

Working Time Flexibilities: A Paradox in Call Centres?

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Abstract

Call centres are a source of job growth in many parts of the world. Jobs in call centres are a manifestation of the opportunities offered by ICT, together with the internal restructuring of organisations, to reduce costs and to achieve efficiencies. Extensive research has been conducted on the labour process in call centres, with findings suggesting that the work is demanding and high-pressured, entailing continuous operations with shift work being the norm, repetition and extensive monitoring and control. Moreover, call centres often have many female operatives, linked to non-standard work arrangements and the provision of emotional skills. Two features of call centres that are generally understated in the literature are their flat organisational structures and the use of team structures as a form of work organisation. There are often formal and informal mechanisms that could support flexible working arrangements, especially in the context of work-life balance issues. In this article we examine the impact of call centre work on work-life balance. Given the evidence of a high pressure work environment, we explore the types of working time arrangements in call centres, how working hours are determined, and the impact of these hours on work-life balance. Findings derived from a survey of 500 call centre operatives across 10 call centre workplaces and focus group interviews suggest that, despite the intensive and regulated work regimes that there is flexibility available in terms of adjusting working time arrangements to support non work responsibilities. A reconciliation of these developments is considered.

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Introduction

Call centres represent one of the most important sources of emerging jobs in the service sector in Australia and elsewhere (Batt et al 2009; Russell 2008). Recognised as the fastest growing workplaces in the 1990s, call centres have emerged as organisations of the new economy which have restructured service work as a result of the possibilities provided by emerging information and communication technologies. This restructuring has not only extended to the internal re organisation of service work but has also included very extensive external outsourcing of service work to specialist call centre providers in Australia and overseas (Burgess and Connell 2004). The internationalisation of the call centre industry has been a major development in the offshoring of jobs over the past decade to such countries as India, Mexico and the Phillipines (Srivastava and Theodore 2006; Taylor and Bain 2004).

There is an extensive literature on call centre work, in particular on the organisation and regulation of work (Russell 2008). Much of this literature has stressed the tedium and repetition of work, the automated distribution and regulation of the work flow, the forms of monitoring and control, the scripting of customer engagements, the stress and pressure of work and the high employee turnover attached to such work (Barnes 2004; Taylor and Bain 1999). The labour process imposes tight control over employees, exercised through the twin demands of customers and the technology. The technology can rationalise, allocate and control the pace and pattern of work and in turn generate metrics on work performance. Through technology work is not only controlled, it is also standardised. Hence most of the literature on call centres examines the Taylorisation of work within a context of high levels of control and standardisation. Batt et al (2009) suggests that around 80 per cent of employees work in mass market call centres where calls are routine, scripted and monitored and require customer service operatives with limited formal skills.

Complete standardisation and uniformity in tasks and calls is not, however, present at all call centres. For a start, inbound and outbound calls often perform different tasks – reaching new customers as opposed to servicing existing customers. Also, the service being provided may not be uniform or provided by those who have basic customer service skills. Many call centres provide complex services to professionals that require highly trained and qualified operatives who also have customer service skills – for example, health care and emergency services call centres (Russell 2008). Here the customer exchanges are far from routine; they can be complex and take long periods of time. With these types of engagements,

it is the quality of the exchanges, not their duration, which is important. The technology itself is not uniform, and not all call centres exclusively operate in telephony. Rather, there can be a variety of service interactions provided, including texting, web, fax and emails and call centres may operate simultaneously across these different forms of ICT. As Russell (2004) reminds us, not all call centres are the same. There is great variety between and within call centres in terms of the nature of the business transacted, the type of technology employed, the way work is organised and the degree of control and autonomy that is present within the workforce.

Apart from the potential for oppressive and routinised production processes, two features are also present in call centre organisation. First, there is a flat organisational structure. Call centres do not require elaborate chains of command and line managers. Typically a call centre will have a number of managers and team leaders who are responsible for a cluster of operatives. Team leaders generally perform a quasi managerial task and are appointed by and responsible to management, which initiates and imposes the team structure (Martin and Healy 2009, p. 403). Secondly, around the team leaders there are constructed teams. Through team organisation the responsibility for organising production and labour is decentralised down to the team leader and ultimately to the team. Teams in call centres have very little control and independent decision making authority (Russell, 2004).

It is these two features, teams and the team leader, that we wish to highlight in assessing the potential to balance work with non work responsibilities in call centres. Since many of the organisational details are left to the team, and specifically the team leader, there is scope for negotiating changes in working arrangements for the purposes of meeting work-life balance obligations. The irony is that while the organisation of production facilitates high pressure and controlled working conditions, this very process in itself can lead to formal and informal flexibility arrangements emerging with respect to work-life balance issues. The following section provides an overview of the working time and work-life balance literature as far as call centres are concerned.

Call Centres, Working Time and Work-life Balance

Call centres epitomise the shift towards technology-based work. The highly competitive nature of the market has placed immense pressure on call centres to maximise their availability and profitability (Paul and Huws 2000). Many call centres have expanded their services around the clock in order to service a wider

range of clientele in different time zones. Call centre staff are therefore expected to deal not only with the intensive nature of the work but also with often demanding shift arrangements that may impact on both their work and non-work lives (Union Research Centre for Organisation and Technology [URCOT] 2000; Paul and Huws 2002). High stress levels, high turnover and employee burn out have been reported as common occurrences within the industry (Healy and Bramble 2003).

The organisation of working hours in call centres depends on a number of factors, including the type of service provided, staffing levels and the location of the customer base. Call volumes and levels of demand are a large determinant and can vary according to the time of the day or the time of the year. Paul and Huws (2002) note that most call centres operate a two-tier system, which is based, first, on the normal operating hours where all call centre activities are carried out and the full range of services is made available to all callers, and, secondly, 'after hours' activities and services such as emergency call-out and support services, where a more restricted range of services is provided. There are also those call centres that operate around the clock, providing full ranges of services. The Australian Communications Association's (ACA) Call Centre Industry Benchmarking Report (2008) indicates that some 45 per cent of Australian call centres are open for five days per week, for an average of 13 hours a day during week days, and that a further 16 percent of centres operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call centres are also put under pressure to service significant variations in demand through managing staffing requirements. This quest for flexibility has led to a shift away from the traditional 9am-to-5pm, 5-days a week employment structure, a reduction of the working week to 35 hours and extension of opening hours in order to hire a higher proportion of part-time and casual workers (Watson et al 2003). Paul and Huws (2002) state that these workers are regularly called on to work shifts at short notice, and sometimes, for short periods of time. Researchers note that the ineffective management of staffing requirements can prove to have wide-ranging implications, from inadequate service quality through to increased levels of stress and sickness among customer service operators (CSOs) (see Paul and Huws, 2002).

There are also questions as to whether call centre employees are able to achieve an adequate balance between their work and non-work lives. Call centres are predominantly 'female' dominated workplaces: women occupy approximately two-thirds of all call centre positions in Australia (see URCOT 2000; Australian Communications Association [ACA] 2004). On the one hand, the wide range of

hours and shifts available in call centres has facilitated the entry of more women into the workforce (URCOT 2000; Belt 2002). On the other hand, the literature indicates that unsociable hours are often a job requirement and have the most negative impacts on women, particularly those with domestic responsibilities (URCOT 2000; Belt 2002; Paul and Huws 2002). UK evidence suggests that it is difficult in a call centre context for employees to negotiate work-life balance. (Hyman et al 2003). Studies show that men are also being affected by these issues, not only in call centres (Paul and Huws 2002) but in other organisational contexts (Watson et al 2003). Furthermore, call centres often use part-time and casual workers to generate flexibility in their operations (Todd and Burgess 2006). The outcome of this 'flexibility' can be ambiguous, suiting the needs of certain employees, particularly those with study or family commitments, whilst introducing greater precariousness into the working lives of others (Paul and Huws 2002).

In this paper we wish to examine whether call centres are supportive of flexible arrangements when it comes to varying shifts. The key role assigned to team leaders in organising and deploying labour suggests that there is a fair degree of discretion available to team leaders to accommodate workers in meeting non-work responsibilities. Although the internal production process may appear to be inflexible in call centres, we suggest that the sustainability of the process and the flat organisational structure are conducive to supportive flexibility arrangements within teams.

Methodology

We report findings from a cross-industry study on work and social cohesion in Australia. The call centre leg of this project took place between December 2008 and August 2009 and involved ten call centres of varying sizes and characteristics located in New South Wales (9) and Victoria (1) - see Table 1 below. The identities of the call centres involved are not revealed so as to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of participating organisations and individual respondents.

The study was in two stages. First, anonymised self-administered surveys, involving a combination of dichotomous and rating style questions, were conducted in each of the call centres in either hard or soft copy format. This resulted in 357 usable surveys with response rates ranging from 21 percent to 100 percent (as outlined in Table 1 below). The second stage involved researchers undertaking focus group interviews in each of the CCs. Focus groups involved between 4 and 7 CSOs and lasted between 50 and 80 minutes. The focus groups delved into greater depth about CSOs' experiences with the various facets of the work

environment, work-life balance being one of the key themes of focus. While the surveys highlight general trends in the work-life balance experiences of the survey respondents, the focus groups placed these trends in context by examining the deeper issues surrounding these experiences. The questions asked in the surveys and focus groups examined the hours that respondents worked, the amount of weekend and evening work they were required to do, whether the work required overtime, how working times were set in each of the call centres and the impact of work on home and family life. The following section outlines the key findings derived from the survey and focus group questions.

Table 1: Participating Call Centres' Characteristics

CC	Industry	Length Of Time in Operation	Inbound [IB] Outbound [OB]	No. of Seats	Turnover (% of overall workforce pa)	Survey Response Rate
1	Private equity	22	IB/ OB	50	NA	48%
2	Insurance	15	IB/ OB	148	20%	46%
3	Outsourcer: Answering service	12	IB	22	< 10%	100%
4	Local council	60	IB/ OB	4	<10%	100%
5	Insurance	24	IB/ OB	271	30%	31%
6	Medical Services	4	IB	50	<10%	44%
7	Insurance & Finance	7	IB/ OB	25	12%	72%
8	Finance	2	IB/ OB	400	NA	21%
	Outsourcer: Answering Service	9	IB	40	20%	50%
10	Outsourcer: Answering service/Telemarketing	13.5	IB/ OB	67	10 – 15%	33%

Findings and Discussion

Profile of respondents

The survey results indicate a prime-aged workforce, with only 18 per cent being 45 years or older. The majority (51.5 per cent) were in the 25 – 44 years category,

whilst almost 31 per cent were aged 24 years or less. Many studies of call centres across the world show that they are characterised by primarily female employment. This study was no different, with 71 per cent of respondents being female. These characteristics of employees working in Australian call centres are consistent with those indicated by other studies regarding the profile (ACA, 2008; Todd and Burgess, 2006).

The survey results indicated that 67 per cent of respondents were full-time permanent staff and 28 per cent were part-time permanent. This is not to suggest that the call centres surveyed did not use casual and part-time staff; rather, most of the surveys were likely to have been completed during the week, within the more standard working hours; part-timers and casuals, on the other hand, may be expected to be found in the evenings and on weekends. Far from being an obstacle, the high representation of full time and permanent staff is useful in terms of examining the flexibility and choices available to the staff who are employed under regular working time arrangements

What Working Time Arrangements Exist in the Call Centres?

Shiftwork is considered a growing phenomenon in call centres, with many centres increasing their availability by extending their hours of operation (Paul and Huws 2002). Whilst shiftwork may represent a desired employment model for certain CSOs because of their non-work commitments, for others it may intrude on their family and social activities (Dawson et al 2001). Of the ten call centres examined, two featured shiftwork as part of their 24-hour opening times. Whilst the literature suggests that larger call centres are more likely to offer shiftwork (see Paul and Huws 2002), this was not the case in this study. The only two call centres offering shift work (CC3 and CC6) had small configurations, having 22 and 50 employees respectively.

The shift workers within these contexts had been specifically recruited to work night or late night hours and consisted wholly of part-time or casual workers who had actively sought such arrangements. The working hours were therefore not imposed on workers, suggesting that there is some level of mutual flexibility in the arrangements.

Weekend work was more common than shiftwork. Of the ten call centres, eight opened on weekends as part of their regular opening hours; and seven of the eight opened on both Saturdays and Sundays. The 33 per cent of respondents who stated that they worked on weekends were more likely to be employed on

a part-time basis. As was the case in the ACA (2008) study, for some of these workers, the choice to work in the call centre represented a lifestyle choice, with weekends working in well with other commitments. For other workers, however, the focus groups indicated that weekends might in fact infringe on their lifestyles, particularly for those with non-work commitments that restrict their participation in the labour market to non-standard arrangements. As one CSO stated:

Ideally it would be nice to drop a couple of the weekends.. when you've been doing them as long as I have you feel like you are missing out on something especially when all the friends and family are off when you are slugging away (CC4).

Table 2: Call Centre Opening Times and Overtime Arrangements

CC	Opening hours	Weekend work	Overtime payments?
CC 1	Mon – Fri: 8am – 9pm Sat – Sun: 8am – 8pm	Sat/Sun	Unpaid
CC 2	Mon – Sat: 7am – 6pm	Sat	Paid
CC 3	24 hours/ 7 days	Sat/Sun	Paid
CC 4	Mon-Fri: 8am to 5pm	No	Paid
CC 5	Mon-Fri: 7am-10pm	No	Paid
CC 6	24 hours/ 7 days	Sat/Sun	Time in lieu
CC 7	Mon-Sun: 8am-9.30pm	Sat/Sun	Paid
CC 8	Mon-Sun: 8am – 9pm	Sat/Sun	Unpaid or time in lieu
CC 9	Mon – Fri: 7am - 7pm Sat – Sun: 9am-5pm	Sat/Sun	Time in lieu
CC 10	Mon–Fri: 8am-7pm Sat–Sun: 9am-2pm	Sat/Sun	Paid

In two of the smaller call centres (CC3 and CC7), there were several instances of workers on full-time appointments who worked at least one day over the weekend as part of their regular working hours. These call centres also afforded their employees significant flexibility in terms of choice over their working hours (discussed further below). This indicates not only the increasing use of more flexible working time models within call centres, but also a redefinition of 'standard' full time working hours to encompass weekend work. Within this context, the incidence of weekend work may not necessarily impose on work-life balance. Rather, it may afford certain CSOs more opportunities and greater flexibility in

managing their non-work responsibilities, particularly where CSOs have choice in determining their hours of work. The issue of how working hours are determined in the call centres is discussed below.

Evening work, which we define here as work conducted after 6 p.m., occurred in eight of the ten call centres. The remaining call centres (CC2 and CC4) opened until 6 p.m. at the latest. As was the case with weekend work, these hours were predominantly worked by CSOs on part-time or casual contracts. In all instances, the call centres had deliberately recruited for evening shift: the hours were not imposed on CSOs as a job requirement. These shifts were also accompanied with greater pay, which acted as another motivating factor for CSOs seeking these hours. Furthermore, fulltime CSOs were given some level of flexibility and choice to take on evening shifts on either a one-off or an ongoing basis if it worked in better with their non-work commitments.

The incidence of overtime was a concern in two call centres (CC1 and CC8) because overtime was both unpaid and involuntary. In the CC1, the 2009 global recession had brought about significant financial pressure, which led to restructuring and greater work intensification. In this call centre, increasing pressure was put on CSOs to meet targets and to process a greater number of calls within the same amount of time. It was therefore not uncommon for CSOs to work at least an hour of unpaid overtime a day. Overtime was considered a job requirement despite the lack of compensation and was therefore a cause of discontent. Nevertheless, it was accepted as a new norm within the call centre, particularly because it was expected of all CSOs. These practices largely contradict what has been determined as best practice in call centres by Paul and Huws (2002), but are common in the Australian call centre industry (see URCOT 2000) as discussed below.

In CC8, the largest of the call centres examined, involuntary and unpaid overtime was due to slow computer systems, which CSOs noted would take up to 15 minutes to start. This start-up process was not accounted for in the working hours, but rather, expected as part of the job. Although overtime occurred in smaller increments, CSOs were aware of the aggregate effect which this had over the course of a year, both in impinging on their non work lives and causing monetary loss due to the lack of compensation.

My computer used to take half an hour to load and I would come in an hour before I started to make sure it was up and loaded and if I needed I could restart and load it to make sure I was ready to start (CC8).

I feel that we do often have to work overtime. But a lot of it is small chunks like there was a time in the morning where the computers never used to work and everyone was expected to come in 15 minutes early to actually start our computers so we were actually ready to start on time. We weren't getting paid for that 15 minutes. Whereas people in branches actually get paid to set up before the start – before opening time. It's only 15 minutes, but over a year that's a fair bit (CC8).

Similar findings were reported in the URCOT (2000) study, with CSOs logging into their systems 15 minutes before the start of the shift in order to avoid losing time on the phone and lowering their 'stats'. A common feature however, is that CSOs cite the pressure to meet targets as the strongest factor driving them to work overtime. In these situations, CSOs find themselves in a difficult choice: whether to log on at the start of their shift, wait the 15 minutes for the computers to start and thereby let their statistics suffer, and experience scrutiny from team leaders and team members; or to log on 15 minutes earlier, work the unpaid overtime, but maintain their statistics, therefore keeping onside with their team and team leaders. The question whether this is voluntary or involuntary is ambiguous. While CSOs do ultimately make the choice whether or not they come into work earlier, the team structure, headed by the team leader, plays a major part in determining what is considered acceptable and 'normal' practice (van den Broek et al 2004). In this context, CSOs who fail to conform risk being reprimanded for achieving lower statistics, which may in turn threaten their job security (URCOT, 2000).

In CC8, overtime was also associated with sudden increases in call volumes and the pressure placed on CSOs to satisfy call demands before finishing shifts. CSOs claimed they were simply 'not allowed to leave' until all calls had been processed. Furthermore, time in lieu rather than overtime payments was provided by the call centre in these instances. Many CSOs saw this as inadequate compensation because of the disruption caused to their non-work lives. Again, this is a common occurrence within call centres (URCOT 2000; Paul and Huws 2002), and team structures accompanied by their norms only act to further standardise and reinforce such practices (den Broek et al 2004).

.. the big issue with that (overtime) is, people would generally have a life after work. They're not allowed to leave the phone until all calls are finished in the queues. So if one minute before eight a hundred more people call, those calls have to be answered before you can stop taking calls. That might not be until nine o'clock at night and what if you actually had to be somewhere or do something. You're not allowed to just pack up and leave. (CC8).

Across all ten call centres, the practice of staying beyond the end of the shift to finish existing calls was not recognised as overtime by either CSOs or team leaders, but rather, was considered another part of the job, confirming that it is one of the norms of working in a call centre (URCOT, 2000).

As long as you finish your last call without rushing or whatever.. you do get people who just want to talk forever, and they only happen to call 2 minutes before the shift ends..one of the perks of the job ... oh very very frustrating when that happens.. but it's not like it can be helped unless you log off before your shift ends, but we're not really encouraged to do that. (CC3).

In all the call centres bar CC1 and CC8, the overtime that is acknowledged is that in relation to satisfying last-minute increases in call servicing requirements. In these instances, the overtime was considered voluntary and accompanied with overtime payments or time in lieu.

it's more a choice if we want to extend our shifts.. the work doesn't really demand it unless there's a crisis or emergency (CC3).

In CC6, CSOs were happy to work overtime (paid with time in lieu) if it meant achieving or surpassing the team targets or seeing tasks through to completion rather than handing them over to CSOs in the subsequent shifts. Within this context, the existence of a strong team culture and a sense of pride in the work itself represented key motivators for CSOs working overtime voluntarily.

The issue of choice and compensation are major considerations as far as overtime is concerned. Understandably, where overtime is voluntary and acknowledged through some form of compensation, CSOs are more receptive to it. Nevertheless, the problem is in cases where overtime that is perceived as voluntary may in fact be influenced by the pressure to satisfy team targets and norms. CSOs 'voluntarily' working overtime may therefore be doing so in order to fulfil an unspoken duty or obligation to the team. Therefore, while Paul and Huws (2002) stress the importance of 'choice' in the setting of work times as best practice in call centres, forms of normative control operating within these organisations may effectively act to counter this.

How are Working Hours Determined?

The notion of flexibility is central within call centres, in terms both of numerical flexibility pertaining to the ability of the organisation to vary the number of workers employed and temporal flexibility in varying the number of hours worked by

employees in what could be either a regular or irregular pattern (Paul and Huws 2002). Paul and Huws argue, however, that this flexibility can be ambiguous in its effects, working in well with the study and family responsibilities of some CSOs while bringing about unwanted insecurity for others.

In terms of the call centres examined, there were two types of flexibilities within the working time systems. The first was in terms of the choice of shifts. Seven of the ten call centres operated at least two shifts, and five operated three. In five call centres, CSOs had the opportunity to choose between set shifts and to negotiate these around their non-work responsibilities. In some instances, there was evidence of CSOs doing a mixture of morning and afternoon shifts according to what suited their needs. The ability to choose shifts was considered valuable in reconciling non-work responsibilities, particularly for those with childcare responsibilities.

I mentioned earlier that I have kids that depend on me, so this is the ideal situation in a lot of ways. If I need early starts or late finishes because I have to drop the kids off in the morning, or if their minder can't watch them, I can usually do that. For me this is the biggest factor. If my job interfered with my kids and how much I saw them, I wouldn't be in the job for long. (CC7)

I have two school-aged kids, so having early finishes works well with me. It means I can still drop them to work twice a week and pick them up three times a week so there isn't too much of a burden on my parents. I'm quite happy. (CC9)

CSOs also spoke of being able to swap shifts with co-workers to meet their non-work responsibilities. In these cases, swapping was facilitated by the existence of team-based structures and informal processes that allowed teams members to approach one another directly for this purpose. Significant flexibility was afforded in the system, with Team Leaders considered very accommodating of CSOs' needs. There was a condition that adequate notice be provided; but there was still evidence of CSOs changing shifts at short notice, and the call centres being open to this.

.. being able to change shifts works well when you have children if for some reason you can't come in you can stay home and look after them and work another shift (CC1).

The second area of flexibility was in terms of employment status. In four of the call centres, CSOs stated they had the opportunity to change from full-time to part-time status (or vice-versa) if there were pressing non-work commitments that called for a change. The opportunity for changing between the two largely depended on the length of employment, with those employed for longer periods of time afforded greater flexibility.

We also do have flexibility around, say if you are working full time and for child care reasons you need to go part time, that is something that we will look into. Obviously it still has to meet the business need but we do want to get that work-life balance as well for the consultants. (CC2)

Within the call centres that employed CSOs on both a part-time and full-time basis (all but CC4), those employed on a part-time basis reportedly had the greatest flexibility in their working hours. In two of the call centres, part-timers' hours were completely self-determined. In the remaining call centres however, the irony of part-time status was that these workers were also subject to the more unsociable hours.

Martin and Healy (2009) have suggested that one function of a team structure is that it facilitates the management of shift rosters and absences. This was the case in the call centres investigated. CSOs were able directly to swap shifts with other team members at short notice, and also had some capacity to negotiate and plan future rosters and leave within their teams. This indicates some level of self-management of working hours both amongst individual CSOs and within the team structures. According to the Griffith Work-Time Project (2003), where CSOs have a direct role in the active self-management of their working hours, the outcome is more effective management of work time. Similarly, within the case studies, CSOs were largely satisfied with their hours of work. The fact that these organisations' continue to offer these options on an ongoing basis suggests that the benefits may be mutual. These findings are also contrary to the notion that teams in call centres have very little control and independent decision making authority (Russell 2004). Rather, determining and changing shifts appears to be one area in which authority is disseminated to the team level.

Overall, the supportive environment for CSOs in meeting work-life balance objectives may appear surprising in the call centre context. This is largely at odds with earlier evidence suggesting that compensatory remuneration and penalty rates for working anti-social hours was rare in call centres, while there was dissatisfaction with the inflexible nature of working and leave arrangements

(URCOT, 2000). We suggest that where organisations are flat and employment is organised into teams around team leaders, there is some managerial discretion available to support employees in meeting family and non-work commitments. Through team organisation, call centres decentralise responsibility for meeting production targets (quantity and quality) and for organising labour in order to meet these targets. As part of this process team leaders need to provide flexibility to operatives to ensure that when there are absences or production quotas are not being met, staff are prepared to work different or longer shifts. This points towards the important role played by informal and personal mechanisms at the workplace in juggling work-life balance. Once again, in a team context there is scope to negotiate employment and hours changes within the team, despite rules or apparent inflexibilities that may be present within the organisation.

Conclusions

While much of the focus of research on call centres has been directed towards the organisation of work and working conditions in call centres, there has been relatively very little discussion of work-life balance issues in call centres. Indeed, it has been almost implicit that extensive control and regimentation of work regimes entail little flexibility over work-life balance issues. The evidence indicates strong mechanisms of control within the workplace, together with high levels of employee stress (Barnes 2004; Healy and Bramble 2003). In this study, such inflexibilities also emerged. For instance, unpaid overtime, both voluntary and involuntary, continues to be common practice, and is an outcome of a highly target-focussed environment where pressure is placed on CSOs to meet both individual and team-based targets. Within this context, the team structure operates as a form of normative control that standardises overtime as an accepted call centre practice. The paradox is that alongside these inflexibilities are certain flexibilities that are built into the system. The evidence presented here indicates that there is support for modifying working arrangements to meet short term work-life balance matters. There is scope to vary employment arrangements and to negotiate short terms changes in shifts and hours. CSOs on the whole felt that they had the support of immediate managers (team leaders) in negotiating these changes. In some instances, working hours were largely self-managed by the team and/or the individual and hence afforded CSOs some empowerment in an otherwise regimented work environment.

This study is not necessarily representative of the call centre industry. It did, however, take in both large and small centres, a range of industries and both public and private sector workplaces. Given the absence of official data on the

industry (Todd and Burgess 2006), we do not know what a representative sample of the industry would look like. But there clearly are issues for further research. First, the position of casuals and part-time workers (who were under represented in the survey) warrants further analysis. Secondly, there is a need to interview team leaders within call centres to assess how much discretion they have over working time and employment arrangements and how important discretionary changes are for maintaining commitment and in meeting production targets. Thirdly, there is a need to go beyond descriptive data and to examine the relationship between employee characteristics and call centre characteristics and relating this to satisfaction with working hours and the impact of work on home life. The impact of shift work on the more precarious workforce should also be investigated.

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