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Productivity Is Calling

An analysis of the role of hegemony
in constructing workers in call centres.

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Abstract

In New Zealand the call centre industry is receiving strong support from both business and government due to its conception as providing opportunities for information employment. Notorious for their reputation as the “sweatshops” of the new millennium, call centres have received widespread criticism from academics and unions alike due to the nature of their labour controls. Consequently research on call centres has focused on patterns of labour control and in particular the nature of employee surveillance. Two types of research are predominant. The most topical sociological research pertains to the Bentham/Foucault notion of the Panopticon of Surveillance and is highly critical of call centre management. Alternate literature from the field of Human Resource Management exercises a somewhat softer approach and often examines call centres from a business perspective focusing on improving employer/employee relations. This thesis argues that neither perspective provides a solid theoretical base to explain the significance of the social mechanics of call centre labour relations, nor do they explain in any detail how workers are moulded and shaped to meet the needs of employers within the larger framework of the “new economy”. Using data from a case study of a call centre, Telecorp Services, this thesis outlines how the concept of hegemony can be effectively applied to the call centre labour process to explain the activities and tactics used by employers to manage productivity. This thesis identifies a number of practices at both the pre-employment and post employment stages that indicate the roles of employees of call centres are constructed within the ideological parameters of the free market. Call centre employers use a variety of methods including profiling, character assessment, motivation management and training to boost productivity and performance. In the process call centre employers expend a great deal of energy attempting to convince workers of the legitimacy of increasing productivity. Despite this they are unable to reconcile tensions within the labour process. The demands of efficiency and service delivery appear to be irreconcilable within an excessive performance culture. This leads staff to adopt various forms of resistance such as unionisation and staff turnover, problems that employers appear to be struggling to find answers for.

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Chapter One: Introduction.

During the first year of the new millennium I caught up with Cheryl an old friend of mine. An education employee and full time mother, she had recently discovered her employment contract was not to be renewed. At the time she was considering a change of occupation anyway, as her part time work was essentially domestic and involved caring for pre school children. She felt it was time for something new. She wanted to move into a more people orientated industry, and as a woman recently returned to the workforce, she wanted employment with greater financial rewards. Her attempts to find full time work in sales and retailing were unsuccessful and with time running out she began to worry. In fact she was starting to get desperate. Seeing an advertisement in a local paper, Cheryl decided to try out for employment at a newly established call centre that was basically being built as new.

Although not being exceptionally proficient in computing and data processing, Cheryl took the initiative of contacting the advertisers. According to the recruitment staff involved, her phone manner was pleasant and confident and she was invited to give them further details. She was also told her previous occupations as a caregiver, pre school worker, and Board of Trustee were "good" attributes that would be valuable in the burgeoning call centre industry. Subsequently Cheryl was invited to attend another interview for a position as a call centre worker. She was told that this was one of a number of screening processes that she would have to undertake to gain employment in this industry.

According to Cheryl, this first interview was very focused on her personality. She was asked questions about her attitude and beliefs, her ability to work under pressure and how well she felt she would fit into a team

environment and culture. She was also given a comprehensive application form that appeared to be orientated towards constructing a personality profile as well as revealing her learning abilities. Her aptitude and practical skills while relevant were apparently not as important as details pertaining to the type of person that she was.

A few days later Cheryl discovered she had passed the initial interview and was called upon to return for a further meeting to ascertain her preparedness for aptitude training. She was told her prospective employers would require her to attend a month long training course to assess her suitability and proficiency in a simulated work environment. At the end of this one-month training period she was not guaranteed employment. Cheryl was advised there would be more people trained than those actually picked at the completion of this course. Essentially the workers would be required to compete for the jobs, with the likelihood that some would be "cut" at the end of the programme.

Cheryl found the month long course stressful, requiring quick learning to master the computer simulations. The call centre work was based on predicted types of phone calls and associated administration duties. Time was of the essence, with the call centre due to come on line within 6 weeks of the start of the course. Staff were required to develop a variety of knowledge based skills pertaining to the business they were in. Cheryl suddenly found herself drawn into an environment of team cultures, based on promises of performance based payments, as well as a weekly wage. In training she was introduced to the importance of customer service protocols and the significance of flexible working hours. Her employers warned her that the work was structured, with rostered breaks and limited days off. She was also inducted into accepting call surveillance to meet call targets and fast customer

turnover times. Great emphasis was placed on the company's goals and values and the importance of her role in the organisation in which she worked. Cheryl was encouraged to share the managerial vision for excellence and performance.

At the end of the one month assessment period, she was advised she had won a position. She had been one of those chosen to work in the call centre. When I talked to her she seemed very pleased at this, and was generally very supportive of her new job. Induction into the call centre culture seemed to suit her.

As Cheryl was being moulded to meet the call centre's needs, I was able to share her induction. For me this association was an insight into the call centre world that provided clues to some unanswered questions regarding performance regimes. At the time I was conducting a research exercise for a BA Honours media paper at Massey University. The research involved a content analysis of call centre articles found in the New Zealand Info Tech Weekly (Dominion Newspaper). A content analysis looks at written articles in newspapers and magazines and makes comparisons of common themes. This research focused on productivity strategies in call centres, but provided little on pre-employment processes. Through this project I was able to gather some interesting information on how call centres use types of labour controls to make their staff more productive. I was particularly interested in strategies used by managers to assist them in maintaining power and control over workers, so they could essentially make them work harder and faster. Frequently these strategies appeared in articles in newspapers and journals that outlined employment related practices used by call centre managers to improve worker performance. Often these practices promoted workplace enterprise, like touting competition and individualism and encouraging

workers to meet the free market. Strategies encompassed activities like motivation management and the monitoring and taping of phone calls, or self-improvement techniques and quality assurance meetings. Close personal supervision was also a prevalent strategy, and seemed purposely designed to keep an eye on the workers at all times.

This modest research paper also focused on how call centre managers pursued flexible labour, like working outside the traditional Monday to Friday nine to five 40 hour week. Through this research it became evident that call centre workers were very much part of what is called the “new economy”, a rather vague term that signifies the technological, information and internet aspects of work in today’s society (Touraine in Ben Rafael and Sternberg, 2001: 271). Work in the so called new economy is typified in many cases by a lack of job permanence and labour stability which has been traded for performance and productivity in a service culture world of the here and now.

The information I had gathered from Cheryl had filled in some gaps that had puzzled me about the nature of call centres and in particular how call centre managers were able to establish what appeared to me as an environment of control, in the first place. It appeared, from conversations with Cheryl that her trainers were very keen on assessing her suitability for the call centre environment prior to being employed. In a way this confirmed something thrown up by the content analysis research of newspapers: call centres have unusually thorough pre employment procedures designed to select certain types of people. In other words call centre employers look to select certain personalities that will suit the controlling environments they operate. The employee profiling that Cheryl experienced has relevance for workplace futures given that call centres are probably good indicators of how working conditions are structured by other industries in the new economy.

What this suggests is that in a tight labour market, only certain types of people will get jobs, and these jobs are likely to involve some quite controlling conditions. For society the ramifications of this change are very important and warrant further investigation.

Further contact with Cheryl has been sporadic. During more recent conversations she often commented about how tired she was. Frequently she bemoaned how extremely busy she was, often working six days a week or on shifts and saw much less of her family. During my most recent conversation I was surprised to learn she had been told she was to be made redundant. Her call centre was closing due to rationalisation. It appears her loyalty to her employer had not held her in good stead. But from my content analysis I had learned that this is an industry that changes quickly, a contract for outsourcing can be here today and gone tomorrow. For Cheryl it was gone. But for the new economy these jobs are here to stay.

1.1: Call Centres and the New Economy.

In June 1999, Trade New Zealand (TradeNZ) and former Information Technology Minister, Maurice Williamson, launched a major initiative to attract call centres to New Zealand. TradeNZ C.E.O, Fran Wilde, stated the industry represented a powerful opportunity for New Zealand to create jobs nation-wide, while also benefiting local telecommunications providers. It was claimed that call centres were the fastest growing part of the global telecommunications market after the Internet. Also stated, was that New Zealand had the software, telecommunications infrastructure, and people skills, needed to create a viable market in this “distance neutral” industry. This

particularly applied to the Asia Pacific call centre market, but also nighttime “shifts” for Europe and North America.

TradeNZ, with a high degree of collaboration between local bodies and the private sector, facilitated this campaign, known as the Call Centre Attraction Initiative (CCAI). Many of its member partners also acted as consultants in call centre establishment. While offering new employment prospects, there was also a suggestion of self interest in the agendas of this body in terms of profit and international competitiveness in a globally competitive market. Furthermore, the initiative represented a joining of economic interests similar to those involved in globalisation strategies. The initiative highlighted the junction through which the State and the market join (Larner, 2000) in pursuit of the concept of the “global agenda”.

To promote New Zealand call centres as cost efficient, the CCAI made a number of comparisons to international benchmark figures. Using figures such as labour costs and rentals the CCAI set out to demonstrate that New Zealand was a cheaper place to operate call centres than its overseas competitors. However, according to Auckland University sociologist Wendy Larner (2000), the figures given were often dubious and contradictory. As an example, there was disparity over the number of call centres quoted as existing in New Zealand. At the time it was claimed that there were between 300 and 600, depending on who was quoting the figures (Larner, 2000). With regards to benchmarking calculations used by the CCAI, Larner further states that:

the data generated by these studies is neither statistically valid nor based on representative samples, and each generates contradictory findings (Larner, 2000).

Larner's comment would suggest that the CCAI were either inflating figures or elaborating them to promote an overly positive image of call centre industry in New Zealand. Yet despite the inconsistency of these figures, they have taken on a life of their own. These and other statistics, such as those quoted by the NZ InfoTech (Pamatatau, 2001), represent call centres as a hugely important industry, perhaps a major way of the future employment. Certainly when examining events from overseas, there is evidence that call centres are on the increase. Call centre growth is forecast to grow at a worldwide annual average of around 17% (Burwell, Dellazizzo, Slocum and Payne, 2002) and while New Zealand figures regards call centres may be ambiguous there is evidence that call centres are on the rise. But the question arises, why are call centres so important?

Call centres are reputed to be the main growth activity in the global telecommunications market. Worldwide call centres number 150,000 and are claimed to employ 1.6% of the European work force and 3% of the work force in North America, (Burwell, Dellazizzo, Slocum and Payne, 2002). In Australia call centre employment is said to be expanding at a rate of 20 per cent per annum (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002: 2). This also highlights just how significant e-commerce and e-communication will be, both now and in the future. Given this expansion it is understandable why TradeNZ explicitly identifies call centres as presenting new employment opportunities associated with globalisation and the knowledge economy (Larner, 2000).

In New Zealand Call Centres are big business. InfoTech Weekly figures suggest that there are around 500 call centres in New Zealand generating around 3 billion dollars each year. Clearly call centres are a growth industry and a major new source of employment (Pamatatau, 2001, N.Z. InfoTech Weekly). Yet there are some problems in this growth, particularly as regards

how call centres treat their workers. There are both positive and negative scenarios regards call centre work.

Larner (2000) suggests there are two types of call centre work and identifies two conflicting visions associated with call centres. The first suggests the work will involve high wage, high skill employment, encompassing e-commerce through customer service and email enquiries. Employees skilled in this type of vocation will exhibit creativity, flexibility, teamwork and high levels of literacy and numeracy. They will also demonstrate problem solving skills, with high levels of specialised knowledge, particularly in technology and science.

The second vision is significantly less positive. Here call centres would operate internationally to receive "outsourced" overflow or off peak calls from the clients of trans-national companies. Information would be simply transferred, requiring no more than basic computer processing skills. This environment would be highly competitive with relocatable contracts open to the lowest bidder. Such an environment was unlikely to be either high waged or skilled (Larner, 2000).

It appears that the latter vision is the one that TradeNZ is pursuing. Internationally call centres have obtained notoriety as the satanic mills and sweatshops of the new millennium (Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell, 2000: 967). Of major concern is how call centres control their employees to ensure they meet strict standards of performance and compliance at work. Call centres have a reputation for using rigorous profiling techniques and questionable methods to boost productivity. Often call centres operate from lower wage countries to service the activities of trans-national companies They may incorporate "global strategies" or cross national strategies to service customers, often working 24 hours per day (Larner, 2000).

The idea behind attracting call centres to New Zealand was that trans-nationals would locate their Asia Pacific operations to this country to complement their existing business. New Zealand was/is marketed as having a cost effective labour force in a time zone similar to Asian markets. TradeNZ states as follows.

New Zealand is the first English speaking country to see the sun every day, and its working day starts before that of any other developed economy. By locating your call centre in New Zealand, your customers can reach you any time from any time zone.

(CallNZ.com, call centre information web page for TradeNZ)

Apparently the aim of this Government/Industry initiative was to increase jobs and stimulate economic growth. More recently trade strategists have focused on the United States, as potential investors in future call centre initiatives (NZ InfoTech, 1999: Vol. 398).

TradeNZ strategy consisted of assisting international corporations to explore the advantages of "setting up call centres in New Zealand, in collaboration with Economic Development Agencies around the country" (TradeNZ web site, 2000). Guy Tapley, Trade New Zealand's Investment Services Manager for Asia Pacific, said: "We are going after corporations, considering the location of operations in other countries including potential call centre investors" (Tapley, 1999: TradeNZ website).

Generally the corporations Tapley refers to are seen as companies looking to offload sectors of their operation by outsourcing. This is a lucrative sector of the economy. The world's top 100 outsourcing deals range in value from 14 million to 10 billion dollars US (N.Z. Infotech Weekly: 394: 1999: 19).

Outsourcing essentially involves contracting out services to the lower bidder. It is an accepted way to address human resource constraints, while keeping ahead of technological change and business goals. Organisations are said to be frequently under budgetary pressures to reduce staffing and associated costs, but at the same time provide higher network availability, increased access and superior customer service to clients (N.Z. Infotech Weekly: 394: 1999: 19). In essence, outsourcing is about saving money through the ultimate in rationality. It allows companies to run a service without the networks and skills needed to operate it from “in house”.

Privatisation and deregulation a feature of New Zealand in recent years (Kelsey, 1997) have been contributing factors to the popularity of outsourcing in New Zealand. Where this has occurred, organisations traditionally “downsize” or restructure and outsource. The general impetus is to try and do more with less. Government departments and businesses often resort to the use of outsourcing. Examples include organisations such as the Earthquake Commission (NZ Info Tech, 401: 12 July 1999) and Exxon Mobil amongst others (NZ Info Tech, 28 May 1999). These national outsourcing patterns reflect trends in national and global economies. Call centres are one example of outsourcing. However in the process, call centres have created some questionable trends in labour controls and employment that have aroused academic enquiry and critique (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998, Bain & Taylor, 2000, Buchanan, & Koch-Schulte, 2000, Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). This thesis joins this enquiry.

This thesis puts forward a theoretical explanation to explore and explain call centre labour controls. In doing so this thesis asks a number of questions about the nature of this work. Is a call centre workers role constructed (like Cheryl, who went through all the tests in preparation to be a call centre

worker), through the use of ideologically driven strategies and tactics designed to increase productivity? Do call centre managers attempt to “construct” the workplace role of their employees along free market lines? If so, is this role construction achieved by employee profiling prior to starting work at a call centre and subsequently maintained by implementing practices designed to increase employee performance during work? These questions are examined in the next eight chapters, which are outlined as follows.

Chapter Two explores perspectives of call centres and some of the current theory used to explain them. These theories include perspectives from the likes of Apostol (1996), Belt, Richardson & Webster (2000), Bain & Taylor (2000), Buchanan & Koche-Schultze (2000), Callaghan & Thompson (2001) and particularly Fernie & Metcalf (1998) who claim that call centres are technological electronic sweatshops, where supervisory power has been apparently rendered perfect. These authors are cited as providing important examples of explanations of the “new labour process”. In Fernie & Metcalf’s case particularly post modern methodological perspectives have been used in a controversial fashion to explain the call centre paradigm by focusing on panopticism and role of surveillance. This approaches, while compelling, demonstrate some weaknesses when aligned with the realities of the contemporary call centre workplace. For example, Fernie & Metcalf (1998), claim employees are subjected to panoptic prison like controls due to electronic monitoring at work. In incorporating Foucaultian notions of disciplinary power through surveillance in their explanation, they sensationalise call centre understandings. This chapter questions how accurate is the panopticon in explaining the dynamic that occurs between workers like Cheryl and her managers.

The second chapter ends, offering a historical synopsis of past interpretations of call centre operation. Here I focus on two areas. Firstly the notions of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon of Surveillance", a subject that has been expanded by Foucault and is used often to explain surveillance in call centres (such as by Fernie & Metcalf, 1988). Secondly I investigate the burgeoning abundance of alternative literature on call centres, supplied by human resource management, some of which, like Bain & Taylor, (2000), are highly critical of the Panoptic vision. From here I develop a sense of how both these perspectives have portrayed call centres and why neither approach really explains the call centre dynamic in terms of its use of profiling and performativity on any thing other than a superficial level.

Chapter three challenges the Bentham/ Foucaultian view by offering an alternative theory to explain how call centres operate. This alternative theory utilises the more classical sociological approach of Antonio Gramsci. Here I to frame call centres within the notion of hegemony. This Gramscian alternative to the "panoptic gaze" is proposed to explain how a call centre worker can be drawn into free market perspectives of the labour process. Rather than the idea of draconian supervisory control, i.e.: the panoptic gaze, the Gramscian hegemonic approach suggests a call centre worker is inducted either consciously or unconsciously into the dominant perspective. This induction is achieved through a variety of methods, but is based mainly on establishing productivity based labour cultures. With this alternative hegemonic theory in mind, I pose a research question that asks whether the role of a call centre worker is in fact "constructed" to meet the expectations of the market realm and the accompanying dominant interests. To unpack this argument, discussion in the chapter four centres on the activities and practices in call

centres as well as various applicable work organisation theories relating to call centre structure.

Chapter four offers an in depth look at the activities and practices of the call centre industry. Written as a history, chapter four outlines topics relating to how call centres are staffed, structured and their function in the realm of the free market. How managers approach the running of call centres. And the subsequent problems found within the industry. Overall the chapter creates an image of how call centres operate. Throughout emphasis is placed on how hegemony can offer a useful explanation of the call centre dynamic in that it focuses attention on the practices used to “construct” the worker in line with dominant views.

Chapter five outlines the methodology used to explore the research question. This chapter discusses the type of research envisaged, explaining the logic and practice behind its use, and the relevant terminology. Essentially data was collected using a number of interviews from call centre workers associated with a particular organisation. A number of interviews were conducted and these were coded and analysed using standard qualitative techniques. Transcribed field notes were supplemented by observations on occasions as required. Ethics committee approval was sought and obtained prior the commencement of the research. The organisation researched is a high profile call centre in a large city in New Zealand that employs a large number of staff. Called Telecorp Services for the purposes of this research, this call centre has given permission for this research under the agreement that it’s real identity will not be revealed.

Chapters six and seven are dedicated to outlining the results of this research. Primarily this qualitative research explores productivity and profiling of employees. Beyond this these two chapters seek to confirm if workers are

indeed drawn into a market culture at either a conscious or unconscious level. Chapter six details the results of interviews with workers who discuss the pre-employment practices used by call centre Telecorp Services. These devices include how potential employees are screened using a number of personality and aptitude tests well before they start work. Often these tests appear to surpass the pre assessment criteria of many other jobs. It raises questions regards what qualities call centres are looking for in potential employees? And why are these qualities required?

Chapter seven details the strategies used by employer Telecorp Services to increase productivity by the use of motivation management practices and surveillance. Although the research data primarily supports evidence for the idea of hegemony, a number of other issues arise in conversation with informants. Besides finding examples of how call centre employers draw workers into a market culture, the researcher also discovered a variety of other occurrences such as the reliance on training, coaching and the individualisation of workers.

Chapter eight summarises the research at Telecorp Services and comments on the findings of this research. Discussion focuses on the qualitative material that has been collected and how these link to the central argument of how the role of a call centre worker is constructed. This chapter concludes that in this call centre hegemony is indeed calling, with employers attempting to normalise productivity throughout many stages of call centre work using practices that stretch well beyond the controversial boundaries of employee surveillance. The research finds that employers use motivation management, teams, training as well as other practices to constantly reinforce the importance of productivity. Also this research explains how profiling potential workers prior to employment is linked to these performance

enhancing practices with workers selected for their suitability to adapt the regimes of high expectation productivity.

This chapter also considers some of the issues that exist within call centres, and suggests new directions uncovered by this research that may be worthy of further investigation. In this regard comments are made about the contradictory organisation of this call centres and how its relationship to an outsourced structure seems to be at odds with its role as permanent provider of a non business service. Questions are asked about the veracity of the call centre as a place keen on retaining workers when it continuously employs younger workers who are likely to leave. The possibility that Telecorp Services uses the sacrificial HR strategy is also raised.

Chapter 2: Recent Old Explanations of Call Centres.

“When Bentham invented his panopticon, he could have been thinking of the call centre!”

(Sally McManus, Call Centre Union Organiser: A.C.T.U, 1999)

This chapter consists of a five-part overview of literature regarding call centres. Part one backgrounds a common theme used when describing these organisations, namely the notion of Bentham and Foucault’s panopticon of surveillance. Part two outlines an example of this approach as advanced by sociologists Fernie and Metcalf (1998) who claim employees are subjected to panoptic prison like controls due to electronic monitoring at work. Part three critically assesses the veracity of this claim of panoptic control, using material from managerial theorists Bain and Taylor to assist in an antithetical reply to Fernie & Metcalf. Bain & Taylor argue that Fernie & Metcalf have used debatable theory and very little data in order to critique of call centres on (Bain & Taylor, 2000). They claim that surveillance does not engender prison like controls and in fact has quite the opposite effect in that it fosters employee resistance. As such they offer a different perspective based on this belief. Part four explains the limitations of human resource perspectives in analysing call centres. Often these views lack substance and appear overly positive. Part five summarises this chapter and introduces an alternative theory to both the panopticon and human resource approaches to provide a more complete answer to the question of call centre labour controls by introducing the reader to the notion of hegemony.

2.1: The Panopticon of Surveillance: Bentham to Foucault.

The late 18th century social theorist Jeremy Bentham was the architect of the panoptic theory (Bain & Taylor, 2000: 4). His principle, based on the concept of a hypothetical tower that stands inside a surrounding prison, supposedly describes the fundamental problem of call centres. This tower, which Bentham refers to as the “panopticon”, is occupied by prison supervisors, who constantly watch the inmates through the periphery of the surrounding building. This “panoptic mechanism” arranges spatial unity’s, so that it makes it possible to “see constantly and to recognise immediately” (Easthope & McGowan, 1992: 85). Accordingly, those who inhabit this “prison” are constantly under surveillance. The Panopticon essentially turns the visibility of the occupants into a form of trap. Each individual is confined to a “cell” where they are viewed by their supervisors, but cannot, due to surrounding walls, have any contact with their companions. Thus they exist in a state of axial visibility, being watched from the front, but laterally invisible from others. This state, according to Bentham, guarantee's order, supervision and constant unrelenting control.

More important than the physical attributes are the psychological implications of this structure. The aim of the panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power (Easthope & McGowan, 1992: 85). In time the inmate supposedly becomes conditioned and disciplined to the effects of this control. Eventually this surveillance creates an air of psychological permanence, so that even when discontinued, the inmate still behaves as if being watched. Thus, the framework of discipline is transferred from the

perpetuator to the individual, rendering the act of surveillance unnecessary. In essence power is used as a tool to make the individual discipline his or her self.

In his book "Discipline and Punish" Foucault (1979) uses Bentham's theory to develop his own conception of power. He expands the framework of the panopticon to show how disciplinary practices affect individuals in modern life. To explain this he uses the "disciplinary" to portray life in modern society describing it as an anatomy or a physics of power. He associates this power with the emergence of an "ideal of the perfectly administered social system" (Sawicki, 1991). For Foucault, discipline is a type of power that can be used in techniques, procedures, levels of application or targets within institutions. As part of the social system, it is here that discipline forms a connection with work. These practices, according to Foucault, are carried out by institutions as an essential instrument for obtaining a particular end (Easthope & McGowan, 1992: 87) such as gaining control over workers through technical rationality (Sarup, 1993: 70). One such end, according to Fernie & Metcalf (1998), is the reinforcing or reorganising internal mechanisms of power between managers and workers in call centres.

Thus workplace discipline becomes a prime tool in achieving this. It is a state where control is not secured by physical dominance, but rather through a process of isolation. The organisation of our private spaces, essential mechanisms to maintaining power relations, "are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible" (Foucault, 1979, 200). Apparently for Foucault the "carceral gaze" is a means to an end, the creation of individualisation. It is with this idea that Foucault's conception of power has been used to explain labour practices in call centres involving the use of surveillance.

2.2: Call Centres and the “Panopticon”: Fernie & Metcalf’s View.

Fernie and Metcalf (1998) take the notions of Bentham and Foucault and apply them with fervour in their recent research on payment systems in call centres. In their article titled “(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops” Fernie & Metcalf claim that “the call centre provides management with the ultimate opportunity for control”. They further state that “in call centres the agents are constantly visible and the supervisor's power has indeed by "rendered perfect" - via the computer monitoring screen - and therefore "its actual use unnecessary." These conclusions were gained during a study of call centres undertaken by Fernie & Metcalf to examine incentive payments offered to staff. Their aim was to empirically test predictions from new economics of personnel theory (N.E.P.) in relation to the various payment systems used to compensate staff for work. See also Personnel Economics, by Lazear (1995)

Fernie & Metcalf examined how the wages of call centre employees are calculated, using measures relating to their work performance in relation to incentive payments. They focused on the so called “benefits” employers derive from monitoring measured inputs, effort, and outputs relating to worker productivity, in order to derive a payment system. This information they found was to determine the amount of incentive payments and how they were delivered to employees. Throughout this process there pervaded a sense of rational calculability, with money being inextricably linked to performativity. According to the Fernie & Metcalf employees wages were normally set using performance measures dependent on surveillance and monitoring techniques. Consequently, an employee was paid on the basis of the amount and quality of

the work completed. This of course, is ascertained through high levels of surveillance, which record a workers performance, within a set period of time.

In their investigation, Fernie and Metcalf follow approaches that categorise call centres as the “sweatshops of the 90s” or “dark satanic mills” (Apostol, 1996, Demaret, Quinn & Grumiau, 1999, Davis, 1999). They state their research shows that, “for call centres, Bentham's Panopticon was truly the vision of the future, and these organisations are the very epitome of what Foucault had in mind” (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). They base this claim on the relationship between wages/performance pay and the measuring of this performance through monitoring work systems and behaviours. Examples of this can be seen in call centres where work performance is assessed through the examination of voice recordings or statistics relating to call turnover. It is the effects of this performativity and monitoring that are most significant.

Some unions report that call centre workers suffer from the stress of technology from being under constant surveillance (Workers On Line: 1999). Being monitored, (sometimes practically eight hours a day), means workers are said to be highly visible, have little control and few breaks. These factors, along with the exhausting shift patterns, can create difficult and stressful working environments. One union official from Workers Online describes it as follows:

It's 1984, big brother stuff. Quality assurance in a call centre is basically stand-over bullying and pressure. The stress is HUGE! There is a 24-hour a day, 7 day working week with shift rostering at the company's discretion. It's an American working culture, with teams and team-leaders and a shape up or ship out mentality.

While productivity may be high for managers, such oppressive monitoring leads to low staff morale and high churn rates in the industry. (Workers On Line: 1999). Given the assertions made here, it is not surprising that the notion of the panopticon has found favour with critics of call centres. The problem, however, is that not all call centres have conditions like those described above. Therefore, questions can be asked as to whether this notion of panoptic domination is accurate.

Fernie and Metcalf's exploration of call centres provides an air of inevitable fatalism with regards to the panopticon. Discussion inevitably centres on notions of an environment of Orwellian "Big Brotherism" where total controls are applied. In their account, employee choice and resistance is largely ignored in favour of the belief of unbridled power. Similarly, this appraisal does not touch on the more "human aspects of managerialism", such as the establishment of work cultures, the training regimes, and the use of motivation management strategies. In Fernie & Metcalf's approach it appears that the fate of the worker is largely determined by the oppressive system and the machine alone. However, there is a problem here. Has supervisory power indeed been, "rendered perfect"? Does the psychological discipline imbued by the panopticon make "its actual use unnecessary"? Using examples from other call centres, the idea of perfectly integrated control is contestable. For example, contentious opposing views can be found within the field of Human Resource Management who offer a somewhat less rigid framework.

2.3: A Critique of the “Panopticon”.

Bain and Taylor (2000) are human resource management theorists. They offer a highly critical rebuttal of Fernie and Metcalf’s work. They reject the draconian fatalism proposed by the notion of the electronic panopticon, focusing more on employee resistance within the presence of collective action in call centres. Using a number of case studies to support their views, Bain and Taylor firmly maintain that Fernie and Metcalf’s argument lacks evidence and representativeness. Bluntly they assert that Fernie and Metcalf “have erected an unsustainable theoretical superstructure upon the flimsiest foundation of data” (Bain & Taylor, 2000).

Bain and Taylor’s research attacking the idea of a panopticon is based on UK telecommunications company Telcorp’s example. They base their challenge on four aspects. Firstly they point to the fact that management faces a number of problems within a call centre that even an electronic panopticon cannot resolve. These include such thorny issues as loss of productivity through high labour turnover, absenteeism due to sickness, problems with motivation and commitment, lack of promotion prospects and competition from other employers. Beyond this, the authors mention the amount of time and energy dedicated to analysing surveillance statistics and staff “training” meetings. It is their contention that these practices illustrate that management, far from holding absolute power, lack confidence in their own abilities, and thus react in response to their fears of recalcitrant and uncooperative labour (Bain & Taylor, 2000: 12).

A further criticism of the panopticon pertains to the “rendered perfect” carceral gaze. Bain and Taylor (2000: 12) suggest many experienced agents were able to pick when they were being watched or listened too. When asked

workers often pointed to managers acting predictably, through familiar patterns of behaviour that made surveillance patently obvious. In response, the worker could make themselves look as if they were busy or proactive, until the so called “gaze” was over. Also Bain & Taylor found that surveillance was not practised with uniform stringency due to the inefficiency of the technology, so it often became inconsistent in terms of monitoring and control. At other times the technology simply failed or alternatively workers use the excuse of possible failure to circumvent the desires of performance obsessed management

Managers, Bain & Taylor found, often discovered that their interests coincided with those of their workers, also potentially debunking the notion of the unyielding disciplinary. These complimentary interests can occur where a manager’s performance is dependent on the actions of his team. In these case's contradictions arise, as managers suddenly realise they must present a united front with their staff. For instance, where a team has to meet targets, in order to receive their own bonuses, it is likely that the same arrangement applies to the manager. In this case the manager must work with the team as they share mutual performance goals, but at the same time cannot be seen as over generous or lax. Here the need for a manager to present a positive image to call centre superiors is likely to conflict with need to be “controlling” when dealing with staff, as reciprocally, they are dependent on each other.

Leidner (1993) provides other examples of this mutual co-dependency. She talks of how management controls over workers are overstated due to the presence of service recipients. Here Leidner suggests that the labour /management work dynamic is made more complicated by the overlaying feature of the needs of customers. When customers enter the equation, their needs impact on both labour and management in a way that causes salient fluctuations that work either towards or against labour controls. In a sense a

customer's interests may complement or work against both management and labour interests, causing shifting alignments depending on the nature of the customers needs.

Bain and Taylor (2000) suggest that the occurrence of collective resistance in call centres is a strong indicator that the electronic panopticon is a fallacy. Moreover collective resistance weakens the idea that the panopticon creates an air of psychological permanence in workers that suppresses their ability to resist. Bain & Taylor clearly show in Telecorps case that when this call centre became unionised, employee resistance becomes paramount, frequently offsetting the controls of management, or at least going some way to abating them (Bain and Taylor: 2000: 16). Interestingly, even the practice of surveillance can undermine management power. For example by taping staff/team leader meetings where disputes had arisen over performance, the recordings and transcripts could be used in a court of law against management (Bain and Taylor: 2000: 16). Often the court cases involved examining transcripts of these disputes, with the interpretations vigorously contested, even to the point of semantic expositions. This practice of counter taping appears to seriously undermine the concept of electronic panopticon, as it essentially turns the concept on its head, thus abrogating the fundamental intent of surveillance as a tool to intimidate workers. It may intimidate management.

Bain and Taylor offer a strong critique of the Panopticon and thus of Fernie & Metcalf. By comparing managerial fragility against employee guile, Bain & Taylor have shown that employees sometimes gain the upper hand. Beyond this, they point out how managers and workers often share similar goals when dealing with customers, which further undermines the idea of the quintessential carceral gaze. By incorporating unionisation, employee turnover and staff commitment into their argument, Bain & Taylor demonstrate that

employers do not have it all their own way. The existence of these displays of resistance in the face of oppressive labour practices, appear to markedly weaken Foucaultian notions of the psychological permanence of controls.

It is important to qualify that Bain & Taylor's counter arguments to Fernie and Metcalf, they do not offer any in depth explanation of call centre operations. On the contrary, the Human Resource discipline seldom attempts to analyse call centres on any level other than that which is based on management "spin". It is this aspect that is discussed next. Although providing a useful perspective on call centres there are major shortcomings with Human Resource Management theory on call centres, particularly as regards this discipline's tendency to play down the intrusive nature of the monitoring and surveillance regimes and the incessant drive for productivity.

2.4: Limitations of Human Resource Management Theory.

Human resource management literature usually appears strongly supportive of call centres, often explaining call centre tensions by examining managerial strategies rather than critiquing the labour process. Solutions are invariably based around improving the working environment, or enhancing the role of the worker. Such literature focuses on the nature of the work or the causal problems that arise. The structural problems of the work, such as its emphasis on performativity, surveillance, and the subsequent stresses and pressures of labour intensification, seem to be either ignored or viewed as unavoidable.

Remedial approaches prescribed by this discipline tend to focus on alleviating the symptoms rather than the cause. Frequently these approaches appear to fall within the realms of what is known as "cow sociology", that is

strategies based on theories aimed to make workers feel content and satisfied so they will produce more (Beder, 2001:102). Such strategies appear to attempt to foster worker “gratitude” through the creation of social rewards and social cohesion in order to boost productivity.

Drives to improve worker performance in call centres for human resource management theorists invariably lean towards demonstrating that there is supposedly a fine balance between high staff turnover and productivity. Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (2000), for instance, outline case studies of how two call centres developed highly sophisticated human resource practices designed to promote employee commitment to help balance the pressures of a highly controlled and monitored work environment. Here they seek to demonstrate how managers can apply strategies to offset what they describe as the “worst features of call centre working” such as the pervasive systems of control. Response strategies include providing fun incentives and social events along with reducing overtime expectations and creating payment incentive schemes. Little discussion if any is devoted to reducing the emphasis on productivity or control.

Regarding surveillance, human resource literature often focuses on the practice rather than the morality of the activities. Listening in on a person’s calls could be seen by some as a rather underhanded activity, but human resource literature seems to view it as normal, acceptable and unavoidable. For example, Kinnie et al. describe these activities as crucial in a service driven company (Kinnie et al. 2000: 968). Here these authors subordinate the practice of employers spying on workers by highlighting what they term as a “new model of service”. Here they describe the success of management systems used by companies that apparently put front-line workers first by designing business systems around them. Here Kinnie et al. outline a raft of

motivation management strategies and incentives they describe as “Fun and Surveillance” designed apparently to placate stressed and undervalued workers. As with labour intensification, the practice of surveillance appears to escape unscathed in favour of managerial activities designed to make the work more palatable rather undertaking any serious structural change.

Hatchett (2000) meanwhile diffuses the issue of productivity by highlighting differences in call centres. He explains how quality of working life varies markedly in call centres, depending on the nature of the business how this affects staff turnover. He discriminates between different types of call centres, such as mail order firms, particularly where they use part time staff, pointing out that other organisations report much lower turnover rates, particularly those that are family friendly. Meanwhile in this explanation, discussion focusing on the drive for productivity is largely ignored. The intensity of the work, it seems, is unavoidable.

In reality the intensity of the work is the most pressing problem in most call centres. It is the most common cause of staff turnover, and is closely followed by competition from other employers who offer of better wages (Whitehead, 1999). Such a high incidence of staff turnover suggests that call centres are not always ideal places to work. Systemically they may have major problems, if staff are constantly looking to leave them. Yet these issues are not addressed in this example, but instead are simply “glossed” over in favour of discussion on strategies that can be used to improve a worker's “lot” or alternatively based on the type of workers call centres should employ (see Miller & Furnham, 1998).

This type of approach raises questions regarding human resource management theory on call centres and the solutions that they pose. It appears human resource management theory all too often relegates the drive for

performance to a function of selecting the right staff and imposing the right management systems. When comparing the views of sociologists (such as Fernie & Metcalf) with those of some human resource theorists (such as Davis, 1999, Whitehead, 1999, Hatchett, 2000, Kinnie, 2000) a contradiction regarding the nature and operation of call centres seems to arise. As Fernie and Metcalf may have overemphasised the role of surveillance, so it seems some human resource writers (Davis, 1999, Hatchett, 2000, Kinnie, 2000) appear to play them down. Human resource literature often appears somewhat apologetic, often suggesting, for instance that call centres are often misunderstood. Frequently the writers highlight the positive aspects of the work, in order to restore some "balance" to the apparent undeserved reputations that call centres carry. Even Bain & Taylor, when remonstrating their concern at the highly repetitive, stressful and intense nature of this work, condemn the "panopticon" theory by labelling it as a mechanism that stifles worker resistance, rather than commending it as a criticism of the actions of overly controlling employers.

This debate leads to a vexing question? If call centres are not as Fernie & Metcalf would have us believe, repositories for unbridled panoptic domination, then why are they subject to such negative imagery? Clearly there are major issues with staff turnover and the intensity of call centre work. Repeatedly unions, employees and academics condemn call centres. They highlight the intense, stressful nature of the work, the high reliance on electronic surveillance, the unrelenting emphasis on performance and resistance to collective action as key indicators that call centres are places of major inequity. The problem is that those who offer such critiques are often too keen to adopt the idea of the panoptic prison, based on Foucaultian notions of unremitting control and domination. By adopting this extreme view they

open themselves to counter arguments premised in sensibility, such as those offered by Bain & Taylor. Such arguments reduce disturbing practices like labour intensification, surveillance and worker controls to matters of academic quibble. Thus the importance of these practices in terms of their impact on worker's lives are lost as a consequence, as human resource management dilutes the ramifications of the draconian effects of this new way of working.

Human resource literature lacks a critical perspective in their portrayal of call centres. Certainly they acknowledge the presence of monitoring and surveillance as a problem, but tend to view it as a "necessary evil". There is often a paucity of comment of an optimistic nature that belies the Orwellian nature of call centres (Davis and Whitehead, 1999, Kinnie and Hatchett, 2000). At the same time this field of academic pursuit offers little theoretical explanation of call centre operations that might clarify how a call centre actually works. What appears to be missing from Human Resource analysis is a mechanism capturing the social mechanics of a call centre. While there appears to be little dispute between disciplines that some call centres are undesirable places to work, Human Resource explanations at times appear overly generous. Often they consist of little more than a superficial discussion advising firms to acquire more positive managerial approaches, such as employee motivation management and incentive schemes. And frequently, if call centre turnover rates are a guide (over 50% report staff turnover of between 16 to 33%, New Zealand Herald: 2 August 2001), it appears these approaches are not working.

2.5: Summary.

Two approaches outlined in this chapter view call centres in conflicting ways. Fernie & Metcalf (1988) see call centres as prison like structures dominated by managers in conditions reminiscent of early 19th century factories. Bain & Taylor, Davis, Whitehead, (1999), Kinnie, Hatchett, (2000) see them as an extensions of the traditional “paper” office, enterprising work places that while varying in quality, are projections of the contemporary face of labour. Neither perspective suggests a robust theoretical model that explains how call centres work.

To simply label call centres as panoptic prisons, as Fernie & Metcalf (1998) have done, is far to simplistic an explanation, ignoring many other processes beyond the boundaries of technological surveillance, including the complex nature of human relations. Similarly, to portray call centres as simply places requiring managerial change, without theoretically probing the underlying dynamics of the personnel “mechanics” also denies the importance of human interaction. This Human resource management approach merely scratches the surface, by describing the events without stating how and why they occurred. In so doing this analysis relegates important social forces, such as the underlying ideologies that stimulate these controls as secondary, concentrating only on that which can be seen. In this instance a means to an end simply becomes an end.

Is there an alternative conceptualisation of how a call centre works? Could there be a theory that can be applied to explain call centres in a more encompassing way? Assuming there is not the total panoptic domination within call centres, what mechanism might explain why call centre workers endure the working conditions typified by labour intensification and

surveillance. Can one superimpose some form of classical theory to explain the acceptance of surveillance that moves away from notions of inevitable non-participatory control? Possibly there is some middle ground that captures portions of the panoptic notion without accepting its inevitable fatalistic conclusions. Clearly human resource management, while a useful evaluatory tool, offers little explanation for this. Its explanations are designed more as succour for business. It is necessary to look elsewhere. In the next chapter an alternative theory is put forward in an effort to help explain how call centres work. There a notion is proposed that explains the acceptance of technological controls without embracing ideas of a workplace prison.

Chapter 3: Even Older Theories: Ideology In Call Centre's.

As outlined in the previous chapter, there are a number of problems with current analysis of call centres. Fernie and Metcalf (1998), for instance, have analysed call centres through the use of technology, particularly in relation to surveillance methods that are founded in notions of dominance of machine over man. Fernie & Metcalf explain their interest in call centres as follows.

This occupation merits study because the possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output are amazing to behold - the "tyranny of the assembly line" is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony.

The problem with this analysis is that in focusing on the technological controls, Fernie & Metcalf neglect the other important factors, particularly those that centre around the development of workplace cultures and motivation management strategies. Such strategies are important in call centre work. Other academic disciplines, however, do take these activities into account when conducting research on call centres.

Human resource management approaches call centre research by focusing purely on managerial activities and strategies used to improve the day-to-day running of call centres. While not entirely unsympathetic to the plight of workers, who face dramatic labour intensification to improve productivity, this discipline tends to approach these issues at face value rather than utilising any in depth theoretical approach. In attempting to explain the

work organisation in call centres, human resource management analysis is embedded in employer based managerial strategies based on improving the running of the business. This is also limiting, as it runs the risk of trivialising the powerful controlling forces that underlie call centre operation.

In order to redress the limitations of both human resource literature (Kinnie, Bain and Taylor and others) and writings based in technological determinism (Ferne and Metcalf) this thesis pursues an alternative perspective. The ideological aspects of call centre management and how these might provide a more encompassing explanation of call centre work organisation are explored. The aim of this thesis is to explore the prospect that a call centre worker's role is constructed along free market lines, through the use of ideologically driven managerial strategies and tactics. Thus, this thesis seeks to explore the nature of the power structures and mechanisms used in obtaining control over call centre workers. A question is asked as to whether ideological perspectives influence how workers act in a call centre? Assuming there is some form of mechanism involved in maintaining power and control, could ideological influences provide a better explanation than the panopticon of surveillance? This question is developed further in this chapter and the rest of this thesis.

This chapter consists of a five part discussion on a possible ideological framework in call centres. Part one introduces the idea of hegemony through the lens of Antonio Gramsci, as a theoretical explanation of labour controls occurring in call centres. Miliband in Ransome (1992) describes hegemony as a process of permanent struggle, to maintain control over the hearts and minds of subordinate classes and suggests the work of hegemony is never done. This statement summarises a major assertion of this thesis, that domination by coercion with consent is present and active in many call centres today. Part

two outlines the contribution of flat management structures in providing an environment that assists in implementing these controls. Part three assesses information management work organisational approaches to see if any are useful for explaining how labour controls are implemented in a call centre. A further question asks whether it is possible to apply a combination of these approaches to explain the call centre dynamic. Part four questions the role of call centre management asking whether the creation of performance based workplace cultures can form the basis of establishing domination by coercion with consent. Such cultures are, according to Beder, designed to create within employees certain core values and sense of purpose beyond making money (Beder, 2000: 143). Larner's interpretation of Dean's (1999) the "technology of agency" is also raised here. Larner presents a theoretical description for call centres that explains the connection between the culture of performance, and its relationship to the free market. Larner uses the "technology of agency" to describe how "call centre workers are encouraged to participate in performance based practices designed for the pursuit for international competitiveness. (Larner, 2000: 16). Part five summarises the argument so far and introduces chapter four.

3.1: Hegemony In Call Centres.

Hegemony pertains to ideology. Thompson's (1990) classical or critical ideological perspective is tied to Marxist beliefs regarding class relations and the means of production. Hallmarks of this arrangement centre on issues regarding exploitation, contradiction, and opposed class interests. In a sense ideology is about understanding, or being prevented from understanding class and social relations. In a call centre ideology can be used to explain who's

interests are being served through work organisation, and how these processes operate to attempt to maintain "control" over workers.

In order to unravel these processes a number of questions come to mind. Could the operation of a call centre be explained by examining the dominant interests behind labour controls? Is it possible that there are ideologies behind call centre managerial strategies that promote particular conceptions of how labour should behave? If so, from where do these interests originate? Do dominant interests in call centres try to develop a way of thinking amongst workers to justify and maintain these conceptions? More importantly how can this be shown? In practice, an ideology, cannot be measured, simply because it is a way of thinking. It is intangible and essentially conceptual. To counter this problem a researcher has to find a more concrete way of ascertaining the thinking behind dominant call centre interests. This thesis suggests the answer lies in examining the practices used in call centres to promote particular ethics and beliefs. In this way it is possible to surmise how dominant interests think by analysing how they promote and maintain particular points of view, within their labour force. An explanation of this could lie in the notion of hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to describe the various modes of social control available to the dominant social group (Ransome, 1992). This thesis asks whether the classical approach of hegemony, as proposed by Gramsci, is in fact of more use in explaining the dynamics of call centres. Hegemony is described in the following terms.

Gramsci used the term hegemony to denote the predominance of one social class over others. This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and

'natural'. Commentators stress that this involves willing and active consent. Common sense, is 'the way a subordinate class lives its subordination (Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992: 51).

Gramsci's main goal was to attempt to take the theories of Karl Marx and develop them philosophically. He saw Marxism as a philosophical system, reflecting a rising social order. Although captivated by Marxism, he was concerned that certain aspects of the theory remained undeveloped. In shifting his emphasis to economics, Gramsci felt Marx had not achieved the purity that came from higher philosophical sophistication. Accordingly he attempted to take Marxism to another level. While undertaking this process, he developed his insight into the concept of hegemony (Hoffman, 1984).

Gramsci created a visionary elaboration of this concept by enhancing Marxist/ Leninist perspectives about the emancipation of the proletariat. It was a fundamental aspect of Gramsci's major philosophical work, the philosophy of Praxis. The notion of hegemony had a long prior history as "one of the most central political slogans in the Russian Social Democratic movement" (Hoffman, 1984: 52). Gramsci however, expanded the meaning (beyond its original Marxist understandings) to describe number of different relationships of social forces (Ransome, 1992:132). In one form it encompassed the process and evolution of society. Another more relevant description focused on analysing social relations, particularly the idea that hegemony represents a conscious struggle to control the hearts and minds of individuals in subordinate classes. This is the central concept of this thesis. Gramsci believed, this conceptualisation should be maintained and reproduced in intellectual reflection and synthesis for use by society. The purpose was to provide a new form of material reality, and to develop understandings of this process for political and social strategies and actions.

While hegemony was not original, Gramsci gave the concept new life. Initially the term hegemony was used to describe the perspectives of the working class in terms of their unity in rebelling against the bourgeoisie (upper classes) in a feudal capitalist society. Gramsci extended the concept beyond this, by showing how hegemony is a class rule in general that allows the bourgeoisie to dominate the working class by implementing a different type of unifying perspective. Instead of the working class unifying their thinking against the upper class, in this way of viewing hegemony, the upper classes persuade the working classes to accept their point of view in a way that appears voluntary. So hegemony shifts from a description of unity against power, to a description of unity by the use of power.

An important function of hegemony was the formulation of revolutionary strategy. Gramsci used the concept to analyse how the bourgeoisie held power. He maintained hegemony was a political and social form of control. It enabled a dominant class to maintain its position of power by combining coercion with consent. The unifying of both phenomena as a dialectical strategy allowed dominance to appear as voluntary, hence the notion of the dual perspective or "Machiavelli's centaur". The value of this theory is that it can be applied to explain power relations at many different levels, from a macro level to a micro level, wherever there is a dominant and a subordinate group.

It is here that the concept of hegemony appears to "fit" the call centre dynamics. In particular I am emphasising the idea of domination by coercion with consent using various labour controls. With this type of class dominance, it is conceivable that those who run call centres are capable of promoting a type of voluntarism by force, to impose their will on their employees. The

question of course is how? The goal of this thesis is to explore this question by first explaining hegemony and how it might work in a call centre.

A hegemony refers to the everyday facts of life as lived and practised by a community or culture. It involves acknowledging there are structures of domination and subordination in society and in work. Using call centres as an example, one can consider the use of phone surveillance by managers to spy on workers as an example. In society people might frown on the idea of someone listening to another's conversations without them knowing about it. This could be seen as a sneaky, underhanded thing to do. But in a call centre this is a commonplace event that managers insist is necessary in order to protect the interests of the callers, but also in order that they can keep a watchful eye on their workers to ensure they all busy working.

Here we see a dominant structure, in this case an employer, stating that this practise is not an immoral thing, but in fact normal and acceptable behaviour. In a sense this is an example of hegemony, where things are legitimised to suit the purpose of the dominant party or group. In this way something that does not appear right (such as listening in on others phone calls) can become a common-sense practice taken for granted by people in everyday life. It becomes acceptable and normal in a call centre, even though our common-sense beliefs state otherwise. In a sense a hegemony is created and maintained by a "ruling" ideology, through the winning of consent of ideas and beliefs, in such a way that it becomes the domain of everyday consciousness.

Essentially, in accordance with Gramsci's understanding, hegemony refers to a loosely interrelating set of ruling ideas permeating a society, that attempts to establish order of power and values that appear natural, taken for granted and commonsensical (McQuail, 1994: 99). It constitutes "us" as

individual subjects, by shaping our conscious beliefs, and eventually how we come to see ourselves. In the context of a call centre, the managerial goal is to increase productivity by getting workers to take more calls. In order to do this is it possible that managers must try to shape the conscious beliefs of their staff to accept these productive requirements, even if it is not in the workers interest to do so. Is this achieved by the creation of a hegemony? Does an employer impose his/her will onto the workforce by domination by coercion with consent through a mixture of labour controls, to persuade worker's productivity is normal?

According to Bain & Taylor (2000) the panopticon of surveillance cannot be the sole method of labour control because it alone is not sufficiently effective in gaining worker compliance. Call centre managers, as will be demonstrated from interviews from staff, use a variety of other strategies both at the pre employment and post employment level to persuade workers to accept the dominant way of thinking. In fact it could be argued the panopticon, forms part of a bigger picture based on attempted ideological controls that include motivational and technological strategies designed to persuade workers of the importance of continual productivity.

Fernie & Metcalf (1998) argue that:

In call centres the agents are constantly visible and the supervisor's power has indeed by "rendered perfect" - via the computer monitoring screen - and therefore "its actual use unnecessary.

In contrast to Fernie & Metcalf's argument, Gramsci's model allows one to dispute this notion that the supervisors power is rendered perfect by technology. Using Gramsci's model as an alternative, could it be that

technology is just one tool of many used by managers to impose their ideological beliefs (and thus power) relating to productivity onto their workforce. Workers need to accept the use of this technology as a normal and acceptable activity, before they even start work. This would suggest that the supervisors power has not been rendered perfect by the computer at all because in all likelihood a worker has already prior to engagement accepted the nature of the controls as part of the job.

Is the computer simply one tool in a barrage of technologically and socially derived strategies designed to coerce workers into working harder and faster? If this is the case, does the use of the computer, as Fernie & Metcalf believe, become unnecessary over time? The constant use of activities seeking to continually reinforce managerial beliefs regarding maintaining productivity would suggest this is not the case. Thus there must be other forces at work beyond the computer. Do managers find they need to continuously facilitate workplace practices based on increasing performance, to try and win the hearts and minds of workers? In essence do they strive to achieve domination by coercion with consent through a variety of tactics. Perhaps the use of the computer is simply not enough? To further develop this argument this thesis turns to how these labour controls might be applied by firstly examining the call centre structure.

3.2: Implementing Controls: The Role of Flat Management.

A flat management structure is a common feature in call centres. The flat management structure has a short chain of command, but a wide span of control (Riggio, 1996: 399). This type of structure provides managers with a suitable framework to develop labour control strategies based on employee monitoring and the imposition of specific work cultures. Often implemented during periods of workforce rationalisation, flat management structures allow organisations to eject bureaucracy and become more responsive through job demarcation and managerial controls (Clark, 1993). Rather than the traditional hierarchical structural pyramid, managers in these structures use their organisations like networks (Sennett, 1998: 23), thus removing cumbersome chains of command. Such frameworks embody the ethos of efficient workplace practice, by creating organisations that are viewed as readily broken down and redefinable entities. Technology, such as computing and data processing services, further enhance the network structure by streamlining the nature of these controls so they are easier to deliver in the workplace. Creating this environment is one thing, how it is used is another. How these controls are subsequently applied and the vehicle in which they travel require further elaboration.

Two proactive parallel systems are at work in a call centre. Firstly, technology and secondly, human managerial controls. There is a temptation to explain controls through technological determinism via Foucault's notion of the internalisation of power, (via surveillance) is understandable. However, this outlook relegates the other extremely important strategy of the internalisation of power through managerial cultures and teams. Power in this sense is not, as Foucault would have it, everywhere and nowhere (Sarup, 1993). Here power is

derived from two sources. First, the dominant interests who attempt to establish work based ethics in order to promote their point of view. Secondly, the computer used as a tool to reinforce the former. The ultimate aim in both cases is to ensure employees work harder and longer, supervised by each other, through group pressure, under the guidance of coaches and “leaders” who urge them on to greater heights of productivity (Beder, 2000).

Utilising the guise of loyalty and commitment, modern managers often attempt to promote a sense of purpose amongst their workers that goes well beyond pure profit (Beder, 2000). Frequently workers are "managed" using attempts to improve their motivation, through so called work enrichment strategies, such as by making workers responsible for their own performance and quality control (Beder, 2000: 144).

In call centres this so called “worker democracy” however, is underpinned by the use of surveillance, in order to generate greater commitment from the worker, while avoiding the employer’s reciprocal responsibilities (such as trust and job security). An important point here is that often these employer strategies involve inducing acceptance of surveillance as normal, fair and simply "just part of the job". Often this consent is obtained through justifications supporting workplace monitoring, such as claims that surveillance is not for staff control, but to protect the needs of the clients. This understanding, one can suggest, is not achieved by implementing a panoptic threat, whereby the worker becomes conditioned and disciplined by psychological controls, but rather is suggested here occurs through ideological acceptance of the dominant point of view. In essence is the worker coerced by employers into accepting that surveillance and its partner productivity are normal everyday practices that are an accepted part of working call centre life?

Explaining how workers are coerced into ideological acceptance of these practices is problematic. To do so requires an explanation of how call centre labour controls are applied to workers and what type of work organisational approach(es) might be used in the delivery of these controls. This in turn requires the reader to understand the types of work organisations that exist in the world today and how each operates. By work organisation I mean the types of employment structures that are applied in advanced working societies today (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire and Tam, 1999: 3).

Labour controls based on "domination by coercion with consent" undoubtedly involve a work organisational approach that is complimentary to strategies like monitoring/surveillance or teams and motivational management. These strategies can then be exercised through employment structures (such as flat management) in order to control workers. It is necessary therefore to examine work organisational approaches (and the managerial activities found within them) to provide a suitable match. By finding a matching work organisational approach it should then be possible to develop an insight into how ideological acceptance and ultimately hegemony might be achieved in a call centre. But there is a problem with this.

The act of imposing call centre labour controls may not necessarily fit with any particular work organisational approach. As a consequence it becomes necessary to not only define work organisation approaches, but to also ask whether more than one approach can be used at any one time to explain labour controls in call centres. The next section of this thesis discusses exactly this, by firstly describing the three main work organisation approaches (Marxism and regulation theory, Micro sociology and Organisational analysis) and then asking whether more than one can be used to explain labour controls and capture hegemony in call centres.

3.3: Work organisation and Call Centres.

To examine how labour controls are applied in a call centre, a question arises as to what work organisational approach is likely to be applicable. In light of the lack of existing literature offering a suitable work organisational approach, this thesis proposes a model that could explain the controls existing in a call centre. By controls I mean strategies like monitoring/surveillance, teams and motivational management that are complimentary to work organisation in a call centre context. By developing this work organisational model it should then be possible to develop clarification into how ideological acceptance and ultimately hegemony might be achieved in a call centre.

To devise this model it is possible to look to Thompson's work organisation analysis (1989) for guidance regards conceptualising labour controls in a call centre. Thompson takes a stance that many positions proposed in work organisation theory do not fit all models. Through Hyman (1987) Thompson points out with regards to labour controls that, "their diversity is likely to be far greater than is recognised in the typologies proposed by recent writers" (Thompson, 1989: 229) such as Burawoy (1979) or Friedman (1987). Thus he is saying that one theoretical position does not fit all. This is echoed by Frenkel et al who argues that addressing labour analysis should involve utilising the strength of each work organisational approach and avoiding the limitations (Frenkel et al.1999: 13).

According to Frenkel et al. (1999: 13) there are three approaches to analysing work and organisations. They are Marxism and regulation theory, Micro sociology and Organisational analysis. All of these theories can be used to sum up aspects of call centre labour controls. Frenkel et al point out that

there are many emerging forms of work organisation stemming from intense market competition and the use of computers as a cost effective working medium. These “transformations” of work organisation may be inter linked, and can be particularly useful in explaining the general effects of information technology on work. Accordingly they can all go some of the way towards explaining the modern call centre but not entirely. In accordance with both Thompson and Frenkel et al’s philosophy and approach I present the three approaches to work organisation and highlight how each helps explain some portion of the call centre dynamic. These are later combined to explain how call centre labour controls and ultimately hegemony might work in a call centre.

In Marxism and Regulation Theory, labour process theory is used to analyse the macro and microstructures of work organisation. Labour processes are ways in which materials are transformed into human labour to be exchanged as commodities in the market (Thompson, 1989: pxv). The purpose of labour process theory is to reveal the dynamics of capitalist exploitation and worker resistance within labour processes as structured by managerial and state strategies (Burawoy in Frenkel et al.1999: p14). This approach is preoccupied with production and encompasses such approaches as the classic “Taylorist view” of management. Taylor constantly analysed workers and their work was essentially broken into components. Braverman termed this process deskilling where employers have complete control of the production process. In a modern day scenario Tayloristic management utilises the opportunity to exercise greater control over workers through techniques such as telesurveillance, and teams (both seen in call centres) and through the use of rigid technological formats which reduce the autonomy of the employee (Miles & Ducatel, 1994: 154).

Using this approach, it can be surmised that exploitation and worker resistance within labour processes, are real and occurring in call centres. Thus the desire to implement labour controls becomes paramount, and can be viewed as the employer response to this resistance. This can be seen through activities of surveillance and monitoring, and analysis of call centre labour activities, where workers are constantly analysed and the work essentially broken into components for comparisons to idealised statistics on expected employee performance. Consequently the work is deskilled, as per Taylorism, with the view to complete control of the call “production” process. This allows managers to exercise greater control over workers through techniques such as telesurveillance, motivation management and teams.

Also featured in Marxism and regulation theory (Frenkel et al.1999: 14) is another labour process called “Responsible Autonomy”. Friedman in Miles & Ducatel (1994: 157) describes this theory as where more control and responsibility are said to be placed in the hands of the worker, allowing them to maintain quality, workflow and flexibility. This is also a particularly common scenario in call centres, as they often require a range of skill levels, depending on the market they pursue and the customers they deal with. Later in this section I will explain how both Taylorism and “Responsible Autonomy”, which on the surface appear quite paradoxical, can be applied to call centres at the same time.

The Marxism and Regulation theory approach also encompasses the notion of hegemony through Burawoy (1983) who promotes the existence of managerial hard or soft control strategies created to influence the thinking of the workers. The hard strategy relates to managerial efforts to attack unions and change worker customs, practices (and beliefs) so they become more responsive to managerial desires. The soft strategy works in tandem with the

hard strategy by seeking to build worker consent, based on flexible labour and increased productivity (Frenkel et al.1999: 15). All these strategies can be formed through attempts at domination by coercion with consent and feature strongly in call centres. These controlling strategies are enhanced by Regulation theory through the introduction of loyalty inducing and skill enhancing human resource management policies (Frenkel et al.1999: 16). These policies include monitoring, surveillance and motivation management as outlined in chapter two.

Regulation theory also seeks to explain the how manufacturing production based theory is being transformed to explain new service industry work and in particular to those forms of work (like call centres) that are based on mastering abstract knowledge systems by putting them on software and computing systems (Frenkel et al.1999: 16). In this scenario learned knowledge that previously would have been the domain of years of experience and practice in the workplace is transferred to a computer database and accessed by help files or a knowledge base. As such, information in a call centre is accessed via these knowledge systems in a manner akin to a factory, where knowledge is a product taken from a database and provided to a customer via the phone.

The problem with this work organisational approach is that it does not encompass the micro sociological aspects of work such as individual worker experience. This experiential aspect of working is important, particularly with regards to internalised tensions and contradictions arising from the opposing demands of emotional labour and managerial expectations regards improved customer service (Frenkel et al.1999:17). This is discussed in the next work organisational approach, micro sociological perspectives.

Micro sociological perspectives look at work at a much closer level than the Marxism and regulation theory approach. Often achieved through ethnographic research, that is participant observation (Tolich & Davidson, 1999: 3), work is analysed at the grass roots level with small details recorded regards how the work is conceived, learned accomplished evaluated and most importantly experienced over time (Frenkel et al.1999:17). Worker identities are at the forefront of this research. This work organisational theory therefore deals with issues such as emotional labour, which pertains to the inducing or suppressing of feelings by workers when dealing with others (Hochschild, 1983: 7). In this theory how workers produce a suitable state of mind in response to dealing with customers are explored.

This work organisational approach concentrates on exploring things like corporate cultures and managerial techniques, which strongly feature in, call centres. These techniques, which are often packaged as market based values and norms can lead to internalised tensions and contradictions within workers (Frenkel et al.1999: 17). In call centres this work organisational approach manifests in the contradictory nature of providing customer service and providing productive efficiencies at work. Often these contradictions cause tensions that are not resolvable in organisations focused on productivity gains. Another aspect of this work organisation theory is a focus on how managers attempt to create enterprising subjects by asking workers to work upon themselves in order to better themselves. An example of this is can be seen in an information technology labour process theory called multiskilling.

Multiskilling suggests technology is associated with an upgrading of jobs (Miles & Ducatel, 1994: 155). In this scenario there is a need for a qualitative flexible workforce capable of multiskilling. Workers should be adept at coping with change and exhibiting managerial, technical and social skills acquired

through continual workplace training and motivation management. This is a strong theme found in call centres particularly to combat staff turnover. In essence managers introduce hegemony into the workplace an attempt to influence their workers that the productive environment they work in is normal and acceptable. Often this normalisation of productivity and change is often constructed, as a replacement for employer commitment to life long employment by suggesting that through technological advancement there is no other alternative. This labour process fits well with flat management structures, where employees take on the responsibilities previously the domain of middle management by conducting self-management in conjunction with employer motivational strategies as part of a company or work ethos of individual responsibility.

Despite this environment of self-management, in this work organisational approach employees are not always envisaged as conforming to management expectations. Often they are said to display only limited accommodation to management values and norms (Frenkel et al.1999: 18). As a result both employers and workers are said to have little organisational commitment to each other. This can be seen in many call centres, particularly, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis regards call centre staff turnover. As a consequence this organisational approach suggests management looks to promote an environment where workers should be adept at coping with change and exhibiting managerial, technical and social skills acquired through workplace training and motivation management. It is the premise of this thesis that this again is achieved through the dynamic of hegemony and the persuasive nature of strategies designed to increase productivity.

A major drawback of this work organisational approach relates to its concentration on a minimal setting. In studying the micro sociological aspects

of work Frenkel et al suggest that larger organisational structures and how they connect are ignored, which detracts from what these authors term as the nested nature of work, such as organisations like networks. To counter this I now raise the third and final work organisational approach called Organisational perspectives.

Organisational perspectives are an amalgamation of perspectives from management, sociology and industrial relations. Basically this approach suggests that decision making is a laterally based process, rather than top down hierarchical process, with decisions made by workers who are higher skilled and work in networks. Through the Organisational perspective it can be suggested that call centres have structures or organisational units that are designed for lateral communication (networks) and built around specific types of knowledge and data (Frenkel et al.1999: 19). This is evident through the information-based nature of the work and the activities of data processing, such as advisory and sales based communicative labour that this typifies call centre work.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) cited in Frenkel et al. (19) speak of what they call the “hypertext organisation” which overlays structures of lateral communication on structures of hierarchical control, creating an environment open to domination by coercion with consent by the nature of its workplace structure. Here managerial controls are dominating, but also hidden, behind a network structure that appears to be operating on its own. Thus management control is combined with co-worker decision making such as working in teams, which is also a feature of some call centre work. This notion of the “hypertext organisation” is an important concept that requires elaboration due to its similarity to Taylorism and Responsible Autonomy which are found in Marxism and Regulation theory.

Call centre workers appear to work under both Taylorist strong supervisory controls and in an environment akin to Friedman's notion of Responsible autonomous labour (as premised by strategies such as Beder's ideas of "workplace democracy" see section 3.2). This becomes evident with the appearance of the deskilling process of Taylorism and the oppositional process of responsible autonomous labour where control and responsibility are said to be placed in the hands of the worker, allowing them to maintain quality, work flow and flexibility. In a sense the deskilling and control process is overlaid by the appearance of workers operating by themselves (generally in teams). The important point here is that in both Taylorism, Responsible Autonomy and the "hypertext organisation" the managerial controls are hidden by the appearance of an autonomous self controlled workforce that overlays the controls. In a sense one can argue that hegemony is hidden by autonomy.

Could this in fact form part of a call centre paradox? Workers in many call centres could work in conditions described by both of the Organisational perspective and Marxism and Regulation theory work organisational approach. Both perspectives elude to labour processes where one process overlays the other, thus creating a curious dimension where freedom masks authority. It also demonstrates how work organisational approaches can clearly overlap and operate in tandem.

Beyond this, attention is drawn to another part of the Organisational perspective that relates to the role of the market. This is highlighted by Frenkel et al regards work place structures with entrepreneurial focus and "market mimicking" forms. This can apply to call centres which are often found competing for business through outsourcing forms of work. The Organisational perspective also raises flexibility of labour and organisational

response to change as a result of the rapidly changing nature of technology and market itself. Together “market mimicking” forms and flexibility open the call centre to the possibility of “ideologies of the free market” where the views of market based labour are superimposed onto call centre workers by virtue of the environment in which they work.

The second aspect pertains to flexibility of labour and organisational response to change. Flexibility supposedly disposes of routine. It denotes pliability, adaptability and responsiveness to pressure (Blyton, 1994: 299). Both these features set a platform for the call centre that could allow it to operate as a “pure” market entity by having a flexible workforce that responds quickly through timely decision processes. In practice the movement towards this flexible work structure is stimulated by management desires for workers to be able to adapt to changing circumstances rapidly. Both are common features of call centres. The idea of flexible labour and outsourcing which will be discussed in chapter four.

As I have demonstrated each one of these theoretical work organisational perspectives forms part of the call centre puzzle. It is acknowledged again at this point that this is only speculative model explaining how hegemony could filter into a call centres. This model only offers suggestions about how call centre labour controls might work. It is important to stress that the mechanisms by which this blending of work organisation approach appears and manifests in a call centre structure require further investigation. To develop this enquiry further a question is put forward as to whether this model could be confirmed by enquiring into the nature of the hegemony its self. Does this hegemony appear in the form of workplace performativity cultures and expectations in order to construct the role of a worker along free market lines? The next section of this chapter begins this

process of enquiry by enquiring into the role of performativity and the market, as the indicators of how the hegemonic process occurs in a call centre. Do workers learn to accept through the norms and cultures of their managers to accept their role as productive and economic units?

3.4: Creating Performance Cultures: Constructing the Role of a Worker.

Is it possible that call centres operate through both surveillance and by establishing work cultures? Do they place as much, if not more emphasis, on establishing “market” cultures and creating an environment that "constructs" the role of their workers to meet employer expectations? Having a established a call centre model that could explain how hegemony occurs, this thesis now turns to the practical aspects of what constitutes as hegemony in call centres. To examine these questions further, discussion now centres the creation of workplace cultures as a method of establishing domination by coercion with consent. Often these appear through motivation management.

There are a number of practices enacted by call centres to “motivate” their workers. Generally they involve encouraging active participation and workplace enterprise cultures (Larner, 2000). Often these practices are derived from an environment commensurate with the free market conceptions of the work organisation, which involve things like increasing productivity and creating a flexible workforce. Larner refers to this as the Technology of Agency (Larner, 2000). Originally conceived by Dean (1999: 195), the "Technology of Agency" occurs at the level of work-based enterprise and can be used as a framework to assist in identifying productivity and profiling practices in call centres. Workers are often encouraged to participate in

pursuing international competitiveness, while accepting relatively low wages and highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures. Often this begins at recruitment, where the "right" type of worker (like Cheryl in chapter one) is identified through aptitude tests and psychological profiling. Once employed, a worker is often encouraged to practice entrepreneurialism and teamwork. Employees are controlled and monitored through supervisory/surveillance techniques, suggested to be used to develop worker's skills and performance. All these tactics are very prevalent in call centres.

In fostering these capacities for "active participation", a call centre may also subject its workers to rigorous monitoring to ensure they comply with best in class and benchmark performance standards. This opens the wider organisation to the prospect of flexible work practices, constant change and reorganisation, essentially prescribed as efficiencies. All of these practices can compromise forms of traditional solidarity that underpin the labour movement.

Call centre terminology uses many phrases steeped in the ideological tradition of the free market. Generally themes espouse assumptions of workplace enterprise, derived in an environment of innovation, flexibility, performativity and competition. It is here that the notion of the market as the driving force in labour practices becomes visible. These are the expectations of employers in call centres. Their cultures are constructed around these needs, their strategies set up to both enforce, and to engender acceptance of these outcomes. It is a central tenet of this thesis that a desire to see these practices accepted in a workforce, could result in the development of a hegemony, with staff coerced into behaving in ways that complement management needs. In essence, in this scenario, the role of a worker is "constructed" using cultures

and management expectations. As will be shown in chapter eight it is here that hegemony becomes reality.

Constructing the role of a worker is a phrase that requires explanation. A role in this sense is described as a general concept that refers to the fact that people have their behaviour restricted and patterned in various ways (Salaman, 1974: 35). For instance a new worker who joins a work group might instantly fall into the role of novice that is someone who knows little about the job. Thus his/her fellow work mates may treat the worker as a novice in accordance with the “assigned role”. Yet later as the worker becomes more known to colleagues he or she might demonstrate a good sense of humour thus establishing themselves as a joker, which then redefines the worker in a different role, this time as person who relieves work boredom or stress (Riggio, 1996: 303).

Essentially a worker’s role is constructed by exposing the worker to a set of norms and values within a specific organisational culture, and then presenting them as normal practice. These can be referred to as role expectations, that is beliefs concerning the responsibilities and requirements of a particular role (Riggio, 1996: 303).

In a call centre, workers are said to be exposed to a set of norms constructed around productivity, performativity, and flexibility (Larner, 2000). Other aspects of work associated with the market ethos such as competition, and performance pay and incentives also feature highly. Often these requirements are introduced through various modern managerial practices and regimes designed to initiate workers into the normality of a market based labour culture.

Founded on business perspectives these cultures are frequently advanced in the form of employment values managers might perceive as

desirable in their work force. Examples include issues such as accepting flexible working hours, performativity through surveillance/monitoring, and productivity measures designed to increase call turnover. Eventually these cultures pervade through the call centre workforce, persuading employees to act in certain ways that meet the company's goals and visions. And this fits with Gramsci's hegemony.

Gramsci believed that cultures like these could be interrelated with mechanistic institutions of society. He felt culture related to social systems, which he saw as the real force in society. Thus these social systems were developed or restrained in line with society's forces. Gramsci saw culture's place within society as part of the process of hierarchical class domination. In fact for Gramsci culture was dictated by domination, with those in weaker positions eventually accepting (through Gramsci's notion of hegemony) the position of those who controlled the mode of production (Alexander, 1990: 8). Such ideological development was according to Gramsci a feature of intellectualism, where dominant "understandings" were passed to those who were more "organically linked to society". In this manner ideology filtered through institutions of capitalist society in the form of a doctrine, that protected the interests of production through cultural hegemony. Hence society developed what Gramsci called the moral-political bloc in which class aided by intellectualism institutionalised a voluntary adherence to dominant ideas (Alexander, 1990). This notion of the adoption of dominant ideas can be visualised as including attempts to construct the role of the worker in a call centre.

3.5: Summary.

This five-part discussion thus far has developed a picture of how a call centre might function under hegemony. If Gramsci's model is useful and a hegemonic relationship is created by employers, with a culture and roles established, then what types of practices arise? What instils the values and how are they maintained? The rest of this thesis details a number of practices common in call centres. It is tentatively suggested that when these practices are applied, staff could be persuaded to behave in ways that compliment management needs.

This thesis asks if there are a variety of events, both socially and technologically determined, that might contribute to the development of a hegemonic perspective in call centres. It does not claim that this always eventuates. In the course of researching this topic, the writer suggests there are a number of themes that could lend themselves to the attempted induction into a hegemony. Frequently these appear as tactics used by managers to stimulate particular workplace behaviours and practices.

One could argue that these types of "tactics" involve activities like motivation management, and other actions of commission, developed to draw workers into an employment tradition. Here, supported by the flat management structure and the use of a blend of work organisation, managers would adopt strategies that are intended to influence feelings, thoughts, desires, values, inclinations or actions of employees (Pfeiffer, 1987: 106). It is suggested dominant call centre interests could attempt to persuade to workers to think along similar lines as themselves, by proposing a particular ideological perspective, rather than simply a technological one. Through the progression of this thesis, these themes will be discussed, with indications as to how

managers could conspire to create a “composite worker” whose role is readily defined through the imposition of performance based cultures.

With this in mind in the next chapter I conduct an historical exploration of call centres. Here I present topics relating to how call centres are staffed, structured and function. The idea that a worker’s role is constructed is elaborated there, by further explaining the practices and tactics commonly used by managers in the day-to-day running of their call centres.

Chapter 4: Creating an “Ideal Type”.

“Call centres can usually adopt a culture that reflects the behavioural competencies needed to provide flexibility and adaptability in the environment of constant change”. Janine Stewart CCMA. (NZ Info Tech, vol 435:2000.)

This chapter defines a call centre and looks at the types of call centres in existence in the market today. It also discusses the types of people that call centres look for, and explains some of the practices used in employment. These include strategies and tactics commonly used by managers to engender productivity in the day to day running of their operations. Defining a call centre, and explaining call centre "types," are relevant to the reader because these help in understanding how employment practices and productivity strategies are linked. The “type” of call centre directly contributes to how it is structured. This in turn determines the practices that used by managers to engage and supervise their staff. Different types of call centres, that is types A, B and C, require different types of workers and have different ways of operating. But having said that they share many common themes.

As previously mentioned, through my friend Cheryl’s story, call centres go to great lengths to try and assess a potential worker's attributes and personality. This is achieved by using advanced profiling and assessment methods to assist in engaging people deemed as suitable for the job. Call centres do this because they say they need people who will adapt to an environment of high productivity and tight labour controls. These controls form the basis of the activities that allow managers to get as much work out of their staff as they can.

This chapter further develops the theme outlined in chapter three that a call centre worker's role is constructed. How employment procedures are used to seek the right “type” of worker, with the view to increasing productivity and how these innovations are integral to constructing this role. In closing this section the panopticon is revisited through discussion on the role of unions and staff turnover, demonstrating both another facet of call centre practices based on performativity, and how these issues subvert the panopticon by highlighting employee resistance.

4.1: Call Centres and Types.

Call centres are a relatively recent phenomenon first appearing in the late eighties and early nineties, that have been made possible by vast changes in telecommunications and information technologies. New technology has created a system where customer service representatives (CSR's) can answer customer phone calls from a type of centralised office designed to deal quickly and remotely with customer needs (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000). They consist of large groups of workers using phones linked to a computer to answer volumes of calls per day. CSR's may perform a variety of different functions, such as enquiry and customer assistance, telemarketing, financial services, reservation systems and customer service departments. Places that use call centres are widespread including power companies, government departments, sales and telemarketing companies to name a few. Call centres work by connecting the CSR to the customer's account information on a computer, while the call is discussed through a headset. As call centres can be centralised in locations far from the customer's home, they allow firms to cut costs by

reducing the number of local service outlets (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000).

There are two kinds of call centres, inbound and outbound (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000). Inbound call centres are customer service orientated and are associated with things like banking, insurance, government enquiries, help desks, and airlines. Outbound call centres, are more sales orientated and use automated dialling systems that route calls to CSR's for the purpose of selling products, marketing, research or fund-raising activities. Buchanan & Koch-Schulte further differentiate inbound and outbound call centres into two categories. They refer to these as "types" as being "*indicative of the trend in the new service economy for there to be good jobs (full time, well compensated, and secure) and bad jobs (part time, insecure, and low paying)*" (Buchanan & Koch Schultz, 2000: p vii). Good jobs, according to Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, are usually found in inbound call centres. Conversely bad jobs are a feature of outbound call centres. Outbound call centres tend to pay less wages than inbound call centres and have higher rates of employee turnover. Buchanan & Koch-Schulte do point out that this is a very "loose" definition. Inbound call centres vary strongly in the quality of their working conditions and can also fall into the category of having "bad" jobs. Similarly there are outbound call centres, that don't fit the general "bad job" description either, such as high quality sales and marketing establishments. While this dual explanation is a very good "rule of thumb" when describing call centres, it is also very simplistic. To further expand on the differences between types of call centres, Kinnie (2000) offers a more sophisticated model that helps complete the call centre picture.

Kinnie (2000) talks of call centre "types" in terms of the "*nature of the transaction*". What he means here is that call centres are built on the basis of their customer relationships and corresponding financial gain. In more simple

terms he is saying that call centres are structured around the service they provide in relation to their customers needs. Bain & Taylor support this depiction by saying that *"call centre operators have joined, with flight attendants, shop assistants, fast food, and waiting staff, the swelling ranks of service worker whose performance at work is shaped by the objective of the customer"* (Bain & Taylor: 1999: 109). Thus a call centre can be said to be constructed around the type of customers it has, and how that customer is perceived by the business.

Kinnie (2000) argues that call centres are aimed at a target market. They provide a level of service to meet the expectations of a customer while incurring the lowest possible cost. So Kinnie (2000) categorises call centres according to the nature of their employment practices. He states *"the differences in working conditions depend very much on the nature of the transactions carried out by the call centre, and on how it is valued by the organisation as a whole"* (Kinnie 2000: 34).

Often the responsibility for this lies with the staff, and how they are managed. Using this definition, a call centre can be classified as being one of three types, which are labelled as type A, B, and C. And it is the nature of the call centre "type" that contributes to how a worker's role is constructed with regards to employer expectations on the job. So a call centre "type" is determined by an employer's commitment to their staff, and the skill levels they require from their workers. This makes the nature of the information they handle and the end product very important, because these are the things that dictate what skill's workers will need. This in turn determines how a call centre will manage its staff. The various call centre types are as follows.

Type A: This is a call centre at the "lower end" of the employment spectrum. It offers little commitment to its employees, and staff have little flexibility in their work. Thus staff have few workplace freedoms, are frequently measured for performance and have tasks that are simple and

heavily scripted. (A script is like a routine set of words used repeatedly to advise a potential customer of the availability of a product or service). Business activities in this call centre are usually transactional, that is sales based, rather than relational based (customer serviced based). Typically this “lower end” type call centre target's commodity markets, with sales based on high volumes and low margins (Kinnie, 2000). Because price and competition are major factors, staff are viewed as "disposable", tightly managed and pushed towards an emphasis on quantity rather than quality with regards to customer contact. Pay, staff training and conditions are likely to be poor or non existent (Kinnie, 2000). Often such work is of a temporary nature, involves sales or cold calling, marketing products such as time shares. As this type of call centre is outbound in nature, Buchanan & Koch-Schulte (2000) would place this in the category of a “bad” job.

Type B: Operates at the mid range employment level. This call centre has a moderate commitment to its employees, but staff still have little flexibility in their work. Again they lack workplace freedom, but their jobs will require some complex multitasking skills, which means there is some autonomy. Again they will be tightly managed and frequently measured for performance. Staff are not necessarily expected to form and build relationships with customers. There may be both permanent and semi permanent staff, some security of employment and a limited career structure (Kinnie, 2000). Salaries and training costs are likely to be average for the sector. This type of call centre is where the dividing line between a good and bad job becomes blurred, according to Buchanan & Koch-Schulte’s definition. Although this type of call centre is likely to be inbound, it may have either “good” or “bad” jobs.

Type C: Call centres in the upper employment range are said to show strong commitment to staff, and allow high levels of flexibility. CSR’s generally

have exceptional product and organisational knowledge and skills. They will identify strongly with a company or product, and are highly experienced in their field. There is likely to be less emphasis on performance measures and more attention to quality and long term sales targets or support. Scripting is rare with these CSRs who instead maintain strong relationship ties with customers. Employees are likely to be involved at all levels in call centre strategies and decision-making. Staff are often permanent, with secure employment and a career structure. Salaries and training costs are likely to be higher than average for the sector and may include performance payments. Organisations, such as those involved in providing technology based assistance, such as software management are examples. These call centres would be according to Buchanan & Koch-Schulte's definition "good jobs".

By combining all the key points raised about call centre types, (as espoused by Buchanan & Koch Schulte and Kinnie (2000)) a picture is created that helps understand how labour strategies are formulated in these types of call centres. A CSR's role is determined by a variety of factors, including whether the call centre is inbound or outbound, the type of customer, the flexibility and autonomy that the role provides. Other factors include the nature of the work, its required skill level, and the costs/benefits ratio of the service being provided. What does become evident is that the quality of treatment a call centre worker receives, is directly relational to the quality of the call centre itself, and the product that it offers its customers. Work and conditions vary markedly between a type A and type C call centre because the latter "sells" a more valuable product on the market. So in essence, it is the market and product that determines how a call centre works, as well as the strategies and tactics that managers will use on their staff.

Employment practices in call centres can be described as a "framing exercise", designed to engage people to suit the particular types of call centre work. Similarly, it is clear that all call centres must also use managerial strategies in one form or another to motivate their workforce while at work, also based on the type of call centre. It is evident from this, that all three types of call centres, therefore, have the potential to fall into the category where the role of their workers are constructed using cultures and management expectations. They all fall into this category because they all need to get the best from their workers in order to meet the market. So they all share the same practices and tactics, but have different ways of using them.

The question then arises, what are these practices that managers use to employ and motivate their workers, and where and how are these practices applied? It would be impossible to cover all of the different approaches that call centres use because as we now know, type and product dictate how a call centre works. But there are some generic practices that appear to be applied to all of them. Beyond this, I suggest that in New Zealand the most prevalent call centre is the call centre Kinnie (2000) calls type B. Typically these call centres are inbound and operate at the mid range employment level, with moderate commitment to employees. Staff have little workplace freedom or flexibility in their work. Their jobs may involve complex multitasking skills, and are tightly managed and measured for performance. Staff sometimes form relationships with customers and may be permanently employed with some security of employment and a limited career structure.

It is this "type" of call centre that I have chosen to investigate. The rest of this chapter addresses these issues, by looking at employment procedures, the types of people employed, and productivity strategies used in call centres.

4.2: Call Centre Employment: Finding the “Ideal Type”.

When my friend Cheryl made her first phone call regards her new found job, she had no idea that she was under assessment. Yet given her job was to answer phone calls she needed to have a very good phone manner. Fortunately for Cheryl she has a great phone voice. And call centre recruiters were very interested in the sound of her voice. This is one of many of attributes that they look for in potential employees.

Profiling workers is a practice frequently adopted by call centre recruiters. They attempt to find employees "tailor made" for the position. To achieve this they often ask call centre applicants to answer questions and fill out questionnaires in order to ascertain their personality "type". This is done by using psychological profiling and aptitude tests. To enhance the abilities of getting "the right employees" many companies even go as far as using very sophisticated methods to ascertain a candidates personality. For example, one company, International Futures, uses Nuerolinguistic programming and a 14 category verbal questionnaire to establish a language and behavioural profile of potential call centre workers (NZ Info Tech, 437: 17 April 2000). Trained interviewers listen to language patterns of candidates and decide whether the recipient likes talking to people, is task orientated, and gets to the point. The same technique is also used to assist call centre staff in ascertaining the type of customer they are talking to on the phones. For example voice testing is used by Addeco recruitment consultants in Wellington. This firm has an 0508 number available for people to ring and find out about call centres and also undergo voice suitability testing (NZ Info Tech, 8 November 1999: vol. 418).

Pre employment courses or assessments lasting some weeks before a worker starts on the job also a feature of call centre employment. Here new

prospects undertake various types of competency testing. For example call centre trainers might conduct work simulation tests during which they play recorded phone calls and then prompt candidates to respond to them. Sophisticated software programs record reactions and choices made and analyse a candidates abilities, particularly how they learn and develop skills deemed suitable for a call centre (Whitehead, 1999). In short call centres look for a variety of different attributes, which are outlined as follows.

Although all three "types" of call centre, (as proposed by Kinnie, 2000) offer diverse standards of employment, the personal characteristics of those required to work in them are thought to be surprisingly similar. According to Whitehead (1999), a particular character assignation is sought by call centres. Often it is stereotypically assumed, that a bubbly, chatty, confident extrovert is the perfect personality for this customer service type job. But this is not the case. Whitehead (1999) quotes research from Performance Advantage Technologies and psychologists at the University College of London who say other attributes are required in any call centre.

They say that ideal person should in fact be rule conscious, dutiful, conscientious, perfectionist and introverted. A candidates learning style is also said to be a primary indicator of success when working in a call centre. The most successful learners are claimed to be logical, rational, disciplined and objective. According to the University College of London, people with these attributes are called theorists. Their low tolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity and disorder apparently makes them in particular successful sales and contact staff .

From a New Zealand employer perspective, Janine Stewart (nee Iva) former spokesperson for the New Zealand Call Centre Management Association of New Zealand (NZCCMA) offers another part of the puzzle of

what call centres look for. She claims that call centre success can be attributed to attitude. She says the "right attitude" accounts for 80% of an individual's suitability for call centre work, while specific technical skills can be taught (New Zealand Info tech, 400: 5 July 1999). Many New Zealand call centres appear to focus on attitude and aptitude when engaging staff. This is reflected in their assessment procedures and is well supported by other research regards call centre recruitment, that demonstrate that call centres directly recruit staff with a particular attitude. For instance Callaghan & Thompson (2002: 240) offer a similar insight into attitude in their own research on call centres. They argue, regards call centre pre employment assessment at British Banking call centre Telebank that, "*personality is given priority in this recruitment process. To management, good customer service requires a positive attitude and importantly, this cannot be taught, it is part of someone's personality* (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002: 234). This further adds weight to the idea that call centres indeed look for a particular personality type.

The information generated from this assessment process can be used to closely match individuals to required roles (Davis, 1999). Following employment, this information can also be applied to "performance management" of a worker. Thus the employer can use this assessment to gauge a workers future potential on the job. Employment assessment in call centres seem to outstrip many other occupations, as employers attempt to find new ways to "locate the perfect worker". From the information above, this also confirms that call centres seek certain personality types. A question that remains unanswered is why? Is it compliance?

Critics of call centres (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998, Beder, 2000: 145, Buchanan & Koch Schulte, 2000) suggest the work is individualistic, emphasises performance and attempts to promote entrepreneurialism through

surveillance, supervisory techniques, incentive payments and rewards. As mentioned in Chapter three, Larner (2000) also describes these "tactics" in her "Technologies of Agency" as they attempt to foster capacities for active participation on the job. Possibly this answers why call centres place great emphasis on personality profiling. Call centres are very intense places to work with strong labour controls that emphasise productivity. Evidently it appears they are looking for people who will adapt to these stringent controls. But can it be that simple? Although one could argue this is a direct result of the desire of employers to employ workers disposed to compliance and authority, other issues arise.

Call centre workers are often under stress in their jobs, which leads to high employee turnover (New Zealand Info Tech, 1999: 395, 400). Accordingly call centre employers have to be careful about who they employ as costs of recruitment are very high. Issues regarding employment are particularly complex and multilayered and clearly go well beyond simply matters of control.

Overall it appears call centres have operations that are highly variable in terms of work and conditions. At the same time they are still largely customer driven organisations that need to balance the intensive nature of the work with the type of staff they employ. It is evident that call centres do this in part by constructing their labour requirements through profiling and personality tests that seek to ascertain competency and attitude. But another question arises? What types of people do they employ? The next section documents how and why call centres focus on certain groups of people.

4.3: Traditional Employees of Call Centres.

Phone any call centre and it will probably be a woman that answers. Three quarters of call centre telephonists are women with many under 30 (Demaret, Quinn, Grumiau, 1999). The Incomes Data Services U.K. (sourced from the Communication Workers Union Org (CWU), 2000) say that on average 70 per cent of the workforce is female. Other studies, like in Belt and Richardson & Webster, (2002) report similar figures. They say 70-80% of call centre workers in the U.K. are women. According to Janine Stewart (of the former CCMA), New Zealand inbound call centres employ approximately 75% female, 25% male. These demographics changes in outbound telemarketing type call centres, who employ approximately 55% female and 45% male. These figures are based on Stewart's ten years experience in the call centre industry and offers some evidence of the impact of "feminised" labour. The figures are also offer an insight into gender differences in type A and B call centres as espoused by Kinnie (2000).

On reflection it appears that my friend Cheryl was not the only mother who called a call centre either. In New Zealand mothers returning to the work force are frequently targeted by call centres including those on the Domestic Purposes benefit (Larner, 2000). Often women with children are employed, as people returning to the workforce, or on the understanding that call centres are places where people with relatively low levels of formal education might gain access to jobs (Larner, 2000). Meanwhile industry sources promote a different picture. Janine Stewart disputes claims that workers are all, "just" young and female (New Zealand Info Tech Weekly: 1999: 400). She claims some are likely to have a tertiary education also. According to Ms Stewart, most call centres employ a range of people of both sexes, cultures and age

groups. She highlights her own staff (at the time New Zealand Insurance) as an example. This business apparently employs both males and female of various ages between 18 and 53. Unfortunately the statistics from researchers (Richardson & Marshall, 1999, Buchanan & Koch Schulte, 2000, Belt, Richardson & Webster, 2000, Larner, 2000) and notably Ms Stewart herself, appear to refute this gender balance. So how is the use of women in call centres explained?

Call centres according to Marshall & Richardson (1999) employ women workers primarily because of the clerical nature of the work, and the belief that women have superior telephone skills. They are believed to be more “*natural*” to “*smile down the phone*” (Marshall & Richardson, 1999: p8). The majority of women employed in call centres either work full time on regular day shifts or permanent part time in the evenings (Marshall & Richardson 1999). Larner also claims there is a tendency for call centres to use these part-time and shift workers (Larner, 2000). But there are also other reasons why employers might want to use women. In their Canadian study on call centres Buchanan & Koche-Schultze (2000: 4) state that there has been “*both the feminisation of the labour market, and an increase in women's labour market participation rates. We have also seen a shift in the type of jobs being created, resulting in a higher proportion of non-standard employment, or women's work*”.

Buchanan & Koche-Schultze say call centres are one example of this “*feminisation of the labour market*” that has occurred. In fact they claim call centres “target,” individuals from the socio economic groups that are described as sectors of disadvantage. Buchanan & Koche-Schultze include women in these socio-economic groups. They say women have a long history of being “targeted” as an “exploitable” workforce, particularly where domestic and service labour are concerned. One major factor influencing the employment of

women is that they provide an opportunity for employers to provide lower pay rates. According to Buchanan & Koche-Schultze (2000) women display persistent gender disparities in income in call centres when compared to men. For instance, in the sales and service sector of the call centre industry, three out of every five workers were female, the discrepancy between a man's and woman's wages was very large, from \$33,828 per annum for men to \$20,932 per annum for women.

Larner (2000) explains these lower pay rates in call centres as stemming from the nature of the work. She describes call centre work as routine, lacking in career structures, requiring flexibility and highly dependent on communication skills. She says women often accept full time, part time or casualised forms of this type of work. In fact many woman undertake underemployment or part time employment for financial and family reasons, choosing to juggle domestic and work commitments. Such work often becomes gendered, and thus assumes a position lacking legitimacy in comparison to other occupations, because it is viewed as "women's work". And call centre employers take advantage of this perception.

Part time work is often "feminised" and devalued, not constituting it as a "proper job" (Davidson & Earnshaw, 1991: 263). Service worker labour can be viewed similarly. This results in it becoming "occupationally segregated". Occupational segregation is where a type of division of labour occurs in the context of paid employment. As a result men and women are channelled into different occupational roles and tasks. The outcome is to produce two labour forces (Marshall, 1998: 460). This segregates work into different streams based on gender. Once work is perceived to be undertaken by women, it is also perceived to be worth less pay than comparable jobs traditionally undertaken by men. This creates an earnings gap, thus allowing the perpetuation of

inequality between male and female employees. Call centres are one example of where work has become occupationally segregated.

This is supported by Buchanan & Koche-Schultze (2000) who state that in call centres the *"common perceptions of this work as unskilled, we argue, are related to its construction as "feminised" work"* (Buchanan & Koche-Schultze, 2000: vii). Belt, Richardson & Webster (2000) meanwhile comment regarding call centres that *"many of these women will use computer-based technology at work, but they work as machine 'operators' rather than 'technicians', and the competencies that they exercise on the job do not tend to be recognised as involving technological know-how or 'skill'.* (Belt et al, 2000: 10). Thus, by labelling call centre labour as women's work it assumes less importance than other jobs. And this is reflected in the pay and in how the role is constructed. This occupational segregation can become entrenched, thus portraying this work as a "role construction" of typical feminised labour.

Fernie & Metcalf (1988: 6) also found that call centres preferred to employ women. But in their case, the reasons were not just about lower pay. Employers told them that women *"go hand in hand with payment incentive systems"*. It was also asserted that *"female employees are more malleable and accept incentive systems more readily than men"* and *"women have not subjected such systems to the same degree of pressure as have men. On the whole women appear to have accepted the result of work measurement as "correct" and tend not to bargain over times or prices"*. Fernie & Metcalf also observed that *"when workers are being timed, far from their attempting to mislead by a carefully concealed slowing down of work pace, many of the women are obviously too nervous for successful deceptions or, indeed, work faster than their normal pace as a matter of pride"*.

Women are employed in call centres for a variety of reasons. They are reputed to have great clerical and telephone skills. They also offer employers the chance to pay less in wages and thus save money, by utilising the

reputation that call centres are essentially workplaces for women. Their work can be portrayed as unskilled and thus lacking the status of other more “important” jobs. And finally it seems women are seen as a more compliant and malleable labour force, more inclined to accept without complaint the strong supervisory controls of managers. But these are very strong claims, which call centre managers could say are unfair. Is there a way to support these claims? Call centres are known to target the unemployed and other socially disadvantaged groups (Richardson & Belt, 2001: 13). Are there other groups of people that call centres also target?

One group that has been identified as a marginalised potential labour pool for call centres are those who are multilingual. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions states there are approximately 3000 multilingual call centres in U.K (LabourNet, 2000). Many employers require multilingualism to field calls from a number of different European countries. The ICOFT refer to these call centres as “communications factories” implying they offer less than favourable working conditions. The ICOFT say workers are often flexibly organised, continually under stress, closely supervised, under monitoring and surveillance, and often insulted by angry clients (Demaret, L, Quinn, P, Grumiau, S., 1999). In these call centres migrant labour fills the void of competent multilingual workers. They also provide a cheap source of labour. Migrant workers reportedly come from three groups. Multi-lingual, language graduates, locally based foreigners or their spouses, and workers specially “imported” for the teleservice business (Richardson & Marshall, 1999).

Employing migrant labour is a common trend occurring overseas. In Europe employing migrant labour has fuelled the rise of the so called pan European call centre (Yorgey, 1999). Here in “Multi-Channel Integration” call

centres CSRs handle voice, e-mail and Internet communications in a variety of languages.

Call centres can also provide employment opportunities for another minority group in the form of disabled workers. Many of these workers identify call centre and telework as a potential means of employment. New technology allows disabled workers to break down traditional work barriers through computers and voice equipment. As an example Telstra's Burwood call centre in Australia has 400 workers, including a "substantial minority with a disability" (Hindle, Phillips & Noble, 1999: 4). In New Zealand a number of disabled workers including those who are blind have studied or graduated from call centre training courses. Using specialised software that converts keyboards and text to Braille or voice. According to a recent NZ Infotech article (NZ Info Tech, 1999: 413) at least one employer has accepted the software and is ready to employ those who are visually impaired.

Evidence therefore exists that call centres are open to employing workers that have been traditionally on the periphery of the labour market. Call centres welcome the prospect of migrant workers by touting the benefits of multilingualism, yet as has been shown overseas, these workplaces are hardly described as favourable. Similarly call centres express interest in the disabled, who are often enthusiastic to work, but a minority workforce is open to exploitation. Given these details it is evident that call centres look to employ groups beyond feminised labour, that they see as having less power than others sectors of society.

Australian figures give further evidence of call centres operating at the margin. As in most countries, call centres in Australia predominantly employ women (Finance Sector Union Web page, 2002). A recent article regarding the Australian poor (titled "Men Need Not Apply) points to rising national

figures of poverty regards single men. This group has the second highest poverty rates in the country (409,000) behind single parents with children (Jobsletter 159: 10/1/2002). This is blamed on the rising number service sector jobs in the “new economy”, from which men are largely excluded. Similarly in the UK Belt, et al (2002: p20) report how male employment participation rates are declining while women are increasingly gaining work in the new service economy. Given the high levels of male unemployment, one has to wonder why men are not targeted by call centres in Australia and the UK. There seems to be no rational reason why this should occur. Whilst wishing no disrespect to women, minority workers and the disabled, men are equally able to operate computers and answer phones, yet it seems they are not preferred or do not fit the call centre “profile”. Perhaps they are not seen as sufficiently compliant? One can only assume that men are not viewed in the same way as women and others employed in call centres. They are seen as a costlier source of labour that are not so easily controlled. In a sense these figures indicate that as women are being included in the new economy, men are being excluded

Despite the historical marginalisation of feminised labour, it is hardly reasonable to claim that all women are naturally disposed to compliance. They are clearly not. And this explains why call centres need to profile and assess workers. Are they attempting to fit certain types of workers to the job? But why do they need these “ideal types”? Why are call centre employers so stringent about who they employ? Answers are found within the competitive environment in which they operate.

4.4: Productive Ideal Types.

According to Larner (2000) call centre workers should be ideally flexible and prepared for work based in a competitive market environment. The reason for this is that labour costs are the biggest operating expense in calls centres, with workers costing a call centre between 60-80% of the total budget (Buchanan & Koche Schultze, 2000). Accordingly call centre management are generally dependent on cheap labour, and often structured around the availability of a vulnerable, low wage workforce. Great emphasis is also placed on ensuring workers produce a high level of performance in the "restructured" economy that exists today.

Outsourcing is a prime example of this restructured economy. This is work where a "home" organisation gets an outside organisation to do work that was previously done in house (Beder, 2000: 134). This is a favoured practice of trans-national corporations, private companies and Government Departments worldwide. It allows the creation of a highly competitive environment; with call centres competing for work both nationally and internationally on the "global" stage. "Follow the sun" call centres are an example, where trans national corporations pay outsourced call centres to provide a 24-hour service to customers from all over the world. It is this type of operation that TradeNZ seeks to attract.

Call centres are often private companies tendering for work. Here they make money by answering calls and performing routine services for business and governments. They do this by attempting to pick up various contracts from these organisations. Some examples include the Earthquake Commission, which outsourced by tender, for the round the clock processing of claims in the event of an emergency. Instead of the Commission assuming

responsibility for customer contact, this function is devolved to a call centre on their behalf (NZ Info Tech, 401: 12 July 1999). Also Exxon Mobil based its Australasian call centre in Wellington, employing 125 people (InfoTech Weekly, 28/5/2001).

Outsourcing is not secure employment. It makes service providers vulnerable to the whim of the contracting client, who can change to another provider at any time. This constant "flight" makes call centres push for internal competition and increased productivity, while also reducing costs. They do this to retain their client base in face of competition from other call centres. Beder (2000: 135) believes outsourcing will double in the next five years, with more jobs becoming casualised or temporary as a result. Often outsourcing leads to the erosion of work conditions, creating claims of call centre sweatshops. Although the reality isn't always this bad, there is no doubt that work conditions in call centres are stressful, irregular, tightly managed and involve unpredictable hours as a result of this drive to save money.

Outsourcing and tendering for contract work leads outsourcing providers to create a need for standards and measures of performance compare call centres to see which one is best. Such comparisons are called "bench marking" or "best in class". These are measures done by companies like the Teleservice Bench Marking Research for academic research and comparative analysis on call centres (Kjellerup, 1999). They are global measurements used to assess call centre efficiency, cost, quality and customer satisfaction (Mortlock, 1996). Often these measures are used as standards to rate a call centre and to assess the relationship between call handling techniques and customer satisfaction. These benchmarks are used to compare a call centres performance against an ideal model of customer service, which determines a call centres success.

By using benchmarking measures, call centres focus on being cost effective inclusive of flexible employment practices, as well as seeking cheaper floor space options. They also try to develop a "culture" of performance amongst their staff by setting call targets and maximum talking times. For example the average daily number of inbound phone calls handled by a call centre agent is said to be 108 calls (NZ InfoTech, 400: 5 July 1999). Where an agent receives and makes a mixture of calls, inbound calls tend to average 86 and outbound calls 23 per day (NZ InfoTech, 400: 5 July 1999). As an example one type B call centre, a government department asks its workers to make 72 calls a day, which appears to equate to about 6 hours of phone time (N.Z. Info Tech, 427: February 2000).

Call centre workers need to be quick learners. Training and retraining for new skills is common. Staff are expected to be multi-skilled and multi-talented, with varied levels of knowledge about computing and processing data, particularly in type B (mid range employment level) and C (upper range employment level) call centres. Employers often see the need for "professional development" such as developing other skills like fielding email inquiries, video conferencing, and conversations with customers over the internet (NZ Info Tech, 435: April 2000). New technology also contributes to this competitive environment by rapidly enhancing or altering the work place. In response the call centre workforce is required to demonstrate multiskilled capabilities, exhibit managerial, technical and social skills and adapt to labour processes relating to the "upgrading" of jobs. In short call centre workers are often expected to upgrade their skills, which means a commitment to life long learning.

Competition among call centres workers abounds. Call centre workers often compete for bonuses, incentives or pay rises. They also must compete

against one another for promotion, as progression in the flat management structure of a call centre is limited. Many call centres workers can only rise 3-4 levels above their original positions. Accordingly the gap between the novice agent and the call centre manager is small and opportunities are limited.

Along with creating a competitive environment management uses a variety of strategies to improve productivity and maintain controls. For instance with reference to the positioning of workers in teams, a common occurrence in call centres, Baldry et al (1998) say the following strategies are common. These include the design and placement of furniture for constant managerial observation, various supervision processes, visual and phone surveillance, elimination of visual and acoustic privacy, organisational cultures, team taylorism, production targets and intensification of work load.

Both nationally and internationally call centres, particularly those described as type B and C also try to make people work harder by adopting cultural practices aimed boosting workplace productivity and fostering employee involvement in their job. Team discipline is one way of doing this. Team discipline is seen as necessary to make up for the eradication of layers of middle management and supervisory staff. Emphasis is placed on team approaches introducing new goals and projects to the workplace to motivate staff. Managers use teams and team leaders to keep an eye on their staff and to remind workers that if they don't perform, it increases pressure on fellow workers (Beder, 2000: 143).

Other types of motivation management are also found in call centres. Managers often try to impose productivity values on call centre workers to improve their performance. The reason they do this, according to Beder (2000), is because in new systems of labour (like call centres) managers assume that workers have no interest in their work and need to be closely controlled.

These new systems are necessary to elicit loyalty and commitment in the absence of the historical workplace contract of work for secure employment. (Beder, 2000). The systems are generally driven by managerial desires to increase productivity and efficiency in such a way that it is seen as advantaging or empowering the worker. Yet in reality they can't offer them anything concrete other than short-term security.

These new systems are often fashioned by industrial and management psychologists who write in terms of increasing worker satisfaction, maximising task involvement and responsibility. Often this is achieved through team participation and addressing issues said to be associated with employee growth and advancement (Pfeiffer, 1987: 105). This managerial drive for employee "self fulfilment" and "creativity" of the "whole person" can be described as a psychological approach that substitutes command with persuasion. It can also be described as psychological manipulation to hide the real purpose of the controls, which are simply to increase productivity and get as much out of the worker as possible.

Managers might, for example, use strategies to promote a positive view of the workplace. For instance they might try to sell monitoring and surveillance to workers as a "training tool", to improve personal skills and career development (New Zealand Info Tech: 395, 31 May 1999). Alternatively they use it for goal setting and performance recognition to ensure workers do not become bored or lose "focus" in their jobs (New Zealand Info Tech: 395, 31 May 1999). Other strategies might involve creating an environment of "warm fuzzies", and include activities like Friday mufti days, performance incentives or staff lucky dips. For example a team leader might give the weeks hardest worker a chocolate fish (New Zealand Info Tech: 395, 31 May 2000). These theme days and incentives are designed to "relax"

stressed workers and give the impression that manager's care about them. Alternative motivation strategies involve encouraging the "personalisation" of workstations such as a mobile set of drawers containing personal items such as photos, flowers, cartoons or knick knacks.

The subtlety of motivation management is that it creates an illusion of promoting the interests of the subordinate worker, rather than revealing the interests of the employer. A worker's needs may be exploited through pressure to conform to this relationship. Thus a worker, who complies, becomes accepted as a "team player" by having the "right" attitude. At best the rewards are usually promoted as mutual, at worst the rewards offered can be framed in a way that appear totally in favour of the worker. In reality these systems are purely for the benefit of the employer. Listening into phone calls of call centre worker/customer interaction is also another example of who benefits.

4.5: Listening In

Call monitoring is probably the most contentious issue raised in academic discussion (Ferne & Metcalf's, 1998, Bain & Taylor, 2000 in chapter two are examples). In this practice managers listen in on phone calls and sometimes tape them. Termed Quality Assurance, the procedure involves various means of measuring "conversations". For instance, a CSR might be asked to follow a script or to say a customer's name a certain number of times during a call as part of the job. Call monitoring may be used in bench marking assessments, in order to assess the efficiency of the calls and the call centre. This puts increased pressure on call centre workers to perform. Despite Bain & Taylor's claims to the contrary, call centre workers do not always have the ability to guess when they are being taped. However, rather than this

occurrence being an example of evidence of Fernie & Metcalf's (1998) notion of an all controlling "Panopticon of surveillance" this thesis asks if call monitoring simply is another part of the greater culture of performativity. As such, it is not as Fernie & Metcalf would claim, the guiding force of call centre control but rather just one of many strategies adopted by call centre managers to keep staff working harder and faster. Another factor that would support the argument that call monitoring is a performativity and motivation strategy is the fact that workers may need to be persuaded to accept these practices as being in their own interests. Call centre managers are often keen to promote the benefits of call monitoring to their staff.

For instance Janine Stewart of the former NZCCMA suggests these listening in surveillance practices are not "draconian" controls but merely a benevolent tool to help workers. Often this "help" involves two managers meeting with a single staff member at regular intervals in an office, to listen to sample calls. The stated goal of these meetings is to "assist a worker in improving their performance" and to "set new goals, targets and objectives" (NZ Info Tech, 31 May1999: vol 395). In reality these practices may be benevolent, but equally they can be negative.

For example call monitoring by call centre managers can involve either positive and negative monitoring. It all depends on how the company operates (NZ Info Tech, 31 May1999: vol 395). With negative monitoring, taped calls are used as a tool to subjugate and intimidate workers. Managers do this by exposing their failings during phone calls or by not meeting required call targets. This can be used as a tool to keep wages down or impose minimum conditions and forms part of the greater regime that is performance management.

Call monitoring in call centres varies in its intensity. An example of call monitoring can be seen in one New Zealand government department call centre. This call centre uses technology to make voice recordings and screen captures of over 200 calls per week, which are replayed, reviewed and discussed with call centre staff fortnightly (New Zealand Info Tech, 427: 7 February 2000). Daily and weekly statistics are also given to the staff indicating that the level of monitoring of these calls is quite high.

At a global level the ICFI (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) claim some employees performances are so highly regulated, they are monitored continually (New Zealand Info Tech, 395: 31 May 1999). Usually workers have their daily and even hourly activities measured. Detailed reports can be generated showing information like how many calls were taken, time of the calls, manner/tone of the calls and operator availability (occupancy time). This information can be routinely presented to the worker with the view to making them work harder and faster by telling them they're not doing enough work. This, the ICFI (New Zealand Info Tech, 395: 31 May 1999) claim, is the development of a finely tuned art of exploiting human labour. The ICFI claim levels of surveillance are unprecedented, and far greater than any seen in production factories of the past. Such claims would suggest that call centres are very difficult places to work with resistance to these controls seemingly futile. But is this the case? This can be investigated by examining the role of unionisation.

4.6: Countering the Panopticon: The role of Unions and “Churn”.

Unionisation is one form of resistance that adds further weight to argument against the “panopticon”. Bain & Taylor (2000) raise this critique strongly by outlining a number of examples where unionisation weakens the idea of a panoptic air of psychological permanence. They point out that where call centres have become unionised, employee resistance becomes paramount, frequently offsetting the controls of management, or at least going some way to abating them. Conversely some unions representing call centre workers report that many call centres are particularly anti collectivist. Sally McManus, Call Centre Union Organiser: A.C.T.U even suggested that when Bentham invented his panopticon, he could have been thinking of the call centre, such are their apparent similarities in prison like controls (Lewis, 1999). But despite this, the incidence of unionisation is a strong indicator that the panopticon rather than creating obedient passive workers, in fact stimulates resistance. This is hardly a feature of “psychological permanence of controls.

It is fair to say that call centres have traditionally resisted their employees access to unions. Janine Stewart (NZ Info Tech, 2000: vol 435) for instance states *"I believe the adoption of a union focussed call centre will pose some obstacles in the way of real time management of customer demands"*. Don Farr union organiser of Finance and Information Sector Union (Finsec) meanwhile described the Call Centre Management Association of New Zealand as essentially union neutral. Richard Wagstaff a union official with the Public Service Association similarly argues that call centres adopt strategies through agendas that *"pick presumably compliant people and stitch them up on individual, non union employment contracts"* (NZ Info Tech, 2000: vol 440). This comment gives

rise to the other problem with union organisation, the nature of call centre working conditions.

For example unions believe call centre working conditions prevent union association. The high degree of monitoring and the oppressive atmosphere that this breeds is said to facilitate anti union strategies. This results in the fragmentation of the call centre workforce, creating something of a challenge for organisers. Other barriers to unionisation created are said to include the high staff turnover, lack of trade union tradition, use of agency (temporary) staff, the younger age group of the workers and number of hours worked (Bibby, 2000). Furthermore employment strategies emphasising informal management techniques and team working are also claimed to affect the employees desire for union membership. An example of such attitudes can be seen from Janine Stewart who argues that advanced New Zealand call centres can do without unions. Stewart claims that call centres have in a sense moved on beyond unions, by creating an environment premised on trust and support and based on individual accountability. In this context of the new economy, unions are no longer required. The employer it seems will provide.

This anti collectivist stance can be challenged. One independent study of call centres carried out by Britain's Income Data Services (in People Management, May 1999) found that 54% of all call centres had collective bargaining (Hatchett, 2000). Some organisations such as Barclays Bank, even arranged for a partnership with unions, after operating for lengthy periods opposing them. Why they did this, can perhaps be attributed to issues such as bad press and employee opposition and resistance to monitoring and surveillance. Also as the New Zealand PSAs Richard Wagstaff also points out "*call centres have a lot to gain from unions*" (New Zealand Info Tech vol 440: 2000). Modern unions look to operate as industrial partnerships, working on issues

from a mutual approach rather than adversarial. Wagstaff suggests skills and professionalism are more readily achievable in an environment where staff are supported. He emphasises that unions provide a better platform for “genuine” employer/union dialogue and bargaining. Hence the real argument is one of individualism versus collectives, something call centres appear to fear. Barclays seem to have realised this. So from this it is evident that the “automatic functioning of power” is not always a match for the ability of workers to organise. There is another reason however that may have influenced this turnaround, probably the ultimate snipe at the panoptic vision, the matter of call centre “churn” otherwise known as staff turnover.

Churn is a common problem in many call centres. In fact call centres are notorious for their staff turnover with some estimates suggesting the “churn rate” is around 30% (New Zealand Herald: 2001). As such the cost of employee recruitment is particularly high. This issue alone forced Barclays to reconsider their anti union stance. Clearly when staff continuously leave, service and quality suffers. This in turn frequently results in customers receiving poor service, from less skilled staff which obviously impacts on business and profits. For this reason alone, companies with call centres are often forced to acknowledge the nature of the work as highly intensive, and stressful and often attempt to appease their staff with financial incentives and improved work and conditions in order to keep them (Hatchett, 2000). Clearly this desire to yield to the needs of staffing ones office makes the notion of the panopticon look somewhat frail. However, not all businesses are ready to attempt to appease their staff. Another aspect of staff turnover that arouses interest is the sacrificial HR strategy.

It appears that staff turnover is factored into some call centre work. The sacrificial HR strategy” is described as the deliberate, frequent replacement of

employees in order to provide enthusiastic motivated customer service at low cost to the organisation (Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee, 2000: 174). Here employers openly acknowledge that managing both service and efficiency causes tensions that are not resolvable in organisations focused on productivity gains. Thus service and efficiency are achieved at the expense of the physical and psychological well being of the staff. In essence staff are simply expected to leave once they become “motivationally burned out”. Wallace et al (2000) surmise that this strategy is a common to many call centres but caution that how widespread the practice is unknown. This strategy, however, is likely to be attenuated by the inevitable result of this practice, which sheds call centres in a bad light and thus creates the troublesome problem of image.

Given the levels of staff turnover, businesses have become conscious of the notoriety of call centres, particularly how they are presented to the public and potential workers. Panoptic perceptions of call centres as “dark satanic mills” or “human battery farms” (Hatchett, 2000) leave lasting images that many businesses wish to avoid. In response companies have adopted numerous strategies to rectify these problems which also help undermine the totality of the Panopticon. New practices adopted include improved staff training, working environments, enhanced management training and improved rates of pay (Whitehead, 1999). It is evident from this that call centre panoptic controls are not nearly as powerful and the likes of Fernie and Metcalf, (1998) would believe.

And has been demonstrated in this chapter, motivation management, strong labour controls, the employment of “marginalised labour” and employee profiling are also strong features of call centres. These labour controls are conducted using a variety of strategies that stretch well beyond the notion of the panopticon of surveillance as proposed by Jeremy Bentham.

These strategies start at the employment stage with staffing needs constructed on the assessment of potential workers. Employees may be selected on the basis of gender, minority group or more likely those with a disposition and tolerance for strong work based controls. The practice of profiling also raises the possibility of tactics of exclusion, by allowing call centre recruiters to "screen out" those whose personality and attitude do not match the desired attributes. The right attitude, ability for learning, adapting to change, being rule conscious, dutiful, conscientious, perfectionist and introverted are some of the characteristics that call centre managers profile for in their potential workers. Call centre managers then also appear to seek workers disposed to compliance, while at the same time discouraging collective through unionisation. All these tactics that are of interest to this thesis

So the major question that arises then, is how do managers go about doing this. How do they go about instilling an acceptance of these tactics? The premise of this thesis is that this is achieved through the creation of a hegemony, creating an environment that draws workers into a culture founded on free market principles, and based on domination by coercion with consent. To test this theory with regards to the concept of hegemony, this research explores the idea that a call centre worker's role is constructed, using various performance regimes and environmental controls. The next stage of this document discusses how best this can be achieved. By explaining what methods can be used to see if these practices and strategies are present in a real live call centre setting.

Chapter 5: Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological issues of this research. It begins by explaining the use and application of qualitative analysis as the chosen research method. Following this, the origins of the research questions are discussed as well as how these were applied to the interview process. Procedures used in collecting the information and compiling the research data are outlined, with attention given to the processes and requirements involved in carrying out this type of research and how the participants in this research were located and approached. The purpose of this research is to qualitatively investigate managerial strategies and tactics used in a call centre. The aim was to enquire into the prospect that a call centre worker's role is constructed along free market lines. To "test" this notion I interviewed a small sample of fifteen call centre workers and discussed the nature of their work. In particular the interviews focused on three broad areas: 1/ monitoring and surveillance regimes, motivation management; 2/ the establishment of work cultures; 3/ how productivity in general is "patterned" into a call centre workers daily working life. Interview transcripts were and coded to extract meaningful information with results appearing in chapter's six and seven. This chapter closes with an overview of call centre Telecorp Services where the bulk of this research was carried out.

5.1: Qualitative Analysis: a definition.

Qualitative analysis is a form of research that is used in fieldwork. It involves a researcher carrying out participant observation or interview research on people in their natural "real life" settings. This type of research is

useful in searching for the meanings in activities that occur (explaining why things are happening) the examination of behaviours and practices, roles, relationships and the study of organisations and their structures. In order to collect this information, a researcher has to undertake what is known as data analysis, which involves four steps that occur in a cycle: data collection, reduction, organisation and interpretation (Tolich & Davidson, 1999: 8).

Each step in the cycle has a different purpose. Data collection is the actual process of gathering information. In this research two forms of data collection were used in the study of call centres. Conducting an interview with someone or recording observations of people's activities. Data reduction then takes these recorded details and breaks them down into smaller bits, carefully analysing the details and extracting the useful themes and discarding that which is irrelevant. Once these themes are determined, they are organised through data organisation so that any recurring themes that might occur in the process of the data collection can be identified and put together in one place as a category. Finally in data interpretation these recurring categories are explained in terms of their relationship to the research project and conclusions drawn as to what they mean to the researcher and the reader. The conclusions that arise from this research are known as "grounded theory" because they are derived from empirical data that has come out of the research as real, typical and based in the context of the places and people who have contributed.

5.2: The Research Question: Performativity and Profiling.

This thesis uses hegemony as theoretical tool to explain how managers apply labour controls to gain control over their workforce, this thesis asks the following questions. Do call centre managers attempt to “construct” the workplace role of their employees along free market lines? If so, is this role construction achieved by employee profiling prior to starting work at a call centre and subsequently maintained by implementing practices designed to increase employee performance during work?

The central goal of this thesis was to conduct qualitative research by interviewing call centre workers about their jobs in order to answer these questions. In order to do this it was necessary to ascertain what practices employers in call centres use in order to “construct” their worker’s roles. To answer this question there were two issues that needed to be operationalised, discussed and defined. One was to define what strategies call centres use when profiling workers prior to employing them in a call centre. The second was to define what practices call centres use in order to maintain employee performance in a call centre.

As there was no one definitive literature source available to the author that outlined all the performance and profiling practices in call centres, it was necessary to use number of different sources to find out what these practices were. By taking these sources and combining information from them, it was possible to formulate a solid empirical list of performance and profiling practices commonly used by call centres. The sources used to extract this information are discussed as follows.

Three sources have been used to ascertain the practices used in employee profiling and enhancing employee performance in call centres. They

are firstly, Larner's Technology of Agency, from her paper "Economic Irrationalities: The New Zealand Call Centre Attraction Initiative" (2000). Secondly Human Resource Management Journal "People Management", featuring two articles, Whitehead's (1999) "Churning Questions" and Davis's (1999) "Smoother Operators". The final source is a small content analysis project, conducted in 2000 by the author, based on articles from the New Zealand Info Tech Weekly. These indicate a variety of performativity and profiling activities.

Larner's, *Economic Irrationalities* (2000) describes a variety of practices used by call centres to engender performance under the heading of the Technology of Agency. Larner claims workers participate competitively in highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures. The Technology of Agency explains the practices employers' use as follows. Employees are encouraged to practice entrepreneurialism and teamwork. They are controlled and monitored through supervisory/surveillance techniques, suggested to be used to develop worker's skills and performance. Collectivism is discouraged. Call centre managers also use other strategies to ensure that productivity will be maintained, such as using profiling and assessment of potential candidates prior to their engagement in order to select the "right type of people".

While this description by Larner is useful, it lacks some detail, particularly as regards the profiling aspect. Hence further sources are used to enhance this description, firstly through Whitehead and Davis and latterly through various items from a content analysis project conducted by the author, based on articles from the New Zealand Info Tech Weekly.

Whitehead, in his article, "Churning Questions" (1999) suggests a particular character assignation is sought by call centre employers. Call centres often have assessment courses that last for some weeks even before a worker

starts on the job. Often call centre employers appear to look for certain personality traits such as attitude, competency and work ethic and use aptitude tests and psychometric profiling to ascertain this. It is suggested in this article that the best call centre workers are rule conscious, dutiful, conscientious, perfectionist and introverted and thus this research inquires as to whether these characteristics are also sought during profiling. Davis (1999) further enhances how these practices are used by outlining how the information generated from this assessment process, can be used to closely match individuals to required roles. He further points out that call centres conduct “performance management” of a worker by attempting to gauge a workers future potential on the job.

The third source of information is a mixture of common themes derived from a content analysis pertaining to performativity and profiling practices. The purpose of this research was to detect the existence of common themes that pertain to values and cultures that appear in the literature. In this case the literature consists of New Zealand InfoTech articles about call centres, and themes detected pertaining to profiling and performativity practices used in the management of workers. As well as confirming a variety of practices already highlighted by Larner, Whitehead and Davis, this source also revealed a number of activities pertaining to motivation management, workplace enterprise, incentive payments and bench marking, all of which are common practices in call centres.

Using material ascertained from the above three sources it has been possible to construct a list of profiling and performance practices common in call centres. These are detailed separately and are explained as follows.

From the information gathered from Whitehead, Davis and the New Zealand Info Tech Weekly, employee profiling prior to employment in a call

centre involves a number of assessments. These include testing for competency, aptitude, character through psychological profiling. Role matching and future potential may also be tested for. Of major importance appears to be an employees attitude to work as well as their ability to adapt to the rigorous labour controls used in call centres such as surveillance and monitoring, motivation management and teams as outlined in chapter four (also see Callaghan & Thompson, 2002: 234).

In a sense it appears that employee profiling is the first step in establishing controls designed to boost worker productivity. The following list outlines common profiling activities used by call centres. Given that call centres appear to use workers from socio economic groups that are described as from sectors of disadvantage, (see Buchanan & Koche-Schultze, 2000: chapter four) it was felt appropriate that a question should be asked regards this also. The following activities pertain to call centre profiling and were the themes explored in the first set of interviews (chapter six).

Profiling Activities in Call Centres

- Indications of intention to use women or minorities.
- Aptitude tests and psychological profiling.
- Evidence of character assignation.
- The importance of attitude.
- Telephone screening, competency testing and psychological profiles.
- Matching to required roles.
- Assessment for future potential.
- Competency testing.

From the information gathered from Larner (2000) and the New Zealand Info Tech Weekly, there are a number of practices used by call centre employers to attempt to enhance the performance of their workers. These include monitoring and surveillance, application of measures like best in class and bench marking, incentives payments and rewards systems, and encouraging competition and entrepreneurialism between and within labour forces. Of major importance appears to be the use of motivation management techniques, teams management systems and the exclusion of non-managerial activities like unionisation and attempts at collectivism. The following list outlines common performativity activities used by call centres and were the themes explored in the second set of the interviews (chapter seven).

Performativity Activities In Call Centres

- Involves controlling supervisory techniques and surveillance.
- Discourages/ unionisation and collectivism.
- Promotes ideals of workplace enterprise such as competition, best in class and bench marking.
- Strives for an environment of innovation, performativity and constant change.
- Encourages competition within labour forces.
- Promotes employee entrepreneurialism
- Use of incentives payments and rewards systems rather than equal pay.
- Use of motivation management techniques.
- Use of team organisational structures.

These same themes were incorporated into questions that focused the research on profiling and performativity activities in a call centres. The questions were then be put to call centre workers in an interview. In this way the researcher explored whether these activities were present in a call centre and how these practices were implemented by managers. By recording and reviewing these interviews it was possible to discover whether these practices are present in the day to day running of call centre.

5.3: Informant Recruitment

Participants in this project were located by making a number of approaches to various call centres and requesting their assistance. Of all the call centres approached only one offered access to its staff for interviews. In accordance with Kinnie's notion of call centre types, this call centre fitted the category of being a Type B call centre. This offer was accepted on the understanding that the identity of this call centre would not be revealed. This was viewed as a fair and reasonable request and accordingly the terms were accepted. The call centre then advised staff of my request, and asked for volunteers. A number of people indicated a willingness to participate. For identification purposes the call centre will given a name. It will be called "Telecorp Services".

A list of potential participants was compiled and forwarded to the researcher by Telecorp Services. On receipt of this information, the researcher made application to the Massey University Ethics Committee for approval to conduct this research. One major problem that arose was that a number of the participants who were available for interviews were known by management to

be participating. Arrangements had been made through a team leader to contact these staff and thus there was a risk that their comments could be recognised. This was not an ideal situation to either the ethics committee or myself and so three steps have been taken to preserve participant confidentiality.

First all participants were not be identified by their real names, but instead by pseudonym only. Second, only some of the comments made by the participants have been actively quoted in this research. Many participants information is readily identifiable and so has been stored under certain recurring themes for interpretation. The third important point to note is that not all the participants were approached through their place of work. Some informants were located by another research approach called “snowballing” where an informant recommends another person who is interested in participating but may not wish to reveal there wishes to do so through the prescribed channels. In this way some people have participated by a private approach. This includes some former employees of this call centre. Most employees interviewed worked or had worked in the call centre for approximately one to three years.

Upon receiving ethical approvals, the researcher wrote to all those who indicated an interest in participating. The researcher conducted interviews with any individual who volunteered their time. A letter of invitation was given to all participants prior to being interviewed which included an information sheet and consent form. These were completed at the time of interview. Discussions on times, place of interview, and issues relating to informed consent were determined by mutual consent, once the participant confirmed a willingness to participate. Where the interviews occurred at the call centre, approval was also gained from the managers involved.

Most interviews were conducted on the premises of Telecorp Services during the latter half of 2001. Other interviews took place at locations mutually convenient for the participants and the researcher. Interviews generally had a duration of between 30 to 50 minutes. Interviews were taped and recorded where agreed upon between both parties. Between each interview there was a lengthy period of time, usually between 20 to 30 minutes to consider the information gathered.

Each interview consisted of a semi structured talk regards working at Telecorp Services. Questions were based around issues relating to the Profiling and Performativity activities as listed in tables one and two. Basically the interview attempted to ascertain what strategies were used by managers to engender performance, or what profiling practices were used at the pre and during employment stages. Workers were prompted using questions like “What does it take to be a successful call centre worker?” Or “What sort of things do your team leaders do to try and motivate you and keep you going?” (see questionnaire appendix 1). Workers were essentially encouraged to talk about their jobs and how they perceived them. In particular they were asked about motivation management strategies and whether they felt attitude or culture was considered important by their employers.

Overall the interview process was typical of qualitative research. Peoples stories were recorded and then interpreted by looking for particular recurring themes that matched the profiling and performativity activities listed on page three. At the same time the researcher looked for other recurrent themes, beyond the profiling and performance activities that might indicate issues peculiar to this call centre. These activities were then used to create analytic categories to formulate and reveal common perspectives found in the interviews. To deduce commonality between the various passages of these

narratives, the texts were coded and categorised to look for converging trends evident in the call centre.

During my visits to the call centre I also had the opportunity to conduct observations and note details regarding the general environment and mood of the office. This simply involved watching and recording various activities and behaviours that occurred during interaction between staff in their working environment.

Both the interviews and observations were coded on an ongoing basis. Coding, according to Tolich and Davidson, involves reading through expanded field notes and transcripts as soon as they have been written, marking as you go the positive and negative aspects of the information collected (Tolich & Davidson, 1999: 141). Using this process the data was transcribed with dual intent. Firstly, the data was scrutinised in an effort to ascertain incidences similar to original profiling and performance activities as listed previously in this chapter. At the same time, attention was paid to emerging theory, with any newly “discovered” themes also recorded. This was done by listening to the taped interviews and transcribing them word for word and then reviewing each transcription, question by question to find any comments that matched of the above themes. For instance a call centre worker might talk about a strategy used by their team leader to get them to work faster. This would fit under the theme of motivation management.

The final process in this research involved bridging analysis, which is the process where the categorised themes are interpreted and placed as explanatory text in the data and laterally discussion portion of this document. Although the sample of participants is small and cannot be said to be representative of call centres in general, there are a number of themes that are explored in the next chapter and are familiar to many call centres. Further

more the interpretations of the data are subjective, that is they are base on my interpretations of what has been said in these interviews. Accordingly they reflect my views and beliefs and must be viewed in this context. The content derived from these interviews attempts to reveal common themes that can add weight to the idea that the role of a call centre worker is indeed constructed by their managers.

5.4: Telecorp Services: An Overview.

My research began at Telecorp Services an inbound, mid range call centre that was, taking thousands of customer contact enquiries a day. In call centre terms, this operation is quite big, and it employs a staff of around 200 people. In accordance with Kinnie's notion of call centre types it fits the category of being a Type B call centre. It is open for business from 8.00am until the mid evening weekdays, and all day Saturdays and falls into the category of 84% of all call centres, by operating for at least ten hours a day (N.Z. Infotech Weekly: 400: 1999). Hence the workers are required to work irregular hours, accepting the notion that the Monday to Friday nine to five working week no longer applies. The majority of the staff are full time, generally averaging 40 hours per week, including shifts. Staff usually work evenings and weekends by roster, most averaging one Saturday, every six weeks. Some members of the staff are part time workers, often working from 9.00am until 3.00pm. One call centre person indicated this time slot was school hours, or more to the point, a parent with child hours.

During this research Telecorp Services were recruiting to boost its staffing numbers. Historically the staff have been unable to meet call requirements at peak times due to the high volume of calls. According to one

media source, 30% of the staff opted to quit during the year 2000, including 63 in September/November (due to ethical reasons the source cannot be quoted). Reasons for low staffing included the volume and complexity of calls and other opportunities elsewhere. At the time of writing this document I was assured by a manager these figures had reduced.

CSR's are expected to answer between 70-80 calls a day. This equates to about 6 hours and 20 minutes of phone time during an eight-hour shift. On average a CSR should take about five minutes or less per call. This includes notation of details or "wrap" time, as it is known. Wrap time is the period following the call, where the CSR records information on the computer prior to the next call. To meet the demands of the large volume of calls, management likes CSR's to spend 78% of their working day on the phones. Accordingly this means that they should have no more than about 22% of their day not answering calls. This downtime includes periods such tea breaks, lunch times, going to the toilet and similar. Generally this time is spent constantly answering calls. As a result call centres are very busy places, requiring from workers a high degree of productivity. It was appropriate therefore that my initial research focus started with an enquiry into the environment of performance.

My visits to Telecorp Services occurred over a number of weeks and during this time I was able to carry out a number of observations of call centre life. I sat at the end of the room in a vacant desk among one of the teams and was able to passively participate in many daily activities. Telecorp Services housed in a very large open plan building. The layout is such, that any offices and interview rooms are located in clusters in the middle of the room with large spaces and walkways between them. Most of these interview rooms and offices have very large glass windows although some had blinds. There was

also a small refreshment area. The overwhelming impression one gets is that visibility is important here. There seemed very few places that are unexposed. A few of the offices at the end of the building look more private and I understand these house some of the senior staff members.

To one side there was a help desk, where those charged with coaching, training and other specialist functions reside. Generally the set up is very modern reflecting the ethos of flat management structures. Described by Clark, (1993) in chapter three, Telecorp Services reflects an organisation designed to eject bureaucracy, and become more responsive through job demarcation and managerial controls. The structure here is very much like a network (Sennett, 1998: 23), thus removing cumbersome hierarchical chains of command.

Every one I spoke to seemed to be quite familiar with the bosses including the head manager. The hierarchy was simple. There was a manager, an assistant manager, team managers, team leaders and then various types of workers. Some of those workers occupied positions as coaches or staff trainers charged with the function of teaching new recruits and existing workers new jobs and skills and assessing their abilities. There were also people who had technical expertise in particular areas relating to the running of Telecorp Services. But the bulk of the staff were CSR's who were employed to answer phones

My first impressions were of an office where people were smiling and happy, but generally industrious. Although many did not even know I was watching, some were aware of my presence. That alone-created mild interest, perhaps even some suspicion. This matter aside, the office had a friendly ambience and was tidy, light warm and accessible. Some managers were talking and joking with their staff. Phone conversations between CSR's and

customers were polite and knowledgeable. Some staff might occasionally lean across and chat to another staff member. Certainly the panoptic vision was not evident here. No one appeared to be suffering from prison like controls. But as time passed there were degrees of tenseness evident. On one occasion a CSR ran from one desk to another across the room with a worried look on his face. No one noticed. Some people looked tired, and occasionally some one might run their hand through their hair or rub their heads with concern. Often conversations between CSR's related to work situations and while amiable, at times people would sigh or shake their heads in their short discussions. Often the talk over cubicles was a grumble about customers. At one point a staff member was taken out of my hearing for a chat about some matter. He looked concerned.

There was not a lot of teamwork evident; people were largely doing their own work in their own space. It appeared to be a very self-focused place. Sometimes CSR's answered calls in a somewhat restrained fashion, taking care with what they said or did, but calls always seemed to be managed professionally. Phone conversation, however, were not as continual as I had expected. Often CSR's took frequent breaks between calls, filling in details about the previous call (wrap time) before moving onto the next.

One person I observed expressed concern about not meeting their call targets. This was an important issue, and one that engendered some sympathy from a colleague. And through the low chat and laughter it became evident there was an air of business in this place, a no nonsense environment premised in the spectre of performativity. Team leaders were ever present and those that were not could be seen in offices discussing quality assurance issues with staff. Often team leaders would come out and call a CSR into one of the central offices for a chat about their work. Elsewhere there was likely to be a

group of new or repositioned recruits undergoing some form of training or coaching for a work assignment. Telecorp Services was a busy place. Although as I found later, this was not always the case.

A second visit about a month later revealed a much different environment. The time was closer to Christmas and less calls were coming in. During these quiet periods the computers register the absence of calls by showing a green line at the bottom of the screen. Green lines are an indicator of what is called green time, periods in a call centre when customers simply aren't calling. This is a rare but incredibly welcome occurrence at the Telecorp Services. People were smiling, chatting and some were even clowning around. It was like the pressure had been lifted from their shoulders and they were very relaxed. It was a very different environment from my previous visits. One of the CSR's advised that unfortunately that wouldn't last forever. Generally the place was much busier than that. Apparently it was more normal for the phone calls go all day without stopping. And this lead to a need for motivated and performance orientated staff. The subject of the next two chapters.

These provide examples of the data extracted from these interviews, by outlining some of the comments made by workers in the context of their every day working lives in their call centre employment at Telecorp Services.

Chapter 6: Recruiting the right fit.

So from the role-plays we then take them onto an interview, which is about 45 mins to an hour long. And we're looking for why they want to be here. Call centres are still used as a stepping stone, were happy for that to happen, but we'd like that commitment of 18 months in the CSR role. Ummm.... so (in employment) motivational fit is a big one.

Chapter three introduced Larner's (2000) notion of the "Technology of Agency". It referred to the idea of how call centres at the level of work based enterprise carry out productivity and profiling practices when engaging staff. In the pursuit of competitiveness and highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures, the "right" type of worker is sought using aptitude tests and psychological profiling? Based on discussion with call centre recruitment workers, trainers and staff at Telecorp Services, this chapter examines employment processes in a call centre. Do call centre managers attempt to employ people who are more tolerant towards a work environment based on compliance? Interviews suggest they do. Results indicate that call centres like Telecorp Services go to great lengths to select potential recruits by subjecting them to a number of personality and aptitude tests well before they start work. These assessments appear to surpass the pre assessment of many other jobs, as my friend Cheryl experienced when applying for work at a call centre. Just what are call centres looking for? And why? This is the first step in constructing the role of a call centre worker.

6.1: The First Stage: Agency Recruitment.

Gaining employment in Telecorp Services is a lengthy process. It consists of three steps. Firstly, a prospect applies for work through an external recruitment agency which initially involves a series of interviews and tests. If successful, a prospect would then need to undergo another interview, this time with Telecorp Services. If the prospect was selected by Telecorp Services they would then enter step three a Telecorp employee assessment program.

Step one for any of these prospects was dealing with the recruitment agency. They would see an advertisement in a newspaper, web sites or other types of mediums used by recruitment agencies. They would then apply. Telecorp Services use two recruitment agencies for the initial staff selection process. Both agencies screen recruits prior to contact with Telecorp employers. A prospect needed to demonstrate an enthusiasm for the job in the recruitment agency interviews. As my friend Cheryl found, the first interview takes place on the phone, and the second at the recruitment agency. The initial phone interview is a 30 minute evaluation of the candidate. Although no specific skill background is sought, the questions apparently assess their potential as call centre workers. The recruitment consultant determines the candidates ability to communicate, problem solve, and demonstrate life skills. If a candidate is assessed as not suitable they are advised verbally that they do not fit the criteria. If the candidate is viewed as suitable, they will then invited to the recruitment agency for a face-to-face interview.

The face-to-face recruitment agency interview involves going through things like their resume, their skills and competencies and having applicants explain why they are interested in call centres and where they are “heading”

in their careers. Applicants also complete a 12 minute 50 question multi choice test. The test is used to assess the prospect's aptitude. The focus of the test is both on general knowledge and maths. Recruits are encouraged to go as fast as they can without making mistakes. They were also instructed not to skip around the questionnaire, nor should they spend any more time that they had to on any one question. These instructions were their first brush with ethos of call centre performance. Can the prospect follow simple instructions and answer questions logically and quickly in an appropriate manner? A similar format is required in the real world when answering customer calls.

Telecorp Services recruitment officers saw these initial steps as essential for culling out prospects. Andrea a young experienced recruitment professional in her late 20s, early 30s, with 4-5 years call centre recruitment experience saw the test as reasonably demanding but useful. She described the recruitment agency initial step as follows.

Umm it's a sort of problem solving ability assessment, and it's a series of 50 questions. Timed, they've got 12 minutes and our requirement is they get at least 18 correct. Ummm that unfortunately does knock a few people out at that particularly time, but we need it for this environment because it's so technical... Sort of... the technicality of it, and the data we use, as we need them to be able to look at things quickly, analyse it, and come up with some sort of solution.

These strident facts reflect the Telecorp Services environment. The work is technical and the data sometimes complex. A prospect needs to be

able to analyse a customer enquiry quickly, and problem solve it if necessary, however other skills are also sought.

A final test used by the recruitment agency is a “role play”. This is a mock phone call, between the recruitment agency staff and the candidate to assess their ability and confidence at answering phone calls. If the prospect passes the interview, the 50-question test and role-play are then referred to Telecorp Services for step two of the employment process.

Step two is an interview conducted at the call centre by the call centres own recruitment staff prior to entry into step three, the Telecorp Services employee assessment programme. Assessment involves a whole battery of tests and is run wholly by Telecorp. It lasts about six weeks.

Most of the tests in the step three-assessment period simulate the Telecorp working environment. The tests are also about learning as the prospect is taught a number of different computer systems. Prospects also have to be able to work with compact and complicated information that at times requires skilled interpretation. At times they are also required to relay this sometimes complex material back to a customer in a way that the customer can understand. These communication skills require some degree of flexibility, with the style of response varying between callers. Yet all these attributes seemed to be tacit skills rather than learned skills, that could be tested for on day one without a six week assessment. This seemed a little unusual and thus step three, the six-week assessment warranted further investigation as to its purpose. Was assessment about training or was it an extended interview? It appears to be the latter.

A Telecorp Services recruitment officer reflected on this apparent contradiction regarding the purpose of assessment in the following.

The only thing we give to the agencies ummm.... First of all we've got to be working with someone [a prospect] whose got call centre experience because it adds to the value of getting the right people to come through I suppose. Ummm... and realistically it can take three months for them [prospect] to start getting an understanding of this environment, so what we've got them doing is the phone interview and ummmm... because it's a phone based job we need for them to communicate effectively over the phone. Uhhhh... *there's no set skill background*, it's really the ability to communicate, problem solve, umm life skills and things." That interview would normally last 30 minutes. They'd then go into the agency, have a one on one interview go more so through there resume, why they want this particular role, where they're heading. That sort of thing. They then do a wonderlick [the employment questionnaire].

In this statement Andrea indicates that people with call centre experience were required. Yet later in this excerpt Andrea contradicts this assertion by saying that there was no set skill background. This seemed unusual and perhaps a bit illogical. Surely a person with computer skills and experience would be required; someone who had used this software and dealt with people before? Or people with maturity, perhaps, experienced in dealing with the public and meeting the criteria for life skills? Yet it was maintained that no specific background was required. If this was the case then why did they need an assessment centre as their third recruitment step when experience was not a skill Telecorp Services sought? One acquaintance of mine had applied for a CSR position at Telecorp Services. They had a tertiary

education, strong customer service experience, computer and life skills, but on phoning a recruitment agency did not get past the first interview. Why was this? If computer and customer service was not a prerequisite for employment then what was? I began to probe further by examining the third step in recruitment. The activities surrounding assessment.

6.2: Stage Two. Having the Right Fit.

Call centre employment recruiters at Telecorp Services used three “buzzwords” words regularly when discussing recruitment. “Structure”, “expectations” and “fit”. Of these three words the latter was extremely important. People seeking call centre employment must be able to demonstrate the right “fit”. They need the right attributes to meet the “environmental fit”, they needed the right approach to meet the “motivational fit”. If you didn't fit, you didn't get a job. But what exactly is “fit”, and why is it so important? When asked about the Telecorp Services work culture and significance of “fit” Andrea explained as follows.

We talk about environmental fit and that can be the ability to understand the nature of the calls they're going to be getting. I suppose the culture, teams umm, even though the roles are very individual there's a lot of team focus. If you put somebody who's very argumentative, who challenges everybody umm, then they may not fit as such, but you've got to be very careful about how you assess that. They've got to be able to cope with structure. But certainly there's a lot of creative, energetic and quite vibrant people in here, so if you were to say we have a

culture umm I think we would. And there's a lot of people. And it's Telecorp Services and were all wanting to make a change. Very very passionate about what they're doing and want to see it (Telecorp Services) do well. So ... Yeah...

Andrea continued, discussing motivational fit.

Ummmm just why are they here, what skills are they bringing, what areas have they identified that they've got to develop. We want them to be aware of their own areas of development because there's..... Again the role is very self-managed and they need to be able to analyse their own gaps and do something about it. Their understanding of Telecorp Services and their understanding of what the role is that there going to be doing, because we've got to make sure were meeting their expectations. We then go onto a couple of CSR situations where they had to really go out of their way using their own initiative to think outside of the square to resolve a customer situation which is what they do every day. Ummm dealing with emotional or aggressive type customers. What skills do they use, how do they actually manage it themselves; look after their own health and safety all those sorts of things. Umm tolerance for routine, it gets extremely structured and repetitive in here and also their learning ability in a continual learning environment.

Essentially motivational fit is a set of attributes based around how call centre employees would respond to the nature of the work. Given the role of a CSR is very self managed, prospects need to know what skill deficits they lack and how they can develop themselves. These skill deficits appear to be identified at the assessment or stage three step of recruitment. At Telecorp Services stage three potential workers are expected to be able to accept that the business would be actively helping them to develop themselves. This desire by Telecorp Services for self-management suggests that the call centre wanted people who were performance orientated. They also wanted staff who could identify with the business through worker enrichment strategies, such as goal setting to meet call targets, or team participation in games to show their willingness to be part of the larger organisation. In this way prospects would learn to recognise what the business would do for them. Environmental fit meanwhile simply meant how would this worker fit into the call centre. That is how would they adapt to the call centre environment.

The significance of fit appears to revolve around the two other buzzwords, “structure” and “expectations”. Prospects, according to Andrea, needed to be able to adjust to “structure”. They must also have the right “expectations”. These were clearly part of the requirements of “fit”. So to work for Telecorp Services applicants needed to show in steps 1,2 and 3 they had adaptability to the call centre structure. And they needed to demonstrate certain expectations in order to do this. For example when Andrea talked about the sort of person Telecorp Services was looking for she linked structure and expectations with fit. She said.

As I said there's no specific background for that, that's the initial part. Then they come to orientation (step three) and we show them around, ummm... layout the expectations of the role

and the realities of the role, and then they actually go through an assessment centre (step three) which we run. That's when we do role plays with them, and from that we're looking for the ability to work with compact information, but relay it back to a various range of people in quite simple terms. So were looking for them to adapt their style. They need to understand what call control is, or structure is, ummm... Otherwise they can't handle the calls. Initially their call lengths can be ten to 15 minutes purely because (the work) is confusing, and their trying to understand that.

She continued.

“They operate three different systems. They're searching for information while they've got a person on the other end of the phone and they've got to communicate back to them what they're doing and find the information. Read the info themselves and relay it back to them. Ummm, so quite a few people at role-play stage can't bring it all together and umm... We do short list after role-plays, so were looking for specific strengths in that area, and to be really quite confident. Wouldn't say they have to be an extrovert, but it helps because realistically it's 70 to 100 conversations a day. Uhhhhhh so from the role-plays we then take them onto an interview which is about 45 mins to an hour long. And we're looking for why they want to be here. Call centres are still used as a stepping stone, were happy for that to happen but we'd like that commitment of 18 months in the CSR role ummm so motivational fit is a big one.”

While it was evident that certain skill sets were desirable, such as computer skills, communication and literacy, there were clearly other attributes being sought as well. As the interview progressed I developed an impression that the ability to demonstrate these other attributes seemed to be more important than the actual computer based skills. However, finding out what these attributes were, and labelling them proved elusive. At times I got the impression that some of the key attributes sought by Telecorp Services were being left unstated.

When talking to Andrea and other employees it became evident that the terms “structure”, “fit” and “expectations” were very pertinent to the businesses pre employment assessment. I later discovered, candidates with very limited work skills could find their way into assessment providing they demonstrated the likelihood that they had the ability to adapt to “structure” (the routine tasks and the regimented and controlled nature of the work) and meet the requirements of “fit” (having the abilities to adapt to the call centre environment). Employee prospects also had to demonstrate they had the right expectations, that is the personality to meet the requirements of “structure” and “fit”. Many of the employment assessment questions and tasks were structured around trying to ascertain a potential employees “expectations”. On this subject Andrea explained the following.

They’re really just built around the job expectations and are done by HR managers, then the questions are designed around those. Same with the role-plays where we’re looking for specific competencies and their job expectations. And we will change the specific scenarios if you like, of the role-plays and the

interviews depending on where the business is at, at the moment. Depending on the type of group that we're recruiting. What I mean by that is that we have different shifts and so traditionally the 9.30 to 2.30 people are people returning back to the work force. They've been out for two or three years with family so it's going to take them slightly longer possibly to.... Not come up to speed but for everything to fall back into place. Where umm say the varsity students that we take on, because they're learning every day, their mind is far more active and therefore they pick everything up and they want to pass everything faster. So we've got to manage that in our recruitment process as well, so when they start here we manage the differences in their expectations as well.

“Expectations” was for Andrea a descriptive word pertaining to whether a prospect's personality aspects relating to work would match that the needs of the call centre, that is how would prospects would accept and adapt to the working environment. In other words Telecorp Services wanted to know if a potential candidate had the right personality to adapt to the call centre regime. At this point I began to wonder if “fit” and “expectations” were just fancy words for attitude. Attitude as discussed in chapter four is key determinant in call centre employment. Callaghan and Thompson (2002) refer to this in their research on recruitment selection in call centres. They describe call centre recruitment selection of staff for the “right” attitude in the following terms. “The aims are to select staff with the required attitudinal and behavioural characteristics, induct them into a quality culture and, equally important, but often neglected retain there services..... Selection often focuses on attitudes to

flexibility and customer service rather than skill or qualification levels (Redman and Mathews in Callaghan and Thompson, 2002: 234). Further interviews confirmed my suspicions.

Through various interviews with a number of CSR's I became aware that mothers returning to the work force (like my friend Cheryl), or young adults with limited work experience gained access to assessment without the necessary computer based skill sets. The prevailing approach at the call centre appeared to be that these manual skills could be taught. Kay a CSR in her early to mid twenties, who had been with Telecorp Services for under two years gave an insight into this process.

I remember when I was hired months ago, they [Telecorp Services] made a lot of emphasis on the fact that you're hired for your customer service skills; we'll teach you the technology.

This explained the situation of skills and attitude; however, this had not been made clear in the initial interviews with Andrea. It was evident here that potential workers did not need call centre experience at all, nor did they necessarily need strong computer skills. As Andrea later conceded when discussing what recruiters looked for in assessment.

There's really just the main areas. Their learning ability, obviously customer service as a whole, the ability to work in a structured environment, so if your on rosters the fact that they're seated every day. Learning ability, problem solving ability, umm Ability to liase with a diverse range of people. Obviously the systems, they need to be quite ummm Can't

be techno phobic or anything like that. Ummm, they would be some of your main core ones which is why there's no.. ..Ummm if we were to look around the call centre there are some people with previous call centre experience and some people who have never set foot in a call centre. So really it's those main ones there.

People who had never worked in a call centre could enter assessment. There were obviously other important requirements beyond prior call centre experience and computing. Clearly “structure” and “fit” were more important than skills. It appeared they were the key determinants in employment.

Apparently during pre employment assessment a potential CSR needed to be able to demonstrate they could cope with structure (i.e.: routines). This was important, because structure played a “big part” of the call centre routine. To adapt to structure, a person who worked in a call centre needed to be able to adjust to the workplace regimes, and to be able to handle what was termed “call control” (monitoring and surveillance). Prospects also needed to adapt to the highly regulated environment in the office. Workers had to accept the regimented nature of the work, its inflexible rosters and the challenge of being seated all day, literally tied to a phone. They also had to cope with “quality monitoring” where managers regularly assessed their calls and the requirement for frequent training. It became evident that a certain type of person was being sought here. Not any one would do. They needed to have the right “fit” for these structures.

Ongoing self-development as a CSR hinged on the use of monitoring and the regular quality control meetings (Q.C.). Employees needed to learn how to constantly maintain and improve their productivity. Motivational fit

therefore had implicit meanings. Workers would need to be able respond positively (or passively) to monitoring and quality controls. They would have to accept the many meetings with managers regarding their call performance as being in their own interests. As individuals, located in teams, they would also need to be competent self managers.

The connections between the assessment training and the need for performance are clear in the call centre. Employees need the right attitude to perform well. More importantly employees need the right attitude to allow themselves to be managed to perform. Self-management is important in order to meet the required statistics, and competencies. But self-management is controlled by call management. A receptive attitude to the many controls and motivation strategies applied by Telecorp Services is therefore clearly very important. It was evident from the interviews that a prospect's attitude was a strong determinant in their eventual employment. These interviews confirmed the comments made by Janine Iva former spokes person for the CCMA in chapter four. Attitude is very important, and if you didn't show you had the right attitude at Telecorp Services you didn't get employed.

Telecorp Services did indeed looked for certain traits in their staff. Interviews supported the claim that prospects should be willing, flexible, able to adapt to change without fuss. They shouldn't be too argumentative, and they should be keen to get involved with the team. They shouldn't be moaners, and they shouldn't complain when they are told to do things they didn't like. Certainly these are attributes many employers look for, particularly when their company is dealing with the public. But these attributes also certainly reflect a tolerance for compliance, for accepting supervisory controls. In other words accepting the legitimacy of constant surveillance which becomes normal

accepted practice in a call centre. But what other attributes were sought by Telecorp Services?

Character assignation Whitehead (1999) is one issue focusing on particular personality types sought by call centres. Whitehead said these included workers being conscientious, rule conscious, dutiful and perfectionists. All the participants that were interviewed in this study were shown the list of attributes proposed by Whitehead and asked whether they agreed with his assessment that these characteristics made good call centre employees. All the informants agreed that these qualities were highly desirable and generally saw themselves as having these attributes. For instance when shown these attributes Kelly, a CSR who had been there for two years had the following to say.

I would agree with that because as much as our job is to help the public, we have got guidelines that we have to stick too. For example, I couldn't ring up the call centre here and make enquiries about your [private] affairs to see whether you owe us money. Ummm I'm simply not allowed to do that and so there are guidelines here and you must stick to them.... We simply can't help if we haven't got the authority here.... So there are rules and structures to be stuck by....

Learning style was also viewed as extremely important, as there was a lot of training involved. It seems many of these attributes were looked for in assessment also. Helen, a CSR in her late twenties, was something of a seasoned call centre worker having been there for over two years. She had this to say on learning style.

What in here? Uh huh, a good ability to learn, to keep up....
Need to because there is change daily and there's a lot of
knowledge base stuff to learn. The fact that we get a reasonable
amount of training helps a lot.

Similar accord was reached on the need to be logical, rational, disciplined and objective. Whitehead also suggested that the best call centre workers were also likely to be introverts. This assertion regards introversion was also supported by most of the informants with the exception of those associated with recruitment. Kay a CSR in her early to mid twenties had this to say regards introversion.

Those sort of criteria are quite important, for those who are going to stay here for along time, they do need to do their jobs methodically, they don't make a big scene, there introverted, they do the jobs well, they know the routines and they have enough intelligence to carry on with the job day in and day out.

However, the Telecorp Services recruitment specialist Andrea strongly believed that the CSR's were all extroverts, who were able to happily smile and take 70 to 100 different calls a day. The contrasting views arose over the understanding of the meaning of extrovert. It may have also been indication of the gap in views that exists between managers and worker's in call centres regards how they view the nature of the work.

Certainly, from an employer's perspective, the attributes mooted by Whitehead would be very helpful in ensuring that workers accepted and

indeed legitimised the supervisory practices and demands of a “structured” workplace. It seemed the call centre had some definite ideas on the type of people they wanted. But what other evidence was there that Telecorp Services looked to employ people who would adjust well to the strong labour controls. Did the call centre use labour traditionally on the periphery of the labour market and was there evidence of the employment of workers who have been traditionally marginalised in order to retain their power base and controls? Theorists such as Fernie & Metcalf (1998), Buchanan & Koch Schulte (2000) and others suggest women and minorities are employed in call centres for a variety of reasons including that they are seen as a more compliant and malleable labour force. Were there any such groups employed in this call centre? The answer initially seemed no, but there was an unusual characteristic in the ranks of the workers. A distinct lack of mature aged workers.

6.3: Minority Groups.

Telecorp Services call centre did not predominantly use feminised labour. In fact the ratio of men to women was about 50/50. But there was an interesting minority group i.e.: mature aged workers. Very few of the staff appeared to be over 35. Almost all the people I interviewed were young, most in their early to mid 20s. Even those charged with training and recruitment were comparatively young, probably under 30. Was there a deliberate strategy to employ younger workers?

I was discussing the presence of work cultures with Helen. She explained how there were almost two work cultures in the business. One group

consisted of what she described as the more experienced staff, the others more of a youth culture. The conversation went as follows.

Helen “ I think it would be fair to say there are two work cultures, almost depending on which group they’re in. There’s people like myself who have been here for a little while. And because of how we sit based on our skill sets the people. I sit with are people who’ve been there for a long period of time, almost like veteran staff if you like. They’re a little bit hardened maybe a little bit cynical.

Rex: (laughs) “Sounds like a government department, yep.”

Helen (laughs) “ Yeah. They have their own work culture separate from the newer staff. Who have a sort of ... well a younger, more enthusiastic work culture.” (Smirks).

Rex “That's interesting.”

Helen “ Well that's my idea, because you do see a lot of the social side of things or what does go on outside of work is divided into those two groups.”

Rex “ So when you say you sit with the more experienced, hardened people. What do you mean by that? Explain what they do? Don't worry your identity is protected here.”

Helen “No it's not a problem, (laughs) ummmm.... They (the older staff) will always approach new management initiatives with a little bit of scepticism. There will be the odd comment like, yeah we've heard this before umm ...you have changes to legislation which will mean they will go oh yeah we can see this problem coming up and happening and then you get a set of calls coming through about that. Ummm ... They know where the problems come up, as opposed to the newer group, not being aware of that so much so they don't have that ummm. Huh ... immediate perspective.” (of more experienced workers).

The ironic humour in Helen's comments were not lost on me. Younger people were in her eyes more tolerant of the workplace regimes. What became apparent from her comments that there was a genuine division here, one based on age. Although Helen was not old by most standards, she was older than many of the staff here. Her comments were extremely interesting, because of how she viewed the younger staff. To her young workers were also quite naive.

Kay also talked about the “youth culture”. She explained in a matter of fact way.

“There is a (youth) culture here, but it's almost an inevitable result of the fact that most employees are in the 20 to 35 age group. We're all fairly young, most of us are single, we all live in the city and have reasonably high disposable incomes and... So it's almost an inevitable result that friendships among call centres are all along those lines.

I asked why there very few mature workers here and Kay offered the following observations.

That's an interesting question. It's obviously because they're not hiring people in that sort of age group. I was hired quite a few months ago; they made a lot of emphasis on the fact that your hired for your customer service skills, we'll teach you the technology. Well, we had to two older people in my training group, who had great customer service skills but they required the most work for technical changing. There not here, they didn't get through the coaching part. Eventually they (Telecorp Services) decided it wasn't worth fielding the resources to try the one on one coaching to get them up to the levels that were seen as necessary.

Kay explained that the skills required involved the ability to use the technology, computer systems, the phone systems, combined with customer service. Such work was in her eyes accented towards people who had used computers previously. Kay elaborated as follows.

So it's always going to be aimed at the younger person..... I get the feeling that people over 35- 40 plus are less keen to apply for call centre work full stop. Maybe that's because they're aware that they don't know the technology.

Apparently then, this call centre was not mature worker “friendly” and this was reflected both in the systems and perhaps in the assumptions of the

younger staff. Yet despite this, the upper managers were not young, most appearing well over 35. And there was another contradiction, evident in these comments, the matter of life skills. This was a major recruitment stipulation. Yet life skills are hardly an aptitude associated with the 20 something age group.

Helen also raised a similar issue regards the age and preemployment assessment. She outlined an experience very similar to Kay's regards the naivety of younger workers. I asked her if she felt some of the younger people adapted to better to the coaching and training. She responded.

Mmm the new ones, yeah they do, because there coming in and they don't have that ... ummm older sort of harder view of how this all works. Mmm you will get some people who go through training as older staff who will sort of go well why am I here I don't need this.

It was evident from these comments that it was not just technology that was a barrier for mature workers. There were also other factors. It seemed from these comments that mature workers were not only struggling to adapt to the environmental "fit" but they were also failing the motivational "fit". Younger people were, according to Helen, more adept at demonstrating the required expectations because they lacked what was termed as the 'hardened view" regards the performativity and tightly exercised controls. Helen also commented on this when asked about how managers motivate their staff, particularly the older workers.

I think that's something that they worry about as well; it's very hard for team leaders to motivate the older staff because you get to point once you've been here for a while Where that the level your going to get to performance wise, and there must be some kind of ceiling on what they can expect after that. Ummm the one they did quite recently to put uhhh... They wanted a bonus to recognise people that had been progressing very well, and if you had all the skill queues and had been here more than 18 months they gave you an additional bonus that was like an allowance of about 2000 dollars a year. So that was quite cool.”

Clearly in relation to motivation management, there was evidence the perspective of youth appealed to the Telecorp Services call centre managers. Most mature people over 35, despite Kay's view, are capable of operating computers. It seemed rather unusual that so few people of this age were found in the ranks of the Telecorp Services CSR's. It was difficult to come to any other conclusion than the employment of younger workers was a deliberate strategy. Perhaps Telecorp Services felt that younger workers, who were less experienced about matters of the workplace, would adapt better and be more receptive to the controls and the imposition of the rigorous work cultures constructed around performance. Then, there may have been other reasons also. In particular in relation to the staff turnover rate.

Buchanan and Koch-Schultze (2000) described the call centre workers they interviewed as being on the periphery of the labour market. They described call centres as “work of last resort”, places where workers stayed for a limited time before leaving for something better. In marked contrast, one

recurrent theme that appeared at Telecorp Services was a very public showing about their enthusiasm to keep their staff.

To this end, Telecorp Services assured me recruitment policies had changed markedly over time, in order to try and slow the ever-recurring rate of staff turnover. The cost of training a worker they said was expensive. Yet there were contradictory messages here. Despite Telecorp Services claiming to want a stable and permanent workforce, the organisational structure seemed to be framed for exactly the opposite. The call centre structure seemed to be designed so that workers would eventually leave. This was borne out by Andrea the recruitment officer in her previous quote on page 67 during our discussion on “fit”.

Call centres are still used as a stepping stone, were happy for that to happen, but we'd like that commitment of 18 months in the CSR role ummm. So motivational fit is a big one.

Here was a managerial admission that she expected that a CSR's role was terminal. Some might remain in the organisation and move into other roles, but many would move on completely. Youth are a mobile group. Interviews with a couple of workers reflected this: they indicated they had designs to go over seas. Two CSR's, Helen and Kay commented on the about the likelihood of younger workers staying in the call centre as follows. Helen, on the issue of staff turnover said.

Helen: I think there are, as with every job, there are people here who are basically here until they can find something else.

Rex: Mmm is there still a big staff turnover?

Helen: There is a staff turnover. I think it's dropped quite a bit on what it used to be I think. Last year I think last figure I heard was that the average service was up to about 8 months which I believe is actually better than it used to be.

According to Helen there had been a very high turnover in the first year. But this had significantly dropped. Helen believed part of the reason for the drop lay with the changes in recruitment whereby prospects were given a better explanation of the demands of the job. She felt that recruitment was more focused on prospect expectations as a result. Also the training and coaching was apparently improved which according to Helen help the new recruits better cope with the work. But despite these changes, she pointed out, they were still leaving the business.

Kay offered a similar insight. When discussing work cultures and the attitudes of younger workers she said this.

Rex: Mmmm do you think there's a culture here at Telecorp Services? A culture they try to draw you into?

Kay: Mmmmm no I don't think there is actually a work culture as such that is encouraged by team leaders or management. There is a culture here, but it's almost an inevitable result of the fact that most employees are in the 20 to 35 age group. Were all fairly young, most of us are single, we all live in Wellington

and have reasonably high disposable incomes and so its almost inevitable result that friendships among call centres are all along those lines.

According to Kay the call centre had what she described as a relaxed, friendly, somewhat cynical, attitude. None of the workers in Kay's view were there for a long time. As she further explained regards workers leaving.

That's acknowledged, and we're all 20 some things, we're all looking to go to something else in our lives after this.

When Kay was asked why their seemed to be a contradiction between management's claims that they wanted to retain their staff and the tendency to employ younger workers despite the high staff turnover figures, her reply was fairly clear.

That's an interesting question. It's obviously because they are hiring people in that sort of age group.

If, as one suspects, the intention to leave Telecorp Services is a common stream of thought among younger workers, then one wonders why this call centre is so keen to employ them. It seems as if the system is designed for staff turnover. Helen's comment on how people became hardened, more cynical over time is intriguing. This is perhaps related to the progression of workers over time in Telecorp Services. I had been discussing staff training with Helen and the focus of the conversation was on training for good service. Quality monitoring and feedback were a strong part of the ongoing training and

working process. She was describing how the feedback from managers during QA meetings could be intimidating to newer staff members. However, she felt people did improve over time and get to grips with the job. Despite this it appeared there were limitations to those improvements. A CSR could reach a certain skill level after a period of work but then this tapered off. As Helen commented when asked her whether she felt workers generally improved as they developed their skills.

Rex: So do you think umm are people generally getting better [over time] here?

Helen: Um yeah. I think you generally have a point of diminishing returns on that one. Where to start with, you make vast periods of progress over a short period of time, then its little bits at a time.

From the final comment above it appeared progression in the job had its limits. One could only improve so far. And as a worker progressed in the job it appeared meeting the finer points of QA became harder. As Helen further elaborated regards her own skills and abilities.

Helen: My customer service is great, my technical knowledge is great, the only thing that's holding me back is my call handling times. Uhhh, if it was shorter Id go up a pay scale. But it's not and that's sort of... like you say it's a natural part of performance. That's the one that holds a lot of people back.

Rex: Mmm handling time and you've got 5 minutes including wrap time so 5 or 6 minutes? Is that realistic?

Helen: (laughs) it depends on who you talk too mmmm.

With only so many places available for promotion, the phones were as far as some workers got. And progressively it seemed, attaining QC goals got harder and harder. Hence Helen's comment on the point of diminishing returns. At this point one wondered whether workers became demotivated at trying to meet the contradictory dynamic of providing excellent customer service while meeting managerial demands for increased productivity. This left me with a burning question. What happened to a worker, when motivation management was no longer enough? Were they in fact meant to leave? Was it fact possible that the performativity regimes used by Telecorp Services to increase productivity, were also designed to create staff turnover, before the performance regimes were disrupted? To consider this possibility I needed to understand how performance was engendered here.

There was no doubt that this call centre sought to employ people with certain personality traits, people who they felt would accept their controls. But what do call centres do with these staff once they have them. Do they indeed try to construct their roles around expectations of productivity, and how is this done? Are their strategies call centres use to motivate their staff, and how do they legitimise the controls they exercise. And can these activities be linked to staff turnover? Certainly, there were suggestions that they could be. The next chapter looks at these issues, in discussing the call centre drive for performance.

Chapter 7: Motivation Matters: Calling For Performance.

“Questions to ask ourselves? Are CSR's treated as the hubs? Is my time adding value to improve performance? Is this the best use of my time? Are our results improving, CSR's, team, the business?”

I began this thesis with many questions and most of them are answered in this chapter. How was performativity created in this call centre? Is this indeed a place where the market “calls” in all sorts of different ways? Do Telecorp managers attempt to establish workplace cultures and practices, to persuade their staff to accept rigorous labour controls? And what types of controls do they have? I wanted to know how this productivity was maintained in call centres, and what practices were used by management to sustain this environment. Similarly I wanted to find how these practices impacted on the staff. The following are my impressions of a call centre supported by the accounts of those who work there and how they perceive their jobs.

7.1: Motivation Management.

If there's one overall theme that summarises or describes this call centre it has to be motivation management. Motivation, like the air is every where. The spacious Telecorp Services workplace was open, accessible and highly visual. You could see what people were doing from one end of the office to the other. The environment clearly established a viewable platform for management to keep their finger on the pulse. It also exuded an air of productivity, with plenty of reminders to the staff of management's desire for performance. Spatially the layout was undoubtedly designed to be practical,

very much created to keep an eye on the staff and ensure they were all busy working.

Workspaces housing computers, phones, desks and lockable cabinets were scattered across the building in clusters. The workstations were generally grouped around team leaders allowing ease of supervision. If the CSRs had cubicles (and many didn't) they were low and offered clear visibility between themselves and other staff and team leaders. Desk formations were similar to those described in Chapter four by Baldry et al (1998). CSR's we're generally situated in teams of around 10 to 15 people. They we're found located in groups throughout the office with the design and placement of furniture situated in such a way, so as to allow surveillance and contact by their team leaders. CSR had little acoustic or visual privacy. Each CSR had a drawer in their desk to store their private material, pens, headphones etc. I was told the workstations are usually shared, designed to be vacated quickly at handover. Swapping from staff member to another was designed to be effortless and quick so one CSR could pack up as the other moved on to the phone. No time was to be wasted here it seemed.

At the time of my first visit, there had been some activity in the call centre relating to an interteam's competition. Lots of hand drawn pictures and motifs hung cheerfully from certain points on the walls. One group of pictures featured felt tipped drawings of fairies, mermaids and other mythical creatures. Underneath each they had names of staff that had created them. I presumed the pictures were imagined caricatures of the artists. A large sign above them read, "Murray's Magical Wonderland". In response to my enquiries regarding their purpose I was advised that the competition was for a bit of fun. Staff had been encouraged to participate to personalise the teams. The idea was to give the team's new names, rather than just calling them by

their team leaders, such Bruce's team or Fred's team. Such competitions apparently boosted staff morale.

I was told by one of the managerial staff these motivational devices were used to give the place some character, although the same person assured me "it (Telecorp Services) had lots of character already". With a smile she stated, they had "all the bright colours and furniture and umm and a lot of characters around the place". Not far from the "wonderland" motifs hung another sign that was also emblazoned and prominent. It read "attitude is everything". Similar motivational signs appeared on other walls, either placed there by team leaders or staff. For example another sign read "Questions to ask ourselves? Are CSR's treated as the hubs? Is my time adding value to improve performance? Is this the best use of my time? Are our results improving, CSR's, team, the business?" Clearly motivation was a managerial prerequisite here with plenty of reminders to the workers how important being productive was. Workers were clearly being moulded and constructed to meet the needs of management through this approach.

There are a number of examples of motivational practices used to "focus" workers on teams and organisational cultures at Telecorp Services. Nearly all of these strategies are common motivation management practices used in call centres to alleviate stress and the constant demand for productivity (see New Zealand Info Tech: 395: 31 May 2000). Such entertainment's supposedly take a workers mind off the demands of the job and help them to identify with the company goals and visions.

In chapter four the issue of strategies used to promote a positive view of the work was raised. As an example, these small intra-worker competitions and motivating signs offer an insight into the use of motivation management strategies in call centres. Such techniques are adopted by managers to increase

worker satisfaction in order to maximise task involvement, company loyalty and ultimately productivity. As mentioned in chapter four, team participation and creating activities for the staff is one avenue of achieving this.

On a second visit, I found the workers were invited to have a “mufti day” where they essentially dressed in casual clothes. Theme days and incentives are also designed to “relax” stressed workers and show that managers care about them and apparently understand and appreciate how hard CSR's work. Motivation it seems, was not only embedded in the surrounding environment, but was also blended into the daily activities of the organisation. Staff motivation was a key function of the team leader, who is essentially the lowest level manager. A team leader supervised anything from 10 to 15 staff and was responsible to a team manager for the particular section they supervised in. Their job was ostensibly to improve their teams overall productivity. As regards the team leader's role, one CSR informed me that it was as follows.

the team leader's responsibility is to develop them in terms of their stats, to get them up to a certain grade or mark.

So a team leader's ultimate job was performativity, or getting the workers up to speed. Style, or motivational approach was a critical component of that. Team leaders were in fact encouraged to have a leadership style. This, I was told, was an important part of the supervision process

A number of strategies were used by team leaders to motivate their staff. I was told each team leader was different and brought with them a particular leadership approach. The team they supervised often reflected this approach

in the way they went about their work. As Kelly, a CSR who had been there for two years explained regards establishing team cultures.

All the team leaders are very different, like anywhere you know. Some of them might have a very dry sense of humour. So you might find their team you know, kind of reflects in that way, or their team culture is brought into the call centre as team culture but in a different way.

Kelly further expanded on this style by stating that:

There are other team leaders who bribe their staff and things, so there's all different cultures within the teams, but they're certainly encouraged to have a culture by the team manager or the call centre manager in whatever way the team leader sees appropriate.

Some team leadership styles were more obvious than others. CSR's talked about how team leaders offered prizes such as compact disc vouchers to CSR's who had "performed". Kelly again explained.

We have incentive schemes where you get the chance to win cd vouchers or something. You know, they'll hold competitions. You know for this week, the person who gets the highest marks in Q.C. is going to get a cd voucher this week.

Another team leader strategy involved playing a type of card game on the wall that was related to work and maintaining stats. CSR's attempted to

play the game by superimposing their stats on the number of a card in some way I didn't understand in order to win. There were undoubtedly a variety of other types of productivity games. If CSR's performed they were rewarded. If they did not, they were told. As another two year CSR Joeline also confirmed

Yep. Performance is a big thing. Your targets are **really** important. Basically we have set targets that we **have** to reach”.

And if a CSR didn't perform, as Michael told me quite firmly, the following occurred.

Your soon told if a few other things aren't matching up as well, you soon get a kick in the pants.

It was the team set up that allowed for this “kick in the pants” that was most interesting. Performing, it seems, at Telecorp Services was everything?

7.2: Individuals In Teams.

It is difficult to define where the panopticon ends and individualisation begins in a call centre. In all fairness to Fernie & Metcalf call centre workers are indeed very individualised by the nature of their work. Yet in practice they were grouped into teams. And Telecorp Services management, it would seem, are very keen to attempt to capture their hearts and minds, and use this situation to their advantage. Productivity is legitimised to suit the purpose of the dominant party. Here a "ruling" ideology attempts, through the winning of consent of their ideas and beliefs, to capture the domain of everyday

consciousness of their workers. At Telecorp Services this process occurs by individualising a worker and then convincing them that productivity and performance are paramount in their working lives.

Essentially the Telecorp Services workforce are constituted as individual subjects, with their conscious beliefs shaped to accept the endless desire for performance. Telecorp Services therefore imposes its will onto the workforce by domination by coercion with consent through a mixture of labour controls such as teams, surveillance and motivation management. Accordingly the drive for excessive productivity becomes internalised and normalised in Telecorp Services, even though such stressful demands are not always in the interests of the workers.

A major example of this contradiction was the individualistic nature of the job within an organisation based on teams. A number of workers commented on how they worked in teams, but yet essentially they were just individuals. It is here that the spirit of performativity is framed. Through a competitive environment based on call targets and continual meetings with various manager's over performance. This chapter dealing with the working lives of CSR's at Telecorp Services explains these practices and how they occur.

Call centre workers despite being placed in teams seldom work together. Their main contact over their work and performance was inevitably through their manager's production goals and games. Michael, had worked in this call centre for somewhere between one and three years and was well aware of the team and individualised contradiction. He explained emphatically

Yeah you're very much working on your own here basically. Ummm you know, sure you might talk to the person next to you if you can or whenever, but your normally full on with calls.

When asked if he meant he was just an individual working in a team he said.

Yeah that's what I'm saying by working independently and individually.

Although the employees are structured as a team, it would seem they have little real need to work with other staff on anything other than a superficial level. Again Michael put it this way.

Yeah, you know in other jobs you're reliant on you doing your bit, before somebody else can do their bit, or something like that. But there's none of that here.

On the same subject another long-term worker Kay had this to say

I don't actually agree with the process of having teams in some ways in names only. I mean where the individual is focused individually themselves, and the team is a separate entity.

Teams therefore were entities that existed in name only, based around the team leader with individuals working purely by themselves. Yet management focused on teams as groups that worked together, striving for a common cause.

All of the CSR's I spoke to gave the same story. They were all individuals, grouped together in teams. Their relationships were primarily with their managers, rather than other team members. Team leaders emailed the CSR's daily statistics about whether their call targets were being reached. To emphasise a poor calling statistics a team leader might colour the figures in red and ask the individual CSR for an explanation. Accordingly the employment relationship at Telecorp Services was between the worker and his or her boss. The team was really just an entity grouped for managerial convenience around one spot. Teams working together as a group for a common purpose were simply a mirage.

A question arising from these discussions with CSR's was why have teams and team leaders at all? What purpose did they really serve? In Telecorp Services workers have access to a number of forms of assistance to enable them to answer calls. They had access to a variety of sources including their own knowledge base help files and also a very well manned help desk. When asked about the function of team leaders and why they had teams, Kay a long-term veteran of Telecorp Services told me.

Yeah I think in the end after being here for, well actually active on the phones for some time, the team leader and CSR relationship is fairly ummmmmm... is important for a sense of maintaining morale of the CSR, but it's not the key relationship in the eyes of the management, I don't think. I think it's just one tool that the management can look at getting the overall performance of the CSR's up to the standards they want to meet.

Another long time CSR Michael went even further.

Team leadership for us is not a big issue. Well not for me personally any way. Although we are grouped in teams we are largely just 15 individuals sitting in the same area.

For these staff, teams were basically no more than places where people sat. Despite the various team games and competitions CSR's were not actually grouped to work together. Teams were purely a locational convenience, to allow managerial control. It seemed team activities were more illusionary. Kay supported this conclusion well.

There's a lot of words said by call centre management about the importance of teamwork, but in actual fact they're not willing to make the resources or time available for that to be encouraged. In some ways I think that they don't want it to be to team based because you get too attached to certain people, team leaders and certain places in the call centre.

If there were any doubts about the function of a team as anything other than a controlling mechanism, then the following comment from Kelly must surely dispel them. She outlined her relationship with her team members, by highlighting how well she knew them.

But the one down the other end of the team from you, even though they're still part of your team, you might not even learn there name for quite some time, if you didn't make the effort to do so.

To expand on this theme, Michael also made a telling comment regarding staff interaction in the call centre. His comments not only questioned team interaction, but also strongly illustrated the individualistic nature of the job. As he put it.

Like you go for ages without seeing somebody who works down the other end of the call centre, and depending on shifts and that sort of thing too. Like in some ways you could theoretically come into work and go home without really talking to anybody much at all. You might go Hi, as you're grabbing a quick coffee or something, but unless you happen to be in on the same day. Well.....

Kelly took a different perspective. She was adamant that teams did work together and that they performed a unified function. She stated that

You've got your individual statistics but you also work out as a team that you should achieve this goal. Now for example lets take 72 calls a day. If I'm doing 80 calls a day and someone else is doing 60 calls a day, I'm helping our team's statistics as I'm helping to build up for their shortfall. Ok. So you do have goals as a team, you're trying to achieve, so you also have individual goals, so if an individual in a team isn't performing, they can isolate who's not performing and perhaps why they're not. But there are goals you achieve as a team.

It was interesting that Kelly saw the CSR role as a group function rather than an individual one. This was particularly so, given her next statement regards the nature of the teams.

I'm only based on solely my own individual performance. My team's performance, I'm not held accountable for, so as far as I'm concerned if I'm performing better than a fellow team member, I'll be on a better pay rate to compensate for it.

Here was a demonstration of an obvious contradiction. While Kelly acknowledged that there were "team" targets, she demonstrated that the only thing of real consequence was her own statistics. Even though she saw herself as part of a team, she clearly was acknowledging the individualistic nature of her job.

Kelly's comment demonstrates how this motivating strategy works. Despite the emphasis on individual performance, Kelly positions herself as part of the team, thus justifying her need to perform as part of a non-existent team function. Team leaders take advantage of this, in a number of ways. One example was the use of statistical information. All staff receive their "stats" every day, and my understanding was that these were made available in such a way that every one knew each other's stats. Any individual could see who in the teams was performing and who wasn't. Hence, one could see who was not meeting the targets of the team and hence was not a team player.

Here was a demonstration of how organisational team culture worked in action. Team leaders could motivate workers by the use of guilt. This could be factored into promoting productivity in teams, by covertly encouraging peer pressure by fellow workers over tardy colleagues, such as when a staff member arrives late from morning tea (see *New Zealand Info Tech*: 395: 31 May 1999). The teams approach heightens the stress of the job, by not only

placing the demands of management on the worker, but also the expectations of fellow employees

The purpose of teams were not so people would work together for a common goal, but rather so workers would link with a group they could identify with. Thus they would work harder to conform with the group norms and ideals relating to productivity of the team. This is a sign of hegemony essentially at work. In chapter four the issue of how management creates an environment of performance based workplace cultures that forms the basis of establishing domination by coercion with consent was raised. Here Telecorp Services used individual statistics as a tool to maintain and reproduce in worker's core values relating to productivity. In this way Telecorp attempts to influence the way of thinking amongst workers to justify and maintain these conceptions of productivity by using group conformity. This activity fits well with Larner's Technology Of Agency (2000). The practice was one of the highly individualistic forms of employment relations that emphasise performativity. But what were the ideals and goals of the team and where did they come from? One had to look at other motivation management activities to reveal this.

7.3: Quality Assurance: The Role of Surveillance.

Call monitoring and surveillance is another motivating strategy of equal importance in a call centre. Monitoring and surveillance is the practice of listening in on or taping peoples phone calls undetected by both parties. This listening in on calls can be justified by using a variety of reasons, such as an ethical need to protect the clients, or because the information provided is so complex and difficult that the advice needs to be checked on. Other reasons

for monitoring may include justifications that it is a tool used to help and develop worker's skills or that it engenders a good solid work ethic while assisting them to become better, more productive staff. Monitoring is also a valuable way to maximise and legitimise supervisory controls. Another function of this monitoring is to gauge a worker's performance for pay rises and ensure they are doing their job. In some quarters, it can be seen as a particularly underhanded activity, where management essentially spies on one's workers to find mistakes. Yet in Telecorp Services this spying is seen in less sinister ways and is viewed as quite normal.

A team leader can at any time pick up a phone and listen into a call undetected. All they have to do is push a button that connects them to a CSR. As well, call centre management can tape calls, log on to the computer system and view how many calls are being actioned, how many customers are queuing and how many calls are being answered at any one time. The computer logs phone calls and produces graphs and other information that statistically maps progress over any period of time. Such statistics can be used by managers to compare and contrast individual CSR's or across teams, to analyse their daily performance. As well management surveillance technology can take screen captures of a CSR's computer activity to view dealings with various members of the public and what information is being entered in or removed from the computer as well as what sites or screens a CSR has used. Such unbridled power to impose themselves on a workers daily routine gives managers a significant advantage in terms of control, keeping staff in line and above all maintaining the regimes and culture of performance.

One team leader referred to the technology as literally "quite scary" but showed little compunction at using it. Workers had varying views on the

practice also. When asked about the surveillance, CSR Ian was adamant that monitoring was necessary.

Well I think it's necessary. People have to keep track of what your doing. Otherwise what's to stop us writing off bills to friends and things like that!

Another CSR mirrored his thoughts by suggesting that that monitoring was to protect their customers, although that individual did not say what it was protecting the customers from. No CSR for instance, highlighted surveillance as a mechanism to protect the managers, by ensuring they (the employees) "performed" and were kept under "control". No one CSR commented either on the possible ramifications for the future of employee surveillance and monitoring. If it can happen in call centres why not in classrooms, offices, factories and hospitals? Why this did not bother call centre staff was unclear, although it is possible that employment procedures based on finding with suitable "expectations" and the rigorous search for those with the right "environmental fit" might explain this acceptance. What was evident, however, was the feeling among CSR's that monitoring went with the job and thus, was accepted as normal. Kay for instance commented in an explanation regarding call monitoring.

That's a very important tool and it's actually a very useful tool. Because it gives you a one on one relationship with both team leaders and technical people and it's a good way of increasing the performance of the CSR without making them (the CSR's) feel like they're just being muzzled. So I think that's a very useful that they use that here at Telecorp Services.

There was a recurring theme in these interviews. That monitoring was a necessary part of the job. While CSR's accepted the monitoring as necessary, they were less complimentary about how it was used. This in sense a demonstrated an odd contradiction over this obsessively controlling practice. Although the CSR's were happy with the idea of monitoring calls in general, they were less enthusiastic about Quality Monitoring or QC. This practice was essentially a CSR performance review that occurs every two weeks. It also determined their pay scales.

QC is a process where each individual CSR goes into a room with the team leader and a business specialist to discuss their performance. The three go over four calls that have been selected and recorded on the post two week period as well as computer screen captures of data entries that have been made. At the same time a CSR's call statistics are assessed. Discussion regards QC between Telecorp Services team leaders and the individual CSR's is said to be purely for "helping" and "training" purposes. Management essentially discusses issues concerning phone manner, knowledge and possible technical improvements relating to customer service with the CSR. They also go over the information given out by the CSR, its appropriateness, and how it was delivered to the customer. Also covered in this session are the number and duration of calls taken daily. Managers then rate or score the CSR's performance based on the level of competency he or she is assessed to have as a result of these calls. Essentially each meeting is about performativity, that is getting the best possible result from one's staff all the time, while ensuring they are following the call centre rules.

Attempts to increase performativity are not lost on the staff, with most seeing through the so called quality monitoring for what it is, simply an

attempt to inspire staff to work smarter, harder and faster. Helen made these comments when asked how she was doing with the QC.

My customer service is great my technical knowledge is great, the only thing that is holding me back is my call handling times. If it was shorter I'd go up a pay scale. But it's not, and that's sort of like you say, it's a natural part of performance, that's the one that holds a lot of people back.

When she was asked whether handling time and call times were realistic, she laughed, replying.

It depends on who you talk too. There have been people who have left because of what has come up in the monitoring, because it does find faults, more than it does find strengths. And that's probably something that there... Well there trying to constantly improve you, so that's what they're focusing on, because you need to change rather than to give.

Kay meanwhile described the function of Q.C as follows

Their job is to help you to get up to skill, but in the end their job is to monitor you to make sure you get up to skill.

Clearly she saw quality monitoring as purely a performance mechanism, rather than a tool to help workers. During further discussion Kay became more

emphatic about the call monitoring process, particularly in relation to some recent managerial changes to the rules on evaluating calls.

These things they call competencies. These are ethereal things like teamwork, self-management, stuff like that which is really hard to prove. They declined most of the call centre pay rises, all those they reshuffled the teams then the managers got really strict on what your doing and availability and how we were taking calls.

Along with this recognition that QC is not generally designed for the worker's benefit, many workers were also disparaging of how this a practice appeared to exploit the ambiguity of these competencies, particularly in respect to assessing pay. Michael commented on this by saying that.

It is quite helpful in a way. You can pick up on things that perhaps you haven't been taught, you just don't know, ummmmm yeah I still don't know about the sort of yeah..... Marking side of it in a way, and sometimes....

He paused before continuing.

Yeah well they changed it all recently, like you sort of get marked on the technical side of things and then you get marked on the service side of it, like call control and all that sort of thing. Friendliness, all that sort of thing, all sorts of aspects with that. And that goes towards your performance and management thing for the year.

On being asked if he felt that this practice was affecting his grades and thus his pay, he offered as an example one procedure that he felt was grossly unfair.

Yeah yeah, and what they do now is if umm like after a year if you don't get the validation right you fail the call totally. Umm some things like.... You don't seem to get any credit for what you do, right. Say like a call, if you have to talk about two different customers, say for instance a husband and you get something on his wife's, your marked down for the whole lot, so you sometimes feel your not getting any credit for what you do get right.

What Michael referred to here was how the QC process could be used to accentuate the negative aspects of workers performance but at the same time subjugate the positive. QC had a duality to its function, that encompassed not only improvement, but also suppression in the eyes of the workers. In essence this was the strongest hint that the real the aim of the practice was only to improve the worker's performance rather than to assist and encourage the worker. But it was not the only tool of performance. Other activities also occur in Telecorp Services, including one occurrence that is also closely linked to the endless culture of productivity. The constant use of training.

7.4: Training, training, training.

Once employed, call centre workers are assigned to a team who have been assembled to undertake phone tasks relating to a subject within a particular area of the business. These areas are known as queues. Each queue requires a call centre worker to have specific competencies (skills) and areas of

expertise related to this subject, so they can answer customer enquiries correctly. Gaining these competencies requires training, to give the worker the knowledge they need to answer calls correctly. Telecorp Services has a number of queues, all requiring particular competencies. While some skills are generic, others are specific to that queue, such as understanding and using a particular database or information resource. As the call centre is constantly undergoing staff changes a worker needs to be ready for training or intending to train with the view to being moved to a different queue at all times.

A CSR's move to a new queue is a rapid transition, occurring around every three months. This is, however, dependent on whether the worker is judged as being competent in their current queue. Getting to another queue has its advantages. It is often a sign that the worker has gained specific competencies that qualifies them for a pay rise. A person with higher queue competencies essentially obtains a higher status and is also likely to be considered for more supervisory positions like those of a team leader, technical advisor, coach, or facilitator. Queue attainment is therefore a competitive business for those looking for promotion.

In order to assess a worker's readiness to be shifted to a new queue, the call centre has staff employed to constantly monitor their progress. Each employee has a progression plan including charts and statistical information mapping an employee's progress at all times. Essentially a worker is constantly undergoing profiling to ascertain how they were progressing and whether they were meeting the needs of the business. A worker's competencies and skill fits were always being assessed under the watchful eyes of staff trainers and team leaders to try and ascertain who was ready to be shifted on, and who wasn't making the progress they should be. This information was shared with a number of parties including the team leader, team manager, trainers and

technical staff. Everyone, it seemed, was interested in how the worker was performing.

A CSR wanting to move to a new queue for more money and responsibility would first have to demonstrate their competence. They need to show their competitiveness by maintaining their stats and call competencies at a consistently high level. For instance to get this type of promotion, or more to the point a salary increase, a worker would need to obtain consistent perfect scores of around ten out ten in both their customer service and technical abilities, as assessed by their team leaders and others in QC. They also need to have an average handling time of around seven minutes or below per call and take an average above 80 to 85 calls per day. Their occupancy (time on the phones) needed to be consistently measured at 80 - 85% of their working day. This system put workers in a position of constantly having to perform keep their statistics up in order to be considered for more pay and a better position.

Even high scores and solid statistics, did not guarantee success in promotion, however. Unless urgent staffing requirements dictated otherwise, only those who were assessed by the managers as the top “performers” would be placed on the list for new queue training. Often there were a lot more people waiting to be trained and looking to advance themselves than there were positions available. For instance, 25 people might be judged as ready for the new queue, however only ten people might be required. To sort out who would and would not be chosen, training and technical staff would meet to discuss the available staff members, and select only those who were deemed the best that were available. Despite being competent the rest would have to wait their turn. As Paula, one of the staff training people explained.

Only ten can go on it (the queue training) at a time, so obviously the other 15 people are normally a little bit put out, because as far as there concerned there stats mean that they can go on another queue. But the business doesn't allow that much training.

Clearly the management goal here was to maintain a standard of performance by limiting the training to only a few chosen individuals. Thus many workers were forced to keep competing to get to the next level of work and pay, even with their obvious competence and loyalty to the job. This competing was, according to Paula, a general expectation of management. Getting to the next queue was hard. As Paula pointed out

Yeah, it's quite hard to get there and maintain the stats in between as well. Because they've got to still demonstrate they can maintain their stats.

Again performance reared its head. Workers just simply had to perform in order to get into a new queue or even to remain in contention for promotion to a new queue. Performance, it seemed, was everywhere, legitimised, normalised and a common-sense understanding of the Telecorp Services way. And of course every CSR knew they had to also perform during the training.

Training in a call centre started before a worker was officially employed. And once employed it continued with monotonous regularity. The CSR's first brush with training occurs as a new prospect at assessment, which generally last six weeks prior to starting on the job. Retraining lasted any where between two days to two weeks. A refresher course on something like customer service might last a couple of days. Something more complex like queue training for a

new task might take a couple of weeks. The training was, described to me by Paula as “very modern” not traditional stuff where one read new material and then followed the information given. The activities were very much like the work in the call centre, very proactive, demanding a workers full attention. One had to be involved in the training regime, show your enthusiasm for the challenge and of course perform. Described as layered learning, the exercises included lots of activities designed to induce participation. The activities were run by teachers called facilitators, who taught the learners to “have to go and find a certain thing or information, or learn how to do use a certain system or learn a piece of information.” Often the activities involved using computer packages, learning how they worked before incorporating their usage into lines of questions that were designed to mimic customer’s potential requests.

There was almost a factory mentality about management's approach to training. One trainer explained that their job was primarily to ensure that the needs of the call centre were being met. She described the desire to bring on staff for new queues in these terms.

I’m, you know, finding out what the forecast is, and what the impact is, and making sure I’ve got enough CSR's trained in that queue by that time.

So at Telecorp Services training was an ongoing and continual process. CSR’s were constantly being retrained to suit the needs of the business. And yet this was a bit strange given that the avenues for promotion seemed so limited. Workers were inducted into the courses, pushed through them and then rolled out the other end, very much like a factory production line.

Although there were many queue's one had to wonder why so much training was necessary. Surely over time the need to retrain would subside as more CSR's gained more competencies. And clearly given the flat management structures, the avenues for promotion in and around the call centre were also limited. Obviously there were other reasons behind the preoccupation with training.

When I asked how many people had completed all the Telecorp Services queues I was told that there were very few. Of the two hundred or so CSR's only around thirty of them had done all the queues. A number of others had apparently moved on to coaching or facilitating positions. While this explained some of the need for training it certainly did not explain all of it. But there was another factor of call centre life that did. Although some had gained promotion, and others had moved to new queues within the call centre, it seems many had chosen to find another queue. This queue formed a line to the exit door. Helen explained it succinctly.

Yes" she confirmed, "there is a staff turnover. I think its dropped quite a bit on what it used to be, I think. Last year... I think the last figure I heard was that the average service was up to about 8 months, which I believe is actually better than it used to be".

Call centres are notorious for having a high staff turnover and this call centre was no exception. Clearly staff turnover was a key factor driving the need for training. But it became evident during interviews with the CSR's that there were also other reasons for the constant desire to train. It seemed that this propensity for training had a more latent function. These became

apparent in interviewing the staff when discussing the purpose of queue training.

Management had at some point in the past found it necessary to break one queue into two. This was done for efficiency reasons because the workload was too diverse and needed to be reduced to make queue more manageable. Although those working in this queue had the knowledge and skills to work in either of the two newly created queues, Telecorp Services still insisted they do some training. This was a matter that bemused some of the staff. On discussing this event Helen raised some criticisms about its necessity. With reference to the queue, she said.

It's only a one day refresher essentially, and people were there who were quite capable, and going through the motions of being taught things, and were going like, OK! Seeing the question and writing down the answer before it had been asked. She continued "Ummm. It was a strange management policy, to set up a separate queue, and then say you had to be, to have done the course for it. That one-day to be considered to have that queue, whereas (some had been) doing the same calls perhaps for the past 2 and a half years. But because it was set up as a new queue, they had to set up competencies for it. So it was very umm weak.

What Helen was implying, was that the training was being done purely for the sake of training in this case. This perhaps provided another explanation for training. Not only was training required to meet the requirements of the call centre due to the continual occurrence of staff turnover, but it also served as a way of reinforcing amongst staff the need for maintaining performance.

Beyond the obvious desire to maintain and improve productivity, the staff training may have represented what in educational terms is called the “hidden curriculum” (Giddens, 1993: 78) where education, through the application of classroom rules and expectations carry an underlying function of maintaining authority and control. Although it was unlikely to be the main aim of this practice, it was very likely an unintended consequence. Training therefore, not only taught new skills, and created competencies for future assessment of the staff, but it also taught the staff the importance of accepting authority by reminding them of the need to perform. This assertion is to a degree supported by research from Callaghan & Thompson (2002: 248). On training in one call centre they researched in Britain they commented that “Telebank not only recruit attitude, they shape and dictate it”.

Along with the hidden curriculum, this training process can also be described as a form of credentialism. This is a strategy used by employers where the entry qualifications for an occupation are upgraded without any change in the knowledge or skill requirements for the job. Employers typically use it as a means for screening people into jobs while also assisting in the maintenance of the status-quo of the organisation. Two important effects are highlighted in this process, the investment effect where the credentials gained in this training show that the applicant has been made them more productive as a result, and the screening effect where the education, subsequent training and credentials gained, indicate certain attributes in the worker that the employer wants. (Buon, 1997: 1). In a sense this process assists in reinforcing (through training) the ethic of productivity and Telecorp Services desire to see their employees constantly perform.

Another CSR, Myra, supported this notion of credentialism albeit inadvertently. She referred to a recent customer service refresher course. In explanation, she pointed out.

Like, they had a customer service workshop a while ago, that we all attended for a couple of days to motivate us about the customer service side of thing's ummmm...She continued "It was, umm, a two day thing, and they just sort of go more into refreshing ourselves about good service, bad service how we can improve, what we need to do, which is a good reminder because you can get a bit complacent after a while and it just jogs your memory to say... Hey, maybe I could do this a bit more, or maybe I could be doing this or that, you know.

At this point she stopped and looked rather puzzled before stating.

Those sorts of things are picked up in quality monitoring too?

The point that Myra made here was that QC constantly deals with customer service protocols, which are marked for, in assessment. In a sense, therefore, CSR's are already constantly being trained for customer service. This raised the question of why a customer service course was required at all? Why have a course for this when presumably it is already covered in quality monitoring discussion. Did training indeed have a role in reinforcing controls? An answer arose when I looked at the function of coaching.

On completion of a training course, the successful trainees move into what are known as coaching pods. At this point they are assessed for their

readiness to answer real calls on the topic they have been trained for. Here trainers have them all sit together as a group and answer calls under the guidance of coaches. This portion of the training involves having one “floating” coach to three CSRs, to answer any questions, to listen in on calls and to make sure that the CSR's had consolidated the information correctly. Although it no doubt performs a critical function in ensuring customers are being given the correct information, the duality of purpose of these training activities becomes clear. Workers, when discussing coaching, implied how both the desire for improving performance and the need for expressing managerial controls were part of the overall function. Myra, for instance, saw coaching as an activity to induce performance. As she said

It still strikes me its main goal (coaching) is actually to save call centre money by getting people up to speed as quickly as possible, rather than making the customer service person feel secure in what there doing.

Tony meanwhile, described the coaching position as not so much a way of consolidating learning, but rather a way of introducing and reinforcing controls in the workplace.

What it seems their looking for ... is a coach, who, rather than someone who is technically good at the job, and has the ability to teach”. He paused. “They’re actually looking for someone who’s willing to... Um.. Basically to introduce new recruits and people learning new skill groups, to the way the call centre will be managing you (laughs). Their actually wanting you to... yeah.... to be aware that the coaching is just another way of.... Uhhh basically

its just another way of a team leader one on one team leader relationship. Ummm it strikes me at times that these people. Their job is to help you to get up to skill, but in the end their job is to monitor you, to make sure you get up to skill.

It was these comments that revealed more than any others about coaching and training. Like many other practices in the call centre, they serve a function of reinforcing the need for performance and extolling the virtues of control. Workers not only learn new skills for the job, but they also learn to accept being constantly managed. Certainly there are grounds for belief that training, while it fulfils an essential function in the call centre, also has a duality to its use. It is a perfect tool for reinforcing the idea that performance is paramount and that the acceptance of surveillance and coercive styles of management is normal.

In this call centre Telecorp Services management had created an environment where strong labour controls and productivity were a normal expectation in every sense of the word. A culture of inescapable performance presided, supported by monitoring, surveillance, QC meetings, motivation management and training activities. Each activity provided management an opportunity to reinforce these controls and expectations on a daily basis, so that staff not only accepted them as right and proper, but also incorporated them into their daily life as every day normal everyday practices. At the same time, however, many staff analysed their own situations, recognised where their interests were not being served and expressed this accordingly. Although managers had quite clearly attempted to induct staff into an environment of pure performance, there were signs of resistance. Unions and resignations were two options open to staff and both were under consideration by many.

Perhaps if there is one clear message comes from this. Attempting to legitimise supervisory practices doesn't always make them acceptable, nor do they always work. Even if you individualise workers, immerse them in powerful controls and work cultures, persuade them that unrelenting performance is good for them, and perfectly normal, you will still in the long term still fail. People will, in the end, despite notions of the Bentham's Panopticon, make up their own minds, and with the "churn" that is evident in this call centre, it appears many already had. This matter and many others are raised in the next part of this thesis, the discussion chapter.

Chapter 8: Discussion

This chapter is divided into three parts. Initially the goals of the thesis are restated and theoretical arguments regarding previous call centre research reviewed. Secondly this chapter explores the two major assertions of this thesis; 1/ that Gramsci's hegemony provides a better explanation of a call centre than the panopticon of surveillance and 2/ the premise that a worker's role is constructed along free market lines. Comparisons are made between Larner's notion of the Technology of Agency and practices used by Telecorp Services to boost productivity to demonstrate the latter claim. Thirdly this chapter discusses future avenues of research.

This analysis of the role of hegemony in constructing workers in call centres had four interrelating goals. The first goal was to investigate how a call centre worker's role is constructed along free market lines, through ideologically driven strategies designed to increase productivity. The second goal contrasted the merits of Bentham and Foucault's Panopticon of Surveillance with Gramsci's hegemony, suggesting that hegemony offers a better explanation of how a call centre works, because it better explains call centre labour controls surrounding increased worker performance. The third goal explored the structure and activities of a call centre to create an historical picture of the productive nature of the industry. The fourth goal involved interviewing call centre workers at Telecorp Services, New Zealand to gather their stories and examine the productivity regimes and managerial practices that occur there. To explain these goals the following information is recalled.

The cost effective structure of call centres have stimulated concerns about the nature their employment activities. They have obtained notoriety as the sweatshops of the new millennium due to the use of questionable

productivity practices and some disturbing trends in labour controls associated with computer monitoring and repetitively answering phones. These practices have aroused academic enquiry and critique, none more significant than the contribution of Fernie and Metcalf (1998) who have used the Panopticon of Surveillance to analyse call centres. Fernie and Metcalf (1998) refer to the activities of electronic workplace monitoring as comparable to prison like controls that have “rendered perfect” supervisory management. Technologically deterministic, Fernie and Metcalf (1998) focus on call centre labour controls where employees are monitored to ensure they meet strict standards of performance and compliance at work. Fernie & Metcalf claim this surveillance creates an air of psychological permanence in employees so strong, that even when discontinued, the worker still behaves as if being watched. Fernie & Metcalf further state this disciplinary action eventually transfers from the perpetuator to the individual, rendering the act of surveillance unnecessary. In essence power is used as a tool to make the individual discipline his or her self.

In reply the human resource management discipline, offers a strong rebuttal of the Panopticon of Surveillance. Theorists like Bain & Taylor (2000) criticise claims that call centres espouse prison like controls as sensationalised. Human resource management theorists claim call centres offer good working conditions in many cases, despite their tendency to adopt labour practices promoting high productivity and labour intensification. Furthermore it is claimed call centre workers and managers often share similar goals and interests in retaining productivity regimes for customer service and financial remuneration. They argue that call centre workers have a number of avenues of resistance available to them and are not bad places to work.

Regardless, human resource management does not explain call centre operations in any depth and provides little theoretical explanation of the social mechanics of the call centre labour process. Often analysis consists of superficial discussion regards positive managerial changes while avoiding aspects of labour intensification and productivity. In response this thesis examines the limitations of both the Panopticon of Surveillance and Human Resource Management theory and proposes an alternative perspective to counter both views, by asking whether ideological influences provide a better explanation of call centre labour controls.

To elaborate on the ideological delivery of labour controls, various work organisational approaches are used to analyse the call centre structure and explain how managers implement controls based on productivity. Appearing as workplace cultures, these labour controls act to "construct" the role of workers to meet employer expectations founded in ideologies of the "free market". Larner's (2000) reference to call centres through the "Technology of Agency" is used to demonstrate this. This description outlines call centre profiling and employment practices that encourage workers to participate in pursuing international competitiveness, while accepting relatively low wages and highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures.

How a workers role can be constructed is explained, by outlining how call centre employers are exposed to a set of norms and values within their specific organisational culture relating to productivity. These become role expectations, which are both socially and technologically determined and appear as labour control practices used to develop a hegemonic perspective in call centres. To elaborate this thesis asks what activities are used in constructing these role expectations?

In response to this question the profiling, pre-employment and productivity strategies of a call centre called Telecorp Services are examined. To enquire whether call centre managers attempt to “construct” the role of their workers by domination by coercion with consent this research conducts a qualitative study of a type B call centre. Using the performativity practices outlined in Larner’s *Technology of Agency* as a template, this research interviews a number of call centre staff from Telecorp Services to find out what types of productivity practices and labour controls are prevalent in this call centre and whether these activities are typical of those generically described in Chapter four. This research finds there are many similarities and few differences.

Having reviewed the key points of this thesis this chapter now turns to a discussion on the main assertions, namely the useful nature of hegemony as an analytical tool in explaining call centres and the idea that a workers role is constructed along free market lines.

8:1: Hegemony Revisited.

Two questions were asked during the process of this research. Firstly that Gramsci’s hegemony provides a better explanation of a call centre than the panopticon of surveillance and secondly that a worker’s role is constructed along free market lines. These two questions are interlined as a consequence of one major factor. Call centre managers drive for productivity. This research demonstrates how call centres like Telecorp Services rely on motivation management strategies and work cultures to gain ideological control of their workers. These strategies link call centres with hegemony and are explained as follows.

Hegemony, as a form of domination by coercion with consent, much better explains call centres because it captures how managers' deliver these wide ranging controls to workers. Using this theory to explain these methods of gaining control, contrasts with theorists such as Fernie & Metcalf (1998), who see call centre workers as productive victims of electronic surveillance that has technologically deterministically "rendered perfect" supervisory control. On the contrary this research shows that at Telecorp Services the supervisors power is far from perfect and is not effective at eliminating worker resistance at all, hence a managers desire to constantly reinforce the need for productivity.

The Foucaultian assertion of machine's dominance over man is highly over rated, as is the notion that a workers' psychological structures are altered via Foucault's notion of the internalisation of power. Rather than having the ability to induce within workers a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power to a point of psychological permanence, managers at Telecorp Services in reality, have little confidence in their abilities to control workers by technology alone. Accordingly they find it necessary to constantly persuade their workers that productivity is good for them in a variety of ways that are invariably delivered through a raft of labour controls. These controls promote ideas and beliefs regards productivity that filter into everyday workplace consciousness as normal, common sense, every day practice. They are delivered to the worker as a package of norms and values within Telecorp Services organisational culture that are tailor made to persuade workers that productivity is not only desirable but essential. It is the origin of these controls, and how they are applied, that I now turn to, discussing how the role of the worker is constructed along free market lines for increased productivity.

Telecorp Services workers are hired having a personality adaptive to productivity regimes that typify a market approach to labour. They must fit or be able to be moulded into the type of worker that Telecorp Services desires. Such employment relations are outlined in Larner's *Technology of Agency* (2000) and include market based activities that encourage workers to participate in pursuing international competitiveness, while accepting relatively low wages and highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures. To this end the "right" type of worker is identified through aptitude tests and psychological profiling, and once employed, encouraged to practice entrepreneurialism and teamwork. Workers are subsequently controlled and monitored through supervisory/surveillance techniques, suggested to be used to develop worker's skills and performance. At Telecorp Services these market based employment relations are evident through a variety of managerial strategies. They are as follows.

Telecorp Services invests a huge amount of time and money into employee pre assessment and training with potential employees subjected to a progression three-stage interview. Attention is paid to the "expectations" of potential employees and in particular motivational and environmental fit within Telecorp's Organisational structure. Assessments of potential employees occur through an induction type course lasting six weeks and focus not only on training, but also on ascertaining a worker's aptitude for future performance management, their ability to adapt to strong labour controls, and whether prospective workers are likely to be tolerant and compliant to high productivity cultures. Only those with a suitably adaptive personality are selected.

Similarly Telecorp Services employers also place great emphasis on another requirement not specifically raised in the "*Technology of Agency*"

but strongly connected to “fit”. This is the presence of attitude, which appears to be a key component in constructing an employees mind set. Attitude is a major component of motivational/environmental fit and thus essential with regards to coping with the structure and expectations of the job. Attitude is the substance that Telecorp Services management build upon in their effort to construct the role of their workers, and as has been shown in other call centres (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002: 240) attitude appears to be everything.

A third aspect of the market can be seen in Telecorp Services employment policies. Integral to the typical call centre approach to labour is the use of workers traditionally targeted from sectors of marginalisation. As outlined in chapter four, Buchanan & Koche-Schultze (2000) include women in these socio-economic groups. Telecorp Services does not predominantly employ women, migrants or the disabled, despite research indicating these trends are general to many overseas call centres. Instead this organisation chooses another group of workers, who are loosely defined as youth, that is younger workers under the age of 35. According to the International Labour Organisation youth workers fall into the same category as women, migrants and the disabled (Jobsletter: 160: 31 Jan 2001).

Telecorp Services does not appear to be age friendly. More mature Telecorp Services staff implied younger workers seemed to offer their employers a more adaptable outlook to the controls and the rigorous work cultures constructed around performance. They also seem more adaptable to the flexible and changing competency requirements. Beyond this young workers seem to have more energy and perhaps cope better with the stressful intensified environment. They are inclined to display a number of desirable attributes, such as having computer skills (or learning them quicker) but most importantly accepting the value of call control and productivity regimes.

These regimes are evident in their work environment that is premised on the workers and its relationship to pursuing international competitiveness.

The market is global. Telecorp Services workers are encouraged to participate in pursuing international competitiveness through the use of benchmarking and statistical measures. Such measures are worldwide norms in call centres and indicative of the free market approach to labour. Thus workers are drawn to accept productivity as normal through application of standards and measures that filter down from presupposed models based on restructuring and cost effectiveness. Although not an international call centre, Telecorp Services efficiency assessments are thus based on model systems of competitiveness typified by outsourcing and international call centres. To put it more simply they have copied an outsourcing system. As in any call centre labour cost is the major component and so Telecorp Services pursues relatively low wages and highly individualistic forms of performativity cultures as part of this outsourced cost effective model. This is demonstrated by the raft of motivation management, teams, training and quality monitoring strategies outlined in chapter seven all of which form the basis of wage and salary assessments.

At Telecorp Services the size, management style and visual placement of workers are as important as being monitored by a computer. Workers are located in teams near their team leaders, so they can participate in team events and be subjected to supervisory controls that stretch well beyond surveillance to meet the demands of increased productivity. Team leaders can watch their teams and can listen in on their calls at any time. Responsible for overseeing each CSR a team leader is in touch with each workers productivity statistics and can soon tell who is not performing and can take steps to impress on the worker the need to work harder and faster at any time. They may, for

instance, underline poor daily statistics in red pen, to question why a worker has not met their daily or weekly statistics. Thus, for a CSR, statistics take on overwhelming importance, as these are the only criteria they are judged on. How productive they are.

Team leaders use other strategies to promote productivity. These include motivation management by involving workers in competitions, games and ensuring the presence of motivational signs throughout the office. Here Telecorp Services managers attempt to increase worker satisfaction by maximising task involvement and responsibility, to increase worker productivity. These practices are also designed to impress on teams the value of increasing their performance by attempting to create a team player environment based on ensuring the most productive receive rewards. Thus managers initiate the acceptance of productivity on a variety of levels to ensure that workers accept that working faster and harder is a legitimate and normal practice.

At Telecorp Services management also uses team discipline effectively, like the practice of making individual statistics available for all staff members to see, so staff can compare themselves to others. Such peer involvement promotes performance despite the individualistic nature of the work. It is an example of Beder's (2000) "work place democracy, demonstrating how employers make up for the eradication of layers of middle management by essentially making workers supervise each other.

So are the CSR's that comprise the team working as group or not? Despite this emphasis on the team, the work is in reality very self-focused and CSR's basically work as individuals. Their relationship with their team leader is one on one despite the teamwork and managerial strategies emphasising the importance of working together. This is no more evident than in the practice

of quality assurance founded on monitoring and surveillance. Telecorp Services uses surveillance actively and records phone calls and call statistics. This is supported by QC (quality control) where a workers meet with the team leader and other Telecorp specialists to discuss their call performance fortnightly. This practice involves two senior staff discussing methods to improve productivity with a more junior employee with the view to maximising worker productivity through the constant analysis of their call statistics and skills. Here the worker is constantly assessed to ascertain how hard and fast they are working and whether they are meeting predetermined performance evaluation criteria. Again there is a reinforcement process in place that reminds workers constantly that they need to perform. This reinforcement also occurs in other aspects of the Telecorp Services employment, namely the practice of training.

To boost the importance of being productive at Telecorp Services, CSR's are frequently assessed by training staff to ascertain their competency levels. CSR's at Telecorp Services are often required to attend training and coaching sessions, ostensibly to allow them to update and develop their skill base. These training sessions also allow the employers to covertly impress upon them the importance of performing. Although ostensibly these activities are designed for the purpose of assisting workers to adapt to new roles, there is a duality to these functions. Chapter seven raises the issues of the hidden curriculum and credentialism. Training and coaching also serves a purpose of reminding workers of the importance of productivity. Again their lives are covertly shaped by the market view of labour. This is further reinforced by promotion to new queues, a subject closely linked to training.

Telecorp Services staff often require retraining and are expected to be multi-skilled and multi-talented, with varied levels of knowledge about

computing and processing data in order to maintain their productivity and meet client service demands. Often the development of these skills are prerequisites to promotion and increased pay. Call centre workers often have to compete with each other for promotion, incentives or pay rises, as the flat management structure they work under often provides them limited opportunities to progress. Often there are less positions available, than there are CSR's wanting to progress. This forces CSR's to have to constantly maintain their statistics and skills at a high level if they have any hope of promotion. The practice of constantly assessing of workers for their readiness for new queues, as well as making them compete for pay increases and a small number of improved positions is another aspect of the market at work as it impresses on workers that increasing productivity is the main key to self improvement.

In summary hegemony was to the fore at Telecorp Services. Workers roles are constructed to enhance productivity at every opportunity. Managers are charged with the task of getting as much out of their workers as they can at the least cost to the business. The manner in which this is achieved is by normalising productivity at a number of points in the labour process. Thus, in this call centre, worker's roles are constructed to meet the productive needs of their employers through means of hegemony based on notions of the free market. Workers are economic units moulded for the purpose of productively answering phones. Further research may offer more divergent views on the role of productivity regimes in new systems of labour and particularly call centres. Some suggestions are offered as follows.

8.2: Future Research.

Emotional detachment was a recurrent theme and could provide a rich source of investigation for future research into the contradictory nature of emotional labour. Some of the workers, particularly men were disparaging of issues such as health problems and stress although common in call centres. While some recognised these problems, there was a body of opinion that saw it as a weakness. Given recent changes in industrial legislation particularly regards stress this is disturbing. Some of these people are potential managers of the future and they will carry these attitudes with them. Call centres are also notorious for physical health problems such as OOS, eye and voice strain. Managers who are unwilling to accept these as genuine issues that require positive solutions will be a liability that could cost call centres staff and money. Further research could identify these issues with the view to positive interventions.

There are other forms of detachment, particularly in relation to the increasing divide between the client and the CSR as a result of new technology. One worker talked about how caller identification rules caused him to fail a QC session, when he relaxed the rules to help an elderly lady access information about her husband who had recently gone into a home. This adherence to the rules at times causes conflicts between the CSR and the very people they are supposed to serve. It is interesting that the call centre apparently emphasises the need for life skills. Failing a worker for using those life skills is hardly an example of sensible management. Other workers talked about how they had to deal with depressed, angry and even suicidal people. They also complained at the pressure they felt at having to constantly “zap” people through a system where call numbers were more important than the customer. It seems many were ill prepared for this.

Another connection to the market that could make interesting future research pertained to how this business (as Telecorp Services frequently called themselves) seemed to be very much like an outsourced office. In a way this call centre mirrored the outsourcing model, so popular in the new economy (Beder, 2000: 134). Such models are typified by bench marking standards and measures of performance, such as the call targets and handling times that are designed to measure call centre efficiency, quality and customer satisfaction. The Telecorp Services environment is designed to be cost effective, through reduced labour costs and by producing efficiency at every opportunity. Many of Telecorp's senior staff have a finance or information industry background. Yet Telecorp Services is not a business. To reveal the actual nature of the work of Telecorp Services would mean risking identification of the organisation, however, it can be revealed that Telecorp Services is not a private company. Although some would argue that this comparison to an outsourced contractor is unfair, particularly to an organisation that is not part of the private sector, this claim is challenged. The similarities to an outsourcing organisation such as those listed above are more apparent than the differences. I would again raise the references of the staff to this call centre as "the business". It is not a business but it appears to be trying to be one. Thus it is founded on market principles that seem at odds with its non-business role. As such this contradiction offers an interesting research opportunity based on the role of non-business organisations and their paradoxical attempts to serve the customers in a social sense, while operating as a business model. Are social objectives achievable and are the customer's interests truly being served through the adoption of profit based outsourcing models of customer service. Such research could be beneficial to stakeholders in the public sphere as a way of gauging a call centres success or otherwise.

Bench marking and the connection to the global market offer another avenue of research. Call centres, as idealised organisations structured on bench marking and outsourcing models of international origin, suggest there is a strong connection between global influences and how these impact locally. In a sense global forces are shaping our local labour markets. Bench marking investigation and comparisons might lead to understandings of how influential global trends are on local labour controls as well as their origins.

A further research question pertains to the “sacrificial HR strategy”. Are call centres’ like Telecorp Services, running the risk of operating the “sacrificial HR strategy” as espoused by Wallace et al, 2000: 183 in chapter four, even though employers don't intend too? The “sacrificial HR strategy” is described as the deliberate, frequent replacement of employees in order to provide enthusiastic motivated customer service at low cost to the organisation (Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee, 2000: 174). Could this occur even if it is not intentional? This research suggests that at Telecorp Services the “sacrificial HR strategy” might occur naturally, mainly due to the high emphasis on productivity and the free market culture of this call centre. Thus the high turnover (churn) in this call centre may be an unavoidable by product of the obsession for productivity at all costs. While this idea is not specifically raised by Wallace et al in their research on sacrificial HR strategy, they do ask just how widespread this strategy is (Wallace et al, 2000: 183). More widespread research might lend support to this question, that sacrificial HR strategy is the norm in many call centres, even if conversely managers don't want it to be.

A further line of research could involve interviewing people who have left call centres. I found accessing call centres a difficult task and the freedom to gather essential data even more so. I was particularly grateful for this call centre in allowing me the opportunity to access their offices and received a

great deal of co-operation and assistance. Certainly there were no restraints placed on my discussions with staff, but at the same time it did not provide the same freedoms that interviews with former staff out of the workplace would have. This would be an interesting alternative research perspective on the call centre phenomenon. I suspect it would provide a valuable source of information if done correctly.

This call centre perceives itself to be quite advanced in comparison to others. Certainly working conditions are undoubtedly superior to other businesses in this growing industry. The predominant use of temporary or part time workers, or running a “feminised” workforce with the view to keeping wages suppressed is not evident here. Staff are also well supported with regards to their difficult workloads, with access to health care and support mechanisms. They also receive assistance with career development and training as well. Equally importantly, the staff have a working environment that is both ergonomically and spatially of high quality. The atmosphere of the office is far from repressive and clearly not in keeping with the representations of some industrial literature regards call centres. However, people persist in leaving, a situation that this call centre appears to be struggling to find answers for. To an outsider the reasons seem obvious and are clearly related to the obsession with productivity. In response there is continual staff turnover, as people leave to move elsewhere, while those that remain either find promotion or other branches of the industry. It appears that the strategies managers have in place are not solving the problems of resistance and this alternately impacts on the call centre. If managers think these strategies are working then perhaps the system is to their liking. Or perhaps they are fooling themselves.

TradeNZ is currently still advertising for call centre business. Yet as has been demonstrated in this research, call centre work does have some strong

disadvantages. As my friend Cheryl discovered, call centre work is not always permanent. She also remarked that the work was controlling, stressful, tiring and that the turnover rates were high. I recall her saying that no one lasted more than 18 months in a call centre. My impression was that she was happy to leave. Yet this is the type of work New Zealand's Government and business is pursuing. Telecorp Services meanwhile is a call centre that prides itself on having quality facilities and a strong service culture. It sees itself as a call centre far superior to others. Yet interestingly the same themes as raised by Cheryl, appear to be prominent here. If call centres are any thing to go by, then in the new economy, the role of the market is having more influence on peoples working lives than ever before. Proponents of call centres argue that call centres are good places to work. This, however, is clearly a debatable. Yet for New Zealand in the 21st century one thing is certain. Hegemony is calling. But who is going to answer?

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