

Safe and Healthy Call Centres

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Notes on the presentation:
Stress and Call Centre work
Dr. David Holman
University of Sheffield

Research specific to stress in Call Centres is not commonplace, and yet Call Centres are often singled out for media attention; "The Sweat Shops of the 20th century". Evidence of high attrition of call centre employees is cited in support of this claim, but employee migration depends on more than just workplace conditions. Attrition is high in areas where there are alternative call centres, suggesting one possibility that staff move from one centre to another.

Measurement of stress in this review was based on a two-dimensional model based on arousal and pleasure at work. High arousal and high pleasure would be associated with enthusiasm, pleasure without arousal would be associated with contentment, low arousal/low pleasure with depression and high arousal/low pleasure with anxiety. The reported aim of the research work was to find out what causes stress in Call Centres and whether or not call centres are more stressful places of work than others.

The relationship of diagnosable ill health with these descriptions of anxiety and depression was not investigated and the accuracy of any correlation between anxiety and high arousal/low pleasure and what might be recognised as a clinical feature was not addressed, ditto, depression.

Essentially arousal/pleasure matrix allows some general research tools to be used, but interpretation into terms suited to assessment of risk of personal injury, remains unclear. They have plausible links with job satisfaction and attitudes to work but these factors were not addressed in the review.

Research work based on the arousal/pleasure model is able to identify personal and workplace factors that are commonly associated with the more negative states of being. Causal direction is not easily assessed by the work referred to here, but some of the variables tested are time dependent and therefore suggest a causal direction.

Job design

Protective factors (associated with contentment/enthusiasm) include high job control, increased variety, skill utilisation. Factors associated with "anxiety" and "depression" include work demands (but complexity of demands is not a problem if accompanied by high job control). The suggestion is that high and complex demands tend to be adverse.

There was no report of the kinds of people for whom these factors were operative. It may be that there are people who prefer little or no control, who get satisfaction from meeting difficult challenges.

Performance Monitoring

Obsessive performance monitoring (PM) of activity and outcomes is often cited in the press as stressful and a ubiquitous feature of call centre work. Research is more equivocal and suggests that individual interpretation of performance monitoring is significant.

PM which is perceived to be directed at personal development was found to be associated with enthusiasm and contentment, PM directed at punishment tended to be viewed negatively. Positive regard for PM was improved if the rules were well understood and the facts that were being recorded were actually consistent with those rules. Some commentators reported that staff demanded performance monitoring as a means of justifying their own pay rises.

Highly intense PM which is intrusive and cannot be switched off was associated with "anxiety" and "depression". Intensity of PM was the most clear-cut variable. Call centre managers reported that successful and positive monitoring had moved away from key stroke rates and call durations which tended to be technically interesting but largely ignored, and on to repeated calls, sales made, calls transferred... i.e. the outcome actually being paid for by the call centre customer.

Social Support

Supportive managers and team leaders were found to be positive attributes, but the value of teamwork per se depended on congruence with business and personal objectives.

Human Resources Practices

Adequate training, honest performance appraisal and a fair system of pay and promotion were viewed as protective factors.

The Call as a source of stress?

Emotional dissonance in call centres is prevalent at a rate of 80%. That is, agents tended to behave differently from how they felt, most of the time. Emotional dissonance was associated with the negative aspects of the arousal/pleasure matrix. In our view, this aspect of work could be found to apply equally well in many customer facing job tasks. Some agents may take satisfaction for being able to perform well under such circumstances, but on the whole emotional dissonance was seen to be a negative feature of work.

More objectively measured features of the call work itself were: a high number of short calls and, negative interactions with customers.

Which these factors were the most predictive?

“Anxiety” tends to be associated with intensity of performance monitoring and an unclear purpose.

“Depression” tends to be associated with low utilisation of skills and intense PM.

“Job satisfaction” tends to be associated with high skill utilisation, support from team leaders, clear purposes of PM and job control.

Comparisons with other sectors/industry?

It is unusual for research results on stress to be directly compared. Most often, the tools used in two studies are different or have been modified to meet local needs. Fortunately in this case Dr. Holman has used the same tools in a number of industries.

He finds that employees in well-run and well designed call centres have similar levels of well-being (as measured and the arousal/pleasure matrix) as employees in manufacturing and office work.

Definition of a well run call centre

Employees experience well-being when:

- Monitoring is not intense
- Monitoring is based on an effective system of performance feedback and when it is part of a development system
- Their skills are well used and the focus is on skills development
- They work in a supportive environment
- They have control over the method and timing of their work
- They are engaged in a variety of activities beyond their primary task

Comment

Measurement of the above factors is essentially qualitative. The degree to which each may contribute to the sense of well being is not known and the interrelation between sense of well being and diagnosable injury is unclear. The challenge to Call Centre managers is to assess and record their reasonable view of these factors, as part of their stress risk assessment. The record should explain why each factor is as it is, whether it can/should be reasonably improved and if not, why not.

In general, a balanced stress risk assessment should be made in the round, and not focus on each work item in isolation or at just one specific time. Most employees probably do not perceive their work and workplaces as a series of individual factors, but as an integrated whole.