the interview;
  b) want to work and are available to start work within two weeks of the interview;
  c) have taken active steps to look for work or to start some form of self-employment in the four weeks prior to the interview.

(It is interesting to note that currently unemployment is a major problem for matriculants and graduates, and their rates are estimated at 30 % and 10– 15 %, respectively. This equates to some 7 000 unemployed matriculants and 2 000 unemployed graduates per annum. (Deloitte

KRI, 2004) As this age category tends to be the average age of recruitment for agents within a call centre, (see table above – Deloitte, KRI, 2004) it would seem that call centres are almost an answer to prayer. Furthermore, it is predicted that the industry could absorb as many as 25 % of unemployed matriculants over the next two years. (Deloitte, KRI, 2004).

1.5.3   Problems with Super-powers: Telkom's Monopoly

However, all is not rosy on the local scene, as according to a press release by ISI Emerging Markets (The sprouting of company call centres has created some 75,000 jobs for South Africans, 2005), despite South Africa being in Europe's time zone and having loads of English speakers to recruit, the country seems to have hit a road block in terms of prohibitive telecommunications legislation and costs. Omar, (2001) states similarly that the existing monopoly of Telkom and lack of deregulation of the telephony market has been identified as a barrier. Telkom was seen a having non-competitive international telephone rates, which has also detracted potential clients.

Hence, regulation of the super power, Telkom, cutting telephony costs and ensuring there were enough skilled people to staff the new centres, have been of paramount importance. The government has been criticized for holding on to the Telkom monopoly, as it is stifling job creation for its own people. Furthermore, by keeping the price of bandwidth and international call rates outside competition, the advancement of commerce is being stifled, (Omar, 2001).

Fortunately, in September 2004, the Minister of Communications in South Africa announced a major liberalisation of the telecommunications sector, effective February 2005. In a far-reaching package of reforms, Value Added Network Licenses (VANS) were able to carry voice as well as data over their networks, using any protocol, effectively increasing to 10 or more the number of companies providing international voice connectivity. In terms of the Configuration Bill, Telkom will lose some of its power, in that it will be more strictly regulated, and in turn, this will allow for other companies both local and international to survive in the telecommunications environment. However, and of note in terms of a developing industry, such capping of pricing could well inhibit international or other potential operator interest.

1.5.4   Areas for development

There has been so much focus on technology, job creation and the development of call centres that Deon Scheepers, the Technology Solution Director with ATIO's intelligent business solutions division, says the focus must now give way to the human element. It seems that South Africans have become so inured to bad service as the Merchant's Group study (Business Day, Financial Times, May, 2001) identifies as follows: The average time a person will wait for a call to be answered is less than sixty seconds, while eighty percent of callers to IT or telecommunications call centres will abandon within thirty seconds. Nevertheless, it was notable that 11 % of them will wait 90 seconds before hanging up. Interestingly, in the same report, which benchmarked trends across 269 call centres in 24 countries, South African agents call answering speed on average is 20 – 30 seconds, which is in line with the world average. However, local agents are outclassed by European agents who answered 40 % of calls within 10 seconds.

Ken Wheeler, Managing Consultant for Merchants Group, supports these findings believing that that while South Africa has good technology, it's people lagged the rest of the countries surveyed. He believes that management, and the training of call centre staff, will need to be improved if call centres are to fulfil their full potential in this county.

However, a report in Intelligence (1998), suggests that the up-skilling of agents is not the only concern for South African companies who are wishing to reap the business advantages of call centre implementations. Gartner Group's industry analysis indicates that more than half of all call centres have to be redesigned, with failures caused predominantly by poor design, inappropriate technology investments, or failure in day-to-day running and management. It would seem that an often repeated error within the South African context is a failure to investigate exactly what the call centre is being designed to achieve as well as reluctance to invest in the skills required to tie call centre solutions together by means of systems integration. What then, is the design structure of Call centres and how can it impinge on organisational success and worker satisfaction?

1.6   CALL CENTRE DESIGN – 'THE (STORMY) MARRIAGE OF TWO MINDS'

As mentioned previously, a seemingly dichotomous structure exists in call centres. The alleged simple task of the call centre agents has been designed, based on a division of labour principle, paralleling Tayloristic principles (Pruijt, 2000). In contrast, in the flexible workplace of the new century, "workers' subjectivity – cognitions, attitudes, emotions – has come to be seen as a prime productive resource" Hyman et al., (2003, p.218). This apparent anachronistic environment therefore gives rise to tension, as call centre agents, blinkered to the job, struggle with managing their work, (and indeed, their home-life), in institutions, which ironically have been developed as a method of dealing with the enormous changes brought about through the current global, economic and technological age. As such, Houhihan (2000) states that call centres are a bedrock of often competing values which in turn inform a contradictory organisational structure. In addition, (Zapf et al., (2003) believe that modern organisations place a high price on productivity and efficiency, and have paralleled their functioning with Tayloristic principles.

It would therefore be effective to outline Taylorism and comment on how it relates to the modern day workplace, and to call centres' organisational structure in particular.

1.6.1   Taylorism in a Global Age

One of the central features of Taylorism is the 'separation of conception from execution', and this is achieved by management by applying three principles, all with the aim of logistically streamlining and standardizing components: (Pruijt, 2000).

❖ The **first principle** of 'scientific management', as Taylor called it, is the decoupling of the labour process from the skills of the workers, and this is done by "gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae (Braverman, cited in Warr & Wall, 1975, p.25). The basic aim of such scientific management was the development of a 'science' to replace the 'rule of thumb' typically used by managers of the day. Taylor pointed to the fact that whereas managers had reliable and useful information concerning the capacity and efficiency of their machines, they had no such information about their employees. With this in mind, he focused his

attention on two problems, how to make work methods more efficient, and how to encourage men to work harder, (Warr & Wall, (1975).

- ❖ The **second principle** is removing all possible brainwork from the shop and centring it on the planning and laying-out department, (Braverman, cited in Warr & Wall, 1975).

- ❖ The **third principle** is that management should not leave it to the workers to decide how they go about their tasks. Instead, they themselves should prescribe exactly how, and how fast, the tasks must be performed.

Taylorism is a refinement of the management strategy of detailed division of labour, and it is important to distinguish between division of labour and specialisation. Whereas specialisation, includes the further development of people in their professions, division of labour reduces people to performers of routine tasks. Detailed division of labour entails analysing a production process and breaking it down into a multitude of tasks performed by different workers. (Pruijt, 2000). However, this division of labour is taken to new extremes in that the work cycles are then measured in seconds. This simultaneous monitoring and control of how work is done is described as management by detail, (Danford, cited in Pruijt, 2000).

Understandably therefore, Taylorism often generates lack of trust between the employers and the employees and as a result, control or coercion is required in order to "ensure that labour power bought is turned into labour performed", (Pruijt, 2000, p.443). It therefore becomes management's prerogative to design systems whereby they can get the workers to work as they should, according to the rules laid out, and within the time limits required. Furthermore, in evaluating or monitoring the progress, they may outline sanctions if required.

Pruijt (2000) believes that the application of pure Taylorism has areas of solid growth, such as the McDonalds-type firm ('McDonaldization'), and call centres, which are characterized by predictability and controllability, (Ritzer, cited in Pruijt, 2000). Certainly, (Zapf et al., 2003) consider call centre work as a modern form of Taylorism because it is characterised by routine tasks, and low task control. This is evidenced in the fairly short-cycle routine interactions with customers which are controlled by automatic call distribution (ACD) systems, and supported by networked information. Therefore they have little control over when and with whom to speak. Furthermore, when they do speak the content is usually scripted, (Holman, 2003). The marionette analogy is extended by the expectation that agents should be friendly, "as if they are smiling on the telephone"(Holman, 2003, p.125). Zapf et al., (2003) further posit that most jobs in call centres can be characterised as unskilled work, once again

paralleling the Tayloristic principles, and Baufort (cited in Zapf et al., 2003) supports this, stating that seldom is professional training received by the agents, and hence the complexity of work is often restricted, thereby preventing inexperienced call centre agents from making mistakes. Rajan, and Stanworth, (cited in Houlihan, 2000) contend that on the whole call centres rely on deskilled labour and low wage rates.

Holman (2003), differentiated between two call centre models, the Mass Service model (more akin to Tayloristic principles) and the High Commitment Model, (based more on relationship building and self development) which are tabled below. For the purposes of this study, however, the researcher has included an additional model, the Call Centre Organisational Model which is tabled in the third column below, and sets out a typical call centre organisational structure alongside the two differing models. In this way, a clearer representation as to how call centres parallel Tayloristic principles is obtained.

Mass Service Model	*High Commitment Model*	*Call Centre Organisational Model*
1) High Market Volume	1) Low Market Volume	1) High Market Volume
2) Low Added Value	2) High Added Value	2) High Added Value to customers
3) Primary Goal: Cost minimization	3) Relationship Focus	3) Tensions exists between cost minimization, relationship focus & high volume attainment
4) Routine Work	4) Jobs are Empowered	4) Routine Work; little empowerment
5) Low Complexity	5) Tasks are complex	5) Generally low complexity; little training provided for more complex queries/tasks
6) Low Control	5) High control for service providers	6) Low control
7) Scripted Dialogue	6) Customer interaction corresponds to the relationship building	7) Scripted dialogue; emotional dissonance; voice of the organisation / automaton
8) Detailed Instruction	7) Human Resource Incentives such as training, employment security and relatively high pay.	8) Detailed instruction, with differing scales of pay ranging from very good to poor, incentive bonus, but little employment security and insufficient training
9) Greater Quantity focus by Management		9) Greater Quantity focus by management

The 'mass service model' is similarly associated with the principles of Taylorism, and clearly, greater similarities are noted between the call centre organisation and the mass service model, rather than the high commitment model. Hence logic directs the assumption that call centres are closely organised in terms of Tayloristic principles. The 'high commitment model', perhaps more idealistically, is one which management could possibly work towards in order to level the behavioural needs of the agents with the structure and rigours of the work itself. Indeed, Pruijt (2000, p. 444) talks of "smashing Taylorism" and believes that "supervision cost, lack of flexibility, loss of creativity, central information processing overload, unattractive work on the shop floor, and a clash with democratic values and bureaucratisation" are all reasons to develop an alternative to Taylorism. This would require "consciously moving towards job enrichment instead of division of labour and towards a reduction of the separation of conception and execution". It also means choosing to use human skills instead of trying to incorporate these into information systems. It further "entails striving towards worker autonomy and codetermination instead of increasing discipline", (Pruijt, 2000, pp.444- 445).

Never-the-less Tayloristic principles (almost despite all odds) are still favourable in the 21st Century, based largely on the following points:

1)   The notion of 'the one best way' is adopted, and this usually includes standardization which is described by Adler and Cole (cited in Pruijt, 2000, p.447) below: "Standardization captures best practice and facilitates the diffusion of improvement ideas throughout the organization - you cannot diffuse what you have not standardized. In this view, standardization means that, for each task X, the best way is determined and laid down in rules. Everyone who has to perform this task X, must follow the rules for X exactly"

2)   The second core attraction of Taylorism is called 'systematic soldiering', and applies to the natural behavioural tendency that when workers are granted autonomy, workers in mass production do not put in a maximum effort (Springer, cited in Pruijt, 2000). This ties in with the need to coerce agents to take x number of calls per shift, within an x time frame.

3) Taylorism itself creates the conditions for its propagation. According to Zuboff (cited in Houlihan, 2000) advanced automation tends to disempower workers to handle unexpected situations, which leads to the necessity of advancing automation even further. Similarly, in organizations in which employees are systematically following detailed rules, a likely reaction to imperfections, is creating more rules.

4) Mass customisation allows for an information system for collecting parts together or for the generation of customized instructions to workers (Laudon & Laudon, cited in Pruijt, 2000).

Taylorism persists because its attractions are relevant in large sectors of the economy, and its methodology too is most adaptable, especially when working with large numbers of people. Breaking away from Taylorism, or as Pruijt (2000) prefers, 'smashing Taylorism', is possible, but it requires much energy, and at a time when call centres are in the ascendant, the pace of growth is such that there is little opportunity to stop, strengthen and plan development. Hence it is likely that in the immediate future the conflictual and contradictory nature of call centre organisations will continue to generate a culture of mixed messages, (Stiles et al., cited in Houlihan, 2000).

Indeed, the above suggests that call centres are run on Tayloristic principles rather than more proactive, integrating and self-empowering ones, and this management style in itself can be problematic. Coupled however, with the nature of call centre work and its heavy demands on the individual agent, it is not surprising that the estimated tenure of call centre employment ranges from just 18 – 22 months, (Houlihan, 2000). Hence, what are these consequences of call centre work, and how do they play out in the lives of the agents?

1.7 CONSEQUENCES OF CALL CENTRES

1.7.1 *Shift Work, work-life imbalance, ill- health and fatigue*

Perhaps the biggest stressor of call centres, is not so much the monotony and regularity of the actual call centre task, but it is the ongoing, and intangible incursions into household life which include exhaustion, feelings of stress, disturbed sleep patterns, and even a tendency to continue worrying about work following the completion of contractual working hours. (Hyman et al., 2003). Interpersonal, relational and well-being issues too, add to spiralling

stress, and significant numbers of agents claim that they suffer from health problems, and resent the effects on personal, family and social lives. (Ahasan et al., 2002). Ahasan et al., (2002) continue that due to shift work and the workers' tiredness (and resultant inability to stay awake) the USA loses an estimated 50 billion dollars per year. As such the researchers stress the believed demerits of a shift work regime, and their studies reveal that such disruptive working hours further de-motivate the work force.

Cooper et al., (2001, cited in Hyman et al., 2003, p.220) talk of the synchronous changes in patterns of both working and household life, and describe it as "a complicated multi-variable balancing act as workers juggle these different parts of their lives, with an understandable concomitant level of stress and social tension." Research has shown that this applies particularly to the service sector, and that workers are increasingly expected to extend their commitment by putting their whole selves into the job. (Taylor, cited in Hyman & Summers, 2004). Furthermore, Cunningham et al., (1996, p.145) state that "the worker is expected to exercise his or her thoughts, feelings and initiatives in attaining goals, performing above and beyond contractual terms of employment if necessary". As a result the traditional distinctions between work-life and home-life have begun to blur (Scase, 2002).

However, even where employees do attempt to resist these definitions and maintain some psychological space between their work and their social lives, the reality is that it would appear that the above expectations are built into the human resource management practices, (Hyman et al., 2003). Subsequently, one could assume that call centre agents are merely automatons turning the cogs of a world that isn't theirs.

In addition, at the same time that work is being expected to play an increasingly dominant role in people's lives, household life too is becoming more complex. (Crow & Hardey, cited in Hyman et al., 2003). This, increasingly so, when looking at the South African context. The notion of UBUNTU, and bread winner responsibilities, outline the importance of maintaining a job when the lives of so many are so dependent on the worker. Importantly, "low unemployment means that employees have the option to avoid degrading jobs," (Pruijt (2000, p.442), which as statistics show, is not the case in South Africa. The scourge of HIV/Aids, and reduced life expectancies, or alternatively longer life expectancies (in South Africa's 1st-world-3rd-world setting), extended families, community commitments, but even the mere day to day humdrum of household responsibilities generate their own stress, without having to

deal with the mental and physical spill over from one's work. Hochschild (1989) purports that this might impact especially on women (approximately 50 % of the sample call centre agent force), who consequently may be described as coming home to a 'second shift'.

What is notable is that this mental and physical spill over into non-work life, is now not only seen as acceptable by the employer, but often it is even welcomed. Could it be that this recalcitrant organisational commitment is perhaps that which weaves the iniquitous thread through the thinking behind the sweatshop concept? Or is it the organisation's desire to control and exact Tayloristic methodologies in their working structure?

1.7.2   (Im)Balance of Power

Cartwright (2003, p.121) focuses specifically on the balance of power within call centres and the "extent to which employee perceptions of psychological empowerment impact upon stress and job satisfaction. Contrary to Richardson, et al., (2000), Cartwright (2003, p.121) concludes that call centres are more stressful than traditional office environments "if they are organized in such way that they significantly reduce the opportunity to exercise individual autonomy". Houhihan (2000) augments this statement with the assumption that knowledge and learning reside up, rather than down the organisation. In this way, the call centre operates through roles, rules and scripts, and someone else does the thinking and controlling. Furthermore, she believes that call centres have turned in on themselves, and have become victims of their own successes. This is because in managing to reduce costs and specify inputs and outputs with increasing precision, "they have become 'intensification projects', featuring little space for learning, brittleness and a strong core rigidity". (Houlihan (2000, p.235).

1.7.3   Stress, Task Monotony and Boredom

In ACA Research (1998), (cited in Wallace, 2000), stress was mentioned as a very great challenge within the call centre environment. It reported call centre agents having a stress profile higher than that of a coal miner. Nearly 25 % of the 433 agents surveyed in that study felt that stress in their job is high or very high, 47 % reported a medium amount of stress and 80 % had requested training in stress management. Interestingly, over 60 % of the agents had not experienced stress symptoms prior to working in a call centre, but since working in a call centre 70 % reported experiencing at least one stress symptom.

Gilmore, (2001) suggests that call centre agents suffer work stress due to having to deal with unexpected calls or requests fairly frequently. At times too, agents advise that there is a lack of appropriate expertise for more of the complex, often largely technical problems. Lack of support and guidance also add to general work strain as well as the agents being torn between trying to help customers and sticking to the company's rules. This latter point is supported by Hyman et al., (2003) where even though call centre agents may at times be cast as automatons greasing the cogs of modern day industry, their desire to adopt Flecker and Hofbauer's 'new model worker' is ever present, as even though the technology is still used to deliver and track productivity, the service is assured by the personal commitment of the employees. Therefore both service and efficiency are achieved, but tension exists between the customer-focus of the call centre agents and the productivity-focus of management. Measurement, monitoring and control allow for management's upper hand, but seemingly at the expense of the physical and psychological well-being of the staff. Wallace, (2000, p.175) terms this the 'Sacrificial Human Resource Strategy' because the enthusiasm and motivation of the front-line are sacrificed by management. She states, strongly that "it is a strategy because it involves a coherent set of management activities and attitudes, which together solve the efficiency/service conflict". In this way she declares that emotional burnout and high turnover are tolerated, if not encouraged.

Zapf et al., (2003) add boredom to call centre challenges. Depending on the business, a call centre agent can take between 60 – 250 calls per 8 hour shift. The more customers spoken to, the less time is available for each of them and the more routine and boring these conversations may become, and this often leads to increased absenteeism and resultant high turnover of staff. As mentioned previously, the average call centre tenure is between 18 and 22 months, (Houlihan, 2000). Wallace, (2000) cited that one manager even stated (remove comma) that agents were no longer needed after 18 months, as by that stage they are assumed to be burnt out and are no good. This of course has consequences for training of the call centre agents.

1.7.4   *The Vicious Cycle of Training and Development*

According to Crome (1998) many call centres invest the bare minimum in customer service training because, with such high staff turnover, and often low training budgets, development training is seen to be a 'nice to have' rather than a 'must have'. It is a vicious cycle: staff who are not given the training support to maximise their potential are more likely to leave

and, with constant churn, achieving consistently high levels of service becomes a greater challenge as the company constantly struggles to train new recruits in basic procedures and standards. Sadly, many companies introduce call centres under the banner of improving customer service and in the process, they raise customer expectations but, without adequate investment in customer service training, these expectations will be sorely missed.

A further frustration is the paradoxical task of employing agents with sufficient education to handle calls effectively and accurately, but without sufficient ambition to want to pursue a career outside the call centre, nor to advance significantly within the call centre. Most call centres recruit staff with some level of qualifications, like good or very good communication skills, a friendly voice, and verbal fluency (Zapf et al., 2003) and these skills are difficult to find among unskilled workers. Therefore, candidates with higher education are usually preferred. But, because of their high basic education, many of these employees find call centre work too undemanding after a while, and this in turn exacerbates the high turnover, (Holman, 2003).

1.7.5   Due Care and Support of Agents?

Wallace (2000) believes that such high levels of stress could be due to the inherent lack of supportive elements in the work design. Because agents are not receiving the type of assistance from their superiors, they seek socio-emotional support from their peers. However, the structure and the design of the agents' task limits such interaction and one agent was quoted as saying: "it once took me six months to finish telling a story to my workmate." Wallace, (2000, p.179).

Quite simply, Holman (2003) believes that by failing to attend to the causes of employees' dissatisfaction or lack or well-being, costs relating to absenteeism, turnover, recruitment, and training are incurred. Schlesinger and Heskett (cited in Holman, 2003) further his argument by stating that poor well-being may also decrease the quality of customer service and could increase the number of errors, (and in turn could lose clients to the organisation). In line with Holman (2003), Crome (1998) also feels that due care for the agents would enable cost savings, especially regarding the mandatory inclusion of effective training, which he believes would go a long way in improving job satisfaction and overall morale.

1.7.6   Reduced Morale

Crome's, (1998) research involved 25 major call centres throughout the UK, representing a wide spectrum of businesses. His studies showed that more than 50 % of staff felt that morale was low in the workplace and 40 % were unhappy with management support and direction. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the average staff turnover rate in call centres typically exceeded 30 % per year. He contends that too often call centres resemble battery farms where line after line of employees are force fed a continuous stream of calls, via and ACD (automatic call distribution) system. (The Automatic call distribution system is one which re-routes incoming calls to free receivers. This is efficient especially in reducing call volumes in that as soon as a line is free, the call is routed. The disadvantage experienced by the call centre agents however, is that there is no time in between ending a call and starting a new one. This is especially traumatic if the call has been an unpleasant, abusive, or emotionally charged one. It also becomes increasingly stressful towards the end of a shift). In terms of this research focus group commentary reveals that currently morale is at a decreasingly low ebb. (Focus Group Discussions, November / December 2005).

1.7.7   Problems with Measurement and Performance

One of the greatest challenges within call centres is the dichotomy between measurement and performance, (Focus Group Discussions, November / December, 2005) and agents continuously struggle to meet call quotas and at the same time provide sufficient, accurate and relevant information to their clients. To varying degrees, call centres have to balance conflicting principles of standardisation of processes versus customisation of products (Frenkel et al., 1998), as well as the principles of brevity of calls versus quality of customer service. All types of call centres have many internal measures - including the length of 'talk time' with a customer, the 'wrap-up time' (that is, time spent on work to complete a transaction following a call), and the costs of lost calls (through a failure to match the capacity of resources with call intensity). (Focus Group Discussions, November / December 2005). However, according to Denny (cited in Gilmore, 2001) agents are more often than not judged on how quickly they deal with the inquiry, and MacDonald (1998) predicts that while managers continue to assess performance by the quantity rather than the quality of the calls, employees will continue to become demoralised.

1.7.8   Ambivalence of call monitoring

Such measurement is achieved using an advanced monitoring system. The use of such a system is a unique function of call centres and they are used to log statistical data as well as to allow for effective agent feedback. There are arguments both for it and against monitoring, (Holman, 2003), but either way they cost the company, either in updating technology to monitor calls effectively, the manpower to analyse the calls and provide the feedback, and once again attrition, recruitment and retraining costs, if it is felt that that the monitoring process serves to threaten, inhibit and de-motivate the agents. Arguments in favour of monitoring propose that employees benefit as the feedback provided enables them to develop new skills (Grant & Higgins, 1989), and therefore feel somewhat more empowered to handle similar calls in the future. Arguments against monitoring suggest that it is intrinsically threatening to employees because the information gained may affect employees' remuneration or co-worker relationships (Alder, cited in Holman, 2003). Monitoring is also considered as a demand in itself (Smith et al., 1992). The threat of monitoring and the increased demand are thought to negatively affect employee well-being

1.7.9   Other Consequences of Call Centres

In addition to stress, burnout, lack of morale, unsupportive management and all manner of adverse consequences cited above, other writers refer to additional call centre challenges, namely disengagement, resistance, emotional labour and reduced space for 'escape', (Houlihan, 2000), Zapf et al., (2003). Furthermore, the long term welfare of call centre agents is also a problem in terms of de-skilling, lack of career prospects, the footloose nature of the industry and the resulting potential community level impact. Moreover, "the individualised psychological contracts and a "take it or leave it" attitude to employees within many call centres often distance these issues from immediate recognition". Houlihan (2000, p.230)

1.8   PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH RATIONALE

In the preceding discussions an initial overview of the call centre environment has been outlined, as well as the global, environmental, and organisational reasons resulting in their inception. Furthermore the design of call centres has been considered especially in terms of the issues relating to Taylorism and its consequences.

Indeed, owing to the problems encountered in call centres and the unique factors inherent in the call centre environment, the research problem rests on this overview and hence enquires: **"What are the types of work dysfunction in call centres and what are their consequences?"**

The rationale for the study is further enhanced due to the following reasons:

❖ The fact that call centres are vital for the new age work place, and simultaneously are perhaps the biggest challenge for most organisations based on their overall costs, human resource issues, and continuous technological advancement, is an unfortunate paradox, and one that begs further enquiry.

❖ The dichotomous nature of the call centre operations is perplexing as although they exist in a work age, where empowerment, self-actualisation and flexibility are considered de rigeur, agents, in fact have to contend with scripting, reduced accountability and decision-making, emotional dissonance, and hours which impact heavily on work-life stability, (Houlihan, 2000).

❖ There is a desired growth of this industry in South Africa, and Cape Town in particular, (Deloittes, KIR, 2004) and can therefore perhaps serve to both ameliorate current conditions, and plan effectively for suitable new call centre implementation.

❖ As yet, no known study has been conducted on the alleged relationship and proposed positive correlation between call centre work and work dysfunctions e.g. stress and its resultant work life imbalances, in the form of e.g. substance abuse, depression, and eating pattern disorders.

Furthermore, call centres, these figurative monoliths, are organisational necessities and clearly are here to stay, and while providing companies a global competitive edge also create employment for thousands, even though agents often succumb to dysfunctional work behaviour. Yet in this way, the utilitarian argument holds its ground, but perhaps then improving conditions within call centres could serve not only to boost economic growth all round, but to ensure that due social and cultural regard is given to the said incumbents, the agents. Finding a balance surely would be optimal but would require intense research into the

needs of the protagonists, both the employer and the call centre agents, and this, on strictly ethical grounds would perhaps be the 'right thing to do'.

However in the hurly burly of globalised industry where cut throat commerce is the harbinger of personal sacrifice, is there room for such specific consideration? In a land of constant flux where retribution paves the way, and millions eke out subsistence living, is employment not the overarching panacea, regardless of the social by-products that might result?

Thus, the resulting study seeks to uncover these questions, the aim of which is to explore and to understand the dynamic in which call centres operate and how their function and operation cause work dysfunctions in the lives of call centre agents, in a specific cellular company, within the unique cultural and social milieu of the Western Cape.

Hence, this chapter has served to highlight the varying forces at play within a call centre environment, in terms of their rocky inception, their design and the consequences of their functionality. It has also served to outline the rationale behind the study, and from this flows the logical assumption, that the **"exploration of types of work dysfunctions experienced by call centre agents and their consequences"** is crucial for the advancement of the call centre industry as a whole. This is the case, whether it be to improve existent conditions within the centres or to ensure that those centres planned for future implementation are designed in accordance to the principles which are considered imperative for successful outcomes.

1.9   THESIS OUTLINE

Understanding the context within which call centres operate is important to the study as a whole, as the work dysfunctions encountered in these particular organisations are unique, owing to the specific challenges that they face. Thus the research problem and rationale behind the study are outlined in this chapter, from which the research statement flows, and the thesis takes its direction.

Chapter Two explores the prevalence of stress in call centre work and its resultant effects on call centre agents, often resulting in dysfunctional behaviour. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in the thesis, and will cover especially, why a qualitative research method was used, and secondly, why the research was conducted in this particular way, using Focus

Groups. Chapter Four includes the presentation of the findings. The original transcripts are available on a CD enclosed at the back of the thesis, and a categorisation of factors runs alongside the focus group transcripts. An interpretation and discussion of the findings will ensue in this chapter. Thereafter in Chapter Five, a summary and possible organisational interventions will be detailed. Chapter Six includes recommendations for further research based on the many thoughts and ideas that have been drawn from the richness of this initial study.
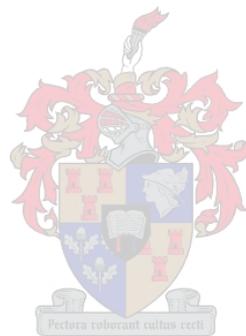
2 CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One included the discussion of the inception of call centres, with special regard to their South African development. It also focussed on call centre design and the effects that this unique organisational structure has on the working environment and thus, the agents. The consequences of call centres were also noted, in particular, stress and it resultant proactive and dysfunctional coping mechanisms. The aim of this chapter, is to further uncover and explore these outcomes, especially as they relate, and often are causal to work dysfunction in call centres. Initially however, discussions include the definition of work dysfunction, the definition of stress, and consideration of stress as a work dysfunction, and how in this way it manifests in call centres. The resultant agent behaviours, both effective and dysfunctional will then be discussed in greater detail.

2.2 ORGANISATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL RELEVANCE OF WORK DYSFUNCTION

"No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community, …. (furthermore, work) is indispensable to the preservation and justification of existence in society". (Freud, 1930/1961, cited in Lowman, 1993, p.1). Indeed, Lowman supports Freud's statement believing, that " productive work should be the legacy and expected birthright of each adult". Furthermore, he strongly asserts that in a figurative sense, "the capacity to work is similar in life importance to issues of mating and reproduction and constitutes one of the most significant developmental milestones in the transition to adulthood", (Lowman, 1993, p.3). He strengthens his argument by purporting that 'work' in fact is a 'metaphor for adulthood'. In this way then, the working milieu becomes the forum in which developmental angst is evidenced, inter and intrapersonal conflicts are played out, and individuals chafe against the rigours, restrictions and freedom that work allows them. This could be the progression that Herzberg et al., (cited in Warr & Wall, 1975, p.37) describe as that "compelling segment of man's nature which urges the realisation of his own potentiality by continuous psychological growth."

Lowman (1993, p.15) states fairly glibly that "only a post modern society can pause long enough from survival tasks to be concerned about whether work is meaningful, worthwhile, or a good match for an individual's needs and interests". And certainly, based on Herzberg's theory, (1959), (cited in Warr & Wall, 1975) post modern (industrialised) man is (most often) far removed from that animal disposition, which centres on avoidance of loss of life, hunger, pain, and sexual deprivation. It is reminiscent too, of Maslow's hierarchical apex of self actualisation. Indeed, research in a prognosis of the year 2020 (Furnham, 2000), indicates that issues around quality of life, and intrinsic job satisfaction will become more important. Based on this, Katzell (cited, in Furnham, 2000) believes that the trend will continue for people to stress intrinsic (meaningfulness and challenge) rather than extrinsic (comfort and security) factors. He outlines what he sees to be broad trends:

1) The traditional economic significance of work would be supplemented by a rising concern with its psychological quality and social meaningfulness;

2) More workers at all levels will want a stronger voice in decisions affecting their jobs and to be less subject to hierarchical control;

3) A shrinking proportion of the workforce will be content to have routine, unchallenging jobs;

4) More people will think in terms of long-range careers and even multiple careers, not just in terms of immediate jobs; and

5) The importance of non-work (family, community, retirement, leisure) will increasingly rival that of work.

In support of Katzell, Etzioni (cited in Furnham, 2000, p.246) describes 2020 as "quality of life society".

Interestingly, and based on literature cited thus far, there is already a shift towards the above trends, which has revealed the identification of increased work dysfunction in organisations. In this regard Lowman (1993) believes that for the overall benefit to the employers, employees should be well-suited and well adjusted to their work. This is especially important due to the general disintegration of social fabric and hence the negation of familial, neighbourly or even community support, Schaufel et al., (cited in Lowman, 1993). Therefore it is vital that people experiencing work-related difficulties receive relevant assessment and

effective intervention, primarily at work, and hence the need for those in authority to be more involved with work dysfunction management and prevention.

2.2.1 Definition of Work Dysfunction

In terms of Lowman (1993, p.36), work dysfunction refers to "psychological conditions in which there is a significant impairment in the capacity to work caused either by characteristics of the person or by an interaction between personal characteristics and working conditions". Such dysfunction may result in serious personal difficulties, and certainly as stated previously organisational disadvantages such as increased turnover, absenteeism and increased health related costs owing to the needs of the ailing employee. Lowman (1993) continues to add that this dysfunctional relationship is also possible even with employees who are well suited to their work, but suggests, conversely, that workers with prior dysfunctional characteristics are more predisposed to stress and therefore, often increased work dysfunction too.

Krantz, Conrada, Hill and Friedler, (cited in Lowman, 1993) believe that some working conditions, especially those characterised by high levels of responsibility with limited opportunities for control, can have far-reaching consequences in terms of workers' health and psychological well-being. It is important to note however, that in terms of the definition above, the individual / personal factor has a role too, as their own eccentricities, shortcomings or personal make-up too have a bearing on problems on the job. (Keita & Jones et al., cited in Lowman, 1993).

2.2.2 Definition of Stress

Lazarus and Launier, cited in Paine (1992, p.135) purport that the term 'stress' refers to events "in which environmental or internal demands (or both) tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual" Similarly French (cited in Warr & Wall, 1975) argues that job stress occurs when the job either poses demands that the worker cannot meet or fails to provide sufficient supplies that the worker needs. Dollard et al., (2003) on the other hand, find meaning to the concept of 'stressor' by considering Hobfoll's (1989, p.517) work on the Conservation-of-Resources theory (COR), which defines stressors as "the actual or anticipated loss of valuable resources." A valued resource is that which increases the likelihood of experiencing pleasure by providing positive reinforcers. Hence the loss of a valued resource, would prove stressful. For instance, low role clarity (an obstacle of task

fulfilment) may lead to a reduced sense of mastery, while low complexity may threaten feelings of personal growth.

Wainright and Colman (2002, p.58) assert that the concept of stress is an ambivalent and contradictory one, even though it is able nevertheless to provide meaning to most industrialised workers of the western world. They further suggest that a general understanding of work stress would include reaching the "natural limit of human endurance and resilience; a product of the unsustainable pressures and demands placed on the worker by later capitalism."

Le Fevre et al., (2003) draw on the work of Selye, (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003, p.733), one of the original researchers of the concept of stress, who claimed that stress can be broken down into eustress (good stress) and distress, the latter being "when the demands placed on the body exceed its capacity (both physiologically and psychologically) to expend energy in maintaining homeostasis". Therefore, Le Fevre et al., (2003) contend that if stress can be broken into either eustress or distress, and distress is represented by too much or too little demand, then it follows that eustress might be considered to be that amount of stress between too much or too little, i.e. an optimal level of stress. Furthermore, this differentiation results in the logical conclusion that "both under and over stimulation may lead to distress while moderate stress results in eustress." (Le Fevre et al., 2003, p733). This chafes against alleged modern management practices whereby, there is a belief that optimal efficacy is achieved when stress levels are optimum too.

(Le Fevre et al., 2003). However, Selye, (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003) finds that regardless of definition, the eustressful or distressful nature of any particular stimulus is in fact governed by individual interpretation and reaction. It is also dependent on the characteristic of the certain stressor, namely, the timing of the stressor, the source of the stressor, the perceived control over the stressor, and the perceived desirability of the stressor.

Finally, Lawson, Savery and Luks, (2001) purport that stress is a mental and physical condition, which affects an individual's productivity, effectiveness, personal health and quality of work, the results of which affect quality of work life and job satisfaction.

However, in the light of indistinct definitions cited above, it is understandable then, that Wainright and Colman (2002, p.60) could deduce that "the phenomenon represents nothing more than claim-making by disgruntled or feckless workers backed by woolly and imprecise science!"

2.2.3   Stress: Multidimensional Causality

Researchers, Wainright and Colman (2002); Le Fevre et al., (2003) attest to the fact that any particular stressor identified as a cause of stress is likely to be one of a constellation of interdependent factors, and that one-shot efforts to alleviate stressful conditions, are unlikely by themselves to be successful. Indeed, Behr and Newman's review (cited in Wainright & Colman, 2002, p.69) concludes that there is no doubt that perceptions of stressful situations are related to employee health and well-being, but the problem lies not with the "specification of the stressors, but with the fact that they are interdependent, making patterns of causality difficult to determine".   Furthermore, Le Fevre et al., (2003, p.730) support this notion believing that the amount of stress a person experiences at work is likely to be a result of the interaction of a number of factors "such as the type of work they are doing (their occupation), the presence of work stressors, the amount of support they receive both at work and at home and the coping mechanisms they use to deal with stress".

Finally, Wainright and Colman (2002, p 69) very succinctly state that "if the work stress epidemic cannot be explained purely in terms of an historically unique high point of adverse experiences at work, then other social, political, institutional and cultural factors must also be viewed as potential antecedents of the phenomenon". They continue to assert that "rather than assuming that work stress is exclusively an automatic response to changes in the character of paid employment", consideration needs to be given to the "factors that have led adverse experiences at work to be increasingly interpreted within a psycho-medical idiom, rather than being addressed through the traditional strategies of politics and industrial relations."   He concludes by asserting that virtually any adverse experience at work can be defined as a cause of work stress.

2.2.4   Definition of Stress as a Work Dysfunction

Paine (1992) argues that both 'job stress' and 'burnout', alleged 'buzzwords of the 1980's', have become a little shop-worn owing to media hype and the generally held, blasé attitude

that job stress and burnout are problems, and they always have been. Never-the-less even well into the 21st century, both concepts continue to perplex researchers especially as the role and needs of human resources too have changed, based on the fluctuations of organisational and economic drivers. In particular, Murphy (1995) observed that there has been a growing recognition of job stress, especially over the last 20 years, and it has manifested as an important occupational health problem. This is so, especially in the light of the costs incurred by the organisation, in that it contributes to a significant portion of worker compensation claims, health-care costs, disability, absenteeism, and productivity losses. Although Murphy (1995) refers to businesses in general it applies equally to the call centre industry, but stress is perhaps further exacerbated in the call centre environment due to its unique conditions, (Zapf et al., 2003). According to an Interview Assessment Sheet (cited in Zapf et al., 2003, p.316), reports are made that "agents constantly feel tired and complain of stress symptoms such as spastic colons, headaches, fatigue, lack of energy and weight loss or gain". In addition, the less obvious symptoms of irritability and aggression were noted, resulting in a lack of understanding or care of the customer's problem. In addition, Cooper, (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003) claims that prolonged stress may have a negative impact on an individual's mental and physical health and may manifest in significant illness, such as heart disease, back pain, gastrointestinal disturbance, anxiety and depression. Furthermore heightened stress may also result in behavioural maladies such as increased tobacco smoking, excessive alcohol or caffeine consumption and irregular eating habits. Le Fevre et al., (2003) also note an increasing concern regarding occupational stress from both employers and government. This is especially so, due to the fact that employers are now at risk of being held legally liable for damages to stressed staff , more so in the light of the accelerated pace of organisational change. (Midgley & Rees, cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003).

In fact, Midgley, (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003) cites that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that inefficiencies arising from occupational stress may cost up to 10 % of a country's GNP (Gross National Product). Furthermore, Cartwright and Boyes (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003) estimate that in the UK, over 60 % of all workplace absences are due to stress, and although it is difficult to measure the total cost of occupational stress, estimates in the USA range from 200 to 300 billion dollars per year (Atkinson, cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003). For the individual, however, should stress be left unchecked, morbidity is the most common resolution, Siegrist. (1998).

Although stress is evident across all occupational groups, consideration should be given to the demands that are particularly stressful in human service work, (Dollard et al., 2003). Houlihan (2000) adds weight to this statement suggesting that writers on the experiences and behaviours of call centres identify themes such as stress, disengagement resistance, emotional labour and reduced 'space for escape'. This is especially so as service employees, such as call centre agents usually only have one opportunity to provide excellent service. Known as the "uno acto principle" Zeithami and Bitner, (cited in Dollard, 2003, p.89), have likened a call centre agent's response to that of the irreversible occurrence of a bad haircut. There is no second chance, nor a quality assurance safety check prior to final delivery from the agent to the customer, and in addition to this, specific levels of service are anticipated due to the (on the whole, high) customer expectations. Knowledge of customer needs and desires are brought about by surveys into organisational customer perceptions (OCP) and the following features are most often expected: (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Barry (cited in Dollard, 2003).

- ❖ dependability (reliability)
- ❖ prompt delivery (responsiveness)
- ❖ value for money and use of high equipment (assurance)
- ❖ physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written material that look good (tangibles)
- ❖ individual attention (empathy)
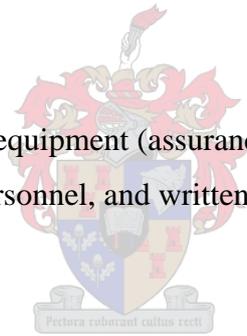
Hence there is a three-fold dynamic to providing service: (1) dealing with individual customer behaviour, as well as (2) managing employer instructions, to act in a manner which meets the expectations of the above (3) feature delivery. In addition, these actions are tempered by the unique behaviours and eccentricities of the individual call centre agent.

Indeed, research has evidenced that the call centre world is a stressful one. (Houhihan, 2000, and Cartwright, 2003). Furthermore, it is believed that many of the stresses involved are due to the organisational design based on Tayloristic principles. Even though these might be effective in terms of production, no tenable balance has not been sought nor implemented that would serve to meet the 21st century needs of workers striving for meaning in their work, advancement, empowerment, work-life balance and ultimately job satisfaction. Hence call centres seem to be "rooted in contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes and confront a number of trade-offs on that basis", (Houlihan, 2000, p.237). Weick (cited in Houlihan 2000, p.235) further purports that as call centres try to become more adaptive, "the parts

contradictorily become simplified, hierarchical and prone to non-adaptiveness, narrowness and group think", and ultimately they develop "inherent system brittleness and core rigidity". This is the milieu in which stress develops, and the following discussions consider its manifestations.

2.3 STRESS IN CALL CENTRES (CUSTOMER-RELATED SOCIAL STRESSORS – CSS)

Dollard et al., (2003) based on COR theory, believe that individuals most often seek positive reinforcement. They thus, "seek to create and maintain personal characteristics (e.g. mastery or self-esteem) and social circumstances (e.g. tenure or intimacy) that will increase the likelihood of receipt of reinforcement and to avoid the loss of such characteristics and circumstances" (Hobfoll, 1989, p.518). However, according to Dollard et al., (2003), it is the customers' behaviour during service transactions that threatens to offset agents' equilibrium, and may be more stressful than the actual length, frequency or interactions with customers themselves. Hence it is their opinion that customers' behaviours constitute CSS.

Zapf et al., (2003) agree that customer behaviour can:
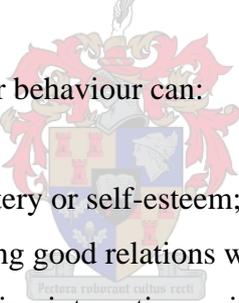
a) threaten employees' sense of mastery or self-esteem;
b) prevent employees from developing good relations with their customers; and
c) make employees feel insecure during interactions with their customers.

Additional stress is caused by the contextualisation or scripting of calls which limit and restrict agents from providing individualised customer care. Thus the inflexibility of the system does not seem able to cope with occasional anomalies or exceptions, and the agents spend much time as organisational buffers, brushing over customer frustrations, rather than managing the calls in their own individual way, (Houlihan, 2000). She continues to add that behind this "veil of efficiency and control" there is often a black hole, as management has failed to provide agents with the scope of taking their own initiative and using their own discretion when appropriate, (Houlihan, 2000, p. 235).

Wharton (1996) cites in agreement with Houlihan (2000), that the close monitoring of words and manners and the limited variation that employees are often allowed in service interactions has meant that call centre workers have lost a large measure of control over their presentation

to customers. Furthermore, their control is even further marginalized when the customer is involved at management's behest to monitor and supervise the agent, (Deary et al., 2002). In this way, not only can they be solicited to provide feedback on the quality of the service that is being delivered, they may also lodge complaints about the service provider.

Furthermore, As Leidner (1996, p.57) notes, the customer can "reinforce management's control efforts, reprimanding workers for dawdling or behaving rudely… and complaining to workers' superiors when service … (does) not meet their expectations. " This is akin to the agent gaining "an additional boss", which can result in exacerbated frustration, increased feelings of powerlessness, and a distrustful customer-agent relationship.

Finally, as a last stab at the agents, as they attempt coping in an already stressful environment, it has been noted that "customers are now more able to discern the difference between genuine "quality service" and "feigned quality service" (Taylor & Bain, 1999, p.113), putting paid to a degree the concept of surface and deep acting! (Concepts that will be explored later in this chapter).

2.3.1   *Organisational/Managerial Related Stressors*

Le Fevre et al., (2003) mention that occupational stress represents a real threat to the quality of life for employees, and if increased levels continue unabated, often result in the disengagement of employees from organisations. This is especially so, as there is a tendency rather than minimising the level of stress in the workplace, to manage the stress at optimal levels. (Selye, cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003). This concept is supported by the Yorks Dodson Law, (Benson & Allen; Certo; and Lussier, cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003, p.728) which states that common management practice assumes that a "reasonable amount of pressure, anxiety, or fear in the environment leads to higher performance among employees than if stress is not present". Interestingly therefore, one could deduce in the light of this, that stress management becomes the domain of supervisors or management, which in turn too reduces individual control even further, resulting in increased stress for the employee.

Houlihan (2000) blatantly states that call centres are rooted in contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes, and that the organisation imposes conflictual role requirements on the agents. Perhaps the biggest paradox is the quantity versus quality debate where even though

agents are trying to get closer to their customer base, they are restricted by "routinising, centralising, cost reductions and prescribed standards", (Houlihan, 2000, p.235). She succinctly continues: " The quality: quantity tension means that customer service rhetoric and quality customer care are juxtaposed against pressure to keep calls short in order to maintain service levels and meet performance management targets." (Houlihhan, 2000, p.237). Although the language of call centres is teamwork, mentoring and support, the reality is 'about meeting the stats' and this unspoken assumption thereby introduces an autocratic and oft-cited McDonaldised organisation, rather than a flattened hierarchy. Stiles et al., (cited in Houlihan, 2000, p.231) warns that these contradictory underpinnings lay the foundation for a culture of "mixed messages" and it is these "mixed messages which undermine confidence and induce agent scepticism towards management intentions and deep concerns about accuracy and fairness".

The concept of scripting calls is often cited as a stressor as the organisation rehearses the things that it wants said and feeds them through the agent, thereby taking the role of the "mouth piece of the organisation, rather than the brain", (Houlihan, 2000, p.234). Once again a paradox is noted, in that the agents require a complex range of varied skills, and often need to make use of these skills in customer management and care. However, most often the organisation, casts the agents as having a restricted repertoire of skills with the inability to think beyond a programmed level. Furthermore, agents are often thought of as inherently lazy and requiring coercion in order to get the job done, reminiscent of McGregor's Theory X. (Milkman, (cited in Houlihan, 2000).

Holman (2003) focuses on performance monitoring in call centres, and questions whether the data is used for punitive purposes, developmental purposes or to inform, reward or make decisions around payment? Employees view the process differently, based on their perceptions of monitoring fairness, intensity and the degree of trust that a call centre agent has in the system. Those who favour monitoring believe that they are able to learn from the feedback provided and therefore may develop more skills, (Grant & Higgins, 1989). On the other hand, monitoring may be seen as threatening and stressful as the data gleaned may affect employees' remuneration, bonus and or co-worker relationships (Alder, cited in Dollard, 2003). Smith et al., (1992) also add that the very process of monitoring itself may be considered threatening, as at any time throughout a day, calls may be intercepted and investigated.

Various empirical studies (Aiello & Kolb, and Chalykoff & Kochan, cited in Holman, 2003) reveal that there are disadvantages to monitoring resulting in increased stress; and advantages to monitoring, resulting in immediacy of feedback and increased job satisfaction. Hence it is generally accepted that performance monitoring can reduce stress if it is conducted in a developmental manner and if based on regular feedback and clear criteria. (Holman, 2003). Although he continues to state that excessive monitoring may over the long term, make employees more depressed, less enthusiastic and increasingly prone to stress.

Houlihan (2000, p.236) takes a refreshing stance on the idea of monitoring calls and questions what in fact management or supervisors are listening for? "Are they counting the countable, rather than what needs to be understood?" Almost any measurable aspect of activity maybe drawn from the system e.g. absenteeism, extent of yield per person per hour, but how do the figures explain the reason behind these issues? Houlihan (2000, p.236) continues that management, is so removed from the front line that they are reliant on "virtual lenses of statistics" and questions, even though the agents are being heard, is management really listening? Indeed, the call centre philosophy of feedback is built on the "assumption of mono-directional correction rather than rewards and development" (Houlihan, 2000, p.237), and Hofstede (1992) refers to this as the 'poverty of management control' philosophy. Milkman, (cited in Houlihan, 2000) questions why management take the low versus the high road, when the resultant effect is defensiveness and lack of trust.

Finally, Holman (2003) in a sense quite controversial, claims that call centre work in itself may not be intrinsically stressful, as employee well being differs from centre to centre. He attributes this to differences in job design and management practices, which add enormous weight to the importance of management roles within the call centre environment. Hence in this way, he thus asserts, that call centre work can be designed to lessen its deleterious effects on employee well-being, should management ensure it.

2.3.2   *Environmental Stressors*

Many researchers have sought to understand the relationship between stressors and their final outcome, and below follows a diagrammatic representation of a model of work/environmental stressors, adapted from French and Caplan, (cited in Warr & Wall, 1975).

The diagram indicates that each property of the work situation (Box A) is seen as an environmental demand which, accentuated or minimised by the individual's characteristics (Box B) may result in feelings or physical indications of stress (Box C).

A: STRESSORS	B: PERSONALITY/ BIOGRAPHICAL FEATURES	C: STRESS
e.g. Conflict Ambiguity Overload Responsibility for others Repetitiveness Fast pacing Characteristics of the work situation	e.g. Rigidity-flexibility Anxiety proneness Age Ability Field Dependence Characteristics of the person	e.g. Peptic ulcer High blood pressure Job Tension Job dissatisfaction High heart rate Low Trust Characteristics of the individual's experience and physical condition.

As cited in the Noise Advisory Standard (Queensland Government, 2003), some hazards in call centres may not create an immediate risk of obvious traumatic injury, but they can result in short and long-term debilitating injuries and illness. Wainright and Colman (2002) cite some of the environmental sources of stress in the workplace which could result in call centre hazards:

Possible sources of stress in the workplace (Wainright & Colman, 2002)

Physical Conditions	*Job Design*	*Work Organisation and Conditions*
Noise	Inconsistent Management	Continual changes in work organisation and structure
Poor Lighting	Lack of support assistance	Lack of control over work
Poor temperature control	Social isolation	Unclear reporting lines
Poor ventilation	Poor communication	Excessive working hours
Poor equipment	Bullying	Lack of participation in decision making
Poor workstation design	Harassment	Inadequate staffing
Exposure to fumes	Customer / client complaints	Lack of recognition or promotional prospects
Exposure to the elements	Lack of appropriate training	Over-promotion
	Threat of violence	Complexity and demands of new systems
		Lone working
		Excessive Workload

To this already extensive list, the Labour Research Department (cited, in Wainright & Colman, 2002) adds:

Overcrowding, badly designed furniture, poor maintenance, dangerous equipment, working with visual display units, poor child are facilities, need for time off to care for sick dependants, armchair-paced work, surveillance and monitoring, repetitive work, responsibility for others' lives, uncertain responsibilities, new technology, unsure of skills, unsympathetic management, financial constraints, rigid hierarchy and harsh disciplinary procedures.

2.3.3 *Other environmental Stressors included the following:*

2.3.3.1 *Overload*

Overload refers to having work to complete which is either too difficult, or of which there is too much, to carry out in the time available. Findings, cited in Warr and Wall (1975) include the following: As a result of greater overload, employees felt stronger job-related tensions, (Sales, 1969) were lower on measures of self-esteem (French, Tupper & Mueller, 1965) exhibited higher blood-cholesterol levels and showed faster heart rates (French & Caplan, 1973).

2.3.3.2 *Acoustic Shock*

Acoustic shock is defined by the European Telecommunications Standards Institute as (cited in Queensland Government, Noise Advisory Standard, 2004, p.63): "any temporary or permanent disturbance of the functioning of the ear, or of the nervous system, which may be caused to the user of a telephone earphone by a sudden sharp rise in the acoustic pressure produced by it."

The condition can occur following a sudden sound from telephone handsets and headsets (referred to as an acoustic incident or spiking). A range of physiological symptoms may then be experienced including tinnitus, (ringing in the ears); vertigo (dizziness and loss of balance); a feeling of pressure or fullness in the ear; facial numbness; tingling, tenderness or soreness around the ear and neck; ear pain and often, burning sensations. In a very few cases loss of hearing may occur.

With the occurrence of an acoustic incident, the operator's reflex is stimulated or activated and takes time to return to its normal state. There is evidence that a stressed individual will

exhibit this response more easily than someone who is not suffering from stress. Following an incident the worker may then be in constant anticipation of the next loud sound. This becomes an issue because the ear muscle affected can 'learn' to react at lower noise levels thereby causing the psychological response to occur more easily in the worker, (Queensland Government, Health & Safety, 2003).

2.3.3.3 *Background Chatter*
Most call centres operate as an open office environment. In view of the loudness and constancy of conversations i.e. background chatter, the ambient (background) noise may rise to levels that interfere with good communication ability. This can be frustrating to both the worker and the caller and it may necessitate the operator turn up the volume on the headset in order to hear over the ambient noise, resulting in increased noise exposure, (Queensland Government, Noise Advisory Standard, 2004).

2.3.3.4 *Sexual Harassment*
To do justice to the multidimensional aspects of the construct ' sexual harassment', Fitzgerald (cited in Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000, p.122), defines sexual harassment over the telephone thus: "(it) consists of the sexualisation of an instrumental relationship through the introduction of sexual remarks or requests, in the context of a formal power differential. Harassment can also occur where no such formal differential exists if the behaviour is unwanted by or offensive to the person".
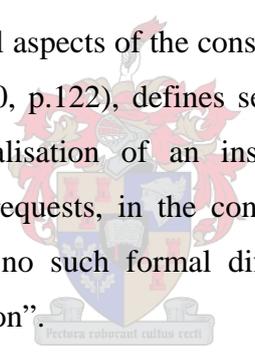
Lazarus (cited in Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000) states that the experiences of sexual harassment over the telephone will induce stress, reflected in affective, cognitive, and physical responses. Hence those who have been sexually harassed over the telephone have felt angry, uneasy, nervous, disgusted, abused and manipulated. Comparative studies between men and women determine that women experience greater measures of stress, and men's responses manifest in feelings of repulsion, rage and anger, judging the event to be negative and unpredictable. In the study by Sczesny and Stahlberg, (2000), more than one-half of the harassed participants felt stressed, thereby affecting job satisfaction and job performance in a negative way, having long term consequences for the whole organisations, such as higher absenteeism and employee turnover.

However, research on incidents of sexual harassment within the workplace has shown that the greatest problem for both victims and organisations is the diffusion of responsibility (Koen,

1989). Therefore it is important to define clearly who is responsible for taking special action to solve the problem. Furthermore policies should consist of strategies to improve the immediate situation of the victims, with the aim of reducing or even eliminating the phenomenon completely.

2.3.4   Occupational Stressors:

Wainright and Colman (2002) further deduce that as a result of any work stressors including those cited above, the following health and behavioural effects are encountered in the work place resulting in various manners of occupational stress:

Health and behavioural effects of Work Stress: Wainright and Colman (2002)

Physical Symptoms	*Mental health Symptoms*	*Social Symptoms*
Headaches & migraine	Irritability	Heavy drinking, smoking or use of drugs
Raised cholesterol	Withdrawal	Increased accident rates
Digestive tract disorders	Depression	Eating Disorders
Thyroid disorders	Burnout	Relationship breakdown
Pregnancy problems	Anxiety	Increased sickness / absence
Cold and other respiratory infections	Post-traumatic stress disorders	
Increased blood pressure	Suicide risk	
Heart disease	Low self-esteem	
Diabetes		
Sleepless nights		
Asthma		
Ulcers		
Increased cancer risk		
Menstrual disorders		
Lethargy		

The *Tasks Advisory Standard 2000* cited in (Queensland Government, 2003, Health & Safety) outlines a number of risk factors that add to environmental stressors and furthermore, may increase the likelihood of musculo-skeletal injury developing. These in turn are likely to cause increased stress to the agent and might include the following:

2.3.4.1 Working postures:

This refers to the physical nature of the agents' job, which is a sedentary one, where movements are small and centre around a work station. In this way the job allows for little overall movement with the same posture being held for hours at a time. Even though awkward postures (i.e. postures in which body parts are not in their normal, comfortable positions) may not cause any damage, when such a posture is repeatedly combined with other awkward positions, damage to muscles and other tissues may result, e.g. (e.g. when a worker is seated and reaching for a low desk drawer at a computer workstation or sitting at the workstation with the neck tilted backwards to view computer monitor: or, with the elbow away from the side of the body and the shoulder elevated to access and use the keyboard or mouse).

2.3.4.2 Repetition and Duration

Repetitive work is cited when the duration of a work cycle is less that 30 seconds and the work is performed continuously for a minimum of 60 minutes, as is often the case with the work of call centre agents. Repetitive movement reduces the rest and recovery time resulting in increased 'wear and tear' of body tissues and greater potential for muscle fatigue. This may then be followed by an inflammatory response and tissue damage.

Duration refers to the length of time a worker is exposed to a risk factor such as repetitive movement or awkward and / or static postures. The duration of a task can have a substantial effect on the likelihood of both general and muscle fatigue.

2.3.4.3 Work Area Design

Back pain and injury in call centres is linked to workers sitting for prolonged periods with little opportunity to vary their postures. Even with good chair design, prolonged sitting can lead to back pain caused by spinal intervertebral disc degeneration and other disorders

2.3.4.4 Work Organisation

Depending on how they are implemented, some organisational factors that may contribute detrimentally include:

(i)   Staffing levels – too many / too few workers for the demands of the work load

(ii)   Place of work and bonus schemes – if excessive demands are made on workers it can increase muscle tension and reduce functional capacity

(iii)   Lack of variability in tasks – the absence of changes in posture and the chance for recovery increases the load on muscles and tendons

(iv)   Inadequate rest breaks – contribute to fatigue and over exertion by not allowing enough time between activities (possibly leading to permanent soft tissue injury over time).

(v)   Role uncertainty (Ferris, 1996) - that the uncertainty of how to perform is as debilitating as lacking the authority to perform.

(vi)   Role ambiguity, conflict, and overload, (Cooper & Pane, 1988), particularly when coupled with real or perceived lack of control, and lack of social support especially from one's supervisors.

(vii)   Implementation of new equipment or plant restructuring often leads to stress and increases in injury (Lawson et al., 2001).

(viii)   Survivors of organisational downsizing have paid the price in increased job insecurity and declining morale which has been shown to increased stress and burnout (Cascio, cited in Lawson et al., 2001). Furthermore, these "walking wounded, become fearful of being retrenched themselves and the cognitive responses include, anxiety, reduced concentration, a sense of being out of control and hopelessness (Mishra & Spreitzer, cited in Lawson et al., 2001, p.100). They also tend to withdraw from work and procrastinate about decision making and may attempt to escape through absenteeism and lateness (Whithey & Cooper, cited in Lawson et al., 2001).

(ix)   Force-fed nature of the calls (ACD System – Automatic Call Distribution System) Houlihan (2000).

(x)   The monotonous and repetitive nature of calls often leads to agents 'losing it' as the pace increases, or towards the end of a busy day, Houlihan (2000).

At the beginning of this chapter, the concept of work dysfunction was introduced and defined and the causal role of stress manifesting in such dysfunction was examined. Environmental, organisational and occupational stressors were outlined, providing insight to the task or work related stressors inherent in a call centre job. Other factors too, intrinsic to call centre work, such as the inevitability of shift work, and emotional labour, will be discussed in the section below as these act as antecedents of stress with this environment.

2.4 ANTECEDENTS OF STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

2.4.1 *Work-life Imbalance*

Hyman et al., (2003) state that longer working hours, together with greater work intensification and heightened levels of occupational stress among workers is currently becoming one of the defining issues of the current employment scenario. It is further recognised that these interrelated factors can contribute to internal conflict for workers who have only "finite resources in terms of time and energy" to deal with both work and household pressures, (Cooper et al., cited in Hyman & Summers, 2004, p.420). Hyman and Summers (2004) support this notion and discuss the changing etymology of 'life', as initially it had been rather narrowly construed to imply 'family life' but a more inclusive perspective was deemed necessary in order to include free and leisure time, irrespective of family commitments. As a consequence there has been a political and organisational shift from 'family-friendly' conceptualisations of working practice toward those of 'work-life balance'.

Hacker and Doolen (2003) mention the rediscovery of employees as more than mere automatons, but human resources with mind potential too. This is comparable with Flecker and Hofbauer's 'new model worker' (cited in Hyman et al., 2003) who is encouraged to surrender his or her subjectivity and harness it to the goals of the organisation. Hacker and Doolen (2003, p.288), comparable with Houlihan (2000) also mention the necessity for organisations to foster creativity. Hence, by "holding spiritual rallies of a sort at work – not so different from Sunday night revivals…with fanfare, gigantic video screens, and inspirational speeches from organizational leaders, these rallies attempt to recharge the batteries of employees, at least for a time". Therefore, in taking on the body and soul of workers, organisations may well have created world class organisations, but often at the expense of 'low performing' families.

In this way, the choice has become work, or family in terms of time, physical strength, mental capacity and spiritual energies. Work often wins, but when considering organisational indicators, such as increased turnover, unplanned absenteeism, decreased company loyalty, and increased health benefit costs, the victory could be a Phyrric one. Hyman et al., (2003) cite that the overflow is subtle or insidious as a little more overtime (unpaid) and taking more and more work home are manifestations of the increased demands of work. They refer to these additional demands as tangible extensions of work, but cite that the resultant intangible extensions manifest in effects on health, exhaustion, feelings of stress, disturbed sleep

patterns, and tendencies to continue worrying about work following completion of contractual working hours.

Furthermore, Hacker and Doolen (2003) believe that the consequences of such extensions to the family dynamic may well include increased divorce rates, latch key kids, the breakdown of the extended family, and stress as likely outcomes. Certainly Crow and Hardey (cited, in Hyman et al., 2003) support this, believing that at a time when work is expected to play an increasingly dominant role in an individual's life, household life is becoming more complex, and in addition to the decline of the extended family, there is an increasing number of lone-parent households. Furthermore, household life has become more complex in terms of managing different relationships (step-relationships), as well as care for the elderly (often owing to longer life expectancy, certainly in more first world countries). It is pertinent to say, that in a South African context, where there is interplay between first and third world standards of living, the additional burden of HIV/Aids and its far reaching consequences is increasingly evident.

Hence Hyman et al., (2003, p.216) concede that "work and home are not separate domains, but operate within fluid and dynamic boundaries for which establishing normative balance can present considerable conceptual and practical difficulties in different work settings". From a call centre point of view, although work is seldom if at all taken home by the agent, spill-over is experienced through the difficulties of juggling complex patterns of working hours with domestic responsibilities and through the consequences for family life, including aspects of occupationally induced ill-health such as fatigue and stress.

2.4.1.1 *Work-Life Imbalance – "2nd Shift"*

Hyman et al., (2003) argue that while women's participation in paid work has been growing, there has been little change in patterns of household responsibilities, with women continuing to undertake the majority share of domestic labour (Charles & Kerr, cited in Hyman et al., 2003). These home demands, represented by family commitments, include having dependents or care responsibilities as well as household responsibilities. They tend to and are most likely to impact upon women who consequently, and as stated previously in the document, may be described as coming home to a 'second shift', (Hochschild, 1989).

2.4.1.2 The Importance of Work-life Balance for Mental Health

Hacker and Doolen (2003, p.288) cited, in a survey conducted in a company where stress was nearing epidemic proportions, a comment which was startling in its representation of the current working environment. The comment was, "Work is not life". They continue to comment that:

" If work is not life then what is it – time out from life? Has the separation viewpoint been emphasized so much that some people are no longer simply living two lives, one home life and one work life, but have progressed to the point of living a home life and a non-life?" Alternatively, they could pose instead that they are living a work life and little else. Either way, when considering the words of Freud, mentioned earlier, and taking note of the inner intentions and needs of people, it is imperative that work-life balance is sustained not only in call centres, but in organisations as a whole.

2.4.2   Shift Work

As stated previously in this document, McGreevy (2003), describes many of the economic drivers necessitating the advent of service availability 24/7. Thus this service demand, clearly gives rise to the shift work processes, especially in industries reliant on human rather than mechanical skills, and also paves the way for complex human resource management challenges.   In fact Brooks (1997) describes shift work as one of the many complex, controversial and unresolved human resource issues within the health care and service industry. Indeed, many occupational stressors have resulted from shift work, but foremost, according to Smith and Wederburn (1998), are unsociable working hours and fatigue. They further state that such stressors often cause performance errors which manifest in either production error and resultant decreased quality, as well as increased workplace accidents, and injuries. In this way, customer call agents might not perform as satisfactorily as they are able, clients might be dissatisfied, and ultimately this could result in their taking their business elsewhere. It is important therefore, from a human relations and industrial point of view to assess the effects of shift work, not only in terms of fatigue and working hours which cause social disruption, but other occupational stressors which result ultimately is loss of productivity, poor morale, absenteeism and increased human resource management challenges.

It is interesting to note however that although literature is plentiful concerning the effects of shift work, there is no international guideline on which to create a template for effective shift work scheduling, (Ahasan 2002). He continues to assert that at present "there is little information available in the literature that supports the effective design of shift schedules, which offer effective productivity levels, while maintaining the health and safety of shift workers and offering them appropriate levels of job satisfaction," (Ahasan, 2002, p.9). He further cites that much of the legislation is old and out of date, and that the international guidelines on shift work, that do exist, e.g. (OSHA, (Occupational Safety Health Administration) 1979; ILO (International Labour Organisation) 1988, 1990, 1993) even though available, cannot be easily implemented in many workplaces. Hence he concludes that in terms of shift work, there is little recourse to effective information regarding resting periods or work-rest regimes. It would appear therefore, that hinged on the urgency of organisational restructuring in the wake of service demands, shift work scheduling centred more around the needs of the organisation, rather that on a thorough knowledge of the needs of and effects on the call centre agents. One such initial and obvious problem was that of basic communication, and Ahasan, (2002) emphasises that at the very least workers should be made aware of possible risks of work-related exposure to harmful or irritating substances and conditions. Bettinghaus, (cited in Ahasan, 2002), believes that not only does simple communication promote awareness of health, hygiene and safety risks, but it can increase one's knowledge about circadian rhythms, regular sleep, naps, diet and other activities.

2.4.2.1 <u>Fatigue</u>

When excessive hours are worked per day, with too little time off in between work shifts, and when too little time is taken between work shifts and too many consecutive days are worked without rest days, it is believed that fatigue is experienced. Paley and Tepas (1994); Smith (1979). Furthermore, Hildebrandt and Rosa, (cited in Smith et al., 1992), discovered that such fatigue and tiredness are essentially cumulative, hence exacerbating the problem especially in organisations where inadequate roster design or scheduling is implemented. Tilley et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997) also support the notion of the cumulative effect of fatigue, stating that efficiency declines towards the end of a week on night shift, owing to a progressive sleep deprivation.

This, therefore, highlights the need for effective scheduling and provision for reducing the phenomenon. In this way, rest breaks during work periods are designed to provide time for workers to overcome the fatigue arising from the work and to allow workers to attend to personal needs (such as going to the toilet), but even though the research on rest breaks is limited Ahasan, (2002) believes that the breaks do influence the workers' physical and psychological well being, and in so doing, might affect productivity levels. Ahasan (2002) continues to surmise that an effective reduction of fatigue and work stress can be achieved under some optimum break schedule, and that it may be e.g. that longer break periods are required towards the end of a working day / shift as fatigue levels rise.

Saito and Sasaki, (cited in Ahasan, 2002) discovered that scheduled naps during short breaks (of at least 30 minutes) can improve alertness in night shifts. The reality however, is that providing such 'nap breaks' is both rare, and perhaps impractical. However, Harma et al., (cited in Ahasan, 2002) instead, suggest the encouragement of proper and appropriate sleep patterns at home, perhaps through an alertness-counselling program. In addition, they purport that the balance of sleep wakefulness has also been shown to be influenced by physical fitness.

Of import too, is Ahasan's (2002) belief that in addition to the more obvious physical relationships between shift work and adjustment, human adaptation to shift work is influenced by individuals' cognitive, psychosocial, economical and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, fatigue levels are affected by environmental and climatic conditions, by familiarity with job activity, and by factors such as working conditions, job content, tasks, and the work organisation. Zapf et al., (2003) and Houlihan (2000) have drawn attention to the routine nature and monotony of the call centre agents' work, and Rosa and Bonnet, (cited in Ahasan, 2002) believe that this too plays a part in the effects of fatigue. However, Ahasan (2002) advises that the provision of frequent breaks is not usually advisable for monotonous tasks.

A different type of fatigue, more physiological in design, occurs during night shifts when the normal human circadian rhythms, or sleep-wake cycles are disrupted, Akerstedt, (cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998). Di Milia, (also cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998) mentions that this disruption is associated with sleep loss because daytime sleep is shorter than night time sleep. Furthermore he purports that alertness is lowest when working at night. This is supported by Tepas, et al., (cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998) who after extensive research,

undertaken over many years across many industries demonstrates that night work reduces human performance efficiency and well-being. This research indicates that it is not night shift per se that causes the decrease in human efficacy, but rather the continuous switching and swapping of shifts. (e.g. in terms of the call centre – change-overs between shifts). What then, is the most effective shift?

2.4.2.2 *Shifts, Schedules and Social Disruptions*

Although much research has been conducted on shift work, with reference to the best ways to organise 24 hour staffing, there are only limited studies directly comparing participants' sleep characteristics on permanent night and rotating shifts. (Brooks, 1997). The outcomes, nevertheless are significant:

The average sleep for those on permanent night shift is 6.72 hours (between night duties);
The average sleep for those on rapidly rotating shifts is just 5.79 hours; and
The average sleep for those on weekly rotating shifts 6.3 hours.

Clearly, these average findings indicate that permanent night staff enjoy the longest duration of sleep. The difference between permanent night shifts and rapidly rotating shifts too, is statistically significant (Barton & Wilkinson, cited in Brooks, 1997) and necessitates consideration when shift work scheduling. However, Mullaney et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997) believe that provided workers average at least six hours' daily sleep, performance, for most people is not adversely affected. Therefore relating to the above statistics, it would appear that both permanent night shift and weekly rotating shift staff gain sufficient sleep. However, observations would appear somewhat mundane if Wilkinson (cited in Ahasan, 2002) were not to caution that *for some individuals,* work, safety and general well-being are substantially impaired (because of sleep deprivation) even on permanent night shift. By the same token, and in keeping with Wilkinson's conclusions those working on rapidly rotating shifts appear not to achieve sufficient sleep, and hence the likelihood of some work, social or family dysfunction is increasingly presumed.

In an experiment concerning shift work and staff turnover in a call centre, conducted by Pollitt (2003, p.12), findings revealed one major issue that a three week rolling shift pattern "did not provide staff with enough stability with which to balance their home and work commitments." Furthermore this became increasingly apparent for women with child-care

responsibilities, as it made arrangements for child care much more complex. Indeed, literature is scattered with references of the adverse affects of shift work and Ahasan et al., (2002) in their case study on the psychosocial implications of shift work, particularly with reference to a rotating shift format, found that there were many negative associations for the individual, for partners, for families and for friends. Interestingly a total of 83 % of the subjects claimed that they suffered from health problems; 85 % had sleep disturbance, and 78 % experienced mealtime irregularities.

In support of the above findings, Barton (cited in Brooks, 1997) too, found significantly more social disruptions between successive night shifts among rotating staff than those on permanent nights.

Mullaney et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997) cites family and social disruption, together with excessive fatigue as the cause of increased sickness, absence, and lower job satisfaction. Although he suggests that sleep deprivation is a causal factor in the incidence of such work-related problems, he believes that stress and underperformance are consequent factors too. However, Colligan and Rosa (cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998) contend that stressors are exacerbated during the unsociable hours, these being linked to weekend work, evening and night work and morning shifts that start very early. This is the case as working these hours tends to disrupt normal family life (Barling, cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998). In addition it has been found that parental and partner roles are also impacted (Barton et al., Bunnage; and Repetti, (cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998). Colligan and Rosa, (cited in Smith & Wedderburn, 1998) further purported that such hours of work also disrupt community involvement.

Of course in terms of 'normal' working arrangements, the evening is the most common time for social contact with family and friends and it stands to reason that any prolonged period of evening or night shift working will hinder social contact and may cause stress and resentment. (Ahasan et al., 2002). Therefore, when scheduling shifts, such factors should be recognised, as well as avoiding very early starts for morning shifts or quick change-overs from night shifts to afternoon shifts. In addition, a number of researchers (Ahasan, et al., 2002) believe that suitable timing of shifts and breaks can enable greater productivity, while retaining a sustainable shift system, and in fact Knauth, (cited in Ahasan, 2002, p.13) talks of such design changes as "production boosters". Folkard (cited in Ahasan, 2002) suggests that this can be

done in such a way that enhances workers' health and safety and meets many of their social and familial needs. Hornberger; and Knauth (both cited in Ahasan, 2002, p.13) have also proposed an investigation into "optimal working time", i.e. making use of the productive hours within a shift, and designing the shifts around these hours in conjunction with the needs of the organisation.

According to Ahasan et al., (2002) working schedules should be re-examined at intervals to ensure that the particular mix of work and rest remains consistent with the changing nature of work and of the working environment. This is particularly true where the workload is heavy and fatigue is significant.

However, while the 'which shift?' debate rages on, researchers have revealed that often a causal variable influencing the effects of shift work is the element of choice of shift pattern given to shift workers, (Brooks, 1997). Research findings, intuitive arguments and anecdotal knowledge all indicate that, if given the choice of shifts, many of the reported ills of shift working are reduced, negated or even reversed. Researchers (Barton & Skipper et al., cited in Brooks, 1997) have stressed the significance of the individual circumstances of each shift worker in influencing whether they chose to work nights to facilitate the sharing of childcare responsibilities (Robson & Wedderburn, cited in Brooks, 1997) and domestic commitments (Barton, cited in Brooks, 1997) to allow them time at home with their young children (Gadbois, cited in Brooks, 1997) and enjoy the added financial incentive (Barton, cited in Brooks, 1997). Barton continues that "tolerance to night work appears to increase when individuals have made the decision to work at night", (Barton, cited in Brooks, 1997, p.63). This evidence suggests that the element of free choice by staff of the shift they are to work appears to relieve many of the reported problems of shift work suggesting that compulsion, especially to work nights or rotate shifts, leads to more reported health problems, lower job satisfaction, potentially reduced sleep and other problems. (Brooks, 1997). And finally, in the light of this, it would seem intuitively sound to argue that the availability of a choice of shift might reduce absentee rates and that both actual and self-reported health problems will have a bearing on the outcome.

2.4.2.3 Physical and Mental Health

There has been considerable research conducted in a wide variety of organisational, occupational and international contexts which reveals an increased incidence of health problems associated with shift work (Akerstedt; Barton; Gadbois; Rutenfranz et al., and Walker, (all cited in Brooks, 1997) including sleep-wake disorders, gastrointestinal problems, emotional disorders and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease. Furthermore Akerstedt and Trosvall, (cited in Brooks, 1997) believe that coping mechanisms of the shift workers related principally to tolerance levels. This might well be affected by factors such as the pace and type of work, and the nature of personal sleep patterns, as well as social and family life. They further claim that a lack of tolerance may result in a general malaise, accumulated fatigue, loss of harmony in circadian rhythm, as well as digestive and neurological problems. Costa and Koller, (cited in Brooks, 1997) believe that the improved provision of medical treatment facilities and health surveillance can also play an important role in improving worker tolerance.

Folkard, (cited in Brooks, 1997) suggests that, as a rule, night as opposed to day workers report significantly higher levels of stress. However, based on a study conducted by Tasto et al., on nurses, (cited in Brooks, 1997), they purport that permanent night nurses reported lower levels of stress than temporary or rotating staff. The highest levels of stress overall were reported by under 30 year old night shift workers, and lowest levels by over 30 year old night shift workers. Hence, age is an important variable, together with shift pattern worked, in susceptibility to self reported stress. While the Tasto et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997) study focuses on the particular variables associated with nursing, parallels are drawn regarding the incidence of manifestations of stress in certain age groups. (Greenhaus et al., 2000).

Verhaegen et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997) assigns the relationship between shift work and stress to either an internal or external locus of control stating that those workers who were able to control their lives through the ability to choose their shift reported a more favourable evaluation. E.g. those working a permanent night shift as opposed to their rotating shift colleagues reported a 'good family life more friendly atmosphere (at night), and increased independence. On the other hand, when the rotating shift workers worked the night shift they stated that (night work) "gives me indigestion, is tiring, disturbs my sleep, makes me irritable, restricts my social life, is boring, is lonely and upsets my appetite", (Brooks, 1997, p.61). In

this way, clearly the more favourable evaluations received by permanent staff is attributable to the element of choice they exercised over shift scheduling. Permanent night shifts suited their domestic arrangements, better satisfied their financial aspirations and fitted their psychological and physiological capabilities.

A corollary to the above would include improvements in the decision-making process, while exercising a degree of flexibility to meet individual needs in scheduling. This in turn would go a long way in ensuring that sustainable job satisfaction is attained. In conclusion, the case for permanent night or rotating shifts is unclear, although the balance of evidence is in favour of greater permanency or consistency. (Brooks, 1997).

However, in contrast to the above, even though longer term or more consistent shifts might be beneficial to the worker for many social, economic, emotional needs, it is questioned as to whether the individual's circadian rhythm is ever fully adjusted to such shift work, (Ahasan et al., 2002). In fact there is debate concerning the extent to which shift workers' circadian rhythms adjust to night work routines. Furthermore, there is a general agreement that lack of adjustment is a causal factor of higher incidences of health (physical and mental) problems, sleep disorder, dissatisfaction at work, and reduced job performance, (Ahasan et al., 2002). Even over many successive night shifts, full adjustment of the circadian system remains incomplete, and (Fokard, Knauth & Rutenfranz, cited in Brooks, 1997, p.64). The researchers conclude, "that long-term adjustment can occur in permanent full-time night nurses, thus manifesting itself in a developed capacity for short-term adjustment rather than a permanent flattening of the rhythm". Although Fokard (cited in Brooks, 1997) also argues that the extent of adjustment of circadian rhythms depends on the maintenance of a nocturnal routine on rest days. Others have suggested, somewhat more tentatively that the circadian pattern of body temperature can adjust almost completely to continuous night work of about 21 days where there are no days off to disrupt the adaptation (Akerstedet and Knauth et al., cited in Brooks, 1997). But this rarely happens in a practical context, so the findings are not necessarily relevant.

In general, the endogenous circadian body clock of a shift worker does not adjust to night work within one week (Knauth, cited in Brooks, 1997). Therefore it is important that shift rostering embraces this knowledge and schedules accordingly. Hakkinen, (cited in Brooks, 2002) believes that too short a shift rota exposes the human body to excessive stress, while

Folkard, et al., (cited in Brooks, 1997), claim that the perturbation in rhythm plays an important role in influencing workers' performance. Therefore, when adjusting shift schedules, a knowledge of the likely effects on circadian rhythm must be added to the mix of factors used to minimise the accumulation of fatigue of shift workers (Ahasan et al., (2002).

2.4.2.4 *Ergonomic and External Factor Considerations*

Kerkhof (cited in Ahasan, 2002) found that individual differences and circumstances in relation to shift work, play an important role regarding health, safety and high performance. Factors outside work such as living in areas of high noise, family angst and tension, are prone to affect both sleep cycles and overall tolerance of shift work. Folkard, (cited in Brooks, 1997) believes that even though external factors, as well as the nature of the work, the workload and individual tolerance have major roles in the adaptation to shift work, adjustment can be improved where effective ergonomic design is in place. This is crucially important, and in the Tasks Advisory Standard (Queensland, 2003) it lists certain risk factors that increase the likelihood of musculo-skeletal injury developing. These include working postures, repetition and duration, and work area design. (As discussed earlier in this chapter).

Other researchers have noted external factors which may or may not have a bearing on shift work improvement and employee efficacy: Czeisler et al., (cited in Ahasan, 2002) observed that bright light can be used to good effect too, in that during a night shift, it can quickly reset the biological clock and can also improve alertness. However, the cost of introducing appropriate bright lights and using them effectively is high and is often impractical. This too parallels the Hawthorn Theory, whereby productivity improved due to care of the workers rather than the overall effect of any proposed change. Wongphanich et al., (cited in Ahasan, 2002) also found that shift work can affect a worker's sensitivity to physical, chemical or biological substance, dust, or noise.

2.4.2.5 *Shift Rostering – Towards Finding a Solution*

While Pollitt (2003) outlines the view that levels of dissatisfaction with the shift system tend to outweigh any positive views of other work factors, and that as a result overall job satisfaction when working shifts is unlikely, others contend that any shifts are manageable if given the option to choose which one. When given this choice, it has been found that

absenteeism is reduced, job satisfaction sustained and worker efficacy noted. (Ahasan et al., 2002). Additionally, As Barton and Fokard, (cited in Brooks, 1997) purport, it is quite plausible that an individual's choice may be influenced by their perceived ability of the adjustment of their circadian rhythms or at least their abilities not to allow incomplete adjustment to adversely influence their motivation and general capacity. Furthermore, they argue that commitment to night working will better ensure adaptation of circadian rhythms. Wilkinson, (cited in Brooks, 1997) adopts this argument, after completing a wide-ranging debate crossing multiple sectors and occupation groups. He felt that permanent night shift would be favourable over the internal rotation system. Moreover he recommends that if "people can be found and encouraged to work the night shift permanently, then perhaps it is not too presumptuous to suggest that the best compromise of acceptability, productivity and health will be realised, " (Wilkinson, cited in Brooks, 1997, p.65).

Ahasan et al., (2002) recommend that further study be undertaken to more fully understand the relationship between various forms of shift working and the satisfaction levels of workers. They also feel that a better understanding is needed of the relationships between shift patterns and fatigue levels.

Hence the area of shift work and work dysfunction is yet unchartered, and further research could reveal interesting and far reaching industrial consequences. It does, however, suggest that particular work regimes might cause problems for workers and that such problems are likely to result in less than optimal performance. In this way, it would be pertinent for management to attempt to identify such problems and to work with the agents to discover whether (within the local and or global economic framework, and organisational structure) changes to the shift rosters could alleviate the worst of the problems and bring real benefits for both workers and organisation. Indeed Ahasan et al., (2002) confirm and support this suggestion, as there is no one 'right' solution. Furthermore, however, they believe that by synchronising shift workers' socio–cultural attitudes and relevant aspects of work systems, management too could reduce fatigue and go some way in reducing work dysfunction.

2.4.3 Emotional Dissonance

2.4.3.1 <u>Introduction</u>

As mentioned previously, call centre work can be described as a mode of Taylorism (Zapf et al., (2003) owing to its characteristic routine tasks and the agents' low levels of control. Even though these two factors alone are thought to create a stressful environment, the organisational policy to avoid any expression of negative emotion, and in fact, rather to work with a smile adds fuel to the fire, requiring agents to develop coping mechanisms, which when they do not work, often result in emotional dissonance. Indeed, Holman (2003) mentions the relatively short-cycle routine interactions of the call centre agents, and confirms their decreased levels of control owing to the automatic call distribution systems, (ACD) the reliance on network information technologies which both in turn, inhibit freedom or scope of when or with whom to speak. Holman, (2003) also cites the expectation that call centre agents are always friendly. Deary et al., 2000, p.472) confirm that agents are "actively discouraged from arguing with the customer and were expected to be polite and maintain a calm demeanour in all circumstances". Furthermore, employees are expected to limit their emotions in order to create a desired 'state of mind' in the customer, and this has been characterised as "smiling down the telephone", (Deary et al., 2000, p.472). Erickson and Wharton (cited in Pruijt, 2000, p.440) contend that employees are expected to "appear happy, nice and glad to serve the customer". Clearly, then literature asserts this notion of presenting or even fabricating emotions that are aligned to organisational policies (Morris & Feldman, 1997, cited in Deary & Iverson, 2000), and this manoeuvring of emotions is described by Gordon (cited in Deary et al., 2002) as the commoditisation of emotions.

Hence at this juncture, three factors alone are thought to increase stress levels in call centre agents, namely reduced control, monotony of task as well as the high degree of personal contact with the public and the performance of what has been termed by Hochschild, (1989) emotional labour (Deary et al., 2000). It is thought that such workers, who have little flexibility in negotiating their relationships with customers can be expected to suffer more negative consequences from the performance of emotional labour. (Hochschild, 1989). Indeed studies conducted by Zapf et al., (2003) relating to stressors within call centres revealed that call centre agents suffered significantly more from psychosomatic complaints than employees in banks and administrative offices. Hochschild, (1989) based on the work of Goffman (1959), identified the roles that people play in different circumstances in order to

create a particular impression. I.e. agents often exert effort to publicly display certain emotions and hide others during interpersonal interactions. E.g. amplifying their displays of enthusiasm to deliver quality service (Pugh, cited in Cote, 2005).

These impressions are merely the "display of normatively appropriate emotions", (Houlihan, 2000, p.237) and as this is a general social behavioural response agents are no different to their customers or clients in their display of emotions. (Zapf et al., (2003). In the same way, "agents cannot be assumed to be always in a good mood", and owing to the nature of their job, might indeed experience many angry episodes, (Deary et al., 2002, p.475). However, emotion work is the domain of call centre work, and as such the display of organisationally desired emotions is required, even in unpleasant situations. In this way, emotion work can be defined as "the psychological processes necessary to regulate organisationally desired emotions as part of one's job", (Zapf et al., (2003, p.315).

2.4.3.2 *What are Emotion Labour, Emotion Work and Emotional Dissonance?*

Emotion work is defined by Morris and Feldman (cited in Dollard et al., 2003, p.86) as "the effort, planning, and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions"

Emotional Labour, according to Ashforth and Humphrey (cited in Lewig & Dollard, 2003, p.368) is a double-edged sword, as it seeks to facilitate task effectiveness, but it may also become dysfunctional thereby resulting in emotional dissonance. Hence emotional labour serves to provide the agent with an emotional mechanism in which to cope with customer interactions. In this way a certain degree of objectivity is maintained, the agent is able to distance him/herself somewhat from the interaction and hence allows for emotion management. This may thereby elicit empowerment in the agent, as he/she is able to "project at least some of the authentic self into the enactment" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p.94). Hochschild (1989, p.78) originally defined emotional labour as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display."

However, **emotional dissonance** is said to have occurred when there is disparity between the felt emotions and the displayed emotions, and may be represented as a form of work dysfunction. Thus, emotional dissonance occurs when an employee is required to express

emotions that are not genuinely felt in the particular situation. A person may feel neutral while required to display a particular emotion, or alternatively the display rule may require the suppression of undesired emotions and the expression of neutrality or a positive emotion instead of a negative one, (Zapf et al., 2003). Interestingly, studies on emotional dissonance consistently found correlations with emotional exhaustion, (Morris, Feldman, Nerdinger & Roper; Schaubroeck & Jones, (cited in Zapf et al., (2003).

Furthermore, this incongruence between feeling and action, (emotional dissonance) may ultimately lead to lower self esteem, depression, cynicism, and alienation from work. (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Similarly, "self-alienation may result when the worker ceases to recognise or even feel authentic emotions." (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p. 99).

In terms of the Frankfurt Emotional Work Scale (FEWS), Vogt, Seifert, Mertini and Isic (cited in Zapf et al., 2003) five factors of emotional labour are differentiated:

- ❖ the requirement to display positive emotions;
- ❖ the requirement to display negative emotions;
- ❖ the necessity to display sensitivity to the needs of the client (sensitivity requirements);
- ❖ the ability of an employee to decide when to engage in an interaction with a client and when that interaction will end (interaction control); and
- ❖ emotional dissonance.

Morris and Feldman (cited in Zapf, 2003) proposed that frequency and duration of emotional labour did not directly impact on employee well-being, but it could do so, through emotional dissonance. By the same token, Zapf et al., (2003) propose that the requirements to display positive emotions, negative emotions, and sensitivity requirements are not necessarily stressful but may also become so through emotional dissonance. Lewig and Dollard (2003) further propose that emotional dissonance is more important than other forms of emotional labour in accounting for variance in emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. In addition, such regulation of both negative and positive emotions requires a degree of self-control. However, self-control is a limited resource, and the COR theory predicts that this depletion causes strain (Hobfoll, 1989).

Kruml and Geddes (cited in Cote, 2005) maintain that emotion too, has a bearing on the clients, both in terms of effect, (how the agent manifests positive, negative or neutral emotions in them) or in terms of their own particular state of mind during the call. Therefore agents, regarding customer care requirements are also required to be accurate in their perceptions of the client and respond accordingly. This, according to Zapf et al., (2003) is another aspect of the emotion work concept. Cote (2005) terms these experiences as intrapersonal (effects of emotions on own behaviour) and interpersonal (effect of emotions on the behaviour of others).

2.4.3.3 The Effects of Emotional Dissonance

Zapf et al., (2003) revealed that relatively high levels of emotional dissonance were experienced in all call centres independent of the specific call centre, and result in increased stress or strain for the agents. This together with low complexity, and low resources were deemed the established problems of working in call centres. Furthermore, strict adherence to rules regarding customer interaction in terms of both behaviour and dialogue are also enforced and thus limit the agents' ability and freedom to cope with stressors. Dollard et al., (2003) agree that such emotional dissonance leads to a loss of the capability to regulate one's emotions, and serves as one of the major stressors in human service work. Zapf et al., (2003) contend that emotional dissonance can be experienced by employees if they are required to express emotions that they do not genuinely feel, which can result in feelings of hypocrisy and may ultimately lead to lowered self esteem and depression. Certainly Dollard et al., (2003) support this belief stating that emotional dissonance is associated with ill-health, although Brotheridge and Grandey, (cited in Zapf et al., 2003) suggest that only the demand to hide negative emotions was related to burnout, whereas having to display positive emotions was positively related to personal accomplishment. Support for negative consequences of emotional dissonance is evident in the comments made by call centre agents themselves, in a study conducted by Brotheridge and Lee, (cited in Zapf et al., 2003), where overwhelmingly the most stressful aspect of call centre work was dealing with angry, abusive and dissatisfied customers. This suggests that dissonance between felt emotions and emotional display rather than the requirement to express positive emotions per se, contributes to strain and job dissatisfaction among the studied group of call centre workers.

Clearly emotional dissonance affects all human service workers, even though they may vary in the extent to which their work involves lasting relationship with clients / customers, and in the amount of training they have received to deal with client / customer-related social stressors.

Hence, Dollard et al., (2003, p.90) assert that social support and training designed to develop "role separation" are crucial resources needed to help service workers cope with the unique emotion stressors of their jobs.

Finally, given the rapid growth of the call centre industry it is important from a practical perspective that organisations are aware of the impact of the emotional and psychological demands of call centre work on their employees in order to optimise the effectiveness and well-being of front-line workers and decrease levels of job dissatisfaction, work dysfunction and the resultant costs of turnover and absenteeism.

2.4.3.4 *Agent Personality and Age*

Carrithers, (cited in Schabracq, 2000, p.229) talks about this current technological age as being confronted with an "unprecedented acceleration of change", and he surmises that this global competition is bound to have undesired outcomes for all parties involved, because it may lead to exhaustion, and even total breakdown of the conflicting parties. Although some researchers appear dramatic in their concern of the pace of industrial change, Cumming and Cooper, (cited in Le Fevre et al., 2003, p. 728) merely contend that "the best fitting" ("the one most apt in adapting to a certain environmental niche") parties will make the grade. And making the grade, is pacing oneself (individuals, entrepreneurs, organisations, industries, nations) "in adapting to a continuously changing environment that demands a highly flexible approach, based upon a developmental process that matches the environmental one".

2.4.3.5 *Emotional Intelligence*

The above is very relevant to the staffing of call centres as human resource officers are constantly at pains to employ 'the right fit' and continue to seek means for reducing turnover and curbing the resultant recruitment and training costs, (Higgs, 2004). In this way, attempts have been made to offset attrition through the implementation of 'high commitment' employment practices, and these include the recruitment of staff based on emotional

intelligence criteria. Those in favour of this practice, stress the merit of spending more money on fine-tuning the recruitment and selection processes, thereby ensuring that they have the right person for the job, as in general their studies of recruitment procedures have revealed that there "does not appear to be a significant emphasis on interpersonal skills and personal resilience", (Higgs, 2004, p.444). Instead, it appears that the economic driver in the call centre is more focused on the cost of recruitment for adequate performance than the value of identifying the characteristics of outstanding performance.

In the light of this, Dukewicz et al., (cited in Higgs, 2004) conducted a study in a call centre regarding the relationship between emotional intelligence and performance, and they considered the following characteristics of import concerning general coping abilities and thus sustainable tenure:

* Self-awareness
* Emotional resilience
* Motivation
* Interpersonal sensitivity
* Influence
* Intuitiveness
* Conscientiousness and integrity
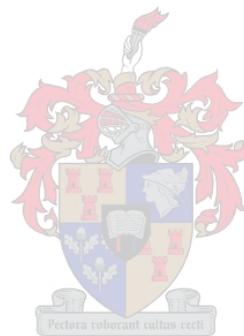
Results from the study proved the importance of empathy and interpersonal skills in call centre work, as well as demonstrated the negative (and significant) correlation between the EI elements of intuitiveness and agent performance. Thus it was proved that the constrained and controlled nature of the work in call centres limits the freedom of agents to make decisions outside set parameters. This notion of locus control was studied by (Gleitman, cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004) and his findings support those of Dukewicz et al., (cited in Higgs, 2004) in that those agents with a strong external locus of control feel they lack the ability, skill authority, or attention from others to have any influence on their work. Consequently as locus of control is strongly dependent on self-esteem or personal self-confidence, those individuals with a high self–esteem or strong internal locus of control are likely to respond to new or different tasks with a less severe stress response than those with a low self-esteem, or strong external locus of control. (Raitano & Kleiner, 2004).

Hence EI theorists believe that certain personality factors or elements (namely, conscientiousness, emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal sensitivity, and to an extent, self awareness) could assist in more accurate selection of call centre agents and thereby improve retention, (Higgs, 2004).

However, Muchinsky and Tuttle, (cited in Paine, 1992) believe that personality traits are not consistently related to turnover. Instead, behavioural theorists suggest that behaviour depends more on the transactions or interactions between people and their environment, rather than on individual predispositions. (Mischel, cited in Paine, 1992).

Maddi and Kobasa, (cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004) argue that there are hardy personalities who are generally less prone to stressors, as they display three common characteristics, namely commitment, control and challenge. Commitment is the level of curiosity and interest toward a task. Control, (internal locus of control) is the perception of one's abilities and skills as sufficient to achieve a goal despite obstacles. Challenge – by viewing one's work as a challenge, they see an opportunity for creativity, innovation and individual achievement. Thus they believe that such hardy personalities would be best predisposed to call centre work, although interestingly they also state that the most significant stress modifier is the employee's social support group. (Maddi & Kobasa, cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004).

Lowman (1993) looks at the factors of A-type personalities in determining stress tolerance. Lawler and Schmied, (cited in Lowman, 1993) found that the combination of Type A behaviour and the perception of limited ability to control the situation was likely to have cardiovascular implications. Certainly Lowman (1993) cites that although a controversial topic and as yet not comprehensively empirically founded, in the workplace, Type A workers are apparently more likely to experience stress, with work dysfunction consequences. Further studies imply (Blaney, Brown, Blancey & Greenglass, cited in Wainright & Colman, 2002, p. 61) that Type A workers are more likely to be negatively affected by work stressors, and that they "to some extent create their own stress on the job and are less likely to know how to ameliorate its effects at least through the use of social support".

Finally, in a study on job strain, by Zani and Pietrantoni (2001), it was consistently revealed that women report more symptoms, both psychological and psychosomatic, than men. This could be due to the fact that women tend to be more honest than men in describing somatic

complaints, and more often than not, men tend to deny difficulties more frequently than women.

Clearly the findings regarding stress tolerance, personality type and the role of the call centre agent are as yet undefined. Psychometric testing, in conjunction with contextual application, as well as an emotional intelligence outlook, may assist in determining more suitable candidates for the job, who owing to their specific traits may tolerate more stress. However, it would appear that further comprehensive research in this regard, is indicated.

2.4.3.6 *Age of the Call Centre Agent*

Others might argue that rather than focusing on elements of emotional intelligence, fewer attrition, absenteeism, and retraining costs would be incurred if the majority of call centre agents fell into the middle aged category (Greenhaus et al., 2000). At present, the national average age of agents is 26, and the average age of team leaders is 30. (Deloitte, Key Result Indicator, 2004). In terms of career stages, the ages from 22 – 28 mark the entry life structure for early adulthood. This is the time in a young person's life when they enter into the adult world, but need to face up to "two potentially conflicting tasks: (1) to explore adulthood by trying out different roles (e.g. jobs, relationships) while keeping one's options open, and (2) to settle down and create a stable life structure" (Greenhaus et al., 2000, p.110). This would indicate that in a regular job without the demands of shift hours, nor the stressful nature of the work, it is a challenging enough time. It would appear that the apparent inflexibility of call centre conditions, could deem one's options very narrow indeed. This in turn would produce the likely result of high job dissatisfaction and turnover, and career growth frustration, which could act as triggers for exacerbating stress and resultant organisational sabotage. From this perspective, it is understandable then, how the more senior agents, whom might well be settled, have grown families, and are happy to make the call centre their career, could be the better candidates for the job.

2.5 CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS (I.E. DYSFUNCTIONAL COPING MECHANISMS IN TRYING TO ALLEVIATE STRESS)

2.5.1 *Eating Pattern Disruption*

2.5.1.1 *Introduction*

The role of the call centre agent is a sedentary one, particularly so designed so as to minimise time away from the telephone and thus ensure productivity and call targets. As a result the work station has been ergonomically designed so that the required functionality is at the agents' fingertips. Thus very little activity is exerted throughout the shift. Lowell (2004, p.238) states that "the more calories we take in and the less we exercise the bigger we get; and the bigger we become the more susceptible we are to life threatening conditions such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers". He continues to add that the situation is complicated by the fact that certain types of foods, such as those containing high levels of salt and animal fats, may also contribute to a person's lack of well-being. This is important as the foods on offer at the canteens and on the snack trolley wheeled periodically around the call centre mostly contain foods of this kind. (Focus Group Discussion, November / December, 2005). From an industrial point of view, it is also valid, as although the costs of obesity, cannot be strictly measured, the costs of all associated illnesses, accidents, absence from work in relation to obesity can be measured, and according to the IOTF "between 2-8 per cent of the total sick care costs in Western countries are attributable to obesity", Lowell (2004, p.238).

In addition, snacking for nourishment in place of meals has become popular due to convenience and time saving. This in a sense equates to the gradual ceding of nutritional control to others, as food in many households is no longer prepared at home, (Lowell, 2004). Indeed the US National Bureau of Economic Research suggests that 65 % of obesity is caused by fast food and snacks, (Lowell, 2004). Certainly the modern age has reduced physical output in favour of technological convenience, and increasingly modern societies are drawn into 24/7 operations necessitating the implementation of shift work. This in turn disrupts Work-life structures as shifts often run over meal and meal-preparation times, resulting in either fast food consumption or consuming meals at irregular times, not necessarily conducive to effective nutrition and digestion.

2.5.1.2 Effects of Shift Work on Eating Imbalances

Many factors influence eating schedules including food supply and availability, hunger satiety, social habits and convenience (Fieldhouse & De Castro, cited in Reeves, 2004). Therefore, it stands to reason that shift work too, would disrupt normal eating patterns, could cause changes in food intake and have an effect on shift workers' overall health. In a study conducted by Mason, (cited in Reeves, 2004), it was found that in addition to food intake patterns, shift workers are also known to consume more stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine than their day working counterparts. There is also reportedly an increased amount of alcohol consumed by night workers on their days off, often with the mistaken belief that this will aid sleep. In this way night-shift workers are increasing caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol consumption and thereby increasing their risk of coronary heart disease (CHD). The study also explored the positive relationship between night shift work and reduced exercise, a life-style choice which would also lean towards CHD risk. Certainly, Florida –James et al., (cited in Reeves, 2004) reported a significant decrease in physical activity from 7.7 hours to 3.6 hours per week when people work at night. However, despite this apparent reduction in physical activity, Reeves et al., (2004) reported that no significant differences were identified in the weight and body mass indexes of night and day shift workers but that all night-shift worker eating changes can be linked to the disruption of the natural circadian rhythm, changes in physical activity levels and dietary food intake habits. This contradicts the claim of Niedhammer et al., (1996) who suggest that night shift workers are more likely to be obese than their day working colleagues. Interestingly in a study conducted by Rutenfranz, (cited in Brooks, 1997), it was noted that between 20 % and 75 % of night shift workers complain of disturbance to their appetite, in comparison with 10 % – 25 % of day shift workers. The reason provided was that night shift workers often have little time to eat, and they usually take quick meals in a short break. Clearly, owing to contradicting conclusions, research is inconclusive and begs further investigation.

Weight aside, Morikawa et al., (cited in Reeves, 2004), reported that night shift workers have an increased risk of high blood pressure and hypertension, a higher risk of CHD (Boggild & Knutsson, cited in Reeves, 2004) and are more likely to have increased gastro-intestinal problems (Lennernas et al., cited in Reeves, 2004). This interesting study reported that shift workers eat more incomplete meals than complete meals, and are less likely to eat fruit and vegetables, subsisting on sandwich type meals. Certainly Krauchi et al., (1990) confirm this

notion, believing that shift workers have been described as grazing their way through their shift, eating smaller amounts at increased eating periods. Reeve et al., (2004) also identified this grazing phenomenon, with day workers consuming significantly (p<0.05) more meals per day than the night-shift workers.

Interestingly in the studies mentioned above, the subjects have included mostly male participants. This is due to the existing dynamic eating patterns of women, owing to what Reeves et al., (2004, p.218) describe as the "confounding menstrual cycle". In a study by Barr, (cited in Reeves, 2004) it was found that food intake varies during the menstrual cycle. The significance of this being that an increasing number of women are resorting to shift work, since this allows them to both support their families and spend time with their children (Charles & Brown, cited in Reeves et al., 2004). Hence they are clearly an important group to study, when investigating the effects of shift work, and eating pattern consequences.

Theory is inconclusive regarding shift work and overall food intake. However it is certainly a factor in the timing of the food consumption and food availability, which in turn can cause problems in the establishment of healthy eating patterns in call centres. For this reason, night-shift workers may be at a greater risk of weight gain, than their day-working counterparts and this may have a negative impact on their health, (Reeves et al., 2004). Furthermore anecdotal evidence would point to unstable eating patterns and potential weight gain due to the sedentary type of work and the grazing nature of shift workers, especially if what is made available by the organisation is of the high fat, high sugar, nutritionally poor kind.

2.5.2 Depression

2.5.2.1 Introduction

As cited previously in this document, Jahoda (cited in Furnham, 2000) argued that work is a source of identity, as well as of creativity and mastery. Furthermore it provides many opportunities for social interaction; it structures time and gives a sense of purpose; and it keeps people active and included as valued members of society. What she also mentions is the notion that work keeps at bay the deprivation that is associated with psychological distress among the unemployed. This perception of psychological distress is supported by Brief and Nrod, et al., (cited in Lowman, 1993), who believe that people who are unemployed but wanting to work are at higher risk for depression than are those who are employed. The

researchers in fact stress that for certain populations, work can itself be a means for managing depression and preventing more severe depression from occurring. However, and by virtue of the fact that this section on depression is included in a chapter on work dysfunction, it is vitally important to acknowledge that depression is often associated with or caused by problems at work or within the work role, (Johnson & Indvik, 1997). It is also interesting to note that frequently, the disease first appears when an individual is 20 – 30 years of age, (Johnson & Indvik, 1997), an age usually associated with the first formal introduction to work life. (Greenhaus et al., 2000). Furthermore, the illness often strikes during a person's most productive years, as nearly 70 % of adults with depression are under the age of 45, and more than 70 % of those are in the workforce. Finally, the fact that depression is estimated to affect 8 – 12 % of men and 20 – 25 % of women through out their lives, is indicative of its effect on workplace issues, (Charney & Weissman, cited in Lowman, 1993).

Depression in the workplace is rife and such mental health symptoms are increasingly evident owing to raised stress levels, conflicting and ambiguous demands, work overload, lack of power and job insecurity, (Phelan et al., 1991). In fact, it was reported that about one in five Americans suffered from some form of mental illness during the course of a year, and at a global level, experts maintain that about 71 % or approximately two thirds of the world's population is predisposed to depression. (Solomon et al., cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997). In addition, according to the January 1994 issue of *The Archives of General Psychiatry,* (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997) 50 % of adults will experience depression and illness during their lifetimes. This of course raises great concern for employers both for the individual welfare of the worker, but also in terms of human resource productivity and efficacy.

It should however, be borne in mind, that due to differing capacity in terms of tolerance of stressful conditions, there is the obvious propensity for some to be more inclined to depression than to others, (Strelau, cited in Lowman, 1993), with those enabled by more effective coping mechanisms avoiding such mental illness. From a literal perspective, however, ambiguity is evidenced owing to an incomplete understanding or evaluation of what in fact constitutes stress, anxiety or depression, and hence different symptoms are experienced by those claiming to suffer from the malady. At this junction therefore, it would be of value to briefly define the understanding of depression as it relates to this material.

2.5.2.2 Definition

Attempting to define or indeed even understand the concept of depression is difficult as its very nature is entirely subjective, and has resulted in much academic argument and discussion. Indeed Lowman (1993) mentions two commonly encountered clinical manifestations of work dysfunction being anxiety and depression, and how these two constructs might not be entirely independent of the other. In support of this, in their research Meier and Warr, (cited in Lowman, 1993) have shown that both anxiety and depression exhibit moderate to high correlations. According to McReynolds (1973) cited in Lowman, 1993, p.144) anxiety is reflected as an "inevitable part of the human condition, and might be either transient or situational". It can also almost be incapacitating, thereby inhibiting effective daily functioning. Depression on the other hand is defined by Braus, (cited in Johnson & Indvik 1997, p.13) as "a spell of two or more weeks of sadness and four out of eight other conditions, including loss or gain of appetite, sleeping disorders, fatigue, slowing of body movements or thoughts, feeling worthless, loss of pleasure in something usually enjoyed, difficulty concentrating, and suicidal thoughts, desires, or attempts. It also tends to be cumulative in effect, with people usually in considerable mental pain, by the time that help is sought."

Similarly Johnson and Indvik (1997) discovered that the term 'burnout' is often associated with depression. However, Freudenberger, (cited in Maslach et al., 2001, p.177) believes that they are not synonymous, but that " depression can take many forms and may or may not be connected to burnout". He believes that "there are differences between a generally depressed state of mind and the form of depression which signifies that burnout is taking place. In non-related (to burnout) depression, the condition is prolonged and pervades all areas of a person's life. An individual may sleep much of the day, have no interest in sex, or desire to eat; and there is a general withdrawal". On the other hand, "the depression associated with burnout is usually temporary and may be specific to a particular segment of a person's life."

Ebony, (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997, p.361) defines depression as the "common cold of mental health", and Pagano (1995, p.399), purports that many people think that depression is "just a temporary malady, that they can pull themselves out of". Both impressions are precarious, as depression, if left unchecked may manifest in serious mental health, and even violence to self or others.

2.5.2.3 Tangential Depression? - Rustout and Introjection

Even though the sub-title above depicts both Rustout and introjection as forms of tangential depression, it is pertinent this discussion, as commentary from the focus groups (Focus Group Discussion, November / December, 2005) appears to relate clearly to the these definitions, and hence may serve to provide an explanation for the agents' angst, withdrawal and feelings of helplessness.

'Rustout', Humphries (2000), is believed to be devastating to the well-being of those who experience it, its main characteristics being apathy and learned helplessness, i.e. a protective belief that as a worker one is powerless and the victim of a neglectful work organisation. In a sense therefore, it could be described as depression, turned in on itself, as it manifests in similar behaviours, but with the added focus of a victim mentality, which is not necessarily the case with 'mainstream' depression.

People who have 'rusted out' appear to have lost the challenge and excitement of work and have poor relationships with colleagues. Furthermore, minimal work effort is undertaken and their general perception is that the existing bad conditions will remain unchanged. Furthermore, they do not constructively confront their employers, but they do regularly condemn them for their failure to offer more appealing alternatives. As with depression, however, the condition should not go unchecked, in order to negate individual stress, and work place dysfunction.

Some of the typical signs of 'rustout' are listed below:

- ❖ High job dissatisfaction;
- ❖ Learned helplessness;
- ❖ Apathy;
- ❖ Hopelessness;
- ❖ Frequent absenteeism;
- ❖ Non-caring attitude and sometimes cynical about work and work organisations;
- ❖ Avoidance of responsibilities and new challenges;
- ❖ Isolation from other members of staff;

❖ Psychosomatic complains (low energy, low blood pressure, poor appetite);

❖ Reduced immune system;

Introjection could be described as 'rustout' turned even more on itself, as it is a mechanism used to protect the individual by 'denigrating oneself' (Humphries, 2000). Whereas 'rust out' is more projective in effect, blaming everyone else for problems experienced, with introjection, there is the belief that: "I'm useless and worthless, and I deserve the abuse that I get at work," (Humphries, 2000, p.181). In this way, the subconscious defence in introjection is perceiving the self as so weak, so stupid and so ineffectual that any risk-taking, and challenges to the self are ruled out. The victim, furthermore, by adopting this exclusive, internal locus of control, believes that everything is beyond their control and that they are powerless to do anything.

2.5.2.4 *Depression and Women in the Workplace*

Interestingly many studies have focussed on the association between women and depression, and revealed that on the whole, they are more susceptible, and appear to be at higher risk for depression than men. (Braun & Hollander, cited in Lowman, 1993); (Johnson & Indvik, 1997); (Phelan, 1991). This is thought to be the case because women experience unique sources of stress both on and off the job, but unlike their male counterparts they most often bring their non-work problems to the work place. (Johnson & Indvik, 1997). Working women frequently are confined to low-power, high-demand jobs which are inherently stressful. Off the job, women typically maintain major responsibility for the home and family, often spending triple the time on household tasks that their working partner / spouse spends. In addition, problems that are rare or non-existent in a man's work day, e.g. sexual discrimination, are common for women. (Johnson & Indvik, 1997). Furthermore, Hochschild, (1989) believes that in addition to the job stress experienced by most individuals, there also exist stressors exclusive to women employees e.g. the role demands of being wife, mother and professional provoke role conflict. Of import too is the fact that in a depressed state, men tend to "explode" and women tend to "implode", (Johnson & Indvik, 1997), thereby absorbing the increased stress and trauma, rather than dealing with it, possibly in a more violent or physical manner.

2.5.2.5 Depression as a Work Dysfunction

Krohe (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997) claims that just two trends alone are sufficient to make depression disproportionately present on the job, namely changes in the workforce and changes in the nature of the work itself. Certainly it is so common a phenomenon in organisations that corporate psychologists have coined the term 'workplace depression' to characterise the feelings of anger and anxiety which are widespread in today's workplace.

Johnson and Indvik (1997) claim that depression is seldom traceable to a single cause, but plays on the interaction of an individual's biological predisposition, psychological tendency towards pessimism, feelings of low self-esteem and trauma. In addition, it may be the cumulative effect of long-term stress. Lowman (1993) too agrees that the causes of depression are multi-dimensional. Non-work factors may influence depression at work, and similarly work can influence non-work life. Various researchers cited in Lowman (1993) describe the following causes which most often manifest in depression: problems with supervision (Golding, cited in Lowman, 1993); demanding work (Holt, cited in Lowman, 1993) particularly when coupled with limited ability to make relevant decisions (Braun & Hollander, cited in Lowman, 1993); ambiguity of authority; perceived or real lack of social support (Fifth & Britton, cited in Lowman, 1993); corporate instability (Little, Gaffney, Rosen, & Bender, cited in Lowman, 1993). In addition, the following are also highly associated with work-related depression: frequently encountered low stressors of role strain, role over load, and role ambiguity (Katz & Kahn, cited in Lowman, 2000).

Johnson and Indvik (1997) cited environmental causes too as cause for increased stress and often resultant depression, these being, working longer hours, excessive environmental noise, non-supportive management, unfair rating procedures, and failure to receive recognition. Psychological causes too which tend to negate or downplay agents' contributions, or interfere with their ability to function as individuals may start the cycle of depression or even violence. E.g. feelings of being overwhelmed, tensions with employees, lost sense of purpose and burnout; responsibility but no decision-making authority; routine, monotonous jobs with no room for creativity; and last but not least, the "isms- racism, sexism, and ageism". (Johnson & Indvik, 1997, p.14).

2.5.2.6 Effects of Depression

Lawrie, (1992, p.6) mentions that on the job depression "reduces effectiveness and results in patterns of damaged thinking, acting and feeling, all of which undermine and sabotage the depressed person's relationships with other people and job effectiveness, leading, inevitably to deeper and deeper depression". Ramsey (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997) emphasises this, stating that when depression strikes, job performance takes a nosedive, as it can manifest at work in several areas: low morale, decreased productivity, lack of co-operation, accidents, absenteeism, increased fatigue, health complaints, and alcohol and drug abuse. Furthermore, the disease robs thousands of people of their will and capability to work and costs employers billions of dollars in sick leave, medical expenses, in addition to counselling, medications and production losses (Breuer, cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997). Employee symptomatology also includes irritability, sharp mood swings, impaired concentration and change in cognitive functioning, often paving the way for problematic employee / employer relations. (Johnson & Indvik, 1997). Johnson and Indvik (1997) have also found high levels of co-occurrence of depression with alcohol and other substance abuse. It is clear therefore that even though depression is described as a common phenomenon, the effects of such work dysfunction in the call centre, if left untreated are significant, and any incidences therefore warrant due care.

2.5.3   Substance abuse in the Work Place

2.5.3.1 Introduction

Although substance abuse includes the ineffective use of alcohol and drugs, literature research reveals far more information on drug abuse in the Western Cape rather than alcohol abuse, certainly within the scope of call centre work. This does not in any way downplay the iniquitous effects of alcohol abuse, nor its social and organisational consequences. Literature however, reels at the drug epidemic, especially that related to "tik" abuse: "Western Cape 'losing battle against' tik" (Kassiem, 2006), "UN sounds alarm over rampant tik abuse", (Freijser. 2006) and "Tik addiction soars at an alarming rate" (Caelers, 2005) and hence in the following section, it receives more focus than alcohol misappropriation.

Drug abuse manifests in dysfunctional work and social behaviour. Furthermore, the behaviour is often worsened by the addictive nature of the drug, whereby addicts resort to socially unacceptable behaviour in order to procure the 'next fix'. Hence such undesirable behaviour

would necessarily overflow into the drug addict's work place, with possible dire consequences. In fact a report from the CTDCC Statistics (2003) (Cape Town Drug and Counselling Centre) indicates that prior to succumbing to drug abuse, their clients relayed the following:

❖ 30 % admitted to accidents / errors at work due to drug use
❖ 71 % stated that their productivity at work had declined due to drugs
❖ 67 % admitted to taking sick leave due to drug abuse
❖ 20 % admitted to criminal activity at work due to drug abuse

Statistics and consequences such as these are reported the world over, which brings Eckersley and Williams (1999, p.221) to quote that "Any employer who thinks his workplace is free from drugs is wilfully blind or totally naïve." Indeed, they further state that drug misuse is recognised as the root cause of more wasted and unnecessary expenditure than any other non-commercial business problem. They propose that the question is no longer: "Does management want to pay for the drug problem?", but rather, "How does management want to pay? Since knowingly or unknowingly business is already paying heavily through rising illness, absenteeism, injuries at work, and damage to and stealing of company and employee property", (Eckersley & Williams, 1999, p. 221).

2.5.3.2 *Substance Abuse as a Work Dysfunction*

Loup (1994) claims that having drug and alcohol abusers on the payroll is expensive and dangerous. However, the exact cost is difficult to calculate owing to the intangible nature of the effects, but he considers the following:

(i)   diminished productivity;
(ii)   substandard performance;
(iii)   increased accidents;
(iv)   management difficulties; and
(v)   security problems.

(i)	Effects on Productivity

Productivity problems include absenteeism and substandard performance on the job. Drug and alcohol abusers are absent from work two to eight times as often as the average employee; they are late for work about three times as often; and request early departure about twice as often. (Loup, 1994). It should be borne in mind of course, that this time 'off' is time for which they are paid at their normal rate by their employer. According to the US National Institute on Drug Abuse, (cited in Eckersley & Williams, 1999) employees who use drugs are considered only two-thirds as productive as their non-drug using colleagues, and two to three times more likely to be absent for periods of eight days or more.

(ii)	Substandard Performance

Drugs and alcohol alter a person's bodily functions, behaviour, personality and therefore work performance. When functions such as motor skills, reaction time, sensory and perceptual ability attention, concentration, motivation and learning ability are affected, the result can be a decrease in accuracy, efficiency, productivity, worker safety and job satisfaction. (Jardine–Tweedie & Wright, 1998).

The cost of such poor performance depends on the degree of impairment and the nature of the job, but it is commonly held that productivity of an impaired employee is reduced by about 20 – 25 %, (Loup, 1994). Butler, (cited in Loup, 1994) supports this data, suggesting that a chemically dependent (either alcohol or drugs) employee usually is less that 75 % effective.

Understandably product quality is also affected, and in terms of the uno acto principle inherent in the call centre agent's job, such substandard performance or quality service could adversely affect customer perception, and result in loss of client base.

(iii)	Effects on Safety

The accident rate for substance abusers is about four times that of an average worker, (Loup, 1994). Furthermore up to 40 % of workplace deaths and about one half of workplace injuries can be linked to substance abuse, (Loup, 1994). Similarly the US National Institute on Drug Abuse, (cited in Eckersly & Williams, 1999) state that employees involved in substance abuse are nearly four times more likely to be involved in a workplace accident causing injury to themselves or others. They are also five times more likely to be the victims of an accident away from work. Leonard, (cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004) states that when an employee is

impaired by drugs, alcohol, stress or fatigue, the potential for error increases tenfold. Furthermore, the victim could a co-worker, a customer, or a member of the public, and not necessarily the abuser him/herself.

Loup (1994) adds that in addition to the human costs of accidents and injuries, sick-leave, death benefits, equipment repairs and replacement, and downtime in the plant, should also be considered.

(iv)   Management problems

People with substance abuse problems tend to have interpersonal problems both at home and at work. As a result relations with co-workers, and supervisory/managerial staff tend to be strained, possibly aggravated by the irritability and mood swings associated with the use of certain drugs. Interpersonal difficulties at home, might also exacerbate the situation, as family support as a coping mechanism is thereby negated.

Of import, is the effect of the abuser's behaviour on colleagues, as sober workers often resent having to 'take up the slack' for a drug or alcohol user, especially if their own safety is jeopardised by the user's impairment. When working in a team, as in a call centre environment, bonus structures too may be affected, resulting in increased frustration. However, when faced with a choice between covering up for a drug user or informing on him/her the sober worker can become demoralised and unproductive and may eventually start looking for another job. Not surprisingly alcohol and drug users change jobs more frequently than the average, but the effects of their behaviours can in this way, affect the retention of 'non-abusing' staff too. Hence more recruitment and training necessitates additional costs to the employer. Eckersley and Williams (1999), also cite that abusers tend to be most proactive when making claims against their employers or insurers, thereby causing additional costs in terms of legal fees, and claim courts!

Substance abuse also adds to other managerial woes in that there are an increasing number of complaints against other staff or claims about stress and working conditions. In addition, lack of interest in training is noted, and fewer employees are willing to take on the responsibilities of promotion, (Eckersley & Williams, 1999).

(v)   Security Problems

Drugs are expensive, and in order to feed the habit, many users finance their own supplies by selling drugs to acquaintances including co-workers. In this way, drug sales may take place on company property and on company time, and result in a clique of drug users at the workplace. Addictive users, unable to raise the required funds often resort to theft, fraud, and embezzlement, which in the workplace can include theft of equipment, embezzlement of company funds, or even stealing from colleagues.

Monthly Drug Sending Patterns from (The Cape Town Drug Counselling Centre (CTDCC) (2003) Statistics Report (Taken from a client base sample at that time)

(The centre estimated that extrapolating data from their records, drugging clients would have spent R20 044 860 in 2002).

Amount	% of Respondents
> R10 000	5 %
R1 000 – R9 999	47 %
<R 1 000	47 %

Even though Loup (1994) states that there are no reliable data on the cost to business of drug-motivated crime, the following table indicates its very real existence.
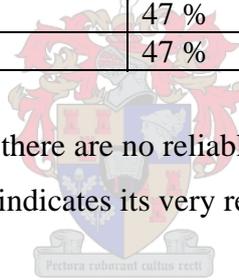
Involvement in Crime from (The Cape Town Drug Counselling Centre (CTDCC) (2003) Statistics Report (Taken from a client base sample at the time)

Response	% of clients
Admit to / convicted of crime	62 %
No admittance to / conviction of a crime	35 %
No response	3 %

2.5.4   Inconclusive Research on Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Interestingly, it is important to include the views of Jardine-Tweedie and Wright (1998) who state that there is a lack of scientific evidence linking alcohol and drug use to negative consequences in the workplace. They believe that much of the evidence suggesting that drug use is associated with increased accidents and decreased performance is based on laboratory studies showing that motor coordination and perceptual abilities fall with the ingestion of

impairing drugs. However, actual empirical studies are few and have too many limitations, thus invalidating the evidence of relationships between usage and industrial accidents or performance problems. They therefore feel that research is largely inconclusive, and purport that there are many other factors associated with workplace accidents and injuries, which pose as likely variables. These include, dangerous working conditions, noise and dirt, conflicts, stress, fatigue and sleep problems, MacDonald; MacDonald et al., (cited in Jardine-Tweedie & Wright, 1998); Leonard, (cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004).

Never-the-less, while academic arguments are important in understanding researchers' claims, the effects of substance abuse in the industry, and particular in call centres are of major concern, and it is the responsibility of management to ensure that effective measures in curbing the sometime epidemic outcomes are in place not only to effect employee well-being, but to negate the negative consequences of the resultant employee behaviours on the organisation.

Having looked at the more deleterious approaches to managing stress in call centres, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the effective coping mechanisms of the agents which include a reliance on social support, emotion management, and adopting some of the organisational buffers provided by call centre management.
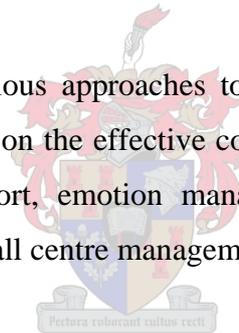
2.6 COPING WITH STRESS - EFFECTIVE COPING MECHANISMS IN DEALING WITH STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

2.6.1 Introduction

Owing to the high demand for agents in a society of plentiful human resources, (certainly in a South African context), call centres have adopted more of a 'take it or leave it stance', Houlihan (2000). Certainly there are agents, who can't take it, who resign and seek work elsewhere. There might also be agents whose personality profiles are more adaptable to the call centre environment, (Higgs, 2004) and who may enjoy the work that they do. For those however, whom have no option but to stay, and are frustrated with their work, often coping methods or strategies, are sought out and implemented. These then serve even temporarily to waylay the manifestation of advanced stages of stress, support the agent and result in effective behavioural coping responses.

Such behavioural coping mechanisms come to light in the form of disengagement and resistance, (Houlihan, 2000), and this research provided plentiful evidence of agents circumscribing prescribed routines with their own strategies, manifesting as both resistance and 'creative workarounds'. These included "cutting off difficult customers, withholding service to complicated and uncooperative callers, editing scripts according to interpretative knowledge and a range of call avoidance strategies," (Houlihan, 2000, p.230). In their part, these exploits assist in achieving targets, albeit creatively, and minimising personal frustration and tedium. However, should agents feel that they are being mistreated, rationalisation of circumstances can extend beyond these creative "workarounds" and result in possible sabotage. (Houlihan, 2000).

2.6.2   *Stress Buffers – The Importance of Resources in Human Service Work*

Resources can be described as the conditions, objects, energies and personal characteristics "that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means of attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, or conditions, or energies" (Dollard et al., 2003, p.87). On the other hand, in terms of COR theory, they are perceived as "conditions that reduce the impact of stressors, i.e. obstacles to task fulfilment on strain. (Hobfoll, 1989, p.519). Similarly Dollard et al., (2003) describe such valued resources as those that increase the likelihood of experiencing pleasure by providing positive re-inforcers. E.g. those features that fulfil basic human needs, namely security, a sense of relatedness, self-esteem, autonomy, mastery, and personal growth. By the same token a real or anticipated loss (reduction) of them is expected to cause psychological strain.

According to Dollard et al., (2003), the most important resource conditions in work stress are control/autonomy and social support. I.e. if employees are constantly assured of their colleagues' support then this may help to buffer the negative impact of resource losses (stressors) in other areas. A perceived lack of available support (and or poor social relations at work in general) has been consistently shown to be related to strain, and there is also evidence that social support, is particularly useful if other stressors are present. (Holman, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003; & Dollard et al., 2003).

Other important resources mentioned are appropriate leadership (e.g. giving feedback and sharing information) and the quality of internal services in an organisation. Together these

factors contribute to high levels of perceived service quality and satisfaction of customers, (Dollard et al., 2003).

As discussed previously individual personality traits have some bearing on the fit between worker personality and job demand. Nevertheless it is believed that appropriate training can assist in the development of effective coping strategies, and hence these coping strategies, act as stress enabling resources. While on some occasions, such learned coping strategies may be incorporated in the agent-client interaction and may prove effective, at other times, agents might adopt the following behaviours as resources:

❖ **Surface acting,** i.e. modifying their public display but not their internal experience of emotion, (Cote, 2005).

❖ **Deep acting** i.e. modifying both their internal experience and their public display of emotion, (Cote, 2005).

❖ **Emotion Suppression** i.e. reducing or eliminating public displays of emotion. (Cote, 2005)

❖ **Emotion Regulation** i.e. "includes all of the efforts to increase, maintain, or decrease one or more components of an emotion" (Gorss, cited in Cote, 2005, p. 510).

❖ **Detached concern** (Larsen et al., cited in Cote, 2005) i.e. – a kind of role separation which is able to provide a balance between emotional under-and over-involvement. It is felt that this role separation has proven to be most effective as a coping strategy which mitigates the negative effect of emotional dissonance and CSS on strain. Similarly, role separation should lead to both positive customer outcomes and less employee strain. (Savicki & Cooley, cited in Dollard et al., 2003, p.518).

It is also cited by Houlihan (2000) that agents make use of a range of cognitive strategies to make sense of their environment and this 'interpretative repertoire' enables their coping ability and determines the performance that results. Such behaviour would include the acting and detachment as cited above, as well as embracing, ignoring, 'misbehaving' and resisting. Houlihan (2000, p.232) continues that when 'misbehaving' or playing the system, agents are attempting to channel stress, and such clashes with the system emerge as " a psychological

battlefield of trade-offs that the agents negotiate on an ongoing basis during the course of their work."

2.6.3 Emotion Management

At the outset, emotions are affective experiences that unfold over a short period of time, (Frijda, Lazarus, Levenson, & Scherer, cited in Cote, 2005), and elicit various types of responses:

(i) Cognitive tendencies are dispositions to engage in certain behaviours and to process information in certain ways (Fredrickson & Frijda, cited in Cote, 2005).

(ii) Subjective internal experiences are the conscious experiences that people verbally report.

(iii)Facial and bodily expressions involve muscle movements that produce public displays (Eckman, cited in Cote, 2005).

(iv)Physiological changes such as heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance also co-occur with emotion. (Levinson, cited in Cote, 2005).

In regulating emotion, an attempt is made to increase, maintain or decrease one or more components of an emotion (Gross, cited in Cote, 2005) and theorists have categorised two forms of regulation:

1) **Emotion amplification** – in this way public displays of emotion are enhanced or exaggerated, e.g. when attempting a sale, salesmen / women might be more forthcoming, enthusiastic or assertive.

2) **Emotion suppression** – conversely, public displays of emotions are reduced or eliminated. (Research however suggests that an individual is not entirely able to hide public displays of disgust and embarrassment).

Cote (2005, p. 516) describes below *how*, the types of regulation and the various directions can influence the emotion experienced:

❖ Employees can amplify an emotion through deep acting by emitting behaviours that initiate or enhance the internal experience and in turn, the public display of that emotion.

❖ They can also amplify an emotion through surface acting by emitting behaviours that initiate or enhance the public display of that emotion when that emotion is not experienced or is experienced at low levels internally.

- ❖ Employees can suppress an emotion through deep acting by emitting behaviours that reduce or eliminate the internal experience and in turn the public display of that emotion.
- ❖ They can also suppress an emotion through surface acting by emitting behaviours that reduce or eliminate the public display of that emotion when that emotion is internally experienced.

2.6.4   Organisational / Group Support and Interaction

Houlihan (2000) considers another form of managing stress even though it is of a short term nature, but serves at the particular, and required time, to alleviate angst. She contends that agents benefit from forums for de-stressing, such as team meetings, where they can air their concerns and frustrations, often defusing them. Certainly, others cited group coping strategies as more effective than individual ones, (Paine, Behjat, & Cobb, cited in Raitano & Kleiner, 2004). The groups allow individuals the opportunity to express themselves freely, to draw on the information from others in the group, and to glean insight from the group in terms of handling stressful situations. Basically they can tell stories about their work or difficult or unusual customers. Indeed Davis (cited in Armistead et al., 2002) supports this believing that in the high-performance and high-control environments of call centres, a supportive environment is a prerequisite. Maslach et al., (2001) too accept that social support from co-workers and supervisors can help buffer stress and enable employees to manage their job-related problems. Houlihan (2000, p.233) also adds that the status quo within a call centre "is a temporary, emergent and arbitrary social production that can and will change as contradictions and competing priorities engage with each other". Furthermore, this non deterministic style of groups within a call centre can evolve and develop as call centres themselves are doing, adding credibility and value to such social support.

Indeed, social comparison processes have been shown to reduce stress and fear (Schachter, cited in Czesney & Stahlberg, 2000) Certainly, Wainright and Colman (2002) contend that the emotional support received from groups may increase individuals' confidence in their ability to deal with the challenges that confront them. Furthermore, an individual's sense of control is enhanced, especially as he / she learns new strategies for problem resolution, and often problems seem reduced when placing the challenge in the context of difficulties encountered by others.

2.6.5 Coping Strategies: Gender Based Differences

The possibility of significant gender differences in work-related coping has been controversial, and several researchers have found no gender differences in the use of a variety of coping strategies. (Menaghan & Merves, cited in Zani & Petrantoni, 2001). However in contrast, Pearlin and Schooler , (cited in Zani & Petrantoni, 2001) found that, compared with men, women reported less use of effective strategies and greater use of 'selective ignoring ' a form of coping found to exacerbate rather than alleviate stress. Other research suggests that men tend to cope by taking direct action, whereas women more frequently use distraction and relaxation (Folkman et al., Stone & Neale, cited in Zani & Petrantoni, 2001). However, Parasuraman and Cleek, (cited in Zani & Petrantoni, 2001) found that female managers reported greater use of adaptive coping strategies (e.g. planning, seeking information and setting priorities) than did their male colleagues.

2.6.6 Summary

The aim of Chapter Two – the Literature Review, was to explore in more detail the theory pertaining to the research statement. In this way it was the researcher's intention to examine more closely those elements within a call centre which give rise to stress and the consequential work dysfunction. At the outset however, it was imperative to define work dysfunction and to understand the meaning of 'stress' and how it relates particularly to dysfunctional behaviour in the call centre environment. An exploration of the various organisational, environmental and occupational stressors was conducted, setting the scene for the antecedents of stress and work dysfunction in call centres. Antecedents, comprising work-life imbalance, shift work, emotional dissonance and the role of personality and age were introduced prior to uncovering the dysfunctional consequences of stress. These deleterious coping mechanisms include eating pattern disruption, depression and substance abuse and highlight the detrimental effects that these maladies have on effective call centre functioning. More proactive coping strategies were then outlined, including discussions regarding stress buffers, emotion management and social support. Prior to presenting the data however, it is necessary to understand the methodology, research design and structure undertaken in collecting and analysing the information, and hence a review of the research methodology follows in Chapter Three.

3 CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH AIMS

In Chapter One discussions highlighted the varying forces at play within a call centre environment, in terms of their rocky inception, their design, the consequences of their functionality, and how many of these consequences give rise to work dysfunctions in call centres. Hence it was the aim of the research to consider this problem of work dysfunction in the unique call centre environment and to thus "**explore types of work dysfunction experienced by call centre agents and their consequences".** Once call centres were seen within their developmental context, causal factors of dysfunctional work behaviour were indicated, the objective of Chapter Two, the Literature Review, being to further explore these aspects. It was determined that stress is a major work dysfunction, and its antecedents, as well as its consequences, were outlined. At times these consequences resulted in effective coping behaviour, but dysfunctional work behaviour was also noted, which merely served to exacerbate stress, and often created additional work dysfunctions, e.g. eating pattern disorders, depression and substance abuse. Hence the overall aim of the study is to explore in detail all manner of work dysfunctions and their consequences, in call centres. Either such investigation may be used to improve existent conditions within the centres or it could ensure that those centres planned for future implementation are designed with long-term efficacy in mind. Chapter Three then, details how the information was obtained, outlining the sampling, collecting and analysing processes. It also serves to explain the use of qualitative rather than quantitative research design and provides an understanding of focus groups, their advantages and disadvantages, and why this particular data gathering procedure was used.

3.2 COMPARING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH IN DEALING WITH THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Fundamental to this study is the desire for a comprehensive understanding of work dysfunctions in call centres. The basis of the study is broad, deliberately as it is a relatively new one. Even though certain aspects within call centres have been investigated in great detail (e.g. burnout, emotional labour and stress), (Houlihan, 2000), and (Zapf et al., 2003), it was the researcher's intent to glean all variables brought to light by call centre agents within the call centre environment which possibly manifest in work dysfunction. For this reason, the study itself could not be confined to the brevity and preciseness associated with quantitative

work, as the overall intent is exploratory. The primary goal therefore is to understand and then describe certain phenomena, rather than qualifying or explaining the various human behavioural responses. One of the tenets of qualitative research too is to gain an 'emic' or insider view (Babbie & Mouton, 1998) of the study field, so that an in-depth or 'thick' description of actions and events can be obtained. This then forms an idiographic motive rather than an attempt to generalise the study to some theoretical population, as a quantitative study might do. The essence of this research design is to enable the discovery and uncovering of the protagonists' feelings, views and opinions of their environment, and in this particular study, how they manifest in work dysfunction. Furthermore, instead of focusing on counting and quantifying patterns in behaviour, the emphasis in qualitative description is on "thick description, or a rich, detailed description of specifics " (Geerts, cited in Babbie & Mouton, 1998, p.102).

However, as Babbie and Mouton (1998) state, it is most important to attempt such understanding and analysis, within the actual environmental context, and this needs to be described in sufficient detail. Hence the researcher's inclusion of such details in Chapter One, where initially call centres were described in terms of their global functioning, then in terms of their South African operations, and then finally, within the unique milieu of the Western Cape. This is important as only if one understands events against the background of the whole context and how such a context confers meaning to the different events concerned that one can truly claim to understand the behavioural manifestations. (Babbie & Mouton, 1998).

3.3   ENSURING RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Although some followers of quantitative research methodologies believe that the 'right way' of conducting scientific research deals with setting hypotheses and controls and projecting experiments onto certain population groups, other methods of scientific research are equally reliable and valid and are used when the more scientific approach, would not serve the aims and objectives of the particular research problem. The qualitative research method used in this research, is guided by the same rules as any reliable research design, whereby systematic data collection, data handling, processing and data analysis has been carried out. In addition field notes and electronic recordings have been used to capture the comments of the focus group participants. Furthermore, during the focus groups, participants would be asked to explain their views if they were not clearly understood. In terms of analysis, a systematic process was

used, whereby key points were identified and compared with results from the other groups, in this way uncovering patterns or commonalities in the data. Further increasing the study's validity is the fact that for each point identified in the results, a trail of evidence can be verified. Either way the findings are an accurate reflection of what the focus group participants said.

Furthermore, prior to conducting the research, the questions were pilot tested to ensure that they were understood, relevant, and included all aspects of the Research Problem. Hence, at inception the design was created to encourage free and open sharing. The facilitator, too had experience in mediating, was knowledgeable on the topic and was sensitive to the needs and views of the participants. In summary, the accepted protocol was followed in order to ensure trustworthy and accurate results.

Bias was also considered, and standardised procedures were used to gather and analyse the data, so that expectations were not mismanaged, nor pre-empted. In the same way, findings were distinguished between what was said in the group, from individual interpretations and recommendations.

In such a study, especially qualitative research which makes use of focus groups, more subjectivity in the interpretation of data and recommendations is anticipated. However, these interpretations are open to debate, as of course, people with different backgrounds and different experiences may well determine different interpretations and recommendations.

3.4 CONTENT ANALYSIS AS DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

3.4.1 Definition

Content analysis is a method whereby the content of texts or documents (such a focus group transcripts) are used for analysis. 'Content' refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, themes or any message that can be communicated. Furthermore the data sources are given, hence the only methodological issues concern the principles and processes of selecting the data or documents, (Mouton, 2001).

According to Morgan, (1988), researchers begin the analysis by a detailed examination of one or two groups, developing hypotheses and coding schemes that can then be applied to the remainder of the groups. It also includes generating reports of where and how often various codes occur, and then these programs allow the researcher to automate the process of counting instances of core categories within and across transcripts. However, there is some controversy regarding the counting of the particular codes or categories as this is not deemed part of true a qualitative data collection. In the light of this, Morgan (1988, p.69) quotes as follows: " There is no question that focus groups represent a qualitative means of collecting data, but at this point in the development of social science approaches to focus groups, the place of quantitative analysis remains an open issue. Focus groups will always remains a qualitative technique for generating data, regardless of how the data are handled. Furthermore, those who rightly argue for the advantages of a qualitative analysis of data that are qualitatively generated should feel secure enough in their own approach to pursue it without rigidly denying the additional possibility of quantitative analysis on the same data." Axelrod, cited in Morgan (1988, p.68) more emphatically contends that: "Numbers do no belong in qualitative study at any time."

For the purposes of this study, although coding and categorising was administered on the data, tallying of incidences or commentary was not undertaken, but data was rather sorted in terms of the major themes that have woven continuously through the document as a whole. This is specifically the case, as the intent of this research is rather to explore the reasons behind work dysfunctions, rather than to count their incidences.

3.4.2   Process of Analysis

Krueger and Casey (2000) state that the use of content analysis in focus group analysis is systematic, sequential, verifiable and continuous. Systematic analysis means that the analysis strategy is documented, understood, and able to be clearly articulated by the researcher. Furthermore a trail of evidence is guaranteed, allowing for increased validity, and reliability.

On the whole, when data collection stops, usually analysis begins. However, in focus groups, analysis can be conducted concurrently with data collection, as each subsequent group is analysed and compared to earlier groups. In fact, analysing data at the same time of the focus group discussions, may improve data collection, (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This is due to the

fact that when analysing the transcript from one focus group, the researcher will be able to identify insufficient information on some topics, or a need to probe further into certain issues, or even uncover where some questions have either not been answered, nor answered sufficiently comprehensively. In this way, the researcher has the benefit of being alerted to these shortcomings prior to the next focus group discussion.

Transcripts-based analysis uses unabridged transcripts of the focus groups as a basis for analysis. Soon after the focus group discussion, the researcher or a typist completes the transcript, wherein the moderator / facilitator's and participant's comments are differentiated.

The analyst then reads the transcript and makes notes, codes sections, and develops categories, and the transcripts are then tabled in such a way that the specific categories are detailed alongside the various comments. Differing themes, as explored in the literature review cut across the questions and commentary and the full text is thus categorised.

At this juncture the researcher is able to consider the research problem based on the data uncovered, summarise the information and provide a presentation of the findings. In addition recommendations may be provided for, a) for improvement of conditions, b) for further study.

3.4.3   Strengths, Limitations and Other Considerations

Strengths:

❖ The analysis of texts and documents is an unobtrusive (non-reactive method, which means that errors associated with the interaction between researchers and subjects such as observation effects) are avoided;

❖ Quantitative content analysis is particularly useful for research involving large volumes of text.

Limitations:

❖ Authenticity of the data sources; representatives of text analysed which can make the overall external validity of the findings limited.

❖ Personal Bias – people differ in their thinking and thus analysis of content.

❖ Premature leaping to conclusions, in the hope of proving some personal expectation.

❖ Pre-existing opinions can sometimes be unhelpful, and also bias findings.

Other considerations:

Morgan (1988) includes an important consideration in that a more common means of supplementing observations is through the collection of questionnaires in addition to transcripts. However such supplementation of transcript data with questionnaires has both disadvantages and advantages. The largest disadvantage is that the two methods are mutually contaminating: doing questionnaires first will direct the group discussion, whereas conducting the focus group discussions first may change attitudes. This should be borne in mind if considering this option, but was not considered in this research.

3.5   SAMPLING

Babbie and Mouton (1998) believe that participants in a focus group should be currently involved in the work under discussion, that they are thoroughly 'encultured' in the environment, i.e. that they have had sufficient tenure in the environment, and that adequate time is available for them to take part in comprehensive and relevant discussions.

Indeed, the sample group for this study comprised 27 individuals in 4 different focus groups, all of whom were employed in the call centre at the time, and with an average tenure of 4 years per participant. The various groups included agents who knew each other, had worked together for many years, and who were at ease in each other's company, thereby avoiding a communication gap. Focus groups are usually made up of people with certain common characteristics and similar levels of understanding of a topic, rather than aiming for diversity. This is because, in general, people tend to express personal views and disclose more to those whom they perceive as similar to them in certain ways, than to those who differ from them, (Morgan; O'Brien; Kruger; cited in Lottiselli, 2003, p.32).

An average of 6 – 7 participants attended each group of an hour and an half to two hour's duration. The groups were average in size, and in terms of the sensitivity of the subject material, the enthusiasm of the participants, and their desire to express their views, the size enabled easy facilitation, and the opportunity for greater contribution was welcomed by the participants. Morgan, (1988, p.72) states that "a large total volume of comments from each

participant makes for increased personal contribution and often produces a dynamic of higher involvement in the life of the group". This was certainly the case in this particular field study. Latane et al., (cited in Morgan, 1988), mention the concept of 'social loafing' which is usually associated with a large number of participants per group, a disadvantage that was not encountered in the field work of this study.

Characteristically, homogeneity is important for effective airing of views, and this was achieved by the fact that all participants were call centre agents. No supervisory or managerial staff were included in the study, and hence equal levels of power and expertise were noted. All participants performed the same work, and each member of each separate group worked the same shift. This served to create a strong sense of support and intimacy which made for greater sharing of real issues. Variation too is important (Morgan, 1988) and this was achieved through differing demographics which are tabled below: An approximately equal gender mix (56 % male, 44 % female), equal marital status, differing educational standards, (44 % matriculants, 41 % tertiary education, 15 % not determined), and ages ranging from 24 to 40 years. It is important to note that even though their work experiences tended to be similar, their shifts differed and contrasting opinions were noted in terms of the work-life balance and coping mechanisms of the different agents.
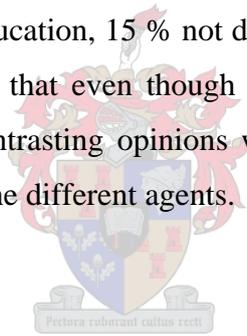
Focus Group Demographics

(See Appendix (1) for Total Focus Group Population Group)

(i)   Gender

Male	Female
15	12
56 %	**44 %**

(ii)   Educational Qualification

Unknown Status	Matric	Tertiary Education
4	12	11
15 %	**44 %**	**41 %**

(iii)   Marital Status

Married	Single	Other Status
13	13	1
48 %	**48 %**	**4 %**

(iv)   Tenure at Cellco

< 2 years	2 to 4 years	4 to 6 years	> 6 years
7	5	10	5
26 %	**18.5 %**	**37 %**	**18.5 %**

(v)   Age

20 – 24 years	25 – 29 years	30 – 35 years	35 – 40 years
2	14	10	1
8 %	**52 %**	**37 %**	**3 %**

3.6   DATA COLLECTION

3.6.1 Focus Groups: Definition

According to Babbie and Mouton (1998) there are three different types of qualitative research designs, namely ethnographic studies, case studies and life histories. Focus Groups fall into the case study category, and in particular a social group study, and are defined as: " a methodology of exploration which allows participants to express their concerns within a context that is useful to the scientific community", (Zeller cited in Morgan, 1998, p.27). Furthermore, Brodigan, (cited in Morgan, 1988) believes that the feature which most clearly distinguishes focus group research from other kinds of qualitative research is the group discussion. He continues that while the discussion centres on issues which are of interest to the researcher, it involves the exchange of opinions personal reactions and experiences among members of the group. Hence the words of the participants are used to explore the participants' feelings, thoughts, or observations about the topics of discussion. In this way, the researcher is able to draw on multiple sources of information that are not normally available to the quantitative researcher. The focus group research observes the answers and has an opportunity to follow up and probe to amplify or clarify responses. Moreover, the focus group research can feed back the key points and seek verification from participants, (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 202).

3.6.2   Advantages of Focus Groups

Folch-Lyon and Trost, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) believe that focus groups have a distinct advantage over individual interviews in that the former allows for great depth in terms of perceptions and beliefs of the participants. Furthermore, Beck et al., (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) believe that the group environment allows for greater anonymity and therefore assists individuals in disclosing information more freely. In addition, Hirsch and Peters, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) contend that because each participant is not required to answer every question or respond to every comment their responses are likely to be more genuine and substantial. In this way too, because such openness is encouraged, Byers and Wilcox, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) believe that focus groups offer the opportunity to elicit a range of opinions. Lederman, also (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) finally contends that the data available from focus group interviews are therefore, often richer and fuller than the data available from individual interviews.

Babbie and Mouton (1998) further support the inherent efficacy of focus groups in their belief that the group provides a forum for sharing of information that one would not otherwise be able to access. They add that focus groups are useful in that they allow a space in which people may get together and create meaning among themselves, (rather than individually), where opinions are challenged, confirmed, strengthened and reshaped in the process. Hillebrandt, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) supports this view believing that the open exchange of different perceptions is likely to spark new opinions or strengthen present convictions. Such interaction in a focus group thus allows the researcher to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic, in a limited period of time based on the researcher's ability to assemble and direct focus groups. Furthermore, this particular type of interview technique enables the provision of direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analysis of separate statements from each interviewee, as would be the case in an individual interview methodology.

Hess, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996), proposes various interesting advantages due to this interactive process within focus group discussions, as are listed below:

❖ Synergism (when a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction);

- ❖ Snowballing (when the statements of one respondent initiate a chain reaction of additional comments);

- ❖ Stimulation (when the group discussion generates excitement about a topic);

- ❖ Security (when the group provides a comfort and encourages candid responses); and

- ❖ Spontaneity (because participants are not required to answer every question, their responses are more spontaneous and genuine).

Vaughn et al., (1996) also add that while the focus group is instrumental in bringing cohesion amongst the participants, the researcher too may be drawn closer to the research topic through a direct, intensive encounter with key individuals. As this moderator-participant interaction shifts through out the process an increasingly trusting forum is created whereby individuals feel more confident in reporting on their own cognitions, feelings and behaviours in an accurate and forthright manner. (Lederman, cited in Vaughn et al., 1996). Unlike most structured interviews or surveys, participants in focus group interviews have the opportunity to clarify, extend, and provide examples. Obviously this then allows for a comprehensive understanding of the issues to hand.

In relation to the cohesion building within the dynamic operation of focus groups, Byers and Wilcox, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) observe what they call a 'loosening effect'. This is described as the setting where participants sense that their opinions and experiences are valued, and hence they are more likely to express their opinions and perceptions openly. This heightens the probability of more candid and reflective responses, and in turn, richer and more in-depth data.

Interestingly, when such candour is evident, focus group discussions can serve as a form of catharsis whereby participants are able in such a supportive environment to fully reveal their feelings and intent. In fact Basch, and Elrod, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996), reported their findings that after participating in focus group interviews, individuals often feel a higher level of commitment and motivation because the focus group served as a sign that management cared about them and were interested in their experiences, thoughts and feelings.

Finally, Krueger et al., (2000), very succinctly state the overall purpose of focus groups (thereby adding weight the suitability of this methodology for this particular study): " It is important to keep in mind that the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not

to generalise but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation".

3.6.3 Disadvantages of Focus Groups

❖ Errors could be made in choosing a sample group who are not sufficiently homogenous, to enable free talk and easy expression;

❖ Sourcing candidates to be present at particular times can be problematic;

❖ High costs can be accrued to pay for candidates to participate in focus groups;

❖ Should candidates not attend for any, either valid or non-valid reason, the number of participants in the group could be too small, and render the discussion invalid;

❖ Latecomers to the process, can disturb the natural flow of discussions and could miss the briefing at the start of the discussion.

3.6.4 Data Collection Process

Litosseliti (2003) suggests that it is good practice before the sessions to inform people about the purpose of the research (in general terms) and the future uses of their contributions. Gibbs, (cited in Litosseliti, 2003) adds that managing the participants' expectations too is important in terms of the following:
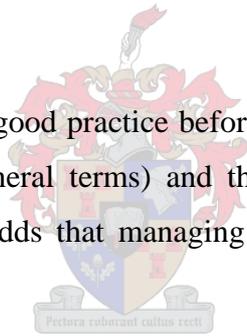
❖ They are free to talk;

❖ Not pressurized to speak or to speak in a specific way;

❖ Not expected to reach consensus or to provide answers; and

❖ They can decide what and how much to disclose to the group.

Morgan (1988) adds that the best introduction is often the honest admission that the researcher is there to learn from the participants and to clarify what Bellenger et al., (cited in Morgan, 1988) terms the researcher's 'incomplete understanding'. Furthermore Axelrod, (cited in Morgan, 1988, p73) notes that "almost anyone will respond to someone who wants to hear his/ her problems, listen to his/her experiences, and find out how he / she thinks and feels".

In the light of this, prior to the commencement of each session, the researcher outlined the intention of the discussion, requested anonymity, and encouraged use of pseudonym name tags to allow for the moderator's easy inclusion of members into the discussion. Nevertheless information sheets reflecting the pseudonym but correct demographic details were completed by all participants. The researcher further outlined her impartial stance that the discussion was merely for the gathering of information about the call centre environment, and also advised that the discussions would be recorded. Once again surety was provided that the tapes and transcripts were private and for academic use only.

The smaller groups encouraged much discussion, as did the intensity of the work environment. Emotional outbursts were noted as well as paralinguistic observations, including gestures, laughter, sounds of disbelief, gazes, etc, (Shamdasani, cited in Litosseliti, 2003), which in keeping with focus group aims, assist in adding to the overall richness and feel of the protagonists' perspectives.

Four focus groups were conducted, 8 tapes were transcribed into a document of 200 pages, which appears in computer disc format in the appendices of this thesis. Most researchers agree that it is unwise to conduct only a single focus group, and it is believed that conducting at least two focus groups with different participants allows the researcher to confirm the initial group's responses (Bortree, Buncher & Goodman, cited in Morgan, 1988). However, focus group interviews should be conducted until the moderator can predict the participants' responses, as was the case in this particular field study. In general, according to Calder, Lyons, McQuarrie and McIntryre, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996), this requires between two and four focus groups.

Calder, cited in Morgan, (1988), supports this by stating that if the moderator can clearly anticipate what will be said next in a group, then the research is done, and this usually takes 3 or 4 groups.

A semi-structured interview process was used through out the focus groups, where key questions were put to each particular group, and facilitation was flexible allowing for much commentary on particularly pertinent topics. Participation was heightened in the groups, with all participants sharing their particular feelings and points of view. The questions stemmed from research literature, as well as information received about the particular call centre, and

included emotional dissonance, work-life imbalance, substance abuse, as well as tenure, and original motivation for joining the company, i.e. a desire for call centre work, or a means of employment, rather than taking the first job to be found. Although much discussion ensued around these key areas, other dysfunctions too were noted. Prior to the focus group sessions, and in keeping with the focus group process, questions were evaluated by members of Cellco, involved in the overall project.

Babbie and Mouton (1998, p.96) also stress the importance of the role that language plays in the study, as documentary is not couched in scientific terms but rather in the terminology used by the protagonists: " Rather than reverting to abstract, theoretical constructs, qualitative researchers prefer to use categories and concepts used by the actors themselves as a further attempt to stay true to the meanings of the actors themselves. "

3.6.5   Cellco: Site of Field Study and Data Collection

It is important to note that Cellco is a fictitious name to assure anonymity of participants of the focus groups and the organisation as a whole.

Cellco was founded in the 1990's, operates throughout South Africa and has captured markets well into the African continent. At present their subscriber base exceeds 10 million and their call centres employ more than 600 agents.
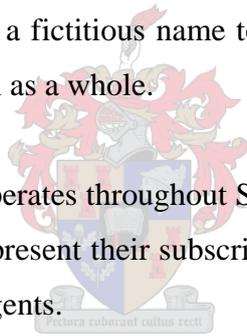
They are an organisation who make use of fixed and temporary cellular contracts, and are competitive in terms of product, aligning themselves to current technological and system trends.

Their call centres boast employees who are computer literate, many of whom have tertiary qualifications, and some of whom are currently completing further studies. 321 males are employed in the centres, and 305 females. Age categories are as follow:

19 years – 24 years   37 agents
25 years – 29 years   29 agents
30 years – 34 years   206 agents
35 years – 39 years   73 agents
40 years – 49 years   23 agents
50 years – 60 years   4 agents

The call centre is structured on a system of 10 - 12 agents per each team leader. Four team leaders report to a supervisor and the call centre is run by two managers. Over the festive seasons, (Christmas and Easter) or as demand increases, additional assistance is used in the form of temporary agents.

On commencement of employment at Cellco, each agent receives a new cell phone with two SIM cards, one for work use, and one for personal use. They have the option of taking out any contract they choose which is subsidised by the company. In addition to this, they receive a shift allowance, which pays for weekend work too. (There are complexities within this system depending on tenure and shift worked, etc). They may also receive a three monthly bonus, should they reach their targets. However, if targets are not reached, no bonus is awarded, even on a pro rata scale.

At the present time, the shifts are being re-negotiated to cater for both the business demands and the needs of the agents. However the shifts worked at the time of the focus group discussions, which cater for 24 hour service availability, were as follows:

Option One: 06h00 –15h00; 09h00 – 18h00; (Anytime between 06h00 and 18h00). This is not based on any particular rotation. They may e.g. work one week from 06h00 – 15h00 and the next week from 09h00 – 18h00.

Option Two: 15h00 – 24h00; 14h00 – 23h00; 06h00 – 15h00; 09h00 – 18h00; 18h00 – 03h00; 20h00 – 06h30

Option Three: 06h00 – 14h30; 07h00 – 16h00; 15h00 – 23.30; 15h30 – 24h00; 22h00 – 07h00

3.7 SUMMARY

Explaining choice of methodology and research design is critical to any study as therein lies the direction of the investigation. Subsequently thesis structure and mode of collection and analysis rest on the information gleaned. Hence the discussions above serve to qualify and affirm the researcher's choice and create a rationale for the mode of study. In this way too,

the resultant course of study is highlighted. Hence Chapter Four introduces the actual presentation of findings, and thus reveals the data for collection and analysis.
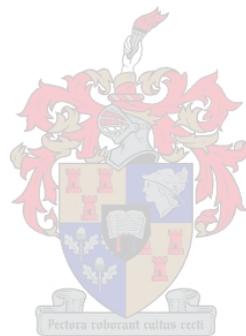
4 CHAPTER FOUR – PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Focus Group Discussions conducted in November / December 2005, were varied, passionate and cathartic, providing participants with what they mention as a 'debriefing' session and allowing the researcher valuable and intimate insight into their work environment. The agents' honest and willingness to divulge information highlighted the stressful nature of the job, and it was interesting noting those agents for whom the consequences of such, had manifested in dysfunctional behaviour. On the other hand some agents were able to adjust their lifestyles, and were able to cope with the stressful work conditions by adopting either a different mindset or making deliberate behavioural choices.

Hence the following chapter details the actual agent commentary and provides enormous insight into the management of their work stressors. Comments include both those where participants have struggled with stressors and have succumbed to measures of work dysfunction, as well as comments from those who have accepted the status quo, and have made behavioural shifts in order to adopt their different lifestyle. For ease of reference and continuity, the themes of stress, its antecedents and consequences is carried through into this chapter detailing the presentation of data. In this way too, theory pertaining to the role of stress and its resultant work dysfunctions in call centres can be aligned with this prevalent and realistic commentary.

4.2 STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

Call centre literature often reveals themes pertaining to the modern epidemic of stress, or psychosocial implications of shift work, and emotional exhaustion, as well as numerous articles on how to manage the particularly complex functioning or operations within a call centre. Indeed stress manifests itself in many ways within any work environment, but it is believed that the unique circumstances within a call centre create an environment that is more stressful than other occupational surroundings (Zapf et al., 2003). In fact, Houlihan (2000, p.233) describes the call centre as a "war within itself" and this sort of sentiment is echoed in the following monologue, relayed by a member of one of the focus groups:

"Huh, you know, to put it simply, we fighting a system, it's a corporate system umm, everything that is done here, or any corporate for that matter is always, "what is best for the

company"? Um, what everybody seems to forget and what the corporate seems to forget is that we are human beings you know, its good to want to provide a specific kind of product or service and be the best that you can be in that particular market but at the end of the day, we're human beings. If you look at a human's physiology, we were not designed to do this, you know, we not nocturnal creatures and it has an effect on your body, it has an effect on your mind, your entire being. It has an effect on, you know, each person in a different way. So you can see the effects, I mean you've spoken to many people. At the end of the day somewhere a long the line, its not you that needs to draw the conclusion that there's something wrong, it's the guys up there that need to draw the conclusion that there's something wrong because there is this massive circulation of people coming and going, how they manage to stay here that long, I don't know".

If one recalls the more theoretical definition of work dysfunction, the above holds true that there is an adverse complex interaction between the individual and the work environment, and the above quote asserts a "them versus us" scenario. On the one hand, the organisation is striving for productivity, quality service and indeed aligning itself with dynamic environmental factors, and on the other hand, the agents are fighting for a work ethic that caters for their needs of development, growth, and satisfaction. In any psychological work contract these are believed to be fair return for labour provided. Indeed, in the introductory section of work dysfunction in the Literature Review, Freud and Herzberg, (cited in Lowman, 1993) stressed the importance of work and how it not only assists in developing individuals, but is vital for sustaining them too. When the balance shifts somewhat, causing a vexatious attitude amongst agents who rile at the coercions of authoritative organisational structures or management, work dysfunction is said to evolve. And thus such dysfunction in the form of advanced stress is thought to have happened in this call centre.

Not surprisingly, Houlihan (2000, p.231) believes that call centres are rooted in "contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes, and that the organisation imposes conflictual role requirements on the agents". Certainly, the attempt at scripting calls, whereby agents are 'force fed' desired organisational speak, or need to respond in a certain manner regardless of following the flow of the discussion, have caused stress and tension. One agent described having assisted a client and having met their needs effectively, but was later marked down as she failed to call the customer by name, (which seems pointless and the customer was very happy with the service received). Another agent mentioned that he would like to help

customers in his own way, but because of company protocol he is not able to and feels that this reduces his efficiency and certainly his autonomy.

4.2.1 Organisational / Managerial Related Stressors

4.2.1.1 Management Practices

During research investigation and inception, the intention of the study was to focus mainly on the behavioural dysfunctions manifesting as a result of the stressful nature of the call centre job. However, it became clear during the research process that determining factors fundamental to stress and the resultant shaping of behaviour, were stressful antecedents. The focus group highlighted these factors, two of the most pertinent issues being the role of management and training in call centres. Agents felt that management practices were not effective, nor conducive to a healthy working environment. Comments such as " too strict… like school" and " .. can't talk to colleagues" were noted. Agents also believe that management has a 'take it or leave it' attitude, and hence feel that they are mere automatons in the industry, without consideration of the agents' lives beyond the call centre.

"I think in some ways its not always humane (changing shift times sporadically and without due notice due to operational demands) because they saying its operational requirement on one side and on the other side they are also saying to you if you don't like it, there's a lot of people…" (the implication being that you could lose your job).

The agents too were resentful of management for employing external consultants at great expense to the organisation, to assist them with design and re-structuring. They feel that they, the agents themselves, are at the coal front of the organisation and therefore should be heard. They also feel that management should take a more hands on and interactive role in managing the call centres.

"But now they get external people that doesn't know much about the work we do, then they say ok listen try this and this solution. Now we tell them, it's not going to work, OK?? But they don't' want to listen to us, because they pay millions of bucks with these other people who are experts right?? And then, it's not going to work… "

"What I would say, they should let these people work in the call centre, they should let those top people come and sit in the call centre with us and take calls, and let me evaluate 2 of his calls, see if you can get a 96% on his calls… if you want to be a farmer, you can't farm from the stoep, you must be able to work with the ground, grapple with you workers, otherwise you can't farm".

Furthermore, agents became distrustful owing to contracts that were negotiated prior to commencing employment but differed after commencement. (Interestingly this comment was made by several members of the focus groups):

"I know if you work in a CC environment especially if they open 24 hours a day there's a risk that you might be required to work during the night or late at night, so that's not my issue, my issue was being promised you'd get 3 days off and then they change it without notifying me by the time I've put pen to paper to sign my contract then afterwards I realized ok, no, I've been screwed over."

4.2.1.2 *Training*

Remarks concerning insufficient training and poor work systems were numerous. From a human resources point of view, it could be determined that without the necessary training, the agents are not fully equipped to perform their job and hence in terms of the job contract the employer or organisation is not fulfilling one of its primary functions. This applies to both soft skills training, and product training. Interestingly all members of the focus group, mentioned that they had received soft skill training only at the commencement of their employment at Cellco. Since that time (and the tenure of the agents range from 2 – 7 years) no refresher courses, nor specific courses on dealing with nuisance callers, or de-stressing courses, or even conflict management courses have been catered for.

" I would say the last 4 years training just went from bad to worse. At one stage we had quality trainers who go out of their way, if you don't' understand a question… they would go out their way to explain it to you or alternatively if they couldn't answer you they'd go out their way to come back to you afterwards and tell you what's happening. Now what's happening people, they read you from a whiteboard or blackboard whatever you want to call it, they read you the so-called the rules or if it's a product and then when you ask them a

question they look at you with this big mouth and they start ridiculing you in their own class because you dare ask them the question."

Furthermore, the agents mentioned that in some instances they were actually advised by the trainers before the sessions, not to ask questions as they were unsure of the product material themselves. This was seen as most stressful as owing to poor training, they were then unable to assist the client professionally, and efficiently. In addition, product training, although undertaken was on the whole considered ineffectual.

"What normally happens is a subscriber ..... and asks us about a product and we like go, oh, okay – do we have a product like that??"

"Actually ... it's more about feeling incompetent. There's a customer phoning in knowing about the product, you working for the company and don't even know about it! And sometimes you actually argue with them you say, "no I've never heard something like that…. I had a guy who threatened to have me fired because I had no idea what he was referring to…"

"I mean sometimes there's new products released we don't ever receive training. I mean it's not like major products, its maybe like an addition to an existing product you know, and extra feature. We'd just be advised you know, that that was available."

The agents also mentioned that the timing of training was ineffective and that work overload was experienced owing to the quantity of new products being explained at one time, sometimes up to 6 or 7 products in one session. Often training would take place in the last hour of the shift, which as one agent put it:

" I mean who switches on that last hour??"

"I feel that the training itself is um..It's just not necessarily provided in time. Like with us as agents I mean anyone can tell you we always the last to know of a new product. A product will be launched, we'll hear about it because a customer called to ask about it. Then while you on the call you need to research and check what this person is actually referring to and

then somewhere you find some bit of reference info and then we get trained on it a month later!"

Agents mentioned that they did not receive training on the various cell phones, and that this would be beneficial to them. In addition, they felt that there was too little communication not only within the call centre itself, between management, supervisors and the agents, but also nationally between Gauteng and Cape Town, especially with regard to time, date and place product launches. Additional stress therefore is felt by the agents as some customers are aware of the new products and want information about them, prior to the actual launch of the product.

"What the other problem is they say ok listen we going to launch something say this and this date, so now you tell people already about it but now it comes to the date now its not being launched that date anymore, now people want to have the service but its not there!"

4.2.1.3 *Call Monitoring*

Monitoring of calls in terms of research findings is controversial as divergent literature suggests that no agreement has been reached regarding its positive or deleterious effect. While Aiello and Kolb (cited in Holman, 2003) believe that disadvantages include increased stress, Holman (2003) believes that such performance monitoring can in fact reduce stress if it is conducted in a developmental manner which would include feedback to the agent. However, the members of the current focus group have not found this to be the case. Instead, the monitoring of calls is felt to police them into correct procedures. Furthermore, they are at times afraid that they will be monitored, especially after having taken an abusive call, without having had opportunity to debrief, distress and realign themselves with their work function.

(Describing her thoughts when having taken a abusive call). "......and you get evaluated on your calls so you must please God, don't let them evaluate my next call, because as you already in a .....mood and you going to take that next call, you can't be in that mood. You need to basically just be the Hi, Good day, my name is….whatever you know."

4.2.1.4 Quality service versus call targets

The continuing debate around quantity versus quality is ever present, and hence the agents battle to provide the required meaningful quality service as well as keep to their targets:

"I know change is constant, and change is good sometimes, but they changed everything haywire, ...in the beginning when I started working here you had to work on stats and quality, that was…you cleared the queue and you make sure you say the right things at the right time…that was fine. Then there were rules in productivity, and I couldn't handle that because my productivity was too low because my calls were too short, I was just saying what I needed to say. People were fired because of productivity, the next day it meant nothing! Which is stupid, so what about the people who lost their jobs because they couldn't make their productivity, they can't say…you can't tell me score a goal here, then move the poles there, when I can score it here, because that is unfair. But then you tell them that they tell you "change is constant" and you just have to keep up to it, which is stupid, it doesn't make sense to me. If something works, you keep it because it works, you don't try and change it because it's working for some other company. "

Dissatisfaction was also felt regarding the various targets which are seen to change too regularly, for example, one week the focus seems to be on quality and the next on productivity, and the agents are left stymied as to how to manage their calls. Furthermore, blind obedience to the changes is expected, much to the chagrin of the agents……"*And they don't give you good enough reason as well."*

4.2.1.5 Other significant Work Related Stressors

(i)   Re-routing calls

Many agents felt that if some system or programme could be implemented whereby information is obtainable via voicemail for customers, it could possibly save them time queuing and reduce job monotony for the agent.

"I don't think people's the problem, I think they should filter out some of the stuff that comes through the queue and put out proper information on the systems… So like for a simple thing when they call in, can't they be clever enough and say "welcome to Cellco" you are currently

on the x package, please hold for a consultant. As it goes on it says, your voicemail – or something like that is currently active or you are on a contract. Just give them information on their thing so that by the time to get that, they might say, ok but actually I found out that, or used one of the options."

(ii)   Problems with Cellshop:

Almost unanimously the agents mentioned the impact that these franchise stores have on the call centre. The general feeling is that the salespeople at these outlets, work on a commission basis and merely sell the phone to the customer without assisting them further. As a result, queries concerning the start up procedures are handled by the call centre agents rather than the Cellshop salespeople. Of note too, is the number of these customers who are angry because they have not initially received the service that they had expected, which in turn creates additional stress for the agents. Furthermore, it would appear that the information given to customers too, is inaccurate.

"What could also assist as well if you think in the Cellshop I don't know whether they do actually get their training from as well because the calls that you get, what they've done, what they have maybe explained to the people is totally the opposite of what we know. So we still have to rectify that as well."
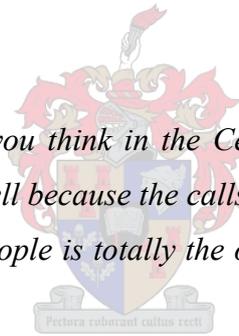
(iii)   Deteriorating Morale

There appears to be a change in the general sentiment of agents towards the call centres. Many attested to the fact that previously they would have had no hesitation in working a little after their shift if the need arose, or coming in a little earlier to chat to friends and check up on work prior to their shift starting. Currently, however, the general feeling is despondency in coming to work in the first place, with a desire to leave as soon as the shift ends.

"All the conditions and targets that we need to meet are all for operational requirements. Anyone here will tell you that when we started, the type of training and the environment and the whole vibe of the call centre was much more positive. It was fun to come to work, it was fun to come to training, it was fun to work because you still had your 3 off days so your first day you could rest, 2nd day do you necessaries and the 3rd day relax in time again to start

afresh. You don't have those options anymore so it's not one thing specifically it not the job itself, its not the shift itself it's everything collectively you know."

"The feeling that I get with all my colleagues as well, we like our work, the only problem was when they started bringing in the restrictions on this and that and curbing you with this or doing that and like I said when we started here we enjoyed doing the work, we would actually tell someone, no Cellco is a lekker place to work, and now you tell someone don't even come close to Cellco, not ever"!

(iv)   Internet Information Programme (HANK)

Agents expressed their concern about the above programme, commenting that it was ineffective and often not up to date. Furthermore, by the time that the information was available on HANK they had, out of necessity sought it elsewhere. The agents were also unsure that anyone was actually attending to updating the information on a regular base and therefore their electronic source of information was deemed inaccurate and unreliable.

"Ja, it just causes more confusion, rather try and figure it out yourself than actually go into it."
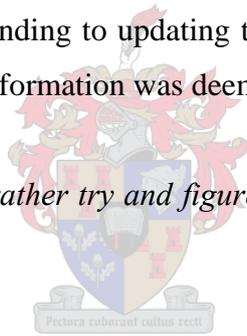
"You know what's upsetting for me, you can't check your emails or read around while you on a call, You've only got an hour on old, now my hour on hold, I smoke, I want to go smoke, I want to go to the toilet because I'm human. Now I can't update myself with HANK because then I'm going to have to go on hold, I can't read and speak to the person at the same time, I can't check the emails from my Team leader, because they going to mark me down, now when am I supposed to do that? I'm not going to do it in my own time, I've got children at home, I've got people that look after them, so by the end of work here, I want to go home, I'm not going to stay behind to check emails or to check the HANK to update myself because that's…either allocate time for me to update myself of they going to have to make training time for us to be updated."

(v)   Logistics

The following quote is self-explanatory, regarding the logistics and system requirements at Cellco:

"But… now its all good and well like they getting like a thousand more people, whatever the case might be. But what's the use like say for example only say 100 pc's and they get like 10,000 operators, but you can only use 100 at a time. So it's not going to help the queue. So they must get more equipment to handle…because I mean what helps if you got 1000 people, but only 100 that can work at a time, its not going to help the queue. Because they say ja, no they employ more people right but it's not really helping."

(vi)   Application for Leave

Many problems were associated with booking leave and taking it. In fact, in one of the discussions, after the focus group had ended, it was revealed that an agent had to swap his shift with someone else as he had been unable to book his leave to get married!

"It's very disruptive you have no forward planning for anything because even if you take our leave application into consideration you can only apply for leave 2 months in advance to the date requested so I mean if its January now you can't plan a mid year vacation. I mean there's things to consider if you gonna go anywhere for that matter maybe there's flights you need to arrange or accommodation or so on, in 2 months it's very short notice… I mean if you going to a resort or something within in 2 months from the time now, you not gonna get a booking"

4.2.1.6 *Organisational Support*

While the focus in the study thus far has considered the themes of stress, its antecedents and its consequences, focus group discussions included mention of positive factors in support of the agents, by the organisation. These organisational support structures in fact have the aim of relieving stress in the call centres, and of significance was the unanimous agreement by all participants that in terms of ergonomic work station design and salary, the organisation appears to have their best interests at heart. The agents agreed that the work stations were well positioned, and they were easily able to manoeuvre themselves around the pc, the

drawers, the work station and the screen, thereby negating or minimising the possibility of musculo-skeletal injury, or occupational stress. A few occurrences of acoustic shock were noted. However these were not considered as a major cause for stress, especially as headsets were replaced whenever required. Furthermore, hygienic considerations and standards were upheld in the call centres, as each headset was the responsibility of each agent, without the need to share them.

In addition, many felt that the working environment too was well kept and conducive to pleasant working surroundings, although some wished for a new coat of paint and more user-friendly pause areas.

"I'm very happy, as I say I've worked for another company for 3 years and that was terrible in standards. Most companies that I've seen inside the buildings, we've got a very nice building, nobody can dispute that. Sometimes some of the chairs I'd say, sometimes, is broken, but they generally keep that nice. We've got trees inside, it's always neat and they do clean quite often, so no complaints."

Even though all participants agreed that they were well compensated for the work that they did, it was seen by some as a 'golden handcuff', as their desire would be to leave the organisation owing to the various work dysfunctions.

"…. even though you have all these restrictions and you so unhappy umm, its still a comfort zone where you used to what you doing, used to the money that you getting, so if you gonna look for something the first thing that I would think of is "Are they going to pay me that much?" Because I've become so used to what I'm getting paid now so I would think twice before I leave."

"Salary wise I don't complain, not really……"
"There could be an improvement…." (general laughter around the room)
"There could but basically…"
"Umm, nobody's going to say no! But ja, I don't think we really have much reason to complain about the salary."
"It's holding most of us here, that I can promise you!"

4.2.2   Environmental Stressors

4.2.2.1 <u>Abusive Calls / Sexual Harassment</u>

The stresses of taking an abusive call are such that at times, the agent is rendered shocked, disorientated and sometimes disgusted. Not only is such an occurrence inherently stressful, but to continue with receiving calls, without the opportunity to debrief, or at least remove oneself from the ACD for a moment would serve to emphasise these very stressful incidents within the job:

(Male agent) "…...for instance with the prank callers, you know, kids calling in, we have men breathing on the phone, they don't know who you are hey, they just breathe on the phone like I don't know the worst thing that happens on the call you don't want to know of. Umm, and for a guy, I don't' know what's for the girls but for a guy to now listen now this guy is now …whatever…fiddling with himself…"

"No, you can't.   (Put the phone down).   Ja, and if you get marked down, it affects your money. So you cannot just put down the phone."

It would appear that as abusive calls are such a regular occurrence, they might not receive the attention that they aught, but consideration needs to be given to the often stressful consequences of many of these calls. Discussion group agents calculated that on some shifts (especially those outside regular working hours) up to 25 % of calls were nuisance calls, which could include irate callers, children, pranksters and sexually harassing calls. It is important to note however that even though the majority of these calls seem to be taken during these hours, they occur through out the day. As previously mentioned in this text, research (Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000) has revealed that calls of an invasive and abusive sexual nature can yield negative impacts on personal safety, psychological well-being, job satisfaction as well as harbouring an unfavourable attitude towards men in general. It is important to add, that as seen in the quote above, negative effects too are experienced by men, but scant research masks empirical knowledge.

"What usually happens like especially if I had a call like that you just go on hold. Then your team leader comes to you, why you on hold? Then you just either swear at him or you go off

at that person, just to get it out of your system because if you not gonna do something, the rest of your day is going to be messed you know."

However should an agent need to take some time, it may be taken from an allowance of 45 minutes per shift, which includes all the time needed to visit the toilet, have smoke breaks, deal with calls that might take longer than usual, e.g. account queries, complete wrap up or follow up work after the call etc.

Furthermore, Leidner (1996, p.58) asserts that call centre agents are "readily available targets" for abuse, especially regarding their lack of autonomy.

" *..... she might become louder, I find myself becoming quieter, more and more quieter, I want to curl into a ball and just melt away. That's what I want to do, and um, they start shouting all louder and louder and louder...."*

The above quote is from a male agent who has had in excess of four years experience in a call centre, and is indicative of the nature of the very abusive calls often received. Over the time, he has managed many abusive calls, and only at times is he able to conduct himself in an emotionally detached manner, whereby he can handle the nature of such anger.

4.2.3   Occupational Stressors:
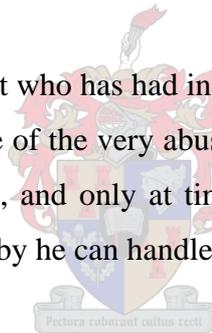
4.2.3.1 Role Uncertainty, Job Security, and lack of authority to perform

Role uncertainty is another area of confusion, and resultant stress, as in some groups, the instructions when dealing with an abusive or nuisance caller is to hand the call to the supervisor, while in other teams the agents are expected to handle the calls themselves. Ferris, (1996) believes that the uncertainty of how to perform is as debilitating as lacking the authority to perform.

"Ja, this one's quite funny right, there's a rule that say's if there's an irate coming through you have to put through to the team leader but when you put it through to the team leader they say, "well why don't you take the call?"

Issues were raised concerning the amount of students and temporary staff in the call centres, with the unspoken expectation that permanent agents are supposed to train them. While many are happy to show the newcomers the ropes, they sometimes fear for their jobs, not knowing if they will be replaced by these new incumbents. As it would appear to the agents that many long-term, knowledgeable agents are being replaced by new untrained agents, much job insecurity exists. Thus more pressure is placed on the current agents, who in this uneasy milieu are expected to train these 'new incumbents'.

"... and like they come to you and ask you, oh do you know what this is? And I don't mind helping them and telling them do this, do that and that, but exactly, I'm not going to help somebody who's really going to take my job at the end of the day."

4.2.3.2 ACD

The agents feel that they do not have sufficient time to document the caller problem, because no sooner have they completed a call, then the next call comes through. Even though a computer programme allows them to go back and work with the information later, it takes more time from the already limited 45 minutes wrap up time as they are having to recall the exact problem, long after the call was taken.

"It actually doesn't help a person that much because sometimes when callers finished, some information you still have to capture on the system and then ...all the information gone, the next call comes in ...like you know it's frustrating."

"And also ... the e-mail thing. Sometimes you know stuff happens during the daytime, you know while you're on shift say maybe something might go down but you don't' know about it because you not allowed to go read your emails while you on a call and so how do you know, say for example say the 100 service goes down for the recharge, for example, now you pick up just now, all of a sudden I get like 10, 20 calls of people who are having the same problem, right, but now you might have picked it up if you were allowed to go check your email but I mean, the moment you finish the one call, the next call comes through and you don't even have the time to just like one or two second break just to see if anything else came through or whatever, you know like the next call comes through."

Furthermore, many agents mentioned the problem with the 45 minutes wrap up time, in that on some days, when they were handling many e.g. account queries, the time was not sufficient. A discussion ensued and a suggestion, as follows, put forward:

But do you think it could, I mean if one would have a shifting balance in terms of what calls you are doing and the amount of "on hold" time you need, that they could register that and that's how they could monitor that?... but if there were a sliding scale and they know you, you know somebody's gone to the full 1 hr 15 minutes or 1 hr 30 minutes or whatever you've been allowed and then they look up on the system and see well he or she did do 10 account queries that's valid – I mean do you think that could be effective?

4.3 ANTECEDENTS OF STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

4.3.1 Work Life Imbalance

In the study conducted by Hacker and Doolen (2003, p.288), the comment, 'work is not life', by one of the members of the survey group, prompted the researchers to ponder the concept further: (as cited previously):

"If work is not life, then what is it – time out from life? Has the separation viewpoint been emphasized so much that some people are no longer simply living two lives, one home life and one work life, but have progressed to the point of living a home life and a non-life?" However, an alternative viewpoint is that they are perhaps living a work life and little else.

This has been adopted by members of the studied focus groups and a similar idea is succinctly portrayed:

"The problem for us, or for me, is that we become our work, although we don't want to, we really don't want to, we become our work the only thing we talk about, the only thing – even when I go out with my own friends, my personal friends, I cannot switch off, the subscriber becomes my life. I am everything, if somebody asks me something what I think of is, MMS (multi-media messaging) – am an MMS already......." "... you have to plan your social life around your, everything is planned around your work, and .....I mean everything is just work,

work, work.", "...understand that each person that sits here has got a life that's behind Cellco, because Cellco is a life on its own, right…."

Or sadly as portrayed below, where an agent feels that she is longer even part of a life that seems to revolve around her:

"Well I suppose for me its like looking through a looking glass. And I'm participating in this walled (what's supposed to be) Cape Town (or supposed to be the social life of Cape Town). I'm not participating in it because what I see, I see myself looking through a looking glass and I'm not participating, I'm a sort of a strange kick back and I've never wanted to become part of it, I can't become part of it totally because I'm always held back by the work. "

The cause of such a negative outlook is likely to be based on many variables or a "constellation of interdependent factors" as is the nature of stress. (Le Fevre et al., 2003, p.729) And surely the above statement holds true of that of a stressful encounter, as it would appear that the environmental demands have exceeded her adaptive resources? In turn she has withdrawn somewhat, and in a sense blames her work for her demise. Humphries (2000) might assign this behaviour to that of 'rustout' whereby she feels that she is powerless and the victim of a neglectful work organisation.
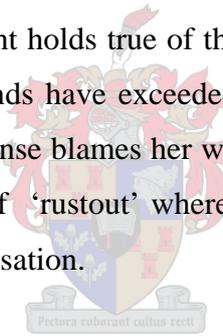
Many agents feel the frustration of a disrupted social life and Brooks (1997) in fact, has outlined that the unsociable working hours and fatigue are two of the major occupational stressors in the service industry. This certainly was evident in that data collected, as many members commented on family life disruption owing to shift work:

4.3.1.1 *Effects of Shift Work*

"Forget friends, I just want to see my kids – I just want to see my wife… you know your social life suffers, I mean I know people that work here, have lost so many boyfriends or girlfriends."

Many agents could identify with the fact that they often did not see loved ones because of the timing around shifts. E.g. coming from work when spouse is going to work and children are going to school; being away in the evenings or over meal times. Agents cited that sometimes

they would have to wait for 6 weeks to get 2 week-ends off, where they would be able to enjoy a 'normal' family weekend together, and they found that this was most disruptive, with one agent stating : " *your son wonders if he has a father any longer and I mean ja, that is very strenuous (stressful) especially for a growing up child*".

" *and another thing I've found, my child, … it was more like she was so close to the Nanny and my husband because I'm not there, I'm never there, she doesn't get to see me, when I get home at night, she's sleeping, and I can't wake her up. In the morning, just getting her ready to go to crèche and that's about it, that's the only time I see her and weekends, they are always home, I must come to work.*"

" *I would get a phone call and I would answer it, and when you answered it, you could hear my daughter crying on the phone. And it's her phoning me crying daddy when you coming home, I miss you. And that…. it breaks your heart… you can't take a call like that again.* "

From a human resources perspective, Brooks (1997) ascribes shift work as one of the many complex, controversial and unresolved human resources issues within the health care and service industry, and when considering the quote above, it is hardly surprising. Sadly though, according to Ahasan (2000), there is no guideline in terms of effective shift scheduling, and much research is needed to investigate optimal working hours, which are conducive both to organisational effectiveness as well as agent well-being. The problems are seemingly exacerbated when considering the details or intimate dynamics of the shift worker lifestyle, especially when its resultant effects have far reaching ramifications on e.g. dependents, as the example below depicts:

"*Also when I get home then my kids are watching TV or playing play station, then I will tell him, "just put that rubbish off" I want it to be quiet, I want the TV to be off, which is unfair because he's been playing all the time but when I get home I don't want him to talk to me, sometimes I'll tell him, "just shut up for a few minutes, I don't need to talk to you right" I just want quietness, because I feel so irritated and I don't know who to say it to, like now when I get at home, I'll rather, just often sometimes sit in the car for half an hour just to calm down, because I know that its unfair shouting at them.*"

The above also reveals what Hochschild (1989) refers to as 'going home to the second shift'. So often family, dependent and household duties remain the domain of women despite increased numbers of women in the working environment. Although attempts have been made to alleviate these stressors by allowing choice of shift to facilitate child care, this is often at the expense of financial reward. The rigidity and harshness of shift work is intensified especially in the early days following the birth of a child:

4.3.1.2 *Effects of the 'Second Shift'*

The rigours of caring for and nursing an infant for women on a shift work schedule can be harrowing, as so often, especially in the early days, the mothers' lives revolve around nursing the baby. The schedules therefore during this time are considered very rigid and inflexible. Mothers complained especially of the fact that no sooner had they fallen asleep after a shift, then it was time to get up and feed the baby.

" ...new mothers, you know the babies is still small, .. if they could work Option 1 instead of Option 2 or Option 3 at that time, for maybe a few months, or the first 6 months that they come from maternity leave because I think that would be much better for them because I know from experience, I was working shifts at the time when I had my baby and it was horrible"

" the maids don't watch them at night even if you have a sleep in, they work during the day and that's it, they need to sleep and then you have to be awake, you come from work, you've been awake all day now you can't expect her to be awake night and day, so you have to look after the kid at night, now you can't sleep and then in the morning you have to go to work and then she's had a good nights rest, she has to take over, so the mother never gets rest."

The second shift dimension takes on a further role too, in that women, not only have their work and child care responsibilities, but they too are equally instrumental in keeping marriages intact. According to Barton et al., and Repetti, (cited in Smither & Wederburn, 1998) parental and partner roles are impacted.

"I find with my husband I have to make an appointment for sex because I'm always too tired..... and I mean that's an important part of your marriage, it is"!

"And that's why I stress all the time because they go out like on weekends…and there's always women who are available. People have affairs and I'm too tired to go with …and I worry about that like I'll sit and work and I'm thinking, Oh my God my husband is there now….and it goes through my mind, my mind is not here because I'm thinking, is he looking after the kids, is he doing this is he making sure they're not wandering away, so I'm not really here, I'm there also".

Some agents expressed concern that when they are able to get out with their spouses they are so tired from the work and from talking all day, that they become relatively anti-social, and as a result the relationship as well as friendships with others have suffered. Furthermore, shift work reduces the quality time experienced by couples and often personal or intimate conversations are either not had, or are talked about over the phone.

"I just want to say one other thing um, I've only been married a month and a half now and my wife wakes me up now and it's a problem because you really, you, you want to be there for her but you are so tired that the last thing on your mind is that…but it does create a lot of problems especially in your relationship."

Suggestions of socio-cultural disruptions were also noted in that members felt that they were not able to worship either at church on Sundays or at Mosque on Fridays. As they were not allowed to swap out such times with colleagues they feel that in a sense their freedom of choice has been denied them, and they are unable to meet their spiritual needs.

4.3.1.3 *Sleep Disturbances and Fatigue*

In the study conducted by Ahasan et al., (2002), on the psychosocial implications of shift work, 85 % of the subjects claimed that they had sleep disturbance, and when considering the examples cited above, it correlates with the above findings.

The disruptions to sleep, (as seen in the examples above) and the cumulative effect of fatigue was cited by Brooks (1997) as a major stressor of shift work. Many members detailed their dependency on sleeping pills, and their exhaustion during, and at the end of shifts. Furthermore, it would appear that the shifts at Cellco tend to be more of a rapidly rotating kind, rather than either a day or night shift, and hence, according to Wikinson, (cited in

Brooks,1997) sufficient sleep is not achieved which would serve to exacerbate work / family dysfunction.

"...you constantly tired, I personally am constantly tired, I would sit there and tell them tomorrow is going to be a good day, I'm going to start working harder from tomorrow and then that will be my whole psyche and then I would come to work and then it would just change within the first hour. You just lose it and I just go down that slump again".

Hildebrandt et al., and Rosa, (cited in Smith et al., 1998) discovered that fatigue and tiredness are essentially cumulative. Therefore, in the above example, despite her initial will to create a positive environment, perhaps physically owing to fatigue she is unable to get herself out of "that slump". Furthermore, this feeling of powerlessness could manifest in other areas, and possibly contribute to depression.

"...but with sleeping tablets, my problem with sleeping tablets, I will finish a shift say 12, you come at home say half past 12, at 3 o clock (am) I'll get to sleep. Ja, at 3 o clock, but you still awake, you lying there but your mind is thinking all the time, its thinking, its thinking and then I'll get up and I'm awake again 8 o clock then from 8 until my next shift 3 o clock, then it's the same thing over and over again. The most I'll ever sleep is 4 hours a day."

Mullany et al., (1977) believe that provided workers average at least six hours' daily sleep, performance, for most people is not adversely affected. Wilkinson, (cited in Brooks, 1997) continues to state that in the presence of insufficient sleep, as noted above, work, social or family dysfunction is increasingly presumed and in addition, work, safety and general well-being are substantially impaired.

"I developed a sleeping disorder from working shifts, ... I used to have serious trouble with sleeping I mean if you working till half past 11 then you get home 12 or 12:30 now you first need to wind down so you end up only falling asleep at 3 or 4 o clock and then you sleep till the next day at what time and then you up again and its back to work".

"And I actually managed within the last 2 months, I managed to get into some kind of sleeping pattern, I'm getting off the sleeping tablets but I find it again, like last week we worked our early shift again, so I had to get up early um, so the previous night, you used to

going to bed by 12 o clock, now tomorrow morning you have to get up at 5 o clock I had to take a sleeping tablet by 8 o clock so that I could be asleep by 10 and get up at 5, so there's always that changeover".

Paley and Tepas (1994), and Smith (1979) warn of the effects of fatigue if insufficient rest time is had in between shifts, and too many consecutive days are worked without rest days. Furthermore "there's always that changeover" is significant as researchers studying the effects of shift work and circadian rhythms feel that either a day shift or a night shift is more akin to balancing circadian rhythms while a rotating shift is disruptive on all counts, (Barton & Wilkinson, cited in Brooks, 1997).

"If it was maybe a set pattern where you work every single week the same shifts then its fine, but, no I mean like 7 o clock or 8 o clock. Then its fine but now the one week you work 6 or they change your shift the one day you work 6 the next day your work 8 and so your body don't really get used to it".

"Well, what's basically been happening for me personally and I know its been happening with him to is that your body actually shifts because we start most the time we work 2 o' clock or 3 o'clock so our day actually starts at 12 and its actually been here 2 o' clock in the morning but other people obviously sleeping we wide awake we want to go to the Waterfront ….....so there's actually nothing to do so you have to go home & watch TV and I mean you like go through the channels and then you fall asleep."

Many agents too, mentioned the problem with only two days off in-between shifts, and this did not allow them sufficient time to unwind from their previous shift and to carry out their day to day chores.

4.3.2   Emotional Dissonance

Many agents experience a loss of power, in that they are unable to express their genuine emotion during telephonic conversations, and thus experience emotional dissonance. In the same way that emotional detachment, might provide a certain type of power or control, dissonance in a sense removes it. Indeed, this incongruence between feeling and action, may

ultimately lead to lower self esteem, depression cynicism and alienation from work, (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

"You have to make sure you mention everything and now this person maybe like you say they come across warm and then they'll ask you something and then you have to cut them short because you just have to then let go because you have to…so that is a bad thing".

This is also an example of surface acting whereby once the emotion is fully under way, components of the emotion are manipulated, and then result in a change of public display, but the internal experience remains intact. I.e. the agent enjoys contact with the caller, who is friendly and engages easily. The natural propensity of the agent would be to respond in a similar fashion, but owing to scripting, targets, company protocol, she needs to end the call quickly to take the next one. Emotional dissonance has happened because her actions are not aligned with her feelings. Emotion suppression too has occurred as her public displays of emotion are reduced or eliminated. Another example of surface acting appears below:

We should be able to take control of that call, be able to say sir, I understand where you coming from sir, I understand that you are um, that what is happening in your life there, I've got empathy for what is happening there, but I must advise sir that that's nothing, its not part of my job to relate, to help you on that occasion. I'm not allowed to do that for the client….".

Here the agent also struggles with a natural empathy towards the customer, but with the need to stick to company rules. The quote also highlights the lack of control that agents have in managing their calls, and the frustration felt.

At times however, everyone has their limit as the following example cites:

"… if you call in and shout and swear at me and I just really feel that I can't deal with it because you're bloody rude and you don't' want to listen to me, I'm not allowed to tell them listen you can speak to my team leader, because then I get marked down. I can't suggest it to you, you need to bring it up yourself. Now if I feel that I'm going to swear at you, I'm going to tell you, "hold on, I'll give you to someone else" because every person has a certain limit to where they can be pushed and that's it, but they still monitor you on that also. You mustn't tell the person, do you want to speak to someone else. And sometimes that helps, I feel that

sometimes if I tell you…it works, you just need to hear it from someone else, because some people are like that."

Hochschild; Morris and Feldman; and Rafaeli and Sutton, (cited in Cote, 2005, p.512), describe emotional dissonance as "a state of discrepancy between a public display and a subjective experience of emotion that is psychologically taxing and strain enhancing. "

The agent above has clearly reached her limit and has chosen to put the call through to the supervisor so as to avoid an inappropriate response. In this way, emotional dissonance has occurred as her public display differs hugely from her inner turmoil and emotion. This turmoil is derived too because of the organisational stressors placed on her. She is discouraged from putting calls through to her supervisor. Furthermore such action will result in her being marked down. Had she continued with the call she was sure she would be rude to the customer, which was the reason for putting the call forward in the first place. Had this happened she would have run the risk of a warning, as the call would have been picked up on the monitoring system. Furthermore, by taking time with the customer, whom she felt clearly wanted to talk to someone in a more authoritative position, she would have wasted time and might have jeopardised her target objective. This is what Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) term the double-edged sword of emotion labour it, as it seeks to facilitate task effectiveness, but it may also become dysfunctional thereby resulting in emotional dissonance, and in this case, the extreme frustration of a powerless 'catch 22' situation.

4.4   CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS – DYSFUNCTIONAL COPING MECHANISMS

4.4.1   Eating Pattern Disruption

It was noted in the focus group discussions that many of the participants experienced mealtime irregularities. This was caused as often shift times fell over meal times, or meal preparation times. Often fast food or take-away foods were consumed, and Lennernas et al., (cited in Reeves, 2004) reported that shift workers are inclined to eat more incomplete meals than complete meals and are less likely to eat fruit and vegetables. Certainly snacking or grazing (Krauchi et al., 1990) is common in this study as evidenced below:

"After we come home from work, I come home I eat something or before I go to work I eat something, but its like odd hours in the morning I'm eating food and in –between I'm eating snacks the whole time, also I'm not eating healthy at all."

"Since I started working here, I picked up 25 kilos because when you sit and you eat all the time, and you eat anything that they bring past you, I spend more money because I don't have time to make food at home ....so we buy more take outs because I don't' have time to make food I'm just too tired to make food... "

The agents too mentioned that their choices of food were unhealthy owing mainly to what was offered to them in the call centres, viz., chips, chocolates, toasted sandwiches etc. As a result a significant number of agents revealed weight gains while working in the call centre. Furthermore, it is interesting and important to note how the effects of call centre work and balanced eating overflow into the primary care giver role*:*

"Even my son who is 9 years old, he's got a weight problem, but I'm never at home or I don't have normal shifts where I can cook food for him every night to make sure that he's eating properly. He's got a heart problem, he needs to eat properly but I just get to the point when I'm so tired and I'll just say ok, tell Dad he must get a pizza, or get Nando's we always eating out – there's food in the house but it gets rotten and you have to throw it away because nobody gets time to make it."

However, adverse effects of shift work, do not only result in weight gain. Some members mentioned that either their weight remained constant, or in the following example, they have lost a considerable amount of weight owing to the stress of the environment:

"In, ok probably the last two years, umm most of what we referring to now is our restrictions (in terms of authoritative management style and external locus of control) and so on, most of them came about within the last 2 years in the last 2 years in itself, I mean with regards to eating, weight loss, I have probably lost about 15 to 20 kilos, seriously. I've been to doctor and everything and had myself checked out um, even more frustrating than that I was even called aside once and I was actually asked whether I was involved in substance abuse…."

Niedhammer et al., (1996) suggest that night shift workers are more likely to be obese than their day working colleagues, and although other researchers (Reeves et al., 2004) might

dispute this, (and indeed the lack of literature on this phenomenon encourages further investigation), agents in the focus groups referred to the unhealthy eating patterns adopted due to night shift work and the resultant stress:

"*Ja, we don't lead a healthy life in the call centre environment, the times we eat is irregular, 3 hours down your shift, if you start 3 o'clock your lunch is 6 o'clock, I mean you not used to eating at 6 o'clock during the course of the day ...you know irregular times of eating so, basically, and its only take outs anyways because you don't have time to make your own food to bring to work, because of the times that we start ...*"

"*I think the people that work on the late shift, their eating pattern is actually worse, because of the times that you working and you come home late night at night and decide I'm gonna eat now because I'm hungry, and that's not a good thing.*

One of the agents too cited that since she had worked in a call centre she had become anaemic and diabetic, owing to unhealthy eating choices and patterns, within the constraints of set shift schedules.
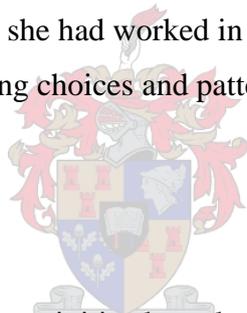
4.4.2   Substance Abuse

In another sense, hobbies and leisure activities have been left in abeyance as time no longer allows for it, but of a different nature is the increased possibility of risky sexual behaviour –

"*If you actually look at yourself after every shift going home, thinking to yourself will a red wine do tonight, or a white wine, do I finish 2, do I get a partner, wouldn't you like to join me for a glass of wine?...*"

- as well as increased substance abuse owing (particularly in this context) to the need to unwind and de-stress after a shift – and one notes the leeway that drugs in a sense can also serve as the universal panacea of stress release and even abetting marital harmony:

"*I think it also started with when you realized coming home at that time of the evening I got into a habit of also making sure there was some form of cocktail going on with regard to my*

drugs and things just so that either I could have a good sleep or depending on the type of drug, just something to keep me awake and actually have time with my husband"

"Well, is normal, you we just sniff or whatever, if I wanted to have a good sleep I'll have some dope and things umm, but that led to other things you know because I wasn't having any time with my husband and then he became addicted to the things so that stopped and then with me I also started taking sleeping pills it had no effect on me afterward and umm for a while now things has been better but I'm finding it I'm going back into that routine where I'm not able to sleep so it's the same thing as Joy said earlier, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning you still lying there nothing to do..."

Focus Group Facilitator:	*So do you take a diet pill to keep you awake?*
Agent:	*Yes, because it makes me active*
Focus Group Facilitator:	*It makes you active, OK, and then when you get home do you find you need something to wind you down a bit?*
Agent:	*Yes, sometimes, if I take, it, like I took it this morning, I can't sleep at night, I'll stay awake until 3 o clock and then tomorrow morning I'm working 6, then I'll be so tired so I'll find myself taking 2 instead of 1 tomorrow morning, just to get awake.*
Focus Group Facilitator:	*And then do you take sleeping pills to help you sleep through?*
Agent:	*Yes, after the shift I have to take sleeping pills.*

Research (Mason, cited in Reeves, 2004) has indicated that shift workers tend to imbibe more caffeine related substances and that nicotine usage is also elevated. Commentary from these focus groups would seem to confirm this as smoking, it seems, regardless of the shift worked, aides call centre agents as a form of stress management:

"Well anyway, it just numbs your brain and sometimes you get something happening you know, then you just need to shut down and when you take that first drag, everything just shuts down."

"It's mentally draining. I drive to work and I'm thinking oh here I am at work again… I do a lot of smoking, more at work than home. You smoke more, I mean ja.."

"Umm, I rarely smoke. Unfortunately I take the occasional cigarette now and then ... just to ease that stress levels especially on my shift as well where stress just hits the fan, then I just totally switch off and I think to myself you, to hell with this you know because I mean you can only take so much ....around, and I mean that's what happens on most of our shifts, we burn out, and ....."

For some agents however the palliative effects of nicotine are not strong enough to block out the immense stress, frustration and tension that they feel as a result of call centre work, and drug use and excessive alcohol consumption are fast becoming the popular (and increasingly affordable, due to home manufacturing) (CTDCC, 2003) methods in which to manage the alleged unbearable organisational environments. Of course, the abuse of such substances are of grave importance to management as diminished productivity, substandard performance, increased accidents, general relational difficulties and security problems (especially in the form of stealing, to procure additional drugs) are noted within the environment, (Loup, 1994).

"I smoke weed, but I've been trying to stop as everyone knows but it's not easy because of that added stress that you have because of the type of life you living I mean, the part of life you get to live. Facing up to the fact that you not going to be there for your kids when they get home, things like that..."
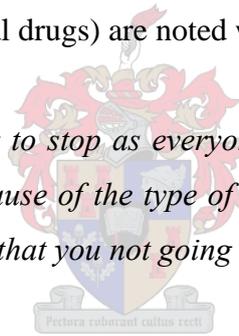
"I actually get stoned every night to be quite honest, ..."

"I'm so strange with this wall around me that I'm not even part of it. I feel like an alien and um I will find myself getting very much mixed up with alcohol and taking stuff I shouldn't be taking and its just like, I'm trying to, I don't' know I'm trying to socialize with people that are....I can't ...(agent was overcome with emotion and cried).

"Um not drugs, I used to be very heavy with alcohol - it was like almost every day, especially after work ..." .

Agent:	*Tablets, they all know I'm always taking tablets.*
Focus Group Facilitator:	*What tablets are you taking?*
Agent:	*Just relaxants.*

126

Focus Group Facilitator:	*And do you find that you take them throughout the day?*
Agent:	*All day, about 4 a day, sometimes more. That's a very stressful shift, you get all the 'irates' and the funny people calling in, so then just to calm me I would have one, two in the morning and maybe two in the afternoon.*
Focus Group Facilitator:	*OK, and then when you get home?*
Agent:	*I don't take them when I'm home and I'll try not to take them as much as I do, because it has other side effects on my body as well.*
Focus Group Facilitator:	*Alright, ok, what sort of effects?*
Agent:	*Palpitations, umm sleeping all the time, umm don't feel like really getting up… Just in that mode all the time.*

4.4.3   Medical / Health Consequences

Stress of course, manifests in all measure of physical ailment, as indicated below:

" Umm another thing that I noticed in the call centre especially regarding well being of the people, they tend to have um high blood pressure problems, due to the fact of the medication they are on and all this like for example I was rushed to hospital one day, out of this call centre, for high blood, my blood pressure was like nearly boiling, they told me if I hadn't had monitored it that day and go down to the sister, I would have been dead on the spot."

"… there has been people that has had heart attacks here at work already…….the girl that won that award last year already, she had a stroke, she was off for a month and a half."

4.5 COPING STRATEGIES – AGENTS' SUGGESTIONS IN ALLEVIATING STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

4.5.1 *Choice of Shift and Mind Shift*

Pollitt (2003, p.12) declared that a three week rolling shift pattern "did not provide staff with enough stability with which to balance their home and work commitments". What has transpired however, in some organisations, is the inclination to allow workers to choose their shifts, thereby giving them more control to manage their 'non-work' life around their shift times. However, these shift options need to be reasonable, and possibly to be structured according to a particular mix of work and rest, ensuring that it remains consistent with the changing nature of work and of the organisational environment, (Ahasan et al., 2002).

"I would like more stability, more of a routine so that I can…I can even live with the only 2 weekends off. I'm prepared to work my weekends because I actually like having a day or two off during the week. Shopping centre's is quieter and everything but for me those change over's are terrible."

"I've come to accept the fact that I've only got 2 days off in every frame, umm I don't like sitting in traffic so it would be difficult for me to go back to normal office hours so I would actually prefer them putting me on a permanent late shift. … I'm going through these periods when I have to take sleeping tablets to adjust my sleeping pattern, so I would prefer, if they gave me the option, I would volunteer to be on a late shift for the rest of my life…"

"But I think it's a choice you make. I had to realize I need to adapt to this environment, not let this ruin me, my health, my social life and everything. But as I said previously, I would prefer to have some kind of stable working pattern. Either always late or always early."

4.5.2 *Increased Exercise*

The increased use of stimulants has been cited above, and the following example indicates how an individual has sought to relieve his stressful work through gym, which serves in a sense to counteract his unhealthy eating patterns, but he also adopts cigarette smoking as a form of de-stressor too!:

"I think with me its helped me because now I've been going to gym because I find that to hit something, to run until you nearly collapse..........(laughter)...you know, you know, anything cycle until you can hardly breathe anymore, that it a big release for me, so I tend to, a lot of times when I leave here, I just tend to go to the gym, otherwise I'm going to kill somebody!! And the I just... I find its more of a release and try ...but you do tend to eat more of the junk food during the day though...the chips, chocolates, and then its nice, you go for your smoke break...I don't even smoke at home, but I smoke here.....(laughter).......but on my 3 days off I won't touch it, I won't touch it!! But when I come in the car, it's like, have a cigarette, ok...

4.5.3   Proactive Medical Advice and Therapy

Other agents, before succumbing to substance use / abuse, have sought the help of a doctor who's oft quoted response on initial meeting of the stressed agent is: "do you work in a call centre?" However, even though the doctor might prescribe medication and book the agent off for weeks at a time, for stress related illnesses, the agents are loathe to take the time, as *"its going to count against me",* and thereby merely *"creates more stress"*, because *"then that's going to affect my adherence because we've got adherences and all that and then we thinking oh gosh, its going to affect my bonus as well".*

Others have sought the help of therapy and of note is the large number of people seeing therapists or attending clinics to assist them with their inner turmoil as a result of their inability to cope with the rigours and stresses of their jobs.

4.5.4   Managing Their Work: 'Creative Workarounds'

Despite the ongoing battle between maintaining quality service and ensuring productivity, there are agents who instead of believing that the two requirements are mutually exclusive and getting bogged down by the seeming unfairness of it all, adopt alternative methods of reaching call targets. Agents also use the system, prolonging calls to give themselves space thereby creating a coping mechanism. These methods are described by Houlihan (2000) as "creative workarounds".

"I mean some people do actually reach their targets but how they do it...you see in the sense of, I wouldn't say "con the system" they would say someone just a bunch of rubbish whatever

or they would create some other way of getting through that stats say personally myself, and I can vouch for a few of us here as well is, because of that, first call resolution, we gonna solve this query no matter what then we move on Whether it will take us 20 minutes or 30 minutes its ok, but then you get those other people, they reach that 150 / 160 /170 but if you should actually listen to all their calls, most probably half of the calls is not actually valid calls, but I won't go into that."

"What I also find myself doing these days especially with irate calls and that I'm starting to (do), with the normal calls that are boring, even if the guy is very boring he's chatting away, I mean its work related but he's being boring but he's not actually being….I'll keep him on the line longer because I know the next call might just be a killer call. It lets me relax a bit, like don't you want to know a bit more about this product or that product? I'll tell him about other products just, so that I can just get a breather for the next call. I've got no other way of getting a breather, I can't go on hold, I can't do anything outside to get a breather by keeping the caller what's got a valid query but might sometimes be very boring keep him going, just so I can get a breather for the next call."

Therefore these "creative workarounds" to a degree are in fact sabotaging the system. Another form of initiating individual agent power is evident in the following example. This agent is avoiding emotional dissonance and his behaviour would appear 'normatively appropriate' (Zapf et al., (2003). However, in the light of his role as call centre agent, scripting and organisational protocol, it is entirely inappropriate. This in turn, and in terms of policy, could result in the agent's dismissal, and would therefore be at his own expense. .

"I actually enjoy them now, (rude / abuse callers) … I didn't used to but when I'm stressed then I match up with them……..laughter……….."don't shout at me"….then I threaten them, "if you continue …." I also shout at them, you're just going to have to speak to me now and I'll see if I can sort it out, and if you swear at me, I'm going to cut the call, finish, I won't take abuse from you."

4.5.5   Emotion Management

Surprisingly no official role of debriefing is carried out by any supervisory or management staff. Such a real or perceived lack of control experienced by the agents, as well as a lack of

social support especially from one's supervisors is thought by Houlihan (2000) to be instrumental in causing occupational stress. Hochschild (1989) states the workers who have little flexibility in negotiating their relationships with customers can be expected to suffer more negative consequences from the performance of emotional labour. Some agents, however, are well able to practice emotional detachment –

"... if you have a bad call, ok number 1 management doesn't acknowledge that. You have to take that bad call like it was the previous call you've taken for the day, you have to have no emotion. So what's happening with me personally is that um I really, I listen to what you tell me and I have the solution to your problem but other than that, your phone can be stolen, you can be high-jacked, you can be bleeding somewhere you can tell the ambulance to come but its not your problem ma'am, you asked me to lock your phone and that's what I'm doing. I have no emotion…".

The agent has clearly detached himself from the call and is enacting emotion work i.e. "the effort, planning and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions" (Dollard et al., 2003, p.87). The quote below also provides an example of emotional detachment, but this agent, has further distanced herself on a psychological level by not using her name too. She also reveals that it has taken time for her to become removed from the emotion, and as researchers have suggested, such emotion detachment or detached concern could be a learned function. (Dollard et al., 2003).

"I personally just find I switch off and I realized more than any other reason that's why I don't' use my own name because when you sitting there whether it be Christmas Day or any other day of the year, and a small child calls in and starts swearing at you and making rude suggestions or anything. I think that's what prostitutes do, change their name, it doesn't feel like you are being attacked or humiliated or insulted, I'm somebody else while I'm sitting there, and they can tell me whatever they feel like to Danny because Danny stays at Cellco, the real me is going home tonight. And I think as well, its one of those things, if you choose to be in this kind of industry, you have to be prepared to do that. But ja, I just switch off and try not to let it affect me. It was very difficult for me in the beginning, how to feel personally insulted if somebody complained, "you guys are the worst, I'm going to cancel my contract with… your service is pathetic" even through I wasn't the guy who screwed up the previous

complaint. Switch off, realize, just 5 minutes, just relax, let this pass. The next guy might be friendly. You just need to be able to cope and get used to it."

Her comment "just cope and get used to it", also suggests an element of being the correct fit for the type of the job. This is in line with Higgs' (2004) studies of Emotional Intelligence and call centre work, and he purports that emotional resilience is vital for such work. In fact in terms of Cote (2005) the extract is an example of deep acting, whereby while the call is in progress, she is changing her internal experience and her public display of emotion.

The extract below quite clearly details the agent's emotion detachment, revealing a fairly objective and rational stance:

"Being a consultant is very stressful at the end of the day because 9 hours of your life in a call centre, 8 of that hours is taking calls and different types of people come through as Stacey said, you know, some are nice, some are rude, some are way worse than rude and um at the end of the day you basically need to cut yourself off from these guys that basically come through and go ballistic with you, I mean its not your doing, its their own doing."

In a sense therefore, this agent is generating to a degree a sense of power, in that he is able to control his emotions in such a way, or according to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993, p.93) he is able to "project at least some of the authentic self into the enactment".

4.6   SUMMARY

Participants in the focus groups, it would seem took advantage of the opportunity to communicate their angst, anger and frustration with their day-to-day encounters in the call centres. Owing to the familiarity experienced within each group, the understanding of anonymity and aims of the research, they felt free to express clearly how they felt. This therefore, resulted in a comprehensive commentary which embraces the stress and work dysfunctions experienced. Furthermore, their comments in a sense have served to justify the theories of the human behaviourists and researchers and therefore, aid in validating various thoughts, studies and hypotheses. For the purposes of this study, however, their commentary has substantiated the claims of stress in call centres and how they do manifest in various work dysfunctions. Furthermore they have detailed what in fact the dysfunctions are and how their

consequences affect a constructive work ethic. What remains, therefore is to finely deduce the relevance of data and summarise the findings, so as to create meaning and draw a conclusion to the research problem. This summary therefore, will be detailed in the following chapter, together with possible suggestions for organisational interventions.
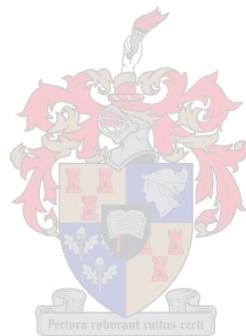
5   CHAPTER FIVE –SUMMARY AND POSSIBLE ORGANISATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

5.1   INTRODUCTION

Research data from the focus group discussions as seen in the previous chapter, has revealed much information, and in this final chapter it is important to summarise the findings, laying emphasis on those factors which are deemed significant. In this way, one can reflect on the research problem and possibly construe what these work dysfunctions are, the role that stress plays in exacerbating current problems, and how agents ameliorate their condition or alternatively worsen their situation through ineffective and sometimes harmful coping strategies. Furthermore, by exploring causal factors to stress and work dysfunction, problems are highlighted and hence suggestions for improvement are facilitated.

The themes of stress, its antecedents and consequences are carried through into this final chapter, with however, greater emphasis given to the role of management in call centres, as in terms of focus group discussion, it was generally believed that their dissatisfaction with management and systems was in fact causal to advanced stress in many agents. Hence in the following chapter, Organisation and Managerial Related Stressors will be explored, prior to considering the antecedents of stress and finally its consequences. Suggestions for improvement, where possible will be included.

5.2   STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

5.2.1   Organisational / Managerial Related Stressors

A significant element, not proposed initially in the study as dysfunctional, but through discussions revealed itself to be, was that of ineffective call centre management and the associated project management of work systems. Many agents were vociferous in their criticism of "pie in the sky" organisational speak, based on external professional input, introducing and then re-introducing various methodologies when the answers, the agents believe lie with them, at the coal face of the organisation.

Indeed call centre management is an onerous task and a huge vessel to craft, with the ever present organisational pressures abrading human resource demands. However, if one were to turn off the incessant organisational buzz words of 'operational requirements', 'stress', and

'profit margins', then perhaps one could begin to understand the dynamism within the call centre. In so doing, one could seize the opportunity to create call centre jobs 'from scratch' (Grebner, 2003) making use of established principles of job design, thus originating work that is motivating and enhances productivity. (Parker & Wall, 1998). Indeed, many of the call centre quandaries are palpable and within reach, when, as Lowman (1993, p. 15) cites "one pauses long enough from survival tasks to be concerned about whether work is meaningful, worthwhile, or a good match for an individual's needs and interests."

Industrial and psychological work in terms of its validity and credibility transcends time and is as relevant today in its prescription of people and work, as it was years ago. Indeed, Hawthorne, whose research in the 1920's revealed that production and job satisfaction is significantly improved owing merely to the concept of managerial care is equally applicable today. In support of this Deary et al., (2002) noted in their recent research that when first line management demonstrated a concern for staff welfare it made a difference to the emotional well-being of employees. Furthermore, when team leaders were seen as willing to listen to the work-related problems of their staff and showed an ability to assist and support them, the level of emotional exhaustion amongst team members was significantly lower.

And yet, according to the agents, in a work place where the notion 'change is constant' has itself almost become an 'operational requirement', more and more strategies are implemented, fail and are re-introduced under a different guise or through a new leader at a later date. Of recent (and continuing) debate is that of creating the call centre as a profit unit. (Brunico, cited in Cellco Summary 2001, p.9). This is allegedly undertaken by " by examining company objectives, and evaluating business processes and technology platforms " with an allied corollary and a glib one-liner – "to invest in people".

But is management investing in people?

Certainly, recommendations are made, new strategies are implemented, policies are viewed and reviewed, key result areas are re-applied and re-emphasised, but is this busy-ness perhaps masking efficacy? Is an alleged vainglorious ideology, academic rhetoric and organisational prophesising, merely kowtowing to company dogma, while potential for real managerial excellence is left in abeyance?

All the while agents as a means of coping with the inherent stress, dice with dismissal through 'creative work-arounds', mothers leave their children to be brought up by others, unable to cope with balancing domestic and work life. Others, burnt out from call centre stress succumb to drug-induced perpetuity, and grown men break down, overwhelmed by the traumatic consequences of advanced call centre tenure. And still the debate draws on: "Cost-focused call centres gauge their success by tallying the number of calls they process. Profit-focused customer contact centres on the other hand, gauge their success by understanding why customers call in the first place." (Cellco Marketing Brief, 1998, p. 5). But where is the voice of the agent?

As stated previously the objective of this study, is not to provide organisational systems and technical solutions to call centre operations. It is to explore work dysfunction in call centres and based on the wealth of information in the focus group discussions, it is possible to see that with some project management, training and caring human resource management, many of the irregularities may be brought to light and could be managed, whether by re-routing calls, providing effective training, or whatever is deemed necessary.

Furthermore, and finally, with regard to the voice of the agents, if other employees in the organisation have the rightful opportunity to negotiate the original job contracts, why then in the call centre where agents face constantly shifting parameters, do they seemingly lack the recourse to do so?

Objective work contracts serve to outline the job requirements and reciprocal employee duties, and just as overwork should be fairly compensated, under-work or work digressing from agreed quality or quantity too should have its penalties. However, every effort should be made to ensure that the measurements in place are equitable and realistic so that the unwritten but equally important psychological contract remains secure and reasonable. To this end, therefore it is believed that instead of focusing entirely on a customer-centric organisation through various strategies including marketing, and customer relational schemes, a concurrent development of an agent-centric organisation could serve to reduce many of the work dysfunctions cited.

Houlihan (2000, p.237) reflects that a radical shift in management process is required, and encourages supervisors and managers to "completely rethink the knowledge, purpose and

underlying assumptions of call centre organising." She questions the need for call monitoring, promotes performance management, but on level playing grounds, and strongly advocates the review of organisational structures including job design, staffing levels, tasks mix and of the type of skills developed and expected in agents. Lowman (1993, p.23) is in agreement with the above, states that "it is not only characteristics of individuals that contribute to work dysfunctions, but that jobs can be poorly designed, supervisors non-supportive or incompetent, and demands unreasonable." Ultimately however, Houlihan (2000) pleads for the development of a more professional environment where the status and working conditions of the agents are significantly elevated.

She also advocates, in agreement with Pruijt (2000, p.444) to 'smash Taylorism' which would require a conscious "move towards job enrichment instead of division of labour and towards a reduction of the separation of conception and execution. It also means choosing to use human skills instead of trying to incorporate these into information systems. It further entails striving towards worker autonomy and codetermination instead of increasing discipline," all the while being conscious that by increasing quality of working life, productivity is not negatively impacted, (Houlihan, 2000, p.234).

Pruijt (2000, p.445) warns however, that "breaking away from Taylorism is possible, but it requires a lot of energy." He further encourages "developing alliances between change oriented managers and worker representatives on the one hand, and researchers on the other hand" to facilitate the thoroughness of the process.

Houlihan (2000, p.238) plays devil's advocate in counter arguing the notion that there is "a vested interest in not changing things". She feels that those in positions of power are slow to lose or share it, and furthermore management is poor, and lacking in strategic and analytical processes. She purports that the rapid advances in call centre growth restrict sound organisational development, and furthermore that "industry norms play a big part in the perpetuation of this culture." Hence, she concludes that "in a reaction industry, call centres are running fast with eyes wide shut."

5.2.1.1 *Lack of Autonomy , Problems with Measurement and Monitoring*

Perhaps one of the defining problems with the organisation or management per se is the lack of control that agents experience coupled with measurement and monitoring. Indeed, lack of

agent empowerment is an oft heard criticism of call centre work, and one cited on many occasions in this study. Zapf et al., (2003) theorised that jobs in call centres are characterised by lower complexity and control, and that they are strongly controlled by the customer. In the course of the agents' work, any agent – client interaction is specified by codes of conduct and policies which serve to prescribe their interpersonal behaviour as well as how they proceed with the required task. This then limits the agents' possibilities in coping with stressors (Zapf et al., 2003). Deary et al., (2002, p.475) are in agreement with this notion, and they suggest that although "strict scripts and display rules may have a protective function because they are reassuring with regard to the behaviour preferred by the organisation, they often inhibit the agent's autonomy and their ability to provide customised service."

Gilmore (2001) believes that increased agent empowerment and involvement in service improvement would not only be appropriate but would contribute to longer term staff motivation and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the amount of control call centre workers have over their job is now recognised as a decisive factor in the development of occupational stress. (Zapt et al., 2003). Hence jobs with high demands and low control most often result in stress, and for these reasons he suggests the implementation of the following job enrichment strategies in call centres:
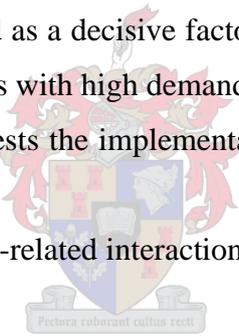
- ❖ Include a mixture of customer-related interaction work and administrative work in call centre jobs;
- ❖ Develop and maintain a working environment where workers are consulted and can provide feedback to changes impacting on workplace / tasks;
- ❖ Incorporate some tasks variation or job rotation where high repetition and lack of mental stimulation is present;
- ❖ Allow workers to develop their own communication style and technique over the phone as opposed to the use of phone scripts. (In this context however, it is important to note that   scripts may be of value for training and induction purposes); and
- ❖ Allow workers to control the flow of calls, i.e. be able to log out of the phone system as needed.

Agents too, felt powerless in terms of the existing measures of control operating in the call centre. They believe that on the whole they are unfair and unrealistic, as on some occasions, when dealing with longer type calls e.g. account query calls, they could possibly exceed their 'wrap-up' time, and yet they might well have performed exactly accordingly to quality

criteria. However, they would be marked down nevertheless for not reaching target calls in the specific shift. In addition to this, in another example, even though the customer might be happy with the outcome of the call, they were penalised for not following the script correctly, e.g. not greeting the customer by name. Furthermore, agents were conscious of call monitoring, especially on completion of abusive calls, when, reeling with the effects thereof, they felt they needed time to collect themselves, prior to taking another call.

Perhaps, however, the most perplexing concern regarding measurement however, is the constant productivity versus quality debate, and these contradictory underpinnings, according to Houlihan (2000) lay the foundation for a culture of 'mixed messages'. Stiles et al., (cited in Houlihan, 2000) continues that it is these mixed messages which undermine confidence and induce agent scepticism towards management intentions and deep concerns about accuracy and fairness.

Houlihan (2000) feels that for measurement to happen, objects and actions must be transparent and formalised. Little, (2004) suggests that customer care can fail if customers are put through to agents who are under pressure from throughput incentives. He therefore also stresses the importance of putting measures in place to monitor the human side of the call centre's performance. This notion is adopted by Houlihan (2000) whom in fact questions how the tacit skills and interpretative knowledge of agents are measured.

Focus group discussions revealed succinctly the problems experienced with the above organisational structure and policies, and hence serious reconsideration, planning and re-design is indicated.

5.3   ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS

5.3.1   *Abusive or Sexually Offensive Calls*

Additional stressors in call centre work are exacerbated repeatedly when a sexually offensive or abusive call is received by the agent. In a study conducted by (Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000) participants were asked whether the harassment had led to any long-term consequences. 25 % of the women reported that the experience had negative effects on their attitude towards men. 25 % felt it affected their feelings of personal safety. 21 % indicated a negative influence on their psychological well-being and 19 % on job satisfaction. The experience of sexual

139

harassment led therefore to serious and varying consequences, especially in the personal lives of the surveyed female employees. In addition roughly one third of the women reported that the possibility of further sexual harassment over the telephone has negative consequences on their job satisfaction.

Owing to research cited above by Sczesny and Stahlberg, (2000), it is important that experiences of harassment over the telephone be acknowledged as a risk factor in telephone-related jobs. Furthermore clear cut procedures and policies need to be implemented for dealing with abusive customers. This is especially relevant in the current research as it would appear that rules and procedures in this regard differ from team to team. Furthermore, these procedures and policies need to be communicated to the agents, ensuring that there is consistency throughout the shifts.

What is evident, however, and especially owing to the South African social milieu where a semi-culture of often antagonistic and abusive behaviour towards women exists, is the need for the organisation to consider taking a firmer stance on this unacceptable and invasive infringement on the rights of agents. Furthermore, in the light of agent commentary, it appears essential that debriefing follows such traumatic occurrences. What is of equal import, in relation to the study, is that ideally such debriefing time should not be taken from the "wrap up" time nor the "on-hold" time. As the number of female agents is set to grow, owing to the proposed growth in the industry, it is suggested that these issues are timeously resolved.

5.4   TOWARDS STRESS RELIEF

Clearly, preceding discussions through out the study have considered stress as a major dysfunction in call centres, and no further summary is required at this time. Hence in terms of suggestions for improvement, Siegrist (1996, p.107) urges containment of stress prior to it reaching tertiary level status. He believes that organisations should introduce a Stress Prevention Strategy, which he defines thus: "an organisational philosophy or set of principles that employs specific methods to promote individual and organisational health and prevent individual and organisational distress".

He has categorised the strategy into three forms of prevention:

- ❖ Primary prevention refers to the elimination or reduction of factors that promote distress: e.g. job design (redesign), participant management, and flexible work hours.
- ❖ Secondary methods involve moderating the stress response itself, e.g. relaxation training and physical exercise.
- ❖ Tertiary prevention is the attempt to minimise or cope with excessive distress from inadequately controlled stressors and inadequately controlled or moderated stress responses. Inadequate intervention has resulted in a dysfunctional environment or dysfunctional employees. This level of distress can only be resolved through some type of crisis intervention.

Furthermore, without having the rigours or organising and scheduling stress management courses, Carrol (2002) believes that practical on-the-job-de-stressors could be greatly appreciated and she suggests the following:

- ❖ Regular breaks and a change in working patterns to beat mental fatigue;
- ❖ Five minute stretches every hour or two;
- ❖ Regular massage and deep breathing (Some organisations currently make use of mobile masseurs who are able to provide 10 minutes head / shoulder de-stress massage at individual work stations);
- ❖ Posture education; and
- ❖ Preventative health care programs.

5.5 ANTECEDENTS OF STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

5.5.1 Training

5.5.1.1 Insufficient Training: Product Knowledge, Technical Systems, and "soft skill training"

At Cellco, the agents feel that the clients appear to know about the new products before they do. Furthermore it is felt that the trainers themselves do not have a proper knowledge of the products and therefore are not able to provide effective training. This could prove increasingly problematic owing to the dynamic nature of the call centre environment and the necessity to keep up with industrial drivers. Armistead et al., (2002) believe that the biggest driver for

change is the spread of e-business with Internet-based technology altering business models and the role of call centres. In addition, the increasing use of Web access by customers is likely to change the number of call centre agents and their roles. Customers are increasingly interacting with organisations through a variety of channels. They can also gain direct access to a company's self-service systems (e.g. multimedia kiosks, the internet, and interactive digital television) but might need assistance to be able to exploit these technologies to maximum advantage. Electronic media and customer-service telephony can be blended so that access to customer-service advisers is not precluded. This of course, necessitates agents being fully skilled in assisting customers with increasingly technical information, and they will need to develop competencies in moving between different contact mechanisms, such as voice and text.

In addition, "soft skill" training was reported unanimously as a once off procedure at the commencement of employment. Some agents of tenures in excess of 4 years, felt that this is inconsistent with the needs of their job, and would benefit from regular soft skill training interventions. (It is also important and of significance to note that all training usually happens at alleged inconvenient times, when absorption of the material is not optimal, e.g. the end of a shift).

5.5.1.2 Suggestions for Improvement
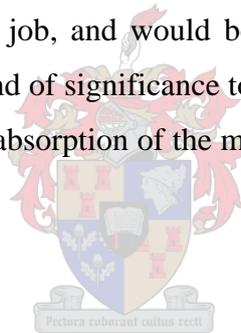
(i)   Soft Skill Training

While correct scheduling of training and the necessity for increased product knowledge remains critical and obvious for day-to-day call centre operations, it is important that management note the far reaching effects of sufficient soft skill training. Many theorists, especially Armistead et al., (2002) are strong supporters of "soft skilling" as they contend that more successful centres in terms of staff retention appear to be those which have appreciated the benefits to be accrued from "soft skills" training. In addition, Crome (1998) suggests that the following soft skills are introduced into regular training modules:

1)   **Rapport building** - mirror the tone, tempo and volume of their customer's speech pattern encouraging warmth towards the organisation. Differentiate between the needs of the different customers.

2) **Spin Doctoring** – reformulating phraseology and habitual sentence structures to give negative comments a positive spin. E.g. instead of "not launched yet …." "IT specialists are fine-tuning functionalities of the product…"

3) **Listening as a contact sport** – active listening and skilled questioning techniques. Interjects with simple responses such as I see or I understand. E.g. when a customer calls with a specific request, the operator by carefully reading between the lines can bring to their attention other focus, services or special offers that may be more appropriate.

4) **Alchemy** – (turning base metal into gold) – good service provides for long term loyalty and is cheaper than gaining more customers.

5) **Maintaining positivity -**Holter , cited in Franklin, (2000) mentions that a trait of agents is to be positive, sympathetic and focused on problem resolution – not be confrontational.

6) **Shifting management control** – allowing employees control of their work and encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their decisions.

5.5.2 *Shift work*

One of the more significant stressors within call centre work, and certainly evidenced in this study is that of work-life imbalances caused through shift work, (Ahasan, 2002). Certainly many incidences of the disruptive nature of shift work in terms of family, marital and socio-cultural disruptions were expressed during the focus group discussions. Even though mention was made of the difficulties in working the night or 'graveyard' shift, dissatisfactions were noted across all shift times. The other major work stressor, resulting from shift work is fatigue and many incidences were observed in the discussions, especially in terms of struggling to adjust to circadian rhythms owing especially to the alleged random rotation of many of the shifts. Furthermore, many agents struggled with sleeping patterns and often had to resort to either sleeping pills after the shift, or otherwise, stimulants during the shift. The progression from occasional consumption to abuse of such stimulants and suppressants, was noted in the focus groups as a particular method of both enabling sleep and reducing elevated stress levels.

5.5.2.1 *Women and Shift Work*

Of significance in this study is the role of women in call centre organisations. The sample group mirrored the total population in terms of gender, revealing an approximate 50:50 ratio.

Hochschild's (1983) 'second shift' studies, although not pertaining exclusively to the call centre industry are relevant to the study, as many women in the focus groups cited their struggle with the dual responsibility of working on a shift basis and maintaining a functional domestic life. Work overspill was also mentioned in terms of the effects on their marriages, their functioning as primary care givers, with some mothers, owing to their shift times, being unable to have their children live with them at home. Impact was felt in terms of their health and well-being, their weight and general coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the varying roles and functions that women play in their lives also add different dimensions to the workplace, and McKeen and Burke (1994) urge organisations to be considerate of the possibility of a different career model for women, especially those with a primary responsibility for family and children. E.g. early career commitment when women are single and childless may shift with the as yet unshared burdens of marriage and children, but re-emerge as children become less dependent.

Regardless, management could consider Ahasan's (2002) suggestions for planning and implementing shift schedules, so as to ensure as effectively as possible the needs of the call centres as well as agent well-being. These are suggested below:

5.5.2.2 Suggestions for Reworking Shift Schedules

(i)   Optimum Break Schedule

This could allow for an effective reduction of fatigue and work stress e.g. longer break periods are required towards the end of a working day / shift as fatigue levels rise.

(ii)   Effective Working Schedule

Ensure that the mix of work and rest remains consistent with the changing nature of work and of the working environment. This should include some free weekends and in-between shift time should include at least 2 days off. (This recommendation is important as many of the agents in the focus groups cited that on day one of their off times, they would sleep and day two, they would do necessary chores, which allowed them little time for any meaningful recreation. A three day off-time would therefore provide them with a leisure day too).

(iii)   Napping & Alertness

Scheduled naps during short breaks – of at least 30 minutes – can improve alertness in a night Shift, (Saito & Sasaki, cited in Ahasan, 2002).

(iv)   Alertness-counselling program

(Harma et al., cited in Ahasan, 2002) support the notion of a 'sleeping programme' to assist employees in falling asleep after their shifts. The balance of sleep-wakefulness has also been shown to be influenced by physical fitness, which strengthens the argument above in favour of subsidised gym membership for call centre agents.

(v)   Innovative working schedule

Muzet et al., (1997) believe that one short nap during the night shift produces favourable results. Suitable timing of shifts and breaks has also been discussed in several papers (Ahasan, 2002; Ahasan et al., 2002). It therefore seems that shift work patterns can be adjusted to improve productivity, while retaining a sustainable shift system.

(vi)   Use of bright lights

Czeisler et al., (cited in Ahasan, 2002) noted that bright light can be used to more quickly reset the biological clock and can also improve alertness during a night shift. (However, the cost of introducing appropriate bright lights and using them effectively is high and is often impractical).

(vii)   Adjustment or rotation of shifts

When adjusting shift schedules, a knowledge of the likely effects of the circadian rhythm must be added to the mix of factors used to minimise the accumulation of fatigue. This is especially so as the circadian body clock of a shift worker does not adjust to night work within one week (Knauth, cited in Ahasan, 2002). Furthermore, too short a shift rota exposes the human body to excessive stress (Hakkinen, cited in Ahasan, 2002); and the perturbation in rhythm plays an important role in influencing workers' performance (Folkard et al., cited in Ahasan, 2002).

(viii)   Flexibility

Ideally flexible shift schedules should be designed allowing for management of social and family lives. (Gartner et al., cited in Ahasan, 2002). Education should also be carried out to assist agents in adjusting to the shift system.

(ix)   Education & Job Training

At the outset, prior to embarking on a shift working routine, agents should be advised of the pitfalls of the system and its possible adverse effects. Furthermore, it promotes awareness of health, hygiene and safety risks and increases knowledge about circadian rhythms, regular sleep, naps, diet and other activities (Bettinghaus, cited in Ahasan, 2002).

Houlihan (2000, p.232) in support of this more humanistic offering, pushes the envelop even further and relates how "one company employs only part-time staff working a maximum of four hours per shift in the belief that the work is unsustainable for longer periods!"

5.5.3   *Agent Personality*

5.5.3.1 *Emotional Intelligence and Psychometric Testing as recruitment and Selection Aids*

The fact that some individuals have more of a propensity towards work in a call centre than others, is an oft debated topic, (Lowman, 1993; Higgs, 2004). As yet, the findings regarding stress tolerance, personality type and the role of the call centre agent are as yet undefined, but it is believed that psychometric testing may, in conjunction with contextual application assist in determining more suitable candidates. Certainly Human Resource specialists when considering high call centre agent churn, high rates of absenteeism, stress, and indeed the training impasse, have paused to consider recruitment and selection criteria in finding the right person for the job. As such, Higgs, (2004) purports tentative evidence which suggests that those involved in recruiting call centre agents may achieve improved performance by using emotional intelligence criteria. Given the high proportion of costs attributable to staff in a call centre and the growing recognition of the increasing importance of 'managing people issues' such a development may prove beneficial. Particularly so as researchers have stated that at present call centre recruitment specialists have sought to employ agents based on reducing attrition and improving retention rather than on improving agent performance. Hence an Emotional Intelligence and psychometric based selection process could prove effective in the screening of potentially high performing entrants.

5.6   CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

5.6.1   *Depression*

Depression is oft described as the psychological 'common cold' Ebony, (cited in Johnson & Indvik, 1997) in that its occurrence is frequent and symptoms are often difficult to detect. However, Pagano (1995) considers some symptoms that a manager might look for in order to catch the malady in time, as once detected, the recovery rate is quick and sustainable.

These symptoms include drooped posture, poor grooming, withdrawal from co-workers, missed deadlines, and fatigue. What is critical however is to consider the agents' normal propensity to behave in this way or their natural habitual tendencies, prior to forming a diagnosis. E.g. Are these behaviours, these moods, increasing in their intensity, both in number and frequency? If the agent's current behaviour was compared with his or her behaviour on the job six months ago, how would it be different? (Lawrie, 1992). However, as depression is one of the most treatable mental illnesses, and considering its costs to the organisation in the event of lost man days, it would seem worthy of focused consideration.

5.7   SUMMARY

The previous chapters have sought to investigate and explore stressors and work dysfunctions in call centres and their consequences or effects in the environment. At the outset, the general conception and milieu of call centres was defined, creating a context for the study. The rationale behind the research was discussed, positioning it as a very real, and relevant study, especially at this time of increasing call centre growth. Stress was explored as a work dysfunction, and was often seen as causal to other dysfunctions which manifested as a consequence of the call centre design, structure and functioning. Furthermore, agent commentary in the group discussions created a very realistic understanding of the strains and stressors involved in call centre work, and how these can degenerate into maladaptive coping strategies, or alternatively give rise to changed perceptions and proactive, reinforcing behaviour.

However, of import too is the fact that despite call centres being stressful environments, which may and do give rise to work dysfunctions, the focus group discussions also revealed positive aspects of call centre work, and included incidences revealing the various agents'

enjoyment of the actual work that they do. Furthermore, they mentioned enjoying the team work and its associated camaraderie. They also felt that they are well remunerated for the work that they do, and that they are appreciative of the shift and quarterly bonuses. They felt that their work stations have been well designed to negate physical injury, and are appreciative of the ease with which head sets are replaced in the event of any noise disturbance or acoustic shock symptoms. Certainly a Cellco Summary Document (2001, p.14) cited that workers didn't leave Cellco for more money. Instead, they "were looking for satisfaction in they type of work preformed, respectful treatment by the company, coaching and feedback, and the opportunity to learn new skills."

Indeed, agents at Cellco are primarily seeking more effective management, greater system efficiency, and project management. In addition, they resent the lack of control or autonomy and feel that the measurement systems in place are unrealistic, and unreasonable. They also resent the socially disruptive nature of many of the shifts and often find the work demands untenable. Froiland, (cited in Lawson et al., 2001, p.99) asserts that occupational stress is generally a consequence of two ingredients: a high level of job demands and little control over one's work. This is supported by Umiker, (cited in Lawson et al, 2000, p.101) who states that "individuals who feel that they are in control of their jobs and their futures are better able to handle stress. … these employees also become more productive out of being in control."

Agents at Cellco also considered the product knowledge as well as soft skill training, so insufficient, that at times it rendered them incapable of performing their tasks effectively. This is critical as call centres are transforming into increasingly technical organisations, especially with the advances of IT and web based voice-text systems, as well as the increased technical complexity of products being offered and serviced. This would imply that the skills of the agents need to be commensurate with the changing needs of the organisation. Once again this re-introduces the human resources dilemma of providing training, without assurance of sustainable tenure. And hence the vicious cycle recurs, as without training, optimal work efficiency is improbable. Coupled with this is the increasingly pressing need for effective recruitment and selection to match the advancing technical needs of the environment.

Thus the study of work dysfunctions experienced by call centre agents and their consequences has brought to light many of the problems in call centre work, emphasising particularly the needs, the frailties and the powerlessness of the agents. These often chafe against managerial, organisational needs and indeed economic factors which serve to exacerbate stress and tensions, especially owing to the fast pace of change. Hence a system which caters for the socio-cultural needs of the agents, in conjunction with their task needs, while being realistic and cognisant of the greater organisational needs is the lofty requirement for effective call centre sustainability.
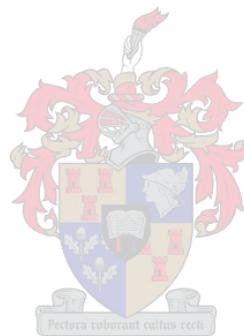
6   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Research and data collection have revealed associated areas of study, where little or no further investigation has been undertaken. In the interest of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of stress on call centres, (which surely are to be a major part of current and future organisational practice), it could be beneficial to consider some of the recommendations listed below:

❖ As this study focused on the role of the call centre agents only, it would be interesting to investigate those of the call centre supervisors and management too.

❖ Scant research was uncovered in terms of facilitating effective shift work structures, other than a mention of the existence of optimal working hours. Thus uncovering such information would be most useful in structuring workable shift rosters, which serve to maximise agent ability.

❖ The wealth of literature surrounding the dysfunctions mentioned in this thesis, suggests that each factor could be considered on its own, as an individual research topic:

  ▪ Depression
  ▪ Stress
  ▪ Weight pattern imbalance
  ▪ Shift work
  ▪ Emotional Dissonance
  ▪ Work Life Imbalance
  ▪ Substance Abuse

❖ In addition to this, other challenges faced in call centres were revealed in the data collection and studies on these elements too would be beneficial:

  ▪ Training and motivation
  ▪ The relationship between performance management and stress in the call centre environment
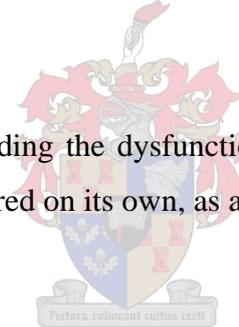
- An ergonomic study: Musculoskeletal injury and repetition employment and or environmental factors (headset use, acoustic shock etc).
- A further exploratory study of environmental stressors

❖ Psychological effects (i.e. burnout, poor concentration, suppressed anger, anxiety, depression, apathy, psychiatric conditions)

- Heartache
- Musculoskeletal disorders
- Cardiovascular disorders (i.e. high blood pressure)
- Gastrointestinal disorders (i.e. nausea, constipation, stomach ulcers)
- Amenorrhoea (i.e. cessation of menstrual period)
- Suppressed immune function (i.e. increased susceptibility to infection)
- Sleep disorders
- Chronic fatigue effects
- Behavioural effects (e.g. smoking, drug abuse, aggression, error-proneness).

❖ Following on from this thought, a study of emotional intelligence in call centre supervisors / managers could be useful.
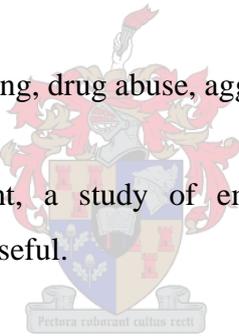
❖ As mentioned in this document, many of the studies in call centres regarding effects from shift work, have focussed on male subjects, rather than women. This is due mainly to the fact that so many variables would be introduced to the study owing to the existence of the menstrual cycle. The studies that have been undertaken however, prove that women in night shifts have been reported to have higher rates of menstrual irregularity and painful menstruation than non-shift workers, (Totterday et al., cited in Reeves et al., 2004). In addition, it has been established that food intake varies during the menstrual cycle, (Barr, cited in Reeves et al., 2004). However, more and more women are resorting to shift work, as they are able to juggle their time, and their family and work commitments. (Charles & Brown, cited in Reeves et al., 2004). An increasing number of agents too are women and hence there is significance in studying these issues further.

❖ On a similar note, looking at female call centre agents and emotional intelligence would be an interesting study, especially as it has been thought that women are more nurturing

than men, and can empathise more fully with the customer, and therefore might be the better person for the job.

❖ A general and exploratory study too, of the current role that women play in work would also provide interesting information, as in a globalised age, where the expectations of Hochschild's (1983) second shift are more or less entrenched, women's roles are in constant flux. Provision too needs to be made for successful career women, who are returning to work after having had and settled their family.

❖ Call centre human resources management would be a very useful and vital study to undertake. This is especially so, as research outlines the reactive rather than proactive approach that call centre management often takes, often owing to the fast growing, divergent and ever changing nature of call centre work.

❖ The study was limited to agents handling inbound calls only. Clearly further research is needed using a similar sample of agents engaging in outbound calls, or indeed both.

❖ The effects of job rotation on call centre workers. Job rotation has been cited as a method of reducing stress in the call centre environment. Providing empirical evidence to prove this, would be useful and could assist in providing practical solutions to stress management in call centres.

❖ The effects of Work/family benefits and the call agent or an exploratory study of work/family benefits that would assist agents in their quest for work life balance. This stems from the fact that today's human resource and line managers have come to understand that there is a relationship between the well being of the employee and business results. This realization has intensified the development of corporate policies and programs focused on work/life issues and in many cases more narrowly focused on work/family issues, (Flynn, cited in Zapf et al., (2003).

❖ Focus Group discussions revealed the often traumatic effects of abusive or nuisance callers. Even though articles have been written on sexual harassment (Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000) in call centres, there is scant information on the effect of irate or abusive callers on employee well-being and productivity in call centres.

❖ Ahasan (2002) recommends the further study of the relationship between various forms of shift work and satisfaction levels of workers.

❖ Sieben and De Grip (2004) conducted studies on the correlations between training and job mobility in call centres, and found that training does not significantly affect the perceived labour market perspective of call centre agents. Furthermore the intention to quit the job within two years is the same for agents with or without training. However agents who followed firm-specific training, significantly less often considered quitting for a job in another call centre. The researchers conclude that organisations merely need to keep their employees satisfied. Therefore further study could centre on the relationship between effective training and employee job satisfaction.

❖ Firth et al., (2004) investigated the variables predictive of intentions to leave a job, and their findings revealed that in order to ameliorate stress and the resultant intention to quit and hence reduce turnover, managers need to actively monitor workloads, and the relationships between supervisors and subordinates. Therefore further research could include the study of the relationship between agent-supervisor relationship, motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic job satisfaction, as well as commitment to the organisation.

❖ As was evident in the focus group discussions, many agents mentioned their dissatisfaction with insufficient training. They felt that this impacted on their providing efficient service, and thereby had an in direct affect on their remuneration packages. In this way their sense of well-being and job satisfaction was affected and it is felt that a study considering these aspects would be of value to the organisation. Indeed, Crome (1998, p.139) states that "regarding training as "must have" instead of "nice to have" would go a long way in improving job satisfaction and overall morale.

❖ Project management was thought to be ineffective within the call centres. The internet information provider was not maintained, leave systems appeared inoperative, allowances for non-call work were at times unrealistic, and rules and policies were unclear. Ferris (1996) cites that role uncertainty and role conflict are particular stressors within a call centre. It would hence be an interesting study to correlate poor project management or systems control with work behaviour or employee performance, and even employee intention to quit.

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APPENDICES:

APPENDIX ONE: SAMPLE GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

It is important to note that owing to the anonymous nature of the call centre groups, fictitious names were used, and at times men chose to use female names. This should serve to clarify any confusion when assessing the transcripts against demographical information.

Number of participant	Date of Focus Group	Name	Age	Gender	Duration at Cellco Call Centre	Duration at previous call centre	Marital Status	Number children	Age children	Education / detail of qualifications/ current studies
1	14 /11/05	Charlotte	32	Male	5 ½ years	N/A	Single	2	N/A	N/A
2	14/11/05	Bob	24	Male	4 ½ years	N/A	Single	1	4 years	ND Marketing Mngment; N4, N5, N6
3	14/11/05	Stacy	27	Male	3 ½ years	N/A	Married	0		MCP, A+ Pastel
4	14/11/05	Sihle	30	Female	1 ½ years	3 years	Single	2	14,6 years	ND Financial Information Systems
5	14/11/05	Joy	25	Female	3 ½ years	2 years	Single	0	N/A	N/A
6	14/11/05	Tracy	31	Female	5 ½ years	N/A	Married	2	7, 2 years	2 years into BA degree
7	14/11/05	JP	37	Male	8 years	7 years	Single	0	N/A	Matric
8	8/12/05	Christa	26	Female	4 years	2 ½ years	Single	0	N/A	Matric
9	8/12/05	Carlos	31	Male	6 years	N/A	Married	3	8,6,1 years	Matric
10	8/12/05	Petrolhead	26	Male	5 – 6 years	N/A	Married	0	N/A	1st year tertiary training
11	8/12/05	Daniel	30	Male	6 years	N/A	Single	0	N/A	Matric
12	8/12/05	Sally	28	Female	6 years	N/A	Single	0	N/A	Matric
13	8/12/05	Molly	27	Female	3 years	½ year	Single	0	N/A	Matric
14	9/12/05	Sheila	27	Female	7 years	N/A	Married	2	9, 1 years	Matric
15	9/12/05	Paul	26	Male	3 years	3 years	Single	0	N/A	Matric
16	9/12/05	Max	28	Male	6 ½ years	N/A	Married	0	N/A	Matric
17	9/12/05	Buffy	31	Male	4 years	6 years	Married	1	8 years	Matric
18	9/12/05	John	29	Male	2 years	1 ½ years	Married	1	3 years	Matric
19	9/12/05	Angela	30	Female	6 years	N/A	Married	1	2 years	B Tech: HRM
20	19/12/05	Cartman	33	Male	1 ½ years	4 years	Life Partner	0	N/A	National Diploma
21	19/12/05	Jenny	28	Female	1 ½ years	9 years	Married	0	N/A	-
22	19/12/05	Wendal	29	Male	1 ½ years	4 years	Married	2	5, 2 years	Business, Credit Management Diploma
23	19/12/05	Ability	33	Female	11 months	2 years	Single	1	11 years	Bookkeeping diploma
24	19/12/05	Melisa	26	Female	11 months	2 years	Single	0	N/A	B.Comm in Marketing & Business Management
25	19/12/05	Percy	23	Female	11 months	3 months	Single	0	N/A	HR degree – final year
26	19/12/05	Goofed	31	Male	7 years	N/A	Married	2	-	Matric
27	19./12/05	Jakes	28	Male	7 years	N/A	Married	0	N/A	-

Gender

Male	Female
15	12
56 %	44 %

Educational Qualification

Unknown Status	Matric	Tertiary Education
4	12	11
15 %	44 %	41 %

Marital Status

Married	Single	Other Status
13	13	1
48 %	48 %	4 %

Tenure at Cellco

< 2 years	2 to 4 years	4 to 6 years	> 6 years
7	5	10	5
26 %	18.5 %	37 %	18.5 %

Age

20 – 24 years	25 – 29 years	30 – 35 years	35 – 40 years
2	14	10	1
8 %	52 %	37 %	3 %

APPENDIX TWO: FOCUS GROUP PRE-DISCUSSION INFORMATION

1)   *Introduction*
   a) Why I am here?
      (i)   Currently doing Masters at University of Stellenbosch in Industrial psychology
      (ii)   Need to complete a thesis which looks at industrial issues and;
      (iii) Need to make sure that field work is carried out in order to investigate or research chosen areas
      (iv)   Either one tends to use qualitative research (e.g. often questionnaires are used on large numbers of people) to get specific research to test various hypotheses, or qualitative research which tends to investigate more broadly proposed problems in the work place
      (v)   I have opted to use a qualitative approach and will be using a focus group format in order to do this.

2)   *What is a focus group?*

   a) Format:
      (i)   A facilitator (me) will develop a discussion using research information around various problems encountered in work. These problems stem from the original research problem as outlined in the thesis introduction, and is what the whole thesis is based on.
      (ii)   Certain questions will be asked and open discussion is encouraged, whether in agreement or not.
      (iii) The discussion will take between 1 ½ to 2 hours and will be recorded.
      (iv)   In this way the information may then be transcribed and analysed in order to develop trends and patterns in the thoughts and feelings of the various discussion groups.
      (v)   Various sessions are held with different groups from the call centre, so that a reasonable population can be assessed.
      (vi)   Groups / individuals are selected randomly
      (vii) Approximately 4 – 7 groups are usually required for sufficient results and within each group 5 – 8 people are usually included, with a maximum of 10 per group.
      (viii) In this particular focus group set up, no supervisors will be assessed as the research problem is relevant to the call centre agents. It is also felt that having supervisors in the group might inhibit free discussion.
      (ix)   Had a comparative study been desired, it would then have been prudent to include both groups in terms of management and subordinates.
      (x)   My views are impartial. I am merely a conduit for the process of the discussion.

3)   *Ethics:*

   a) Confidentiality at all costs:
      (i)   It is essential for you to know that even though your supervisors or team leaders have agreed to your being here, they on no account will ever have any idea of your contribution within this discussion

<ol type="i" start="2">
Complete anonymity is maintained, as your names will not be used at all during the discussions, but rather false ones, which are useful in facilitating the inclusion of all parties in the discussions
In front you, you will see name tags / stickers and pens, and please would you now write a chosen name and stick it on you, so that it is easily legible for me.
On completion of this discussion, that tapes will be given to a typist who has signed a legal document expressing her intent to remain confidential about all aspects involved therein.
Although the final transcript needs to be attached to the final thesis, at no point, will names (even the false ones) be used in the discussion within the thesis.
In this way, rest assured that anything that is said in this context, will not be divulged at all, to anyone at any time.
It is also important for you to note, that I am completely independent of Cellco and am merely doing my field work in the organisation.
On no account is the name Cellco used in the thesis itself.
On completion of the thesis, it will be assessed by an internal and external examiner.
Probably towards the latter part of 2006, it will be distributed to Cellco, who are at liberty to make use of the suggestions or recommendations contained therein.
They are however, not obliged in any way to make use of this information, but please note that in your best interests, they might well be interested, so should you have any ideas or suggestions, please include them within the privacy of this forum.

4) *Demographics*

a) I will be passing around a form which includes some demographic information. Please note that the purpose of this is to tie statements to demographic groups. E.g. Someone might say that they are very unhappy with the shift hours. Obviously reasons for this will differ if that person happens to be a married mother of 2 young children, to a single, 20 year old varsity student who is studying part-time. Therefore in this document, state your false name, but ensure that the other information is true.

5) Any questions from anyone before the discussion commences?

APPENDIX THREE: KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

Research Problems:

1)   Problems of work-life imbalance
2)   Problem of substance abuse in the call centre. (Is this to cope with the tedium of the position to dull their senses, or is it to enable them to manage the high work loads and stressful conditions of the work)?
3)   Emotional dissonance. How scripted call, as well as the inability to respond in an emotionally engaging manner to the client, in either pleasant or disagreeable ways?

(As the problems seem to merge into one another, e.g. as a result of work life imbalance increased use of alcohol as a relaxant might be incurred, the excessive use of which, in turn becomes substance abuse, no distinct boundaries are in place). The discussion will be manoeuvred however, to facilitate full discussion within the specific areas if possible.

1)   How did they come to work in a call centre?

(Objective: want to know if this is what they really wanted to do as a career, or if it was merely a job, with the potential perhaps of moving into mainstream Cellco after a while).

2)   Subsidiary questions:
What are long term career plans, do they wish to stay in their current position, are they looking to be promoted and to move up the organisation, look out for "fear or failure", fear of success"; note group think, in that they might not freely confide this information when amongst others. What tests did they take in the selection process? Were any behavioural type tests conducted? What do you feel particularly are the various behavioural characteristics required to be successful as a call agent? Is this aspect monitored at all? Are there development plans in place and is feedback provided other than to admonish for some straying for organisational norms or structures?

3)   Shift work:
What shifts do they currently work? Are these set shifts or are they able to change them around? For those that work on irregular shifts was sufficient information provided pre-employment to allow them to know what they were expecting and to adapt their lives around this?

4)   (Objective – look at possible stress arising due to insufficient training)
Chat about the training offered at Cellco? E.g. is technical training offered timeously to allow for correct and accurate information prior to a new product launch? How often are there product launches? What is the backup support like, should they not know the correct technical information? Are customers phoned back or are they redirected? What is the soft skills training like? Do they think that it is sufficient for the handling of their calls?

5)   What official or unofficial reward systems are in place that might not be officially noted on the website or in the policies? Are they aware of the policies and the information therein, in terms of call centres? What wellness programmes are available? Is debriefing readily available after a stressful call. Are the team leaders / supervisors able to counsel if need be? How does the company go about making their lives easier?

6) What **benefits / "emotional pull" package** does Cellco offer on employment for the call centre staff, not financial, but in terms of free cell phone, air time, pleasant working conditions, subsidized meals, snack trolley so that they do not need to leave their desk?

7) **Work and physical wellness:**
Have they noticed any changes in terms of the health? Weight loss or gain; general fitness? Have they noticed this with other agents. Do they find that they cannot sleep at night and might have increased their intake of sleeping pills, or tonics to stay awake, cigarettes, more alcohol in order to relax or wind down after a particularly hard day?

8) **Give an example of a rude or irate caller** and how they managed the call. How do they feel about a scripted response during this time? How do they feel about a scripted response any other time? Do they find that they tend to want to move away from the script more when talking to pleasant callers, rather than the angry or complaining ones?

9) **How do their spouses / partners / significant others / families feel about the particular shift?** Does it cause conflict at home? Are you able to work around the hours successfully? Do you have sufficient support as back up? Are lifts provided for late night shift agents? Is security increased for late shift agents?

10) **How often on average (per month) do you take a day off** when you are not particularly sick, but just feel that you need a break, need some time out, can't bear to hear another voice on the phone for a while, or to attend to personal matters?

   ❖ *Blyton (1991) talks about workplace flexibility, as one of the methods of introducing work/life benefits, policies and programs. These are:*
   ❖ *Task flexibility: i.e. job rotation and multi-skilling*
   ❖ *Numerical flexibility: utilise external labour, subcontracting, or fixed-term contracts*
   ❖ *Temporal flexibility: variety of work patterns such as part-time work, telecommuting or variable shifts.*
   ❖ *Wage flexibility: incorporates pay strategies which individualise pay based on performance factors rather than fixed, uniform pay systems.*

Discussion around this needs to include: the various shifts at Cellco and the payment structures of each; their use of part time and casual labour over peak times; is any job rotation happening? Is anything else in terms of task flexibility happening? How do they feel about their incentives being rated on the performance of the team? (See quote below to encourage and further the discussion with regard to measurement versus actualisation imbalance).

11) **Are head pieces shared?** Some information about the ergonomic set up.

   ❖ *"To optimise work, organisations began to focus on productivity improvement efforts directed at people in the workplace, not at people in their lives. This was not a holistic approach. The outcome of this myopic line of thinking has produced some modern day dilemmas. E.g. attempts to increase control and monitoring of employee performance have gone side by side with programs aimed at increasing employee self-actualisation. The conflict between these objectives seems to have gone largely undetected, (or if so, is not acknowledged a major stressor) in part because they*

resulted from different human resource management practise with differing objectives". (Hacker, Doolen,, 2003, p287)

12) How do they feel about the controversial **qualitative / quantitative debate?** Is this stressful that they are more often measured on quantity, but qualitative is used more as a measure of inadequacy than anything else. In addition to any solutions that they might have.

❖ *In Opinion Research International for Kimberly-Clark (cited in Hacker & Doolen, 2003) office employees, were asked to indicate what they would most like to see more of in the office of the future. The findings indicated that office employees were searching for a higher level of integration between their work and family. E.g. 27 % of the employees wanted to see on-site day care, 18 % wanted to have virtual offices, 10 % sought an on-site fitness centre and the ability to control office temperature, 8 % sought concierge or on-site service, and 6 % sought on-site medical care. These data share a common theme - they have little to do with work activities, and a lot to do with lives outside of working hours.*

13) What could the group propose that would provide Cellco with the means to serve them better in terms of reducing the stress associated with work life balance?

(Additional comments anyone else would like to add prior to closing the discussion).

APPENDIX FOUR: FOCUS GROUP TRANSCIPTS CD FORMAT ENCLOSED AT THE BACK OF THE DOCUMENT.

APPENDIX FIVE: SCRIPTED CALL POLICY : SILENT CALL

CALL MANAGEMENT IF THERE IS NO RESPONSE AFTER GREETING

Comments
The duration of a call where there is no customer response should be no longer than 10 seconds. (previously 20 seconds).

1) Accept the call and greet the Customer using the call centre's standard greeting
2) If there is no response after the first greeting, repeat the greeting.
3) If there is still no response, state to the caller that they cannot be heard and request them to please call back on the same number.
4) End the call

URGENT WARNING:

Staying quiet after accepting a call or allowing a "silent" call to continue without adhering to this procedure, will result in a zero score and possible disciplinary action.

Transferring the customer back into the queue will result in disciplinary action (additional)

CALL MANAGEMENT FOR A NUISANCE CALLER

Comments

A NUISANCE CALLER IS DEFINED AS ANYBODY WHO CALLS AND HAS A NON-CELLULAR INDUSTRY RELATED QUERY.

This would include someone who wants to have a personal chat, tells jokes, wants to sing to you, swears without mentioning a cellular related query, asks sexually related questions, asks to be transferred to specific agents, and the like.

It is a call that is not related to the purpose of seeking our assistance with the use of our Cellular Network.

For any calls related to the description above, please follow this call procedure.

NOTE:

❖ If a customer calls in for e.g. the time, or the cricket / rugby / soccer score, please provide the requested information and then provide them with the method of obtaining the information for their future convenience. (Without having to endure a queue).

❖ Sometimes customers have been noted as nuisance callers on our systems – please first establish whether the caller has a valid query before applying this call procedure.

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1) Accept the call and greet the customer using customer care' standard greeting.
2) If the caller exhibits any behaviour related to the description noted above, (Except as indicated under NOTE) ask the caller whether they have a Cellco related query which you could assist them with.
3) If they state that they do have valid queries, continue as you would with a normal call.
4) If they do not have valid queries, politely advise them that you need to end the call in order to assist customers with valid queries.