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# Dial 'B' for Burnout? The Experience of Job Burnout in a Telephone Call Centre

Josh Healy and Tom Bramble<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

*High rates of labour turnover in the call centre sector are, in the view of some commentators, indicative of widespread employee 'burnout'. However, few studies have formally investigated the frequency or antecedents of job burnout for this particular group of workers. This paper presents the results of a case study, undertaken within the call centre of a large Australian public-sector utility firm, which explores workers' experiences of job burnout using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Our results support earlier claims that call centre workers are at least as susceptible to burnout as workers in other occupations that have previously been considered the most 'burnout-prone'. We argue that the experience of job burnout for call centre workers can be largely attributed to the repetitive nature of the work itself, the variability of customer demands, the pervasiveness of managerial surveillance, the remoteness (that is, telephone-based delivery) of customer-employee exchanges, and the performance of 'emotional labour' by workers in the call centre. We discuss the implications of our findings for the literature on job burnout and the future of call centre research.*

## **Introduction**

The academic literature and, increasingly, popular discourse is awash with disconcerting accounts of work exhaustion and the intensification of work (Watson et al. 2003). One term often used in connection with many of these maladies is 'burnout', a condition historically associated with the plight of those who are forced to work too hard, for too long, or who deal intimately, and on a daily basis, with the afflictions, problems and hardships of others (Park 1934; Schwartz & Will 1953; Bradley 1969; Freudenberger 1974). Burnout is a costly and complicated problem that is known to affect workers in many different professions, including nursing, social work, and teaching.

The perspective of burnout that receives the most widespread support in the literature is that of Maslach and colleagues (Pines & Maslach 1980; Maslach 1982; Maslach & Jackson 1984). These scholars summarise the phenomenon as 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work"' (Maslach & Jackson 1986).

Emotional exhaustion is akin to 'compassion fatigue'; it is a feeling that one's emotional resources have been irreversibly depleted (Cordes & Dougherty 1993). At its most extreme, the emotionally exhausted individual experiences feelings of dread or anxiety associated with their work (Babakus et al. 1999).

Depersonalisation, the second burnout component, emerges insidiously as the individual attempts to distance him/herself from the perceived sources of emotional strain, for example through taking extended breaks or using derogatory language to discuss clients (Cordes & Dougherty 1993). A diminished sense of personal accomplishment, the final component, manifests as a perceived decline in job competence, and is often accompanied by a feeling of lost ground or a lack of progress.

There are thought to be two main categories of variables that correlate significantly with some or all of the three components of burnout: work and organisational characteristics, and biographical characteristics (Cordes & Dougherty 1993; Schaufeli & Enzmann 1998; Moore 2000).

High levels of work demand are the most critical predictor of burnout (Cordes & Dougherty 1993; Lee & Ashforth 1996). In particular, interactions with clients determine burnout propensity (Maslach 1982). Role conflict, which results from multiple and incompatible expectations (Kahn 1978), correlates significantly with emotional exhaustion for teachers (Jackson, Schwab & Schuler 1986), nurses (Leiter & Maslach 1988) and service lawyers (Jackson, Turner & Brief 1987), and with depersonalisation for female human service professionals (Brookings et al. 1985). Role ambiguity, which develops when there is insufficient information to perform required activities (Fimian & Blanton 1987), affects diminished personal accomplishment (Jackson et al. 1986). Social support contributes substantially to the experience of all three burnout components (Cohen & Wills 1985; Constable & Russell 1986; Jackson et al. 1986). Co-worker support seems to reduce depersonalisation, while improving the sense of personal accomplishment (Leiter 1991), whereas supervisor support has mixed effects: it enhances employees' senses of personal accomplishment, but can add to emotional strain (Leiter 1988). There is also theoretical support for emotional labour as an antecedent of job burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann 1998).

Employees' biographical characteristics often have complex interactions with their experiences of burnout. Younger employees appear to be more susceptible to emotional exhaustion (Cherniss 1980; Stevens & O'Neill 1983; Anderson & Iwanicki 1984), and older workers 'tend to be more depressed but more satisfied with the intrinsic aspects of their work' (Holman 2002: 46). Women appear more prone to emotional exhaustion, while men are more likely to depersonalise (Schaufeli & Enzmann 1998). Early research found that

burnout is more likely to occur early in a person's career (Maslach 1982; Pines & Aronson 1988), but more recent studies have shown the opposite effect. Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002), for instance, found that longer-serving employees were more prone, not less, to suffering emotional exhaustion.

In our view, three significant gaps in the burnout literature remain. Firstly, and most significant for the present study, only a handful of prior studies have investigated burnout away from professional helping contexts. The assumption that burnout is a professional malady largely remains without strong empirical justification. Secondly, the burnout literature is dominated by studies of employees doing face-to-face work. Little is known about how the experience of interacting with clients via remote means (for example, telephone or email) affects the burnout experience. Finally, the impacts on burnout of managers' methods of organising work and controlling the labour process are not well understood.

We regard call centre work as an ideal organisational setting for overcoming the limitations of traditional burnout research. The call centre presents researchers with a single site open to qualitative study, employees are para-professional rather than professional, work is telephone based, and the labour process is governed by a specific and identifiable style of managerial control. Customer service work in a call centre exemplifies the type of occupation that is thought to be most susceptible to job burnout.

In this article, we set out to investigate three main research questions, through a case study of a single call centre:

- To what degree do customer service representatives (CSRs) working in the call centre experience the three components of job burnout – emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and diminished personal accomplishment?
- How does their exposure to these three components compare with other workers acknowledged as suffering from high rates of burnout?
- What work, organisational, and biographical factors affect CSRs' experiences of the burnout components in the call centre environment?

## **The Problem of Burnout in Call Centres**

For the purposes of setting the scope for this review, call centres can be delineated according to three key criteria. First, employees are engaged in direct contact with customers either through dealing with inbound calls, initiating outbound calls, or regularly performing some combination of these roles (Kinnie, Purcell & Hutchinson 2000). Second, call centres combine telecommunications and information systems technologies in a way that allows employees to interface with customers on the phone, while simultaneously entering information into a specialised computer program. This technological integration is also the basis of the final defining element of call centre operations: they facilitate managerial control over the labour process, through automatic call distribution (ACD), or predictive dialling systems. These systems distribute and set the pace of work, while

monitoring employee performance through real-time statistical displays (Callaghan & Thompson 2002), creating an unprecedented degree of control, which is considered essential to the efficient functioning of the call centre (Kinnie et al 2000; van den Broek, 2002).

The conjunction of these three important attributes is what makes call centres unique. For managers, call centre operations allow for the maintenance of highly structured, cost-efficient work environments, which reconfigure and expand the provision of services to the customer (Callaghan & Thompson 2002). Ultimately, these workplaces can be seen as the embodiment of low-cost production, which, when combined with other 'quality' initiatives, enable service encounters to be differentiated in a way that meets the cost objectives of the enterprise.

Most literature on call centres has been devoted to an analysis of one aspect or another of the work and organisational characteristics of call centres. The early idea that the call centre is an 'electronic sweatshop' (Garson 1988), with the workforce subjected to unremitting and irresistible management control, has given way in more recent research to more modest assessments of the totality of managerial control (Taylor 1998; Callaghan & Thompson 2002). Moreover, the notion that call centres are akin to prisons (Ferne & Metcalf 1998) has since been comprehensively criticised on the basis that this argument is overly deterministic, and too readily neglects the possibility of employee resistance (Knights & McCabe 1998; Bain & Taylor 2000). Indeed, even in environments where work is subject to extensive surveillance, the capacity of managers to elicit the efficient, rapport-building behaviours they desire appears largely dependent upon the degree to which call centre workers perform emotional labour (Taylor 1998). Since this decision remains at the discretion of the individual worker, it is now agreed that managerial control over their call centre employees remains imperfect (Callaghan & Thompson 2002).

Despite the explosion of interest in the call centre environment in management, marketing, psychology, and sociology journals in the past decade, few studies have explicitly and systematically used the burnout construct to explore employees' experiences of the work. Singh, Goolsby and Rhoads (1994) investigate the role of burnout as a mediator between role stress and job outcomes for customer service representatives (CSRs) in a call centre. While noting that *some* strain can be motivating and satisfying (if handled effectively), the authors find that CSRs' experiences of all three burnout components are comparable to, if not higher than, those of employees in other human service occupations. Von Emster and Harrison (1998) substantiate these findings, albeit with slightly weaker reported relationships. In his second major piece on CSRs, Singh (2000) shows that qualitative, but not quantitative, performance is inhibited by the burnout experience. Thus, CSRs who experience burnout are generally able to continue meeting their 'targets', but they do so by sacrificing the finer nuances of their customer service.

Deery et al. (2002) provide a useful analysis of the factors contributing to emotional exhaustion, one of the three, and perhaps most important, components of burnout. They identify job and work-setting variables, social support variables, personal variables, and



demographic variables. The first two of these match quite closely the work and organisational characteristics explored in the general burnout literature. In a survey of 480 staff in five call centres in a large Australian telecommunications company, Deery et al. (2002: 485) find that the most important job and work-setting variables are the quality of customer interactions (whether abusive, demanding, or otherwise stressful), a management focus on quantity of calls taken, workload, task routinisation, promotional opportunity, the average length of calls, and the management of wrap-up time (the time required to enter data following the end of a call). In addition, team leader support has a significant impact on the incidence and depth of employee exhaustion (Deery et al. 2002: 486).

Deery et al.'s findings are supported in other studies of conditions in call centres, which, although not directly testing the phenomenon of burnout or one of its component parts, nonetheless contribute to our understanding of the broad research questions. There is an apparent consensus about the stressful nature of call centre work. Researchers from all perspectives acknowledge that these jobs are typically repetitive, fragmented according to the principles of scientific management, and frequently marked by interactions that place strain on the coping mechanisms of individual employees (Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999; Houlihan 2002). The repetitive, monotonous, intensive, and stressful nature of work in call centres has been repeatedly identified as contributing to negative 'employee well being' (Kinnie et al. 2000; Taylor & Bain 1999; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002; Holman 2002). Pressure to finish calls quickly is a further contributor (Deery et al. 2002), as is lack of control on the job (Holman 2002).

The tight performance monitoring characteristic of work settings governed by automatic call distribution is more controversial, with some arguing that regular developmental feedback and mentoring contributes to job satisfaction (Frenkel et al. 1998). However, Holman (2002) points to the negative repercussions associated with intense monitoring. A managerial focus on quantity at the expense of quality, with the resulting tensions arising from this contradiction, has been identified as a normal characteristic of work in call centres and one which contributes to a stressful working environment (Kinnie et al. 2000; Korczynski 2002).

The phenomenon of emotional labour is frequently cited as contributing to the generally draining nature of work in call centres (Frenkel et al. 1998; Deery & Kinnie 2002). Emotional labour is required because call centre staff are the front-line for the organisation in its relations with customers or clients. This leads to the demand that such staff 'smile down the telephone', leading to an emphasis in recruitment on staff with 'bubbly personalities' (Callaghan & Thompson 2002), particularly women, who are commonly perceived as more adept at emotional labour (Belt et al. 2002).

The 'three-cornered fight' in which the employee, the customer, and the management of the service firm all compete for control over the service encounter (Bateson 1985) also lies at the heart of the high stress and uncertainty experienced by customer contact employees (Leidner 1996; von Emster & Harrison 1998), a group which now encompasses call centre workers as its newest breed. Thus, even when the face-to-face interaction of a

traditional service encounter is substituted by telephone contact, employees may still be subjected to climates of high stress and ambiguity. A crucial party in such 'three-cornered fights' is the supervisor, and, as with burnout more generally, supervisory support (or its absence) affects the experience of work (Frenkel et al. 1998; Deery et al. 2002; Holman 2002).

In summary, a brief review of the call centre literature confirms that the work and organisational characteristics of call centres are such that we might anticipate high levels of job burnout to prevail in such environments. The call centre therefore appears to be an ideal site for exploring the issue of job burnout.

## **The Research Site**

In order to investigate the degree and antecedents of burnout in a non-professional work environment characterised by remote contact with customers and clients, a case study of a single call centre was undertaken for this research. The call centre was established in 1997 and now represents the 'first point of contact' for customers of a large, public-sector utility firm. It exemplifies the 'typical' call centre work environment, outlined in previous call centre research, in every important respect.

The call centre unified the customer contact function of the firm, which was previously conducted from separate branch offices, and offered a cost-effective means of co-ordinating and monitoring staff. Initially, management practices were haphazard, employees were overworked, and rates of staff turnover were high. The arrival of an experienced call centre manager in 1998 brought significant changes, including documented procedures, comprehensive training programs, and an internal career hierarchy. Inside the call centre, posters hang on the walls showing achievements and progress since that time.

However, the functional and financial imperatives that led to the creation of the call centre remain. Its managers face considerable pressure to demonstrate the centre's 'bottom line' contribution to the company. By their accounts, the costs incurred in order to run the call centre (predominantly wages), exceed the revenue it generates. Management's main interest, therefore, is efficiency. The aim is to achieve this without a diminution of service quality or customer loyalty.

Employees respond to a range of customer enquiries. They provide customers with advice about services, complete applications for new accounts, and negotiate the repayment of bills. Each employee is assigned to a team, led by a team leader and a senior CSR. There are 15 teams in the call centre, each of which is physically divided from the next through partitions.

## **Methodology**

There were two stages to our study. First, we asked CSRs to respond to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) – a short, standardised questionnaire that measures the three

components of burnout. All surveys were entitled 'Human Services Survey' to prevent respondents being influenced by their preconceptions about the meaning of 'burnout'. CSRs completed the survey individually and returned their responses personally to the first-named researcher to preserve anonymity.

Means levels for each of the three dimensions of burnout were calculated and compared with the results of prior burnout studies from the literature. ANOVA testing allowed us to determine whether any demographic characteristics – age, gender, and tenure – had significant interactions with the three components of burnout.

The second, more extensive, stage of our research was qualitative. We follow the advice of Handy (1988) who advocates the use of qualitative methods to overcome the paucity of 'rich description' in the burnout literature. First, we conducted several weeks' worth of observation within the call centre (before, during and after administering the MBI), which included sitting in on a monthly staff awards presentation, and talking informally to employees about their reactions to the survey instrument. Observation continued in final passage after responses to the quantitative survey had been returned, to aid in the development of 'probing' questions for subsequent interviews.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews, with actors at various levels in the call centre hierarchy, eventually took place. This included 12 interviews with CSRs, one with a senior CSR, two with team leaders, and one with the operations manager of the call centre. The number of interviews was guided by the concept of theoretical sampling, which involved the deliberate selection of interviewees who were considered likely to either replicate or contradict results procured earlier in the research process. Each interview was conducted privately between a single CSR and the first-named researcher, over a period of two weeks. The physical location of each interview was a small conference room adjacent to the call centre. Each interview was recorded for later analysis, to preserve informants' thoughts and exact comments about the research problem, for later inclusion in the results. Each interview took between 45 minutes and one hour. Two separate interview protocols were used; the first for interviews with CSRs, the second for managers. The format for the senior CSR and team leader interviews utilised questions from each of these separate protocols, which reflected the midway point of these respondents in terms of their place in the organisational hierarchy.

Various pieces of documentary evidence were also used to augment and clarify other sources of information. These included reports of historical turnover and absenteeism rates, organisational charts, training and performance appraisal forms, enterprise agreements, employee pay scales, and exit interviews. Together these documents lent the study a quasi-longitudinal dimension: events that had transpired prior to this study, but which continued to exert an influence on the call centre environment, could be ascertained more reliably than through purely reflective accounts of interviewees.

Our overarching objective, to paraphrase Handy (1988), was to understand the social and organisational structures within the call centre. Our preference was to explore these structures using the survey as the basis on which to develop and interpret our



qualitative work, rather than to derive findings from pre-meditated hypotheses. In making this choice, we are mindful both of the limitations inherent in our approach, and the judgements it embodies. We feel that the reader's comprehension of the many complete relationships underpinning call centre burnout is best facilitated by rich description that uses employees' own words, interspersed with our reflections and comments.

## Results

Seventy-three workers in the call centre responded to the MBI survey (a response rate of 57 percent). The majority were women (82 percent), employees less than 35 years of age (61 percent), and employed full-time (73 percent). This composition is consistent with the young, feminised profile of the call centre industry that other researchers have observed. Forty-three percent had worked in this particular call centre for less than one year, but most (54 percent) had between one year and three years' experience in other call centres.

The mean results on all three components of burnout are shown in Table 1 for the 73 customer service representatives who responded to the MBI. Once the results for the personal accomplishment scale were reverse scored, to indicate the extent of *diminished* personal accomplishment, the mean burnout results for customer service representatives in this call centre were: 2.86 for emotional exhaustion, 2.55 for depersonalisation, and 1.29 for diminished personal accomplishment respectively.

A comparison between these results and those of prior burnout research (Table 1) indicates that the call centre workers in this sample experience relatively high rates of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, but comparatively low rates of diminished personal accomplishment. Of all the occupations shown in this table, only lawyers (Jackson et al. 1987) and childcare workers (Maslach & Jackson 1984) exceed the rates of emotional exhaustion experienced by the call centre workers surveyed in this study. With respect to depersonalisation, the results show that the employees who participated in this study experience mean rates of this burnout component that are second only to those found in a prior study of CSRs (Singh et al. 1994). Finally, on the diminished personal accomplishment scale of the survey, the employees in this study reported an unexpectedly low mean rate, much lower than that for medical residents (Rafferty et al. 1986), lawyers (Jackson et al. 1987), mental health workers (Leiter 1990), and other CSRs (Singh et al. 1994).

A significant relationship between employee age and emotional exhaustion emerged, which is in line with the earlier findings of Maslach and Jackson (1984) and Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998). In particular, the main cause for this relationship was the relatively higher mean score on emotional exhaustion for employees aged less than 25 years. This was the only significant correlation identified in our results. Contrary to Deery et al. (2002) and Maslach (1982), we found no relationship between call centre tenure and burnout, meaning that experienced and inexperienced CSRs had about the same burnout propensity. As an explanation for this, we would contend that a significant factor is the deliberate recruiting of new CSRs who 'match' the characteristics of what management see as the ideal worker

type (a model that we describe more fully in our qualitative analysis, below). We were also unable to find a significant relationship between gender and the burnout components. This contrasts with the findings of Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998), but is consistent with Wharton (1993) and Deery et al. (2002). The large number of female respondents in our sample contributed to this particular result.

**Table 1: Comparison Mean Values for Burnout Components in Prior Research**

	<i>EE</i>	<i>Dep'n</i>	<i>DPA</i>
CSRs (Healy & Bramble 2003)	2.86	2.55	1.29
CSRs (Singh et al. 1994)	2.71	2.64	2.34
Welfare workers (Leiter 1991)	1.93	n.a.	2.50
Mental health workers (Leiter 1990)	1.87	1.03	2.17
Nurses (Leiter & Maslach 1988)	2.00	1.25	1.70
Lawyers (Jackson, Turner & Brief 1987)	2.89	2.41	2.03
Medical residents (Rafferty et al. 1986)	2.34	2.03	2.08
Teachers (Jackson, Schwab & Schuler 1986)	2.04	n.a.	2.23
Childcare workers (Maslach & Jackson 1984)	3.11	1.20	n.a.

Source: Adapted from Singh et al. (1994)

## Understanding the Burnout Process

In what follows we explore some of our qualitative data to help illuminate the structures and experiences that impact on the quantitative outcomes identified above. In line with our earlier literature review, we highlight three particular elements of call centre work that appear to account for CSRs' measurements against the three components of burnout. The first is the repetitive work process, offset by variability in the nature of the work itself (customers with different needs and moods). The second is the mismatch between the rhetoric of quality service and supportive teamwork, and the reality of sophisticated monitoring and statistical adherence. The final factor is the performance of emotional labour by CSRs, a process that is exacerbated by the anonymous nature of their customer contact.

The work of CSRs is repetitive, highly structured, and, as other observers have noted, akin to an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor & Bain 1999). The monotony of the job is closely related to CSRs' experiences of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. The sheer volume of calls that CSRs handle, each separated by only a four-second break, magnifies the emotional demands associated with helping customers. The repetition of their interactions leads CSRs into a position where they feel like they have 'heard it all before'. This makes them more cynical about their customers, which prompts depersonalisation:

You tend to get a little bit of a frame of mind that, when you pick the next call up, as soon as you hear them say: 'I'd like an extension', you're already thinking, and you have to keep it in check, 'oh God, whatever you reckon, here we go again, what sort of garbage are you going to come out with?'

Like many service workers, CSRs are the first point of contact for customers wishing to contact the company, and they deal with an immense variety of customers. While the actual nature of their task (i.e. answering the phone) is repetitive, CSRs must vary their mood, tone and behaviour frequently in order to move seamlessly between callers. It is this process of constantly changing tact and mood through a more or less constant stream of callers that makes the job both mentally and emotionally taxing for CSRs.

In some cases, their customers are genuinely friendly and receptive. This bolsters CSRs' levels of confidence, giving them the impression that their efforts are appreciated, and even offsetting other unpleasant experiences at work. CSRs talked of the challenge associated with getting customers 'on side', and most expressed great satisfaction with those exchanges where they had been successful in doing so. This suggests that customer contact can enhance CSRs' senses of their personal accomplishments. But even when CSRs indicated that they found the task of helping customers generally rewarding, they acknowledged that the job of dealing with customers all day is like being a therapist, having to handle and resolve peoples' problems:

You encounter a lot of people from very different socio-economic groups... a lot of customers do use you as a bit of a sounding board, and a lot of it is not business related... sometimes they just want to have a chat, sometimes they are just feeling lonely sitting at home, and they sort of tell you all sorts of things... it's strange, just talking to faceless people.

Every interviewee recounted stories of having dealt with customers who were abrupt, abusive, or plain hostile to them on the phone. Some customers are just frustrated from waiting in a queue during peak times. People ring the call centre with an expectation that they will receive prompt service, and if this is not forthcoming, which is often the case during peak periods, CSRs may have to expend considerable effort talking to customers and explaining the cause of the delay so that their reason for initially calling can be dealt with amicably. Although this task of quelling customer ire is one that CSRs perform frequently, its cumulative effects are still a potent source of emotional exhaustion for many of them.

Another common theme is that CSRs feel blamed or personally liable for their customers' problems. Several spoke with resentment of situations where they were subjected to personal insults from customers – the very people that they were attempting to help:

You answer the call and you are the face of the company, you are the company as far as they are concerned, and they don't really care what the problem is, you are the person they pay

the bill to, so you are responsible.

By far the most challenging aspect of customer interaction, at least in this particular call centre, is 'debt calls'. These are customers who ring the call centre to request some leniency from the company in the repayment of an outstanding account. The relevance of these calls for employee burnout exists in the fact that customers may plead, even falsify, cases of hardship, in order to earn CSRs' sympathies. While there are procedures covering many of these situations, employees must also use much of their own discretion to judge the merits, and the truth, of each case. This position provides an insight into why CSRs may be motivated to depersonalise their customers for the sake of trying to make an objective decision. The task of discerning genuine facts from manufactured stories frequently calls CSRs' emotional resources into play. Some stated unequivocally, for instance, that they were more affected by, and hence likely to be more forgiving of, cases where children were involved. Their choice is between behaving as a charitable friend, or as a belligerent debt-collector.

A second feature of the call centre work environment that impacts on CSR burnout is the extensiveness of performance surveillance. The statistical measurement of CSRs' adherence to prescribed targets is used to monitor deviations, mistakes or anomalies in employee performance. This is a contentious issue for staff. There is some acknowledgement that the monitoring of their work is necessary for keeping check on the progress of the call centre, and also an important part of rostering for peak periods of demand. There is also some acknowledgement that monitoring may be an important part of engendering customer loyalty to the firm. However, employees express several further concerns. The first is that many perceive an oppressive, 'big brother' in the workplace. The presence of this monitoring inhibits what staff can do with their time. In order to maintain the designated grade of service (GOS) with the minimum number of staff working at any one time, it is essential that managers ensure everyone is 'pulling their weight'. Those employees who are not working quickly enough are singled out. Statistical monitoring therefore gives staff the impression of a constant need to increase the rate at which they are performing their work:

You're looking at your watch all the time, because you have these statistics to meet. Each call, your 'top time' is meant to be less than three minutes, so if you're on a call for longer, bang go your stats. [Managers] put a lot of emphasis on it, because they have to keep the GOS.

The sense of having to deal with more customers, more quickly, is central to CSRs' experiences of both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. There is a constant awareness of not spending too long with each customer; to satisfy managers, they must shorten the length of their calls, and quickly get to the next customer in the queue. CSRs face the burden of meeting all the customers' demands as quickly as they possibly can, without compromising their performance in managers' eyes by digressing into 'overkill'



or 'wastage' time. The essence of the CSR's job is therefore to identify the point at which they have done enough with each call to ensure customer loyalty the firm, but not so much as to jeopardise their statistical targets.

The effect of monitoring on the burnout experience of CSRs, while being substantial in its own right, becomes most salient through interaction with other aspects of the work environment. Foremost among these is the team-based structure of the call centre. Although teams are *intended* to provide CSRs with a sense of membership, belonging, and collegial support, the reality for most workers is quite different:

Some days you don't even get to speak to the other people in your team, because it's so busy. It is like a team, but it's not, because we don't get a lot of time together, and they change them quite often, so you don't get to know anyone too well...it's just you doing your job, there's not a lot of interaction, because you haven't got the time.

The attitudes and approaches of some team leaders further reinforce the impression that statistical compliance is paramount:

If the team leaders weren't so friggin' well concerned about looking good for themselves with the stats...they're concerned that they personally are looking bad because their team's call times are up and things like that. They're so focused on that, they forget that they need to focus more on how to make that happen by building rapport with each other. They are there to keep you together and keep you motivated, and they just don't do that.

The impressions of CSRs were corroborated by other observations made during the research. Team leaders clearly set the tone for those who work under their guidance, and their behaviour is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if the team leader is overly 'stats-oriented', this shapes the way workers respond to the emotionality of their work. On the other hand, CSRs who indicated that their team leaders were not pre-occupied with the statistics, or were more sympathetic to the challenges of meeting them, seemed on the whole to be less overwhelmed by the challenges of working in the call centre.

Team leaders play a further role by assessing the performance of CSRs through 'call observations'. This involves team leaders intermittently plugging themselves into employees' phones to judge the service quality of random calls. Despite their potentially positive function as a source of immediate feedback, these call observations were not utilised with anywhere near the degree of frequency, or effectiveness, that managers claimed. They were sporadic and often ambiguous. For CSRs, they sent a powerful signal that managers in fact value adherence to statistical benchmarks much more highly than customer service. Indeed, the lack of alternate measures of staff performance, which might have served to complement or offset 'hard' statistics like the GOS, undermines managers' rhetoric about keeping service 'quality' first.

Yet CSRs still resisted being merely a vehicle for statistical compliance:

I can only take so many calls, I'm there to please the customer, and I'm not going to cut one call short just so I can get to the next one. When that [alarm] bell rings and there are thirty calls in the queue, it's like a bloody emergency room in a hospital. You can only answer so many calls! You have to go to lunch, you have to have your breaks; the calls are still going to be there when you come back.

The third feature of call centre work that is crucial to understanding CSR burnout is the 'remoteness' introduced by the telephone line. Unlike many service workers, CSRs in the call centre cannot see their customers or respond to their non-verbal gestures. This physical separation fundamentally changes the emotional nature of the exchange between customer and employee. CSRs who had worked in face-to-face environments previously were especially cognisant of the difference. Many of them felt that the remoteness of call centre work makes customers less inhibited, for instance:

The customer is more likely to fight you than they would be at a counter; a customer is more likely to really vent over the phone, whereas they wouldn't want to make a spectacle at a front counter.

But the fact that customers are on the other end of a phone line, and not standing across a counter, also allows CSRs considerable latitude in detaching themselves from the most difficult callers:

You just take a deep breath, and think: 'ready for the next one'. Once you hang up from the phone, they're gone. It's like having an angry box. Like some children can have an angry box, and they do a drawing and put it in there, and the anger's gone, you know?

Employees use the anonymity of the phone line to detach themselves from customers in this way. Of special interest is the apparent blurring of boundaries between what might be called useful 'professionalism', and the more serious, dysfunctional aspects of depersonalisation:

It's a very emotional job. You get yelled at, some people cry if you can't give them extensions, and there are lots of things that you have to deal with. You have to be numb to it, I guess, by remaining as professional as you can.

By far the most common strategy used by CSRs is one of conscious removal from difficult customer interactions. They console themselves with practiced reassurances about how the customer is annoyed at 'the company' or with 'the situation', rather than them personally:

You've got sort of be able to not to take it seriously, and take it upon yourself to think, well,

they're not upset with me, they're upset with the company.

This dissociation technique is inculcated in the company's internal training programs as a fundamental part of maintaining a 'professional' demeanour. Supervisors walk through the call centre reminding staff periodically of the importance of maintaining this emotional distance. In the eyes of team leaders, the CSRs who successfully cultivate this strategic detachment are exemplary – both less likely to encounter difficult customers, and more capable of handling them if they do.

It is not all that surprising, therefore, to find that those CSRs who feel they are *not* depersonalising, also have the impression that their performance is somehow deficient. These CSRs identify detachment as competency, something they need to cultivate or improve:

They try to steer you away from sympathising, which is often very hard. I feel really bad when we have to say 'no' and hang up, because I can't not involve myself. That's something I've got to learn how to do, to step away from it...that's one thing that I have to work on.

Insofar as employees are required to detach their own feelings from the work, the notion of emotional labour provides a useful basis for understanding the experience of burnout in the call centre. In the process of reflecting upon their jobs, some CSRs expressed a desire to respond curtly to ignorant or abusive customers, but also stated the importance of resisting this urge, given the reprimands that would accompany such a reaction, and the need to uphold the commercial interests of the company.

CSRs' alternative to being rude back to customers, therefore, is to engage in emotional labour, by concealing or subverting their true feelings about unpleasant exchanges. Those emotions that are 'hidden' from the customer are then shared with colleagues in the call centre, or relinquished through some other personal processes of emotional 'venting'. Observations made during the research revealed a particularly common phenomenon: employees lower the volume control on their phone during a difficult call, such that the customer cannot hear their voice, and then make slanderous or demeaning remarks to a nearby colleague (see also Taylor 1998). These remarks are usually accompanied by some understanding gesture from the person to whom the comment was addressed, such as rolling the eyes or encouraging laughter. The CSR who is taking the call then resets the volume control on their phone, resumes their conversation with the customer, and continues to finalise the transaction at hand:

It's like abusing someone when you drive along in a car, and they can't hear you, but you feel better. I don't know why screaming at customers when they can't hear you works, it just does...but my boss is always saying 'one day you won't have that mute button on' (laughs).

These sentiments epitomise the depersonalisation of customers. The fact that CSRs

are dealing with their customers via a phone line may explain why these employees experience greater depersonalisation than other types of service workers (Table 1). Since they are physically removed from their customers, CSRs have far greater capacity to openly express their cynicism about customers. The upshot is that to continue effectively with the job, CSRs must become highly skilled in 'surface acting' (Hochschild 1983), to conceal their true feelings.

In addition to providing an emotional buffer, there are further reasons why CSRs are motivated to employ emotional labour. When they portray themselves as friendly and helpful, this behaviour, regardless of whether it is feigned, can actually discourage customers from expressing discontent or frustration:

If you're very nice, and very polite and very approachable then they will be more responsive, and so they won't be as likely to be angry or upset with you.

CSRs' surface acting can thus be implicated in their experiences of (diminished) personal accomplishment. Their ability to dissipate customer frustration or anger can be a pertinent indicator that they are dealing with customers effectively and competently. If CSRs are able to feign emotions that exert a calming effect on customers, they will believe more strongly in their ability to handle difficult exchanges in what they perceive as a professional manner. But the process of regularly presenting false feelings has other repercussions for the burnout experience. As the strategy of depersonalising begins to be employed more frequently and customarily, rather than sporadically, a feeling of emotional 'hardening' develops, and this can extend beyond the working environment into other spheres of social and family life:

I'm very short with people; I'm straight to the point. I've noticed that I'm not as polite as I used to be. I don't have any time for rubbish, I don't really care much anymore... it's terrible; it makes you a harder person.

It is self-evident that this sort of deterioration in employee attitude undercuts the 'quality' outcomes that managers consider essential to the operation of the call centre. Yet many CSRs in fact believed that there were more serious and undesirable personal consequences associated with *not* employing a strategy of depersonalisation. Thus, the essence of burnout is writ large in this call centre: employees shield themselves from emotional harm, in the belief that this will help them to perform more effectively, but in the process they risk exposure, on a personal level, to serious mental, physical, and social problems, that may, in the end, prompt them to exit the call centre permanently.

## **Progressing the Debate over Call Centre Work**

The results of this study are in line with and confirm the findings of the existing literature on burnout (or some of its components) in call centres (Singh et al. 1994; Deery et al. 2002;



Holman 2002). This study, like its predecessors, confirms for the most part the central role played by interaction with customers, workload issues, lack of variety of work tasks, inadequate supervisor support, the focus on quantity at the expense of quality, the pressure to minimise length of calls, and the performance of emotional labour as contributors to burnout, especially emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation.

It is clear that the pressure to meet performance targets impacts directly upon the CSRs in our study, a fact that echoes the earlier observations of Bain et al. (2002). We argue that their relatively high rates of emotional exhaustion come from facing a seemingly endless stream of customers, all of whom are expecting some assistance or resolution to a problem, and that the fact of dealing regularly with often emotionally-charged 'debt calls' plays a major role in this. There is much evidence in our qualitative data to suggest that depersonalisation occurs for these CSRs as they attempt to keep their customers at arms' length, by consciously refusing to assume responsibility for financial hardship or deprivation. Interestingly, we find that when CSRs become proficient at detaching themselves from customers, they also see themselves in a new light; they believe that they have gained a necessary skill, and so their sense of accomplishment and confidence rises. This, we believe, is the best explanation for the quite low rates of diminished personal accomplishment among the CSRs in this particular call centre, as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (see Table 1).

We have further argued that role conflict and the performance of emotional labour accentuate adverse affective responses among the CSRs we studied. Their interactions with customers offered both desirable and unfavourable outcomes, by increasing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, but bolstering their senses of accomplishment. This duality was moderated by customer mood, the number of calls waiting, and team-based responses to the pervasive use of surveillance. While the call centre managers did not see statistical adherence as their main priority, the specification of alternate 'quality' measurements proved elusive, as evidenced by the irregular usage of one-on-one call monitoring. We believe the underdevelopment of qualitative performance measures in this call centre contributed much to fostering depersonalisation and burnout. Moreover, we observed a contradiction between the ways that employees are managed and controlled, and the type of emotional labour required for them to elicit high levels of customer satisfaction, a finding that has support from Kinnie et al. (2000).

Social support, including that provided by supervisors and peers, appears to offset the various sources of emotional strain that act on our CSRs. At the same time, however, it seems to encourage CSRs to depersonalise their customers. In this particular call centre, co-worker support appears to decrease the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment, but also serves to accentuate depersonalisation. CSRs see depersonalisation as a means of internalising the 'realities' of the work, yet successfully detaching from customers gives them a sense of accomplishment. We see this as an important effect, one which has not been identified in previous analyses of the relationship between social support and burnout, and which warrants quantitative

verification through further research.

The contribution of our study is to show that the various work and organisational characteristics of a call centre impact very differently on CSRs' experiences of the three components of burnout. This has not been explored in previous research because other authors have either chosen to focus on just one component of burnout (for example, Deery et al. 2002 isolate emotional exhaustion); studied workers sufficiently different to those we find working in a call centre; or confined themselves to exclusively deductive, hypothesis-driven research. There is, to our knowledge, no work prior to this paper that has attempted to qualitatively explore the antecedents of all three burnout components in the context of a call centre. While some studies have done so in professional contexts, this is the first do so using data collected from CSRs in a call centre.

We feel that the conflation of the burnout construct and the call centre work environment is doubly useful, first because it introduces a well-established organisational behaviour literature to a contemporary industrial context, and second because call centre research continues to grapple with the sector's very high rates of labour turnover. We also feel that our extensive reliance on qualitative data, especially the words of interviewees, helps to build an understanding of call centre burnout 'from the ground up'.

Our work extends Deery et al.'s (2002) useful analysis of emotional exhaustion in call centres. However, we must acknowledge the limits of what we have achieved. There are the usual limitations on generalising from a single case study, a factor evident in other studies of call centres (for example, Callaghan & Thompson 2002). In addition, the research findings are based on 16 interviews and 73 survey respondents, rather short of the 500 survey respondents canvassed in three (Holman 2002) or five (Deery et al. 2002) call centres by other researchers. This means that our findings must be regarded tentatively.

There is clearly much that is still not well understood about the experience of job burnout for CSRs. We have attempted in this paper to provide a platform for further research using the job burnout construct in the context of one call centre, and our findings provide fruitful directions for future studies in this complicated area. In terms of future work, research that attempts to test the validity of our findings in other corporate settings, beyond call centres, would be valuable. Many other workplaces differ substantively from the professional contexts in which most of the research on burnout has been undertaken. Team-based working arrangements, for instance, are commonplace in service jobs, and could be studied further in the context of burnout. Restrictive management practices, and repetitive, low-autonomy jobs are also the norm for many service workers, presenting an immense opportunity to further develop the place of managerial controls and work organisation as antecedents of burnout.

It would also be interesting to juxtapose, possibly in the form of comparative case studies, call centre workers with other service staff who work with customers face-to-face, and not over the telephone. This would provide a basis for better understanding the degree to which the anonymity of telephone contact impacts upon the burnout experiences of service workers. As service jobs become more impersonal through the advancement of

technology and the closure of conventional branch offices, there will be even greater impetus for understanding the ramifications of these changes for those doing service work.

Finally, our work will be instructive for those who proceed to examine call centre burnout in other ways. While we hear much about the employees in this sector ‘burning out’, the dialogue among practitioners is often speculative and generally involves neither the burnout construct as we have conceptualised it here, nor the standardised MBI instrument we have employed. More research is needed on how the burnout process actually interacts with labour turnover. We do not yet know at what point CSRs effectively ‘burn out’ and leave their jobs, or indeed if a common point exists that can be generalised across individuals. Theoretically at least, CSRs can be exposed to all the antecedents of burnout, and even have very high measurements on the MBI, but still remain in their jobs. The decision to exit is contingent upon their personal circumstances (their requisite human capital, for example) and the labour market and economy more generally, which we have not explored in this paper. A significant step towards a better understanding of the burnout–turnover relationship in call centres would be achieved by including ex-call centre employees (that is, those who have left the industry permanently) in interviews or surveys. Ideally this data would be collected at the point of exit (that is, departure interviews). However, we leave the decisions about the practicality and feasibility of this approach in the hands of the scholars who follow us.

## Notes

1. This paper is based on research conducted while the first-named author was a student in the School of Business, University of Queensland. We are grateful to the editors and referees whose comments on an earlier manuscript helped to refine this paper.

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