CALL CENTRES, RECENT HISTORY – WHERE HAVE THEY COME FROM AND HOW DID THEY GET HERE?

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review literature relevant to telephone call centres in order to provide readers with an understanding of the recent developmental history of call centres and answer the questions *what are they?'* and *'how did they get here?* This will be achieved by drawing upon three broad and diverse categories of information: a representative selection of texts written on operational, technical and human resource related issues; journal articles in refereed publications; and, a review of the main stream and 'trade' media reporting of events effecting call centres which will, in the instance of the latter, principally focus on items gathered from Internet sources.

2 Call Centre texts

Most texts written on this topic originate from the USA and are intended for the practitioner/manager. These books take a practical approach to the management and operation of a call centre (CC), providing advice on a range of topics including the history and development of the CC as a provider of information and services within the in tertiary sector of the economy, usually considered in conjunction with a definition of what a CC is and does. (Cleveland and Mayben 1997; Dawson 1999; Read 2000; Dawson 2001).

Read extends this discussion to ponder the origins of the term now commonly accepted to apply to CCs: '"Call Center" is a foundation phrase – one that describes an object when it is created, becomes established, and is in widespread use' (2000, p. 14) and offers some criticism of other terms which have been proffered by authors to describe the CC

'I stay away from other attempt-to-be-evolutionary phrases for call centers, such as "contact centers" and "customer interaction centers." ... Contact centers sound a little too personal, like someone poking me in the arm. "Customer interaction center" is too

nebulous, too touchy-feely, like New Age group therapy sessions. I talk, e.mail and text-chat with someone, and that's how I refer to these functions – not "contact" or "interact." I simply want to talk to someone about a problem I may have with my dial-up Internet connection, or simply send an e.mail to find out when those luminescent garden gnomes will arrive to complement the pink flamingoes outside my home office.' (Read 2000, pp. 14/5)

The previous quote, as well as illustrating the lack of agreement which exists on a commonly accepted term to describe CCs, typifies the tone taken by authors in the texts reviewed for this paper.

Read also indicates that the title given to the positions of operators is as contentious a topic as the name for the centre itself. ' There is also no agreement on what companies should title their employees that work in the call center. Some of the more common terms used include "account representative", "agent", "customer care specialist," "customer service representative," "help desk rep," and "telephone sales representative," often known by their abbreviations: "AR" and "CSR" and "TSR." (Read 2000, p. 15) Other titles have been chosen by Australian CCs. The Centrelink organisation, for example, uses 'Customer Service Officer' (CSO) to describe the role of contact operative in their CC network.

A distinction is draw between types of CCs on the basis of the orientation of the primary nature of the contact made with the CC. This contact has been broadly categorised into 'inbound,' 'outbound,' and 'combination' types of CCs.

Inbound Call Centres generally respond to caller inquiries by providing information, services and access to products, (Gable 1993; Cleveland and Mayben 1997; Read 2000) although Dawson also believes that inbound CCs are actively involved with telemarketing. (1999)

Outbound Call Centres generate calls to 'customers' with a focus on sales or telemarketing on behalf of a parent organisation or on a contract basis for client businesses. Sometimes outbound CCs provide information to target publics as an active element of an awareness campaign on behalf of private and public sector organisations. (Bodin 1998; Dawson 1999; Read 2000) In speculating about an outbound CC in the year 2005, Dawson speculates that: 'On the outbound side, nothing will change. Calls will be downloaded to the agent from the list processor just as they are today. The predictive dialing engine will either be a fully integrated component of the switch or an application residing on the network.' (1999, p. 125)

Combination Call Centres concentrate most often on answering inbound calls but may, at short notice, make outbound calls when capacity is available or in response to a specific

campaign. Help desk services often fall into this category of CC.(Bodin 1998; Read 2000)

Beyond broad definitional and descriptive aspects of CCs such as those considered above, most texts are structured around a discussion of the three core topics of technology, people and performance. Technology-based subjects are principally centred on explanations of the telecommunications infrastructure and computer hardware and software employed within the CC (Gable 1993; Bodin 1998; Dawson 1999; Read 2000; Dawson 2001). People, at 'agent' and supervisor levels, are discussed within the context of recruitment, selection, training, motivation and staff turnover (Gable 1993; Bodin 1998; Read 2000). Forecasting and reporting of performance results and subsequent analysis of data and monitoring of agent/caller interaction are key themes within this topic area (Gable 1993; Cleveland and Mayben 1997; Bodin 1998; Dawson 1999; Dawson 2001).

Exceptions to the above selection of issues and extensions of these subjects are common and include discussion of the following topics.

An exploration of the organisational need for a CC function and alternative models of service provision to CCs. (Read 2000)

Leadership and management, particularly where this translates into improved CC performance. (Cleveland and Mayben 1997)

The concept of Customer Relations Management (CRM) as related to CCs. Dawson describes the term 'In general, it's the art and science of making customers happy. In practice, it's a relatively new category of software that combines front-end customer interactions with all the customer data lurking behind the scenes throughout the company.' (2001a, p. 177)

Dawson devotes a number of chapters considering the CC as a component of a global industry. He identifies regions such as Asia, the Pacific rim and India as growth targets outside of the USA, Canada, UK and Europe. (1999) In this section he also gives voice to an industry response to articles written in the UK which identified CCs as sweatshops of the 21st century. These articles will be specifically considered in the next part of this paper.

Discussion of the Internet and the use of e.mail as a communication medium with CCs is addressed by both Dawson (1999), and Bodin (1998) in terms of the challenges these media present for the provision of effective customer service.

Under the banner of extension of technology, Dawson includes a chapter in his text discussing the integration of videoconference technology into the telecommunications mix available for CC use. (2001a)

Outsourcing of the CC function to contractor organisations and the considerations which should be addressed in implementing and monitoring this strategy. (Dawson 2001)

As a final topic, and as a contrast to the guidance provided on the location and establishment of CCs, (Dawson 1999; Read 2000; Dawson 2001) Read discusses CC shutdown and closure strategies to reduce the impact of the termination of operations on communities. (2000)

Disappointingly little attempt has been made by authors reviewed in this section to consider group or team dynamics as an active influence on CCs.

3 Call Centres as represented in journal articles

Unlike the literature reviewed in the previous section, there is a balance of academic interest in CCs emanating from the both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Researchers in England, Scotland, Ireland and several European countries, and, to a lesser extent, Australia and Asia, have all contributed articles on a variety of topics associated with CCs. A distinguishing feature of these works is the alignment of themes with authors in certain countries. For instance, it seems that the dominate interests of writers from the USA is similar to the texts reviewed in the previous section originating from the same area; with an emphasis on the impact of change on staff in CCs, (Smith 2002) marketing and customer communication strategies, (Anton 2000; Pontes and Kelly 2000; Eveleth and Morris 2002) customer satisfaction, (Feinberg, Hokama et al. 2000; Feinberg, Hokama et al. 2002) benchmarking, metrics, productivity and performance, (Blanchette n.d.) a subject also pursued by industry professionals and scholars in Canada (Miciak and Desmarais 2001) and Asia (Tschang, Chuladul et al. 2002). An attempt will be made in this section to review articles in clusters associated with their dominant theme. In so doing, the national origin of the particular study or the author will be identified to provide the reader with an insight into the international nature of the research into CCs.

A working paper which is typical of the interest in customer service and the correlation to technology and people, prepared at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the inter-relationship between the elements of people, processes, IT and service delivery. (Everson, Harker et al. 1999) 'Managerial implications' suggesting that the work environment is a more important factor in determining employee turnover than wage compensation is juxtaposed with revelations that lower staff turnover positively influences customer retention. These findings alone are of significant interest to financial institutions, as the authors state that the cost of attracting new customers is five times greater than the investment required to retain them. (Everson, Harker et al. 1999)

The contribution from European authors is typically focused on topics which discuss the impact of the CC environment on the worker within the CC.

Arzbacher, Holtgrewe and Kerst explore industrial relations in and around CCs, the management of internal flexibility through personnel policies, and CCs in their regional (German) context. (2000)

Performance measurement seems to be a theme which is never too distant from any discussion of CCs, regardless of the ultimate perspective of the participant. One facet of this debate concerns the management of uncertainty in call centres using poisson mixtures to model queueing theories and Erlang's formula to determine staffing requirements is a subject which occupied the attention of Jongbloed and Koole, (2001) two researchers from the Netherlands, who developed an approach which draws upon the Taylorist roots of scientific management, to most efficiently manage the workload of a CC.

French author Peaucelle also identifies the strong association between Taylorism and CCs however, he discusses this connection in a different context. (2000) In identifying the theoretical origins of CC management objectives, by drawing a comparison between the work in a CC and large-scale factory-based mass production of the mid twentieth century, Peaucelle lays bare the underpinning force behind the prevailing management obsession with monitoring, metrics and performance as a relentless endeavour to extract the maximum amount of work effort from each CC agent.

> Two objectives characterized Taylorian industry: efficiency and increases in quantities produced. These objectives are coherent with the ultimate objective of profit maximization so dear to company CEOs and neo-classical economic theory. One is concerned with unitary profit, while the other is concerned with the extent of production beyond which profit is realized. The magnitude of profit is derived from the combination of the two. These two concepts are merely the setting in operation of a more general concept, that of profit. They help guide choice in daily operations. (Peaucelle 2000, p.456)

Not surprisingly CCs have been identified as stressful place to work, (Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Knights and McCabe 1998; Peaucelle 2000; Ruyter, Wetzels et al. 2001; Mulholland 2002) a condition Peaucelle ascribes to the pervasive role played by computer information technology. 'Moreover, computers, which are meant to help them do the work more efficiently are also extremely merciless monitoring tools.' (Peaucelle 2000, p. 461) Further, he has also recognised the impact that Taylorian principles, applied at an extreme level, have on working conditions generally and industry staff turnover rates, specifically.

Scottish author, George Callaghan, also argues that Taylorism, particularly as applied to white collar work in an 'industrial office' context by Leffingwell and Galloway, in the early years of the twentieth century, has found a place in the 'modern' organisation represented by CCs. (Callaghan 2002)

Stress in CCs, and variations on this theme, represent a common topic accessed by many authors on CC topics, particularly in the UK. In this respect, opinions are also seem divided on the degree to which CCs represent a source of 'evil' in society, at least in terms of the exploitation of workers and the provision of oppressive working environments.

At one end of the spectrum, the most caustic vilification of CCs is displayed in Fernie and Metcalf's paper which consolidates the view that CCs embody the most extreme and negative features of modern workplaces. (Fernie and Metcalf 1998) In extending Peaucelle's allusion to Taylorism, images such as 'the "tyranny of the assembly line" is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony', and '... describe call centres either as the new sweatshops or dark satanic mills', are conjured up and developed to condemn these workplaces. Their vitriol also draws upon metaphors from the farmyard likening CCs to 'battery farms', and offices where 'individuals sit in tiny pig pens'. (Fernie and Metcalf 1998, p. 2) The most acerbic criticism however, is reserved for the exertion of management power through monitoring of CC agent activities. Here Fernie and Metcalf invoke analogies to incarceration and omniscient scrutiny.

Call centres are therefore the archetypal organization to represent Foucault's (1977) application of Bentham's Panopticon to the workplace. "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell... a worker... They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible... Visibility is a trap... Each individual is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication... this invisibility is the guarantee of order... there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect... power should be visible and unverifiable." 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."' (Fernie and Metcalf 1998, pp. 8/9)[1]

This article represents a surprisingly bitter indictment of CCs, particularly as the expressed intent of the paper was to collect data on the compensation systems employed by firms in UK call centres. Without doubt, Fernie and Metcalf's perspective has attracted support from some authors however, it also has its critics, even amongst those who maintain their own, less than flattering commentary, on this 'new' category of organisation.

The most vociferous amongst the critics are Bain and Taylor, Scottish academics, who roundly deride the perspective stated by Fernie and Metcalf. (Bain and Taylor 2000)

> 'Fernie and Metcalf's influence, sustained by both articles and press releases, has persisted. This article builds on earlier work by seeking to present a throughgoing critique of the positions put forward by Fernie and Metcalf. We believe that there is powerful justification for adopting an explicitly polemical approach, principally because, in securing extensive publicity for their perspectives, these authors have gained a wider audience for a mistaken representation of essential characteristics of the call centre. Not only have they erected a simplistic and false model which ignores the complexities of the employment relationship and the labour process, they have committed an equally serious error in underestimating, even eliminating, the potential for, and actuality of worker resistance... it is clear that the kind of surveillance Fernie and Metcalf associate with the panopticon simply does not exist... A careful reading of Fernie and Metcalf's research findings demonstrates profound flaws in the argument that the electronic panopticon has perfected supervisory power.' (Bain and Taylor 2000, p. 3 & 6)

Even Fernie and Metcalf's previously mentioned reference to the 'tyranny of the assembly line' is categorically dismissed by Bain and Taylor as being 'quite outlandish, abandoning any sense of historical accuracy... It is absurd to compare conditions in even the most oppressive and target-driven call centres in the 1990s with those on the early assembly lines.' (Bain and Taylor 2000, p. 7)

Bain and Taylor further claim that Fernie and Metcalf have not achieved their goal of analysing the accuracy of payment systems either.

> It is important, though, to emphasise that their key article is essentially a study of payment systems, specifically an examination of the accuracy of predictions made using the 'new economics of personnel' (NEP). It is based neither on a broad survey of call centres nor on an empirical investigation of work organisation and the employment relationship. Inflated generalisations concerning surveillance in call centres (dubbed the 'New Sweatshops') are grafted uncomfortably onto detailed study of payment systems. In

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[1] This passage is included as it appears in Fernie and Metcalf's work, deletions from the original work quoted by the authors are of their insertion.

It would be incorrect to interpret the robust vigour of Bain and Taylor's condemnation of Fernie and Metcalf's position as unqualified support for working conditions within CCs. They adopt a patently pluralist Industrial Relations (IR) perspective in providing extensive analysis of the internal dynamics of working conditions, the activities of trade unions in CCs and the emotional commitment workers make to their contact with callers. (Baldry, Bain et al. 1998; Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain 2002; Bain and Taylor 2002; Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002)

'Emotional labor,' a term posited by Hochschild (1983) to describe the personal investment of emotions by an individual into their work; for example, through expressing empathy with customers experiencing difficult circumstances, and the concomitant necessity to separate their own reactions to the caller from the exchange; has achieved a currency with authors on CC topics beyond the original contextual application, to the situation experienced by airline cabin crew. (Knights and McCabe 1998; Taylor and Bain 1999; Houlihan 2001; Callaghan 2002; Mulholland 2002; Taylor, Mulvey et al. 2002)

Another article providing insight into stress in the CC workplace is provided by a collaborative work, combining perspectives gained in Europe and the USA, by Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg, who collectively consider how stress is induced into the roles of supervisors and leaders within CCs. (Ruyter, Wetzels et al. 2001)

Mulholland, from Belfast, Northern Ireland, concentrates on the issue of gender in assessing the extent to which emotional labour impacts on the ability of agents to establish and develop supportive team relationships in a CC environment. The author also discusses the competing pressures with which CC management contend; that of performance monitoring and the nurturing of a supportive, team-based CC culture. (Mulholland 2002)

Houilhan, provides a perspective derived from the study of management in Irish CCs. She considers the role of managers within the context of the competing pressures that exist in CCs, described by her as: 'Call centres are centralised, concentrated, routinised tele-based operations particularly associated with the reengineering of services, communications and sales channels.' (Houlihan 2001, p. 209) Houlihan adds her voice to those of Bain and Taylor in suggesting that:

A further difficulty with the critical literature is that its contribution has been largely side-tracked by the monitoring and surveillance issue and addressing and identifying evidence of resistance to reject the "totality of control" argument. This rhetoric stems from the

metaphorical associations with "big brother", the Panopticon etc., yet researcher after researcher has demonstrated that for call centre agents, monitoring is not a primary source of concern.' (Houlihan 2001, p. 209)

A variation to the management focus in CCs is provided by another writer from Northern Ireland, who compares the influence of 'production-line' and 'empowered' approaches to management on call centre workers. (Gilmore 2001) Gilmore's examination again exposes the fundamental dichotomy which exists in CCs to scrutiny; that is the apparent opportunity cost between outright productivity on the one hand and customer/caller satisfaction and service quality on the other, as measured by a range of tangible and intangible metrics.

The final cluster of topics considered by British authors, while embracing associated issues in its compass, is essentially grouped around the theme of Human Resources (HR).

Steering a less controversial path between the sometimes caustic debates surrounding monitoring and surveillance, imposed/induced stress and IR, Kinnie and his colleagues, discuss the 'best fit' between business strategy and employment practices in CCs. (Kinnie 2000; Kinnie, Hutchinson et al. 2000; Kinnie, Purcell et al. 2000; Hutchinson 2001; Kinnie, Purcell et al. n.d.) Kinnie also categories the HR approaches taken in CCs into three types: 'Low commitment, little flexibility' which offer sales focused, highly scripted, simple task focused jobs, most likely to be automated by voice recognition systems; 'Some commitment, little flexibility' characterised by multi-skilled CSRs, some training, basic employee involvement, job security for permanent staff and limited career structure; 'High commitment, high flexibility,' provide an environment of limited use of scripting, less focus on performance measurement, personal relationships with customers, performance pay and high employee involvement. (Kinnie 2000, p. 35)

The degree to which these features of CC can be generalised throughout an industry, across national borders, between organisations and from workplace to workplace has not yet been fully assessed however, a limited scale, multi-national study, prepared by academics from Australia, Hong Kong, England and Japan, has been published. (Frenkel, Korczynski et al. 1998) In this study, general findings on the extent to which bureaucracy pervades the CC environment by comparing working conditions between CCs in selected countries are derived from qualitative research conducted in CCs located in USA, Australia and Japan and a more extensive survey of 'customer service representatives' (CSRs). (Frenkel, Korczynski et al. 1998)

> This paper has focused on work, employment and control relations among customer service representatives in call centres... the images of these kinds of workers vary from the deeply pessimistic (the de-skilled, wired worker) to the strongly optimistic (the empowered, semi-professional). We found that neither was a fair representation and that a

complex hybrid form of work organization existed which provided for both routinized and customized responses, in effect giving CSRs limited discretion. (Frenkel, Korczynski et al. 1998, p. 975)

In a study published in 1994, Winslow and Bramer pondered what the life of the then emerging concept of an 'information worker' would be like in the future. (1994) In one of the few studies which have cast the career of a CC agent in a positive light, Winslow and Bramer accorded agents the status of 'empowered semi-professionals. (1994) In an accurate portend of the future, information technology was seen to provide the necessary resources to identify and meet the needs of the customer. (Winslow and Bramer 1994) Frenkel et.al. noticed that in speculating on the 'congenial physical working conditions, job designed for interest and challenge, teamwork and participation in task- related decision-making' which 'semi-professional, front-line employees' enjoyed that Winslow and Bramer did not anticipate the reduction of many CC jobs to the part-time, highly scripted, stressful, scrutinised and isolated experience encountered in many CCs. The closest approximation to Winslow and Bramer's model has emerged, somewhat surprisingly, in countries with developing call centre industries, particularly India and in the Philippines. More will be added to the description of CCs and agents' working conditions in these countries in the next section.

Each of the broad themes identified in the above discussion as representative of the research effort focused on CCs, emanating from various regions of the world, is generally reflected by the efforts of Australian authors.

Wallace and her associates expose the recruitment, selection and termination strategies employed in some Australian outbound CCs to scrutiny and conclude that deliberate decisions have been made to 'burn out' CC agents, through the provision of a target-centred, task-focused, sales-oriented environment, in order to achieve a high staff turnover, thus ensuring a free flow of fresh 'talent' and enthusiasm through the organisation on the CC floor. Wallace et.al. also talks of the high stress levels induced through these management practices. (Wallace, Eagleson et al. 2000)

Still considering HR, Holland explores the tension created when the dichotomous perspectives of HR (unitarist, management) and IR (pluralist, trade union) are encountered in an Australian CC environment. (Holland 2001) Holland also recognises the pressure applied to trade unions in their attempts to represent workers in the CC industry, by organisations prepared to relocate to other regions within Australia and to 'outsource' CC business to other countries. (Holland 2001) (Kinnie, Purcell et al. 2000b) The latter trend will be referred to more extensively in the following section.

The subject of service quality and customer loyalty generated by CCs occupies the attention of Dean. (2001) Dean found that the gender bias toward the employment of women in Australian CCs, as did Callaghan (2002) in his subsequent UK study, is based on the belief by management that women bring certain undefined desirable qualities to the communication exchange with callers to the CC which assist in the promotion of customer loyalty. (Dean 2001)

The Centrelink organisation provided the canvas on which a picture of public-sector, CC customer service provision was painted by Bennington and her associates. (Bennington, Cummane et al. 2000) This work compares the appropriateness, advantages and disadvantages for the provision of service by telephones through CCs generally, and the Centrelink CC network specifically. (Bennington, Cummane et al. 2000)

Of keen interest to this thesis is the concept of group development and, to a lesser extent, team dynamics. No distinction is made between the two concepts in the references consulted in this review, in fact, there is an almost universal concentration on, and acceptance of, the term 'team' to describe structural elements of CC organisations. There is little profit to be made from determining the difference between definitions of the terms as all teams are groups in any case. The author accepts that where teams and teamwork are mentioned in articles that this also refers to groups.

In contrast to the largely negative perceptions of CCs visited in this section, a range of images gathered from the main-stream, 'popular' and trade media are juxtaposed and summarised in the next section.

4 Call Centres as represented in the global mainstream and 'trade' media

In this section the reporting of news and events in CCs, the preserve of the journalist and trade practitioner, will be reviewed to provide an insight into the most significant issues buffeting CCs internationally. The range of articles considered appear in professional journals/magazines, (not usually subject to peer review), and include the product of newspaper, television and Internet web-site coverage of CCs. For the most part, due to the extent of the information reviewed, summaries of topics will be included rather than a more comprehensive review of each item. Of necessity, a more comprehensive discussion of all topics encountered is outside the scope of this review and only the most relevant topics to the subject of this thesis are discussed.

A useful summary of topics occupying the attention of the industry media during 2002 was presented on the CallCenterOps web-site. 'A year of difficulties, consolidations, cuts

closures and opens (sic). It is 2002 in review. Previous years were dominated by new and exciting technology possibilities. This year was managing the bottom line. It was a no-hype year driven by controlling costs and ensuring profitability.' (CallCenterOps 2002) The five issues identified reflect the broad compass of media attention on CCs across the world. They were, in order of precedence:

1. **Consolidations, cuts and closures** and the impact this had on causing redundancies in the industry for workers and managers. The scale of closures was significant, often impacting on large CCs with consequent job loss measured in the hundreds in some centres. Downsizing of operations also featured prominently.

2. **International Competition and Migration** was a trend that reinforced the major theme for 2002. 'There were many examples of companies that moved their call center operations from their home location to a distant shore. The competition by governments and local authorities to attract call centers was intense. Governments continued to provide attractive tax and training credits to lure a call center thousands of miles away from where it was based. It is all about controlling costs. Companies continued to shift work to places where labor is less expensive.'

3. **Outsourcing** Centre operators identified outsourcing as an extension of the move to reduce costs and maintain profitability.

4. **Stricter Telemarketing Laws and Practices,** particularly in some regions of the United States, had a profound impact on outbound, telemarketing activities, imposing a stricter requirement to observe privacy conditions of the target customer base on the CC operator.

5. **Customer Service** was discussed as a tension which centres experienced as a result of cost pressures. An indicative quote was that 'service could be better if the bottom line was better.'(CallCenterOps 2002)

Interestingly, the attempts by some of the more 'entrepreneurial' operators to circumvent the privacy laws, introduced by some states (referred to in point 4 of the summary above) quickly resulted in a move by some operators to transfer their CC activity, either by closure or outsourcing, to other states or countries, often Canada and India. This met with a swift rebuke by US President Bush in 2003 in the form of legislation which extended "do-not-call" registries nationally and covered interstate calls. (ICCM 2003; Sunnucks 2003; Hovanyetz 2003a; Hovanyetz 2003b) This move, and legislation passed by eight US states to protect jobs, resulted in the reactivation of CCs abandoned only a short time previously and the repatriation home of some US CCs from India. (Herald 2003; Telegraph 2003)

This volatile episode in CC history in the USA underscores a number of more general features which characterise CC operations. Most importantly, it illustrates the potential mobility of CC infrastructure and separates the CC from the more Taylorist contention of CCs as a factory assembly line and the concomitant notion of 'capital' as a fixed element of the factors of production introduced by authors in the previous section. It shows how governments at state and national level, at least in the USA, are willing to pass laws to regulate the industry and respond quickly to measures designed to circumvent them. It indicates that the propensity of some operators to physically transfer or outsource their operations and the regard for labour as a commodity, to be exploited for the financial advantage of the operator.

Governments in Australia, the USA, UK and Canada are also active in offering tax-based incentives to induce CC operators to locate or migrate to a particular location. (McLaughlin 2002; Edwards 2003) Not all government sponsorship of CCs is free from controversy though. The Welsh Development Agency recently received criticism for a decision to invest almost A$8.5 on a new CC building without having already attracted an operator to the facility, (BBC 2003a) and in the South African city of Johannesburg, the council invested R43-million into a new CC facility. (Ndlangisa 2003) Cameron identifies some of the incentives commonly offered by state governments in Australia to attract CC business. 'The main incentives generally given are: payroll and land tax refunds, stamp duty refunds and cash grants. Cash grants are usually linked to long-term performance. States such as Queensland, Tasmania and South Australia are currently very open to call centre building. Wagga Wagga and smaller areas like the Shire of Melton in Victoria are also currently promoting themselves as desirable locations for call centres.' (Cameron 2000, p. 32) Local government also manipulates building development processes to entice the location of new CCs when a shortage of suitable available space is experienced. (ContactCenterWorld 2002a)

In the state of New Mexico in the US however, a different story has emerged, with the declaration by the Economic Development Secretary that 'the time had come for the state to look for other job creation opportunities. "I'll be candid with you: We need to get out of the call center business"... CCs are 'a "double-edged sword" that keep the state's average wage steady and employ people throughout the state, but do little to move New Mexico towards a more vibrant economy.' (Anderson 2002)

It is easy to understand why governments of all political persuasions are keen to support the establishment of CCs within their areas of influence. In the UK, two per cent of all workers are employed in CCs, twice as many as in any other country in Europe. (Womack 2002) CC employment is expected to increase by 50 per cent over the next five

years and reach 470,000 by 2007. (Womack 2002) In Australia, Kjellerup observed moves to improve service levels through an increase in public-sector CCs.

> 'At the same time politically on all levels of Government a sustained push to provide better service levels at lower cost dominated the agenda with some remarkable results. The Agency (now known as Centrelink), the ATO Customer Service Centres, The Brisbane City Council Call Centre are some of the noteworthy initiatives. State sponsored Call Centre Development Offices was (sic) set up to attract call centres.' (Kjellerup 1999b)

The impetus behind the establishment of CCs in metropolitan areas is tempered by a reduced incentive for 'out-migration,' caused by wage pressures, of CCs from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to 'small, remote and high-unemployment rural communities, and regions (like Tasmania)... Companies in Australia have also found that high agent quality and skills, such as Asian language proficiencies, are difficult to secure outside the largest cities.' (Read 2002c, p. 4)

Efforts are also in progress across the Tasman to capitalise on the many advantages offered by Australia's near neighbour. Read observes that New Zealand is emerging as a challenger to Australia's status as preferred CC destination in the region.

> English is the other Asia-Pacific language. While India, the Philippines and Malaysia are the low-cost leaders, New Zealand is worth considering to serve English-speaking customers. Similar to Canada's advantage for US-serving call centers, New Zealand has sophisticated telecom infrastructure and excellent training. Its population possesses the strongest cultural affinity of Asian nations to Australians and other English speakers. And according to an April 2002 KPMG study for Investment New Zealand, per-workstation operating costs are 27% lower than in Australia.' (Read 2002c, p. 6)

Asia-pacific countries, particularly India, the Philippines, New Zealand and China, have been identified as 'low-cost' locations for call centres to serve the US market, with 65 per cent of the Asia Pacific's regional CCs located in Australia. (Read 2002c) However, it is also noted that the number of Australian CCs dropped five per cent in 2002 from 2001 as a consequence of consolidations even though the total number of seats increased to by 12 percent to 135,000 during the same time frame. (Read 2002c) The adoption of IVR and other technologies also saw the number of transactions rise by 25 per cent from 2001 to 2002. (Read 2002c) Other survey-based research confirms an annual growth rate in 2002 of 11.7 per cent with expectations of this rate being maintained during 2003. (ZDNet 2003)

The development of IVR technology is intrinsically tied to growth in productivity and the quantum of transactions processed in CCs. Considerable caller frustration with earlier IVR systems has been reported. (Kjellerup 2000a) Others report continued frustration

with more recently developed products despite greater levels of caller experience with IVR systems. 'Most people zero out of IVR menus... because they get frustrated or they can't remember which was the right option.' (Myron 2003) Other problems experienced by cutomers, culminating in a condition termed 'phone rage,' (CRM 2002) induced by waiting in seemingly endless queues generated by IVR systems. (Kjellerup 1998a; Kjellerup 1999a; Kjellerup 2000a; BBC 2002f)

Voice Recognition (VR) technology has been heralded within the CC industry as the 'next big thing' in service provision and productivity improvement, eventually leading to the replacement of IVR systems. (Mills 2003; Myron 2003) While considerable flaws were evident in early efforts to recognise callers' voice requests, considerable effort has been invested in overcoming these limitations, to the extent where the latest VR products can adapt to variations in accents, a significant issue in Britain. 'There are too many regional accents in regional Britain... In the short journey from Coventry to Derby, for instance, you encounter more variations in accents than if you crossed Australia. (Booth 2002) Telstra has installed an easily accessible application of VR technology in Australia to assist agents fielding directory assistance enquiries.

VR software has also been applied to the task of call monitoring for 'quality management processes' in order to 'automate, streamline, and improve their call center operations and quality management processes.' (Schneider 2003c) According to Schneider a particular VR product, recently introduced to the market, '... automatically "listens" to recorded calls and understands the content by recognizing the agents' and customers' words, phrases, and tones... Contact center managers can have calls sorted... according to the call center business rules and needs... filtering rules like "dissatisfied customers," "customers requesting a supervisor," "agent was confused," and "agent interrupts the customer." It also allows a business user to establish new business rules according to their specific needs... managers can record calls and quickly analyse agent performance based on keywords and phrases and how the customer reacts, without listening to the entire call.' (2003c)

VR software applications usher in an era where monitoring of call quality and agent performance becomes automated. It would seem to present a significant new development, particularly when it is considered that the full context of a call may not necessarily be considered in evaluating an interaction. The potential to increase stress levels for agents in these circumstances would seem to be considerable.

Not surprisingly, the issue of call recording and monitoring is a vexatious topic. Union response to call recording was swift and attempted to prevent members from being subject to monitoring using this means. As an example, the Community and Public Sector

Union issued the following authority to its members employed in call centres in Australia:

1. Manually block all calls being recorded.
2. In case a team leader overrides the block, ask each customer 'Do you want this call tape recorded?'
3. Take National stoppage action in the event that Call Recording is used to either discipline a CPSU member, or members are disciplined for participating in the authorised actions in 1. or 2. above. (CPSU 2000)

Kjellerup acknowledges that unions often have a valid cause for concern regarding the use of call monitoring citing the 'bad management practices in many call centres resulting in high staff turnover and low morale does give good grounds for concern how Call Centre management will use recording of Calls to further mismanage staff. The high staff turnover indicates, that there are many Galley Slave Call Centres and Toxic Call Centres out there.' (Kjellerup 2001a; Kjellerup 2001b) The 'Galley Syndrome is typified by 'The constant pressure to answer more calls with less people (and) has given us the Age of the "battery call centre"... Currently the worst Galley Slave Call Centres are: Airline reservations, Credit Card Customer Service & Telco's. Mind you, all aren't that bad, but most are driven by call traffic numbers & not **call outcomes.**' (Kjellerup 1998a) In describing the conditions prevailing in the 'Toxic' call centre, Kjellerup claims that these are 'a place you work to make enough money, so you can leave. High staff turnover and sweat shop mentality are key symptoms whereas the underlying cause (sic) are best summed up as <u>bad management practices</u>... Specifically the worst run call centres are Call Factories, so named because the entire focus is on handling as many calls as possible in as short as time possible without any regards for call outcome.' (Kjellerup 1999a) The key characteristics of these CCs are:

1. Disregard for the potential of staff. Use of terms like 'agents' to dehumanise people. Burn-out accepted as inevitable cost of a tough job. No or little training to improve communication & relationship skills of reps.
2. Lack of strategic vision for the Call Centre and how it adds-value to the organisation paying the operational cost. Call factory measurements substitute for meaningful benchmarks which could help senior management relate to the value created in call outcomes.
3. Management role is that of enforcement rather than coaching & skills development.
4. New Technology viewed as the only way to improve productivity. (Kjellerup 1999a)

He balances these observations by offering a number of points defined as 'good practices' for use of call recording, and tips on how to introduce a coaching culture in CCs. (Kjellerup 1998a; Kjellerup 2001b)

Other Internet sites also allude to the Galley Slave Syndrome while emphasising the need to develop a principled call evaluation strategy. 'Alas unless you formulate a Call Evaluation program such recording machines will only become yet another whip in the hands of the Galley Slave Master and will further deteriorate CSR (customer service representative) morale and productivity.' (Kjellerup 1999c) The original purpose of recording calls, to provide a lasting record of transactions is explained and extended to include lists of 'Do's and Don'ts' of call recording. (Kjellerup 2000b)

McLean distinguishes between practices in the best run CCs in the UK and those where performance is less impressive. 'Britain's top call centres aren't the sweat shops some might have you believe, but conditions still need to be improved if employers want to attract more workers to the industry... working conditions aren't as Dickensian as is popularly believed, although things still aren't perfect.' (McLean 2001)

Perhaps victory, albeit partially, has been declared too soon. The image of the CC associated with factory production is a persistent and compelling one. ' For the most of the past century, the factory floor offered a path upward for Americans short on education. But millions of "good" manufacturing jobs have fallen victim to automation and global competition, leaving many low and semi-skilled workers to turn to a 21st century replacement: the telephone call centre.' (Knowledge@Wharton)

McDowall also draws upon the analogy of the CC as a substitute for factory employment in predicting that the number of CC jobs in the UK is in decline from 300,000 people in 2003 to 220,000 workers in 2004 as the more repetitive, lower order work is outsourced to India by firms operating principally in the financial services and insurance industries. (McDowall 2003)

Trade unions, particularly in the UK and Australia, play an active role in attempting to improve working conditions for members employed in CCs. As Bain and Taylor indicated in the previous section, workers are not without some power in the employment relationship however, rates of unionism in public sector CCs tend to be higher, and unions consequently more involved, than in private sector operations. There is little published information on the role played by trade unions in CCs, if any, in countries such as India, the Philippines and the USA however, a British trade union sent a delegation to investigate working conditions in Indian CCs in March 2003. (Farrell 2003)

Unions have been most active countering issues emanating from 'sweat shop' CCs. One practice receiving particular attention is the monitoring, and sometimes limitation, of access to toilet breaks by some employers. A legal loophole in UK legislation insists on one hand that employers must provide toilet facilities but on the other, there is no

compunction to permit workers to use them when they need to. (Richardson 2003) Taken to an extreme, one CC apparently told employees that whoever attended the toilet most would be made to wear a disposable nappy and sign a book indicating how long they spent at the toilet. In another, workers were required to put up their hands like schoolchildren before being able to relieve themselves. (BBC 2001a)

Unions representing CC workers in Australia recently celebrated two landmark legal decisions when the full bench of the Industrial Relations Commission recognised CCs as a general industry for the first time, and also granted significant improvements in pay and conditions. (Robinson 2003)

There appears to be a clear distinction between the conditions experienced by employees in CCs, determined principally by the type of work performed. Where higher order skills which take time and training to acquire there seems to be more emphasis on quality of service to the customer. In situations where workers provide a routinised, highly structured and often scripted, contact with customers, it seems that labour is less valued and opportunities are taken by CC operators to locate to areas of low wage cost, often associated with a large employment pool. In some situations, workers can be confronted with demands to reduce their wages by 25% or lose their jobs to other regions; (BBC 2002e) told by bank CEOs that they were not as good as Asian workers; (2002; King 2002; BBC 2002c) and call strike action in an attempt to prevent their jobs being relocated to India. (Star 2002; BBC 2002b; Mail 2002b; BBC 2002d; BBC 2002g) In many situations, Unions have found themselves powerless to counter the fluidity of capital in this industry and effectively assist members to preserve their employment security. (Mail 2002b)

For many workers, a CC remains a stressful environment, and while the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in the UK 'dispelled the view that all call centres are sweat shops... many staff reported their work was very stressful' (BBC 2001b) The Cape Times likened CCs to 'a cauldron of pressure' where 'Outbound calls are automatically dialled for the operator while inbound calls are automatically answered. With some of the newer technology, the voice greeting is standardised and computerised. This means that an operator has to be perpetually ready to take the next call. "It is a highly pressurised environment and people are busy throughout the year." (Times 2003) Interestingly, the same article also redefines the term 'active listening,' often employed to describe a set of skills in the context of face-to-face communication, to describe the skill of 'speaking with a client and be able to transfer that information to a PC simultaneously.' (Times 2003)

As a balance to the reporting of the negative features of CC employment, articles also consider a range of strategies designed to improve the prospects and working conditions

of employees. The hallmarks for building of morale in CCs have been identified as 'The centers with high agent morale have high levels of real teamwork, where each agent contributes to overall performance; a highly supportive management; "flexible" agents, who move easily among different tasks and projects; genuine interest in customers on the part of agents; and an environment that doesn't burn agents out.' (McCulloch 2003) Management responsibilities identified in improving morale include'... re-engineering work operations to build a more team-oriented, less individualistic workflow, and to reduce stress. Other actions might include changes in management practices to foster a highly supportive culture for agents. (McCulloch 2003) Teamwork as a key focus for achieving a CCs mission statement is emphasised by Ruby who also establishes links to effective workplace management forecasting and scheduling practices in empowering staff. (Ruby 2003) Other prescriptions for empowering CC workers include 'an interactive and accelerated induction program; a management aspirations programme, Best Call Ever initiative and technical aspirations programme,' and recognition 'that successful career management is not always about "climbing the ladder" but can be about broadening skills, experience and expertise.' (Mail 2003) Ballard adds cross departmental career pathing, recognition and reward, provision of training opportunities and exit interviews conducted with those agents who choose to leave, as methods which can assist with reduction of staff turnover rates, (2003) while job rotation is seen as an effective method of reducing staff boredom. (Bryant 2002) Improved workload forecasting is also perceived to make a positive contribution to the creation of a less stressful, quality focused working environment for CC agents by ensuring adequate staff availability, minimising abandoned calls and meeting caller requirements. (Cleveland 2003)

Educational qualifications, recently being made available in the area of CC activity, are perceived to be another means of improving the career path and longer-term retention of workers within the industry. Diploma level qualifications have started to be offered as a formal complement to College-based programs. (Cronin 2002; Gallagher 2002; ContactCenterWorld 2002b) In Australia, the TAFE system offers similar courses and some universities are developing offerings suited to CC managers. On-line training in both technical and customer service skills is emphasised within the CC industry in the USA, (CallCenterWorld 2002; Dawson 2002; Times 2002; Read 2002a) and in-house or on-the-job training also prevalent. (Muraskin 2002)

The initiatives described above would seem necessary to stem the annual staff losses from CCs. In the UK, turnover rates for workers in CCs increased from 22% in 2001 to 25% in 2002 even though wages increased 4.6% during the same period, (Beck 2002; Lancashire 2002; Scott 2002b) although other reports pitch the 'churn' rate much higher at an average of 32% annually, particularly in CCs where the prevailing philosophy is 'pack 'em in, stack 'em high and drive them hard.' (Clark 2002) The Australian

experience is different in that the rate of staff turnover is reducing over the comparable time period though from a similar base measure, (22% in 2001 down to 16% during 2002). (Bryant 2002) It is estimated that the cost to the industry of staff turnover at 16% is $500 million a year, representing $12,500 to prepare each new worker to the standard of the person they replace. (Bryant 2002) In the US, turnover rates have been discovered to range from less than 10% to close to 500% per annum with an industry average in 2002 of 32%. (Robb 2002) In India, a country with one of the fastest growing CC industries in the world, CC operators have reached informal agreement not to poach employees from each other in an effort to reduce the 35% attrition rate experienced there. (Standard 2003)

Some of the additional factors contributing to the high rates of staff turnover experienced in the CC industry have been identified as 'poor hiring practices, sloppy testing, inadequate training and mismanagement.' (Robb 2002) Other investigations conducted in Australia return to the theme of stress induced employee burnout due to unreasonably high workloads. One person interviewed claimed to have taken between 500 to 800 calls in a days work. (Barrell 2000) Boredom is also cited as a reason for staff leaving CC work. (Bryant 2002) The design of the physical working environment can also have a significant impact on the satisfaction of employees' basic health and safety needs. (Byers 1999) The amount of ambient sound in the CC, (Barnes 2000) and varying degrees of privacy (Byers 1999) have also been identified as significant issues with which agents have to contend. 'The most serious problems with distraction from productive work are caused by overheard conversations.' (Barnes 2000, p. 56)

Surprisingly, some CC operators welcome high staff turnover rates. Carver claims that real benefits accrue when CC staff move to other areas of an orgnisation. 'Two years ago we had a 100% turnover rate. Last year and this year to date it's running at 60%.' (2000) Bryant cites Giovanna Savva, who manages an office products supplier's CC in New South Wales, as endorsing the organisational 'training ground' role that CCs can fulfill claiming that 'our print services and marketing departments built their support teams from our call centre... we don't find this a problem as we are training our staff to understand all areas of the business.' (Bryant 2002)

Despite the numbers of people retained within the wider organisational context, 21% of Australian CCs report difficulties in being able to recruit sufficient numbers of suitable staff. (Bryant 2002) One survey in the UK suggested methods to counter the recruitment and retention needs of the 45% of firms who encountered staff shortages has been to target pensioners as prospective employees. 'Call centre employers are saying that they are targeting older workers as they have life experience and are much more aware of customer service. Many say that the downside is that older people take longer to train as

much of the basics of the technology is new to them, but once they do learn they are loyal and effective employees. (HRGateway 2003)

In much the same manner as CCs explore ways to reduce staff turnover, they also investigate the retention of customers. As a consequence, the topic of Customer Relations Management (CRM), and the role CCs play as a component of the process, occupies the attention of many trade magazine and Internet web-site articles. A sample of the subjects addressed include: a basic explanation of the concept of CRM and related concepts, (2000); customer 'churn' rates, (CRM-Forum 2002a); the link between CCs and customer loyalty, (Schineider 2002); the impact of staff job satisfaction on customer service, (Compton 2002); looking at why CCs fail to provide adequate customer service, (Kjellerup 2001c); how to resole customer complaints, (Kjellerup 1998b); an overview of industry research for CRM and Internet CCs, (Kjellerup 2000c); and, speculation about the form the next generation of technology will take in shaping CRM and CCs, (Wee 2003).

CCs are a popular topic for reporting in the main-stream media, particularly where the opening of a new centre heralds the creation of new jobs in a community. The 'birth' of a CC is reported with equal relish regardless of whether it be established in Ipotseng, Botswana to respond to questions on HIV/AIDS, (News 2002) or a paging service operating from Malta. (Malta 2003)

The expansion of services is almost as newsworthy as new centres being commissioned in the USA with most states benefiting from CC employment growth. (Haug 2002; Collier 2003; Larson 2003; Ogles 2003; Snyder 2003; Whelan 2003) The view from across the border with Canada is similarly imbued with positive expressions towards the economic advantages of the establishment of CCs. (ContactCenterWorld 2002d; Lyons 2003)

Echoing the close association of the growth of CCs with the demise of traditional industrial base, Wales has encouraged CC development in areas where mining previously dominated as the primary employer. (Smale 2002; Mail 2002a; ContactCenterWorld 2002c; BBC 2003b; BBC 2003b; ContactCenterWorld 2003b; BBC 2003c) This trend is reflected in Scotland where CCs are welcomed as a replacement employer for the shipbuilding industry, and in the north of England where the decline in the manufacturing sector of the economy has been keenly felt. (Milnes 2002; Armstrong 2003; Herald 2003; ContactCenterWorld 2003a) Northern Ireland has also experienced significant growth in the CC industry with most new activity centred on Belfast. (Drury 2003; Telegraph 2003; BBC 2003d) Large-scale locations are set to double to 40 by the end of 2003. (CRM 2003) Despite this, south of the border Ireland continues to attract considerable attention

as a preferred destination from larger, trans-national entities. (Clabaugh 2002; Murphy 2002)

The Philippines is emerging as a desirable destination for CC activity outsourced from the USA. The main advantage offered to operators comes in the form of lower wage costs than the comparable worker in the US, comparative political stability, a population familiar with US culture which can speak Americanised-English, a perceived advantage over key rival, India. (Ong 2002; Garrido 2003; Oliva 2003; Tenorio 2003; Viray 2003a; Viray 2003b) Canada has long provided a haven for CCs primarily servicing the US market where language, culture and time zones are all closely aligned. (Read 2003; Schneider 2003a)

A number of international airlines have been attracted to South Africa as a CC destination. (CallCentres 2001; CallCentres 2002) The main attractions offered to these operators stem from the availability of suitable telecommunications infrastructure, German speaking and multi-lingual sales representatives and a shared time zone with Europe. (Kjellerup 2001a; CallCentres 2002; BBC 2002f) Wage costs however, while being lower than European standards, are almost double the rates paid to CC workers in India. (BBC 2002f)

Other countries with strong and developing CC industries, spurred on by rapid economic reform and growth, principally catering to the needs of their domestic populations, are Korea, (Herald 2003); China, (Mu 2003); Panama, (Hovanyetz 2003c); Mexico, (ContactCenterWorld 2003c); Qatar, (Peninsula 2003); the United Arab Emirates, (Menareport 2003); New Zealand, (NBR 2002); and, Malaysia, (Melayu 2003; Star 2003; Utusan 2003) . Bold predictions have been made forecasting 20.2% compounded annual growth in the Philippines, and 18.6 % in Malaysia with even higher rates in store for India. (Nair 2003b)

India's CC industry is acknowledged as the fastest growing in the world, (Hearts 2002a; Hearts 2002b) expanding at an annual compound growth rate of 42%. (Hearts 2002a; Hearts 2002b) Many organisations have favoured India as a provider of CC services when outsourcing business from organisations, initially in the UK, but increasingly located in the USA and, to a lesser degree, Australia. (Shanker 2002; Devadeep 2003; Service 2003a; Service 2003b; Nair 2003c) The advantages of availability to a population of a highly educated, English speaking workforce combined with wage rates 25% of those paid in the USA or the UK are powerful attractions in favour of the Indian CC industry. (Devadeep 2003) The locations within the country which best feature these characteristics, and can overcome some of the limitations imposed by telecommunications infrastructure which can be inconsistent standard in places, are

concentrated in New Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Kochi, Calcutta, and, most significantly, Mumbai. (Ravichandran 2003; Ravichandran and Mahalakshmi 2003)

Like the Philippines, many Indian academies, colleges and CCs provide training for their employees in the process of 'enculturation' in order to better understand customer from the country with which they are dealing. (Garrido 2003; Viray 2003a) This can extend from the merely superficial, such as adopting an Anglicized name, watching American or British television shows and attempting to imitate accent and slang expressions (Harrison 2002; U.TV 2002) or studying the weather in the UK, (McGivering 2000) to structured lessons designed to acquaint agents with US geography and time zones, mind set and culture. (Knowledge@Wharton) In recent times, Australian companies responding to approaches from Indian companies to outsource CC work have created a new segment in the training régime for the Australianisation of CC agents. Variations to the 'enculturation' theme include the use of the video The Castle to expose the agent to the 'Aussie' vernacular. (ABCTV 2003)

The political instability experienced between India and Pakistan over the disputed Kashmir territory has tarnished its image as a desirable CC outsource destination to an extent where some British companies evacuated staff during a period of peak tension between the countries. (Fletcher 2002; Quest 2002; Schneider 2003a) Instability beyond India's borders caused by the recent war in Iraq has also caused uncertainty and a slowdown, albeit temporary, in CC business. (Gadhavi 2003) Indian call centres have fallen victim to the move by a number of US states to protect jobs in the USA. (Telegraph 2003) Not content to lose CC business however, and building on the knowledge acquired in a relatively brief period of time, some Indian CC operators plan to open their own CCs in the USA, (Fruaenheim 2003; Service 2003d), and provide Spanish language services to the North American markets from Mexico. (Nair 2001; Reuters 2002; Service 2003b)

Movement of CCs across regional national borders reflects a mobility of capital facilities which distinguishes this industry from manufacturing with which it has been often compared. The ability for technology to be migrated to different locations has had dire consequences for labour in countries where the perceived cost is high, and advantages for some regions benefiting from the relocation of jobs in these intensive sources of employment. It is ironic in the era of global free trade that CCs, once hailed as a saviour of the unemployed in the USA and UK, should now be abandoning these workers, as operators take advantage of the mobility of capital resources in this industry, by exporting jobs in the search for lower factor cost for labour.

There are two facets to this phenomenon; closure of CCs and consequent loss of jobs and the transfer of jobs with few restrictions, often across regional and national borders, to

places that offer a superior economic environment to CC operators. Read identifies a number of factors which drive both closures and relocation of CC activity.

> The benefits of outsourcing customer contacts to a domestic service bureau – low operating costs, quick ramp up times, and ease of adding and dropping programs, services and markets – are substantial. The benefits are still greater when outsourcing to an offshore company.

> Outsourcing offshore can save 5% to 8% in Canada, and 10% in Mexico for Spanish-speaking Americans, compared with domestic outsourcing. The percentages jump to an eye-popping 20% to 40% when outsourcing to India, the Philippines and South Africa.

> The higher offshore savings stem from lower wages and reduced turnover. That translates to less hiring, staffing and training expenses, plus fewer productivity lags as new agents are brought up to speed.

> According to Geri Gantman, a senior partner at Oetting and Company (New York, NY), annual turnover rates are just 5% to 10% in India and the Philippines compared with 50% to 100% in US outsourced call centers. (Read 2002b)

As a balance to the generation of new CC activity addressed above, the evidence of CC closure and relocation through the process of outsourcing will now be presented.

In the UK, those regions which experienced the most spectacular growth in the CC industry during the mid to lat 1990s, have been the hardest hit through closures and outsourcing. In many respects, the industry in Scotland has been a victim of its own success. The initial attractions of the 'Scottish accent... the availability of a quality workforce, close proximity to company headquarters and government financial assistance' were insufficient to sustain it in the longer term. (Tinning 2003) As CCs thrived, more labour was required, shortages of suitable employees arose along with increased wages required to diminish the shortfall. Before long operators responded by seeking lower labour cost alternatives elsewhere. The outcome has been that many outbound, direct marketing, routine and lower skilled jobs, typically in the financial services and insurance industries, have been relocated to India. (Chisholm 2002; Murray-Watson 2002; Fraser 2003; Hannah 2003; Wilson and Simpson 2003; Simpson and Wilson 2003a) One trade union representing CC workers, Amicus, even sent a fact finding mission to India in an attempt to stem the flow of jobs from Scotland to the sub-continent. (Farrell 2003)

Similar stories are writ large in the recent history of CCs in Wales and the Midlands of England. Despite assurances to the contrary from some CC operators, (Griffin 2003) and evidence that three in five CCs had taken on new workers during 2002 and expected to do so again in 2003, (BBC 2002g) the picture was bleak for many CCs. Numerous reports

confirmed India as the destination of choice for much UK CC activity, (Evening-News 2002; Sims 2002; Yapp 2002; Zientek 2002; Scott 2002a; BBC 2002b; ContactCenterWorld 2002e; BBC 2002h) with South Africa also appearing as an alternative. (Evening-News 2002; BBC 2002h) India and South Africa are also favoured by CC operators outsourcing Irish CC business according to Senator Joe O'Toole who claims "There is no future in call centres for the next Ireland. Our future is in research and development, new products and new markets." (Mills 2003) Unfortunately, such a positive a view was held across the Irish Sea. A number of Welsh CCs were closed outright and the jobs lost entirely. (BBC 2002k)

In a widely reports and controversial move, British Telecom, the former government owned telecommunications carrier, is dispensing with 2,200 jobs in closing 53 smaller CCs in conjunction with the opening of new facilities in India. (Hirst 2002; Fluendy 2003; ICWales 2003; Simpson and Wilson 2003b) Union representatives were left lamenting the consequences of the job relocations. (Smart 2003) "The introduction of these changes will in many cases cause enormous problems for members, their families and their communities. We believe the company has obligations to its people which it cannot ignore. This is a huge company with social obligations." (BBC 2002a) It would seem that CC workers in the public sector had no friends in government either. Following BT's move, Britain's National Rail indicated that it will move 300 CC jobs to India by the end of 2003, Thames Water, Britain's major water supplier and Powergen, a major electricity supplier, also joined British Airways and the Prudential and HSBC financial services organisations in exporting jobs to India. (Herald 2002; Express 2003)

A slightly different set of circumstances caused the closure of a Canadian call centre during 2002 in Ottawa. Shades of Bentamesque images of call centres as prisons conjured up by Fernie and Metcalfe were quite literally realised in three Canadian jails where inmates were employed to provide market research services. The programs were terminated by the government despite an audit by KPMG which determined positive correctional value and minimal safety risks. (Lunman 2002)

As the country with the largest number of CCs in the world, it is to be expected that the USA would be an obvious target for outsourcing of services and consequent relocation/export of jobs. A more complex mix of circumstances prevailed in the US though. While outsourcing of services and consequent relocation of jobs did account for some closures of CCs, with India and the Philippines being the most popular locations, (Morphy 2001; DuPlessis 2003; Schneider 2003b) although Russia and China also received attention from some CC operators. (Goldstein 2003)

Allied with outsourcing, general organisational cost-cutting, also forced the closure of some CCs, (Albright 2003) and realignment of organisational strategy was a determining factor behind other CC shutdowns. (Goins 2003; Smith 2003) Reliance on technology to replace the human factor played a major role in the loss of 2,300 jobs in one company in the CC industry and also contributed to the closing of at least one other CC facility. (Dugan 2002; Schriener and Dooley 2002) National legislation, following on the initiative by some states in the US, also condemned the jobs of many low-paid CC workers in the outbound, telemarketing segment of the industry. 'While that might be good news to those who love to hate telemarketers, somebody on the other end of the phone line is going to be out of a job.' (Adams 2003)

CCs have risen, fallen, and otherwise been subjected to the vicissitudes of the economic downturn experienced in the US economy. The recession in the sector has been identified as a direct contributor to the cessation of CC activity in a number of instances, (Athens 2002; Cook 2002; Puget-Sound 2002) possibly also featuring in the bankruptcy of some CC operators. (Peterson 2003)

5   Conclusion

In providing this insight into the recent history of CCs, three sources of reference have been reviewed: the published texts, which principally proved advice for the CC manager from a practitioner's perspective; journal articles which highlight a strongly expressed divergence of opinion between schools of thought, either developed around the view that CCs are essentially prisons entrapping powerless workers and subjecting them to constant, computer facilitated, scrutiny, or the still negative perception that CCs are the contemporary equivalent of the Taylorist factory, a modern day industrial battleground where workers organise to avoid the more punitive repercussions of employer monitoring and surveillance; and, the diverse range of comment reported in the trade and main-stream media focused on the issues of new CC openings, CC closures, outsourcing of CC business across internal borders, the impact of legislation in the USA effecting telemarketing practices and, finally the role of technology in shaping the way CCs perform their function of customer service.

The implications for Australian CCs, the subject of exposure to the global industry milieu, are for outsourcing of services on the basis of cost, in both the public and non-government sectors, to specialist CC providers who may offer the service from locations distant to the population whose needs are being met, increasing use of voice recognition technology to interact with 'customers' on some level as part of the process of contacting a CC. Each of these measures point towards, in economic terms, a reduction in value of 'labour' as a factor of production as a consequence of the unprecedented international

mobility of 'capital', in this case technology, to take advantage of the abundant 'enterprise' and 'land' available in other countries to minimise overall cost of service provision.

Against these 'big picture' issues, unions have found themselves largely powerless to assist their members, especially in the UK, due to low industry levels of union membership, particularly in the private sector, and the difficulty experienced in effectively countering transnational investment patterns and relocation of jobs.

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