

Levels of Involvement and Retention of Agents in Call Centres: Improving Well-Being of Employees for Better Socioeconomic Performance

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This study analyzes call centres in relation with their socioeconomic performance. The main problem these organisations have to deal with is the retention of their agents. Management staff underlines the difficulty they have to retain the agents they have trained. Turnover rate is often over 70%. The agents don't wish to stay and don't feel involved in the organization, which impacts on the quality of services. The study explores the factors and the ways to improve implication and retention of agents in this type of organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Call centres appear to be societal subject that does not leave anyone indifferent: as customers, we have all had to be in touch with call centres for surveys or promotional operations, to deal with a problem, modify a flight booking, notify a change of address, etc. People everywhere have to deal with customer services using this organisational model. As Huws (2009) notes, few among us have never complained about call centres. On the other hand, call centres represent an increasing proportion of available employment, and they are contemporary not only in private companies but a model of organisation adopted as well by the public sector (Pupo & Noack, 2009), such as in police departments, division of vital records, NGOs, government services.

This research paper analyzes call centres' functioning in relation with their socioeconomic performance. The major issue in these organisations is to keep their employees on a long term basis, not to have to retrain new ones all the time and also to develop the employees' competencies and thus, offer a better service. Many call centre managers underline the difficulty in retaining the staff. Many such operations have an employee turnover of 70%, which is extremely high. Additionally, obtaining quality service requires the involvement of call centre agents in carrying out their mission. However, their involvement is limited as most do not intend on staying in these organisations because the work is deemed unattractive.

Considering these elements, this paper seeks to understand why there is such a low retention rate, what causes the problems call centre managers have to grapple with and to determine if it is possible to increase the involvement and retention of agents. In other words, we seek to determine if the work conditions that workers move away from are inherent to the job or if some centers do manage to offer

better conditions, if there is a diversity of situations or if all centers manage in the same way and in the end, to determine if it is possible to improve working conditions, develop the involvement of agents and decrease turnover, considering that job turnover is a cost for the organisation, but also a cost to employees who have to look for another job, without always finding a better one (considering their level of qualification).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The following is a definition of the theoretical and methodological framework used in conducting this research.

Literature Review

Analysing the elements of the scientific production on call centres, we identify their characteristics and introduce the interest of our research for the academic debates and research on work organisation and working conditions mainly.

An Increasingly Popular Model

The definition of call centres by Taylor and Bain (1999) is amongst the most commonly used and describes them as “*a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound, or make outbound, telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an automatic call distribution or predictive dialling system.*”

A call centre offers telephone-based services. Customers are delayed in tele-queues (Brown, et.al., 2005). Call centre operations are designed for information delivery, customer service, and sales operations (Houlihan, 2000). Their activities are based on the intensive use of communication technologies (Koh, et.al., 2005).

The number of call centres has seriously increased with the goal to reduce costs in companies (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2006). They represent today a significant proportion of workers in some regions: approximately 1 million people were working in call centres in the United Kingdom in 2003 (Paul & Huws, 2003). The volume of employment is difficult to evaluate precisely because call centres are integrated in the sector of activity of the enterprise or organisation. However, it is recognised they represent a significant volume of employment. Huws (2009) describes a “*callcenterisation*” movement: jobs are organised more and more on the model of call centres. This type of organisation is in development as well in the public sector. Pupo and Noack (2009) analyse the use of a single telephone number in the Canadian administration, which transforms civil servants into call centre agents.

Harsh Management Practices under Bad Press

According to a number of authors (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Knights & McCabe, 1998 ; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Paul & Huws, 2002; Huws, 2009), employment in call centres is generally characterized as repetitive, uninteresting and without future prospects for employees. Work appears to be tightly controlled (Deery & Keenie, 2004). Studies by Zap & al. (2003) indicate that the agents are unsatisfied about the low complexity and variety of their tasks, as well as the control to which they are subjected. Brophy (2006, 2009) notices management practices that can be characterised as abusive and that are regularly attacked in the media and generate action by employee unions.

These images that are broadcasted broadly do not integrate the diversity of call centres that in our view seems to be replacing the stereotypical perception. However, it is unclear if there really is such diversity of call centres or to what extent this diversity exists, as well what relation exists between management styles and the performance of the call centre (Wood, et.al., 2006). As our research shows, there are some call centres that do make efforts to couple economic and social performance, taking into consideration working conditions, as we will show in this paper. Although it is of course not the case of all centers, it is interesting to highlight this diversity to show that bad working conditions are not intrinsic

to call centers, and that management does have an option and can chose to offer better working conditions to agents, something which may increase its retention rate.

Studies on the Link Between Economic and Social Performance

Some research does focus on the link between human resources management and call centre performance. According to Wood & al. (2006) this type of research is attracting more interest. In the same vein, some studies show the benefits of coupling quantitative and qualitative indicators (Brown, et.al., 2005; Robinson & Morley, 2006), and the implementation of management actions to increase the involvement of agents, which decreases absenteeism and turnover. Wood & al. (2006) present absenteeism and turnover rates as performance indicators, but in our view, it is also to ensure more human working conditions that research on this issue is of interest.

Objective of the Research

Our paper thus aims at analysing a certain number of call centers to determine if diversity of working conditions does exist, to determine if some strategies are more beneficial to socio-economic performance and also to workers' wellbeing, and to try to identify the means to increase involvement and retention of agents in call centres.

The research attempts to answer the following main questions:

1/ *What are the problems to which call centers are confronted and which reduce employee wellbeing while increasing turnover rate? and to what extent is the situation the same or different in different working environments?* We will see that involvement and retention are the main issues.

2/ *If the firms seek to correct these problems, what would be the benefits of increased employee involvement and retention?* the objective is to improve the understanding of human resources and work organisation practices in call centers, and try to determine the benefits some might gain from the adoption of better practices, from the point of view of agents and management staff.

3/ *What are the factors that influence involvement and retention?* These questions are extremely important, and lead us to identify the reasons that bring employees to involve themselves and to stay in call centres or, on the contrary, to limit their implication and to leave the organisation.

4/ *What are the levers of change that could favour better working conditions, and thus the further involvement and higher retention of agents?* Given the fact that the call center sector appears to be growing immensely and that many persons find jobs in this sector, it appears important to identify possible solutions to the difficulties that have been identified by some research and this has brought us to not only identify the problems, which have already partly been studied, but to look more into the diversity of situations and to possible solutions for the workers – and firms – in this sector, given that socio-economic performance of firms in this sector is largely dependent on workers, who are central in the work process.

Research Methodology

This section describes the methodology used and the way that the information collected has been exploited.

Methodological Choice

To collect the information for this study, a qualitative approach has been selected, based on semi-directive interviews with managers and agents of several call centres. With the objective to try to integrate call centre's diversity, the interviews have been conducted with managers and agents working in a telemarketing call centre (counting 70 agents), in two call centres belonging to the telecommunication sector (400 agents for the first one carrying out customer service and 600 agents for the second dealing with invoicing), and as well in the call centres of a Canadian federal administration dealing with internal telephone operations and offering services to citizens (counting 20 agents full time and volunteers in periods of exceptional high demand).

In this way, we have decided to analyse simultaneously – some call centres from both the private and public sector, - some call centres exclusively based on inbound calls and some based on inbound and outbound calls - internal call centres and outsourced call centres.

Our objective being to show the different interfaces of call centres (Huws, 2009), the environment of call centres has been integrated in the research. Since there has been rather little research on call centers in Canada, and all the more so in Quebec where there are practically no publications on the sector, it appeared important to try to determine firstly if this diversity exists. The point of view of other actors is also included for a more complete vision: views of call centre customers and from the institutional level are thus taken into accounts. The point of view of the customers and the regional institutions on their perception of the quality of call centre services and on their image is important since it appears to impact on agent’s involvement and retention. We thus have an analysis of call centres from an *insider* and an *outsider’s* perception: the views from the staff, but also the views from the customer, and that of the organisations that deal with call centres.

Collecting and Analysing the Information

We conducted 16 semi-directive interviews with 4 call centres and 4 economic developers, as well as 4 interviews with customers (ref. Table 1).

**TABLE 1
LIST OF INTERVIEWS**

POPULATIONS		NB OF INTERVIEWS	ORGANISATIONS
Internal stakeholders of call centres	Managers	4	- Internal call centres of a federal administration - Call centres belonging to the sector of telemarketing
	Agents	8	- Call centres belonging to the sector of telecommunication 1 - Call centres belonging to the sector of telecommunication 1
External stakeholders of call centres	Institutions	4	- Local development agency 1 - Local development agency 2 - Local developpement agency 3 - International development agency
	Costumers	4	-
TOTAL		20	4 call centres 4 economic development agencies

Based on these 20 interviews of one hour each, 900 witness-sentences have been extracted, with more than half of them integrated in this study. The sentences that have been selected have been classified into themes linked with the main research questions:

- 1/ The problems and difficulties impacting on the issues of attraction, involvement and retention of workers.
- 2/ The factors of involvement and retention.
- 3/ The practices to involve and retain the agents.

Within these themes, the witness-sentences have been structured in subthemes and essential ideas, this structure offering the possibility to analyse the convergences and the specificities between different interviews and to identify some elements that tend to be considered as generic.

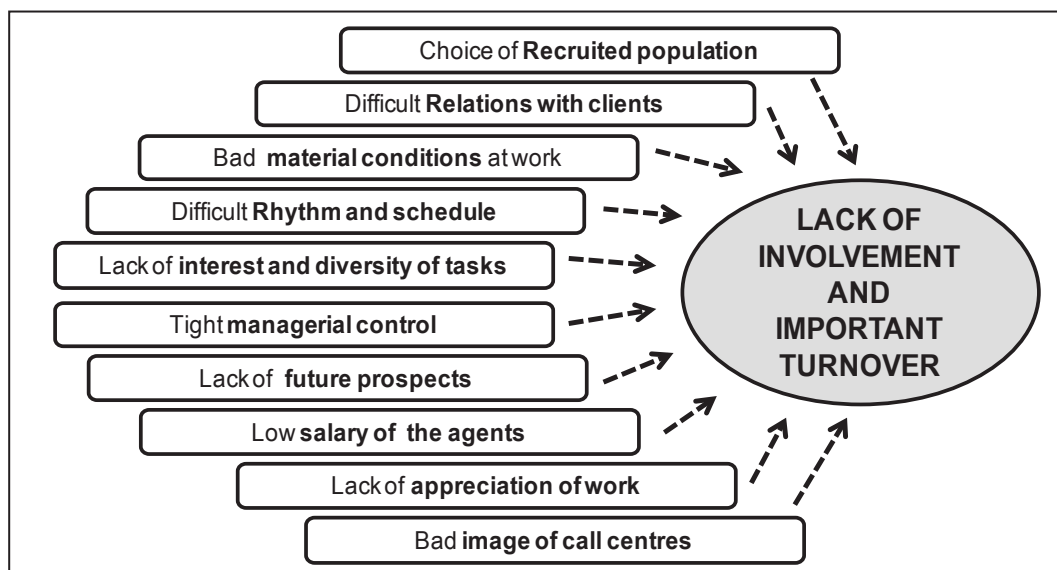
RESEARCH RESULTS

The study presents firstly the involvement and retention factors we have identified, and in a second part, the interests for call centres to act on them in a way to improve their socio-economic performances. The results of this research are put in perspective with the scientific literature on call centres.

Involvement and Retention Factors

This section identifies eleven factors that explain problems of involvement and retention of the agents (Ref. Figure 1). The degree of importance of these factors is really different from one call centre to another. Some call centres are doing a real effort to improve the involvement and retention of their agents. The importance of each element compared to the other is different from one agent to another, a perception which is also true for the management staff.

**FIGURE 1:
INVOLVEMENT AND RETENTION FACTORS**



Recruited Population

The choice of the recruited population has an impact on involvement and retention of the agents. Many call centres hire in particular students, the schedule offered being attractive for those who wish to continue their studies while having some revenue, as noted as well by Kirov & Mircheva (2009). Unfortunately, these populations are often inexperienced, which leads to some management problems and a need for more structure when it represents a large proportion of the staff. Otherwise, beyond the duration of their studies, students generally do not wish to stay in call centres. Some call centres choose to favour the recruiting of students when they enter university to keep them for the duration of their studies. To extend the choice of recruited populations, some centers envisage the development of telework, offering the possibility to access new populations, such as retired persons who could be interested in working part-time from home.

TABLE 2
WITNESS-SENTENCES

CALL CENTRES RECRUIT A LARGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS

Management staff: *“We do have 75% of students. We have people having a second job who come here to increase their income.”*

Agent: *“The problem is that we hire a lot of people with no experience just out of university. Then they are not really good in their job and it’s hard to trust them.”*

SOME CALL CENTRES RECRUIT STUDENTS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR

Management staff: *“People come here without wanting to do a career. But if we take them at the beginning of their university cycle, we keep them longer. Agents have no ambition to stay on long term.”*

USE TELEWORK TO ACCESS NEW POPULATIONS IS ENVISAGED

Economic developer: *“Next step is telecommuting. If there are people available but far away, we install them at home. I think call centres will have retired people at home. It will be good for people who want to work three days a week.”*

Relationship with Clients

The agents often consider their job as being stressful and tiring because of the volume of calls and the level of stress in dealing with customers. In particular, when they are beginners, agents feel anxious dealing with someone on the phone. This phenomenon is amplified when they have to use a foreign language (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2009). The anxiety tends to dissolve with experience. The agents are led to manage customers who are annoyed either because of the problem they have to deal with or because the call centre uses a system that requires waiting in tele-queues or to be transferred from department to department. In the situation of outbound calls, customers are often upset about being disturbed, which is especially observed in the telemarketing call centres. Agents sometimes deal with the potential racism of customers or the fact they are unsatisfied with the delocalisation of call centres and “the delocalisation of jobs” in their region. Some call centres ask their agents to hide their identity and their location (Huws, 2009). Finally, strategic choices to manage the customer in a way that makes calls profitable more than to secure the loyalty of customer generates difficult relations between agents and clients; the agent is in a position to exploit the call sometimes at the expense of the quality of the answer to the demands of the customer. D’Cruz & Noronha notice that agents feel they have a tendency to harass the customer and can sympathise with them. The relationships with customers show some difficulties that are not comfortable for the agents. At the same time, some of them consider that it is part of their job to deal with this situation.

TABLE 3
WITNESS-SENTENCES

RELATIONS WITH CLIENTS ARE OFTEN DIFFICULT

Management staff: *“Some call centres increase costumers’ valorisation but do not search for their loyalty. The clients call and they try to find the way to sell them other goods or services. There is a complicity in the market to not decrease price. There is an incidence on the way agents are managed: they are under pressure.”*

Agent: *“Three or four times a day I talk to nice people. But a lot of people call to ‘mess up’ your day.”*

Agent: *“It is challenging to do call after call. It’s exhausting, when situations you deal with are difficult. You talk about people’s life.”*

Material Working Conditions

As described by Koh & al. (2005), agents in general have a desk, a chair, a computer, a headphone. We observe that the comfort of the furniture is sometimes insufficient, in particular the comfort of the chair in which agents spend a long numbers of hours. Their desk could be too small, especially when agents have to share them with another agent they have to train.

The offices can be unappreciated if they are confined or lack natural luminosity caused by of a lack of windows. Some agents complain of the neighbourhood in terms of commodities and security. The quality of the buildings and location are highly appreciated in some call centres making significant efforts in terms of comfort and aesthetics and some give priority to the proximity of agents to windows. D’Cruz & Noronha (2006) observe that in India when the agents compare their position with other jobs, some do note that their offices are modern, aesthetic, and offer services such as cafeteria and rooms to relax during breaks. The geographic position and the landscape offered by some call centres make a significant difference for the well-being of the agents.

TABLE 4
WITNESS-SENTENCES

AGENTS ARE SOMETIMES NOT SATISFIED BY THE MATERIAL WORKING CONDITIONS

Agent: *“Chairs are bad. We do not have comfortable chairs although we are on eight hours a day.”*

Agent: *“The desk is a bit too small. Often you have to share it with someone else: the next person on shift or someone in training. Two persons on the same desk is not practical.”*

Agent: *“I would have preferred working in a neighbourhood with a restaurant. When leaving in the evening, there is not enough light in the street. I do not like the neighbourhood. It is not safe, I feel scared.”*

SOME CALL CENTRES OFFER NICE MATERIAL WORKING CONDITIONS

Management staff: *“Having nice offices is really important. Here the windows are for the agents. The supervisors are in the middle. It is an open space with administrative offices on the side.”*

Agent: *“Offices have windows with a view on the river. It’s really important. Working conditions are nice. It’s spacious and we have intimacy. We are all in separate offices.”*

Agent: *“The offices have good natural light. Some call centres are cramped and have no view on outside.”*

Work Pace and Work Schedules

Some agents consider that they deal with far too many calls per day. Deery & Kinniem (2002) and Huws (2009) also show that the agents feel pressure because of the necessity to deal with customers as fast as possible because others are waiting in the queue. Some agents complain about the lack of breaks or their length, in particular for eating. The schedules can also be difficult. They are sometimes very extensive and can cover evenings, nights, weekends and holidays. The consequences are problems to manage private life and overtiredness/stress caused by night schedules, generating reduction in work quality. In some call centres, it has been recognized that schedules are the main reason for turnover. Some of them allow agents to determine their schedule: every week agents give their planning (volumes and dates) for the next week. Using information tools, management staff determine who should be present and when. This way of functioning requires an investment of time by managers, but is also judged as very attractive by agents.

TABLE 5
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>THE WORKING PACE IS IMPORTANT</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“Here there is productivity, pressure, objectives. You have to keep the pace. You have to know how to deal with pressure.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“I take between 85 and 100 calls a day, sometime 110. It is too much.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“The staff should never been tired. We have important things to deal with. But sometimes the pace is too intense.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“To eat, we only have thirty minutes. I would rather have 45 minutes or one hour. We have to eat fast and have no time to digest.”</i></p> <p>SCHEDULES GENERATE SOMETIME PROBLEMS</p> <p>Agent: <i>“The big problem is to have to work by night. If there was no need to do the nights, people would stay longer in the department. But we have no choice. On 14 weeks, we have two periods of seven consecutive nights.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We are asked to work during Christmas holidays. There is a lot of demand during that period.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“To get holidays you have to give your priority. Sometimes it is the priority number they retain and after there is no way to change it.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“With schedule change you have to change suddenly your routine, and you cannot negotiate with managers. Some people want to study, to get out of the call centre but they have to abandon some classes because of the schedule. It is a vicious circle for them.”</i></p> <p>SOME CALL CENTRES TRY TO OFFER ADAPTED SCHEDULES AND A SUSTAINABLE PACE</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“The agents manage their schedule. Every Monday they give their schedule for the next week. Few call centres are doing that. That is why they stay longer with us. We adapt ourselves in a way they feel much-valued. We have computerized tools to manage and forecast who will be present. It is a lot of management for us, but we have agents who come freely.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“What I do really like is the flexibility with schedules. You can give the time when it is convenient for you. I do not think it is like that in other call centres. It is the biggest advantage.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We do have time to talk with supervisors and take breaks if the clients have been horrible.”</i></p>

Interest and Diversity of Tasks

The work in call centres is often judged as repetitive (Knights & McCabe, 1998; Taylor & Bain, 1999; Brophy, 2006), which is one of the main problem agents complain about. Tasks are simplified and the significant turnover requires a fast training. This results in simple and uncreative work. The tasks of the agents are more or less “humdrum” depending on the nature of the work, in particular if it is inbound or outbound calls. The managerial staff give agents prepared scripts that they have to follow during calls with clients. Agents and customers are like stock in the scenario that has been prepared and, as described by Huws (2009), have little space to evolve. As noted by Zapf and al (2003), we observed that the dissatisfaction of agents comes from the lack of complexity of their tasks, their lack of variety and the tight managerial control to which they are subjected. The possibility offered in certain call centres to change the scripts used by an agent makes the jobs less dull. In some call centres special projects are assigned to the agents. The possibility for the agents to have relationships with the outsourcer also contributes to increased interest in their work.

TABLE 6
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>AGENTS DO NOT ALWAYS LIKE TO USE SCRIPTS</p> <p>Agent: <i>“The script to read is what makes me want to leave this job. We always have to follow the same speech.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“At the beginning scripts are useful, but after we should not have to use it anymore.”</i></p> <p>WORK IN CALL CENTRES IS REPETITIVE</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“We do know that the work is repetitive and boring. There is a phenomena of lassitude quite fast.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“What bothers me the most is to have to do always the same thing. It is really uninteresting.”</i></p> <p>THE INTEREST OF WORK IS VARIABLE</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“Nature of work is different between inbound or outbound. The nature of work is what is going to attract agents or not, as well as the outsourcers and the objective of the work.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“The nature of work is really different between night and day. During the day it is boring and less intellectually stimulating. We just have to do some calls transfer and answer basic questions. We do not need as much knowledge.”</i></p> <p>EXTENDING CONTENTS OF WORK GETS AGENTS INVOLVED</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“We do have a participative management style more than executive. Executive means that you have a script and do not get out of it. Here agents can introduce their own contribution. It’s more attractive for agents.”</i></p> <p>Management staff: <i>“Before we start a campaign, we always organised a meeting with the outsourcers and the agents who will work on the project. In that way the agents have the chance to see the client and reciprocally. That creates a beautiful work group, makes a real difference and creates links. But this is an investment. Yesterday we took 20 persons during three hours with the client.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We have been asked to create an internal document on the main questions asked and the answer to give, so we feel involved.”</i></p>

Surveillance

In most of the call centres, managers and outsourcers listen during calls, which are in general recorded. Some of the agents have the feeling of always being “watched” (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2006). We note that when some agents do not appreciate to be listened to, nor the criticism they received; others consider being monitored as a way to improve themselves, in particular with the support of their managers. It is also a way to keep track of calls, which is useful to define the responsibility of customers when a call has been problematic. Some call centres try to reduce the feeling of pressure of surveillance, in particular by offering proper breaks and monitoring with less rigidity the time between calls: managers indicate that their role is to help the agents to keep the rhythm to make sure to attain the objective, but at the same time knowing how to reduce the pressure to ensure that they do not burn out.

**TABLE 7
WITNESS-SENTENCES**

<p>SOME AGENTS DO NOT APPRECIATE MONITORING Agent: <i>“It’s uncomfortable to know that someone could be listening. We never know when.”</i> Agent: <i>“People around me do not like to be listened to. They do not like to be criticized.”</i> Agent: <i>“With the new person, monitoring is ok. But not with someone else doing that previously. It is causing problems.”</i></p> <p>SOME AGENTS UNDERSTAND THE INTEREST OF BEING MONITORED Agent: <i>“Being listened to is part of the job. Maybe the new ones are surprised but I’m used to it. If we are monitored it is to improve the way we work.”</i></p> <p>MANAGEMENT STAFF REDUCE SOMETIME SURVEILLANCE PRESSURE Management staff: <i>“We try to create a nice atmosphere. We control less the wrap-times. In that way the agents have less pressure and have the feeling they have scope.”</i></p>

Career Advancement and Prospects

Managers in our research agree that few possibilities of hierarchical evolution are offered in the centre. The only possibilities for job evolution are quite often external. In the case of internal call centres, we found other departments “draw” sometimes personnel from the call centres department. Consequently, some agents leave the call centres. In certain call centres, agents can become occasionally supervisors when the management staff is on leave or in the case of exceptional demand requiring the recruitment of temporary staff during a limited amount of time. The choice is sometimes made to develop new hierarchical levels to create job evolution possibilities.

In the call centres of telemarketing some ‘assistant supervisor’ positions have been created and are occupied by agents. Otherwise, agents who are recruited for a temporary period, as it is described by Brophy (2006) as being usual, do not know if and until when their contract will be extended and sometimes do not even know the volume of hours that they will be asked to do. These factors contribute to explain involvement and retention problems. With the goal to encourage agents to plan to stay longer, some call centres guarantee work security at least for the middle term: management staff let them know that they can work in the call centres on a long term perspective and do the number of hours sufficient for their needs.

**TABLE 8
WITNESS-SENTENCES**

<p>AGENTS HAVE GENERALLY FEW POSSIBILITIES OF EVOLUTION Management staff: <i>“Our call centre is not a big company offering careers, training and social benefits. People who do have a career here are the team leaders and supervisors.”</i> Agent: <i>“People leave often for other department drawing in the call centre to hire people. The call centre is a entrance door for some career in our administration”</i> Agent: <i>“We have no stability. There is a contract renewable every eight months.”</i></p> <p>SOME CALL CENTRES OFFER CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND PROSPECTS TO THE AGENTS Management staff: <i>“When we propose to an agent to do 35 hours, he will have the possibility to do it. We do not hire them only for four months. They do have a visibility at more or less long term. They know we will not throw them out.”</i> Management staff: <i>“We have created the first assistant supervisor of the company. They take this job to heart.”</i> Agent: <i>“When the assistant director is on holiday, someone replaces him and is really well paid. It is a way to manage people what we do not have the possibility to do normally.”</i></p>
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Salary

Employees do not always consider their salary as attractive. Some agents judge basic salaries as insufficient. Also, they indicate that few social benefits are generally offered in call centres. Some of the managers interviewed recognize that this may explain partly the lack of effort on the part of agents and the fact that they are not much preoccupied with the results of the call centres. Agents often observe rates in other call centres and are ready to answer to favourable job advertisements. In internal call centres, the agents are conscious of wages in other departments. Van Jaarsveld & Yanadori (2010), in their study on Canadian call centres, confirm that lower cash pay levels are related to higher quit rates and absenteeism. As observed in India by D’Cruz and Noronha (2006), the work in call centres is attractive when the salary is generous compared to other sectors. As we have observed, certain call centres make the choice to offer attractive basic salaries to their agents, hoping to retain them. The implementation of bonuses could encourage more involvement as well.

**TABLE 9
WITNESS-SENTENCES**

SALARY IS SOMETIME JUDGED INSUFFICIENT

Management staff: *“The agents auto limit themselves considering the wages rate : ‘we are not paid much so why should we give more effort’.”*

Agent: *“Nine dollars per hour when you are bilingual is not well paid enough.”*

Agent: *“Wages are not very high. There are few social benefits in call centres, insurance, social coverage... It is the precariousness at this level.”*

Agent: *“People in other departments who give us work to do gain more money than us, even if there is little difference between their work and ours. If we were better paid, people would quit less.”*

SOME CALL CENTRES OFFER ATTRACTIVE SALARIES AND BONUSES

Management staff: *“We have implemented bonuses on all of our campaigns.”*

Agent: *“There are bonuses on sales and on other projects. We would like it to be more, but it does motivate.”*

Agent: *“We are very well paid to do this job.”*

Agent: *“The only thing that retains us is the salary of 15 or 20 dollars per hour. For some people it’s the only way to get a decent salary without having done study.”*

Work Appreciation

Because of the nature of their tasks, agents have sometimes the feeling that they do “low level” work, for which there is little or no recognition. They do not perceive the “societal benefit” of what they do. They can feel that they develop few skills working in call centres and that they are not trained enough to be able to occupy new functions in the short term. In internal call centres, agents have the impression that they are not respected by other departments. When people do not feel recognized for what they are doing they lose their will to be involved and wish to leave their job. On the contrary, in some call centres, agents have the feeling that they have meaningful work that helps their users considerably.

TABLE 10
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>AGENTS FEEL THE NEED TO BE RECOGNIZED FOR THEIR WORK</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“If someone does not feel recognized he will not be involved even if he is well paid.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We do not feel we are useful for the society. It is not attractive.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“It’s a low level work. We need to be recognized, it’s important.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“Because we do not feel recognized, people want to quit. This is not only being recognized by our director, but by the rest of the ministry.”</i></p> <p>MANAGEMENT STAFF RECOGNIZE AGENTS’ WORK</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“In our call centre some efforts are done to develop practices making agents feel recognized.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“Atmosphere is good here. When you are doing a good job, they tell you.”</i></p> <p>WORKING IN CALL CENTRE SOMETIMES GIVES SATISFACTION</p> <p>Agent: <i>“I do appreciate the challenge in this job. There are two types of agents. The one who wants to make 10 dollars an hour and the one who want to develop skills and knowledge.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“The advantage of this work is that at the end of the day you feel you helped someone in his life. It’s rewarding. I already receive flowers and letters.”</i></p>
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Image of Call Centres

Call centres are victim of negative prejudice which can be explained by abusive management practices observed in some and by the dissatisfaction of the customers about the quality of service. Call centres are quite often attacked in the media as offering casual jobs and as having tendency to delocalise (Brophy, 2006). Collective imagination surrounding call centres (Huws, 2005) describes them as “electronic workshops” of the service sector (Wood, et.al., 2005).

Consequently, we observed that some companies having all the characteristics of a call centres refuse to be called that way. The agents conscientious of this image dare not say they work in a call centre and can even feel ashamed.

TABLE 11
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>THE IMAGE OF CALL CENTRES IS NEGATIVE</p> <p>Economic developer: <i>“Call centres do have bad press.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“I’m working here since seven months. I do not like to say it. It’s never a deep desire to work in a call centre.”</i></p> <p>Management staff: <i>“A lot of call centres hide themselves under others names. We are a beautiful industry. We generate billions, creating employments and doing professional work. No need to hide if we are doing things well. When some do not respect confidentiality, clients, work’s schedules, they hide. Otherwise no need to hide and we can be proud.”</i></p>

Management Practice in Call Centres

Our study highlighted the existence of management methods based on mistrust and surveillance creating a difficult working atmosphere and relationships between management staff and agents based on pressure due to the expectation that agents will not stay. In these kinds of call centres, a lack of negotiation between managers with the agents can be observed. Agents are considered to be easily replaceable and little effort is devoted to dialogue and the achievement of “win-win” results for the call centres and agents. Agents are expected to adapt themselves to the conditions imposed on them without letting them express their own requirements and their own perspectives. This method of management has

widely contributed to the negative reputation now attached to call centres. In certain call centres, management staff defines as an objective the development of good relations with agents, based on listening and mutual respect. Also, the accent is put sometimes on developing a beneficial working atmosphere, contributing to the attractiveness of the call centre. In this way, events and competition are regularly organised by the management staff, which has the advantage to allow agents to meet each other. Referring to Koh & al. (2005), it is important to involve agents in the search for solutions that permit the easy diffusion of knowledge. Agents are sometimes asked to present proposals on the functioning of the centre. These kinds of initiatives appear to be unusual however, especially when the agents are paid per working hour and when it appears not directly productive.

TABLE 12
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>HARSH MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ARE OBSERVED IN SOME CALL CENTRES</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“We do not call agents by a code as it exists in some call centres. People are not cattle.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We are treated as cannon fodder. They know that anyway you are not going to stay. They think that if an agent stays 9 months on average, why do expensive efforts to keep them three more months. It is mathematic.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We see our supervisors as enemies and they see us as their enemies. The atmosphere is unhealthy.”</i></p> <p>SOME CALL CENTRES DEVELOP GOOD RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERVISORS AND AGENTS</p> <p>Management staff: <i>“In our call centre we have listening and understanding. There is a real management that is not seen in some other call centres. We are focused on human, but simultaneously on respecting the rules of good business.”</i></p> <p>Management staff: <i>“In many call centres it’s mass management. Here, we listen to the agents and we have good results: we got our ratios, we do our project on time. The client is happy, the boss is happy, and the agents feel very valued.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“We are close to our supervisors. If we do have a problem we can talk with them. If we need to change the schedules, they listen to us. There is no problem with them.”</i></p> <p>THERE IS A GOOD ATMOSPHERE IN SOME CALL CENTRES</p> <p>Staff management: <i>“Regularly we organise a kind of tombola to win movie theatre ticket, gift certificates... We do that to create a relaxing dynamic and a break. Sometimes we order pizza for everyone.”</i></p> <p>Agent: <i>“Between agents, everyone knows and talks to each other. The atmosphere is good.”</i></p>
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Benefits of Involvement and Retention of the Agents

Thus, a set of factors have been presented highlighting the source of limited interest of the workers in their jobs, limited involvement of the agents and a considerable turnover in call centres. This section develops on the observation that call centres are confronted with issues of involvement and retention of the agents due to unsatisfactory working conditions, generating loss of quality in the services they offer. Clearly, better conditions of work are interesting for the workers, as was highlighted above, by many sentences from agents, but it can also be interesting for firms, as some management has also indicated. The possible benefits which could be gained for workers and for firms in managing the involvement of agents and the reduction of the turnover are highlighted here (ref. Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
BENEFITS FROM INVOLVING AND RETAINING THE AGENTS



Difficulties in Involving and Retaining Agents

Based on the problems underlined in the previous section: - agents are weakly involved in the functioning of the call centres, their motivation at work is limited by their expectation to leave the call centre and the primary motivation of the agents is to earn a salary; - the turnover is often significant in call centre's agents population, and a retroactive effect of the turnover has been observed: when a large number of people leave the call centre, the "remainder" question themselves questions on their own case and feel pressure leading them to leave. Often, the agents are attracted by possibilities of external evolution.

TABLE 13
WITNESS-SENTENCES

<p>AGENTS ARE OFTEN WEAKLY INVOLVE Management staff: <i>"Problems are agents arriving regularly late, the absences without telling anybody, people who disappear and come back after three weeks,...globally the lack of involvement. For these people it is a temporary job. They know they will not stay."</i> Management staff: <i>"People are not involved in their work. They do that as a necessity to pay what they have to pay."</i></p> <p>THE TURNOVER RATE IS GENERALLY HIGH IN CALL CENTRES Management staff: <i>"Call centres' employees are very inconstant. People like to change, especially in Canada."</i> Management staff: <i>"In big call centres where I have worked in, the turnover rate is about 70%. When you do a training session with 25 people who just got hired, ten are still there after four weeks, two after three months, and only one after six months. They say they only keep the best."</i> Agent: <i>"Every year approximately seven people leave. Turnover rate is almost 40%. But I will say it is more between 50% and 60%."</i> Agent: <i>"When a lot of people quit, that puts pressure on the others asking themselves: 'Why are we staying?'"</i></p>
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Issues Induced by a Lack of Involvement and Retention of the Agents

The lack of involvement and the strong turnover of the agents generate absenteeism, lack of staff and this is detrimental to the training of agents and the quality of the service.

An agent who does not feel involved in his work chooses sometimes to prioritize his external activities (university activities, second job, and spare time). This leads employees to be absent, and sometimes employees do not think about or do not have the honesty to inform their managers in advance, which generates disorganisation and a lack of staff considering the level of activity.

TABLE 14
WITNESS-SENTENCES

THE LACK OF INVOLVEMENT GENERATES ABSENTEEISM

Management staff: *“People can be sick but they should let us know. The problem is that they don’t assume their engagement. But it is not only in call centres.”*

Management staff: *“During exam periods they are all absent.”*

TURNOVER AND ABSENTEEISM INVOLVE LACK OF STAFF

Management staff: *“It’s difficult to retain employees. They are mostly between 18 and 25 years old. The others are managers facing the difficulty to have the sufficient number of people. You have to plan for 15 in order to get 10 operational.”*

Agent: *“There are always people missing. We never have hundred percent of the staff.”*

Agent: *“We should be 20 but in fact and because of the turnover we are never more than 15.”*

As Koh & al. (2005) or D’Cruz & Noronha (2006) observed, the quality of the work of the agents is based on integration and development of a large quantity of skills and knowledge. Managers expect that agents dispose of interpersonal abilities, good listening skills, a capacity to manage clients, knowledge of products, services and the processes of the call centre. Also, sometimes agents should have special linguistic capacities. These skills and knowledge are gained through training and practice. Referring to Huws (2009), the quality of the calls depends on agents’ skills and this was also shown in our research. The turnover generates problems because when agents leave the organisation, they go with the expertise they have developed without capitalisation and transfer to their successors, and the firm has to start over with the training of new employees. Also, if it is often expected that senior agents will participate in the training of the new employees, when the turnover is significant, senior employees are missing and they are less skilled. This phenomenon of lack of trained agents generates poor quality of the services offered by the call centres. Customers are unsatisfied. They complain especially of the lack of linguistic and interpersonal abilities of the agents.

TABLE 15
WITNESS-SENTENCES

TURNOVER HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON AGENTS' TRAINING

Agent: *"The people who start should be trained by senior agents. Last year, we have had so many people quitting that the new ones have had to be trained by people arrived two months earlier. As a consequence, still now some agents do not do certain things properly."*

Agent: *"Here the agents train the new one. Because of the turnover we constantly have to train people. You get tired of this after a while."*

THE TRAINING'S NEEDS ARE IMPORTANT

Management staff: *"People who are here since 6 months know our functioning and get in the company's culture."*

Management staff: *"People who are doing surveys should have sales skills to sell the time of the call to the client."*

Agent: *"What is difficult is that you need a lot of information to do that job. We have to know the organization of all the departments to pass information."*

Agent: *"The content of the training is on the products and their evolution. It's about knowing what is new."*

Agent: *"We have been trained to manage difficult situations and difficult clients."*

Agent: *"The three first week the training was one how to talk to people and how to deal with problem."*

The lack of experience generates for the agent more difficulty in answering customers' demands and an extension of the length of calls dealing with customer irritation and requiring more agents to answer the same level of demand. Due to the use of an inexperienced labour force, call centres simplify excessively the task and script, giving the customers the feeling that they are dealing with "machines". Huws (2009) explains that few people never complain about call centres, and that even if the number of bad experiences is low they leave a long-lasting negative memory in customers' minds. When clients are in a position to get services another way, their dissatisfaction leads to a loss of the market share.

TABLE 16
WITNESS-SENTENCES

PROBLEMS OF INVOLVEMENT AND RETENTION LIMIT THE SERVICES' QUALITY

Client: *"I have been loyal to my telephone operator for years but I am thinking of changing because I am unsatisfied. The after sale service is really bad. If they want to keep their client they have to do quality. It is useless to reduce costs if it is to lose clients."*

Client: *"The fact people are reading scripts leads me to mistreat them and take them for idiots unconsciously."*

Client: *"With some operators it takes me every time one hour to have an answer when I'm calling. It is not possible to talk again to the same person. It does not make sense."*

Client: *"Sometimes we do not understand what the agents say with their accents. I am losing time with that. When it is for commercial reasons, I hang up systematically."*

Considering Robinson & Morley's study (2006), if call centre managers target customer satisfaction, this objective is sometimes contradictory with prioritizing cost reduction. But when call centres have to deal with involvement and retention problems hidden costs are generated (Savall & Zardet, 1987) and are not always integrated in their decision making process. For example, it has been observed that overtime is generated by the process of recruiting, integrating, training and managing the departure of the agents. Also, when an agent cannot answer a request this could generate extra costs for the call centre or its outsourcer. Koh & al. (2005) show, using the case of a customer service department, that if an agent does not solve the problem of the client, then the company should send him/her a new product, depending on

the warranty, generating significant economic costs. The Managing Director of the *global reservations and customer care teams* of Continental Airlines evaluated at 30,000\$ per agent per year the cost of turnover (Mc Donald, 2010). Additionally, the customers who are lost and the risk of losing an outsourcer are some examples of elements insufficiently taken into consideration in the management practices. It definitely appears useful to develop involvement and retention of the agents if the target is to increase the economic performance of call centres.

Effects on Call Centre Performances

Acting on the factors of involvement and retention and on the quality of the management insures the decrease of turnover and increase in agents' involvement, making it possible to obtain sustainable performance for call centres. As noted by Wood & al. (2006), performance in call centres could be analysed through: *absence, proportion of employees quitting, proportion of employees making suggestions, proportion of calls abandoned, proportion of calls answered in time, Customer satisfaction levels*. In that way, involvement and retention of the agents contribute to call centre performance. In one of the call centres involved in our study, the turnover rate has been reduced from 70% to 20% with management actions. The management staff establishes clear links between reduction of the turnover and development of the results of the call centre. Thus, investing in actions to increase the involvement of the employee and reduce attrition contributes to increases in the economic performance of call centres. At a more macroeconomic level, development agencies that have been interviewed notice as well a link between sustainable performance of organisations and quality of their management. When agents are more involved, understanding the functioning of the call centre and developing the required skills makes agents more efficient and they can then offer quality service. They gain autonomy, are able to move away from the script and do not make speeches that make them sounds like "robots" that customers complain about.

**TABLE 17
WITNESS-SENTENCES**

SOME CALL CENTRES REDUCE THE TURNOVER

Management staff: *"In our call centre we try to retain agents because it's expensive to see them go. We trained them, they know our functioning and are operational. In other call centres I have worked in they let people go."*

Management staff: *"To keep the agents we should be different from the other call centres. Here the turnover is really low."*

Management staff: *"More than 50% of our agents are here since at less two years."*

DECREASING THE TURNOVER IS A PERFORMANCES' INDICATOR

Management staff: *"In our call centres the turnover is inferior to 20%. We try to get stability and some qualitative and quantitative results."*

Management staff: *"There is clearly a correlation between reduction of turnover and development of the call centre's results. The turnover is now of 20% while it was of 70% before."*

THE QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCES

Economic developer: *"Like in all industries there are the ones who manage well and others not that well. With call centres it is the same thin : some are created and disappear after."*

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the diversity of practices in a number of call centres, the factors of involvement and retention of agents, as well as practices contributing to better employee wellbeing, as well as increase in the involvement and decrease in the turnover have been identified.

The benefits of acting on involvement and retention are important to reduce absenteeism and to be able to keep employees in order to offer quality of service. The problems of involvement and retention generate significant costs and bad performance for call centres, but also lack of motivation and morale for employees, as has been shown here.

This paper has identified the causes of these problems and pointed out a set of factors impacting on the involvement-retention combination using an analysis of statements by different actors of call centres on the various problems: *the choice of population recruited, the difficult relations with clients, the working conditions, the work pace and schedules, the lack of interest and diversity of tasks, the control over work, the weak career advancement prospects, the salary and social benefits, the recognition, the image of call centres and the management practices.*

The managers can act on these factors to increase involvement and retention of the agents. It is especially necessary in our view to improve the quality of the management, especially by listening to identify the needs for improvement in each centre, these being quite different from one call centre to another, even from one agent's perception to another sometimes, as we have been able to observe. This study highlights the need to introduce a more qualitative approach in the management of call centres which seem to be too centered on quantitative results and financial performance issues, not realising that human factors have an extremely important impacts on the bottom line in sectors where "human capital" is the core of the business. The exclusive quantitative and financial approach is seen as the source of problems of quality and performance, and generates a negative image of call centres, even of those that actually invest efforts to develop their human dimension, including both their social and economic performance in their management decisions.

One of the main interests of our research is that it shows that it is possible to do things differently and some managers show that another form of management is possible and can lead to better recognition of employees, better motivation and possibly better retention rates. The main result of our work is therefore that there exists a diversity of situations in call centers, and that *it is beneficial to invest efforts in working conditions in order to increase further involvement and retention of agents and thus, to generate simultaneously better wellbeing for employees and better quality of service as well as economic performance for the organisation in call centres.* It is clear from the interviews that call centres are not all doing what is necessary to lead to more involvement and retention. There is a paradoxical situation here in that while it is acknowledged that some factors can be identified to have an impact on the level of involvement and retention, still very few organisations invest in these managerial actions that could increase involvement and retention in such a way that it would increase the performance in call centres. It thus remains to be seen how call centers will evolve in the coming years, that is whether many will continue on the route which prioritises low cost over good working conditions and retention for a better socio-economic performance.

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