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Abstract. Development of work in call centres was an action research project conducted in three call centres in Denmark between 2003 and 2007. During this period the project succeeded in creating new work organisation for seven hundred employees. The change process was documented by qualitative and quantitative methods. The comparison of the surveys and interviews before and after the change show that the employees have obtained a better psychosocial work environment. The project has showed that it is possible to develop the work in call centres with positive results for the employees and the company.

Keywords. Call centre, work organisation, psychosocial work environment

1. Introduction

A growing number of employees worldwide work with customer service in call centres (Holman 2007). Call centres are becoming one of the most significant means by which the knowledge society offers service to customers and citizens.

A call centre is a workplace that is in contact with customers and citizens by means of the telephone or other electronic devices. It is a production concept for the making of service based on integrated communications and information technology. Typically, the workplace is a large, open office space with many people sitting in groups or rows. There are call centres in many fields: the financial sector, industry, retail, logistics, telemarketing, market analysis and in government functions.

Call centres became common in the mid 1990s (Arzbäcker 2002; Bain & Taylor 2002; Holtgrewe 2002; Sørensen & El-Salanti 2005; Sørensen 2007). Some companies established internal call centres; others outsourced their customer service to independent call centres. This development was, and is, primarily driven by the companies' wish to reduce costs in connection with customer service (Bain 2002; Holtgrewe 2002).

The technological concept and the cost reduction strategy very easily lead to an organisational structure which is characterised by a high degree of division of labour and

specialisation combined with strict management control. This had lead to jobs which have no real content and to high demands with regard to speed, combined with low remuneration and high staff turnover (Sprigg & Jackson 2006). Call centres have been referred to as Tayloristic and "the new sweatshops", all terms which bring back memories of the negative aspects of industrial mass production (Bain & Taylor 2000; Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Holtgrewe 2002).

A large proportion of the research regarding call centres characterise the work environment as monotonous, repetitive, controlled, with high quality demands, few development prospects and low degree of freedom. In addition, it is often work where the employee has to "smile down the telephone" regardless of how she feels or how the customer treats her. The employee has to be in control of the conversation and must finish it quickly at the same time as giving the customer the feeling of having received good service (Bain 2002; Callaghan & Thompson 2002; Knights & McCabe 1998; Sprigg & Jackson 2006; Taylor 2002).

Other research projects paint a more positive picture of the work environment in call centres, although they too find that the work is intensive and controlled. Research shows that call centres are very varied and that there are call centres with a relatively broad job content, good management and good education prospects (Batt 2000; Holman 2003; Kleemann & Matuschek 2002; Richardson & Gillespie 2003).

2. A Danish project

In Denmark there are an estimated 20,000-25,000 people working in 3-400 call centres. Employment in call centres is still growing (El-Salanti 2004). The industry took off in the 1990's. The development in Denmark is relatively similar to other industrial countries, however, the unions seem to have had a larger influence on call centre development (Sørensen 2007). The employees in Danish call centres have more discretion, less monitoring and higher wages (Holman 2007).

A three-year project concerning call centres was finalised in 2006. The project was called "Call centres – work development" focused on developing the work and work organisation. A total of 700 employees and managers participated in development activities and training.

The project was one of the largest Danish research and development projects with a focus on work environment, where staff, managers, consultants and researchers worked together with the aim of creating a positive development perspective. The project was supported by the European Social Fund and carried out by researchers and consultants at the Technical University of Denmark, TeamWorklife (TeamArbejdsliv) and the South Zealand Business College.

Two companies from the financial sector participated in the research project. Two hundred employees from a large Danish mortgage bank participated in the project and three hundred employees from the largest Danish retail bank. The third case company was the largest Danish telecommunication provider where two hundred employees from one call centre participated in the project. A fourth call centre serving the utility sector

volunteered for the project, but due to a merger, no change of work and work organisation was implemented during the project period.

3. Methods

The aim of the project was to develop a concept for work organisation and the related competencies, which would ensure efficiency and quality in call centres as well as a healthy work environment. The project could be termed action research as it was carried out as a combination of research based on qualitative and quantitative methods, where researchers and consultants collaborated closely with the company managers and staff in developing the new concepts.

The grant from the EU Social Fund was based on active participation from the companies. When the companies contributed to activities financially or by using time on the project, an equal amount was donated to the project. These funds could be used for research, consultants, meeting facilities, administration, etc. In total, around €2,700 per employee were donated by the fund during the three years intervention project.

The outset was based on the following research based assumptions: The call centre managers can be made aware that service quality, profitability and well-being are closely associated and that active involvement of the employees in change processes creates motivation and learning. Therefore it was well-founded to give time and focus on the project. But at the same time it was important to consider that effective, continuous production is quintessential in call centres. Therefore, the researchers and the consultants had to tailor their effort to the rhythms and needs of the call centre.

The project started in 2003. In February 2003, all employees in the four centres filled out a questionnaire which dealt with questions related to call centres and focussing on the psychological work environment. The questionnaire was accomplished before any changes were implemented and therefore serves as a baseline for the evaluation of the effects of the organisational changes in the call centres.

In the spring of 2003, the project was established at the individual call centres, and a number of initiatives were implemented, leading to the development of new ideas for alternative organisational concepts. The new concepts were developed in a joint process without any readymade solutions. The ideas were based on a vision of moving away from control and towards a focus on staff involvement, independence, responsibility and development. During 2003, the ideas matured and were later implemented in different ways in three of the call centres.

During 2003-2005, qualitative studies were carried out on an ongoing basis in order to evaluate the changes taking place in the four call centres. In 2005, the new work organisations were fully implemented and operational in three of the four call centres. In October 2005, the questionnaire study was repeated in three of the call centres at the same time as a final qualitative study was conducted. A management survey was conducted in addition to the employee survey.

The effect of the organisational changes during 2003-2005 was measured by comparing the responses to the two questionnaires and analysing the extent to which the differences could be seen as the result of changes that had occurred due to the project. The

analysis was based on qualitative studies (observations and interviews) which had been carried out during the project period. The qualitative studies threw light upon the development processes as well as on the ways in which the new work organisation worked in practice. At the same time, the qualitative studies made it possible to control for other events which could affect the questionnaire responses.

3. Results: New work organisation

The development in the three call centres was generally characterised by the implementation of new organisational structures, including greater responsibility, decentralised coordination and better learning and sharing of knowledge. The development had also led to an independent role for the employees, who would take responsibility for their own professional development. It was an overall development process, which changed the work organisation and improved the work environment. In 2005, the three call centres had developed and implemented three different forms of work organisation which were all different to the traditional Tayloristic organisation. In summary, the organisational concepts can be described as follows:

A new role for the single employee and manager: In this concept the employees got an independent and responsible role and the role of the managers changed from being one of control to being supportive of the staff. The employees were trained to get a deeper understanding of the goals of their work and managers were trained to take on a more supportive role and to communicate and follow-up on goals and achievements in a manner which did not come across as control.

Competence teams: In this second concept, the organisation of the group provided an effective framework for the sharing of knowledge and skills development. The group was responsible for skills development and for coordination within the group. Peer coaching was part of skills development. In order to be able to form competence groups, the employees were trained in communication skills and interaction, including coaching, and the team leader was given greater management responsibilities in order to be able to support the development of the group.

Cross-sectional teams: In this concept, more tasks were delegated to the team. This was done by forming teams which consisted of staff with different competencies, and by expanding the professional competencies of individual staff members. In addition, the team became partially self-governing and had a coordinating role as well as the responsibility for follow-up on operational targets. In order to establish this concept, team building and competence development initiatives were carried out. The management skills of the team leaders were strengthened in order for them to be able to support the movement towards independence, responsibility and competence development within the teams.

The project illustrated that it is possible to find alternative ways of organising the work, but our experience shows that this can only be done if management is genuinely interested in the change and wants to invest in it. Team leaders and staff were actively involved in the development and planning of the process and were given the necessary training. This ensured the competencies and commitment which are so crucial for success.

4. Results: Effects on the work environment and productivity[1]

The analysis of the questionnaires and interviews from 2003 and 2005, i.e. before and after the implementation of organisational concept showed the following changes in work environment and productivity:

- The employees had more positive demands (challenges) in the daily work and more opportunity to participate in the development of their work
- The employees felt that their managers supported them more in their development than they used to, and that they were encouraged to come up with ideas for improvements
- The employees felt that their immediate superior and colleagues in other departments appreciated their efforts more. A larger number of the employees felt motivated and committed to their job.
- The employees had more influence on the planning of their daily work.
- The majority of the employees continued to be measured by the calls they answered (number, length, log-in time, etc.), but in 2005, employees experience of the monitoring had become more positive. More employees saw monitoring as a way of increasing effectiveness and making their work visible. Fewer were stressed, nervous, irritated or angry about it, and fewer felt that the monitoring was a kind of surveillance and control.
- The employees were also very happy about being in their teams and they felt that the colleagues had become better to share knowledge and to learn from each other.
- Generally satisfaction with the workplace had improved, and an increased number of the employees would not hesitate to recommend their job to others.
- The number of staff who felt that the work was mentally strenuous had also decreased since 2003.

The stress levels among the employees did not change significantly during the project period. The project activities did not to a large degree affect those working conditions which, according to the study, primarily contributed to stress among the staff. In addition, stress levels could be negatively affected by the significant development and the changes which took place in connection with the project.

The employees experienced less conflict between the number of customer calls and the customer service they were expected to manage. A greater proportion of staff thought that the workplace operated efficiently and delivered good quality customer service. The managers were also of the opinion that the quality of the service had improved, and this was confirmed by the companies' own assessments. Productivity was maintained in all three centres. These results indicate that the implementation of the new organisational concepts in the three call centres was successful and under realistic business conditions.

5. Conclusion

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[1] The analysis of the results can be found in Mathiesen (2006)

The results of the organisational changes were very positive, and the main conclusion of the project is that it is possible to change the work organisation in call centres to make it more satisfactory for the employees and increase the quality of the customer service without reducing productivity.

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