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1

'Striving under Chaos': The Effects of Market Turbulence and Organisational Flux on Call Centre Work

Phil Taylor, Gregor Gall, Peter Bain and Chris Baldry

Introduction

The Marxist concept of the 'full circuit of capital' (see, for example, Kelly (1985: 32)) is seldom used to understand the processes and outcomes of workplace change. However, movements in the capitalist economy, such as market turbulence, and relations between units of capital often have a direct influence on work organisation and the employment relationship. The 'full circuit' comprises both downward vertical relationships between market-workplace and capital-labour and horizontal relationships between units of capital, involving production and realisation of surplus value. This perspective allows for contextualised analysis of articulation and disarticulation between market and workplace consequent upon the capitalist imperative to accumulate. But mindful of replacing one error, the narrow horizons of workplace studies on control, for another, mechanically imputing workplace change from market change, such environmental forces are seen to *shape* rather than *determine* work, and employment relations (Hyman, 1987; Blyton and Turnbull, 1998: 66), thereby allowing for the role of agency while at the same time recognising the compulsion to accumulate.

This chapter examines how workers experience the effects of market turbulence on their work and employment through organisational churn and flux. Turbulence is conceived of as continual disorder, disruption and disturbance in levels and nature of economic activity in general as well as in specific product markets, leading to agitation which produces change in courses of action, that is, organisational churn and flux. Churn and flux are conceived as continual intra-company change and disruption in structures, workforce composition, work design, work organisation and process, work rates and attendant regulations. The salience of turbulence lies in the widespread belief that not only has market turbulence been a constant feature of

capitalism, but it has increased since the early 1980s as a result of economic and social deregulation. There seems plentiful evidence for this: shorter and more accentuated cycles of growth and recession, increasing rates of company births and deaths, ever greater mergers and acquisitions, never ending organisational restructuring, and more 'new' management techniques. Concomitantly, there have been widespread job cuts, increasing employment insecurity, rising work intensification, and growing incidence of atypical work. This chapter investigates the extent and nature of these links and their effects.

Methodology

The research draws on findings from a 3-year study of call centres in central Scotland, funded by the ESRC 'Future of Work' programme. In each centre, four to six members of the research team spent 6 months examining the content and organisation of work and the employment relationship, as well as assessing the links between workplace, community and household. Given the diversity within, and spread of, call centres, the concept of a 'typical' call centre is unsustainable, notwithstanding commonalities *vis-à-vis* integration of computers and telephony. The four call centres – referred to here as M, E, T and H – were selected to represent not only some of the most important sectoral concentrations (finance, media/telecoms, outsourcing and travel), but also because they carried out a range of services requiring differing employee abilities and skill levels. Informal and semi-structured discussions were conducted with call-handlers, team leaders, union reps and managers. In addition, a detailed staff questionnaire was carried out with response rates from 45 per cent to 85 per cent and a range of each company's policy documents, reports and statistical data examined.

Global capitalism

Central to understanding the processes and outcomes of the globalised economy is that it comprises the main component of capitalist society. Accordingly, the central dynamic of both economy and society is the compulsion to accumulate surplus, whereby production, distribution and exchange heavily influence and structure human activity in private and public spheres (Harman, 1986). Capitalism is characterised by an interlinked cycle of booms and slumps, of varying magnitudes, where the conditions of one provide the basis for the other. The unplanned, uncoordinated and relatively decentralised nature of capitalist economic activity at the supra- and inter-firm level creates sharp and unrestrained tendencies towards systemic instability, whether of growth or contraction (Harman, 1986).

Our research was undertaken during the period (late-1999 to 2001) in which the US economy's boom reached its zenith and, following the

bursting of the speculative boom which had characterised it, gave way to recession. The causes, nature and consequences of boom and crisis in the world capitalist system during the 1990s have been the subject of recent debate, stimulated by Brenner (1998, 2002) and responses of Marxist and critical thinkers (*Historical Materialism*, 1999a,b). Agreement exists on the significance of features of the real, but exaggerated, boom and the transition to crisis. The boom was made possible by recovery in levels of profitability resulting from large-scale restructuring that eliminated inefficient capital, historically unprecedented repression of real wages and the devaluation of the dollar relative to other major currencies (Callinicos, 2003: 41). Yet, by the late 1990s, these effects had ceased to create dynamism as the Clinton administration reverted to a high dollar and the rate of return in manufacturing fell. But, following Federal government intervention in 1998 as a response to the profound fears generated by the Russian economic collapse, the greatest financial bubble in history developed. Equity prices exploded and there occurred, 'the absurd disconnection between the rise of paper wealth and the growth of actual output, and particularly of profits, in the underlying economy' (Brenner, 2002: 182). Despite this obvious divergence, the Federal Reserve Bank continued to fuel the hype surrounding the 'new economy', asserting that the dynamism of this sector had ushered in a new era in which the boom-slump cycle had been overcome.

However, 'the economy could defy the gravitational pull of actual relations for only so long' (Brenner, 2002: 188) and when the rate of profit began to fall, the end of the boom was inevitable. From this perspective, the role of the financial markets is: 'less an autonomous source of instability, more as one dimension of a set of interconnected processes driving capitalist economies towards crisis' (Callinicos, 2003: 43). From 2000, e-commerce firms saw their share values collapse first and then the broader markets began their precipitous drop. In both the US and UK, over-investment and overcapacity became widespread, particularly in the 'new economy', most notably technology, media and telecommunications. The 'new economy' has suffered particularly severely as a result of asset price inflation, the dominance of shareholder value, chronic indebtedness and the 'financialisation' of the economy (Froud *et al.*, 2002). The profound effects generated in the course of the rapid transformation from superheated boom to supercooled contraction could not but act as a general source of uncertainty and instability at sector, company and workplace levels.

While, from the late 1970s, leading western governments had publicly vilified the state's role in the economy, in reality, they had played an active role in social and economic developments. First, privatising state-owned industries or removing sector regulation, has allowed companies access to new, profitable opportunities. Second, this was achieved by targeting 'supply-side' factors, for example, deregulating labour markets to facilitate 'flexibility', and/or imposing tighter legal restrictions on workers' rights.

Organisational turbulence

Reflecting tensions emanating from the systemic 'chaos' was the stance of the UK government, described as 'more wary of the European Social Model' than of US 'hyper-individualism and social authoritarianism' (Marquand, 1998: 19). Moreover, dissolution of the post-war settlement's socio-economic regulation, has meant that management and employers have been in uncharted territory. When combined with increased competition, delayering and downsizing, and rapid technological change made possible by ICT, this has resulted, at the organisational level, in an urgent search for new panaceas and paradigms. One of the dominant themes of the academic 'post-ism' literatures is that post-modern/bureaucratic/Fordist social organisation is characterised by fluidity and an absence of stasis, making previous organisational paradigms redundant. Thus, it is argued that bureaucracy embodies too rigid a set of organisational principles to be effective in responding to change and that hierarchies have been replaced by networks, with the concept of flexibility being given iconic status as both a goal and *post hoc* justification for change (Peters, 1987, 1997). For those of a managerial perspective, this could only be a 'good thing', and companies could stay ahead only if they constantly embrace change and 'thrive on chaos' (Peters, 1987). Such exhortations ignored the shop floor experience. Even if companies survive and 'thrive', what have been the effects of constant change (downsizing, mergers, takeovers, just-in time, TQM, HRM, BPR, 'customer care' and 'zero defect' programmes, and teamworking) on workers?

Contextualised workplace relations

Following Kelly (1985) and Hyman (1987), Thompson (2003) argued that current trends in capitalism should serve to emphasise that there are periods when work relations are not the principal drivers of change and that focussing solely on the workplace is likely to neglect the underlying machinery of (capitalist) markets. In one sense these are truisms, but in the context of recent trends in the sociology of work, post-Foucauldian labour process theory and organisational analysis, these observations valuably refocus attention on the system-wide dynamics which structure and shape the contemporary workplace. According to Thompson, a period has been entered in which financial markets are now the dominant drivers whose impact on labour is experienced through processes of organisational restructuring. Sturdy and Morgan (2001) argued that the consequence of the 'financialisation' of change in response to the new dynamics of capital markets is a 'continuous churning inside the companies'. These insights need to be taken on board when analysing workplace and intra-firm change in order to broaden the analytical framework to consider the impact of political economy on the workplace. Just as market operations shape but do not determine managerial

action, so changes in work organisation and labour process at the workplace are not solely explicable by reference to managerial control strategies *per se*. They are understandable only when the wider connections with capital and product markets are explored, and the workplaces are situated in the dynamics of their respective industrial sectors.

Call centres

In the above context, call centres have become an organisational imperative in customer interactions. Their rapid establishment and position of dominance in service delivery has been created by being able to remain competitive by using the speed and data-integrative capacity of ICTs to offer quicker, more complete and, critically, more cost-effective, customer services (Marshall and Richardson, 1996; Taylor and Bain, 1999: 102). With origins in centralisation of bank customer servicing and back-office operations, the cost advantage gained in the UK by Direct Line and First Direct's lead in integrating telecoms and computerising telebanking and insurance stimulated others in financial services to follow (Bain and Taylor, 2002). This established a model for sale and delivery of services that was quickly taken up by the travel industry, telecommunications, public utilities and by any company wishing to expand into direct selling and marketing.

The advantages were obvious – closure of small, relatively high-overhead high street branches, banks and travel agents, and creation of large customer databases, housed in a few centres serving the whole country, increasingly operated on a '24/7' basis, with the ability to respond to customer enquiries and to offer a 'one-stop shop' for sale of ancillary products. The consequences, however, have been those usually associated with innovative work systems. While those who first adopt such models potentially gain windfall profits, imitation by others sees the 'competitive advantage' disappear. The only way to continue to compete is to use the, now established, work system more intensively. Here, although similar trends are evident in telecommunications, travel and utilities, and are additionally found in the growing outsourced sub-sector (Taylor *et al.*, 2002), financial services provides the clearest illustration (Bain and Taylor, 2002). Continual internal restructuring, the translation downwards of performance criteria, ultimately in the form of enlarged targets for call-handlers, and the transformation of customer service roles through the requirement to sell, have all been evident. Therefore, as the product of increased competition and market turbulence, it is not surprising that call centre work displays a schizophrenia of alternating priorities between customer service quality and cost reduction, with concomitant inherent tensions, change and uncertainty.

Four sectors of economic activity

Before examining the experience of work in the call centres, accounts are presented of the market turbulence affecting the companies and the sectors in which they operate.

Finance

Although retail banking has been subject to continuous change in products and processes of delivery since the 1970s, the dominant firms were protected by industry regulation and their ownership of the central clearing system (Morris *et al.*, 2001: 241). However, by the late 1980s, several factors brought sweeping changes to banking, insurance and financial services. Deregulatory reforms, particularly measures contained in the 1986 financial services and building society legislation, facilitated 'rapid change and inter-penetration of the hitherto discrete markets' (Marshall and Richardson, 1996: 1848). The combined effects of tighter market conditions and new ICTs 'irredeemably shattered a post-war honeymoon period in the clearing banks of almost uninterrupted staffing expansion' (Cressey and Scott, 1992: 84). Recession and debt crises led to cost containment strategies, with employment in English banks falling by 80 000 to 220 000 between 1989 and 1999 (while part-timers rose from 45 000 to 72 300), and compulsory redundancies enforced for the first time in 1993 (Morris *et al.*, 2001: 241–2).

The growing sophistication and integration of ICTs saw 'home-banking' develop, pre-dating Midland Bank's launch of First Direct in 1989 (BIFU, 1996: 5). Customers could phone any time, day or night, to conduct transactions normally performed in Midland branches, thus offering: 'a new identity at a time when customer dissatisfaction with traditional banks was generally high, with perceptions of poor service and high charges' (BIFU, 1996: 6). Similarly, Direct Line, established by Royal Bank of Scotland in 1988 to sell car insurance, soon expanded into household insurance, personal loans and mortgages (Marshall and Richardson, 1996: 1852). Although closure of high street branches began in the 1980s, the rapid take up of the call centre medium for delivery of financial services contributed to one in seven closing between 1990 and 1994 (BIFU, 1996: 9). By the late-1990s 'all the main players [were] now vying for a share of the same market [amid] readjustment and rationalisation of existing facilities' (IDS, 1998: 7).

In 1989, M abandoned mutual building society status and became the UK's fifth largest bank (with a market capitalisation of £1.7), offering an expanded range of financial products and services. In its first year, profits and the share price rose from £501 m to £582 m, and £1.30 to £1.81 respectively (M, 2002). Thus, 'With more money available to build the business, and fewer restrictions on its activities, M's conversion to a bank meant it could expand quickly, both organically and by acquisition' (M, 2002).

Table 1.1 M's acquisitions and mergers in the 1990s

Year	Nature of acquired business	Value (£)
1992	Life assurance company	288 m
1995	Point-of-sale finance house	285 m
1996	Car-leasing and used-car finance companies	128 m
1996	Merger with another building society	assets increased by 11.6bn
1997	Wholesale money market and offshore banking company	195 m
1998	Point-of-sale finance operations	347 m

Source: M (2002).

Throughout the 1990s, M pursued an extremely aggressive acquisition strategy (Table 1.1). The company was to later summarise its development during this period as representing 'the transformation of the Group from a newly converted mortgage bank into a diversified, international provider of financial services' (M, 2001).

Like its competitors, M closed many high street branches, expanding services in four new call centres in the UK in the mid-1990s. However, as the business environment became stormier and more competitive, heralded by the dot.com companies' collapse, M continued seeking ways to gain competitive advantage and cut costs. It launched the first interactive computer bank in the UK, expanded its branch-franchising scheme and outsourced its general insurance business. However, due to a flagging share price and perceived lack of strategy, after 2000 M came under heavy pressure and itself became the subject of take-over bids (*Herald*, 2001).

Telecommunications

The last two decades have witnessed a transformation in virtually every aspect of the telecommunications industry (Cave *et al.*, 2002). Technological innovation and application, including increases in capacity through optical-fibre technology, digitilisation and connectionless architecture based on Internet protocols which enable integration of voice, data and video, have been powerful engines of change. Yet, arguably of greater salience, and facilitating technological diffusion in the sector, have been the effects of liberalisation, market developments and growth of financial markets. Since the mid-1980s, neo-liberal governments subjected state-controlled telecom monopolies to competition with the process accelerating in the 1990s following the *Telecommunications Act 1996* in the USA, and the EU's decision in 1998 to liberalise the sector. Consequently, incumbents were challenged by new entrants. At a more fundamental level, the structure of vertical specialisation in telecommunications allowed new entrants to 'buy in' the most

recent technology, thereby significantly lowering barriers to market entry (Fransman, 2002). But this emerging structure of 'easy and rapid entry (made possible in the first place by regulatory change) brought about an increase in the intensity of competition in parts of the Infocommunications Industry' (Fransman, 2002: 21), constituting both precondition for the boom of 1996 onwards and the subsequent bust of 2001–02.

The role of financial markets proved equally decisive, facilitating the entry and initial growth of new companies (Fransman, 2002: 55) and then mergers and acquisitions (e.g. WorldCom's takeover of MCI) which characterised the sector in the mid- to late 1990s (Trillas, 2002). While the scale of investment in telecoms was staggering, estimated at \$1805bn between 1996 and 2001 (Fransman, 2002), share prices of these dynamic new entrants increased disproportionately. Over-optimistic expectations regarding profitability were universally held by investors, telecom operators, equipment suppliers and even regulatory bodies, inducing a gold-rush mania of speculation and over-expansion. Fransman (2002: 25) consequently argued, 'once these exuberant expectations changed to become pessimistic (a reflection of general changing stock market sentiment), the emperor's clothes quickly fell away'. Share prices, inflated far beyond the real level of profitability in the sector, or indeed the economy, started to fall as prices fell and profit margins failed to materialise. The subsequent crash was as spectacular as the boom that preceded it. At its height in early 2000, the total stock market value of all telecom operators and equipment suppliers was \$6300bn. Before '9/11', \$2500bn was wiped off (*Financial Times*, 2001). Since then, the sector has been characterised by universal revenue and profit crises and wide-scale bankruptcies amongst the successful new entrants, such as WorldCom (*Financial Times*, 2002).

This analysis is essential to understanding E's activities and performance, and for contextualising work organisation and the experience of work in its call centres. E, as a large transnational company providing a range of cable-delivered telecommunications and entertainment services in both analogue and digital modes, was a direct beneficiary of deregulation, acquiring in the early 1990s the UK terrestrial television transmission system. Following acquisition by a smaller competing cable company, it grew rapidly through aggressive takeovers, including in 1998 the major player in this market segment, which resulted in the acquisition of its four UK call centres. E exemplifies the generic weakness of the new entrants – exaggerated expectations of customer demand, revenues and profits; massive indebtedness; 'merge to grow' strategies; and inflated share price. Even during the sector's boom period of late 2000, its pre-tax losses of \$630 m almost outstripped revenue of \$666 m¹ (*Financial Times*, 2000a). These problems have been compounded by issues specific to the cable sub-sector and the difficulties caused by attempting to integrate acquired operations. With corporate debt of \$17.5bn by late 2000 (*Financial Times*, 2000b), E attempted to overcome

its problems through continuous capital and operational restructuring. Through the 'Planning for Growth' (PFG) strategy, 2300 redundancies were planned for 2000 and a further 5000 for 2001. With severe internal financial constraints, the intractability of its difficulties in unfavourable telecoms and financial markets, allied to continued competitive pressure from its remaining UK competitor, E was forced to seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2002.

Outsourcing

Outsourcing is a relatively new development in the organisation of production, distribution and exchange under late capitalism. Previously, the *modus operandi* was agglomeration via direct ownership to obtain economies of scale, although significant sub-contracting existed in manufacturing. Outsourcing is now one of the main methods by which the organisation of capital is being reconfigured to meet the present challenges of accumulation. Others include de-mergers, selling off 'non-core' businesses and joint-ventures. Outsourcing, it is argued, reduces exposure to economic risk in uncertain environments as well as facilitating market sensitisation of intra-firm activity, leading to reductions in basic costs associated with full in-house provision. Wage rates can be 20–40 per cent less in outsourced operations compared to in-house. Furthermore, it is argued economies of scale with regard to quality and productivity can be created by dedicated and specialised operations. Outsourcing may suggest, via de-agglomeration, support for the 'disorganisation of capitalism' thesis (Lash and Urry, 1987). In practice, outsourcing is not without problems: control can be weakened not strengthened through creation of dependency, 'quality' of good or service can be reduced and costs can spiral, in spite of contractual terms.

Outsourcing represents a departure whereby sub-contracting now concerns contracting out of key functions (e.g. IT, accountancy, personnel) within service parts of the economy (business services, public sector). Outsourcing has, thus, moved from production to distribution and exchange, and covers back-office functions and interface with customers. However, outsourcing can also involve service sector firms becoming mere 'shell' companies that conduct their core activities through deploying services of others.

Consequently, firms have specifically emerged to provide these services, while existing companies have moved from servicing in-house operations to providing these services *in toto* such as TCS and Vertex. Call centres are a prime mechanism in outsourcing by virtue of their geographical mobility and functional separation from production/delivery of products/services as a result of ICTs. They offer the ability to concentrate sales and customer service functions into a small number of operations at a distance from outsourcees with considerable cost reductions.

In terms of call centre activity, outsourcing represents a dramatically growing specialism within a dramatically growing 'sector'. In Scotland, for

example, the number of outsourced call centres grew from 18 (with 2905 employed) to 42 (9010 staff) between 1997 and 2000, representing a growth in its proportion of call centres from 18.2 per cent to 20.4 per cent (Taylor and Bain, 2001: 12). Originating as an in-house operation of a utility provider and following expansion of its customer services call centre activity (sales, billing, after-sales service) in the early 1990s, T now provides customer services on behalf of about 20 clients operating in Britain and Europe. It sells 'competitive advantage' through selling its expertise, being able to provide tailored services with short lead-in times and lower labour costs. According to T (1998: 3),

Rather than ascend the steep learning and investment curve [of establishing call centres], many companies choose to outsource [which]... reduces the bureaucracy and overheads associated with in-house call centres [and] can raise service levels and increase revenue as well as providing the latest technology at no added expense.

Thus, T provides design, organisation and implementation services for establishing, running and expanding an (outsourced) call centre. Customers have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with T to establish and maintain the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of performance.

T was launched in 1999 with a share price of about £3 that climbed to approximately £8 within six months on anticipated profits. But although an expanding sector, the process of matching supply to demand in a competitive environment is a fragile and indeterminate one. Demand is not real until it is made tangible through a contract or viewed retrospectively and it can be created as well as found. T planned for growth speculatively [sic] by creating capacity to operate more accounts but this was not always forthcoming and, that which did was not always the high-value, quality business sought. This created financial performance problems, and continual refinancing from the parent group which was not repaid through profits. In turn, these created pressures at a lower level on costs and performance. Turnover targets were attained but costs were higher and losses greater than anticipated. This, and growing market instability, created delay in T's flotation from the parent company, flotation that was intended to fund further expansion in internet and interactive services. This culminated in a 30 per cent then 90 per cent slump in share price (*Sunday Herald*, 2000; *Times*, 2000) on news of both worse than anticipated growth and losses, reflecting the bursting of the dot.com bubble. Over-valuation, then corrective action, led to a further collapse in business confidence in this sector.

Holidays

The structure of the lead organisations in the sector follows the vertically integrated model established in the 1980s by UK market leader Thomsons,

consisting of a three-tiered sandwich of holiday company/travel agency/charter airline. Although in 1997, the EU Competition Commission had declared itself satisfied that this structure was 'broadly competitive' (*Financial Times*, 1999), the sector was *de facto* an oligopoly, the UK market being dominated by four companies (Figure 1.1).

This concentration had been stimulated by increasing pressure on profits. This arose, first, from movement in customer demand away from all-inclusive packages (on which the profits of the big four had been based) and the rise of budget airlines which removed much of the price difference between standard and chartered flights and allowed holiday makers to construct their own holidays. Package holidays fell from 70 per cent of all trips abroad by UK citizens in the mid-1980s to barely 50 per cent by 2000 (*Marketing Week*, 2000). Second, profit margins in UK holiday companies were already slender because heavy discounting of holidays in the 1980s had led many British holiday-makers to reject any full-priced holiday that did not seem like a bargain. Since 1995, the average inclusive holiday price had stuck at about £400, with a corresponding depreciation in real income for the companies over this period and steeply falling profit margins.

These pressures led to three main responses: an increase in 'self-focus', merger and acquisition, and use of telephony and e-sales. Originally, the travel agency arms of the big companies acted as general agencies who, for a commission, would sell their rivals' products. By 1999, this was becoming less likely; Thomsons had used its market leadership to impose a smaller commission on sales of its holidays by rivals and, as profits tightened, they in turn retaliated by largely cutting out Thomsons and promoting their own brands. Thomsons was forced to push sales of its own holidays via Lunn Poly which, paradoxically, reduced the commission Lunn Poly earned from selling rivals' packages.

Pressure of increased competition, post-1992 EU market re-positioning and EU endorsement of the vertical integration model, encouraged successive waves of acquisitions: the value of mergers in the sector rose from £200 m (1997) to £900 m (1998) (*Financial Times*, 1999). The process had been set in train earlier when, in 1992, Midland Bank sold Thomas Cook to the WestDeutsche Landesbank (WDL) and the German LTU group. In 1994,

Figure 1.1 Structure of UK holiday sector market leaders in 1998

<i>Holiday company</i>	Thomsons/ Skytours	Thomas Cook /Sunworld/ Club18-20	Airtours	First Choice
<i>Travel agency</i>	Lunn Poly	Thomas Cook	Going Places	Sovereign travel
<i>Airline operator</i>	Britannia	Flying Colours	Airtours international	Air 2000

Airtours purchased the Scandinavian Leisure Group and in 1997, Thomsons bought the Swedish company, Fritidsresor. In 1998, cross-border acquisitions accelerated, involving airline rationalisation in response to the challenge of budget carriers. First Choice bought Leisure International and their airline Unijet (to be integrated with Air 2000) and Carlson Leisure (owners of Caledonian Airlines) bought a 22 per cent stake in Thomas Cook: the other 78 per cent was now owned by WDL through subsidiary Preussag. Caledonian Airlines and Flying Colours were merged and rebadged as JMC. By 1999, bids and counter-bids were being continually announced. Swiss Kuoni bid for First Choice, prompting a rival bid by Airtours that was disallowed by the EU Competition Commission. Preussag then bid for Kuoni to stop the latter's bid for First Choice, which would have created a rival company with similar European coverage. The following year saw Preussag (or rather its subsidiary TUI) successfully purchase Thomsons for £1.8bn, forcing through competition regulation, Preussag to sell its Thomas Cook holding. This was bought, together with Carlson's holding, by German C&N Touristic (formed from Condor Airlines and Neckerman Touristic and owned by Lufthansa and retail group Karstadt Quelle). C&N Touristic was previously outbid by Thomsons for Airtours (now renamed MyTravel). In mid-2002, the European Court of Justice's overturning of the block on Airtours' First Choice bid was widely seen presaging further consolidation. However, paucity of surplus capital, the big players having exhausted their reserves in the first round of merger mania, and the shock to long-haul sales of '9/11' further squeezing profit margins, called a temporary halt to the process.

As a third response, companies sought to increase the flexibility of means of purchasing a holiday, primarily through call centre and internet access for customers, later augmented by digital TV channels. By early 1999, call centres were handling 4000 holiday enquiries a day and the telesales share of the market had risen to 28 per cent. As part of this trend, our holiday company 'H' established and acquired four UK call centres between 1996 and 1999, including the one examined here.

Experience of work

We are now in a position to examine the experience of work in the four call centres. Following this, we analyse the connections between market turbulence and organisation flux and churn.

The finance company: 'M'

The call centre had commenced operations in 1995 and, at the time of our research (1999–2000), employed 170 people. Two-thirds of the workforce was engaged in routinised, low-value loan operations, and the other third in providing higher-value mortgage and personal financial advice. Overhead electronic boards showed the number of calls received, handled and lost,

longest call time waiting, and number of customers queuing. Individual and team performances and targets were displayed in each team area, alongside league tables. Increasingly, by 1999, concerns were being expressed about how work content and organisation was being moulded by a seemingly never-ending process of change and, in the light of their aggressive strategy, about the sort of company M was becoming. Issues such as the hugely increased utilisation of temporal flexibility and outsourcing, and the continuous re-structuring and re-composition of work teams, contributed to feelings of unease amongst employees.

However, a central and recurring feature of company policy was the drive to increase profitability by raising employees' targets. In December 1999, this strategy was made explicit at a special conference of UK call centre managers when, under 'Year 2000 Challenge', the Board revealed new sales targets for all products. While there was one projected increase of 5 per cent, eight between 32 per cent and 176 per cent, one of 400 per cent and one of 1015 per cent, only one product's sales were expected to fall (by 4 per cent). Furthermore, to remove any dubiety about how these targets were to be achieved, the managers were informed 'income must grow two or three times more than costs; therefore, productivity must increase'. The implications of this for the workforce are discussed later, but some managers anticipated problems when employees heard the news. Questions were asked concerning the rationale and analysis used in setting the new targets, and if there were any guarantee they would not be increased again during 2000 (as had happened in 1999). When the corporate plan was cascaded down to the call centre workforce, although there was heavy emphasis on the need to improve performance, management did not mention the new sales targets.

The reality of how these changes were perceived by, and affected, the workforce was graphically illustrated in employee interviews. It had only been a few months since targets had last been increased and a new bonus scheme introduced, and one customer advisor (CA) spelled out what all this meant:

The last two years my targets have practically doubled... When I started I took £5 million worth of loans. [T]his year ... it's rumoured to be £9.5 million in Loans.

The issue of how these policies would affect the quality of customer service was also addressed by another CA:

...if a customer had a problem...with their branch or something, we took it on board and we used to follow it through. Now it's like they don't care... 'get them on the phone – get them off the phone – next'. It's a production line.

As for the new bonus scheme, a team manager was clear concerning the limitations of its efficacy and allure: 'the targets are too high – I wouldn't use it to attract new workers'. However, the pressure from the company took other forms and brought other problems in its wake. Under a revised employment contract introduced in 1999, new starts had to be available to work between 7.00 to 23.00 hrs. (instead of 8.00–21.00 hrs.), Monday to Saturday, and some were on annualised hours (M, 1999). Consequently:

I hate ... com[ing] to work ... because ... you're coming in and you're going to get hit with something else that's changed ...: 'next week on Monday we're doing an 8–5 shift, and we're getting our lunch at eleven o'clock in the morning' [but] ... the canteen isn't even open. ... They want you to take half an hour for your lunch and stay and do a couple of hours overtime. That would be a 12-hour day.

[I] feel as though I'm working for IBM, you know, a little robot. Whereas they always took time out and said how are you getting on, now you're just a number ... it got so bad at one stage in here you had to put your hand up to go to the toilet ... Changes kind of started about eighteen months ago ... it just snowballed from there. We have to do mortgages, car insurance, bank accounts, health checks and you're like 'I don't know anything about this, how can I try and sell it?' But they weren't giving you any briefs to read, so you would put your customer on hold and go and ask, then get shouted at 'You're on that call too long.'

It was also clear the revised targets meant that the 'bottom-up' method by which the high-grade FPA (financial planning advisor) schedule of four customer appointments per day had been organised, was to end. Instead, it would be a 'top-down' exercise in which the company centrally set targets for each call centre, and these would be dis-aggregated to team level and then allocated to individual advisors. This FPA seemed to speak for colleagues in all areas of the call centre:

I've got concerns about the targets that we have been given this year because they have gone quite a bit higher than they were last year, and 95 per cent of the centre struggled to hit them last year. So that tends to make you think, God, here's another struggle again. Every year it's another struggle.

The telecommunications company: 'E'

The prolonged crisis of E described earlier generated uncertainty, insecurity and a reorganisation and intensification of work for call centre staff. First, a merger with its erstwhile principal rival was the source of two issues causing concern amongst operators. Non-integrated customer databases whose effects

managers 'had not thought through' proved to be a nightmare for call-handling. Second, and at the same time, in its drive to reduce costs, E embarked on a strategy to erode the superior terms and conditions of those operators who remained on their original contracts, harmonising downwards to the new E contracts. Third, the effects of E's precarious position were directly felt through the constant fear of redundancy. One manager stated: 'all staff were feeling vulnerable and demotivated', and predictions of impending closure periodically circulated: 'There are actually some rumours that E aren't going to stay here all that long and they are going to sell to Sky or whoever for a better price.' Several operators reported that the implementation of the PFG strategy had caused many of their fellow workers to leave in pursuit of more secure employment. That the high annual turnover rate of 37 per cent for 2000 was caused in no small measure by such fears of insecurity was confirmed by a manager. An integral part of PFG was reduction of administrative resources and support leading to the identification of vulnerable groups – quality, service performance and retention teams – where unnecessary tasks were to be stripped out. One operator reflected a cynicism that ran through much of the workforce: '[PFG] is a pretty unfortunate name, I think Planning for Pay Offs would be more accurate.'

For those operators who remained, PFG also brought about work intensification which was acknowledged by a manager: 'It means we are trying to squeeze out extra performance from each area: customer analogue, digital customer services, moves and transfers.' Operators commented on how targets had been revised upwards as part of the drive to increase productivity, for example,

I feel as though the goal posts were moved. When we came to retentions we were told the bonus would be based on the save rate, average handling times (AHT), call shape and call accreditation.² Then ... we were told your bonus will be based on your save rate, and your AHT target has to come down 30 seconds every month since January. It was 520 seconds.

Bain *et al.* (2002: 167) argued that targets lie at the heart of call centre management strategy. Upward target revision, a contemporary expression of speed-up, became the principal means by which E attempted to raise the productivity of its workforce in the circumstances of general crisis of uncertainty and profitability that bedevilled its operations. Intensification of labour was a direct consequence of the collapse of E's grand strategy of expansion, which itself was a symptom of the crash of the briefly exuberant new economy of telecommunications.

The outsourcing company: 'T'

The call centre at T, employing between 320 and 400 staff, has been subject to general and specific churn but less than might be expected as a result of

particular internal organisational configuration and relations of capital. The inherent nature of rapidly establishing new 'live' accounts for external customers creates its own problems despite economies of scale. Pressure on costs reduces lead-in time, creating hurried preparation. Unfamiliarity with new set-ups and products is revealed. In turn, these are magnified by a high degree of account turnover, either through many short-term and/or loss of accounts. These processes lead to intra-organisational instability and shop floor disharmony that impacts deleteriously on performance quality and quantity. To this are added various factors: the differing nature of accounts and client demands, reflecting, in part the pressures clients respond to by virtue of the sectors they operate in. A countervailing factor is that SLAs stipulate, *inter alia*, response times and quality benchmarks. This exists not because of SLAs *per se* but because they have been initially set with staffing levels for projected demand which can fail to materialise, often substantially so. Although staffing can be reduced through turnover, some staff are agency staff, some contracts are short-term and internal staff move to new start-up accounts, 90 per cent of contracts are permanent, creating 'rigidity' in numbers employed. Furthermore, T's parent, a highly profitable 'old economy' company, has been able and willing to support and fund refinancing, creating some distance between T and the impact of poor accumulation rates. *In toto*, this means that, other than in a couple of high-volume, low-quality accounts of established products and established clients, the volume of calls has not materialised, producing a relatively slack pace of work.

That said, staff turnover, created by processes resulting from rapid business expansion and staff 'exit' strategies, comprises a major source of flux. Expansion has created vacancies that constitute promoted posts for many aspirant staff belying the usual impact of flat managerial structures. Owing to the specialised nature of outsourcing and in order to maintain organisational affiliation, an internal labour market has been the most efficient and effective way to fill these posts. Concomitant, the heavy graduate bent of the workforce tends towards staff movement by dint of aspiration towards upward mobility. Further vertical flux is created, where new staffs are needed to fill incumbents' posts, with knock-on effects further down. Notwithstanding the ensuing general dislocation, the training and experience of promoted staff are often insufficiently developed because of short tenure and training needs succumbing to performance demands, so adding to dislocation. There has also been horizontal flux, where owing to the creation of new accounts and the monotony of work in others, staff chose to transfer to other similar posts. Others have left T altogether due to the monotony of work and to gain better remuneration elsewhere.

The internalised labour market for middle and senior-level call centre staff is such that there is a turnover of staff within the call centre sector, again accentuated by rapid growth. This feeds through to a total turnover of about 29 per cent (officially 12 per cent (T, 1998: 8)) with substantial account

variation, a 15 per cent drop-out rate in training, 4 per cent sickness-absence rate, only 34 per cent of staff having worked for T for 18+ months, only 14 per cent are 35+ years with 42 per cent being between 17 to 25 years old and the absence of espoused team meetings. In turn, these are manifested in lowered productivity and service provision leading to various cultural initiatives to create commitment, motivation and loyalty as routes to enhanced performance, such as 'Building windmills: inspiring motivation' in 2000, and 'Winning Team Restructure' in 1999, where supervisors and managers had to reapply for jobs under competencies-skills matching. However, there has been no reorganisation of work as operations continue on standardised model of layout and process. While quantitative targets and subsequent monitoring exist, cumulatively increasing targets, enforced rigidly, have not featured widely at T. There is, though, use of normative and qualitative targets. Working time and shifts were reorganised to some extent to provide longer hours of opening.

The holiday company: 'H'

The consequences of restructuring and enhanced levels of competition were felt in H initially through employment levels. After one merger in 1999, H announced 325 job cuts (190 in Scotland) resultant largely from closing agency shops as the company's call centres expanded. In late 2001, a further 1500 jobs cuts followed. Although attributed to the '9/11' demand downturn, many staff believed this had been planned beforehand by the new German owners in response to an inherited surplus capacity and duplication of provision.

Less direct consequences were experienced through a series of incremental changes to work organisation and control that cumulatively intensified the labour process and generated high levels of insecurity over targets and earnings. Workflows at H were divided between customer help and sales, with sales having four distinct product groups. The trend away from acting as a general travel agency and towards promotion of own brands was evidenced in the pecking order of products suggested to customers who did not have a fixed idea of what package they wanted, starting with H products and ending with Thomson. Sales Consultants (SCs) were also left in no doubt that the competitive environment included not only other companies in the sector but also other H call centres and, particularly, H's high street agencies.

The impact of external sectoral changes was felt through marked monthly fluctuations in target levels, in addition to the normal marked seasonal sales fluctuations, and in an increasing complexity in the number of target dimensions to be met before bonuses were gained. The monthly sales target was set by head office, often only sent to the centres at the very end of the preceding month, and according to the union rep, determined by what market share H wanted to aim for. Managers then divided it up among the sales groups and these were used to establish team and mostly importantly

individual targets (see Bain *et al.*, 2002). The available bonus therefore not only varied from month to month depending on the projected volume of sales but also from individual to individual. Added to this there was also a 20 per cent shift allowance, all of which meant that SC take-home pay could vary month on month by about £400.

Targets had been originally set in terms of calls per hour and sales volume, including the sale of additional products such as holiday insurance which the SCs were under increasing pressure to promote. In mid-2000, call conversion rates (CCR) were included in target make-up and, by late 2001, as sales still had not picked up, the further ingredient of call-handling time was added. Compared to the start of our observation period, bonuses were getting smaller and harder to reach: as the sales were not forthcoming and few were reaching their targets, the company did not need to cut bonuses, it just did not revise targets downwards.

The effect of the increasing complexity of targets was certainly a decrease in the 'porosity' of working time, as all calls counted towards either volume targets and/or CCR:

Q: Does call conversion mean that you put more effort into persuading a customer to buy a holiday?

A: I think you've always had that pressure to sell... what call conversion means is that you don't now have a breather time in the month.

In addition to target complexity, the result of mergers and acquisitions was by now being reflected in an increase in the number of different types of call which workers had to remember how to process: one SC estimated she handled eleven different types of product.

Labour intensification was compounded by other developments including a draconian new sickness-absence policy and, most significantly, the introduction in early 2000 of 'Blue Pumpkin', a software system that allocated shifts and break-times automatically, thus eliminating what little control workers had over working time. Previously, although start times could vary, it was usual and expected for a given start time to be kept for the week. Under Blue Pumpkin, start times could vary by 15 minutes on a random daily basis and Saturday was treated as a normal working day. The ability of SCs to take lunch breaks in pairs and at times that allowed breaks to be fitted around call patterns now ended and the loss of Saturdays was resented by the young workforce. Complaints abounded that, because hours were allocated to individuals regardless of team membership, team spirit was being undermined as team members might not be working the same days together. This increasing disjuncture between the official ethos of teams and workers' experience was further heightened by frequent changes in team management, and the decision to shuffle team membership in the main reservation area. Finally, the pressure of the shake-out of surplus capacity

and the '9/11' effect on already meagre profit margins was made apparent in November 2001 when H requested salary cuts; after a union campaign these were rescinded in 2003.

Discussion

Workers' experience in the call centres has comprised, on the one hand, work intensification and extensification as well as immiseration of other material and psychological conditions like job satisfaction, although not uniformly so. On the other hand, workers have also experienced the social dislocation associated with staff turnover and organisational restructuring. The latter resulted in lowered productivity, occasioning corrective action by employers, suggesting something of a vicious circle. As with the dominant findings in the growing research on call centre labour processes, there is little evidence of 'shiny happy' workplaces and workers. The immediate source of this churn and flux was not market turbulence *per se* (general, sectoral) but senior management's *assessment* of the meaning and consequences of it for cost bases, revenue, profitability and share price as well as assessments of responses by their competitors, shareholders, investors and financial analysts. Following company assessments, courses of action were taken to deliver set objectives under prevailing conditions. Senior management has choices here but within fairly tight parameters, explicitly and implicitly set by the nostrums of the aforementioned third parties rather than an impersonal 'market'. Their responses invariably include raising labour performance and reducing unit labour costs as the hegemonic *modus operandi*, although launching of new products and mergers and acquisitions to gain market share also feature but in more minor and supporting roles. Notably, responses seldom involve innovative and fundamental redesigns or reorganisations of work such as Volvo's Kalmar experiment. But the prevailing conditions are seldom static because of the dynamism of capitalism, the growth in availability of finance and the recent deregulation leaving the market more unfettered. The degree of turbulence is arguably higher in the four sectors than in some others because of the rapidity of technological change unlocking new productive capacities (Morgan and Sawyer, 1988: 264). This leads to continual reassessments and changes or developments in courses of action.

Courses of action are then translated into initiatives and implemented by lower-level management creating organisational flux and churn. Being 'loyal lieutenants', they seek to make their charges 'strive under chaos' to make the companies 'thrive under chaos'. The flux and churn which workers experience, notwithstanding worker resistance that may dilute this, reflect attempts to 'strive' under market turbulence. Added to this is the impact of their responses to flux and churn, for example, exiting that creates staff turnover, that in turn increases the degree of flux and churn. In this way, we can follow the 'full

circuit' of capital downwards from the global economy to regional and national economies and then to industry and firm, prior to reaching the workplace. This means developing a tapestry of levels of analysis with intersecting processes and dynamics that avoid uni-dimensional sequences and causation while not losing sight of the totality of the imperative to accumulate under capitalism. Consequently, the general and particular can be accounted for and explained; on the one hand, the drive to expand or cope with crisis bearing down on labour costs, and on the other, T's dual but idiosyncratic specificity of SLAs and capital structure. So too can we account for the vicious circle created by the mantra of 'staying the same isn't an option'. The call centres were created in order to reduce labour costs but, as market turbulence ensued, they too were subject to flux and churn as employers sought to respond to crises. Indeed, the forces that create churn and flux continually undermine stability such that further churn and flux are then instituted.

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Notes

1. Although E's core operations were located in the UK, it was listed on the New York stock exchange.
2. The preceding four terms are mechanisms for measuring different aspects of individual call centre workers' productivity in E.

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