

Book Review by V. Hunt¹

***Developments in the Call Centre Industry – Analysis, Changes and Challenges* by John Burgess and Julia Connell (eds), Routledge, Oxon, 2006**

The last fifteen years have seen a proliferation of call centres throughout the world. Companies, seeking to compete, have had to provide a new form of customer service via the telephone. In some sectors this is required on a ‘24/7’ basis. Call centres have attracted considerable academic interest as they are now a major source of employment, particularly for women who make up 70% of the workforce in the Australasia, UK and US call centres. In the main, the research findings have been negative about the Tayloristic labour process used to provide customer service and questions have been raised about whether this form of employment is a positive development in the world of work.

Developments in the Call Centre Industry – Analysis, changes and challenges, makes an important contribution to the relatively new call centre literature, which has only evolved since 1990. Therefore, it is understandable that the editors, John Burgess and Connell, signal at the beginning of the book that it is still a ‘work in progress’ and draw attention to the fact that this industry is rapidly changing and growing and thus issues will continue to emerge as the industry reaches maturity. In particular, they note how call centre technology, organisational change to facilitate the adoption of call centres and its impact on employment have all led to call centre service work being restructured, relocated and reorganised.

While this books charts the growth of the call centre industry, more importantly, it helps to establish the contextual influence on call centre research, an area which has to date been largely missing from the discourse. The book achieves this by including research from a number of different countries, and in particular from countries such as Korea, Greece and Sweden which have not been previously featured in the reported international research. The authors also include a variety of research approaches and employ both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data on call centre work. Adopting this broad methodological approach has been beneficial in that the results have thrown up a number of additional and useful insights about call centre work and its development.

The range of research findings is also a key strength of this book for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates both positive and negative aspects of call centre workplaces as well as the different human resource practices found in these workplaces. The findings reported in the book mirror the extant literature in that similar studies do not entirely paint a pessimistic picture of all call centre organisations and indicate that these types of working environments may not always be a negative experience for workers.

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Second, the range of work discussed in the book highlights the context-driven nature of call centre research. Underpinning this discussion is the essential question (which to date has not been addressed) – namely: “How do different political and socio-cultural regimes impact on the workplace?” By investigating the employment arrangements used in the call centres of the different countries, the book goes further than most others in answering this question.

Third, the wide range of studies and approaches reported in the book precludes an analysis that adopts a singular and narrow theoretical framework, thus providing a useful contribution to theory. That is, some of the studies draw on Foucault and labour process theory; but there is no central theme to the analysis of the research or linking to a single body of theory. The absence of a central theme and core theory are not necessarily detrimental as call centres are heterogeneous, microcosms of workplaces and are more likely to reflect national employment regimes and the political, social and economic environment in which they operate. In other words, context matters and advocating one over-riding theory to explain all call centre research would be problematic.

The book opens with a chapter on ‘off-shoring’ by Srivastava and Theodore who establish a meta perspective of call centre work within the global labour market. They discuss the key drivers of call centre location and the importance of call centre work as a source of employment in the knowledge intensive economy. Chapter 3, by Taylor and Bain, continues the off-shoring discussion by looking at the issues of UK companies relocating to India. Taylor and Bain have worked in this field for over 10 years and are widely acknowledged as the leading experts on call centre research. It was with great sadness to learn that Peter Bain has recently died. His research on call centres and his contributions and insights on the topic will be sorely missed.

Chapters 4 and 5 are based on surveys in call centres in Germany (Weinkopf) and Korea (Lee and Young Kang). Against a background review of studies in Germany since the end of the 1990’s, Weinkopf analyses data collected in a survey of 650 call centre employees across 14 call centres. Findings on job quality, design, employee satisfaction, HRM and IR in this survey confirm a broad variety of features and HRM practices in use in German call centres. Weinkopf demonstrates that the ‘sweatshop’ or ‘dark satanic mills’ image of call centre work does not prevail and that there is a relatively high level of overall employee satisfaction (84.6 per cent of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs). However, she notes that there is still room for improvement as call centres appear to be marginally attached to the German labour market regulations and institutional frameworks. In particular, call centres which are not part of a larger company as in-house operations, tend not to have any collective bargaining arrangements in place.

The research on Korea shows that call centre work is a very new form employment with 60 percent of call centres operating since 2000. Employment relations appears to be externalised with over a third of call centres being outsourced and those operating in-house call centres, employ in the main, non-regular employees. The authors explain that in Korea, call centres use hybrid work organisation where intense real-time monitoring is used to control staff who, are also given a degree of work discretion. They note, that unlike the international research in Europe, US and Australia, there

has been little social capital development with limited public resources and few networks created in this sector.

In Chapter 6 Bob Russell discusses the skills required to perform what he calls 'infoservice' work in Australian call centres and how the problem of matching the expectations of the job with the characteristics of the job is leading to the high turnover rates in the industry. His findings demonstrate that the work in three out of four of the centre studies is to some degree more sophisticated than the semi-skilled assembly line work normally associated with call centres and yet is still some distance away from the type of work and skills required to operate in the 'knowledge economy'. His research highlights the huge variations in skill requirements within the call centre industry and advocates the need to match recruitment of staff with the complexity of the work to be done.

In Chapter 7, Susan Durbin accounts for the barriers which prevent women from developing careers in four call centre case studies located in two UK financial institutions call centres. She questions whether women are held back because of their "soft" skills and, because call centres are still patriarchal institutions that "keep women in their place". Her findings are mixed, however. In one of the case studies, female staff progress into senior management roles while in the other case study, they do not. Call centre work was the only employment most of the female respondents could find and half of all them had experienced 'perceived' or 'real' barriers to career development. These included; a lack of management training, no role models in management jobs, and male stereotyping of women skills. However, despite their obvious lack of career development, half the respondents interviewed said they were very happy with their career progress to date.

The remaining chapters 8 to 11 present both the trade union and employer perspectives. In Chapter 8, Rainnie and Drummond discuss community involvement in the development of a union in a re-located call centre situated in a green-field, mono-industrial site in the Latrobe Valley. This account gives the organiser's perspective of mobilising a union and provides practical insights about community involvement in the union forming process. It highlights the importance of informal and social networking to develop a collective culture and adds to a growing debate on community unionism. The research has wider significance as call centres relocate from city to small towns in search of lower costs. Traditional unions can learn from the success of social capital development that takes account of the community in this workplace organisation.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 cover managerial practices and work organisation in call centres, commencing with Houlihan's ethnographic work. Based on her full participation in a call centre in between 1997 and 1999, Houlihan's study is important, not only because of its method of data collection, but also because it focuses on the experience of the managers, a perspective frequently missing in the discourse on call centres. Although the findings are mixed, Houlihan demonstrates that the same rules and systems apply to managers who may also resist some of the call centre daily working practices.

Chapters 10 and 11 illustrate convincingly that political, social and economic environment are important factors when analysing call centres. In Chapter 10, Koskina tests the level of Tayloristic practises in Greek call centres. She finds that the culture and social norms of Greece are so entrenched that none of the call centres in her study used the call centre technology to drive the labour process but instead relied on high levels of trust and autonomy. This provides evidence that national institutions and culture play an important role in how call centres are organised. In the final chapter, Lindgren and Sederblad investigate workers' autonomy in Swedish call centres. The authors note that the negative aspects of call centre work are offset by compensation, lots of breaks, amenities, private space and in one case low call quotas.

This book is well organised and deals with a number of employment issues across different countries. It provides a range of research studies to provide practical insights about outsourcing, HR call centre practices, union organisation, skills development and career opportunities for female call centre staff. Particularly valuable is the different approaches use to analyse the call centre literature. The book will stimulate new questions and research from call centre practitioners, academics and students alike.