

Who's on the Line? Women in Call Centres Project*

Call centres represent an expanding yet poorly understood sector of the business world. Unfortunately, the rapid growth of the industry has led to potential problems related to limited union representation as well as a lack of public policy regarding management guidelines and production standards. These issues place call centre workers at risk for health problems.

The Women in Call Centres Project explored job stressors, coping strategies and buffers experienced by female call centre workers. Through this qualitative inquiry, 25 female call centre workers had an opportunity to share their perceptions and experiences through face-to-face interviews. Participants talked about the ways in which this type of work influenced their physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being.

Findings

Participants identified several positive aspects of their work:

- ❖ In addition to economic security, factors that positively impacted their well-being include opportunities for social interaction with co-workers as well as a sense of personal fulfilment which comes from having the opportunity to serve and help people.
- ❖ Some women felt that their work gave them greater self-confidence and that they were valued, trusted and listened to by their employer and respected by friends and family.
- ❖ Some women were attracted to this work because it allowed them the flexibility to accommodate other aspects of their lives such as another job or attending university.

They also reported features of call centre work that negatively impact, or had the potential to negatively impact, their well-being. A major theme related to job stressors was the issue of control. Indeed, a lack of control over the structure and processes of their work permeated the women's comments.

- ❖ Participants reported various strain-injuries, headaches and infections as well as varying degrees of low energy, depression, irritability, disrupted eating and sleep patterns, and poor overall mood. They also reported conflicts in family relationships, lack of time to meet personal needs or for leisure activities, as well as conflicts with care-giving responsibilities.
- ❖ While some call centres have employee assistance programs, workers are often reluctant to access these supports due to a perceived lack of confidentiality. Similarly, while some supervisors are open and supportive, women must often rely on informal supports and personal coping strategies (e.g., talking with co-workers, various strategies to vary the workplace) in order to deal with the stress of call centre work. Very few call centres are unionized.

****The Call Centre Research Project was conducted by Co-Investigators Carol Putnam and Anne Fenety with the assistance of Charlotte Loppie. They interviewed twenty-five women from various call centers in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 58 and came from diverse ancestry and education levels. Participants included both part- and full-time workers with both fixed and shift work schedules. Participants' duration of employment in call centers ranged from two months to eight years.***

Policy Implications

1. **Job Security.** Since many call centre jobs are part-time, government economic development strategies need to increase the ratio of full-time to part-time jobs, increase the length of time that companies stay in the region, and increase the time a worker stays on the job. As well, there is a need for legislation aimed at protecting the rights of part-time workers. These strategies also need to incorporate the special needs of working mothers and care givers (e.g., incentives for companies to provide on-site day care facilities).

2. **Management Policy.** Management policy must take a “human-centred perspective” which values the worker, provides opportunities for the voice of the worker to be heard and respected, and gives the worker more control over the way the job is done. Performance standards should be realistic and electronic performance monitoring should be used with discretion. Workers need less variability in their working hours, and greater flexibility in work shifts and time off. Finally, workers need opportunities to rotate tasks to reduce the tediousness of the work and to minimize repetitive strain injuries.

3. **Public Abuse.** The government should introduce media and public awareness campaigns to highlight the negative effects the public has on call centre workers. Industry regulations and/or legislation is needed to establish guidelines on the ways and times call centres approach the public.

4. **Unionization.** Inform union representatives and organizers of the concerns of call centre workers including the overuse of the electronic performance monitoring, unfair or equal treatment of workers, the lack of job security, and the lack of flexibility in work scheduling.

5. **Health Incentives at the Workplace.**

Government health initiatives and company policies should include health promotion (or at least injury and disease prevention) strategies as a priority. These strategies should encourage companies to provide on-site exercise facilities and healthy food dispensers, regular stretch breaks, lunch breaks of at least one hour that coincide with regular eating times, and general health and wellness programs.

6. **Transportation.** Management policy concerning work shifts should take into consideration transportation issues of workers, especially in areas with infrequent bus service. This may affect shift scheduling and/or policies such as providing taxi chits when busses do not run. Company security personnel should consider the safety concerns of workers traveling to and from work late at night.

7. **Workers' Compensation.** Workers' compensation boards must deal more specifically with call centre work environments. Problems such as air quality, ambient noise, and interacting with video display units and other stress-related health problems must be recognized.

The Women in Call Centre Project has published a brochure that answers many of the questions you may have if you are considering seeking employment in a call centre.

Contact the MCEWH for a copy of “Thinking of Working in a Call Centre?”

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The Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health is supported by Dalhousie University, the ANK Health Centre, the Women's Health Bureau of Health Canada, and through generous anonymous contributions.

