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Slowing Down or Seizing Up?: Social Work Practice in a Call Centre Environment

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Abstract: The Labour government modernisation agenda has embraced and promoted the use of information and communications technology (ICT) via 'electronic' or 'e'-government. The target set for e-government for all services to be e-accessible by 2005 put pressure on local authorities for their services to be 'open all hours' and encouraged them to utilise call centre technology to achieve this. Call (or 'contact') centres are now in widespread use by local authorities in the UK to deliver a diverse range of services including social services. Despite this, as Bain et al. (2005) note, there has been a dearth of research into the use of such technology in the public sector; with the extensive studies that have been undertaken being almost exclusively confined to the commercial sector. This omission is even more pronounced in relation to social work settings. The paper aims to shed some light on the social care call centre as a relatively new form. It is based on an in-depth case study of a social services contact centre in the North East of England where qualified social workers work alongside unqualified 'First Contact Officers'. It documents the experience of social workers in relation to their motivation for working in this type of environment, their coping strategies, perceptions of stress and the potential impact of the call centre on social work practice and skill levels.

Keywords: Modernisation, Call Centres, Social Work

Introduction

THE PAPER INITIALLY locates the development of contact centres in the public sector as part of the modernisation agenda of the New Labour government in the UK. It argues that the use of call centre technology is consistent with New Public Management (NPM) and its introduction of private sector methodology into public sector settings. It also highlights the fact that the use of contact centres has been actively encouraged as part of e-government. The paper briefly examines the existing research relating to call or contact centres in the commercial and public sectors and the extent to which they are currently employed. It then examines ICT in relation to social work practice generally before moving on to its use in contact centres and considering the preliminary findings of an in-depth case study into one such centre. Finally it considers social work in this context in relation to the (thus far) universally held view of call centre work as being stressful and damaging to its employees. It argues that the work undertaken by social services contact centre staff is distinct from that carried out in other call centre settings (as are their 'customers') and might have a different experience to other workers employed in this way. The paper aims, therefore, to shed further light on an area of work that Bain et al. observed has thus far 'barely registered on the academic radar' (2005: 4): professional work in public sector contact centres.

Context

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has been promoted by the New Labour government since its election in 1997 as a way of 'transforming' public services (Cabinet Office, 2005). This has been fundamental to its modernisation agenda, with 'electronic' or 'e-government' being the most visible manifestation of its willingness to embrace technology-based approaches for 'e-citizens' (Richter et al., 2005), putting them 'at the heart' of 'e-democracy' (ODPM, 2002: 2). The use of call or 'contact' centres is central to this strategy. The use of ICT in this way had previously been confined to the private and commercial sector with the almost universal use of call centres for service industries being an exemplar of this. Such centres have also been portrayed as one way of increasing community participation and citizenship, which, with consumerism, are central themes of New Public Management (NPM). Thus NPM and e-government can be seen as 'mutually reinforcing' (Marston, 2006: 85).

The use of call centre technology in the private sector has been extensively researched (see, for example, Frenkel et al. 1998, Korczynski et al. 2000, Deery S. et al. 2002, Deery and Kinnie 2002, Korczynski 2004) but until now there has been limited research into their use in public sector settings despite call centres now being an established organisational form in both private and public arenas (Fisher, 2004, Collin-Jacques, 2004, Collin-Jacques and Smith,



2005). It is estimated that by 2008 approximately half a million people will be employed in this type of environment and the number of call centres are expected to rise from 5,980 (in 2004) to 7,230 over the same period with the 'public and health care sectors' expected to record the highest growth (cited in Management-Issues, 2004). A more recent development has been the use of call centres by local authorities in the UK, where they are now extensively employed in delivering local government social services. In this specific context, there has been no research thus far.

According to Castells we now live in a 'network society' which the 'information technology revolution' has made possible. This is a new epoch, an 'interval characterised by the transformation of our "material culture" by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies' (Castells, 1996: 28). As a result of this technology the network society is 'able to link up, or de-link, the entire realm of human activity' (Castells, 1997: 148). Given the omnipresence of ICT, its eventual association with social services was perhaps inevitable and, as we have seen, it is entirely consistent with (and encouraged by) the UK government's modernisation agenda and NPM in public sector services. In parallel, consumerism purports to empower citizens as 'customers'. Key aspects of the employment of technology, particularly ICT, are that it is viewed as a commitment to consumerism, the continuing modernisation of management, the deployment of e-government and evidence of local authorities being willing to embrace 'leading edge' systems of delivery for their social services. This use of call centre technology for social services has been actively encouraged from the centre as part of e-government and by the target set for all government services to be 'e-accessible' by the end of 2005 (it was originally 2008). The increased pressure on local authorities for their services to be 'open all hours' made it almost inevitable that call centre technology would have to be utilised. Actively encouraged by the New Labour government, the use of 'customer contact centres'¹ has been identified as an area in need of 'particular attention' (Cabinet Office, 2005: 12) and local authorities have been urged to utilise them since 1999 (Department of Health, 1999).

The deployment of contact centres in local government is then a relatively recent phenomenon, pioneered by Liverpool City Council in 2000 in partnership with British Telecom (BT Global Services, 2003). These centres are now firmly established in social services, as elsewhere in the public sector.

Given the ubiquity of call centres in the private sector and their increasing deployment and diversification of function in the public sector their use is now largely taken for granted and for many people they are part of everyday experience. This is consistent with e-government and its aim to produce 'e-citizens' who welcome and engage with new technology.

Call Centres in the Private Sector

The rapid expansion of call centres as an organisational form in the last two decades has seen a concomitant rise in the amount of research conducted and it is now one of the most widely researched areas of work (Glucksmann, 2004). The research has often drawn damning conclusions about this form of labour organisation and call centres have attracted a great deal of criticism as the '*bête noire*' of organisational types with a universal view of them as inherently oppressive and stressful (see for example Taylor and Bain, 1999, Bain et al., 2002) and damaging to the well-being of their employees (Holman, 2004).

Their use has been promoted as a way of increasing output and efficiency via 'standardisation of the customer interface' (van den Broek, 2003: 236). Others recognise that call centres also have to address 'customer orientation' (Korczynski, 2002) and accommodate what might appear to be competing elements in this regard; the delivery of cost effective outcomes and achieving customer satisfaction. Bain et al (2005) sum this up as the 'unavoidable managerial endeavour to reconcile the simultaneous priorities of quality and quantity' (2005: 2). In addition, others recognise an additional dynamic, the need to promote worker empowerment and overall job satisfaction (Frenkel et al., 1998) albeit combined with increased managerial control (Mulholland, 2002). The existing research has been almost entirely conducted in the private sector (Bain et al., 2005:3) and has tended to focus on the negative aspects of this form of labour as virtual factories with the potential for the increased managerial control and surveillance of employees (Glucksmann, 2004: 797). This research has, in the main, focused on business outputs rather than qualitative outcomes and customer issue resolution.

The research from the commercial sector has promoted a view of call centres as another form of production line (Batt and Moynihan, 2002) as 'electronic sweatshops' (Garson, 1998, cited in Deery and Kinnie, 2004) or 'assembly lines in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999), where the 'integration of telephone and computer technologies which defines the call centre

¹ The term 'contact centre' tends to be employed in the public sector rather than 'call centre' and has been used in local government since 1996 (Employers' Organisation and Improvement Development Agency (2001). This could be seen as an attempt to disassociate public sector call centres from the unfavourable experiences people generally have of private sector call centres. For the sake of clarity this term will be used when discussing the public sector context.

has led to new developments in the Taylorisation of white collar work' (Taylor and Bain, 1999: 115). This analysis was developed further by Bain et al. (2002), citing managerial preoccupation with targets and the need to measure quantitative (or 'hard') aspects of performance, as well as those relating to the 'soft' qualitative areas such as interaction with customers. This, they suggest, 'is the key factor in understanding the growing evidence of both fundamental managerial dilemmas and high levels of employee dissatisfaction' (Bain et al., 2002: 172). My research offers a challenge to this view of endemic employee dissatisfaction with their lot in such settings. Before turning to my research, the limited research into call/contact centres in the public sector will be briefly examined.

Contact Centres in the Public Sector

As we have seen NPM introduced private sector working practices into the public sector along with consumerism and 'quasi-markets' (Harris, 2003). The use of contact centres in this context has been represented as a response to rational consumer-led demands for services that are more accessible, flexible and diverse (Cabinet Office, 1999, Clarke et al., 2000, Cabinet Office, 2005, Asgarkhani, 2005). The limited research on the use of contact centres in the public sector has examined the British civil service (Fisher, 2004), police control rooms (Bain et al., 2005) and 'telenursing' in Canada and England (Collin-Jacques, 2004, Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005). However, there is a striking lack of research in relation to *social* as opposed to health services, with the only published research having been undertaken in an Australian context (van den Broek, 2003). The studies of call centres in health care settings, such as 'NHS Direct' (Collin-Jacques, 2004, Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005), offer the closest comparison to a social care contact centre, given the high degree of discretion, the increased emphasis on customer interaction (Deery et al., 2004) and the composition of the work force. Like nurses, social workers possess a strong occupational identity and would be expected to be able 'to shape the nature of their call centre work' (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005: 6). Collin-Jacques' (2004) study aimed to explore call centres 'through the lens' of a specific occupation (nursing) and address the lack of research into call centres that employ a 'qualified workforce with more status and authority than a standardised clerical occupation' (Collin-Jacques, 2004: 154). Collin-Jacques and Smith (2005) also highlight the lack of a 'comparative vehicle' in current call/contact centre literature which might consider the influence of 'wider contextual factors such as national institutions, the role of technology suppliers and varying

historical conditions' (2005: 9) on this type of work. The use of telenursing is seen as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, traditional face-to-face nursing and in this respect they argue it is different from other occupations, where it is suggested that 'services are lost to the creation of a new army of industrialized white collar call centre workers' (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005: 6). This, however, suggests a misplaced belief that nursing is unique in not being amenable to certain aspects of the work being replicated by or mediated through ICT.

Van den Broek's (2003) study of 'Childline' in Australia shows that professionalism does not necessarily offer any protection against technological rationalism. Van den Broek's study accepts the call centre as an organisational form that is born out of the logics of rationalisation and specialisation of customer service. Its findings contrast with Collin-Jacques' (2004) and Collin-Jacques' and Smith's (2005) characterisation of a strong occupational identity and distinct professional skills offering some form of protection against high intensity and low skilled work. Despite their professional qualification and a 'strong occupational and professional identity' the caseworkers in this context were subjected to very similar pressures and call centre labour processes more often associated with "low skill" call centres (van den Broek, 2003: 236). This is seen as a direct challenge to Batt and Moynihan's typology of call centre models as 'low skill/low discretion or high skill/ high discretion'. Van den Broek explains that the term 'social worker' is used in Australia to describe a variety of social services workers but the 'caseworkers' she studied were all qualified, with the majority of them holding a degree in social work. The study is pessimistic about the use of call centre technology in the professional context, with the social workers complaining that 'it's all about quantity not quality' and, that they were being 'deskilled'. The perception of being deskilled 'met with varying degrees of resignation and resistance [with the] most obvious and identifiable response [being] that of turnover and low morale' (2003: 248). The issue of deskilling was a concern for the social workers in my study also (see below) and may reflect a fear that the use of increasingly sophisticated ICT and 'expert' systems will ultimately undermine professional judgement and autonomy. This can only be tested by further research in these specialised fields. Van den Broek concludes that there 'was little to inspire confidence' among the staff of there being a balance struck between management/business structures and professionalism (2003: 251).

Information and Communications Technology and Social Work

Social work like all other areas of life has been susceptible to the influence of ICT and its permeation of all areas of social work practice clearly signals social work's incorporation into the 'information society' (Steyaert and Gould, 1999: 165). The current government's assumption that public services can be transformed by the use of ICT and by being e-accessible now extends to areas of professional practice that had once seemed immune to this technological mediation. Direct face-to-face contact with professionals (once seen as indispensable) is now being replaced by or supplemented with ICT in social work, as in health care (via 'NHS Direct'). Furthermore this is represented as a desirable state of affairs that gives the 'customers' of social work the same degree of flexibility that they enjoy in other sectors in terms of access and choice.

NPM and its affinity with technological solutions, has progressively affected social work practice according to Davies and Leonard (2004), as it has produced 'increasing bureaucratic control, together with a reduction in resources [which] furnish the ideological and material spaces within which social workers are expected to practice...[and] the role of the social worker who engages with her client in a supportive, nurturing encounter appears, at least officially, to be dying' (2004: x). They attribute this morbidity to a 'technocratic managerialism and the claims to scientific and objective knowledge that accompany it'. The future of social work they argue is therefore unavoidably

'tied to 'mastering' scientific knowledge and new technical skills, the latest and most glamorous forms of expertise that provide the grounds on which, in a world of uncertainty and occupational competition, social work can stake its claim to professional competence.' (Davies and Leonard, 2004: *ibid*)

The embedding of contact centres in social care practice is the epitome of what might be seen as e-managerialism. The need to be conversant with and competent in the use of ICT is now seen as essential for social workers. This is demonstrated in the recently introduced requirement for student social workers to evidence this competence in order to qualify for practice.

The term 'contact centre' is generally employed in the public sector rather than 'call centre' and has been used in UK local government since 1996. Suomi and Tähkäpää (2003), writing from a Finnish perspective, see the contact centre as a specific form but

one that has generally lacked a clarity of definition. They suggest that a contact centre differs from a call centre in the degree to which different technological means are integrated in relation to customer contacts. It is used to 'manage and integrate the conversation flow with [health care] customers aiming at perfect customer service and organizational efficiency [by] communication through electronic means most usually the telephone and internet at least partly substituting the former with the later' (*sic*) (Suomi and Tähkäpää, 2003: 2). Although their study was in a health care setting the integration of technology that they see as a signifier of contact centres was a marked feature of the social care contact centre in my study. Here, telephone, fax, email, SMS messaging and 'minicom'² were all being used to communicate with callers.

The Case Study

My study focuses on a social services contact centre that relies on a high degree of interaction between the caller and the employee who takes the call. My paper aims to offer some insight into this relatively new, but increasingly widespread, form. Using data gathered over an eight month period from an in-depth case study of one such contact centre in the North East of England it explores the motivation of social workers choosing to work in this type of setting, their perceptions of occupational stress in relation to their previous experience and the implications for their practice. It also briefly examines their relationship with the contact centre technology.

The contact centre in my study serves a large county. It operates via a single, county-wide telephone number for callers and coordinates all agencies involved in the delivery of social (and to some extent health) care services. It serves a large urban and rural population of around 450,000 and employs 24 staff of whom 19 are full-time and 5 part-time. The stated aim of the contact centre is to 'resolve, re-direct or refer' enquiries. This involves resolving callers' problems at first contact (e.g. by offering advice or information), re-directing callers to the appropriate source of help for their problems or by referring callers to social work teams, health professionals or other agencies (in other words formally engaging with those teams and beginning an assessment process). The contact centre staff are a mix of unqualified 'first contact officers' (FCOs) and qualified social workers with varying degrees of post-qualifying experience, which ranges from two years to thirty-three years. At the beginning of the research, seven of these staff were qualified social workers, with two being employed as assistant managers. This changed mid-way through the study, with one assist-

² This is an aid for the hearing impaired which allows text communication via the telephone.

ant manager leaving. The second assistant manager post was not retained and was replaced by two part-time social workers. (See appendix one for staff breakdown).

The contact centre receives on average 350 telephone calls a day and this is supplemented by other technology such as email, fax and mobile phone text messages (See appendix two for breakdown of contacts). It utilises standard call centre technology such as automatic call distribution (ACD) and 'calls waiting' display boards. The technology employed, including the customer resource management (CRM) system, is largely bespoke to the county, apart from telephony and voice recording systems. The data was obtained over a period of eight months using different means including non-participant observation, spontaneous informal discussion following calls and taped semi-structured interviews with all of the qualified social workers except one (an assistant manager). In addition, all of the qualified social workers were observed in practice. This was carried out either 'remotely' (listening to only one side of the conversation), or by listening to the whole conversation with the caller via a headset. Throughout the eight-month period extensive contemporaneous field notes were recorded.

The Contact Centre and Social Work

The image of the call centre as pressurised and stressful (see above) is rarely challenged (a notable exception being Kinnie et al, 2000). The stress and pressure that Bain et al. (2005) report in police control rooms are seen as typical of the 'mass and lean production model' of call centre operation and they cite the fact that operators are often dealing with 'life and death' matters as one of the reasons for this. In the social care contact centre this was also the case (see below) but the stress levels as reported by both FCOs and social workers were remarkably low; indeed one social worker (below) complained about the lack of 'intensity' of the work in comparison with the field social work he had been engaged in for almost twenty years. This appeared to be at odds with Bain et al.'s (2005) conclusion that the public sector is equally as stressful and demanding as the 'production line' models of the private sector. They argue that the problem of high staff turnover is consistent with call centres in the commercial sector and this is indeed the case in the contact centre in my study, although the reasons for this do not seem to be the reasons usually given by respondents in other studies.

Levels of Stress Experienced in the Contact Centre

Bain et al. (2005) infer that it is the type of calls dealt with in the police control rooms that generate the

high levels of stress they found. My study does not offer support for this thesis, however, even though the contact centre I researched routinely deals with 'life and death' matters, such as child protection, domestic violence, severe mental health problems and attempted suicide. The unqualified FCOs all spoke of their 'regulars' with mental health problems for example, who rang at night and who had to be handled in a particularly sensitive manner and all of the FCOs were able to relate at least one experience or contact that they saw as disturbing or stressful. This was in marked contrast to their social work colleagues who all saw their practice in a contact centre as far less stressful than that which they had previously experienced in fieldwork settings. The main source of stress for social workers and FCOs alike seemed to relate to the controls, limitations or failures of the technology, rather than the interpersonal nature of the work. In this respect, unlike most others, it bears comparison with private sector call centres.

Callaghan and Thompson (2001) describe the direct control of employee tasks via the technology employed such as ACD but also the subtler controls its use can bring: '[Management]...are conscious of the power of the call queue in maximising production pace-the workers are almost seen as a part of the machine-of a technology which continuously "fires" calls at them.' (2001: 20-21). For one of the FCOs this characterisation was an accurate one as even when he was on 'wrap-up' (time out of the 'loop' when written recording etc. can be done) he was still very conscious of the noise in the headset :

telling you that there are calls waiting and when everybody is answering fast and furiously and there is a lot of noise because everybody is on the phones, it just feels like the pressure is being racked up, because the technology is telling you "get a move on there are more calls to answer", rather than " relax and just concentrate on the one you are doing" (FCO5)

The 'power of the call queue' was as evident in this environment as in other call centre settings. The issue of direct control of employees and their work presupposes a degree of technological refinement and reliability that was not apparent, however.

Mason et al (2002) are not alone in highlighting the fallibility and lack of sophistication of technology in this setting rather than seeing it as a tool which allows the 'perfect control' and surveillance that some have envisaged (Fernie and Metcalf, 1999). As in my study, Mason et al 'found that considerable energies were expended in making the technology work rather than circumnavigating its supposed negative effects' (2002: 144). It is perhaps significant that the frustration was caused by technology rather

than by callers. Why would social workers want to work in such an environment?

The reasons for social workers electing to work in this environment varied but are probably accurately summed up in one comment from a social worker who had come out of retirement to work in the contact centre:

maybe the people who this job attracts have got different reason for coming here, I am preparing for retirement again, [names social worker] wants to work part-time, other people I would suspect are care worn,[and] have come in for a rest. (SW3)

Or perhaps more succinctly, 'It's a nice job and some might even describe it as a cushy job' (SW4).

The social workers either saw their employment in the contact centre as a way of taking a break from stress in order to re-evaluate their career path (four) or to take them up to retirement (one) or as a way to earn supplementary income in retirement (one). The response below (in reply to why had they applied for the job) was typical in this respect.

... I just found [the] Children in Need [team] very stressful and I just felt like I needed time away and I just needed to.... not to have a big case load and [be] writing reports and you know, arranging meetings and that sort of thing, and this seemed like a good place to do that, .. just to clear my head of everything, [to decide] where am I going to go and what am I going to do? (SW6)

A more scathing summary of the difference encountered was offered by a relatively new addition to the social work staff:

I have been sat on my backside for 8 weeks. I've come from what I would term 100 miles an hour working environments really, from the first minute you walk to the door to the minute you walk out of the door and beyond, constantly thinking on the go, adrenaline pumping, using your initiative, seeking resolutions as quickly as possible or dealing with situations to the best of your ability hoping that things won't develop too much to a crisis point over a period of time, that being when you're asleep. I feel now that I've come in to a work environment where there just isn't that same level of intensity that you function at. I've gone from 100 mph to the zones of 30 mph, 40 and 50mph and occasionally 60mph but I don't think I'll reach 70. (SW4)

The image this social worker conjures up is that of a comfortable cruise in contrast with the overworked hectic schedule that most social workers would recognise (see, for example, Postle 2002). Only one social worker (who had the most years of experience in the centre) did not share the view that it was an entirely stress-free form of social work. He was acutely aware that the quality of the information that the contact centre passed on was vital to ensure a safe or satisfactory outcome and that brought its own kind of stress. He did, however, acknowledge the fact that it was a very different type of stress to that encountered in field social work:

Stresses are different,..... and if you look at [the contact centre] as a funnel we don't have any control of what is poured into that funnel so we could be sat here for a week and not get a call, which doesn't happen, and then on days that are heavy we can get fifteen child protection referrals, or Children in Need referrals (SW3)

This social worker also points out that the fact that all calls are initially 'filtered' by an FCO and only transferred to a social worker when the issue is serious. This he says is evidenced by the attitude of the managers of the team that receives the referral:

..the ones that are serious where a child has been injured and the injury has been identified, we have to ring the team manager[and] there is actually a pressure in ringing the team manager because as soon as you say this is (name of SW) at [names contact centre], we have been met with 'oh my God', because they know that by us ringing them they have got something that is probably going to have to be strategied³ so you know when you get the call from [names the contact centre] you know the shit is about to hit the fan (SW3)

He also empathised with social workers in the field, recognising that the quality of information passed on could make their job easier or more difficult:

[so] the pressures are very real because you want to get as much information as you possibly can to make the job of your colleague in the field easier, so that when they go out they are not going out with an empty tool bag they are going out with one that is relatively full and they know what they are looking for, because some of the people going out have got less than five years experience where as I have got thirty (SW3)

³ Subject to a multi-agency child protection meeting to agree the strategy for dealing with the case

The social workers interviewed all recognised that there were life-style benefits to be gained from this working environment. This included the social worker above (SW4), who, while appearing to miss the adrenaline rush of his previous work, recognises that the contact centre had helped him to restore his work-life balance.

When you go out the door that's it. Your mind's not thinking "oh god what have I got to do tomorrow?" I'm going to have to sit up tonight and write myself a to-do list and take work home. I haven't got that. (SW4)

This sentiment was echoed by another social worker who also appeared to mourn for 'traditional' social work:

To be truthful I felt really de-skilled by doing this job coming from writing reports, going to court, going out assessing people and I do miss the client contact. I didn't realize I would miss it as much but the benefits I've got in my own personal life outweigh all that (SW5)

An Alternative View of Call Centre Work

The contact centre social workers' accounts suggest a very different working experience to that which has been previously documented. The almost universal view of the call/contact centre as being a highly pressurised and damaging work environment has not only been challenged but in this context is perceived as almost therapeutic. This view was clearly held by one of the assistant managers:

I've said this to [the manager], especially for people in child care teams who are often talking about burn out, would this not be an ideal place for someone to come for a year – 18 months to recharge their batteries, get away from case loads and then go back into it? (SW2)

It has to be recognised, however, that this may say more about the pace of change and current pressures in field social work, an area which continues to attract widespread attention (see, for example, Harris, 1998, Lymberly, 2001, Harris, 2003, Postle, 2002). This is mirrored in one social worker's comment:

I think the pressures of my previous job were becoming very overwhelming [with] staff shortages, high caseloads and wanting to have the balance back in my life [and] my family which is the most important thing. It's sad to be leaving because I left a very good team but I thought I would move on for a better quality of life. (SW5)

One area that did appear to show similarities to other studies in the commercial sector was staff turnover, which was relatively high. Here also there was a contrast, however, as this did not seem to relate to 'burn-out' or surveillance, which are the most commonly cited reasons in other studies (Deery et al., 2002, Taylor et al., 2003). For social workers, the central concern appears to be the loss of traditional social work roles and the issue of de-skilling. There seems to be a general agreement that this type of work has a limited 'shelf-life' (see, for example, Callaghan and Thompson, 2001, van den Broek, 2003). When asked whether she thought that this was the case in the context of the contact centre, an assistant manager (who was about to leave having worked there for two and a half years) said:

I think there probably is and I think there should be and I think for social workers there definitely should be, you know, I think I've done longer than I should have done really. (SW2)

In the commercial sector it seems that the length of time that people work in this environment also reflects the degree to which they are viewed as being productive. Callaghan and Thompson (2001) say this roughly equates to two years and they quote a manager cited in an Australian study by Wallace (1999) to illustrate this: 'I don't want an agent working for me longer than eighteen months. By that time they are burnt out and not effective' (2001: 33). For social workers the potential for deskilling was a more important consideration, however. For one, this made her decide not to stay as long as she had originally planned:

Well I actually thought I would probably look at staying here a couple of years, but I don't think I will be [due to] a variety of things, I think it is quite de skilling for the social workers (SW 6)

Most respondents, as in the commercial sector, saw themselves as working in the contact centre for no more than two years and of 24 people originally employed when the centre opened two and a half years ago, only one social worker (although she is employed as an assistant manager) and two FCOs of the original team remained at the time of the study.

Conclusions

The paper aimed to offer some insight into the use of contact centres in relation to social services in the UK, an area of work that, whilst continuing to grow, has not been subject to specific research. It has shown that the use of ICT and contact centres in the public sector is consistent with NPM and has been

actively promoted by the New Labour government as part of e-government and as emblematic of modernisation. The paper has argued that the use of ICT in social work is symptomatic of technological e-managerialism and the need for the profession to be associated with modern technology in order to demonstrate its competence. The use of contact centres is typical of this. It has used the findings of the study to question assumptions made about this type of work in existing research and argued that the social care contact centre is different to other call centres, and that social work in this context is a distinct form, which may have long-term implications for social work as a profession.

The contact centre study identifies some features in common with the commercial sector, including the application of technology. The use of automatic call diversion and telephony systems are obvious examples, as is the relatively high staff turnover rate. This seems to offer some support to the 'shelf-life' characterisation of this form of work, at least for professionals. It also supports Bain et al.'s view that Urwin's (2000) depiction of a local authority's in-house call centre was overly optimistic in believing

that the 'negative features associated with private sector call centre work' had somehow been 'designed out' (cited in Bain et al., 2005: 5). However the 'high-discretion, lightly monitored, professional services paradigm' that Bain et al. (ibid: 3) are unable to locate in the police control room may be present in the social care contact centre for social workers.

There are very real differences however. The environment is not necessarily stressful and pressurised, rather, for social workers, the fear of becoming de-skilled by a lack of face-to-face contact with service users and limited training opportunities are the most fundamental issues at stake. This is why they are electing to leave what appears to be a relatively stress-free environment compared with other forms of social work. The assumption that the models and analyses applied to the private sector can be used to understand organisational behaviours in a public sector setting seem flawed. The study gives some support to Glucksmann's (2004) plea to approach call and contact centre research from a different perspective, as well as highlighting the need for more research into this rapidly expanding area of social services.

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Appendix One

Breakdown of Staff and Patterns of Work

1 x Manager

1 x Assistant Manager (SW PO4 grade) (NB originally two people in this post)

3 x Shift working full-time SW's

2 x Part-time SW's

8 x Shift working full-time First Contact Officers

4 x Day working full-time First Contact Officers

3 x Part-time First Contact Officers

2 x Team Clerks

Appendix Two

Breakdown of contact centre call and referral activity for One day (15th March 2006)

Advice or information given	42
No further action	18
Fostering or adoption	2
Equipment collection	1
External redirection	24
'Home Independence' shop	1
Wheelchair or walking aids	1
Referral taken and allocated to team	99
Call forwarded to the 'Emergency Duty Team'	4
Internal redirection	54
Request for a named member of staff	42
Notes added to information data base	31
Case notes or email sent	31
TOTAL	407

About the Author

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I teach on the social work programme and specialise in mental health, community care and the organisational context of social work. I am a qualified social worker and worked previously as a manager and social work practitioner in the learning disability and mental health fields. Prior to this I qualified and worked as a nurse specialising in learning disability and challenging behaviour. My main area of research is around the use of ICT in social work with a particular focus on the use of call centre technology.

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