'Why do we bother?': Recruitment and training in a call centre

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ABSTRACT

There appears to be a number of paradoxes within the management of the growing call centre sector. This paper considers one of these paradoxes, the extensive recruitment and training regimes in workplaces that are faced with very high levels of turnover. Along with increased levels of control over labour, this large organisation allows employees to transfer internally thus offsetting the high recruitment and training costs.

Introduction

Many call centres appear to have rather involved recruitment and training processes and yet, there remains a high level of turnover and burnout reported within the industry. This paper focuses upon the paradox of call centre recruitment and training. Thus far, there has been little academic debate on the issues of recruitment and training in call centres. While Callaghan and Thompson provide a single case study that focuses on recruitment and training in call centres (2002), the authors also note the dearth of research in the area. Callaghan and Thompson suggest that call centres undergo such intensive recruitment and training regimes in an attempt to 'address the indeterminacy of labour, in part, outside the labour process' (Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 234). van den Broek (2003) provides a two-case comparison that considers recruitment strategies as the strategies relate to union exclusion. This paper explores what a call centre 'does' for their recruitment and training, and ponders a rhetorical question asked by the Training and Development Team Leader 'why do we bother'?

This paper is divided into five main sections. After a brief discussion of methodology, this paper will consider aspects of recruitment, training and emotional labour. This will be followed by some background information about the case study organisation. The recruitment and training regimes at PowerGrid are considered seperately. Finally, this paper will draw conclusions from this case study in an attempt to determine why organisations with high levels of turnover invest substantial time and resources into extensive recruitment and training programmes.

Methodology

The research presented in this paper was collected through an ethnographic case study. Throughout a period of more than six months, data was collected considering a range of workplace issues. Primarily, the data was collected through non-participant job observation in the workplace, including recruitment, selection and training processes. In addition, ten interviews were conducted with informants from the PowerGrid call centre (A total of 18 interviews were performed, however only ten discussed issues relating to recruitment and training). Most of these people were managers and team leaders, although a union representative, a HR representative, a Roster and Planning officer, and a former supervisor were also interviewed. Interviews were informal, but topics of discussion and some relevant guiding questions were established by the researcher prior to the interview. Finally, organisational documents that related to recruitment and selection, training, rostering and turnover were obtained and analysed.

Recruiting and training the emotional labourer

While there has been a large volume of literature examining many aspects of the burgeoning call centre sector, there has been little attention paid to the recruitment and training processes in these organisations. It is becoming commonly accepted that CSRs are required to perform high levels of emotional labour (Taylor 1998; Wray-Bliss 2001; Mulholland 2002). In The *Managed Heart*, Hochschild suggested that there were potentially negative consequences for workers who were faced with 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (1983: 7). While CSRs involved in voice-to-voice interactions may not be required to display observable facial and bodily displays, they are required to empathise with their customer, manage the tone of their voice and control their emotions while servicing difficult customers. A common adage is that the CSR needs to 'smile down the phone line'. Call centre operations are obliged to find employees who can 'micro-self manage' (Wray-Bliss 2001: 42) a complex mix of skills and competencies.

There are alternative approaches to the recruitment and selection of employees within organisations. There is of course the informal network of recruitment where employees are sourced through word-of-mouth. There is a more formalised and traditional 'job-centred' process where employees are recruited for their ability to perform a particular set of tasks. At the other end of the spectrum, organisations can recruit based on more intangible qualities within the person. For example, organisations can seek to match an applicant's adaptability, teamwork skills, self-confidence, and degree of optimism to the existing organisational culture. While it is expected that various organisations engage in different recruiting methods, there is a body of literature that recognise the 'person centred' approach to finding the attitude to match the organisation, rather than the skills to match the tasks (Thompson and Findlay 1999; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Callaghan and Thompson 2002).

An important role of recruitment is a form of organisational 'gate-keeping'. That is to say, that those employees involved in recruiting are responsible for ensuring only the appropriate persons are employed. With the growing focus on customer service in the burgeoning service sector, the gate-keeper's role is becoming increasingly important. The role is two-fold; the gate-keeper must be sure to allow the right people in, but also, to ensure the wrong people are kept out. Furthermore, many organisations with high degrees of emotional labour place a substantially greater importance on a person's personality than their experience, training and skills (Nickson, Warhurst *et al.*, 2001). As such, clichés become the order of Human Resource (HR) and Recruitment Departments with terminology like 'We recruit attitude' (Callaghan and Thompson 2002); 'if they are willing to learn they are better to employ' (Townsend 2004); and the aim to identify 'individuals' with 'suitable characteristics' (van den Broek 2003). The following section turns the focus of this paper to our case study organisation, *PowerGrid*.

POWERGRID: Since the early 1990s the supply of electricity and gas to Australian consumers has undergone dramatic changes. Industry deregulation is one change that has increased competition and had a major impact on previously government owned monopolies. Through a related restructuring process, in 1997 the former government owned monopoly supplier became a subsidiary company, and existing government owned corporation (GOC), PowerGrid. A number of regional electricity boards formed a joint project committee to investigate the development of a joint customer contact centre. While this project ultimately failed, the Customer Service department of PowerGrid utilised the knowledge and detail gathered through the research process to develop their own contact centre.

As a GOC, PowerGrid management are expected to develop efficient and effective operating processes. However, there is protection from pressures such as labour costs that might drive other call centres to outsource, or even to move offshore. Nevertheless, PowerGrid management appear to adopt a similar approach to that presented in many call centres, where employees are distracted from the tedious aspects of their work. This is achieved through a significant amount of time and materials committed to ensure the physical workspace is bright, vibrant and motivating, designed for employees to have 'fun' while they are at work. This environment was the motivation for the labelling of call centres as 'bright, satanic offices' (Baldry, Bain *et al.*, 1998), a play on poet William Blake's reference to the 'dark, satanic mills' of industrialising England (Blake 1804).

PowerGrid management have taken the step of codifying what the organisation's culture means. This was achieved through a simple and reasonably vague five-point framework. Rather than list the five points for the employees in straight forward point form, a five-pointed star was utilised with each point representing a key value required to achieve the organisation's culture. The figure was then developed to become the on-screen wallpaper of every computer throughout the call centre, a constant visual reminder of what was expected of employees.

In addition, forming an acrostic in large colourful cardboard letters spanning one of the walls, **CULTURE** is defined as: **C**ommunication, **U**nderstanding, **L**earning, **T**eamwork, **U**nity, **R**ecognition and **E**veryone. Furthermore, central to the culture at the PowerGrid call centre, but aside from the 'official' cultural norms is the notion of 'fun'. It is the role of the team leaders to be the fulcrum between the arduous aspects of the employment and the social and fun activities.

The work of PowerGrid CSRs is tightly monitored in terms of electronic surveillance, as well as having some scripting of calls, and low levels of task discretion. The incoming calls to the centre are placed in a queue, and distributed automatically to CSRs through an automated call distribution system (ACD). With Erlang 'C' planning, the ACD system also provides the Rostering and Planning officer with a range of information that is used to determine appropriate levels of staffing. Importantly, staff levels are measured to ensure there is always a queue, hence when CSRs are finished with one caller there will always be more calls waiting for them to attend to. It is from this data that the total number of required roster hours is determined, along with opportunities to plan team briefs, 'fun' activities and theme days.

The literature on call centres has evolved to a point where it is very clear that there are substantial differences between call centres (see for examples: Taylor and Bain 2001; Russell 2004). Batt argues that some call centres resemble the classic mass production model of simple and short job cycle times (less than one minute) typically serving up to 465 customers a day. This is compared to the other end of the spectrum where CSRs may handle only 30 customers a day with very complex transactions (Batt 2000: 549-551). The PowerGrid call centre seems to fit towards the quality end of what has been described as a call centre spectrum from quantity to quality (Taylor and Bain 2001). Each individual CSR is expected to take approximately 90 calls per day. Talk times average between 108 and 126 seconds. In addition, a 90 second post-call wrap period in which follow-up clerical work is completed are measured and included as some of the targets that contribute towards an employee's performance bonus. This balance between quantity and quality and the managerial approach at PowerGrid have contributed to the centre receiving two state-wide awards as the 'best call centre' in 2001.

Recruiting the emotional labourer

Traditional job-centred or operational skills recruitment is relegated in importance behind person-centred recruitment designs that aim to attract personal qualities that align with the formal aims of the organisation (Jewell and Siegall, 1990; Thompson and Findlay, 1999; Findlay, McKinlay *et al.,'* 2000; Hallier, 2001; Rowden, 2002). The objective for organisations is to:

> '…develop the selection process so that only people whose values are consistent, or could be made consistent, with the dominant values of the organisations are able to increase the strength of the culture and reduce the possibility and consequences of undesired behaviour' (Ogbonna 1992: 81)

Quite often the intensity of the recruitment process is designed to 'put off many of the less committed' applicants (Wickens 1987: 176). This proposition is supported in PowerGrid with complex and lengthy recruitment procedures.

Recruitment in the inbound call centre plays an important role for a number of reasons, including the growing number of total employees required within the call centre combined with the large turnover. The PowerGrid call centre has reduced the level of turnover from more than 43 percent in 1999 to a low of 21 percent in January of 2000 before returning to the 2003 level of almost 30 percent (Electronic data received from Roster and Planning Officer, 16 June 2003). It is well accepted that call centre employees leave in vast numbers thus externalising their resistance (Thompson 2003). These figures are comparable to many call centres, with data from the 2002 Australian Call Centre Report citing Industry turnover figures falling from 28.5 to 22.7 percent in 2002.

PowerGrid is a large organisation that provides employees with the opportunity for internal transfers. Employees utilising the opportunity for an internal transfer is viewed as positive turnover, when compared to negative turnover when people leave the organisation altogether. Since 2000, negative turnover has been close to half the rate of positive turnover (therefore negative turnover is approximately one third of total turnover). This is important for the organisation as positive turnover offsets the cost of training and recruitment that would normally be lost when employees leave an organisation. Similar to the findings in van den Broek's case study of Tellcorp and Servo (2003; 2004), the key focus of recruitment, in the view of the call centre's recruitment officer, is to find the 'right fit' of employees for such a 'high stress' environment (HR representative, 8 April 2003).

The key focus of recruitment, in the view of the call centre's recruitment officer, is to find the "right fit" of employees for such a "high stress" environment (HR representative, 8 April 2003). Initially, advertising is performed both internally, through intranet sites and newsletters; and externally within the main metropolitan newspaper. Advertising for recruitment has been occurring every two to three months, with each round of advertising commonly attracting more than 700 applicants. The HR department is faced with the task of reducing this expansive list of applicants to a more manageable shortlist of prospective recruits. Generally, this 'shortlist' will be of between 100 and 120 applications. Telephone interviews take place to further reduce the mass of candidates to approximately three times the number of positions available. Generally, ten positions are filled at a time; hence, the group that is invited to take part in the next stage is between 25 and 30 people.

Those applicants who remain on the shortlist are invited to the worksite to participate in the next phase of the recruitment process. This stage involves two activities that the researcher witnessed group role-playing and written tests. Three written tests for the potential applicants are designed to measure levels of abstract reasoning, verbal reasoning and basic computer understanding. A HR representative administers these tests. Following the written testing procedure applicants are relocated in groups of eight to ten to perform group role-playing. HR representatives and call centre team leaders observe this role-play testing to assess participants. One task for the group to perform is to collectively rank ten different aspects of call centre life, based on what the candidate rates as most important.

Throughout this process, vague instructions are provided to add additional frustrations and opportunities to assist in differentiating those people involved. Some examples of the aspects of call centre life that are to be ranked include: teamwork, customer service, problem solving and having fun. Those who are grading the participants in the role-playing exercise place a rating against each potential employee for skills such as communication and cooperation with fellow applicants, willingness to engage others in the conversation, ability to compromise and problem solving. All are important skills when working in a team. This process takes approximately one hour, with the PowerGrid employees engaging in a discussion after each group role-play to ascertain which applicants will be invited back for the next stage of the recruitment process.

Reference checks are completed for those who have been successful to this point and the applicants are invited for the final stage of the recruitment process. This stage also involves two separate activities, the first being face to face interviews, and the second being telephone skills testing. The HR representative places a great deal of importance on the face-to-face interviews. It is in this context, according to the HR representative, that questions regarding previous work experience in customer service are asked in an attempt to determine the probability of potential applicants meeting a 'standard of call centre effectiveness' (8 April 2003). Some of the key traits that are sought by PowerGrid in their recruits are: good communication; teamwork; good customer service; the ability to be trained; and employees who are willing to exceed customer's expectations and find solutions.

Telephone role-play provides the applicant with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to process information while maintaining a conversation with a customer. The applicant is given ten minutes to read eight pages of information about a simulated company. This information includes details about specifics like products and services. While talking on the telephone to a PowerGrid staff member with a script, the recruit is expected to answer questions about information sought and in addition, offer information promoting products and services.

Following this staged call, the applicant is then faced with an angry customer, again a staged call. Observants are looking for an applicant that is able to identify the important information, handle the conflict while remaining calm and empathising with the customer. These skills are all aspects previously presented in call centre research on emotional labour (Holman 2003; Lewig and Dollard 2003; Zapf, Isic *et al.*, 2003).

The recruitment process is developed around a cognisance that the call centre environment is very stressful and therefore successful applicants must be capable of positive interaction when faced with a high pressure situation. In essence, the recruitment process is intended to differentiate between people who are 'team players' with a view to 'avoiding people who may cause problems.' (25 March 2003) This was to suggest that call centres are a high stress environment and it was the role of the HR section to recruit 'level headed people who won't flip out when the pressure is on.'(25 March 2003) Furthermore, recruits had to be the 'type of person' to fit the organisation's culture. This organisation demonstrates a consistency found by Thompson *et al.*' (2002; 2004; 2004) with other call centre recruitment processes where it is the person's attitude rather than their skills that are sought through the recruitment process. It is interesting that the people involved in the recruitment process are aware of the large level of internal transfers from the call centre to the organisation proper. All PowerGrid participants suggest that they pay some attention to the 'bigger picture'; however, they also suggest their primary focus is protecting the integrity of the call centre recruitment process.

Training the emotional labourer

A high rate of turnover in call centres lends itself to arranging training in a manner that is quick ensuring workers are answering the telephones in the shortest possible time (Frenkel, Tam *et al.*, 1998; Batt, 1999). However, as mentioned previously, turnover at the PowerGrid call centre is divided between employees transferring internally within the organisation (positive turnover); and people leaving the organisation all together (negative turnover). Offering expected responses to the related issues of training costs and turnover, the HR representative and the Roster and Planning officer suggest that as the organisation commits a lot of resources to train the staff PowerGrid therefore want employees to remain with the organisation. By maintaining employment with the wider organisation PowerGrid has a greater opportunity to secure a return on the training investment.

When developing a new operating system in the call centre, one of the goals was to bring about a reduction in training time. Previously, new CSRs faced a period of eight weeks training and the goal was for this to be halved to just four weeks. However, the training team leader suggests that the management team withheld information about the new system. Rather than being a completely new operating system, the new system was in fact an 'add-on' to the current system. Hence, the training team leader is now obliged to train new recruits on two systems (the original and the new system) for effective performance in the workplace.

Currently, new recruits undergo a three phase training programme. The first phase consists of two weeks of learning the computer applications away from the telephones. This training is consolidated with two weeks of taking calls in a controlled environment referred to as 'the nursery' and decorated with a range of baby clothes, nappies, pacifiers, and baby bottles. While the infantilising of the learning environment can be interpreted as demeaning, this idea is dismissed by management as just part of the 'fun' culture in the centre. At this stage, the recruits take live calls with the assistance of a training partner. Stage two consists of two weeks learning about more advanced processes, again followed by a two-week period of consolidation in the nursery. After these eight weeks, new recruits are allocated to their team in the call centre proper. Recruits are then on a twelve-month probation period, which more than 80 percent successfully complete.

Once the initial training process is completed, CSRs are required to complete fifteen self-paced training modules within the first twelve months of employment. The successful completion of the fifteen training modules results in the CSRs achieving a State Government accredited 'Certificate in Telecommunications'. Completion of each individual module represents a modest increase in the CSR's wages. In addition to the fifteen compulsory training modules, there are an additional five optional training modules.

These additional modules also provide a modest pay increase, but more importantly, completion of the additional modules 'demonstrates a willingness to commit and therefore the CSR would be more favourably looked upon if there was a promotion to a 'senior' available.'(Training and Development Representative, 10 June 2003).

Using a labour process interpretation of the employment relationship we are aware that members of the labour force do not completely surrender their soul to the management of their organisations. Employees maintain an ability to make decisions to slow their work, lie, cheat or steal from the organisation or indeed, to work hard and honestly for their company, themselves or a manager to whom they may be dedicated. It is one of the key managerial responsibilities to engage the employees in a manner that extracts the highest level of surplus value. As Callaghan and Thompson suggest, the recruitment processes at many organisations, call centres included, are designed to select the right person for the organisation. That is to suggest, use the recruitment process to 'weed out' those employees who may be more likely to resist managerial initiatives and controls and to attract those employees who wish to serve the organisation willingly and honourably. That is to say, the recruitment processes are designed as an investment in the workforce with the expectation that the investment will pay dividends in the future.

PowerGrid managerial staff recognise that they play an additional role in the larger organisation. Not only is their responsibility that of operating the call centre efficiently, but as a primary gate-keeper for the rest of the organisation. Not all PowerGrid employees enter employment through the call centre, however a large number do. Consequently, by selecting the 'right' employee initially, the investment in recruitment and training has an immediate return in the call centre, but an ongoing return when the employees progress into the larger PowerGrid organisation.

The management of the PowerGrid call centre have invested approximately $30 million (AUD) to develop an ACD system that reduces the training time substantially. However, the management failed considerably in this regard by establishing a system that was an 'add-on' to the existing system. Hence, training time for employees actually doubled to ensure incoming CSRs were familiar with the new ACD system and the existing, organisation-wide system. Certainly this is an example of poor planning, or at best, planning with restrained choices on the part of management. Without question the doubling of training time was an unintended consequence of this planning. It is expected that eventually service delivery will improve with the new operating system; however there is doubt over whether training time will decrease while employees must learn their way around two operating systems before they are 'job-ready'.

The new Customer Management System (CMS) was in many ways an investment in removing employee control over decision-making and increasing the managerial control over the quality of service provided. That is, more scripting and fewer areas where mistakes can be made by employees. However, the new systems appeared full of inadequacies or 'BIRs' (Business Investigation Requests). Employees spoke regularly of their frustration with the new system. One of the primary frustrations employees hold is the speed that the CSRs can service the customers while using the new system. Unexpectedly, the new system operated slower than the existing system. Employees found the computer system slowing their service provision frustrating and began to 'flick' between the old and the new systems. This is a difficult situation for management and employees alike. If employees continue to use the old system then the 'BIRs' will never be resolved. However, if employees do not flick between the systems then the customer will be provided with an inadequate level of service. Employees share among their team the information to 'trick' the system and act against managerial expectations for the short to medium-term productivity gains and hence, the benefit of the organisation.

Employees provide a number of responses that consider the irony of disobeying managerial expectations as a means to providing the level of customer service expected by both management and the customer. Employees are facing heightened levels of emotional labour while the CMS system is operating ineffectively. This is an example of a situation that the HR representative refers to when suggesting that the recruitment process is extensive to ensure that the call centre is full of 'level headed people who won't flip out when the pressure is on.'

Conclusions

Callaghan and Thompson suggest that call centres undergo such intensive recruitment and training regimes in an attempt to 'address the indeterminacy of labour, in part, outside the labour process' (Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 234). Labour, the employees, maintain some degree of control over the processes in which they are engaged. This control is certainly limited in the highly scripted, highly monitored call centre context. This case study reflects the notion that employees in call centres face intensive recruitment and training regimes as a means of deselecting the wrong people and selecting people who have appropriate values and attitudes, if indeed they are lacking the appropriate skills. PowerGrid does hold an advantage over many call centres in the fact that it is a GOC and consequently not under the same financial pressures that many publicly-listed organisations would face. Furthermore, the organisation is also in the position to take a more broad approach to the costs associated with recruitment and training as a substantial portion of call centre turnover is internal, or within the larger organisation. Consequently, while pondering the extensive recruitment and training regime in place, the Training and Development team leader is posing a good question when asking 'why do we bother?' It appears the simple answer in this particular organisation is two-pronged: to select employees who would fit the organisational culture and the turnover costs are absorbed in internal transfers.

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