'You don't know what you've got till it's gone': Re-contextualising the Origins, Development and Impact of the Call Centre

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Introduction

In the space of scarcely a decade a diverse literature on the call centre has emerged in the broad fields of management and organization studies, and employment relations. Earlier simplistic and mistaken depictions, such as the dystopian 'electronic Panopticon' perspective (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998), have been quickly forgotten as rich empirical evidence has produced a more rounded and finely-grained understanding. We now know a great deal about work organization, surveillance, managerial control strategies and other central concerns of labour process analysis (see Deery and Kinnie, 2004). However, as Glucksman (2005) has recently observed there is a tendency to treat call centres as 'self-standing sites of work' and to detail their 'internal workings', at the expense of providing broader analysis. It is certainly true that call centres appear in much of the literature as disembodied entities, abstracted from their political and economic contexts, as recent work in the discipline of occupational psychology epitomises.

For example, Holman (2004) 'proves', through a series of empirical tests based on self-completing survey data, the degree of 'well-being' and job satisfaction amongst agents working for a UK bank. The outcomes of an approach, which pre-selects the variables for analysis, is invariably unsatisfactory, serving merely to establish a series of internalised and self-referential statistical relationships, a method which recalls the fundamental criticism made by Wright Mills (1959) of 'abstracted empiricism', of a tendency in social science to sacrifice explanation for statistical assertion. Batt and Moynihan (2004: 34) echo this criticism, when they point to the failure of this method to situate individual workers in the context of work groups and their social relationships. Unsurprisingly, this approach leads to highly questionable generalisations. Holman declares, for instance, that in terms of workers' experiences at least, 'call centres are not radically different forms of work organisation' (2004: 239) and, bathed in an optimistic glow, 'call centre work compares favourably to shop floor manufacturing and clerical work with regard to well being'. Yet, as much authoritative research on the call centre has demonstrated, its work organisation, labour process and the daily experiences its call-handlers have particular – even unique – characteristics[1]. This is true despite recognition that the call centre does have organizational antecedents and the fact that, notwithstanding common defining features, call centres are not homogeneous.

The intention here is not to isolate for critique one particular author, but to emphasise the more general failure to contextualise. It is remarkable how the call centre is often treated as a normative phenomenon, without any acknowledgement of the conditions under which it emerged as a distinctive organisational form, which reconfigured the customer servicing in late capitalism. To cite specific example, both Holman (2004) and Fernie

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[1] The UK's Health and Safety Executive, in dubbing the call centre a 'unique working environment' (2001), succinctly captured the essence of its distinctiveness.

(2004), although their case studies are located in the banking sector, neglect to mention the profound transformations wrought by the call centre throughout financial services, following the path-breaking innovation of branchless, 24-hour, customer servicing by First Direct and Direct Line, in banking and insurance respectively (Bain and Taylor, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999). We contend that an understanding of historical context and legacy are critical for understanding the very essence of the call centre and for grasping the full significance of the profound consequences for work organisation and the experience of work that its emergence has generated.

Gluckman's (2004) frequently insightful remedy to the tendency to internalise is to expand the frame of analysis by building on the concept of the total social organisation of labour (TSOL). She focuses on process, relationality and the division of labour, thereby re-interpreting call centres within a broader sociology of work. In developing five differing call configurations - 'stylized cases' - which should not, she insists, be regarded as a definitive typology, Glucksman inserts the call centre in differing overall processes of 'provision to consumption'. In so doing, the call centre is contrasted with previously existing modes of operation and its agents are situated within the wider occupational structure. While her reflective piece undeniably represents a considerable advance on 'decontextualised' accounts, it should be seen as complementing studies which have already analysed how this telemediated innovation in customer servicing is embedded within the wider capitalist political economy (Taylor et al, 2005), and the dynamics of markets at macro and sectoral levels (Bain and Taylor, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2001a).

In seeking to build on this work, this paper, therefore, concurs with the thrust of Thompson's (2003) argument that a focus on the workplace, and work relations alone, cannot reveal the most important drivers of organisational change. In order to provide for a more complete understanding of the call centre, we need simultaneously a wide-angle lens, to broaden the perspective beyond the workplace, and a long lens, to provide historical depth (Littler, 1982: 2). The paper begins with an analysis of the reasons for the appearance and widespread adoption of the call centre as the preferred mode of customer contact, servicing and sales, throughout diverse industrial sectors. While particular importance must be attached to innovation and price reduction in the domain of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the dangers of technological determinism are readily acknowledged. The explosive growth of the call centre is as much the product of political economic factors; the impact of the policies of deregulation and privatisation, restructuring at the levels of industry and/or firm, the intensification of economy-wide and sectoral competitive pressure, the growth of the 'new economy', and underpinning everything the compulsion to maximise profits and reduce costs.

This discussion prefigures the presentation of case study data from British Gas in the UK utilities sector. Evidence is drawn firstly, from extensive company and trade union documentation and, secondly, from extended interviews based upon oral history methods, where a selected cohort of forty-three clerical staff were asked to reflect upon work organisation and their experiences during their three decades of continuous employment on the same site (Edinburgh). Together these complementary data sets deliver a longitudinal perspective, enabling analysis of the dynamics of organisational change and

the labour process associated with the arrival of the call centre, and an evaluation of its impact on workers' experiences. Methodologically, this paper breaks new ground, not least because it contrasts with the survey snapshots, or interview based data from relatively short time frames, that has constituted empirical call centre research to date. The evidence is compelling that that the introduction of call centre operations signified a qualitative break with pre-existing forms of work organisation. In rapidly becoming established as the dominant mode of customer contact, the call centre replaced all but minor competing forms of structuring work. In sum, privatised British Gas successfully realised its strategic objectives of reasserting control over the labour process, intensifying work, and reducing costs in order to deliver shareholder value in volatile markets.

The Call Centre: Origins, Development and Political Economy

When evaluating how and why the call centre became an organisational imperative for companies as they restructured the processes of interactive customer contact, it is necessary to emphasise, although not to over-privilege, the impact of technological innovation and application. Miozzo and Ramirez (2003) and Cave et al (2002) usefully document the qualitative advances in information networking technology, which generated wider technological and organisational diffusion throughout the services sector. These include the digitalisation of telecommunications networks, optical-fibre technologies, and connectionless architectures based on Internet protocols, which have further facilitated voice and data integration. The dramatic increase in computing capacity, and concomitant price reduction, enabled the transmission and processing of enormous amounts of data, and integration with these new voice technologies. We have always maintained that the call centre has been defined fundamentally by this integration of telephonic and computer technologies (Taylor and Bain, 1999: 102), but the *key* innovation was the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system, enabling calls to be routed to available operators, within (or for that matter between) call centres (Miozzo and Ramirez (2003: 69).

The importance of these developments for structuring and pacing work, for increasing the range of services capable of being delivered remotely, for increasing labour productivity and for monitoring and measuring output, is often downplayed by authors who argue that the variable requirements of customers place strict limits on the degree of routinisation and standardisation that the technology encourages (Frenkel et al, 1999; Korczynski, 2002). Despite variations between call centres, whether expressed in terms of strategic choice, variations in configuration (Glucksman, 2003), call centre type and market segments served (Batt and Moynihan, 2002), or in the dimensions of quality and quantity (Taylor et al, 2002), these ICTs undoubtedly influenced work design and the social technology of relationships leading to a convergence in the direction of standardisation (Houlihan, 2002: 68). It is interesting that the significance of technological innovation was more fully appreciated by some earlier researchers of the call centre. The contrast with pre-existing forms of work organisation and customer servicing was, to them quite stark, precisely because the transformation was recent and abrupt. For example, Richardson and Marshall (1996) understood the revolutionary consequences of the penetration of these ICTs 'further into the customer interface'.

Although there were always limits to dispersal, the technologies also collapsed distance and facilitated geographical flexibility, permitting location and re-location to regions, cities and towns characterised particularly by lower (notably labour) costs and supplies of skilled labour (Bristow et al, 2000: Richardson and Belt, 2001). The increasing trend to offshore to India should be regarded as an extension, however dramatic, of the spatial dynamic that is inherent in the call centre project (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Once, of course, it is no longer obligatory to situate the loci of servicing in close proximity to customers, economies of scale can be realised through the concentration of functions that would otherwise be decentralised. From this perspective, the raison d'être of the call centre lies in its promise to cut costs and maximise profits through the drawing together of customer servicing, or selling, channels. Rather than exemplifying the 'end of the gathered organisation' (Handy, 1985), many call centres developed into large-scale sites of mass service delivery. In Scotland, almost three-quarters of the call centre workforce were employed in establishments of 250 or more employees (Taylor and Bain, 1997; 2001b) with over 1,000 employed at our case study site.

Exceptions to the decontextualised and ahistorical treatment of the call centre include those scholars who have identified organisational antecedents. Bain et al (2002) and Taylor and Bain (1999), particularly, locate developments within the Taylorism of clerical work. Batt and Moynihan (2002) argue that because there were always limitations in applying mass production principles to clerical work, call centres represent an 'exceptional case', precisely because mechanisation now spread into customer contact work. Undoubtedly, one of the wellsprings for the later diffusion of the call centre model was the telephone operator call centre, providing a model of efficiency as it evolved from the old switchboard. Similarly, in a sadly neglected article critiquing the knowledge and 'weightless' economy, Huws (1999) sees call centre agents as the Taylorised progeny of earlier office workers, whether bank tellers, ledger clerks, insurance salespeople, booking clerks and telephone operators toiling in 'white collar factories'.

Notwithstanding historical precedent and the advances in ICTs as preconditions, we must be mindful of the danger of technological determinism - which undermines the credibility of the grander visions of the network society (Castells, 2000 - in explaining why companies in the service sector became receptive to the adoption of the call centre. The emergence of this distinctive organisational form in the late-1980s is inexplicable without reference to the broader political and economic environment of neo-liberalism, de-regulation, restructuring and the financialisation of markets. In UK telecommunications the state-controlled monopoly, British Telecom, was opened to competition in 1984, indicative of a trend to de-regulation which accelerated in the 1990s, following the US's Telecommunications Act and EU liberalisation. Consequently, established incumbents such as BT were challenged by new entrants (Mercury/Cable and Wireless) (Fransman, 2002). In public utilities, the Gas Act (1986) and the Water Act (1989) saw the public flotation of public monopolies and the introduction of commercialisation and competitive pressures through cost centres and disaggregation (O'Connell Davidson, 1993).

In parallel, the 1986 Financial Services and Building Society Acts precipitated an accelerating and ongoing sectoral transformation, facilitating the 'inter-penetration of the hitherto discrete markets' (Marshall and Richardson, 1996: 1848) of banking, insurance and financial services. Competition rapidly intensified, producing instability and organisational churn, and extensive merger and acquisition activity, and inextricably intertwined with these developments was the application of sophisticated ICTs (Cressey and Scott, 1992). Data processing was increasingly taken out of branch facilities and concentrated in processing centres, and Girobank and the Bank of Scotland began to offer remote banking facilities but the watershed was the launching of branchless voice-based operations in banking and insurance, providing 24/7, 365 day services (BIFU, 1995). Together, the Midland Bank's First Direct (1989) and the Royal Bank of Scotland's Direct Line (1988) call centre operations revolutionised the financial services sector (see Bain and Taylor, 2002 for a full account; BIFU, 1995).

By the early to mid-1990s there was a rush to catch-up with these patently successful innovators and to capitalise on the demonstrable cost-cutting and profit-maximising opportunities offered by the call centre. As a senior manager of a Scottish bank admitted, 'Once First Direct had done it, the rest of us had to follow' (Taylor and Bain, 1999: 102). However, emulation took place not just in financial services, but throughout the economy as call centre operations became established in retailing, telecommunications, leisure and entertainment, and travel/holidays (IDS, 1999). For senior corporate management, such as that in British Gas considering ways of restructuring work in tightening competitive conditions, the finance and telecommunications sectors had produced a lean, efficient and profitable model of customer contact, whose attractions seemed irresistible. Integral to this appeal were novel forms of labour utilisation and control, associated with a distinctive labour process, where developments in the Taylorist tradition meshed with the performance emotional labour (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Bain et al, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor, S., 1998; Taylor et al, 2002).

The consequences of introducing call centres have been those usually associated with pioneering work systems. While those who first adopt such models gain competitive advantage through technical innovation and the enhanced creation and realisation of value, imitation by others can see this advantage eliminated as the benefits are shared by all. The only way to continue to compete is to use the, now established, work system more intensively. Thus, particularly within call centres of the 'mass production' type, internally and externally generated pressures have led to work intensification, the raising of the ubiquitous targets and the maximisation of call-handling times (Taylor et al, 2005). In this sense, the introduction of the call centre does not constitute an end point but part of a process that can not be abstracted from the dynamic of capitalist accumulation.

Methodology and Sources

The research setting was British Gas' Edinburgh location, Granton House, which had opened in 1969 to house the regional headquarters of the Scottish Gas Board. Privatisation in 1986 and subsequent radical changes to company structure and work

organisation that accompanied the arrival of the call centre in the mid-1990s, saw the number of employed double from around 700 to 1,400. Given the principal objectives of this paper, to understand the historical nature and impact of this transformation, particularly in terms of workers' experiences, two complementary data sets, which marry 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' are utilised.

Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with *all* workers with a start date prior to 1986, and who were continuously employed in the basic grade clerical occupations entitled Customer Service Representative (CSR) and Senior Customer Service Representative, up to the period of research (2003-4). Excluding many who had been promoted or who changed roles, the forty-three remaining subjects (25 males and 18 females) who fulfilled these criteria provide, from the perspective of active participants at the point of production, a unique testimony of continuity and discontinuity in the labour process. Understandably, given that some had as much as forty years service, interviews typically lasted five or six hours and were completed in two or three sessions. The research was consciously guided by oral history methods and techniques (Shopes, 2004), which have been rarely adopted in industrial sociology. While recognising difficulties associated with the use of this 'maddeningly imprecise' (Shopes, 2004: 1) approach, we nevertheless take as a source of strength, oral history's ability to reveal the *meanings* participants attach to events, phenomena and experiences. Further, it should be acknowledged that 'memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings' (Portelli, 1981: 101). A unique value of oral testimony lies in participant's attempts to make sense of their past and to give a form to their lives (Hubbard, 2000: 10; Truesdell, 2001: 1).

In order to minimise methodological problems such as bias and unreliability, oral historians have long advocated confirming the validity of testimony through verification by, and comparison with, alternative sources (Schrager, 1983: 87; Thompson, 2000: 273; Lummis, 2002: 279; Shopes, 2004: 6). Consequently, we draw upon extensive hard, or written, evidence; company documentation, government reports and union bulletins. This permits the establishment of a 'factual' timeline of critical organisational events and an 'official' record of changing work organisation at British Gas. However, these data sets should not be seen as discrete and stand alone. The research process involved iteration, as issues arising from the documentation stimulated additional questions and further reflection from interviewees while, simultaneously, insights generated by testimony prompted renewed interrogation of the 'objective' sources.

The Context - British Gas from State Monopoly to Privatisation

External economic and political factors determined the strategic re-direction of British Gas and, over time, generated pressures leading to the transformation of established forms of work organisation. While privatisation and the forced commercialisation of British Gas, by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, were the decisive environmental factors, it is important to make the general observation that no direct and immediate chain of causality lay between external shock and change in the organisation (and experience) of work. The process of how macro-level events impact upon the labour

process is complex and non-linear. Mindful of Hyman's (1987) admonition to appreciate the gap between strategy and outcome, there are key salient, mediating factors, including management specifying exactly how workplace change can be effected, the availability (or otherwise) of facilitating technologies and the ability to negotiate change through existing industrial relations machinery at both national and local levels.

Following government injunctions to British Gas to increase gas prices to reflect the true cost of extraction and supply (BGC Annual Report, 1988: 259) - moves intended to make the state monopoly attractive to potential investors - privatisation was enabled with the 1986 Gas Act. Consistent with government policy to shrink the public sector, and following British Telecom's (BT) privatisation (Vickers and Yarrow, 1988: 259; Saunders and Harris, 1994: 5; Foreman-Peck and Millward, 1994: 334; Farnham and Horton, 1994: 13; Colling and Ferner, 1995: 495), BGC was renamed British Gas plc and commenced trading as a private company.

However, it was not privatisation *per se* that provided the real impetus to internal re-organisation, but rather the consequences of ensuing regulation. The regime established by OFGAS followed the same approach as OFTEL had adopted with BT, and centred on price control. Regulation of gas prices was imposed in the form of RPI-x, where RPI was the Retail Price Index and 'x' an amount stipulated by OFGAS (Beesley, 1997: 393). The initial control, covering the period 1987 to 1992, set 'x' as 2 meaning gas prices must be reduced by 2 percent below the rate of inflation (BG plc Annual Report: 1987: 9). The control initially applied to the tariff segment of BG plc's market, including domestic customers, but later included the non-tariff, or contract, segment, which comprised 30 percent of BG plc's revenue (Beesley, 1997: 399; Helm, 2003).

It is difficult to overstate the enormous significance of these controls for work organisation, as BG plc was now compelled to focus on the need to minimise 'internal costs', and to maintain and improve its profitability. More specifically, the imperative to reduce labour costs became an obsession for a senior management, who believed that the foremost source of savings – and, later, expanded value - lay in what they regarded as the bloated, expensive and labour-intensive clerical operations. Additional external shocks in the late 1980s and early 1990s served merely to deepen these concerns. Principally, following a Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) enquiry in 1993, government decided upon a more fundamental restructuring of the gas industry. Many ministers and advisors had always been dissatisfied with the privatisation settlement that had retained the integrated nature of British Gas. Rather than pursuing de-merger the Government brought forward the timetable for introducing competition into the domestic market. The domestic tariff monopoly enjoyed by BG plc was to be phased out from 1996, and fully opened to competition by 1998, in line with Government plans for the electricity market. In order to appraise fully the extent and nature of change in the organisation of work it is necessary to consider clerical work, as it existed prior to privatisation and its subsequent transformation.

'Before the Flood' – Clerical Work Prior to the Call Centre

Clerical Processing

Here we consider clerical work in the three most important departments; 'Records and Billing', 'Metering' and 'Debt Control'. For the purposes of our study, these departments provide an excellent basis for historical contrast between back-office and call centre operations. All the functions of records and billing and debt, and most of those of metering, continued, and continue, to be performed in the new call centre environment, even though the process changed. Concomitantly, clerical workers continued to work within the same function, albeit now conducted through a tele-mediated process. In sum, our study can benefit from comparing discontinuities in work organisation and task execution within the similar broadly-defined business functions.

While work organisation was not homogeneous across Granton House and discrete paper-based clerical routines existed, and while differences existed between departments in terms of inter alia levels of required knowledge and time to complete tasks, it is possible to provide an archetypal depiction of the nature, experience and ethos of clerical work that prevailed during the 1970s, throughout the 1980s and even, to a lesser extent, into the early 1990s.

In the largest department, Records and Billing, 250 clerks were responsible for creating and maintaining accurate customer records and producing customer bills. Several distinct sub-processes existed, including meter installations, removals, exchanges and billing. The closely linked Metering department was responsible for managing meter reading collection and inputting data onto customer records. Clerks planned the daily allocation of work to meter readers, ensured that meters were read twice yearly and dealt with ad hoc requests such as final readings. Customer correspondence was also answered in this department. Debt Control managed the process on domestic accounts, and involved issuing letters, replying to correspondence received and answering customer phone calls. As warrants were required to gain entry to customer's property and disconnect supply in circumstances of unpaid debt, clerical work here was more regulated by company procedure than in other departments.

Until 1993 clerical work was stratified, with several distinct hierarchical grades in each department, and employees performing tasks commensurate with their seniority and/or level of knowledge. BGC typically recruited 'new starts' as juniors aged 15 to 17 and assigned them to routine activities such as sorting mail and counting job cards, and only when deemed 'responsible' were they moved to customer account work. This indefinable attribute of 'responsibility' was acquired by 'new starts' through observations of more experienced colleagues and attending formal training. It was, though, more a rite of passage based on the judgment of experienced workers, than the product of formal supervisory assessment. Clerical pay-scales reflected this calibrated hierarchy, with grades ranging from S1, for routine batching and counting roles, to S3 for Senior Clerks who had a 'team expert' role and perhaps some supervisory responsibility. The bulk of

clerical jobs were within the S2 pay-scale dealing with routine customer enquiries and planning work for operational staff. Clerks within each department were assigned to customers residing in one of six geographical regions[2].

Notwithstanding the patently standardised nature of many routines, clerks did enjoy some autonomy, and reported exercising a degree of control over task performance. One Records and Billing clerk, when asked whether she found her job satisfying, recalled.

> I created my own satisfaction…I think it was the fact that I could set my own goals, that was really everything. It was my own niche and it suited my mind as you were left more or less alone. Also, in some ways because I knew I was good at it and as time went on management would come and ask me things as well because they knew I was reliable. You had your own defined job role and you were in control of it, you felt as though you were treated as an individual. They let you have responsibility and you were judged by how you responded and what you got done (Tania O'Connor, CSA, aged 51).

Although set within defined parameters, clerks did have the opportunity to fully resolve queries, seeing a task through to completion, which was both a consequence of, and served to reinforce, this sense of control and, to use what the context of the period is an anachronistic HRM term, 'ownership'. Evidently, the acquisition of accumulated tacit and formal knowledge, and progression to expert status bestowed on clerks a sense of worth. This comment is, again, typical of many.

> In those days, if you were very knowledgeable about your job then you could get other staff asking you for help. You would also help or teach a new member of staff the relevant jobs. You did have the feeling that they were acknowledging that you knew your job. It gave me more confidence within myself and that's why I wanted to progress in the office. (Linda Munroe, Compliance Officer, aged 49).

Supervision and the Absence of Performance Management

With the exception of the correspondence processes, no formal performance measures existed prior to the call centre's arrival. Clerks completed their own worksheets and handed them to supervisors at day's end, but these were used to compile workflow figures rather than to manage individual performance. The variable volumes of clerical tasks meant that workloads were typically cleared on a daily basis. Clerks could, and would, vary their pace of work largely because each morning they were presented physically with the volume of work that had to be completed by closing time. Further, given sectional autonomy within each department, it was rare for clerks to be asked to complete the work of others.

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[2] The six areas were Edinburgh, Glasgow, West Scotland, Central Scotland, Perthshire/Fife and Aberdeen/ Dundee.

The supervisor played a minor role in managing individual clerk's workloads, acting rather as technical expert, often undertaking clerical duties that required authorisation of expenses, or the allocation of allowances to customer accounts. There was a tacit understanding that certain clerical duties took longer than others to complete, and supervisors were sensitive to the fact that completion levels would vary across their section, depending on the particular tasks being performed.

> I think they accepted the fact that you had your good days and your bad days because you could get work that was more difficult. It depended what area of work you were dealing with at the time. So people recognised that certain people would do one thing and certain people would do others (Tania O'Connor).

The testimonies reveal evidence of informal output norms. Many clerks reported they had become aware of what constituted a 'typical' day's clearance from the 'responsible' clerk who had initially trained them. The underlying purpose seemed to be to establish a workload that would occupy the clerk for an entire day, but was also achievable.

> [There wasn't really any monitoring of work or performance targets]. You did a worksheet but it was just basically so they could do the figures (clearances), what you got in, what you cleared etc. It was up to them to make sure that the work was done. If the work was cleared you could relax. The work always got done [because of] loyalty, basically, to the company. (Nellie Saunders, CSA, aged 51)

Unlike in Records and Billing, and Metering, the correspondence teams in Debt Control did have formal performance targets, by virtue of service standards deriving from the terms of British Gas' licence[3]. However, these did not lead to strict targets, but confirm the picture of informal expectations regarding output and sensitivity towards clerks.

> There was an amount expected from you each day. When you were sitting in with an experienced member of the team to learn the job, you would be made aware of what was expected [which] remained fairly constant throughout my time there. Your supervisor was aware of the type of enquiries you were dealing with. If you had been given fairly straightforward work to do then the work should be cleared quickly. He could check the register to find out how much work you had on your desk. If you were dealing with awkward enquiries then you were allowed more time to deal with them. (Linda Munroe, SCSA, aged 49)

That the role of the supervisor differed between departments was partly a reflection of diversity in clerical activity across Granton House, and partly the result of a comparative informality, sanctioned by senior management. This afforded the opportunity for supervisors to adopt, within the constraint of ensuring 'the work gets done', variable styles and approaches. In Metering, for example, supervisors were frequently regarded as remote but benign figures, as is evidenced by the response of this clerk when asked how much contact she had with her immediate supervisors.

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[3] 90 percent of correspondence received had to be cleared within five working days of receipt.

As little as possible (laughs). They were only really there if you had a problem or needed to book a holiday. You were in full control of your job and you had a sort of a routine where things were done on a certain day. You just got yourself through. A lot of it was preparation for the metering folios coming up, that kind of took up a lot of time. You got left alone to get on with it. (Sally Burnett, CSA, aged 52)

Work Culture

The work culture of Granton House was the product, and legacy, of a nationalised industry, having developed in a period of corporatism. It also reflected its institutionalised industrial relations framework, in which trade unionism exercised considerable influence. Without romanticising what was indisputably the performance of routinised white-collar work, since a premium was placed nevertheless on clerical knowledge and professional service, it would be more apt to characterise the labour process as 'responsible autonomy' rather than 'direct control'. And, workers demonstrably enjoyed a level of discretion within their quotidian work routines, being relatively free to visit the canteen, take comfort breaks and converse with colleagues. With no tied breaks these informal flexibilities had become established as custom and practise.

I think as long as you did your work they didn't mind you going to the canteen for whatever, or going for your coffee. It certainly wasn't restricted as in, you know, timed at the toilet or somebody watching. You were free to walk about. (Margaret Norris, CSR, aged 47)

Symptomatic of the relatively relaxed atmosphere were attitudes to working time. For two decades (1976-95), through flexi-time, clerks managed their working hours providing that at month end they had met their contractual obligations. Further, there was a tacit understanding that clerks could agree collectively their working hours to ensure sufficient staffing levels throughout the day.

In sum, in terms of the extent of discretion clerks enjoyed within a long-established and relatively unchanging work organisation, the pattern of informal knowledge acquisition, the lightness of supervisory touch, the deep sense of clerical professionalism and expertise, and the absence of detailed and strict controls over time and output, the contrast with the later call centre regime could not be starker.

'The Old Order is Rapidly Fading': the Emergence of the Call Centre

In the aftermath of privatisation, two key developments, in 1993 and 1997 respectively, intensified BG plc senior management's preoccupation with cost – particularly labour cost – reduction. Firstly, in response to the MMC Report, BG plc restructured in order to manage its supply and transmission divisions as separate entities, splitting into five

businesses[4] within the domestic market. From inception the new organisations had much flatter hierarchies and utilised generic job descriptions to increase labour flexibility (BG Plc Annual Report 1993: 2) and to erode the old graded job hierarchies, which were perceived to be inappropriate for the new environment. Central to driving the competitive culture and business model (BG Plc Annual Report, 1995: 10) was a radical departure in customer servicing, by which major investment was made in the telephony infrastructure to facilitate a new national billing system, Tariff Gas Billing (TGB), which would replace the localised operations and realise economies of scale. Within three years (1995-98) the customer service departments of BGT were transformed from geographically-based clerical processing centres into fully-blown call centres with a UK-wide remit. Just as widespread redundancies accompanied the contemporaneous penetration of the call centre model throughout the financial services sector, so too did BG plc's restructuring programme involve significant workforce reduction.

A billing clerk recalled the occasion when she was informed of the proposed introduction of the call centre.

> I guess it was in '94 or '95 when I was on TGB training and my pals were all leaving on voluntary redundancy (laughs). They just kept talking about all these things that were going to happen, telling you that you would get a call and deal with it right to the end and used these big words such as empowerment – these were all buzz words at that time. They didn't really use the words 'call centre' though, just that you would be on the phones for so many hours a day. I mean they said that we would be on the phones in the morning and then come off in the afternoon to do correspondence. Turned out kinda different eh? (Margaret Norris, CSA, aged 47)

The first experience of call centre environment provided a genuine shock. In spring 1995, a general bureau initially serving Scottish customers was established to facilitate the downsizing of Records and Billing and Metering. The Newcastle office was then closed and its work migrated to Edinburgh, doubling the bureau's size. Difficulties with the new billing system, excessive call volumes and the inexperience of call operators resulted in a precipitous decline in customer service quality. Between late 1995 and the spring 1996 it was common for between 150 and 250 calls to be stacked waiting to be answered, leading to widespread customer abuse of call handlers, particularly from those in the north-east of England, who resented the closure of their previously local service. The glaring contrast between this 'new world' of call centre work and the 'old world' of clerical processing provided an unwelcome foretaste of how their experience of work was to be permanently changed.

In 1997, the Performance Enhancement Programme (PEP) benchmarked operating costs against those of BGT's principal competitors, the Regional Electricity Companies (RECs). PEP concluded that the cost to BGT of servicing a customer was £22.10, as compared to the RECs' £16.30 (PEP presentation, 1998). In seeking to reduce this

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[4] Public Gas Supply (PGS), Contract Trading, Transportation and Storage, Servicing and Installation and Retail.

differential BGT concluded that £104 million savings in operating costs had to be achieved through applying the test of 'best value' to every customer service operation. The ensuing 'Organise to Win' (OTW) project completely re-organised BGT's eight area customer service offices, which had hitherto performed the full range of services for its regional customers. As discussed above, the distance shrinking ICTs, integral to the call centre, facilitate economies of scale, overheads reduction and functional specialisation (Miozzo and Ramirez, 2003; Marshall and Richardson, 1996; Taylor and Bain, 1999). In this case, OTW segmented the eight sites into four dedicated call centres (Edinburgh, Leeds, Croydon and Southampton), three billing offices (Manchester, Solihull and Barnet) and one national sales office (Cardiff). OTW was to deliver workforce reduction of 927 over three years and net revenue savings of £15.382 million over three years (OTW Business Case, 1997).

Yet, the call centre was not simply the embodiment of the cost efficient logic (Korczynski, 2002), but was perceived as a site of strategic importance in terms of adding value. BG plc's new owners, Centrica, viewed the customer database as its greatest asset, seeking to increase revenue through selling a range of services. Telescoping a longer evolution that occurred in financial service call centres (Bain and Taylor, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2001a: 53), British Gas call centres increasingly embraced selling and marketing activities, and agents were expected to hit sales targets as well as perform quality customer service (Centrica, 1998).

The wholesale migration of processes between sites, which took place between 1997 and 1999, intensified and deskilled work for the vast majority of BGT employees. The existing ACD equipment was replaced with BT's Featurenet 5000 system, creating a virtual call centre, where calls were allocated to free agents in any of the four centres. Streaming specific call types to appropriately trained agents increased productivity maximised on-call and reduced 'idle time'. Tariff Gas Billing (TGB), built upon a Windows platform, featured extensive online help facilities. The discretion clerks had enjoyed in task performance was suddenly and permanently foreclosed, as tacit knowledge was codified into a series of pre-programmed tasks, which guided the clerk, step-by-step through menus, screens and dialogues boxes. In essence, TGB was an application of the 'Babbage principle' (Braverman, 1974: 195) and represented one of the most significant of several moves towards the degradation of clerical work, which by 1999 included call scripting. With the introduction of TGB and the customer-facing 'Front End', 'knowledge' and professionalism were abruptly replaced by speed and efficiency as the most highly valued worker attributes at British Gas.

Call recording technology, introduced in 1999, taped all incoming calls, logging the date, time, duration and identity of call handler. Although the espoused reason was to enable 'verbal contracts' with customers, removing the need for paper forms when setting up direct debits, performance improvement was the underlying objective. Previously random call monitoring had been undertaken in 'real time', with a supervisor sitting next to the agent. Although experienced as intrusive agents did know that the frequency of monitoring was restricted by supervisor availability and that no record of their interaction with the customer remained. Now, by contrast, agents knew that every word spoken, and

every decision taken, left an 'imprint' that could later be used for monitoring and even disciplinary purposes. Affording the opportunity to appraise remotely and retrospectively the performance of workers, the introduction of call recording should be seen as contributing significantly to the redrawing of the frontier of control in management's favour.

Experiencing Change

Respondents were adamant that these new systems both restricted their freedom to decide on appropriate solutions to customer enquiries, and eliminated the organisation's reliance upon their knowledge.

> I felt previously you had to understand the job and have a good working knowledge of it actually to do the work. I don't think there is that requirement to have this knowledge nowadays. There is a lot more help facilities available via your computer, like on TGB there is what is called front end call scripting. (Linda Munroe, Compliance Officer, aged 49)

Since, in scarcely three years, the call centre had become the dominant form of work, clerks were faced with the choice of transferring to it or leaving the organisation. However, despite significant misgivings and apprehension, the age, length of service, lack of formal qualifications and personal circumstances of most of the survivors of the voluntary redundancy programme, meant that exit was simply not a feasible alternative. In this sense, the transition to call centre work was less a choice than a compulsion. The universal refrain of this cohort of Granton House employees was that that the arrival of call centre profoundly changed the quality of their work lives, for the worse. The following response to the question asking how she felt about the move into the call centre is typical and succinct.

> My lovely quiet life with no hassle whatsoever had suddenly changed. Then you were getting the odd barney with people and your lovely job that you had liked with no hassle just disappeared. (Nora Castle, CSA, aged 43)

'In the Wake of the Flood': After the Call Centre

Working Time, Intensification and the End of the 'Relaxed' Atmosphere

It is notable how the more optimistic accounts of the call centre make scant, or no, mention of how this organisational innovation transforms the use of working time, with profound consequences for workers (e.g. Frenkel et al, 1999). Inextricably bound up with the centralisation of function and the achievement of economies of scale are both the *extension* of working hours and an *intensificatio*n of working effort, as the gaps between tasks during which the body or mind rests – the 'porosity' of the working day (Green, 2001) – are filled. In these regimes of lean service delivery, what matters most is the

close matching of staffing levels to the actual, or anticipated, volumes of customer demand. The emergence of the call centre in BGT was dependent on the destruction of traditional clerical work patterns. From 1995, through the 'Planned Flexible Working' collective agreement, management had the authority to calibrate working time to meet operational requirements, to extend weekday hours to 8pm and to introduce Saturday working. The net effect was to corrode the hitherto, and much reported, relaxed atmosphere.

Continuous call delivery and extensive monitoring of agent availability and output necessarily restricted call-handlers' ability to leave their desks. On pain of disciplinary action for failure to do so, agents now had to enter codes at their turrets, indicating when they were 'not ready' to take calls or when they left their workstation. Comfort breaks were now restricted to 4% of working time, fifteen minutes in a shift of 7½ hours. These constraints appear as contemporary expressions of what E.P. Thompson once referred to as 'time thrift' in his account of employers' imposition of temporal discipline in the early years of industrial capitalism. These restrictions were universally detested.

> You are talking to an adult, a mother of two kids, two grown up kids and people talk to you like a child. I'm a responsible person. So what if I have been away for twenty minutes, I don't do it every day. Again this is where they should understand their staff. (Lesley Jones, CSA, aged 48)

Supervision, Performance Management and Lack of Control

Clerks recalled the frenzied atmosphere as performance management became something of a fixation for supervisors. The imposition of monitoring and quantitative targets contributed further to the degradation of work, stripping clerks of what was left of their sense of individuality.

> [The call centre made the environment] totally impersonalised. You are not a person anymore; you are actually a badge number. When I started here you had your own individuality, you had your own job to do and you were left to carry on with it. You had responsibility. You were a person. (Maureen Taylor, CSA, aged 56)

Workers, able to make the contrast with the previous work regime, were acutely aware of the loss of control.

> You don't have control. Your job is to work on the phones as soon as you get in. You have to be logged on to the phone to take the first call, by the time your shift starts, and as you close the last call another one appears in your ear. It's never ending and you just have to sit there and react to these voices. Pretty depressing really. (Steven King, CSA, aged, 46)

Mechanisation had produced a simultaneous degradation of work and quality of customer service which offended the experienced cohort of clerks. Socialised as little a decade earlier into an entirely different regime, some now strove to humanise their working lives by perpetuating older work practices. Confronted, still, with diverse and complex queries,

agents responded by keeping 'pending' files open, working on accounts through meal breaks, and utilising personal contacts in other offices in attempts to deliver personalised resolution that had characterised the old ethos. For management who now idealised simplified agent-customer interaction, through tight scripting and automated systems, these behaviours were regarded as archaic and unnecessary.

The call centre had dramatically changed the role of the supervisor, essentially from being supportive to being directive.

> Well, they are not expected to know your job anymore so they can't really help you with problems. They are also a lot less accessible, I mean although I never really needed to talk to my Supervisors in the past I knew I could if I had a problem. Now if you went up to them if they have not already asked to speak to you then you have to make an appointment. All I can see of them is that they are there to ensure you meet your targets. They are here to do FARE (the time management system) to tell you if you can or cannot have a holiday and to chase you around the building if you are late logging onto the phone. (Lesley Jones, CSA, aged 48)

Monitoring and correcting individual performance arguably constituted the most significant change in the role of supervisors. Individual agent's output was now measured against their contribution to aggregate team and centre-wide targets, unlike previously, where collective output had simply been recorded.

> Now you could actually pinpoint to a second what everybody was doing. One situation I remember was with one of the team who was very thorough at their job…OK they weren't getting their hundred calls a day, and were only maybe getting seventy, but it was consistent. But the manager wasn't very happy about that and was demanding to see an increase in volume. Before, there wasn't any emphasis on your call handling, only that you answered the phone when it rang. They didn't have grade of service (targets), you couldn't monitor how many calls were actually waiting to come through, the phone rang, you answered it. You didn't know if there was ten people waiting to get through, whereas now you do. (Steve Bailey, SCSA, aged 49)

Evidence from a separate research project during 2000-1 confirms the new realities of work at Granton House (Taylor et al, 2003). Three-quarters of call-handler survey respondents reported being 'quite' or 'very pressurised' as a result of work on a normal day. The greatest cause was 'having to meet targets', identified by 74% of agents as contributing either 'a great deal' or 'to some extent' to feeling pressurised. Additional distinctive, and closely related, aspects of the new call centre labour process – lack of time, between calls, repetitiveness, call monitoring and having to keep to scripts – were cited as significant sources of pressure. The consequences of such tightly scripted, intensively monitored and quantitatively driven work routines was that many workers were self-evidently close to exhaustion and emotional withdrawal (Deery et al, 2002; Taylor et al, 2003: 442-4).

Conclusion

While the preceding period had witnessed minor, incremental adjustment, the years between 1995 and 1998 signified a watershed in both the organisation of work and workers' experiences. Reorganisation was abrupt and far-reaching, and amounted to a fundamental discontinuity in clerical processing and customer servicing. More change occurred in this concentrated burst than had taken place in the previous quarter century. Pivotal to the transformation was the introduction of a sophisticated ACD system, which facilitated radically new job design and social organisation of work. By the early 1990s, when BG plc management were forced to confront the central problematic of labour cost reduction, there were abundant examples from financial services and telecommunications of the benefits that the application of the ICTs, integral to the lean production call centre model, would bring. By now, it was clear that the call centre's inherent technological properties could facilitate the following; the possibilities of remote servicing, economies of scale, an augmented division of labour, the unprecedented measurement of output in white-collar work, close monitoring and surveillance of workers, radical departures in the utilisation of work time. However, this is not a tale of technological determinism. In public utilities, as in finance and telecommunications, the impetus to adoption lay as much in regulatory change in the political and economic environment, and in capitalist competitive pressures operating at macro, sectoral and inter-firm level, as in the technological availability of an alternative customer servicing paradigm. However, mindful of replacing one error, technological determinism and an internalised focus on workplace control, with another, mechanically imputing workplace change from market change, environmental and competitive forces are seen to *shape* rather than *determine* work and employment relations (Hyman, 1987; Taylor et al, 2005). It did take almost a decade from 1986, for the fuller consequences of privatisation to work themselves through, and to produce the sharp discontinuity in work organisation that the call centre instigated.

Our retrospective, longitudinal approach, based on both company documentation and oral testimony, affords a rare opportunity to situate change in work organisation and worker experience in historical perspective. To return to the paper's point of departure, such an approach throws into sharp relief the limitations of studies which consciously or unconsciously eschew the importance of context, and rely solely upon static snap shots. Although aware of the dangers of generalising from one case study, the evidence from British Gas does call into question Holman's (2002) sweeping generalisation that call centre work is not very different from other forms of clerical work in terms of worker experiences. The contrast between the nature and rhythms of work prior to, and following, the advent of the call centre at British Gas, is striking and remarkable. To reiterate, this is not to idealise earlier work, for as many studies have demonstrated the pre-call centre white-collar work could be highly routinised and Taylorised (Glenn and Feldberg, 1977; Crompton and Reid, 1982; Crompton and Jones, 1984; Baldry et al, 1998).

However, clerical workers at British Gas for decades patently enjoyed a degree of discretion in task performance, exercised some control over working time and the pace of

work, and were able to leverage a sense of professionalism and satisfaction from acting as experts and providing good customer service. In harsh contrast, the call centre abruptly delivered targets, monitoring, timed toilet breaks, call queues, repetitiveness, the removal of informal controls over output and time and directive supervision. In a parody of Walton (1985) longer serving workers experienced a transition from commitment to control, rather than its opposite. Acutely aware of work degradation, they might have been less conscious that, directly and indirectly, their experiences were causally linked to new patterns of accumulation characterised by changes in technology, firm structure, the organisation of work and political economy. From this perspective the call centre can be seen as an emblematic product of a neo-liberalist age, in which labour has been intensified and the rate of exploitation increased. For some, in this brave new world, the prospect was bleak.

> At the end of the day although you had slaved away, working hard, you had felt that everything you had done, you know, had been worth it. And suddenly it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It's no longer there. Your job is nothing. (Lesley Jones, CSA, aged 48)

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