Job Design and Wellness in New Zealand Contact Centres: A Paradigm Shift or Same Old Management?

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of

Master of Business Studies
Human Resource Management

at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Karen-Ann Boyte
2009
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................. 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................ 3

ABSTRACT ..................................................................................................................... 4

1. INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................... 6

   1.1 DEFINING A CONTACT CENTRE ............................................................. 6
   1.2 DOMINANT MODELS OF CALL CENTRE MANAGEMENT .............. 7
   1.3 MASS PRODUCTION MODEL ............................................................. 8
   1.4 MASS CUSTOMISATION OR HIGH COMMITMENT MODEL .......... 9

2. WELLBEING IN CALL CENTRES ......................................................................... 11

3. WORK DESIGN AND WELLBEING ..................................................................... 16

4. AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH .................................................................................. 29

5. 5. METHOD ........................................................................................................... 32

   5.1 SAMPLE .................................................................................................. 32
   5.2 PROCEDURE .......................................................................................... 32
   5.3 THE QUESTIONNAIRE ........................................................................... 33
   5.4 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS .................................................. 38

6. RESULTS .............................................................................................................. 40

   6.1 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS ................................................................. 40
   6.2 JOB CHARACTERISTICS WITHIN PARTICIPANT CALL CENTRES .... 42
      6.2.1 Timing Control/Method Control (Autonomy) .............................. 42
      6.2.2 Feedback ............................................................................................. 42
      6.2.3 Task Variety/Role Breadth/Boundary Control ............................. 43
      6.2.5 Skill Utilisation/ Variety ................................................................. 45
      6.2.6 Participation in Decision-making ................................................. 46
      6.2.7 Job Design and Management Practice ........................................ 48
      6.2.8 Turnover and Absenteeism ............................................................ 53

6. DISCUSSION ........................................................................................................ 54

8. STUDY LIMITATIONS ........................................................................................... 65

9. CONCLUSIONS ..................................................................................................... 66

10. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE IN CONTACT CENTRES .... 67

11. FURTHER RESEARCH ......................................................................................... 68

12. REFERENCES ...................................................................................................... 70

13. APPENDIX ............................................................................................................ 83
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing a Masters Degree while working full-time is challenge. This challenge was overcome through the support of my partner Stuart, my daughter Rachel and a very supportive Chief Executive, Keith Tempest.

Professor Stephen Legg was a wonderful supervisor and although we have never actually met, provided great guidance and humour during the research and writing of this thesis. I thoroughly enjoyed working with him. You are very good and easy to work with, much appreciated.

Thank you also to the Trustees of the Mary Mallon Memorial Scholarship for providing me with a scholarship to complete my Masters Degree. Your confidence in me was also a huge motivation, when at times I thought I would or could never finish this!

Finally I would like thank my TrustPower work colleagues who have been very supportive of this project. In particular I would like to thank Fiona Smith, Gillian Jackson and Jenna Barnes who generously provided their network contact lists and also paved the way for me to approach them to participate in this research.
ABSTRACT

The impact of the Contact Centre workplace upon employee satisfaction or wellness is attracting the attention of researchers across the globe. Over 10 years of research has resulted in recommendations about how Contact Centres should be managed and how the jobs of Contact Centre agents should be designed. There is growing concern that the current practices result in significant psychosocial risk factors which are ultimately harming the Contact Agents and less obviously the bottom line of their organisations through emotional exhaustion, stress, employee absenteeism and turnover.

The aim of this study was to explore whether Contact Centre managers were aware of these recommendations, in particular those relating to the design of motivating, satisfying and “healthy” jobs. Using an expanded Job Characteristic Model, this descriptive study explored the level of awareness of New Zealand Contact Centre managers (n=20) regarding the recommendations about the design of jobs, and what changes, if any, have occurred as a result. Where changes have not been forthcoming, the study explored the constraints which were preventing or limiting change.

The results of this study indicated that there is a low level of awareness of the research recommendations, that approaches to improving the management and design of Contact Centre agents roles are ad hoc, and that there is a level of resistance in providing agents with autonomy to manage their day to day roles. Some efforts to increase task and skill variety have been made but these are also ad hoc rather than built into the job.
As a result of this study, it appears that Contact Centres in New Zealand are still adopting a mass production model of management.

This study has implications for Contact Centre managers and senior organisational managers, these are discussed. Limitations of the research, implications for Contact Centre Managements are highlighted and areas for further research are highlighted.