

# EXPLORING PREDICTORS OF JOB SATISFACTION IN CALL CENTRES –THE CASE OF AUSTRALIA

*John Annakis\**, *Tony Lobo\*\**, *Soma Pillay\*\*\**

## Abstract

In this paper we examine predictors of job satisfaction within the call centre industry. Using a qualitative methodology, we investigate the nature and extent of job satisfaction of customer service representatives in two large Australian call centres. The findings from the study confirm that monitoring, personal privacy and flexibility correlate to workers' wellbeing and job satisfaction.

**Key words:** Call Centres, Job Satisfaction, customer relations representatives, Australia

*\*Corresponding author, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia*

*Tel: +6 13 9214 5311*

*Fax: +613 98192117*

*E-mail: [jannakis@swin.edu.au](mailto:jannakis@swin.edu.au)*

*\*\*Swinburne University of Technology, Australia*

*Tel: +6 13 9214 8535*

*Fax: +613 98192117*

*E-mail: [tlobo@swin.edu.au](mailto:tlobo@swin.edu.au)*

*\*\*\*Swinburne University of Technology, Australia*

*Tel: +613 92148536*

*Fax: +613 98192117*

*E-mail: [sopillay@swin.edu.au](mailto:sopillay@swin.edu.au)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, the Australian call centre industry expanded from approximately 8,000 people to more than 250,000. These figures are estimated to grow even further. The industry handles 16 million calls a day, and has wages and other HR expenses of \$9.1 billion (ASU 2009). This equates to 1.4% of total Australian employment and represents the second largest percentage of the workforce (the first being retail). Such figures indicate that call centres are a key economic and social feature of the 21st century. Despite their substantial role in the job supply market, there is a dearth of qualitative research on issues associated with predictors of job satisfaction. We use qualitative data to explore the predictors of job satisfaction within two large call centres in Australia. Our conceptual framework reflects predictors of job satisfaction (PJS) within the context of two Australian call centres. To date we have not found studies that directly attempt to investigate predictors of job satisfaction in Australian call centres.

## 2. THE CALL CENTRE ENVIRONMENT

Despite their economic importance, their key role in the labour market and rapid growth as an industry, call centres are associated by academics and practitioners with a plethora of productivity problems

caused by the way they operate. The literature suggests that job roles and practices are purely designed to suit principles of 'economic rationalism' (i.e. the maximisation of profit by minimising costs) to the detriment of workers' wellbeing and job satisfaction (de Grip, Sieben & van Jaarsveld 2005; Paul & Huws 2002; Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee 2000). For instance, the critics argue that there is a strong emphasis on supervision and monitoring of CSRs (customer service representative) whose work is carried out under a very stressful environment, demanding, monotonous, repetitive tasks, lack of training and/or authority to resolve problems. Such experiences by CSR may lead to stress, anxiety and sickness and to high rates of turnover relative to other industries (ACA Research 2001; ABC 2000). A substantial body of statistics supports these arguments. Compared to the national average for other employment types (i.e. 5.2 sick days per employee) Australian CSRs took 8.7 days per year (Hallis 2003; Nixon 2002). It is estimated that call centres lost 1.74 million working days in sick leave in 2002, a loss of \$1.75 billion (Budde 2002; Hallis 2003). This conservative estimate was calculated using a CSR average daily wage of \$140.00 (all overheads included).

In addition, staff turnover in the industry rose from 35% in 2007 to 49% in 2008 (ACA Research 2008b). Using the estimated \$140.00 daily wage and

the replacement costs provided by the Australian Contact Centre Industry Benchmarking Study (2008), we quantify a financial loss of \$953.3 million dollars for the industry derived from replacement costs. Other studies such as Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe (2007) are more conservative, suggesting lower replacement costs globally of around 16% gross annual earnings.

### 3. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

The effect of unhealthy call centre environments on CSRs' (customer service representative) wellbeing and job satisfaction is not fully acknowledged by management executives. Managers may adopt the so-called 'sacrificial human resources policies' deliberately as a response to external labour market conditions (high unemployment rates and strong competition) only. This attitude may be funneled by high customer tolerance to bad service (Chapman 2009). Since the inception of the 'Do not call register' introduced in Australia in May 2007, the level of complaints has dropped. Between May 2008 and May 2009 the level of consumer complaints in relation to call centres and telemarketers dropped by 60%. Despite this, some 12,057 complaints were lodged with the Australian Communications and Media Authority. Customer satisfaction with call centres remained low among households (52%) and small businesses (46%). However this survey was based on only 1,203 households and 760 small businesses (ACA Research 2004a). The external labour market conditions, high customer service tolerance and lack of managers' understanding of these practices on the workers' wellbeing could be supporting the perpetuation of the strategy to maintain minimum service standards – all in the name of 'managing profitability'. ACA Research (2008a) found strong issues associated to the interaction between consumers and CSRs, with 65% of 320 respondents stating that 'interacting with call centres is always problematic'.

There is a lack of empirical evidence about predictors of job satisfaction and wellbeing within Australian call centres. The literature has not yet focused on the CSRs' feedback in relation to predictors of job satisfaction. This is significant in assisting management in developing sound policies that meet CSRs' expectations of job satisfaction while improving the levels of customer service and productivity. This research attempts to fill this research gap.

In order to get meaningful feedback from CSRs, information was collected from two different types of call centres within Australia. These industries used a wide array of control practices. This approach allowed the researchers to compare and contrast the type of strategies adopted by the individual call centre's management. The micro-level analysis of individual employee responses helped the researchers to better

understand how certain employer practices shaped CSRs' level of job satisfaction..

It is important to note that it was not the intention of this research to artificially create typologies of best practices but to examine current practices, their subsequent effects and implications for job satisfaction.

### 4. THE CASE OF TWO AUSTRALIAN CALL CENTRES

The geographical scope of this study was limited to one large city in Australia. The sample is consistent with the call centre's profile in Australia. It included a medium and a large organization across industries and sectors.

The participating organizations demanded anonymity and confidentiality as a requisite to engage in the research. The researcher created the following pseudonyms for each:

- a multi-national car and home insurer – Insureco;
- a large outsourced multi-national organisation servicing 20 firms across numerous industries and sectors – Dynamico;

#### 4.1 Case study organisation 1: Insureco

Established in 1970, Insureco has more than 2.5 million policyholders. It has grown from a A\$25m entity in the 1970s to one that has more than A\$1bn in revenue, 3,000 employees, 50 offices and approximately 2 million customers throughout Australia who hold almost 3 million policies.

The call centre manager revealed that of the 20 teams he managed; only a few individual CSRs reached sales targets. It is therefore not surprising that of the two call centres surveyed, Insureco had the highest turnover/attrition rates at over 30% per annum, with 71% having been employed there less than 12 months, 17% from 12 to 18 months and 12% just over 18 months. The call centres have been operating now for over 12 years.

The managerial approach appears to be one of low consultation and participation on work matters including monitoring. The nature of work is mainly transactionally based and monitored via tight scripted and intense levels of monitoring; CSRs appear to have little control over mainly quantitative driven timing and targets of work.

When asked about the style of management at Insureco, the manager said:

*This is a professional organisation with a strong reputation in the industry, and staff are expected to dress professionally and meet sales and strict targets. I have worked in call centres that use fun, casual dress and faddy motivational techniques to motivate the teams, but at the end of the day the staff see through this and it makes no positive impact on the bottom line. We tell our staff up*

*front – these are our expectations. If you can't cut it, there's the door.*

The company had clear objectives that were stated at induction and reinforced on the job. It was a performance based culture and those who did not make the grade were singled out and asked to leave. The message of competition was promoted and CSRs were continuously promised that, if they exceeded targets, promotions would eventuate.

The high turnover rate demonstrates that Insureco's HR methods are not tailored to retain staff, and that a deliberate sacrificial strategy is in place seeking new and motivated workers. The manager stated:

*Judging by the strong response to CSR job advertisements each time we advertise, and the high level of sales from staff in their first 12 months on the job, suggest to me that the level of turnover in this company is not a problem.*

CSRs at Insureco are divided into separate inbound and outbound teams. They are offered few opportunities to move across teams and very few opportunities to move to distinctly different areas of the organisation. The monitoring of calls, in particular the taping of CSR calls was random in nature and no consent was requested internally or by external groups such as unions. Therefore, no formal consultation was undertaken for this process.

#### **4.2 Case study organisation 2: Dynamico**

Dynamico was founded in Australia in 1995 and at the time of this study operated nationally from one location. Apart from larger in-house call centres such as Qantas, Telstra and the Australian Taxation Office, it is one of Australia's largest purpose built outsourced call centres. Dynamico handles both inbound and outbound calls for some 20 companies. The company culture was identified as rather dominant and consistent across all 20 business units revealing a sophisticated HRM approach with fun and team building as its *raison d'être*, a self-professed charismatic leader, diversity in terms of task complexity, temporal dimensions and other factors making it a rather unique context for studying job satisfaction of CSRs.

The company has been portrayed in the media as 'relationship conscious' (Shoebridge 2000) and is reinforced in the company vision statement 'fun, focus and fulfilment' as portrayed on its website and promotional materials.

The leader (an ex-insurance salesperson) was identified as a founder who had worked his way up, and this mantra is promoted to all new incumbents as the line of career progression open to staff. This cultural mythology is reinforced at induction, to visitors in company materials and training embedded in the workplace:

*He tells the bankers he hates business cultures which assume people are stupid and need rules.*

*His other pet hatred is unions. He went on to say that they were very pleased with their decision to outsource to our company, to which the union official responded by saying that the reason people appear to be happy and the reason there are no union members inside our company is because we and, I guess ladies and gentlemen, that is me – I am running a cult. Does this look like the behaviour of people in a cult. Synchronised drumming it's revealed is a key to team building. So is borrowing liberally from Hollywood movies to stir staff who earns about \$18 an hour plus incentives (Shoebridge 2000).*

Socialisation ceremonies, such as drinks, reinforce the CEO's philosophy. Whilst the researcher was meeting with the HR manager, CSRs were seen to be funning it up, engaging in various team activities. It comes as little surprise to consider these fun tactics as a form of team building and stress relief in a highly intense work environment.

The manner in which Dynamico manages CSR retention is markedly different from the other case study organisation. Security of tenure issues diminish over time as all employees are put on a casual or contract basis, then offered full-time or part-time employment (after an initial probationary period). According to the HR manager this deliberate management strategy assists in reducing voluntary turnover. Salary increments at the completion of probation also act as an effective retention strategy.

Fifty seven percent of Dynamico CSRs remained at the organisation for less than 12 months. Turnover was quoted by the HR manager as being around 6% to 10% per annum. However survey respondents' profiles exhibited lower lengths of service, so some caution needs to prevail in assessing accurate turnover trends of this organisation. Most respondents were employed for less than 18 months with close to one-third having less than six months length of service. One-third had worked at Dynamico for between seven and 18 months and another third had worked there longer. Eighty-nine per cent were aged between 21 and 49 years, and 59% were female and 81% were full-time.

This organisation's representation of culture and management style appears to fit well with Baudrillard's (1995) notion of simulacra, in this instance, an illusion of fun. Dynamico offers the illusion to customers that they are the parent companies they are serving (through outsourced operations). The CSRs knowingly engage in this illusion by telling customers they represent the product/service company when in fact they work for Dynamico and are housed in a factory office environment, with posters and symbolism representing the product/service companies. This has been referred to previously as 'identity and locational masking', for example, firms outsourcing to India. Customers may detect that this is an illusion by listening to accents or vagueness of local knowledge

when questioned by the customer (Russell 2008). It is possible for images to mask reality or even to hide the absence of reality. This has the potential to radically alter our norms concerning ethical behaviour. Although this phenomenon has been reported in the literature, the possible effects on CSRs' attitudes and job satisfaction have not been the focus of previous research.

Russell (2008) suggests that CSRs may look upon monitoring and evaluation benignly or indifferently as manufactured sociability while management sponsored competitions, awards and games can promote an indifference or acceptance of these practices. Dynamico appears to utilise this manufactured sociability or enculturation to remove attention from the actual nature of work, reinforcing this illusion of fun to CSRs, customers and the general public.

Separate teams appear to be taking on the identity of each outsourced product or service company they market, especially when communicating with customers. This also includes company posters, souvenirs and products located in the team areas. Each floor has been set up to house separate product teams to give the illusion of masking to the customer (a form of simulacrum) that they sell and take enquiries for separate external businesses. The CSRs represent this to the customer but underneath this illusion they are one organisation, Dynamico.

Dynamico's paternalistic yet high involvement approach to management includes an open door HR department located in the centre of its building with six full-time staff. In the past, a work building has either been ignored or has been viewed as 'merely a neutral shell, independent of, and unconnected with, the social dynamics that create particular labour processes' (Baldry et al. 1998). More recently, it has been recognised as a structure of control, designed specifically with the priorities of capitalist production in mind (Baldry et al. 1998). Dynamico may identify with this description where office space is, by and large, big and brightly coloured. Staff can decorate their personal work area in their preferred style, contrary to more typical call centres where staff do not have their own desks, but rotate seats (McManus 1999), and the centre itself is often a drab, factory-like workplace (Shoebri 2000). The HR manager explained:

*If our staff feel good, they are more likely to work well for our clients. By handing some control of the environment to staff, staff and customer satisfaction levels should therefore increase. The level of client satisfaction is often reflected in bottom-line results.*

## 5. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

In order to determine how workers derived wellbeing and job satisfaction, the research model drew from

labour process and equity theorists. Among the first group, Braverman (1974), Edwards (1990) and Fernie and Metcalf (1998) argue that employers and employees often have conflicting interests within the workplace. This conflict involves the control of labour processes, and shapes employees' work experience and attitudes to work commitment and effort. The second group formed by equity theorists assesses employees' perception of fairness and equity from an internal and external perspective of management control practices including procedural justice and distributive justice (Blader & Tyler 2003; Folger 1987; Leventhal 1980). Both perspectives are closely related. Using the Rose and Wright (2005) model we use qualitative data to extend from this model about the way employees respond to the managerial control process which then helps identify predictors of job satisfaction.

### 5.1. A situation based model

The situational based model developed by Rose and Wright (2005) has been applied to a UK call centre investigating the perceptions of CSRs and factors that determine job satisfaction. It examines CSRs' control over job involvement factors and how they impact on job satisfaction.

The comprehensive empirical study by Rose and Wright (2005) investigated work context and content, work environment variables that lead to employee wellbeing and job satisfaction. They identified eight latent variables among the items that represented control and control-related aspects: work based characteristics; identification with organisation; involvement; consultation; emotional pressure from customer interaction; technological pressure; job control; and targets.

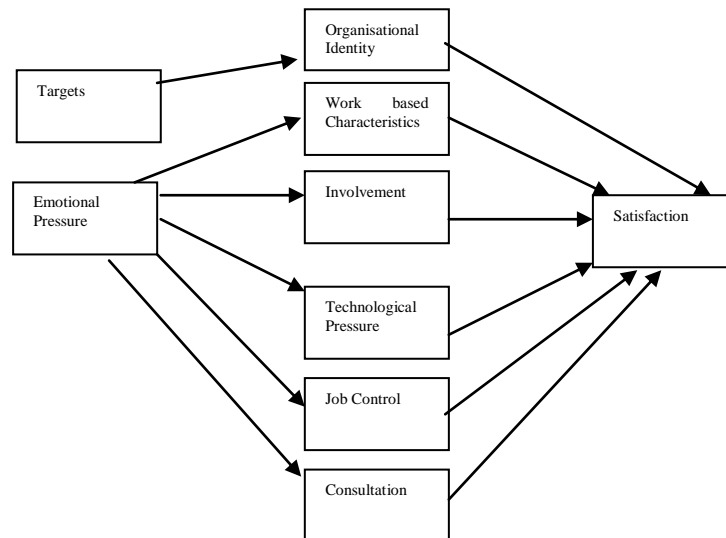
Rose and Wright's (2005) study concluded that the strongest theme to emerge is 'work based characteristics' and this in turn is strongly influenced by both of the underpinning variables, emotional pressure and targets. Job monotony and lack of time between calls were important items in negative perceptions of the quality of work based characteristics, but by far the main cause of concern here was that of coping with difficult customers. The conclusions drawn from their study confirm much of the existing research dealing with customer services (Bain 2001; Callaghan & Thompson 2001; Taylor & Bain 1999).

The significance of the Rose and Wright (2005) model is that it has taken themes, concepts and previous findings and has successfully applied empirical measures to test these in a UK call centre setting. Although the Rose and Wright (2005) model appears to be strong in predicting what factors determine job satisfaction in call centre contexts, it is also important to see if the literature can provide more insight into gauging if any other factors contribute to CSR perception of job satisfaction. A review of the

literature on call centres suggests that other factors may include flexibility, HRM practices and job benefits. We therefore extend from Rose and Wright's

situation based model and develop a predictor of job satisfaction model (PJS).

**Figure (i).** Situation based model



Source: Rose and Wright (2005)

## 5.2. Predictors of job satisfaction (PJS)

In this section we examine the five major constructs which form the basis of the PJS model. Each was divided into a set of sub-constructs in order to attain a thorough and complete understanding of the myriad of effects they have on CSRs' job satisfaction. Our PJS model, Figure (ii), comprises five dimensions (*monitoring, flexibility, environment, HR policies/performance, job benefits*). The dimensions, used to develop a conceptual framework for this study, were adapted from the empirical literature on call centres and job satisfaction (Frenkel et al. 1998; Holman 2002; Hyman et al. 2003; Kinnie et al. 2005; Reilly 2001; Rose & Wright 2005). Although there is some disparity between definitions of concepts amongst researchers, this did not affect the integrity of the model.

### 5.2.1 Monitoring and personal privacy

We integrated monitoring into the questionnaire as the first construct, due to the nature of call centre work being predominantly telephone based and individually transacted with the customer. It appeared that employers perceived that the monitoring of calls was an integral part of the labour process. The basic assumption is that the higher the level, pace and intensity of CSR monitoring, the more work itself is disliked and the greater the likelihood that the CSR has a negative perception of job satisfaction (Rose & Wright 2005). There is also a distinction between the technological pressure of monitoring and targets as a pressure of monitoring. Rose and Wright (2005) also highlight the emotional pressure derived from the

customer, with CSRs exhibiting lower levels of job satisfaction when they feel too much emotional pressure through customer rejections and abuse. The extent and excessiveness of monitoring is considered to have an effect on job satisfaction (Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002).

Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) attempted to measure whether monitoring is also an invasion of privacy or not. With the exception of these researchers, others fail to make the distinction between monitoring of work-related matters and non-work-related matters and how this could be considered an invasion of personal privacy.

Mason et al. (2002) highlight that few researchers distinguish between CSRs perceiving monitoring of work as a legitimate and illegitimate part of working in call centres. However CSRs may perceive some aspects of monitoring as an invasion of personal privacy when it involves non-work-related matters. According to Mason et al. (2002) whether CSRs like or dislike being monitored at work, they understand that managers have a legitimate right to do so.

### 5.2.2 Work environment

The next construct, work environment, refers to work context factors such as worker perception of involvement, consultation about how the firm is managed, the input the CSR has on these and training and promotional opportunities (Rose & Wright 2005). The broader management literature provides evidence that worker involvement and perceptions of equity contribute to satisfaction at work. Equity theory suggests that workers who perceive employment

relations to be fair are more likely to report higher job satisfaction and therefore expend more work effort (Kidwell Jr. & Bennett 1994). Workers are also likely to gain satisfaction through participating in decisions that determine how work is undertaken. Efficiency wage theory suggests that workers who are more concerned about aspects of the job such as pay, promotional opportunities and job security show greater commitment to their work role and the organisation (Akerlof & Yellen 1986).

### 5.2.3 Flexible work practices

There is a shortage of studies and measures related to the flexible work practices construct. The extant call centre research only identifies two forms of flexibility: functional and temporal.

Functional flexibility, also referred to as either job control or task variety flexibility, may be described as the extent to which CSRs can use their skills, autonomy and control over a variety of tasks. Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) and Rose and Wright (2005) indicate that job satisfaction was higher amongst those CSRs who were encouraged to use their skills (referred to as functional flexibility or discretion of tasks).

Temporal flexibility reflected in CSR control over hours, shifts and break times is an area studied by few researchers. Barnes (2005) suggests that CSRs' lack of control over temporal factors of work contributed to stress on the job and this was carried over into home life. Hyman et al. (2003) also found that perceptions of low degree of influence over hours, shifts and having to work overtime or unsocial hours contributed to stress and low job satisfaction.

There is only one study which investigated all five forms of flexibility – numerical, functional, temporal, financial and locational – across industries, including some call centres (Reilly 2001). However the findings were rather anecdotal which focused on the incidence of flexibility without any direct link to job satisfaction. Reilly (2001) reported that CSRs, compared to workers in other occupations and industries perceived low levels of control of these flexibility factors and that these factors were given to managers or other highly skilled workers, not to CSRs.

Although all the call centres chosen for this study are housed in office environments and all CSRs work from these offices and not from home, it was still pertinent to assess whether they perceive locational flexibility an important factor for job satisfaction, because of the lack of research studies in this area. We used five items to measure flexibility. These were constructed along Reilly's (2001) definitions.

### 5.2.4 HRM and performance management system (PMS)

Deery et al. (2002) found that job satisfaction was higher amongst CSRs who considered they had more opportunities for promotion. According to Holman (2002) employees' evaluation of HR practices (fairness of the payment system, usefulness of performance appraisal system and adequacy of training) tended to be associated negatively with depression and positively with extrinsic job satisfaction. He suggests that if CSRs believe the PMS doesn't provide constructive feedback and/or the pay doesn't reflect the amount of effort put in, CSRs subsequently would feel less committed to their work and organization. Receiving appropriate levels of training could also reduce anxieties about the ability to do the job (Chalykoff and Kochan (1989), Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) and Holman (2002)).

### 5.2.5 Job benefits

Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) suggest that the way job benefits are linked to PMS for reward or punishment and the fairness of these could have an impact on job satisfaction. Other non-pay benefits such as social conditions, welfare facilities, parking facilities, personal workstation, staff internet and phone facilities and staff café could contribute to reducing stress and indirectly contribute to overall job satisfaction. Hannif, Burgess and Connell (2008) contend that job benefits of non-pay related matters contribute to morale, improve work-life balance and reduce stress leading to job satisfaction.

CSRs from focus groups suggested that a benefit of working in call centres was the ability to achieve a sense of customer satisfaction. This 'ability' was considered as a measure of the job benefits (construct).

### 5.2.6 Job satisfaction

This is the final construct of the conceptual model and constitutes CSRs' reaction to managerial control techniques. It is a collaboration of effects and responses of the preceding five constructs.

A number of studies provide measures of job satisfaction within the context of call centres. These were drawn upon together with development of other measures where gaps were identified. Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) measured satisfaction of job itself, pay/benefits, promotion opportunities, recognition for a job well done, amount of say CSR has in how work is to be done, and satisfaction with monitoring. Other researchers provided a more comprehensive approach investigating CSRs' attitudes to intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. Intrinsic job satisfaction involves how satisfied were the CSRs with features integral to the work itself (variety, opportunity to use one's skills, autonomy). Extrinsic job satisfaction includes

features external to the work itself such as pay, opportunities for advancement, and the way the firm is managed (Frenkel et al. 1998; Holman 2002). Rose and Wright (2005) measured job satisfaction on criteria including influence/control over job, pay, sense of achievement, respect from supervisor and overall job satisfaction. Job satisfaction, the dependent construct, was measured with five items concerning work conditions, social conditions, benefits and facilities, HRM practices and overall satisfaction of the job. Guided by the literature and taking into consideration the lack of consistency of measures amongst researchers, we adopted a multi-faceted approach that incorporated intrinsic, extrinsic and social components of job satisfaction.

## 6. THE STUDY

### (a) Research Objective and hypothesis

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the nature and extent of predictors of job satisfaction.

This was done by studying CSRs in Australian call centres. We were especially interested in *first*, exploring the strength and direction of the relationship between the call centre job satisfaction dimensions (job related factors) – (i) monitoring, (ii) flexibility, (iii) environment, (iv) HR policies/performance and (v) job benefits and *second*, identifying which call centre job satisfaction dimension best explain and predict job satisfaction. The following hypothesis were developed-

Hypothesis 1: *Monitoring is directly and positively associated to job satisfaction*

Hypothesis 2: *Flexibility is directly and positively associated to job satisfaction*

Hypothesis 3: *Employees' control of environment is directly and positively associated to job satisfaction*

Hypothesis 4: *Performance management and HRM factors are positively associated to job satisfaction*

Hypothesis 5: *Job benefits are positively associated to job satisfaction*

Figure (ii). Conceptual framework: Predictors of job satisfaction (CSRs) model



### (b) Methodology -Focus Groups

Participants were recruited by way of a flyer distributed in the staff room and kitchen areas. Those who wished to participate contacted the researchers directly via telephone or email. Those who confirmed that they wished to participate were given either in person or by email a brief guide of ideas that would be discussed and a letter of informed consent that explained the purpose of the exercise and to also gain

written and signatory permission for participants to join the focus group discussions.

In all, 2 focus group discussions took place with a total of 24 participants. Focus group methods provide direct and immediate evidence about similarities and differences in opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analysis of separate statements derived from each interviewee (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran 2001). The focus group participants were fairly representative of the community with a mixture of

males and females, from various ethnicities, ages (22 to 65) and educational backgrounds. There were no known clusters amongst the participants, which assisted in avoiding any potential partiality or bias in responses. The selection of the sample was based on convenience and availability and was overall considered a fair and good combination. It was not necessary to be precise with the selection procedure because the exercise was really focused on generating thoughts and ideas regarding the nature of work in call centres and the research process.

**(c) Focus group protocol and semi-structured interview questions**

Focus group guidelines were provided to the participants as a general guide only, however being a group discussion also allowed for free flow of conversation by participants (see Table (i)). A case study protocol contained the instrument, procedure, and general rules to be followed during each interview. This is necessary to increase reliability and to guide the investigator in undertaking data collection (Yin 2003).

**Table (i).** Guidelines for focus group discussions

<p>The broad topics of discussion for the focus groups were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring and surveillance in call centres</li> <li>• Examples of monitoring and surveillance at work</li> <li>• Their perception of the effect of monitoring and surveillance on their job satisfaction</li> <li>• Their perceptions of workplace flexibility, work environment; organizational culture; relationship with management and supervisor; relationship with customer; job benefits; HRM and PMS</li> <li>• Their likes, dislikes and suggested changes to work practices in call centres to improve job satisfaction</li> <li>• What participants consider to be the most important contributors to job satisfaction</li> <li>• Any further suggestions for the study</li> </ul>
--

The interview protocol comprised the PMS constructs such as monitoring, flexibility, work environment, HRM and PMS, and overall job satisfaction, and suggested changes to improve job satisfaction. These constructs were tentative and flexible allowing new research themes to emerge for theory building purposes. As more participants were interviewed, certain themes began to surface. This information was incorporated in subsequent focus groups so that emerging patterns could be detected and/or corroborated.

**7. FINDINGS**

We identified a number of incidences both within each call centre and in an aggregated form, to allow inter-call-centre comparative analysis. The responses were classified as positive or negative in relation to the CSRs’ perceptions of job satisfaction. The analysis included the identification of emergent themes which had a strong contribution to job satisfaction.

**7.1 Case study organisation 1: Insureco**

Overall monitoring of calls was at times considered a legitimate prerogative of management for assessing quality, but concerns were raised regarding intensity and a lot of criteria were seen as incongruent to quality of calls actually undertaken. PMS management systems were also considered harsh and incompatible to the work. CSRs often felt that targets were unrealistic, with pay and bonuses not matching the hard work. The work environment was seen as low trust and authoritarian in nature with concerns about lack of participation, involvement and consultation. Flexibility was also negatively perceived along with HRM and job benefits.

**(a) Monitoring and personal privacy**

There was some ambivalence towards monitoring and personal privacy. Levels of monitoring were considered overall excessive. Some CSRs accepted it was a managerial prerogative to monitor calls, but there were concerns about obsession with monitoring and punishing quantitative criteria at the expense of



quality service (see Table (iii) & (iv), Appendices 1 & 2).

*Monitoring is just part of the job I come to expect ... How else would management keep a record of enquiries and sales? (CSRi-2) ... Having calls monitored by ACD is not the problem but I object to having calls waiting or calls lost. What does that have to do with customer service? (CSRi3) ... Sometimes you can't control the amount of calls flooding in (CSRi4) ... If you are understaffed, calls have to wait ... This is not my problem, it is management's fault, but at the end of the day we get abused for this (CSRi5).*

*Personal privacy? ... Yeah, you're joking, right! (CSRi6) ... There is very little time to attend to personal matters (CSRi3) ... Managers don't like you keeping customers waiting or calls dropping off the radar (CSRi6) ... If we are desperate to make personal calls we do it at break times, normally on our mobiles (CSRi4).*

Insureco had clear written policies that were constantly reinforced, stating that staffs are not permitted to use facilities for personal matters during work-time. CSRs generally felt these policies were unfair which related to lower perceived levels of personal privacy than other call centre employees. On a procedural justice, societal justice level and quality of treatment level by supervisors, it appeared to cause resentment. There was stress about attending to family matters and feeling a lack of respect by managers, not being trusted and being constantly watched by supervisors over petty matters.

This is highlighted in focus group discussions on monitoring and personal privacy:

*We are not treated with respect. Sometimes we need to attend to urgent matters ... but all supervisors care about is calls answered on time (CSRi9) ... You are made to feel the pressure ... If you need to speak to someone on a personal matter during work time it is looked at poorly ... You wouldn't treat your kids like that (CSRi6) ... All calls are monitored, it is bloody hard to say it was a client call (CSRi11) ... It is also difficult to get another agent to take your calls when it is busy (CSRi7) ... Supervisors don't like the use of mobile phones at work, so you have to wait for a break and go out of the office to make personal calls unless it is an absolute emergency (CSRi9) ... Trying to pay bills or waiting in a queue to query an account with a bank, there is really no time during breaks ... Also banks are so far away you have to plan ahead at lunchtime or when you get a late shift ... Well, who could be bothered, the amount of stress it causes ... It's not worth the f—n effort (CSRi3) ... Even if I did take time off the phones for personal matters I would feel I am letting my team members down (CSRi4).*

The qualitative findings as depicted in the verbatims above were from a sample of inbound CSRs which highlight issues which include

questioning the quality of treatment by supervisors from a procedural fairness and societal fairness perspective ('You wouldn't treat your kids like that'). Based on the direction of the discussion it could be assumed that collective past experience or embedded in the CSRs' mindset is the interpretation of management control over these aspects appears to be strong (taped and silent monitoring, peer pressure) and that their reaction is to accommodate rather than contest the procedures, feeling a sense of helplessness in the situation. Stress appears to be felt from letting the team down, the customer and balancing family demands and fear of reprisal from supervisors.

## (b) Work environment

The vast majority felt that the work environment was less informed, problems were not dealt with effectively and CSRs were not encouraged to be involved in decisions that affect their direct work role.

In terms of work environment a number of CSRs felt low trust with management, also that there were rather poor opportunities for training and career development. Although some commented that monitoring was a management prerogative, they overwhelmingly disliked unrealistic or moving targets:

*The targets set by management are too high ... It seems like no-one can get the promised bonuses (CSRi11) ... You can't get blood out of a stone ... there is only so much customers want (CSRi10) ... We are constantly told off for not getting cross-sales even if the customer is just making an enquiry (CSRi11) ... Even though I am hired to take enquiries, the pressure is on to make sales and keep call times to fast (CSRi12) ... It is not fair when outbound agents are getting higher pay but we do similar work and we never get bonuses (CSRi3) ... It is also annoying that we have to keep stats on separate spreadsheets on a daily basis which compare individual call numbers, times and sales ratios (CSRi4) ... It can really get you down and stress you out, trying to compete against each other, when you know you can't reach the targets (CSRi5).*

## (c) Flexibility

An area which CSRs raised concerns about in focus groups related to the lack of functional flexibility and how this affected feelings of repetition and boredom, which also indirectly caused emotional detachment from work and possibly from the customer:

*The job after a while is mind-numbing (CSRi1) ... Same thing all day, there is no variety (CSRi2).*

Some CSRs reported that the lack of control over temporal flexibility is limited by availability of operation times or by managerial nepotism:

*The only jobs available here are full-time. Part-time work is only offered to people in*

management or outside of the call centre (CSRi4) ... It's not fair as some people get the good shifts because they socialise with the right people after work (CSRi2) ... After 12 months here you see some new people get good shifts because they suck up to management (CSRi3).

There were also concerns about the unsocial nature of job in regard to lack of control over temporal flexibility (choice over preferred shifts):

There is little choice of which shifts you get and the down side is you have work weekends with no overtime (CSRi7) ... Getting a rostered day off during the week when you worked a weekend is not fair (CSRi8).

#### (d) HRM and PMS

The unrealistic targets coupled with realisation over time that sacrificial HR policies exist to get staff to get results before they are replaced was highlighted by some CSRs:

When I started I was told I could earn up to an extra \$10,000 per annum based on performance and that it was not difficult after training and some on the job experience ... I haven't seen anyone make that sort of bonus (CSRi2) ... Some people in outbound sales are getting higher commissions and bonuses, but they are given leads and are employed to make sales (CSRi3) ... What is unfair is that operators on inbound are also required to make sales but without lead generation ... We are pressured to try and cross-sell customers with a general enquiry (CSRi4) ... Most of the time the customer ... just wants information about when to renew policy or ask for discounts (CSRi4).

Customer abuse and rejections are experienced by outbound CSRs and not inbound. Emerging from the qualitative findings is that outbound CSRs felt the tension between reaching targets and juggling customer abuse and rejections. These type of negative concerns have been reported in literature and their association to stress. However what emerged from the focus group findings is that this is relevant by differentiation of work area (outbound). Outbound CSRs constantly felt the tension of trying to reach often unrealistic targets whilst being subjected to customer abuse:

Haven't seen anyone get those sort of bonuses they promised us as you have to sell over \$30,000 worth of insurance policies per week, which is a big ask (CSRi7) ... They keep pushing us to convert 1:3 calls into a sale ... You call that customer service? What a joke ... Customers start getting quite abusive when you keep pushing them (CSRi8) ... That means selling more than 50 policies per week when you are on a salary of \$30K plus per year (CSRi9) ... No wonder people leave this place (CSRi11).

An area emerging from the qualitative analysis related to identification with the company in terms of its reputation in the wider business community. The negative comments in the verbatims below reveal that what was promised regarding company reputation and career opportunities was not delivered:

They keep telling us that this company had a good reputation and that there were career opportunities open to those who perform well both here and overseas ... Management don't care, they just keeping putting new ads in the paper and get new staff (CSRi3) ... They just seem to spend time training new people who get results before they decide to leave (CSRi5).

#### 7.2 Case study organisation 2: Dynamico

It is important to note that 75% of Dynamico CSRs involved in focus groups were on probation (first six months of employment) and were attending induction and initial training, and this may have skewed their responses.

##### 7.2.1 Monitoring and personal privacy

The results indicated that Dynamico CSRs were rather ambivalent as to whether monitoring was too excessive. The focus group responses pointed towards a number of monitoring volume and time pressures to answer phone calls which affected job satisfaction perception:

You are treated like robots on a production line (CSRd1) ... Management are insincere, they don't care about you or the customer (CSRd2) ... Just more results and to answer calls on time (CSRd3) ... Listening always and walking around, doing nothing else (CSRd4) ... Also there is the constant pressure of calls waiting while you are trying to assist a customer, the call waiting prompt on your computer screen is really annoying (CSRd5).

These findings are consistent with a large number of call centre studies (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002; Deery, Iverson & Walsh 2002; Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002; Rose & Wright 2005; Taylor & Bain 1999).

The qualitative analysis also highlighted two unusual aspects, rarely noted by the field's researchers. The first relates to the positive role of monitoring as a safeguard against abusive customers. The CSRs considered monitoring as a legitimate right of management and in some situations the taping of calls was seen as a safety mechanism to minimise the incidences of customer abuse:

I know I always aim to do a good job and keep customers satisfied (CSRd1) ... Sometimes having calls taped can help the situation where abusive customers may tone it down a little as they are told in advance that the call is being monitored for quality purposes (CSRd2).

This was identified as an emergent theme which had not been considered by the literature. The second issue relates to the role of monitoring as a tool to ensure peer performance at equal levels:

*Monitoring of calls and walking around listening by supervisors can sometimes keep some of the agents from slacking off and constant horseplay (CSR D1) ... They can be distracting while I am trying to deal with customers ... Some people around here try and get away with just shit-stirring (CSR D3).*

The literature on this topic is sparse. The closest references come from Chalykoff and Kochan (1989), Frenkel et al. (1998) and Mason et al. (2002) who argued that CSRs perceived monitoring as positive insofar they get feedback on their performance.

At Dynamico 25% of respondents said that the call centre monitoring policies were an invasion of personal privacy (see Table (iv), Appendix 2). The focus groups help achieve better understanding of this phenomenon. For instance, Dynamico had friendly privacy policies; however it did not provide the staff with enough time, within working hours, to attend to personal matters. Over half of the respondents pointed to a contradiction between monitoring friendly policies and on the job time constraints to use email, internet or phones for personal matters (see Table (iv), Appendix 2):

*We have written policies related to the use of phones, emails, and work computers to make contact with friends or family during work time ... Management state that is permitted within reason (CSR D8) ... Due to the number of calls and calls waiting you never get any free time unless you ring on your mobile during breaks or in the toilet and it is not worth the bloody effort (CSR D9) ... Yeah! Pretty much you are working on the phones all day or you're out of there (CSR D10).*

CSRs only perceived an invasion of privacy when their activities were related to non-job matters. In fact they accepted monitoring as a legitimate management prerogative:

*You can tell when team leaders are listening in and taping calls ... Not that they tell you or anything. It's part of the job (CSR D10) ... It sometimes becomes a problem when you have a difficult customer and you are spending a lot of time on the phone trying to settle them down (CSR D9).*

The limited literature that comments on invasion of personal privacy in call centres (Chalykoff & Kochan 1989; Mason et al. 2002) does not make a distinction between work and non-work matters.

### 7.2.2 Flexibility

A commonly reported theme in focus groups was flexibility, the focus groups asked CSRs to comment

on the most important issues that affected their job satisfaction.

Dynamico responses revealed functional flexibility had the least positive responses to all other flexibility types and the focus group discussions confirm and further highlight these concerns by CSRs. The lack of functional flexibility in call centre work roles is by far the most commonly reported area in the literature. Table (iii) (Appendix 2) shows that just 67% of CSRs felt that they had no control over choosing the type of work, variety, different duties and projects (functional flexibility).

The respondents reported that this often resulted in boredom, monotony coupled with the intensity of work, often leaving them feeling emotionally exhausted at the end of the day. They felt that the nature of calls was repetitive and there were few opportunities to develop skills on the job, coupled with the fact that there were few career opportunities within the organisation, leading to feelings of emotional detachment from the job and indirectly the customer:

*Same shit ... 50 times a day (CSR D1) ... Mind-numbing stuff (CSR D2) ... It's just a waste of talent (CSR D3) ... It is not a career job (CSR D4) ... At least I get paid for this (CSR D5) ... After a while just I switch off and don't really listen to what the customers are saying (CSR D6).*

The management direction that there be a strict adherence to rigid scripts especially for outbound CSRs can cause feelings that CSRs are seen as acting insincerely towards the customer.

*The monotony of working from call scripts (CSR D7) ... Working the same job sometimes for months on end (CSR D8) ... The customer knows when you have to stick to scripts (CSR D9) ... It can sound insincere at times (CSR D11) ... They lose interest and we can lose sales (CSR D12).*

Although rigidity of scripts and concerns about insincerity has been identified in the call centre literature, emerging from the Dynamico focus group findings is that this issue was commonly reported by outbound CSRs only. Inbound CSRs only raised concerns regarding intensity, lack of variety and the repetitive nature of calls. This differentiation by work area was also consistent with the quantitative findings.

Most focus group discussions in relation to functional flexibility were of a negative nature. CSRs also were concerned that the repetitive nature of work resulted in high levels of stress and that this was compounded when they felt that there were few mechanisms on the job to debrief or socialise with the team to discuss such problems:

*I sometimes can get a down feeling while doing the same thing every day which can also be stressful (CSR D1) ... There is no opportunity to socialise or unwind at work as agents are always on the telephone (CSR D3) ... Some people go out after work, but I am always too tired (CSR D2) ...*

*Also it's the in-crowd that suck up to managers and team leaders, who hang out late after work for drinks, they seem to get better treatment, hours and shifts ... It is not fair but I am not prepared to play the game (CSR D3) ... Also you see new staff attending after hours drinks. After a while they will come to realise it is just a game, it doesn't get you anywhere really (CSR D4).*

### 7.2.2.1 Temporal flexibility

In terms of temporal flexibility (see Tables (iii) & (iv), Appendix 2) the results indicate that approximately half of Dynamico CSRs generally felt positive in that they had some control over starting and finishing times, time in lieu and shifts. Further in-depth analysis in focus group discussions revealed that remaining 50% of CSRs, especially those who were within their first six months of employment on probation, felt that the lack of control over shifts, breaks and payment for unsocial hours was a major concern. However being in a large organisation which constantly recruits new CSRs where most are on probation could limit ability to voice concerns about these and other management practices.

To some extent, focus group discussions were consistent but highlighted some interesting emerging information on temporal flexibility not previously reported in the literature. Fifty per cent of female CSRs complained about working unsocial hours including late nights often, in that it interfered with work-life balance issues such as relationships, also personal safety issues about getting to and from work late at night:

*Being on probation for the first six months we feel that we are not in a position to negotiate what times or shifts we work (CSR D1) ... Finding parking when you are working next to an all night restaurant area is almost impossible (CSR D2) ... I don't feel safe walking on my own late at night to the car (CSR D3) (CSR D4) (CSR D6) ... And public transport is virtually impossible that time of the night (CSR D4) ... I feel I can't complain as management aren't prepared to listen as I am still on probation (CSR D3).*

Other CSRs complained that there was inadequate compensation for working unsocial hours/shifts and that there was often unfair decision making by management about who gets these shifts:

*I sometimes feel put out having to work weekend shifts when there is no extra overtime and it interferes with my life (CSR D7) ... Being a casual for the first six months, there is no guarantee of permanent work ... I have to put up with this, but I don't know if I will stay (CSR D8) ... We need longer breaks as exhaustion sets in after a while ... Also I can't understand why team leaders won't allow agents to negotiate breaks amongst themselves (CSR D10) ... It's not fair that some*

*people get the best shifts (CSR D11) ... I keep asking for regular day shifts because of the distance I have to travel every day (CSR D12).*

Apart from these negative comments regarding temporal flexibility a few CSRs in the focus groups made positive comments that Dynamico being a large organisation does allow you to negotiate better shifts, or where problems arise within a working group or with a team leader, CSRs can sometimes ask to be put in another team (job rotation):

*Working for a large company ... you can get to choose shifts (CSR D7) ... This depends on how nice your team leader is (CSR D9) ... Also if you are not getting along with certain agents, you can ask to change teams (CSR D7).*

Overall the qualitative findings on temporal flexibility are consistent with the quantitative findings and some limited studies in the literature of CSRs' concern over unsocial hours and lack of compensation (Barnes 2005; Hyman et al. 2003). However what emerged from the focus groups for female CSRs only was quite unique in that lack of choice over unsocial hours and shifts can be a source of dissatisfaction as it contributes to feelings of lack of personal safety and spills over into home life by putting pressure on relationships.

### 7.2.2.2 Numerical flexibility

In terms of numerical flexibility the results reveal that the majority of Dynamico CSRs felt they had control of employment status whether working their preferred type, either full-time, part-time or casual, that is a close match to preferred number of contractual hours. Focus group discussions did not raise any concerns regarding other forms of flexibility such as financial or locational.

### 7.2.3 Work environment

Just over 40% of CSRs at Dynamico felt that they were kept informed by management of changes related to work, that management and team leaders tend to deal with problems at work, and that CSRs are permitted some involvement in decisions that directly affect their work (see Table (iv), Appendix 2). The focus group discussions appeared to be consistent with the literature covering this field.

Further analysis of focus group discussions shows that CSRs raised concerns such as unfair decisions by management, lack of involvement in decision making, not being informed of changes such as new clients and products, lack of staff meetings, and use of staff meetings for just listening to superficial matters but not being allowed to discuss deeper work problems (see Table (iii), Appendix 1). Sixty-seven per cent suggested regular meetings to communicate with team members and managers, also time and facilities to encourage socialisation at work for stress relief:

*There is no time to discuss problems with agents or team leaders let alone socialise or debrief ... At meetings all they talk about is results ... results and more results (CSR D1) ... What pisses me off is that very often one goes unrecognised unless they are part of the inner clique and suck up to management at social functions or at the pub after work (CSR D2) ... There is no double time payment for weekend shifts, the team leaders also pressure you to attend these social functions on weekends where it is looked down upon if you don't ... Stuff that for a joke (CSR D3) ... I've come to realise loyalty and hard work means nought around here ... to get a pay rise or a promotion or reasonable shifts ... It isn't who you are, it's who you suck up to (CSR D6) ... We need time out for stress relief (CSR D4) ... When there are meetings all we get to hear is the same old stuff, motivational hype. There is no time to socialise with the team at work as you are always on the phone (CSR D5).*

Dynamico's novel approach of reporting awards or individual results of the so-called champion CSRs created deeper resentment by some CSRs:

*One thing that gets us annoyed and is a real putdown is that when someone makes employee of the month for making more sales or exceeding their stats, other agents are made to feel quite disgusting ... 'pie in the eye' (CSR D4) ... It is humiliating, the employee of the month award is given to a team member, a poster is made up and displayed in the office for the month which consists of their photo (CSR D6) ... The team leaders make such a fuss by taking us off the phones for five minutes or so then the employee of the month is given a prize of either movie tickets, a dinner or a holiday, but we go through the 'pie in the eye' farce, it gets annoying (CSR D5) ... That agent is given free rein to hit another employee with a cream pie directly in the face and we are all expected to laugh and cheer, and return to work ... What pisses us off is that the others in the team who helped get the results get nothing by way of group rewards and are normally the target of the pie and have to put up with such behaviour (CSR D3).*

This emerged from the qualitative focus group research and it relates to the negative aspects of organisational culture. A form of simulacrum is evident where the company on the surface level promotes 'fun and social environment' and team work, but the on deeper level a false rhetoric or simulacrum reveals the darker side of managerial styles where one individual is rewarded while others are negatively punished. This is to some extent consistent with what the literature refers to as manufactured sociability. These contradictions are further highlighted when one considers that the 10 CSRs in focus groups commented on how much they enjoyed the fun and social aspects of working with the

company and being part of the team (see Table (iv), Appendix 2).

#### 7.2.4 HRM and PMS

In terms of HRM and PMS Dynamico CSRs generally felt that there was a lot of performance monitoring of most aspects of their work including group and individual targets. In focus group discussions relating to aspects of this, four CSRs on probation were concerned about the lack of job security while two others commented that they disliked the lack of career opportunities.

The remainder of the focus group participants enjoyed working there but did not consider this job to have career opportunities. The concerns raised related to inadequate ongoing training on new products and services (75%), also the need for stress relief time-out in workshops or through training to relieve the pressure. Feelings of isolation from the team due to intense call volumes and lack of times and meetings to debrief were negative aspects related to HRM and PMS:

*Most of the training was on pumping and motivating teams, especially new staff (CSR D1) ... Management get a new contract but don't give us enough product or service training, often we are left to fly by the seat of our pants when customers ask difficult questions (CSR D2) ... I hate this as it reflects on my job (CSR D5) ... Being on probation and treated as a casual for the first six months is hard as you have bills to pay ... Wondering whether I will pass the probation or decide to stay is always bothering me (CSR D3) ... At the end of the day this is not a career job anyway (CSR D1).*

#### 7.2.5 Job benefits

The results for Dynamico in relation to job benefits (see Table (iv), Appendix 2) reveals that CSRs reported that they were satisfied overall with pay and detached from the customer. They generally felt that job benefits were adequate and reinforced the team approach, and liked the individual workstations and staff café. Bonuses for team competitions were well regarded even though there were not enough, and some recognition for individual performance through bonuses was appreciated. On the negative side, the techniques for announcing and rewarding individual performance were considered a negative, as in the 'pie in the eye' ritual.

It appears that Dynamico overemphasises the group or team as the unit for measuring and rewarding performance. When the individual is highlighted for their performance it may single out attention which is incongruent with group job benefits and PMS rationale. This coupled with rituals that indirectly punish teams and individuals was seen as a negative:

*What pisses us off is that the others in the team who helped get the results get nothing by way of group rewards and are normally the target of the pie and have to put up with such behaviour (CSR D1) ... It's always great to get restaurant vouchers or win a free holiday for your bonus (CSR D2) ... Also people are not really recognised for assisting the customer (CSR D3) ... The pay and benefits are as good or better than at other companies I worked for (CSR D6).*

### 7.2.6 Built environment

Emerging from the focus groups is consistent with themes identified in some of the literature (Baldry 1998; Barnes 2007; Taylor et al. 2003), were concerns about the built environment. The selected verbatim from 60% of CSRs from the two focus groups below reveals that the large warehouse structure which housed over 2,000 CSRs affected health and wellbeing in a number of ways. This included poor physical layout of workstations contributing to noise problems which affected ability to concentrate on effectively answering calls. Having open offices, some CSRs constantly felt they were being watched and listened to by supervisors, which affected their ability to comfortably answer calls, perceiving a sense of unnecessary invasion of privacy by team leaders and team members alike:

*Sitting down all day is not healthy ... We could have wireless headsets to encourage exercise and moving around (CSR D9) ... Freedom to chat, to socialise with other agents also (CSR D10).*

The built environment in terms of the lack of partitions and privacy contributed to perceptions that background noise from other staff was distracting and sometimes interfered with the ability to provide quality customer service:

*Occasional noise levels (CSR D7) ... It is hard to answer calls with background chatter and agents laughing or mucking around (CSR D8) ... It is difficult to concentrate, especially with screaming customers on the phone and noise in the background (CSR D11).*

The spreading of colds and flus due to draughts and ineffective heating and cooling in the building contributed negatively to overall health and wellbeing:

*Too many colds and flus during winter ... which contribute to sick days, therefore reduce team motivation as you feel you are letting your team down taking days off (CSR D1) ... Air-conditioning is either too cold or too hot ... causing draughts and colds ... It's a converted warehouse with no partitions and shared office germs ... When one gets a cold the others drop like flies (CSR D3).*

An emerging theme which has not been considered in the call centre literature in terms of differentiating between the work roles for inbound compared to outbound CSRs relates to customer abuse and rejections. The focus group discussions revealed that these were a concern for outbound CSRs only. There was also a feeling of lack of job security for those on probation:

*At the end of the day it is totally off-putting as some customers slam the phone in your face (CSR D10) ... Yes, also getting abused for ringing people at dinner time I can understand it would be annoying to me, however there is no excuse for the abuse and yelling you cop from some customers (CSR D11) ... Although it cuts you up at times ... you must get results and sales are a part of the job that management care about ... Management are aware of how it affects us but do little to help (CSR D12).*

The CSRs accepted monitoring as part of the job, with 50% of focus group respondents finding it 'too intense' but not excessive. What also emerged from the focus groups is that monitoring sometimes acted as a safeguard against abusive customers who knew that their calls were taped.

## 8. DISCUSSION

The focus groups shared a very strong concern about the monotony of activities related to their job roles and the overall lack of functional flexibility (70%). The qualitative information highlighted the important role that job rotation has in diminishing the sense of monotony. This is an emergent theme considered by the literature. Lack of job rotation and skill development seems to be a constant theme across all the call centres, irrespective of the type of service delivered.

The issues identified by CSRs as a source of job dissatisfaction were related to managerial practices such as not dealing with staff concerns as they arise, inequitable decisions and lack of involvement in decision making (work environment). The most reported themes were grouped under the category of functional flexibility, which included repetition, monotony and intensity of calls. Lack of control over shifts, hours and cancelling of shifts without notice were also recurring issues (temporal flexibility). Other concerns related to themes such as monitoring (unrealistic targets and rigid scripts), HRM issues such as pay parity and incentives, lack of career opportunities and lack of training. Categories identified through the content analysis are not mutually exclusive and further clarification is needed to explain the categories and how they relate to other, which will be undertaken in the sections that follow.

**Table (v).** Most negative & positive aspects of working for call centre, plus emergent themes

Most negative aspects	Most positive aspects
1) Lack of functional flexibility including monotony of task, repetitive work and large volumes of calls (66%).	1) Culture of the organisation which included working in teams and the fun and social environment (75%).
2) Work environment: management's inability to deal with problems, unfair decisions, lack of involvement in decision making and limited amount of meetings to discuss problems (50%).	2) Work environment which included supportive managers and team leaders (42%).
3) Lack of temporal flexibility choice of hours and being told to take unsocial shifts, especially whilst on probation for the first six months (50%).	3) Casual dress code (50%).
4) Poor built environment, which included concerns about open offices where colds and flus were spread easily, draughts from working in a converted warehouse, and workstations and partitions contributed to a feeling of lack of privacy.	4) Having a choice of shifts to suit personal lifestyles (42%).
5) HRM issues: lack of career prospects and job insecurity (50%).	5) Associated job benefits such as in-house café and non-monetary benefits (25%).
6) Customer rejections and abuse (verbal abuse and telephone slamming) in outbound sales only (50%).	<b>Emergent themes</b>
7) Monitoring of work related to quantitative results, not quality of service (50%).	Lack of control over shifts and working unsocial hours (differentiated by gender).
8) Isolation from colleagues and lack of socialisation on the job (42%).	1) a) Fifty per cent of CSRs wanted more choice and control over shifts. Most were females who commented on the negative impact of unsocial hours, with their personal safety at risk, getting to and from work due to the lack of access to secure parking and/or catching public transport. b) Control of shifts for overtime payment reasons was cited by a male CSR. This included wanting better pay and conditions to compensate for working late shifts and/or more choice and control of negotiating shifts. 2) Customer rejection and abuse (differentiated by work area). The qualitative analysis differentiated the negative aspects of customer rejections and abuse for CSRs servicing outbound call sales. This differentiation has not been made by the literature previously.

Lack of job variety and lack of control over nature of duties, nature of projects was also an area of concern for CSRs (functional flexibility). Table (ii) (Appendix 1) shows areas where CSRs had negative responses. The theme was categorised as control over task flexibility and can be indirectly related to a suggested solution to one of the major dislikes expressed by CSRs, in particular monotony, repetition and intensity of calls. Suggestions were made to improve managerial practices by having more staff meetings, and overall improved communication including informing staff of changes. Further suggestions that rated highly were related to improving incentives and pay structures. The remainder of the themes appear to relate to HR issues such as more ongoing training, improving career opportunities and better recognition programs. In relation to monitoring, suggestions were made to bring in more realistic targets. Some also suggested improving physical conditions such as noise levels, and improving facilities related to the built environment.

Pressure from the customer as a result of customer abuse across all case studies was only reported by outbound CSRs. This was evident in both the focus group discussions who used outbound or blended operations.

Team leader support, fun and social environment and managerial culture, which included encouraging

involvement and participation, were highlighted as the most positive aspects of job satisfaction. Rewards were mentioned, however what was surprising was that few responses related to the positive aspect of dealing with customers. In working environments where most tasks were devoted to servicing customers, these low positive perceptions could be problematic for CSRs and management alike.

A large focus of suggested changes to improve job satisfaction was in fact not related to monitoring and surveillance, but to improving managerial practices. The other most frequent suggestion related to lack of perceived control over temporal, numerical and functional flexibility. The only suggested changes related to employer monitoring included setting realistic targets and how targets were set to PMS. In terms of dislikes related to monitoring of work, unrealistic targets and rigid scripts also appeared to be a concern. Extrinsic and intrinsic areas of HR were raised but to a lesser extent.

The qualitative findings also demonstrated the significance of the degree and intensity of CSRs' feelings about management policy and practices. They also identified emergent themes and trends not considered by the literature previously. Table (ii) illustrates the exploration of the five identified and two emergent dimensions.

**Table (ii).** Cross-case analysis findings of dimensions and CSR perceptions

Dimensions	Dynamico	Insureco
1. a) Monitoring of work related matters (technological pressure and customer pressure) b) Personal privacy over non-work-related matters	- -	- -
2. a) Employee control over work environment b) Culture	- +	- -
3. a) Flexibility numerical, temporal flexibility b) Task functional flexibility repetition and monotony	- -	- -
4. Performance management and HRM factors 5. Job benefits	- +	- -
6. Built environment	-	-
7. Emotional pressure from customer	-	-

(+ = positive CSR attitude to dimension), (- = negative CSR attitude to dimension).

Emergent themes worth considering for future research:

- Differentiation by gender regarding the negative effects of unsocial hours was a concern for both males and females in two call centres (Dynamico). Females were less concerned with not receiving overtime payments but more with physical safety concerns of getting to and from work, as well as spill-over effects on home relationships.
- A positive aspect both call centres was identification with company or internal teams (which has been reported rarely in the non-call-centre literature). There was positive identification with external customers or clients.

## CONCLUSION

Our qualitative analysis confirmed that the PJS model is a valid and reliable instrument for measuring and predicting job satisfaction. The qualitative findings confirmed Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3 as being positive, that is, that the three dimensions identified (monitoring, flexibility and work environment) are important contributors to CSR job satisfaction. These findings identified and explained the existence of complex relationships between the model's dimensions of monitoring and job satisfaction not previously reported in the literature. For instance most academic researchers considered monitoring as a negative contributor to job satisfaction. We found that it has both positive and negative effects. This novel finding was the result of using a wider dimension

measurement and an innovative methodological approach.

Results suggest that there is no evidence to confirm hypothesis 4 and 5, that is, explain an association between two of the PJS model dimensions (HRM and PMS and job benefits) as contributors to job satisfaction. There is a lack of empirical research involving HRM and PMS and job benefits dimensions. Added to this, the few studies dealing with this topic tend to be confusing as a result of inconsistent ways of operationalising these concepts. We found that call centres that had in place strategies to manage job satisfaction on three dimensions (monitoring, flexibility and work environment) tended generally to have higher CSR job satisfaction perceptions. The PJS model identified a previously unknown relationship between independent variables. Two of the dimensions (flexibility and work environment) have a mediating effect on one of the independent variables (monitoring).

Although this research assumes a uni-dimensional approach, it does have limitations, and these give rise to suggestions for future research. This study was restricted to identifying and predicting the determinants of job satisfaction for CSRs as the major outcome of the research. Linking job satisfaction to other outcomes such as customer service satisfaction and organisational profitability was not empirically tested. These relationships could be considered for future research.

## References

1. ABC 2000, *The Business of Change*, Four Corners, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 28 Aug.,



- [http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/archives/2000b\\_Monday28August2000.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/archives/2000b_Monday28August2000.htm).
2. ACA Research 2001, *Australian Call Centre Industry Study*, ACA Research, Sydney.
  3. ACA Research 2004a, *Customer Service Satisfaction Survey*, ACA Research, Sydney.
  4. ACA Research 2008a, *Australian Contact Centre Consumer Report*, ACA Research, Sydney.
  5. ACA Research 2008b, *Australia & New Zealand Contact Centre Industry Benchmarking Report 2008*, ACA Research, Sydney.
  6. ACA Research 2009, *Australia and New Zealand Contact Centre Industry Benchmarking Report*, ACA Research, Sydney.
  7. Akerlof, GA & Yellen, JL (eds) 1986, *Efficiency Wage Models of the Labor Market*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
  8. Alder, GS 1998, 'Ethical issues in electronic performance monitoring: A consideration of deontological and teleological perspectives', *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 17, no. 7, pp. 729-74.
  9. Alferoff, C & Knights, D 2001, Organizational knowledge as resistance and disciplinary mechanism in the social relations of the call centre, paper presented to 19th International Labour Process Conference, London, 26-28 March.
  10. ASU 2009, *It's Your Call: Improving Australian Call Centres for Workers: 2009 Survey Report*, Australian Services Union, Melbourne, <http://www.asu.asn.au/media/itsyourcall-surveyresults2009.pdf>.
  11. Bain, P & Taylor, P 2000, 'Entrapped by the "electronic panopticon"? Worker resistance in the call centre', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 2-18.
  12. Baldry, C, Bain, P & Taylor, P (eds) 1998, *Bright Satanic Offices: Intensification, Control and Team Taylorism*, Macmillan, Houndmills.
  13. Barnes, A 2005, 'The centre cannot hold': Resistance, accommodation and control in three Australian call centres, PhD thesis, School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour, Faculty of Commerce and Economics, University of New South Wales, Sydney.
  14. Barnes, A 2007, 'The construction of control: The physical environment and the development of resistance and accommodation within call centres', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 246-59.
  15. Baudrillard, J 1995, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
  16. Belt, V, Richardson, R & Webster, J 2002, 'Women, social skill and interactive service work in telephone call centres', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 20-34.
  17. Blader, SL & Tyler, TR 2003, 'What constitutes fairness in work settings? A four-component model of procedural justice', *Human Resource Management Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 107-26.
  18. Braverman, H 1974, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review, New York.
  19. Budde, A 2002, 'Broadband the decade's boomer', *Age*, 1 May.
  20. Callaghan, G & Thompson, P 2001, 'Edwards revisited: Technical control and call centres', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 13-37.
  21. Cavana, RY, Delahaye, BL & Sekaran, U 2001, *Applied Business Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, John Wiley, Brisbane.
  22. Chalykoff, J & Kochan, T 1989, 'Computer-aided monitoring: its influence on employee job satisfaction and turnover', *Personnel Psychology* vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 807-34.
  23. Chapman, C 2009, Australian Communications and Media Authority, Melbourne, <https://www.donotcall.gov.au/>.
  24. de Grip, A, Sieben, I & van Jaarsveld, D 2005, *Employment and Industrial Relations in the Dutch Call Center Sector*, Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market, Maastricht University, Maastricht.
  25. Deery, S, Iverson, R & Walsh, J 2002, 'Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal', *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 471-95.
  26. Edwards, PK 1990, 'The politics of conflict and consent: How the labor contract really works', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 41-61.
  27. Fernie, S & Metcalf, D 1998, *(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops*, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science, London.
  28. Folger, R 1987, 'Distributive and procedural justice in the workplace', *Social Justice Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 143-59.
  29. Frenkel, S, Tam, M, Korczynski, M & Shire, K 1998, 'Beyond bureaucracy? Work organization in call centres', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 9, no. 6, pp. 957-79.
  30. Hallis 2003, *Turnover and Absenteeism Survey*, Hallis, Sydney.
  31. Hannif, Z, Burgess, J & Connell, J 2008, 'Call centres and the quality of working life: Towards a research agenda', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 271-84.
  32. Holman, D 2002, 'Employee wellbeing in call centres', *Human Resource Management Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 35-50.
  33. Holman, D, Batt, R & Holtgrewe, U 2007, *The Global Call Center Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcenter/upload/GC-C-Intl-Rept-US-Version.pdf>.
  34. Holman, D, Chissick, C. & Totterdell, P 2002, 'The effects of performance management on emotional labor and well-being in call centers', *Motivation and Emotion*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 57-81.
  35. Hyman, J, Baldry, C, Scholarios, D & Bunzel, D 2003, 'Work-life imbalance in call centres and software development', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 215-39.
  36. Kidwell, RE & Bennett, N 1994, 'Employee reactions to electronic control systems', *Group and Organization Management*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 203-19.
  37. Kinnie, N, Hutchinson, S, Purcell, J, Rayton, B & Swart, J 2005, 'Satisfaction with HR practices and commitment to the organisation: Why one size does not fit all', *Human Resource Management Journal*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 9-29.
  38. Leventhal, GS 1980, 'What should be done with equity theory? New approaches to the study of

- fairness in social relationships', in Gergen, K, Greensburg, M & Wills, R. (eds) *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research*, Plenum, New York.
39. Mason, D, Button, G, Lankshear, G, Coates, S & Sharrock, W 2002, 'On the poverty of apriorism: Technology, surveillance in the workplace and employee responses', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 555-72.
  40. McManus, S 1999, *The Call of the Wild*, <http://workers.labour.net.au/12/a>.
  41. Nixon, S 2002, 'Sick or not, we just can't shake the Mondayitis', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 Feb.
  42. Paul, J & Huws, U 2002, *How Can We Help? Good Practice in Call-Centre Employment*, European Trade Union Confederation, Brussels.
  43. Reilly, P 2001, *Flexibility at Work: Balancing the Interests of Employee and Employer*, Gower, London.
  44. Rose, E & Wright, G 2005, 'Satisfaction and dimensions of control among call centre customer service representatives', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 136-60.
  45. Russell, B 2008, 'Call centres: A decade of research', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 195-219.
  46. Shoebridge, N 2000, 'The chase goes beyond chasing customers to building relationships', *Business Review Weekly*, <http://www.brw.com.au/content/010698/brw30.html>.
  47. Taylor, P & Bain, P 1999, "'An assembly line in the head": Work and employee relations in the call centre', *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 101-17.
  48. Taylor, P, Baldry, C, Bain, P & Ellis, V 2003, "'A unique working environment": Health, sickness and absence management in UK call centres', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 435-58.
  49. Toomingas, A, Nilsson, T, Hagberg, M, Hagman, M & Wigaeus Tornqvist, E 2003, 'Symptoms and clinical findings from the musculoskeletal system among operators at a call centre in Sweden: A 10-month follow-up study', *International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 405-18.
  50. Wallace, C, Eagleson, G & Waldersee, R 2000, 'The sacrificial HR strategy in call centres', *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 174-84.
  51. Walsh, J & Deery, S 2006, 'Refashioning organizational boundaries: Outsourcing customer service work', *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 557-82.
  52. Yin, RK 2003, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

**Table (iii).** Focus group findings: Negative CSR responses

Number of responses D= Dynamico =12 I= Insureco =12 T= All centres = 24	Coded themes (by dimension)	Number of incidences	Literature Consistent similar context CSC Consistent dissimilar taxonomy CDT	Quantitative findings Yes No	Emergent themes E	Keywords and description of code
D I Total	<b>Functional flexibility</b>	8 6 <b>14</b>	CSC	Yes	E	Monotony, repetitive work, intensity, large volumes of calls, rigid scripts (six outbound CSRs only) Differentiation between inbound concerns of intensity, repetitiveness and monotony. Outbound concerned with rigidity of scripts
D I Total	<b>Work environ</b>	6 8 <b>14</b>	CSC  CSC	Yes  No		Poor management practices including: unfair decisions by management, lack of involvement of CSRs in decision making Lack of staff meeting meetings to discuss work issues Abusive managers, poor treatment and nepotism regarding promotions and pay rises
D I Total	<b>Temporal flexibility</b>	6 6 <b>12</b>	CSC  CDT	Yes	E	Lack of control of hours, shifts especially in first six months of employment (Dynamico) Ongoing problem for Insureco Shifting agents from inbound to outbound without notice and compensation and no training. Breaks not long enough  Unsocial hours Differentiation on gender (link to lack of personal safety to and from work – female Dynamico CSRs). Male CSRs all centres concerns re: lack of penalty rates for unsocial hours
D I Total	<b>Job benefits</b>	0 3 <b>3</b>	CSC	Yes		Pay parity and lack of incentives. Lack of pay rises
D I Total	<b>Other issues Emotional pressure</b>	6 3 <b>9</b>	CDT	No		Customer rejections and abuse (verbal and telephone slamming) (Outbound CSRs or those involved in sales

	<b>from customer</b>				E	outcomes only) Differentiated by role outbound only. Inbound did not raise this as an area of concern in the study
D I Total	<b>(HRM)</b>	6 4 10	CSC	Yes		Lack of career opportunities Lack of job security (Dynamico casuals = 4)  Unrealistic targets (Insureco only = 4) Lack of training on products for new customers/clients (Dynamico =4)
D I Total	<b>Other issues</b>	5 5 10	CSC	No		Isolation from team (no time to socialise or discuss work matters on job), only time to socialise if you attend out of hours functions
D I Total	<b>Monitoring</b>	6 4 10	CSC CDT	Yes	E	Constant pressure from the number of calls waiting prompt on computer screen. Time pressure & associated anxiety. Role conflict torn between providing quality customer service or just answering quantity of calls  Differentiation inbound compared to outbound. Outbound concerned less with overall monitoring, unrealistic targets, rigid scripts. Inbound more concerned with excessive and intensity on quantity criteria of monitoring
D I Total	<b>Personal privacy</b>	3 5 8	CDT	Yes		Policies are in place to allow facilities and time to attend to personal matters during work Time pressures don't allow this (Dynamico) Management have strict policies against this and punish this behaviour. (Insureco) team leaders always listening in.
D I Total	<b>Built environment and personal privacy</b>	6 0 6	CSC	No		Open office spreading of colds, due to draughts in building Open office creates noise (constant chatter of other CSRs talking on telephone or to each other hard to concentrate on call transaction) (Dynamico only). Open office, no privacy from supervisor watching over you and listening in is distracting (Dynamico only)

Source: CSR coded responses derived focus groups 'what like least about working in call centre'. N=24

## Appendix 2

Table (iv). Focus group findings: Positive CSR responses

Call centre D= Dynamico I= Insureco T= All centres	Coded themes	Number of incidences	Literature Consistent similar context CSC Consistent dissimilar taxonomy	Quantitative findings Yes  No	Emergent themes E	Keywords and description of code
D I Total	<b>Identification with 1)customer 2)organisation 3) team</b>	10 10 20	CDT CDT	No No No	E  E	Results oriented and company has a good external reputation with customer (Insureco = 8) Fun and social environment working in teams (Dynamico=10) Overall positive identification with culture aspects
D I Total	<b>Management and team leader support</b>	5 3 8				Other team leaders are supportive
D I Total	<b>Casual dress</b>	6 0 6	CDT	No	E	Casual dress code aligned to internal teams
D I Total	<b>Pay and benefits Non-monetary rewards</b>	3 0 3	CDT	Yes		Good conditions (Dynamico café and bonuses)
D I Total	<b>Customer contact</b>	0 0 0	CSC	Yes	E	Customer satisfaction from job

D I Total	<b>Temporal flexibility Choosing shifts</b>	5 0 5	CDT			(Dynamico = 5) Being a large organisation (after 6 months probation period have a choice of shifts to suit)
D I Total	<b>Monitoring as safeguard</b>	0 5 5	CDT CSC	No Yes	E E	Positive aspects of monitoring include ensuring work equitability (i.e. prevent some staff from slacking off) Ambivalence or acceptance that management have a right to monitor work performance and quality assurance. Call monitoring may diffuse customer abuse and hostility when customers are informed that calls would be monitored for quality purposes (outbound CSRs only)

(Source: CSR coded responses of focus groups 'what like most about working in call centre'. N=24 (Note: there can be more than one response from individuals)).