

Comparative study of the effects of organisational control on well-being in two call centres¹

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Introduction

The effects of organisational choices on health at work are increasingly being documented. For example, Wager, Fieldman and Hussey (2003) have established a link between certain characteristics of managerial control and blood pressure, a major risk factor of cardiovascular disease (CVD). In their study, these authors showed how the perception of the managerial style of the supervisor has a determining effect on blood pressure of employees. When prolonged, exposure to such working conditions can lead to deleterious health effects due to the appearance of chronic hypertension. As it has been established that CVD is the chief cause of premature death among adults, this has led some authors to consider work as a risk factor worthy of further investigation, not only for health at work but also on a public health perspective (Marmot, Bosma, Hemmingway and Stansfeld, 1997, Weibel, 2002). Leaving aside medical considerations, occupational psychology also has a role to play in arriving at a better understanding of the causal relation between the socio-organisational context and the effects on health. For us, this means research on emotions at work; in this respect, it should be borne in mind, as per Damasio (1994) in the postscriptum of his bestseller, that emotions should be taken into account when the focus is on health problems where mind/body inter-relations are clearly involved. This is undoubtedly the case when we consider that managerial control is a potential risk factor for employees. In Damasio's schema, emotions are embedded in complex body/mind patterns, where (among other things) the arterial muscles are physically and chemically affected. This focus is also coherent for the specific workplace examined in this paper: call centres. This is due to the fact that it is now clear (Zapf, 2002) that the emotional and relational demands of the job are considerable in call-centres, and could play a prominent role in the strenuousness of this sector. The job consists mainly in phonic interactions with customers, where the clerical worker perceives the emotions of the client but must also manipulate the expression of his/her personal emotions in order to achieve the goals of the interaction. For this reason, they should control their attitude, tone of voice and level of language, and at the same time permanently assess the effects of these behavioural dimensions on the person at the other end of the line in order to allow retroactive adjustment.

All this encompasses what is now known as "emotional work", according to Hochschild (1993). In the two call centres where this study took place, the task requires the worker to detect, assess and manage the emotions at both ends of the line, and both the management and the training lay down the way in which this should be achieved. The work must therefore be considered first and foremost as emotional work. Difficulties in dealing with these emotions at work, and the effect on psychological health and well-being, are starting to be documented (Zapf and Isic, 2003; Holman, Chissik, & Totterdell, 2002).

In the call-centre sector, the peculiarities of managerial practice have been highlighted (Frenkell, Korczynski, Shire, K., & Tam, 1998; Hammarström, 2001; Pichault, 2000). Many authors distinguish two contrasted organisational models relating to the way control versus autonomy is expressed. To simplify matters, we shall use Pichault's terms. In the first model, people have to deal with quite complex and rich tasks and this is associated with a relative level of organisational autonomy: this is the empowerment model. On the contrary, the second model is structured around the intensification of simple tasks and is characterised by a high level of control: this is the panoptical model. In his conception, Pichault made some predictions concerning the way workers will deal with the two kinds of working condition associated with these two models.

This presentation will focus on a comparison of two call centres in the same organisation. In particular, we shall try to see how differences in the positioning on the empowerment versus panoptical continuum will lead to different patterns of emotions and different outputs in terms of well-being. In this respect, the nature of the tasks (complexity, variety) and the channels through which managerial control is mediated are important. It has already been emphasised that a distinction should be made in terms of work demand. The work could need the expression of either positive or negative emotions. The literature on this topic states that the effects on health are more important when the worker is supposed to express emotion that he or she did not feel. That is what Zapf (2002) highlights with the term "emotional dissonance" and Freund (1998) with what he calls "dramaturgic stress".

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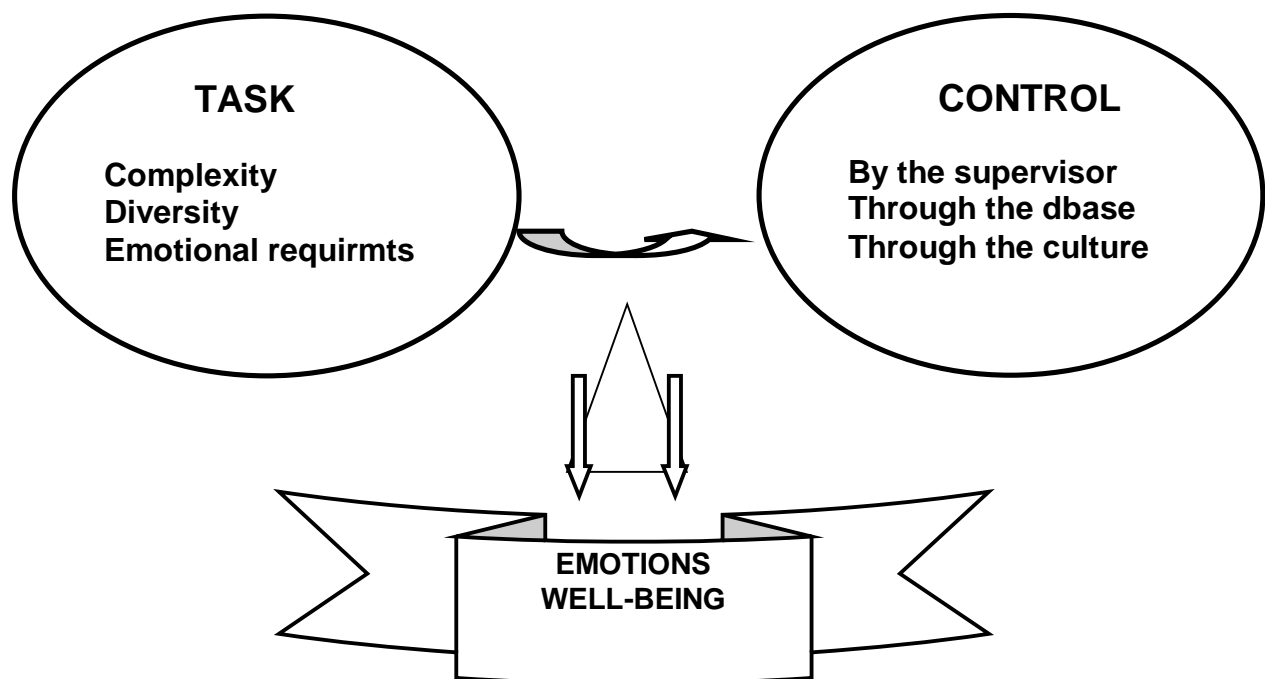
Method

Task: Our work was based on a comparative approach in two units of the same company. To simplify, we shall refer to the sales call centre and the after-sales call centre. Later, we shall present the type of tasks allocated to workers in the two centres. To match the panopticon-empowerment model, we shall examine the complexity and diversity of the tasks. The characteristics of the emotional work (requirement) were also identified through work observations and interviews.

Control: In both units, interviews with various members of the organisation were carried out to determine the kind of controls used in the organisation. The specific role as a supervision tool of the database that records every activity of the operators was also of prime importance and was then examined closely. The communication technique, aimed at promoting a culture of high performance among the workers, was also taken into consideration. We compiled observations and these interviews along with various data to characterize the organisation.

Emotions and well-being: Observations and specifics parts of these interviews were also used to precise the level of well-being. More precisely, we video-recorded the activity of the operators and asked them to specify the nature and intensity of the emotions related to various phases of their activity. Through this method, the context leading to the negative emotions (stressors) specific to each of the two sectors were identified.

At a second level, we interviewed the operators to collect subjective appraisal of their task and working conditions and we asked them to justify the strategies they used to accomplish their tasks, as it is now standard practice in ergonomics. The interviews and observations were also aimed at identifying the coping strategies developed in both situations. These coping strategies provide information concerning the emotional effects of the work and could bring into question their long run efficacy.



Graph 1. Relationship between task, control and well-being

Results

Task and emotional work

In the sales call centre, the operators have to deal with incoming calls of clients, interested in the products of the company. The workload depends on the time of the day, and the analysis shows that they have many calls for much of the time. The mean duration of a call is 2 minutes and 9 seconds. Interactions with clients are short, fast with a very little variety. There is little autonomy as the operator only handles the introductory part of the commercial interaction. The rhythm imposed is very fast and scripts and rules strictly define their interaction. The work rapidly becomes boring.

In the after-sales call centre, the operators must contact customers who have not respected their financial commitments and try to persuade them (by various means) to restart their payments. As it is often difficult to contact the client, they

must develop elaborate strategies to find them: contacting their neighbours, employers, banks, etc. This search often goes on for several days or even weeks. There are three phases in the job: finding, negotiating and convincing. The emotional register to be used is broad (threat, invocation of moral sense, etc.) and should be adapted to the moral situation of the customer. They spend less time on line and the duration of the calls is longer (2 minutes and 54 seconds). The variety of the job and the need to be creative is clearly greater here, even if they have frequently to deal with difficult situations (aggressive customers, people with financial difficulties, etc.).?

Control practices

In both call centres, the nature of control is very similar. It can be divided in three broad areas

Info-normative control: Information technologies contribute greatly to enhancing control. In this company, a specific department is dedicated to developing, implementing and exploiting the criteria used to assess the performance of the employees. These controls are linked to the results obtained by the workers and to the means they use to reach their performance goals. There is a continuous individual and team assessment, and the results are used to determine (a limited part of) the salary. A continuous feedback on the degree of goal achievement is permanently available to the workers through the computer system, and every team permanently knows its previous and current position in the inter-team league table. A feeling of guilt was clearly visible among those in a bad position and they try hard to recover as quickly as possible.

Direct supervision: A manager is responsible for each team and is continuously present in the room. They directly control the activity by regularly listening in to the telephone conversations. The aim is to improve the performance of each worker through regular reminders of the criteria and suggesting the "right way" to handle the task. They also pay attention to emotional work, stating for instance the tone of voice to be adopted in a particular situation. In case of insufficient performance, they make a deal with the operator, deciding the way to achieve the expected level of result and determining the schedule to do so. In this case, a "moral contract" is agreed with the employee. Through that, the employee considers himself as responsible for his success or failure.

Ideological control (Mintzberg, 1990): The company has developed a culture of excellence that is present in the many supports employed (training sessions, posters, extra-professional activities, etc.).

When joining the company, everybody is made aware that the job is not simple, is challenging and that only "the best of the best" will be able to hold the position. A strong team spirit is promoted, based on the concept of commitment. Good people are those who undertake to do things and then carry them through, whatever the personal cost involved. This promotes a distance with "bad customers", who have entered into a commitment and have failed to honour it in the long run. The better people are therefore those who are in the team, reach their goal and contribute to the collective success of the group and the company. Among other values, the company also emphasises the social utility of the job, and promotes competition between the sales and after-sales control centres.

If we consider the panoptical versus empowerment model, we can say that the sales sector follows the panoptical model, with strict control and simple tasks, while the after-sales sector is a composite model, where relatively varied and rich tasks are associated with a strict control.

Emotion and well-being

The results show that the sources of satisfaction and the nature of the stressors in the two work situations were different. In the sales call centre, negative emotions appeared when the workers were confronted with situations that delayed the execution of the task at hand and when achievement of the goals was hindered. For example, when they understand from the interaction that it will exceed the "normal" duration due, for instance, to a customer who speaks slowly or who asks for many detailed explanations, we observed negative emotions. In contrast, when they perceive indicators in the situation that the interaction will shortly reach a positive end, they express positive emotion.

In the after-sales call centre, negative emotions were related to the presence of direct managerial control. In fact, the main source of negative emotions appears when the supervisor approaches the employees.

With respect to coping strategies, there are also sectorial differences. Interviews lead to the conclusion that the coping strategies of the sales control centre were oriented towards rapid achievement of the required results. The operators explained that they aim to build "moments off" after periods when they try to "run faster than the machine". This kind of behaviour has already been observed in industrial assembly lines (see also Grosjean, 1995). These strategies help to give a certain feeling of temporal control in an environment where the temporal constraints are high.

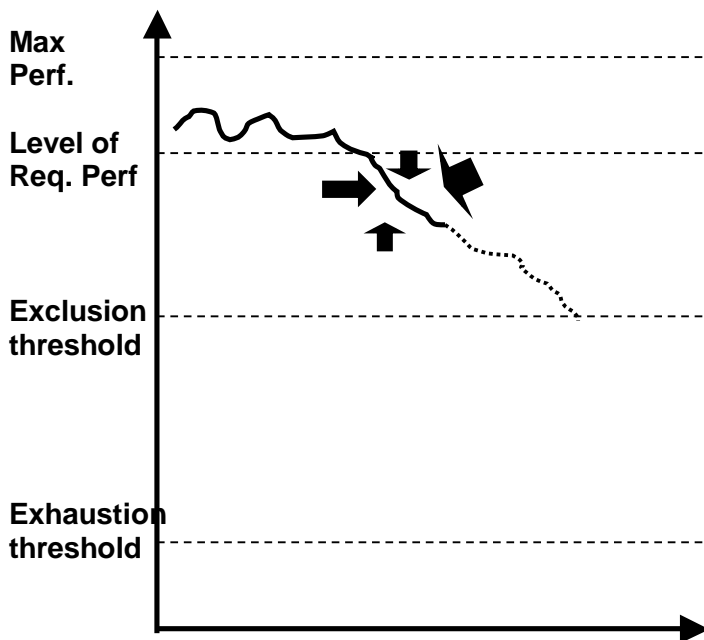
These coping strategies are not present in the after-sales control centre, where the main stressors are linked to the level of control and where the tasks are considered as richer. In both situations, we observed the appearance of cynicism and denigration of the customers, even if this behaviour is officially banned in the company.

When people start having difficulty to reach their goal, they enter in a vicious circle. They first have to accept to enter a remediation program that they should define with their management. If they are still unsuccessful in achieving their target, they start to feel guilty and their self-esteem is affected. This is also accompanied by a feeling of exhaustion. At this point, group pressure to remain among the best coincides with management pressure. Shortly afterwards, the operator agrees with the idea that he or she no longer deserves to have a place in the team and in the company and leaves. This process presents certain similarities with the concept of *burnout*, but also with a generalised mobbing against the “weak link” of the chain. The competitive and excellence culture, accepted by the worker as something normal and valuable, certainly plays a role in this process. In the end, everybody agrees that it would be better for “the weak” to leave.

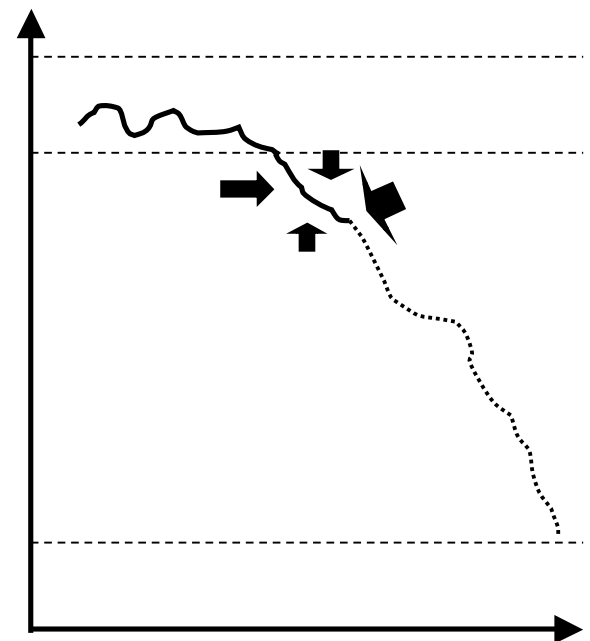
Conclusion

These observations lead to the hypothesis of compatibility between the modes of control and the nature of the tasks, where complex tasks requiring creativity and initiative in association with a detailed level of control are perceived as intrusive by the workers. Even if current technologies allow for continuous and precise monitoring of human performance in modern work situations such as call centres in the interests of well-being, it may be better not to exploit the full possibilities of these technologies.

The long-term effects of such organisational practices were not explored in the study. The fact that the joint degradation of well-being and performance leads to rapid departure from the company certainly reduces the effects in the long run, particularly in comparison with companies where the exclusion occurs later (link with the burning syndrome of nurses in the health-care sector). However, only an investigation of the psychological health of people who have left could reveal their mental state of mind. An ecological approach to the health effects of this kind of organisation should therefore be undertaken.



Graph 2.A. Excluding O.S. (organisational structures)



Graph 2. B. Exhausting O. S.

When the performance is under the requested level, the worker begins to be under pressure. In the excluding model, he/she must leave when under the exclusion threshold. In the exhausting level, he/she only leaves when under the exhaustion threshold.

In the same vein, we can compare two kinds of organisational structures (see graphs 2.A. et 2.B.), differentiating **excluding organisational structures** (OS) from **exhausting organisational structures**. Both types refer to work environments where there is a high level of job demand and a high degree of personal involvement. In *exhausting* OS, where individuals are no longer able to cope with the high demands of the job, they enter into a negative cycle where a feeling of inefficiency and guiltiness on the one hand and attempts to reach the required goals in spite of this on the other go hand in hand. The two factors tend to reinforce each other, and could also be reinforced by environmental pressure (customers, colleagues, hierarchy). As there is no objective way of escaping the negative loop, the worker starts to “fall apart”, then becomes completely exhausted and eventually leaves the job in a state of deep exhaustion (part **B** of the graph). This is what occurs with health-care staff in hospitals in the case of the phenomenon of burnout,

which has often been reported in this class of working environment. In the *Excluding* OS observed in our two call centres for example, when the performance level begins to drop the workers also come under pressure, not only self imposed pressure but also pressure from other members of staff and management. Hence, there are two possibilities: the ability to return to the expected level of performance or not. In the second case, structural and personal factors rapidly result in the employee (more or less voluntarily) leaving the company. This second model is presented in the part A of the graph. From a moral point of view, there is certainly room for discussion, but we should also consider the issue of the health of the employees. What is worse: to remain in the job until reaching the level of exhaustion described in other presentations of this conference or to leave early and have the opportunity to recover afterwards outside of the company? Here again, a more comprehensive examination of the interaction between working life and public health would be necessary to progress to an answer.

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