

## How can we help?

>> **GOOD PRACTICE**

>> **IN CALL CENTRE**

>> **EMPLOYMENT**

Was kann ich  
für Sie tun?

¿A sus órdenes?

Tot hun dienst?

Come possiamo  
esservi utile?

A leur service?

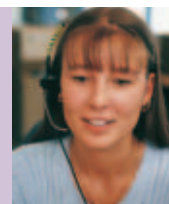
Как га им помогнем?

Jane Paul &  
Ursula Huws  
for the  
**TOSCA**  
Project



HOW CAN WE HELP? GOOD PRACTICE IN CALL CENTRE EMPLOYMENT >>

## Executive Summary



**Call centres are a fast-growing area of employment in Europe. Two million Europeans work in call centres, and many more are likely to do so in the future.**

**This handbook draws on research into call centre employment carried out by the TOSCA<sup>1</sup> project in seven European countries funded by the European Commission's Information Society Technologies (IST) Programme.**

The first project set up at a European level to carry out systematic research on call centre employment, TOSCA's work included an extensive review of the existing evidence, a survey of call centres in Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK as well as in-depth case studies in each of these countries to gain a comprehensive overview of social conditions in call centres<sup>2</sup>. Led by the European Trade Union Confederation (the ETUC) TOSCA is also unique as the only trade union led project funded under the European Commission's Information Societies (IST) Programme.

This study looks at the social conditions in a wide range of different types of call centres in Europe across a broad spread of different



sectors, and asks what is being done, and what else can be done, to promote good practice in call centre employment. It has been written for anyone with an interest in promoting good practice and making improvements in this area. It aims to provide practical guidance for consideration by policy makers, human resources managers, trade unionists, training providers, recruitment consultants, occupational safety and health practitioners and other stakeholders committed to developing good practice in call centre employment in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> The acronym TOSCA stands for Table d'Observation Sociale des Centres D'Appels.

<sup>2</sup> Reports of the TOSCA survey and the TOSCA case studies can be downloaded from the TOSCA website on <http://www-it.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/TOSCA/>

## >> Pay

Fairness, equal pay and transparency are hallmarks of good employment practice. To achieve this, call centres need pay systems that provide a living wage and reward all employees fairly and consistently and at the appropriate rate for the job. The guide covers all the main elements of call centre pay systems, including pay arrangements for atypical workers and the legal requirements that affect pay in the European context.

## >> Performance monitoring

Performance monitoring is an almost universal feature of call centres. It takes various forms, but electronic performance monitoring is the aspect that prompts most complaints from call handlers. This study looks at some of the issues involved – unrealistic performance pressures and targets, excessive surveillance, restrictions on individual movements, communications and breaks, and lack of personal privacy.

Here, good employment practice includes ensuring that

- human needs are taken into account in the design of performance monitoring systems
- adequate training and support are provided for staff
- consultation with call centre workers about the design and operation of performance monitoring systems
- ensuring that monitoring methods and assessment criteria are consistently, and are clear, transparent and bias-free

- training team leaders in how to provide positive feedback to staff with the aim of improving performance as an alternative to applying disciplinary sanctions.

## >> Working hours

Working time arrangements are a critical issue for call centres. With many call centres operating into the night or round the clock, and/or operating across different time zones, the extensive use of shift systems and overtime arrangements can pose significant challenges for call centre staff and managers. Problems can include increased risks to workers' health and safety and difficulties in recruiting and retaining experienced staff, resulting in high staff turnover, low morale, increased costs, reduced productivity and poor quality services. The challenge is to manage working time in positive ways that operate in the interests of workers and employers alike.

The guide looks at legal issues, weekly working hours, breaks, shift systems, emergency cover and call out arrangements, overtime, flexible working, part-time work and related issues involving transport, security and welfare facilities.

Examples of good practice include participative arrangements for allocating shifts, and flexible arrangements for taking breaks, including screen breaks and breaks for recovery time or support following difficult, abusive or distressing calls.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED



## >> Organisational structures and systems

Organisational structures and systems are central to service delivery and employment relations in call centres. The way that work is organised can affect every aspect of call centre work, including managerial relationships, performance management, staffing levels and job design, operational requirements, human resource management and industrial relations.

This guide covers

- managerial responsibilities and decision-making processes
- work organisation
- work distribution and job design
- team composition and team leadership
- staffing arrangements
- homeworking.



## >> Recruitment, training and staff development

The rapid growth of call centre services and the increasingly competitive call centre market in Europe means that issues of recruitment, retention, training and development are very high on the call centre management agenda. But repetitive work, stressful working conditions, relatively low pay and lack of opportunities for career development and pay progression can mean that the call centre workforce is often transient, with high annual turnover rates and consequently high recruitment and training costs for employers. Without effective strategies for combating these effects, larger call centres in particular can end up heavily reliant on casual staff and temporary or transient workers such as students, who may lack the necessary training for the job.

Training and career development are important for managers and team leaders as well as for call handlers. Call centre services are changing fast, and so is the technology they depend on. The pace and nature of these changes means that managers and team leaders need specific types of management training and skills, including change management, human resources, team building and managing systems development. This section of the guide looks at some of the initiatives taken jointly by employers, trade unions, recruitment professionals and training providers to tackle these problems.

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### >> Health and safety

Safeguarding the health safety and welfare of employees is an essential part of good employment practice. Call centre work involves significant risks to health and safety, and these are not always recognised or addressed. As a result, many call centres in Europe report high levels of sickness absence amongst their staff. The risks include

- stress-related ill health
- occupational voice loss
- acoustic shock
- visual fatigue
- musculo-skeletal disorders
- repetitive strain injuries
- violence and harassment
- postural problems affecting the health of expectant mothers and their unborn children.

The guide summarises the hazards of call centre work, and how the risks arising from them can be prevented or controlled. It also looks at the provision of welfare facilities in call centre environments and health and safety issues affecting home-based call handlers. It discusses the legal duties on call centre employers for health and safety and risk management, including risk assessment, prevention and control.

### >> Equal opportunities and workplace culture

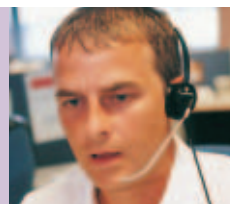
Fair and equal treatment is fundamental to good employment practice. The guide examines some important aspects of workplace culture and organisational ethos in call centre employment, including equal opportunities, work-life balance, dignity at work and wider discrimination issues. It looks at the requirements of European law and their implications for call centre employment. It highlights examples of good practice in developing a positive and productive workplace culture that protects dignity at work, promotes a positive work life balance and removes barriers to employment, training and development, enabling call centre employers to fully utilise the skills and potential of the whole workforce.

Demands for longer operating hours and flexible staffing arrangements can mean conflicting demands on workers that make it hard for them to combine call centre work and personal life. Employers and employees alike are benefiting from a more flexible approach that balances business needs and individual needs.

Practical measures to improve workplace culture and equal opportunities include flexible working hours, effective quality policies and procedures, maternity and parental leave, childcare provision, equal access to employment training and promotion, and positive provisions for disabled workers.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED



### >> Industrial relations issues

Freedom of association and freedom of expression are fundamental human rights, both at work and in personal life. Good employment practices recognise this and make arrangements for consultation and collective representation of staff.

The study examines some of the ways in which employers, their employees, employee representatives and other interested parties can work together at all levels to develop and promote good practice in call centre employment. It looks at the background to collective bargaining and union organisation in call centres, and at some of the innovative initiatives and agreements reached. Despite obstacles to progress in this area, including the transient nature of the workforce, considerable progress has been made, particularly where there has been a past tradition of collective organisation and representation.



### >> Conclusions

Progress in improving call centre employment conditions has been brought about by a combination of trade union activity and proactive approaches to employment by progressive employers.

In some cases other policy stakeholders, such as government organisations, the European Commission, and NGOs have also played a part by funding research, training schemes or pilot projects, by organising conferences or workshops by designing regional economic development strategies involving call centre employment and by a variety of other means. This has yielded benefits for employees and employers alike – and not only in the short-term.

In recent years there has been significant progress towards a better model of employment practice in call centres. More and more call centres are attempting to break away from their negative image and find radical and positive human-centred solutions.

There is little doubt that changes are needed. Failure to break the pattern of low pay, lack of flexibility, intensive workloads, unrealistic performance targets, constant monitoring, poor job design and unhealthy working conditions will perpetuate existing problems and will store up serious risks for the future.

A shift in corporate values in some call centres may help to ensure that short-term gains of increased productivity, meeting targets or securing contracts are not outweighed by longer term losses resulting



from sickness absence, high turnover, low productivity or poor service delivery.

Trade unions have a major part to play in shaping the call centres and contact centres of the future, and making sure that future changes benefit the people who work in them. Working together across Europe, sharing information and examples of good practice, learning from the past, and bringing other call centres up to the standards of the best can all help to make these changes positive. Trade unions will need to proceed on several different fronts simultaneously to achieve these broad goals.

At the most basic level, they will need to continue to promote their traditional values and bargaining agendas already developed in other types of employment and transfer them to the new working environment of the call centre. This includes demands for

such things as higher salary levels, more continuity and security in working agreements, combating stress, ensuring more worker control of work rhythms, improving workstation ergonomics, working hours and holidays and defending workers' privacy.

But these traditional roles are not enough in themselves. In order to tackle the special problems of call centre employment, trade unions will also need to supplement their traditional negotiating and collective representation role with more personalised and specialised individual services. They will also need to revise the relationships between federations to take account of inter-sectoral mobility, and develop means of co-operating more closely across sectoral and national boundaries as well as becoming more responsive to the needs of women workers.

It must, however, be recognised that for many workers call centres may continue to be a transient form of employment, perhaps taken up as temporary work whilst studying or to fit in with some other life transition, such as a period spent looking after young children or caring for a sick parent. In such cases it is extremely important that measures are taken to ensure that during such periods call centre workers still have access to learning opportunities which will give them genuinely transferable skills that they can take with them to other sectors of the economy or use in their capacities as citizens of the information society.

## The TOSCA Partners



**European  
Trades Union  
Confederation**



**Analytica Social and  
Economic Research (UK)**



**Communications  
Workers Union  
(Ireland)**



**Confédération  
Générale du Travail  
(France)**



**Fundacion Formacion y Empleo  
"Miguel Escalera" (Spain)**



**Institut de Formation  
Syndicale Internationale of  
the FGTB (Belgium)**



**Institut Syndical d'Etudes et  
de recherches Economiques et  
Sociales (France)**



**ISA-Consult (Germany)**



**Istituto di Ricerche  
Economiche e  
Sociali (Italy)**



**Sofia University  
(Bulgaria)**

Call centre work is probably the fastest-growing form of employment in Europe, but also one of the most controversial. Are the two million Europeans currently estimated to be working in call centres a new form of sweated labour? Or can this new sector provide the basis for the creation of new high-quality jobs in a thriving information economy? Whilst some call centres experience acute problems of operator burnout, stress and high absenteeism and turnover rates, others have succeeded in creating pleasant working environments with good conditions, opportunities for professional development and a motivated, satisfied workforce. How have they achieved this?

This authoritative study draws on extensive research carried out in seven European countries by the European Commission-funded TOSCA project, led by the European Trade Union Confederation. It is aimed at employers, trade unions, training providers, recruitment agencies, policy makers and any other stakeholders with an interest in developing good practice in this important new field of employment.

Illustrated with successful real-life examples, it presents succinct guidelines to good practice across all aspects of call centre employment including pay, performance monitoring, working hours, organisational structures, recruitment, training, staff development, health and safety, equal opportunities, workplace culture and industrial relations.

To find out how to get your copy of this 80-page report, visit the TOSCA website:  
<http://www-it.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/TOSCA/>

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