Examining the labour process in a call centre: from bad jokes to the possibilities for resistance

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Introduction

I chose the site for my workers’ inquiry the way most people find casual employment: by responding to a generic internet advertisement. The adverts contained few details other than pay and hours, and a number of them led to pre-interview screenings. The advert for the job that I eventually got directed applicants to ring a voicemail number that instructed them to leave a message with their name, number, and why they would be good at the job. I received a call the following day and was invited to come in after the weekend for an interview.

It became clearer at the interview what kind of call centre I would be working in. The introduction explained that the company sold insurance to trade union members. It has “partnership” deals with ten different trade unions.¹ It effectively acts as the insurance broker, arranging various policies from different insurance companies and then selling them to union members. This involves handling sales, customer service, and claims, but not paying out the policy. The basic premise of the business was to call union members to market a free insurance offer with a low payout, and then attempt to up-sell additional paid options. The trainer pointed out that because the marketing material included the union logo, the “customer will think it is from the union.” She then awkwardly added: “but, um, we never lie about who we are.”

Experience of working in the call centre

“Smile down the phone, the customer can hear it!”

The start of each shift at the call centre begins in the break room. The supervisors lead a “buzz session,” which is essentially an opportunity for the company to remind callers of the different rules, stress the importance of quality, and then attempt to encourage some kind of enthusiasm for the upcoming shift. The content of these sessions varies, but most involve playing some sort of game. These range from competitions testing product knowledge (perhaps not the most exciting) to word games – for example, each person in turn shouting out the name of a country, following alphabetical order with no repetition until only the winner remains. Although being made to play children’s games was somewhat demeaning, it did offer the benefit of stretching out the time before we had

¹ Trade Union Cover is a pseudonym for the call centre company.
to be on the call centre floor. Some callers tried to extend these sessions by asking lots of questions and pretending they needed more help than they actually did.

The phone calls were structured by the computer script composed of five different hyperlinked sections, some with multiple pages. The trainer pointed out: “we need people to make the sales; otherwise we would just use an automated system.” Callers were encouraged to build rapport with the customer, to learn additional details which can then be used as a basis for improvisation later on in the script. This improvisation was primarily expected during the description of the features of the insurance, a process called “features-to-benefits.” For example, one of the five main benefits is that the customer is entitled to a rebate at the age of seventy if they have not claimed. The caller was expected to go further than simply reading out the computer generated figure. This involves using hypothetical connecting phrases like: “which means that you could...” The caller should improvise a benefit for the feature, hopefully using some of the additional information gathered in the earlier rapport-building. The trainer described this as “painting a picture,” which is apparently the way to make sales.

Jokes were also a fundamental part of elaboration on the script. At two points on the script, callers are encouraged to try joking with the customer. The first is on the confirmation of details. There are two eligibility questions to confirm: “that you spend 7 out of 12 months a year in the UK?” and “that this is where you pay your taxes?” These questions allow two jokes: “no long holidays planned this year then?” and “no escaping that is there?” On a couple of occasions I tried adding: “unless you are Vodafone”, but this was quickly discouraged by the supervisors. The second is later in the script, with the exclusion “that you won’t be covered for death as a result of... participation in any illegal acts,” to which almost every caller adds: “so if you were planning to rob a bank we wouldn’t be able to pay out! [Fake laughter].” While this is presumably a new joke for the customer, the workers will enjoy it over and over again throughout the day.

Supervisors began coaching during the first shift. Every single call, whether a successful sale or not, was digitally recorded and stored for playback. Each sales call and a random selection of non-sales calls would be listened to and graded by the quality control team. They would be graded as either green (passing quality standards), green D/N (passed but development needed), or red (failing to meet standards and therefore no commission). The supervisors would regularly listen into calls, and analyze how callers could be more successful in future. During weekly “1-2-1” meetings with callers, supervisors would grade their performance and provide instructions on how they could improve. While the supervisors stressed that these were for training purposes, they produced printouts of the computer data which could also play a disciplinary role. Each week I was given a grading and a series of instructions about how to improve. These were always quite vague but in general involved remarks about being more “assertive,” “give 110% to every call,” or even parroting Alec Baldwin’s rant in Glengarry Glen Ross: “remember your ABCs – Always Be Closing!” The “1-2-1” advice was always supplemented with the advice: “remember every ‘no’ is one step closer to a ‘yes!’”

There was a constant pressure to make sales on the call centre floor. It begins feels like a contemporary version of Robert Linhart’s (1981: p27) various unsuccessful attempts on the assembly line. The television screen on the wall taunts workers with sales figures, acting as a constant reminder of how each individual worker compares to others. It was nerve-wracking as I struggled to get sales while watching the more established, Stakhanovite callers. However, after a month or so I
began to regularly make sales, not quite enough to “graduate,” but enough to keep working at Trade Union Cover.

In a typical shift I would make approximately four hundred different phone calls. The majority of these calls would go through to answer phone, especially during the part of the shift that takes place during normal working hours. The calls that did connect often finished abruptly with the customer requesting a call back at a more convenient time, which is then sent through the computer system. It is possible to leave notes for calls so that the next caller has some context, however most people either left short notes that were unhelpful or none at all. The history for each customer can be displayed, which often shows that calls that go through to answer phone have been called repeatedly over a period of a month. This means that the majority of the shift is spent waiting to connect to a customer. While this may seem easier than constantly talking to customers it is far from relaxing. The next attempt to pitch the product could be only five seconds away, so the moments of respite are brief and the pressure is constant.

**Computerised Taylorism and the Labour Process**

Control is ever present in the call centre. From the constant presence of supervisors, the recording of phone calls, to the automated electronic logs, methods of control and surveillance are common during work. The effect of this control on the labour process can be understood through an examination of the Taylorist management principles. This includes the computerized supervision, which is perhaps analogous to the technician in a white coat with a stopwatch, but also in the sense of Harry Braverman’s argument that behind the technician ‘lies a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production’ (Braverman, 1999: p60).

For Taylor ‘this task specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it’ (Taylor 1967: p39). The process of reading from a script and then asking for pre-set amounts during the phone call is a clear example of the separation of conception from execution. The necessity of closely following the script was reiterated continuously throughout the training and first shifts. One of the supervisors suggested that if you stick to the script, “all the work is done for you!”

The use of a computer system linked to the phones allows for a significant degree of control. Callers have to sign onto the computer system in order to make phone calls. The computer system logs the exact time that the worker starts their shift. There is an unpaid hour break between the two half-shifts, and two fifteen-minute breaks half way through each half-shift. The computer system logs the start and end time of the break; if the break exceeds the limit, the system notifies a manager. During phone calls, the computer surveillance system will display three states: “Previewing/Dialling” for the time when the automatic dialling system is ringing through the list of numbers; “Connected,” when the caller is talking to someone on the phone; and “Wrapping,” which provides an opportunity to record the outcome of the phone call and take any relevant notes. This is described as “non-productive” time, only to be used when needed, never exceeding five seconds.
The labour process in the call centre can therefore be understood as a kind of computerised development of Taylorist management principles. Philip Taylor\(^2\) and Peter Bain argue that the ‘driving force’ behind the growth of call centres – whether as the ‘rationalisation of back office functions or as entirely new creations’ – results from the ‘pursuit of competitive advantage’ (Taylor & Bain, 1999: p102). The call centre therefore comes under the pressure to minimize costs and maximize profits, which means that those running the call centres are ‘under constant competitive pressure to extract more value from their employees,’ which ‘from the point of view of capital’ is a ‘far from straightforward project’ (Taylor & Bain, 1999: p115). The complexity of this was illustrated clearly with the call centre management’s project of hiring in an undercover boss to try and find new ways to streamline the company. The consultant is inquiring into experience of workers in order to gain some insight that will be useful for management.

The difficulty stems from the contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative objectives of the labour process, which became apparent during training: the constant focus on the quality of the phone calls as the most important aspect of the job sat uneasily alongside the strict quantitative targets for the number of phone calls per shift. Taylor and Bain argue that ‘even in the most quality driven call centre’ – and the call centre I worked in claimed to put a great importance on quality, given its regulation by the Financial Services Authority – ‘it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the labour process is intrinsically demanding, repetitive and, frequently, stressful’ (Taylor & Bain, 1999: p110).

**Possibilities for Resistance**

The levels of resistance and organisation in call centres are fairly typical for most private sector workplaces in the UK, the occasional report of success, but on the whole it appears that not much is happening. It is important to consider the connection between the specificities of the labour process of different jobs and how these can lead to new forms of resistance. An interesting example of this can be found with the ‘Cathay Pacific Smile Strike.’ The workers drew on the fact the company advertised its ‘service with a smile’ to engage in a specific form of work to rule. The works engaged in a ‘smile strike’, refusing to deploy the emotional labour described by Hochschild (1985) in her famous book. In addition to this the workers also threatened to ‘stop providing meals, snacks and beverages like alcohol.’ As Tsang Kwok-fung, the general secretary for the Cathay Pacific Airways Flight Attendants Union, remarked, ‘we cannot smile because of the situation, because of how the company treats us’\(^3\). This creative approach to resistance could also be developed for call centres. Refusing to participate in certain aspects of the call, the greeting for example, or refusing to ‘“smile down the phone”’ (Taylor & Bain, 1999: p103) could have a similar effect. Kate Mulholland (2004: p709) provides a useful perspective for examining resistance further in her study of informal workplace collective attitudes and practices in an Irish call centre, building on Martinez Lucio and Stewart’s (1997) concept of the collective worker. Mulholland (2004: p709) argues ‘that in subordinated work conditions, workers

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\(^2\) Philip Taylor, not to be confused with Frederick Taylor from whose name Taylorism is derived, is a professor at the University of Strathclyde.

\(^3\) See: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/12/13/cathay-pacific-smile-strike_n_2292796.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/12/13/cathay-pacific-smile-strike_n_2292796.html)
engage in a recipe of informal collective practices that are organically borne out of their daily work experiences.’

The attempt to begin building some kind of organisation involved trying to join a trade union⁴. After finding out about how to join the trade union on their website I called the membership telephone number. I explained over the phone that I was a call centre worker and interested in joining, to which I was told this could only be done by email or post, which was a slightly surreal experience of one call centre workers speaking to another. I emailed over my application and did not receive a reply for a few weeks, after which I got an email confirming my membership and the telephone number for a branch organiser. After missing each other a few times due to the nature of shift work I made contact with the organiser. She informed me that I had been added to a combined, geographical branch that covered a wide area and different employment types. Unfortunately, I had missed the last branch meeting a few days before which had been cancelled anyway for low attendance. I was shocked to find out that the next meeting would not take place for three months.

There was a real difficulty in relating the trade union to the workplace. The jump from collective meetings to joining an organisation whose members the call centre sold insurance to was complicated. This was greatly exacerbated by the high turnover in the call centre. The length of time it took to start having meetings meant that a number of the initial people involved left the call centre during this initial phase.

The close relationship between the call centre and trade union created the possibility for what the trade union Unite (2012) has recently begun to label ‘leverage.’ They define it as ‘a process whereby the Union commits resources and time to making all interested parties aware of the treatment received by Unite members at the hands of an employer.’ In the particular circumstances of this call centre it would be possible to envisage how a ‘leverage’ campaign could develop. The contract I signed specified that my ‘terms and conditions of employment are not subject to the provisions of any collective agreement.’ In most workplaces this would not provide a useful basis for a campaign involving customers, however given the call centre works with trade unions, this could be used to force open a space to organise. Exposing – or even just threatening to expose – the anti-union attitude of the company to the trade unions that it relies on for customers is a potentially powerful bargaining tool.

The lack of trade union organisation meant that many workers did not consider the workplace as a site of collective struggle. The exposure to service sector unionism is likely to create a picture of trade unions that are far removed from the categories of ‘unionateness’ that Robert Blackburn (1967: p18) has used. This relates to a more general lack action over broader workplace grievances. As Taylor and Bain (2001: 62-3) argue ‘the future success of trade unions in call centres will depend in no small measure on their ability to contest and redefine the frontiers of control on terms desired by their members.’ This requires a break from the conception of unions as service providers to a shrinking base of members, and a move towards combative organisations that are focused on workplace struggle.

The high turnover of workers in call centre presents a real and difficult obstacle for organisation. In a number of examples in the literature successes in organising are led by a small core of radical

⁴ The name of the union, like that of the company, will remain anonymous.
workers who are lead organising attempts. However there is a tendency for management to victimise individuals which severely limits the longevity of campaigns. It is therefore necessary to try and conceive of forms of resistance and organisation than can be generalised on a larger scale. In order to move forward the understanding of workplace resistance and misbehaviour has to be deployed to uncover the complex relationships that emerge in the workplace and identify how challenges to management can be constructed. This has to go alongside a strategic critique of contemporary trade unionism, not only to understand its failings, but as part of a demand to utilise its resources in an organising project that has workers self-activity at its heart.

The End of the Line

The final part of my workers’ inquiry was particularly difficult. I had begun to average a reasonable number of sales per shift. However, on a Friday night, all my shifts for the following week were changed: instead of three day shifts I received five nights and a Saturday shift. The next Friday, all of my shifts were again changed to the same pattern. Working every evening at the call centre, while reading and writing about call centres during the day, began to take its toll. I went through a number of shifts with no sales whatsoever. I had a tense “1-2-1” meeting with my supervisor about my performance. The SMART action plan only stated “Giving Jamie 2 weeks to improve his performance.” After a week my performance had not improved. At the end of the probation period I had fallen far short of the targets I had been set. After an HR meeting – which was surprisingly brief – I was no longer employed by Trade Union Cover. Though slightly earlier than originally planned it still meant that I was one of the longest lasting workers in my training cohort.

Bibliography

It might be argued that labour process theory is a lens through which the sociological discipline seeks to explain the mechanisms extolling differences in employee relations contexts in terms of power and exploitation within a country as more. It might be argued that labour process theory is a lens through which the sociological discipline seeks to explain the mechanisms extolling differences in employee relations contexts in terms of power and exploitation within a country as a form of historical analysis (Niehuser and Warhurst, 2012). The explicit starting point of Labour Process Theory (Much resistance to change can be avoided if effective change management is applied on the project from the very beginning. While resistance is the normal human reaction in times of change, good change management can mitigate much of this resistance. Change management is not just a tool for managing resistance when it occurs; it is most effective as a tool for activating and engaging employees in a change. To act in a new way requires more power from the brain. The physiological reaction when presented with a new way of doing something is to revert back to what the brain already knows. Human beings can adapt their behavior, but it is a difficult and painful process—even for the brain itself. Request PDF on ResearchGate | Precarious Labour In The UK: The Impact Of Neoliberalism and The Possibilities For Resistance and Organisation | This paper seeks to examine resistance to precarious employment in the UK. It has been the focus of recent debate in the UK, both in academia and in the labour movement. In academia there have been debates between Guy Standing (2011) and Kevin Doogan (2009) amongst others... The examples of university teaching staff, call centre workers, and the campaigns against zero-hour contracts will be examined to understand how new forms of struggle can lay the basis for the renewal of workers’ organisation.