



A World on the Phone

Experiences of call centre workers
around the globe



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A Report for UNI Global Union

Written by Andrew Bibby

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Introduction

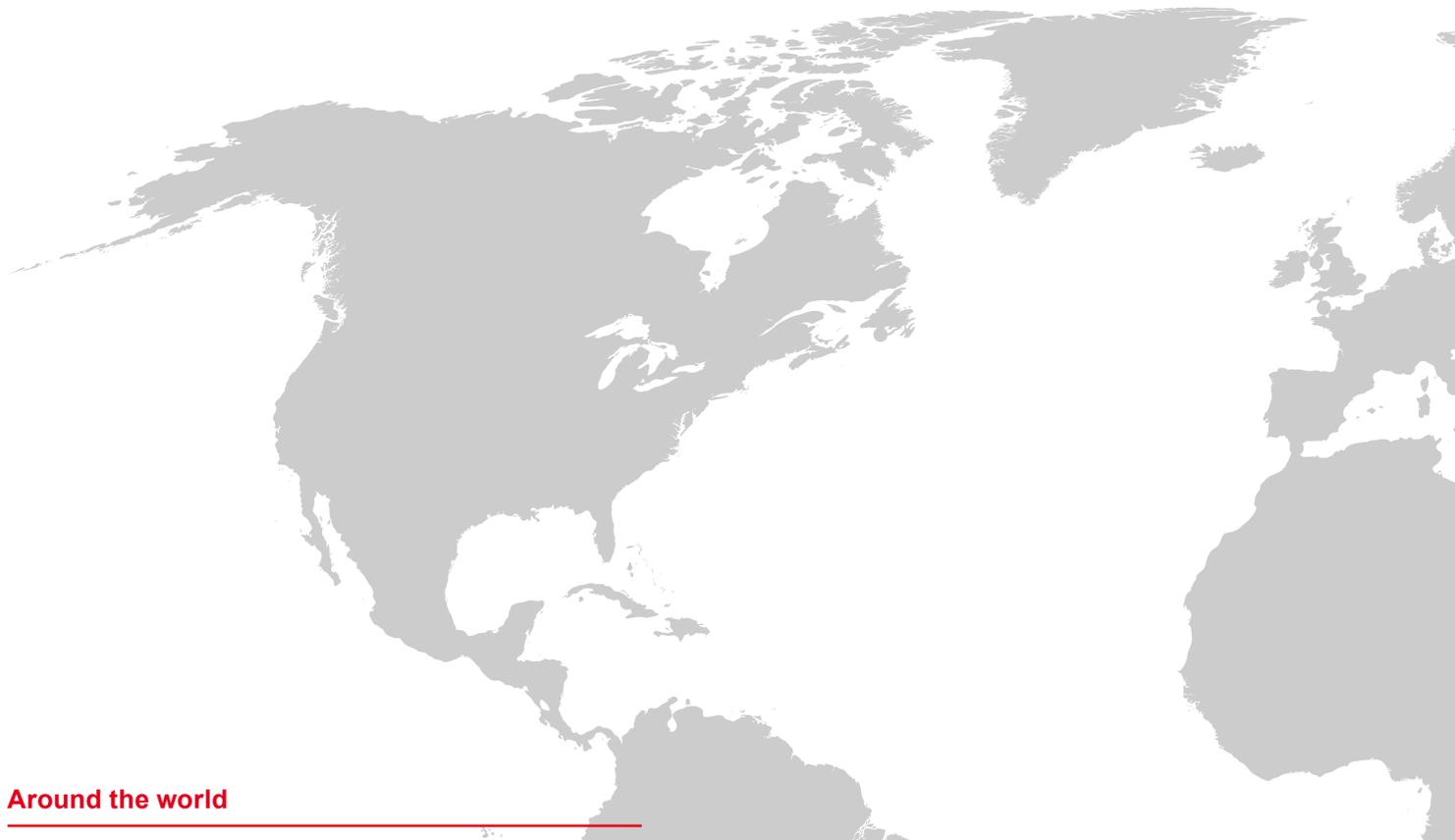
Call centres have become a part of everyday life. Buying and selling goods, arranging travel, sorting out finances or fixing IT problems are among the many tasks which are more and more often done by phone.

Hundreds of thousands of people today work in an occupation which, fifteen years ago, was almost unheard of.

We've talked to twelve call centres workers, from across the globe. They live in different societies and cultures, but have much in common. They share a pride in the professionalism they want to bring to their job, and the satisfaction which comes from helping callers. Their work processes are similar and their working time is controlled by the same automated call distribution (ACD) technology systems.

But while working processes are similar, working conditions can differ enormously. Some centres provide good conditions for their staff, but others are driven by unrealistic performance targets, where human beings are subservient to the technology, where work is stressful or even dangerous, and where it's hard to deliver a quality service.

This is unacceptable. UNI Global Union has long been campaigning for all call centre workers to provide decent work. This report, through the voices of the people who work daily in call centres, suggests ways to achieve this.



Around the world



Anna Bloomquist lives in Everett, a town in Washington state, USA. Her employer is a major telecom company. She deals with business customers who have problems with their mobile phones.

Cléia da Silva, 19, lives and works in São Paulo, Brazil. She's worked for three months in a call centre run by an international call centre subsidiary of a major European telecom company.

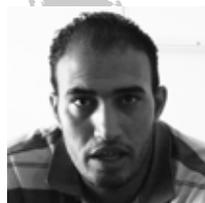
Sidney Ribeiro previously worked in a range of jobs including that of a bank clerk. He was unemployed at the time he first took a call centre job and now works in São Paulo for the same global company as Cléia.

Rainer Hildenbrand is 55. Having taken early retirement from his previous employment, he began six years ago in the call centre of Australia's largest fresh food suppliers, taking orders from stores.



Asim Hussain lives in a small Belgian town not far from the Dutch border. He's worked for four years for a multilingual Belgian call centre company, as a technical adviser on the service desk. He's 30.

Julian Izquierda lives in Dublin and has worked for seven years for an international call centre owned by a major European airline, handling a range of travel-related calls. Previously he worked in a bank call centre in Spain. He is 45.



Haithem Ourghemmi is 29, and has worked for five years for the Tunisian subsidiary of a global call centre company with almost 250 centres in 47 countries. He takes sales and advisory calls from customers abroad.



Lukás Cáp, 28, is originally from Prague. He moved to Ireland about eight years ago and works in the complaints department of the main Irish telecom service provider. This service is outsourced to a major business services company.

Eileen Redmond works in the call centre for the government-owned electricity utility for Queensland, Australia. She's worked there seven years and is a team leader. She is in her mid-50s.

Debbie Ellis works in the call centre of a large taxi company in Brisbane, Australia, which operates round-the-clock. Nine years in the industry, she now undertakes staff training but still sometimes takes calls.



Ericka Ivonne González Reyes lives in a town close to Mexico city and works an afternoon/evening shift doing sales and technical support at a call centre for a large Mexican telecom company. She is 31 and in her spare time studies food science at a university.



Carolina González Suárez, 25, has worked for three years in a call centre in Mexico city operated by a major international telecom company, primarily handling banking enquiries. She has home responsibilities for her eighty-year old grandmother, her sister (a wheelchair user) and her teenage brother, and says the call centre job is one of necessity.

Helping customers -the rewards of call centre work

Call centre work is highly disciplined, with automated call distribution technology controlling the flow of calls to each agent. It can be a dehumanising experience, with the worst aspects of assembly line routine in manufacturing applied to white collar work.

“A typical day? Just like any call centre. You arrive, you log in, you get ready and start a computer and you begin to take calls, one after another. Have a break. Start again. Have a lunch break. Nothing special. Some calls are difficult to handle. Some customers are not happy. Some things need a lot of attention. It’s a bit stressing but you get used to it”

Julian Izquierda (Ireland)

Call centre work doesn’t need to be quite so robotic. Many of our interviewees expressed the satisfaction which they could derive from a job well done – provided that they were given the time to deal properly with callers.

“I like helping people... and being able to find a solution to customers’ problems”

Anna Bloomquist (USA)

“The aspects I like are the customer contact, and getting something achieved. We have a lot of different things to do, so it does not really get boring”

Rainer Hildenbrand (Australia)

“Where I work we have different responsibilities, not just taking the calls – for example, doing letters, faxes and so on. So there is a bit of variety in there”

Lukás Cáp (Ireland)

Finding our way: Call centre career paths

Call centre workers are undertaking a responsible job, representing their employers to the public, but the job is often dismissed as unskilled and menial, both by the public at large and by some employers.

“Being categorised as a call centre worker, people think it is a mediocre little job. It is rare for

people to admire you for being a telemarketing operator. Just the opposite, they make you feel that you are backward. Teleoperators have to make themselves respected, so that others know it is a source of dignified work”

Carolina González Suárez (Mexico)

Limited career opportunities and low job quality lead to high staff turnover for many employers.

Call centre work becomes treated therefore as just ‘a job’, and not a very well paid one at that. Many of our interviewees were young, finding it hard to start a real ‘career’ and often trying to combine their work with continuing their education. Older workers who have been made unemployed or taken early retirement also find themselves taking call centre jobs.

“It becomes very repetitive, very mechanical, and there is no other level to be promoted to”

Ericka Ivonne González Reyes (Mexico)

“We have a two-tier wage system so the more experienced you get the more money you get, but that stops after three years”

Rainer Hildenbrand (Australia)

Responsible employers address the issues of personal development and career progression for staff. One interviewee explained that her company values the discipline which comes from call centre work, and therefore recruit call centre staff into other areas of the business.

Another praised the opportunity she had been given for training: “This company has been like a school for me,” she said.

“There’s lots of opportunity in the job. I started as a customer service representative, worked my way into a senior position, then got a job doing processes, and I’m currently on secondment as a team leader”

Eileen Redmond (Australia)

Give and Take: Fair Flexibility

Call centres demand flexible working, in order to cope with the peaks and troughs of incoming calls or –for

outbound calling – the times when customers are most likely to be available to take calls.

But flexibility doesn't need to mean insecurity. Workers expect, in exchange, a proper, permanent, contract and to be able to negotiate their rosters.

“Call centre work suffers from a bad image – always that connotation of precariousness and instability, making it difficult to get bank credit, for example”

Haithem Ourghemmi (Tunisia)

“I spent eight months working according to various temporary contracts: day contracts, week contracts. In that period I was always flexible and never complained: anything to get that fixed contract. At the end of those eight months I was finally offered one, although it included a three-month probation period”

Asim Hussain (Belgium)

Working shifts can lead to difficulties in integrating home and work lives. Carolina, for example, told us that she works until 10pm and then, late at night, has to take a seventy minute journey across Mexico city by public transport to get home.

Rosters which change from week to week can be problematic, particularly for call centre workers who are also trying to undertake further education studies and those with family commitments. As one interviewee put it, regular shifts would help enormously: “That way, workers would know what to expect and could plan their lives outside their work.”

“We have to put in one evening a week. We're allowed to say which day we prefer, but it's rarely taken into account in the schedule. Setting aside one evening a week for a course or exercise is virtually impossible”

Asim Hussain (Belgium)

“We don't get weekend leave. That makes it difficult to see and meet with family and friends who don't work weekends. That's difficult for those with families, especially those with children whom they can't take out during the weekend. If I were to get married, it would be difficult to lead a family life with this sort of work”

Haithem Ourghemmi (Tunisia)

A number of interviewees working in call centres where there is trade union recognition commented that the union had helped negotiate extra payments for evening, weekend and public holiday work. Payments like these acknowledge the downside of shift working, and can help management ensure that their staff are available when they are needed: as one person told us, “staff here prefer to work weekends, because of the penalty [bonus] payments”.

Give me a break

Automated call distribution technology routes phone calls to staff constantly, and it is necessary to actively log out of the system to take a break.

Workers report that break times are typically too short and inflexible. One spoke of her feeling of being 'chained to the desk'.

Basic human needs are subordinated to work pressures.

“If you work eight hours a day, you're entitled to a thirty-minute paid break. If your day is six hours, you have just over 22 minutes to eat a sandwich. But we can't simply take these breaks when we want: we sign up for them on a queue. If a lot of customers call, we may have to wait hours to take our break, meaning that we eat lunch at 2pm or 3pm. The lavatory breaks are more of a problem. We get to take those any time we want, but they are deducted from our break. I find that a disgrace”

Asim Hussain (Belgium)

“Half an hour sometimes isn't long enough, particularly if you've got to go and pick up something in your lunch break, like a chemist prescription”

Debbie Ellis (Australia)

“You have to handle customer phone requests during eight hours every day, while being allowed a break of 40 minutes, divided into four short ten-minute breaks. And it always depends on work requirements – sometimes you can't take a break because there are customers on the line.”

Haithem Ourghemmi (Tunisia)

Health comes first

For call centres to be efficient and safe, employers need to make regular investments in the technology.

Skimping on the facilities for staff creates unacceptable risks. In one call centre, computer monitors had been perched on rickety old tables, with the back yard described as a 'breeding place for rats'.

Small details, like the types of chairs being supplied or the ability to adjust the height of the workstation, are highly important for workers who have to spend all their working days in the same position.

"The desk should be adjustable, so you can lower it or raise it, because different people have different heights"

Rainer Hildenbrand (Australia)

"The premises were another issue: the seats were quite bad, not at all ergonomic, and we have started to get low back pain. The partitioning screens were quite bad, really if some disease occurred, like the flu epidemic, we are at risk."

Carolina González Suárez (Mexico)

Lighting and heating are also important. Air conditioning, required to keep the IT equipment cool, kept part of one workplace at least four degrees warmer than the other. This may have been good for the equipment, he said, but not for the health of call centre staff.

Problems like these can be addressed. Union pressure has led to huge improvements in health and safety in many of these call centres. One Australian interviewee praised her workplace, which was designed to be fully accessible for people with wheelchairs, including adjustable height tables.

Stress, stress, stress

"The stress situation is quite powerful because from the time you sit down it is dial, dial, dial. Obviously the pressure from the supervisor is sales, sales, sales, we want sales, and more sales."

Carolina González Suárez (Mexico)

Many call centre workers find their work extremely stressful.

The use of technology increases the pressure. Calls are queued up and automatically delivered to each agent as they become free, so there is usually little chance of a breathing-space. Agents normally have targets for the number of calls they have to take each hour. There is a strong pressure to curtail calls and to hurry the work.

The use of scripts (set forms of wording which agents are obliged to use) in some call centres adds to stress and deprives call centre of control of their own work processes.

Several interviewees commented on the way that quantitative targets affect the quality of their work. Rainer pointed out that he was measured by the number of calls he took per hour, and yet could make more sales for his company if he was able to discuss in detail a customer's particular needs - "If I need to advise a customer, I need more time for it," he told us.

"Additional stress comes mainly from the targets imposed by my superiors, such as the number of calls to be processed daily, restrictions regarding their duration, number of seconds to log off the calls etc."

Asim Hussain (Belgium)

Meeting quantitative targets becomes even more stressful if those targets are linked to sales. An interviewee put it succinctly: "Figures and profits are what matter here," he said.

"I find it stressful to do this work mostly due to the quotas imposed on me, and the constantly changing metrics by which I am measured"
Anna Bloomquist (USA)

"The time when I was having my graduation... I was deducted points out of my sales on the grounds that in one month I had very good sales and the next month I had very poor sales. Just because it was not constant they lowered the final result."

Julian Izquierda (Ireland)

Tight performance monitoring along with high targets for sales and number of calls taken can lead to workplace bullying. One interviewee said: "The managers or the supervisors have the ability to say 'I have the power to do as I wish to you, if you fall foul of me', well that is quite harassing," she said.

Interviewees drew attention to the high degree of monitoring and surveillance of workers, a feature of many call centre environments. Covert monitoring (for example, listening in by supervisors to calls as they are taken, without letting the agent know) is particularly stressful.

“If I was in charge, I’d want to change the monitoring arrangements, so there was less monitoring”

Cléia da Silva (Brazil)

Stress is recognised internationally as an occupational safety and health issue, and employers should take steps to meet their responsibilities to their staff. Some call centre managers do try to address this: one of our interviewees said that his manager tried to be helpful when staff had just dealt with an exceptionally abusive caller: “they were actually asked, ‘do you want to go for a little break?’”. Another mentioned the employee assistance programme which offered support to staff.

Stronger Together

Working in a call centre can be a positive experience. The majority of interviewees felt that a trade union presence helped to bring about improvements.

One worker said: “I think it’s nuts not to be in a union. As an individual person, you have no bargaining power, they can do with you whatever they like.”

“It’s very important to have a trade union presence in call centres. I began to work in this centre at a time when there was no trade union presence. It was difficult to criticise management decisions. Dismissal was the fate of anyone who complained or asserted their rights. The presence of the union in the centre has helped to minimise power abuses, raise awareness of worker rights and duties and improve general conditions of work.”

Haithem Ourghemmi (Tunisia)

“It helps quite a lot belonging to a union. We have a collective contract and therefore many irregularities or haphazard behaviour by the company are avoided. When the union came along, many aspects changed, from the premises to the treatment of higher ranking staff towards you. I think the environment is much better since the union has been here”

Ericka Ivonne González Reyes (Mexico)

Recent academic research suggests relatively high levels of collective bargaining in call centres internationally, at around 40%; the same research found that just over half of all call centres have some form of collective representation.

However, some workers still do not enjoy the freedom to join a union or to freely participate in union activity. One interviewee described victimisation: “Managers are trying to harass me and trying to make me feel uncomfortable”.

Management behaviour like this is deplorable and contravenes the fundamental labour rights recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the core Conventions of the International Labour Organisation. It is also very short-sighted. Three interviewees offered the view that collective representation and recognition brought benefits not just to the workforce but to the companies as well. As Eileen put it, “It gives both management and the employees a solid foundation – it’s not to benefit one or the other. You’ve got to negotiate a deal that suits everybody.”

“It works both ways, for the people and for the company, it’s better to have a collective agreement, one set of rights for everyone”

Rainer Hildenbrand (Australia)

This sort of approach has been recognised in Europe where UNI and the employers’ organisation ETNO jointly agreed in 2004 a set of European Guidelines for Customer Contact Centres. This establishes a set of principles for call centres, designed to produce quality employment and high customer service standards. “Those customer contact centres that are genuinely committed to the job satisfaction of their employees are the future of the business,” the statement asserts.

It is the experience of many of our interviewees, too. When we asked Debbie about her employer’s views on their recent innovative collective agreement for the call centre she responded immediately: “Management? I think they’re delighted.”

Some resources

UNI Global Union Call Centre Charter:

www.callcentreaction.org

European Guidelines for Customer Contact Centres
(Jointly agreed by UNI-Europa Telecom and European
Telecommunications Network Operators' Association
as part of the European social dialogue process), avail-
able at:

www.callcentreaction.org

The Global Call Center Report : International Perspec-
tives on Management and Employment

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcenter/>



