



Are Call Centers Sweatshops?

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Abstract: A call center is a division that specializes in dealing with customers. Early studies on call centers regarded them as strategically important areas that, despite some negative aspects, were acknowledged to possess a certain level of expertise and to have a high degree of autonomy as interfaces for customers. However, this view gradually changed, with call centers coming to be seen as workplaces typified by harsh working conditions and isolated from the other divisions of the company. Therefore, research in recent years has entirely focused on these negative aspects, while ignoring the positive aspects.

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Introduction

A call center is a division that specializes in dealing with customers and can potentially play an important role as a contact point for

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gathering customer information in a company. Early research on call centers therefore regarded them as performing work that required a certain level of expertise. Certainly, these studies indicated that there were negative aspects, but the general view was that call centers had a high degree of autonomy and were strategically important to their companies by being interfaces for customers.

However, research focusing on these positive aspects gradually decreased as an ever-growing number of studies focused instead on the negative aspects of call centers, such as employee turnover and stress.

This paper considers how the content of discussion changed in prior research on call centers and suggests possibilities for future research.

Early Studies on Call-Center Management

Call centers have been a topic of research since the 1990s. Earlier studies focused on both the negative and positive aspects of call centers.

For example, Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski, and Shire (1998) indicated that call center employees can be considered semiprofessional and empowered workers. These workers need to use information technology to provide customized responses to customers' concerns. In addition, call center workers were portrayed as potentially being key strategic resources because they served as interfaces for customers and were ambassadors in using market information for companies.

Batt (2000) pointed out that a call center was an effective customer interface and was strategically important to companies as a base for acquiring loyal customers.

Certainly, these studies did not ignore the negative aspects of call centers, but they still took note of the positive aspects, unlike more

recent studies, which emphasized only the negative aspects.

For example, Russell's (2008) review article focusing on call centers notes the focus on call centers as research subjects as shown below.

Much as automobile factories or textile mills were treated as both objects of curiosity and as metaphors for their age, call centres have garnered attention both in their own right as a new means of organizing particular types of work and as an important venue from which to undertake the study of other elements of management practice (Russell, 2008, p. 1).

In addition, Russell asserted that, in an information economy, call centers are treated as important points of customer contact.

Russell (2008) discussed call-center management from the perspectives of managerial control, information economy, human-resource management, gender, and globalization. Within this discussion, the work of call centers is positioned as semi-skilled labor; although it cannot be considered knowledge work, it requires more advanced skills than those of blue-collar operators.

Recent Studies on Call-Center Management

This section considers the types of research conducted on call centers since Russell (2008).

A survey by the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Organization Science*, *Human Relations*, and *Organization Studies* (all major journals in the fields of general management and organizational studies) shows that since 2009, 17 studies have been conducted on call centers. Five studies appeared in the *Academy of Management Journal*, one in the *Journal of Management*, nine in *Human Relations*, and two in *Organization Studies*. There were no articles on this topic in *Administrative Science Quarterly* or *Organization Science*.

In addition, 14 of these studies stated explicit reasons for surveying call centers.

The topics covered in these 14 papers can be generally classified into customer contact, human resources, administration, work meaningfulness, and technology, as shown in Table 1.

1) Studies on customer contact dealt with issues arising from the fact that call-center work entails communicating with customers. Specifically, the studies include customer mistreatment (Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011), impression management (Raghuram, 2013), start-of-work and work events (Rothbard & Wilk, 2011), and mis-selling (Brannan, 2017).

2) Studies on human resources focused on the difficulties of personnel management at call-center operations. For example,

Table 1. Call center research from 2009 to 2017

Topics	Articles
Customer contact	Baranik, Wang, Gong, and Shi (2017), Brannan (2017), Raghuram (2013), Rothbard and Wilk (2011), Wang, Liao, Zhan, and Shi (2011)
Human resources	Batt and Colvin (2011), Kwon and van Jaarsveld (2013), Scholarios and Taylor (2011)
Administration	Fleming and Sturdy (2011), Sewell, Barker, and Nyberg (2012), Vough, Bindl, and Parker (2017)
Work meaningfulness	Brannan, Parsons, and Priola (2015), Shantz and Booth (2014)
Technology	Nyberg (2009)

studies focused on turnover, (Batt & Colvin, 2011), part-time employment (Kwon & van Jaarsveld, 2013), and gender issues (Scholarios & Taylor, 2011).

3) Studies on administration include those that discuss normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), optimal performance measurement (Sewell, Barker, & Nyberg, 2012), and the potential for proactive work behaviors (Vough, Bindl, & Parker, 2017).

4) Studies on work meaningfulness include one dealing with occupational stigma (Shantz & Booth, 2014) and another on employee branding (Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2015).

5) Finally, with respect to technology, Nyberg (2009) dealt with the relationship between people and technology in call centers.

These studies choose call centers as their research subjects because of two main reasons:

- a) There is no need to distinguish between the work and workplaces of call centers and the work and workplaces of other divisions.
- b) Call centers have attributes that were appropriate for the research topic.

In case of a), there is no specific reason for choosing call centers. There would have been no issue with other types of work; call centers just happened to be apropos. Studies to which this reasoning applies include Geller and Bamberger (2009), Grant (2012), and Lam, Huang, and Chan (2015). Of these, Geller and Bamberger (2009) did not explain their reasons for studying call centers. The other two studies did not have a particular reason for studying call centers because they also looked at factories, government organizations, and other organizations besides call centers.

Conversely, in case of b), these studies are more direct in stating their reasons for studying call centers. For example, Batt and Colvin (2011), who studied the problem of turnover, stated the following as

their reason:

Call centers are an appropriate context for this study because high rates of turnover are a major source of high costs and poor service quality for them (Batt & Colvin, 2011, p. 696).

In other words, call centers are appropriate research subjects because they are workplaces where turnover issues occur easily.

Further, Wang, Liao, Zhan, and Shi (2011), who focused on customer mistreatment, stated the following:

Specifically, call-center employees are in frequent contact with customers, giving them plenty of opportunities to experience customer mistreatment (Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011, p. 318).

In this case as well, call centers by their nature are contact points with customers. This makes it easy for customer misconduct to occur, so that call centers are appropriate subjects for studying this issue.

As can be seen from these examples, call centers were chosen for these studies because of these characteristics, and as shown by the use of the term “electronic sweatshop” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), the focus is solely on their negative aspects.

Discussion and Conclusion

As we have seen, research on call centers in recent years has focused on their negative characteristics, which have been mentioned since the time call centers first became research subjects, although call centers were initially regarded as playing a critical role as customer interfaces.

Nevertheless, call centers came to be treated differently as research subjects due to their actual position within their organizations. In many organizations, call centers do not collaborate much with other divisions, and this results in few opportunities to leverage the

information obtained by call centers from customers. Call centers are therefore thought of as divisions that merely do the simple work of taking in customer feedback, and such work is often outsourced. Thus, studies tend to emphasize the negative aspects of call centers.

Certainly, when dealing with actual organizational problems, one cannot ignore the issues faced by call centers. However, instead of looking only at the negative aspects, research can also focus on a call center's role as a customer interface,¹ which was more typical in the past.

The position of call centers is particularly clear when viewed on an organizational level rather than a personal level. For example, because call centers are interfaces for customers, they receive such information inflows as service reputation and problems. This information can be used in not only improving products and services but also new product development. It follows that, because it is essential to have communication between call centers and other divisions, companies can consider how to effectively use information from call centers when they are considering about their organizational structure or communication network.

Call centers are also the contact points through which companies can know customers' impressions about the organizations. When customers' impressions start to deteriorate, call centers can feel a sense of urgency sooner. Because responding too quickly to changes in the external environment can negatively impact an organization,² this also lets companies think about how best to manage organizational reform in the context of this urgency. Call centers

¹ Sales and marketing divisions are another important customer interface. For research on sales and marketing divisions, see Inamizu, Sato, and Ikuine (2017), Kosuge (2015), Sato (2015), Yamashiro (2017, 2018), among others.

² Sato (2017) deals with organizations' strategic consistency.

should not be viewed as sweatshops but rather as having a more important role such as that discussed in prior research.

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