

2012 Call Center Action Month Bulletin

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CCAM 2012 Summary

Performance management from the bottom-up



UNI Call Centre
Action Month 2012

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FROM THE BOTTOM-UP

As October came to an end, UNI and its affiliates concluded the biggest Call Center Action Month (CCAM) ever. Over 30 unions from 23 countries participated in CCAM, which this year focused on the impact of performance management on employee health and safety. Thanks to all the participating unions the event was a huge success, and reported on in written and online press, radio and TV in countries like Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, France and Argentina.

The call center industry has exploded worldwide over the past two decades, as advances in information and communication technologies have reduced the costs of providing service and sales from remote locations. Over the same period, call centers have acquired a bad reputation as places to work.

In the typical call center, work is repetitive and highly pressurized. Employees are required to follow a scripted dialogue and have little control over their schedules and break times. Managers monitor individual employees remotely, and feed employees continuous information on how their call handling times and sales compare to their co-workers. If employees fail to meet targets, they are often threatened with dismissals or a pay cut.

These types of performance management methods have contributed to high levels of employee stress, anxiety and burnout in call centers. In fact, the work of a call center agent is seen as one of the ten most stressful jobs in the global economy.

It is against this backdrop that UNI chose to focus its 2012 CCAM theme on performance management and employee health and safety. On October 1, UNI released the report "Making the right call – redesigning call centers from the bottom up".



The report shows that call center management practices where employees have to follow scripts, where they are subjected to intense monitoring and where jobs are narrowly designed, cause both physical and psychological injuries to the employees. On the other hand, if the employees are given more control over their work, both their well-being and the company's performance can improve. Read more about the report on page 4.

UNI's affiliates carried out a range of activities during the month to actively engage and educate call center workers about the link between performance management and employee health and well-being. The activities ranged from round-table discussions to sports events to info tables and leafleting outside call centers. Read more about some of the CCAM activities on page 2.

In addition to releasing the "Making the right call" report, UNI also developed a number of materials for CCAM 2012. We created an on-line survey directed at call center employees, with questions on performance management and their own well-being. You can find some of the conclusions from the survey on page 4. UNI also released a second report during CCAM, titled "Call Center Legislation and Regulation in Selected Countries". This report studied the legislative and regulatory frameworks for call centers in a number of countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

UNI also blogged about CCAM on its dedicated CCAM blog www.callcentreaction.org. All the materials that UNI produced were translated into English, French, Spanish and German.

Affiliate activities

Ireland



In Ireland, UNI's ICTS affiliate CWU developed and re-launched an important document "Survival Guide to Performance Management" to complement the CCAM materials. The union then visited call centers and engaged directly with its members on the ground to discuss the Survival Guide and encourage the employees to complete UNI's on-line survey.

The CWU also partnered with UNI's finance affiliate IBOA – The Finance Union, to organize their main CCAM

event: a Call Centre Forum for call centre activists on the theme of performance management. The event was held on a Saturday specifically to accommodate as many members as possible. Workers from call centres as diverse as eircom, First Source, ATOS, AIB, Ulster Bank and the Bank of Ireland participated in the day.

It became apparent during the Call Centre Forum that while workers may experience variations of management styles, there was a clear theme across all centres of the use of performance management tools. In some cases, these tools can cause difficulties for workers including unreachable targets, poorly understood processes and the stress and health issues that result.

The participants also discussed best practices in performance management. The key conclusion of this topic was that fairness was central to a positive performance management structure. Agreed and achievable targets, clear procedures and adequate time to perform required duties were all identified as crucial features.

The Call Centre Forum was a great success. Participants expressed their genuine enjoyment of the day and appreciated the opportunity to meet other workers who faced the same challenges in their daily work. The CWU and IBOA will continue to engage with their members to address the challenges faced by call centre workers and will work toward changing the call centre landscape.

The CWU Call Centre Charter was also launched at this year's event and is available on the CWU's dedicated call centre website at www.callcentreunion.ie

Belgium

In Belgium, three of UNI's affiliates carried out joint and separate activities during CCAM: CNE-CSC, LBC-NVK and setca/bbtk. The activities were very well received, and made news on TV, radio and in the press. Prior to engaging directly with workers all over Belgium, the unions issued the joint statement "NO to stress, YES to high-quality jobs", in which they highlighted the importance of a balance between quality and quantity on the one hand and well-being and performance on the other.

Between 22 and 26 October, the unions organized actions at numerous call centres around a central theme: the fight against poor working conditions and stress. A recent study by the Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue confirmed that call centre employees face higher levels of stress than the average Belgian worker. Around 75,000 people are employed in call centres in Belgium.



The unions were adamant that improved social dialogue is needed to secure decent working conditions, and that regulation needs to be enacted in the sector. With this in mind they sought to educate different actors on a series of solutions that can be easily implemented in the fight against stress and poor working conditions, including providing real opportunities for training, taking into account the employees' preferences in the planning, and developing productive career plans.



During the week of action the three unions met with call centre employees across the country and distributed leaflets, discussed and raised awareness of the issue, and handed out flexible pens to symbolize the expected flexibility of workers. The unions also released 160 balloons to symbolize the dismissal of 160 call centre employees who were recently laid off at Tech Team/Stefanini.

Watch the TV clip from Télébruxelles here (in French): <http://bit.ly/Tg3XLG> and from KanaalZ (in Dutch) here: <http://bit.ly/WFSjze>

Croatia



As part of CCAM, UNI's affiliate HST organized a round table on work in call centres in Croatia. At the round table, employees and trade union representatives discussed the main challenges that call centres employees face in their work.

In Croatia, the biggest problems in call centres are stress, burnout, anxiety and insufficient training. Constant changes to the service specifications cause stress among the workers; they feel insecure, leading to depression and anxiety. In order to save costs, employers are cutting the number and length of trainings. Coaching methods, including call recordings and feedback to the worker, are also often misused as tools to punish workers instead of improving their knowledge and performance.

Because of these problems, Croatian call centre employees requested from their employers an opportunity to have their voices heard and their opinions taken into consideration. During the month of October, HST also started collective bargaining in Croatian Telecom and initiated discussions about the above issues. HST posted

about CCAM on their web page www.hst.hr, and sent emails to all its members in call centres with information about CCAM and encouraging them to participate in UNI's on-line survey.

USA

Members of UNI's U.S. affiliate the Communication Workers of America (CWA) gathered during CCAM for the 2012 Customer Service Conference in St. Louis. The conference featured panel discussions about contractual language, off-shoring and organizing, and the 150 participants talked about the industry's challenges and the political environment. During the conference, the attendees also participated in different actions: Some leafleted an AT&T worksite, while others did an action at Wells Fargo, which is expanding its call centre operations in the Philippines.

CWA also kicked off October with a new report to supplement the one of UNI, titled "Why Shipping Call Centre Jobs Overseas Hurts Us Back Home". CWA has also launched a campaign to build public support for call centre bills introduced by Rep. Tim Bishop (D-NY) and Sen. Robert Casey, Jr. (D-Pa.). Locals across the country planned demonstrations, such as pre- and post-shift parking lot rallies and lunchtime workshops on issues of importance to call centre workers.

"There are more than 5 million customer service workers in the United States, employing more than 4 percent of the American workforce," said Chief of Staff Ron Collins. "The more CWA can grow and organize this key sector, the better we can reduce workplace stress [and] negotiate better working conditions for our members".

India



As part of Call Center Action Month 2012, UNI's Indian affiliate UNITES Professionals launched a call center study in the Indian ICT sector. The study showed that stress and feelings of anxiety and insecurity are prevalent in call centers in India. Heavy uses of scripts and intensive monitoring practices were identified as the root causes for these negative effects, which considerably harmed the health and well-being of the call center employees. The study suggested that reducing the use of scripts and monitoring, promoting flexible working hours to allow for better work-life balance, and using the performance appraisal process to develop rather than punish the workers would improve the call center employees' well-being.

The study was jointly carried out by the Centre for Labour Studies in TISS, Mumbai and UNITES, and drew upon a survey conducted among 154 Indian call center workers in 2012.

France

In France, two of UNI's affiliates carried out different activities. FD CGT Sociétés d'Etudes sent a letter to the French Minister of Industrial Renewal, Arnaud Montebourg, calling on the government to enact legislation to combat the structural problems in the call centre industry, including labour shortages, high turnover, high use of precarious contracts, and deplorable working conditions. The union also asked its members to sign a call centre petition in order to put more pressure on the government.

UNI's other affiliate, FEC-FO, informed their members and activists about CCAM in call centres like Teleperformance, B2S, Acticall, Armatis, Sitel and encouraged them to participate in the on-line survey.

Call Center survey

Results from UNI's Survey



As a part of CCAM, UNI also developed an on-line survey into performance management and employee health in call centres. Over 200 call centre employees from 10 different countries participated in the survey, which was carried out during the month of October. The survey confirmed the results from UNI's report "Making the right call": many call centre employees suffer physical and psychological harm from intensive performance management methods.

The call centre employees surveyed had worked in call centres for approximately seven years, and the majority of them handled customer service and sales calls. When asked to what extent they found themselves working faster than they would like in order to complete a task, 70% answered that they do so most of the time or all the time.

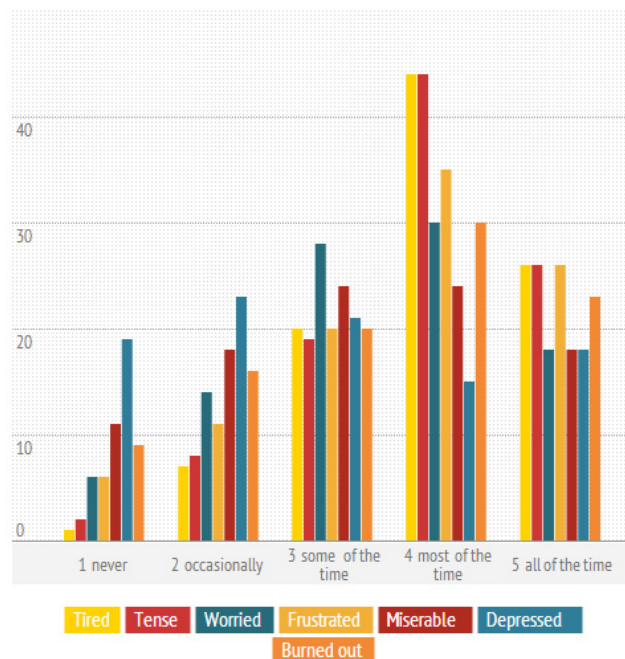
The employees' lack of control over their work was evident from the survey. 52% of the respondents said that they had no control at all over the daily tasks that they do, while 48% had no control over the speed at which they work. Two-thirds of all respondents also said they had no control over the setting of their daily lunch break.

The notion that electronic monitoring is more used as a method to discipline workers rather than to identify training needs was also evident. 64% said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that monitoring in their call centres was used to identify training; 68% responded instead that monitoring was used to punish poor performance.

When asked if their performance targets were fair and reasonable, 79% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. A majority also added that they have difficulties meeting their performance targets.

Harmful psychological effects of the call centre work were felt by a majority of the respondents: 70% said that they felt tired most or all of the time, 70% felt tense most or all of the time, 61% said they felt frustrated most or all of the time, and 53% said they felt burned out most or all of the time.

The physical impact of work in a call centre was also evident: four-fifths of the respondents said they had experienced pain in their body as a result of their work. Neck and back injuries were the most common issues, followed by pain in the shoulders.



The % of time the respondents feel tired, tense, worried, frustrated, miserable, depressed or burned out from their work

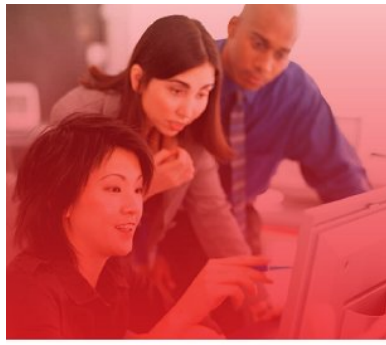
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Report executive summary

Making the right call

The call centre industry has exploded worldwide over the past two decades, as advances in information and communication technologies have reduced the costs of providing service and sales from remote locations. Over the same period, call centres have acquired a bad reputation – both as a channel for customer contact and as places to work. Most people have had the experience of calling a call centre, only to become frustrated or angry when the call centre agent was unable to solve their problem. Poor service quality seems to plague these workplaces, which are often described as the factories of the information economy.

Heavy use of electronic monitoring, tightly controlled schedules and break times, and intense performance pressure have contributed to high levels of employee stress, anxiety, and burnout. Not surprisingly, the work of a call centre agent is considered one of the ten most stressful jobs in the global economy. Employee stress also creates serious problems for companies and their customers. Managers struggle to staff workplaces overwhelmed with high turnover and absenteeism rates. Customers lose valuable time and energy being routed between employees who have been narrowly trained to answer specialized questions.



Making the right call

Redesigning call centres from the bottom up



VERONICA DOELLGAST AND LISA SEUER

In this report, we review academic research that has analyzed empirically how different approaches to call centre management are related to measures of employee well-being and performance. Findings from a wide range of survey- and case-based studies conclude the following:

Effects on well-being: Narrow job design, high use of scripts, intense monitoring, and targets linked to punishment and dismissal are associated with increased levels of physical and psychological strain. This includes repetitive strain injuries, musculoskeletal disorders, stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Reasons for these effects: These management practices have been found to increase strain because they reduce employees' control over their work, their ability to develop and use skills, and their ability to deal with the emotional work required to interact with customers. These factors lower employees' capacity to cope with the high demands they face in their jobs.

Organizational outcomes: Research shows that call centre management practices associated with high levels of employee strain perform similarly or worse compared to alternative practices that increase employee control over their work and that use monitoring to develop rather than punish employees. Most notably, these high-strain practices can increase quit and absenteeism rates and reduce customer service quality.

We conclude with a series of recommendations for practices associated with a more professional model of call centre management, which increase employee control over their work and ability to use and develop skills. These include:

- Cross-training employees to answer a broad range of call types
- Reducing the use of scripts
- Giving employees more choice over schedules and break times
- Limiting monitoring frequency and intensity
- Using monitoring information to develop skills rather than to discipline or sanction employees
- Involving employees in the design and review of performance targets

Examples from a case study in the telecommunications industry illustrate that these practices can be a viable alternative in call centres, creating a strong performance culture through fostering trust and professionalism.



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