

## CALL CENTRES

Sometimes referred to as the modern equivalent of the industrial revolution's 'dark satanic mills', many call centres aren't dark and don't look very menacing. But there are a whole range of occupational health and safety issues that need addressing in them to ensure the safety and health of those working there.

It is estimated that 1–1.7% of Britain's workforce currently work in a call centre. The TUC call centre hotline recently dealt with nearly 400 calls in one week, with callers complaining about bullying, impossible sales targets, not getting wages on time and hostility to unions.

A lot of the issues that arise have been addressed in previous Daily Hazard Factsheets (call the Centre for details). Here we highlight those issues not covered before.

### What's a call centre?

Call centres are where workers sit at computer terminals answering telephone calls about their employers business. They can be small or massive in size. They can be found in the public, private and privatised sector. Staff work their way through computer programmes to answer the callers questions, take orders, record details etc.

### Pace of work

One of the biggest problems reported by call centre workers is the pace of work. Many, if not most, require workers to meet targeted numbers of calls, sometimes with absolutely no space between each call. Some centres have a screen showing the rate of calls being processed; can identify slower workers to their colleagues; have computer programmes which push for more work to be done by displaying messages on individual workers screens.

A forced pace of work can lead to stress, repetitive strain injuries, and other ill-health. Employers are legally required to provide a 'safe system of work' so if the work makes people ill, it is unsafe and unions or staff reps should negotiate a safer pace of work.

Because of the repetitive and monotonous nature of the work, people have complained of 'repetitive brain injury' or 'zombification'.

### Voice loss

Call centre workers' voices are under great pressure because of the nature of

their work. Conditions affecting the voice (dysphonia) can be short or long term, some permanent. Workers should report all cases of discomfort or loss to the voice. Employers should provide liquid so staff can 'wet their whistle' while working and the job should be designed so there are rest periods for the voice as well as other body parts (eg. arms to avoid RSI risk).

### Angry customers

Call centre staff are likely to have to endure customer complaints about the failures of their employer's systems, be it service delivery, poor quality goods, wrong goods etc. Clients can become very agitated when things go wrong and dealing with this constantly can be a stressor for the worker, who is after all not responsible. The TUC recommends employers recognise this as a problem and set systems in place so harassed staff can remove themselves from calls until they have been able to recuperate.

### Sight disorders

Computer operators have reported such symptoms as soreness or dryness of the eyes, blurred vision, light sensitivity and headaches from working long hours in front of a VDU screen, referred to as computer vision syndrome. This requires the employer to provide regular eye tests, frequent breaks away from the screen, additional lighting where needed etc.

### Rest and toilet breaks

Where workers are having to sit in one position all day at work, sometimes for many hours, they must be allowed breaks away from their workstation. Natural breaks like going to the toilet, refreshment or lunch breaks help but may not be enough.

Some employers in this industry have resorted to bullying tactics over length of time for toilet breaks, all with the aim of keeping up productivity. Hazards magazine recently reported the range of ill-health conditions that can develop if people are not allowed to go to the toilet when they need to. The government's advisory body HELA recommends call centre staff get breaks often and that they are not too short (see references below). All breaks should be negotiated and taken by employees.

### Headsets

To enable workers to operate a computer and listen and talk to the callers at the same time, centre

workers wear headsets. These come in all shapes and sizes but could be for both or just one ear and may sit outside the ear resting on the outer ear or plug into the actual ear hole itself. These present three main problems, suitability and comfort, noise levels and hygiene.

### Suitable headsets

Whatever choice of headset is made they must be comfortable to wear over a working day, be light weight, they must be adjustable to fit the different sized heads and ears of those at work, must not restrain the movement of worker etc.

### Noisy headsets

Some headsets may not have adjustable volume controls and are set at high volume levels. In some workplaces the general office background noise levels can be very high and the volume for the headsets will be adjusted louder still.

This is a problem as the levels of noise going into the ear from the headsets can be higher than the first or second action level in the Control of Noise at Work Regulations. Therefore their continued use is likely to damage hearing over a period of time and is a breach of these regulations. It is known that industry standard headphones can and do breach the regulations. To avoid this employers should tackle the general noise levels in the office by using screens, booths etc. Employers should then require the manufacturers of headsets to provide them with noise level details of their headsets, and employers should choose accordingly.

Another noise phenomenon in headsets is 'acoustic shock', where the wearer is exposed to short but very loud bursts of noise which can temporarily or permanently damage the wearer's hearing. It is also reported as being very painful to receive. The CWU has over 80 compensation cases pending and BT has already paid out £93,000 to one worker.

To prevent this occurring checks must be made on the system used before installation and regularly during use to ensure these peaks are not being broadcast. Workers should report all incidents in the accident book to ensure a true picture of the problem at the workplace is recorded and the statistics should be made available to safety reps and workers.

Noise limiters can be put on the system to deal with both the above problems. However, they must not be easy for the worker to disable, as in noisy offices there may be a need to

go over safe limits. Again, tackle the noise at source and reduce office noise so the system does not have to be disabled.

### Unhygienic headsets

Some employers operate a pool of headsets where workers put them in a box at the end of the day and pick any one out of there when they return to work. This is to be discouraged as there is a serious risk of ear infections being passed around a workplace. Some ear infections can lead to serious hearing disorders.

A better system is for each worker to be provided with their own headset by the employer and somewhere to keep it in out of work hours. Even using this system, employers should ensure they have a system in place to keep the headsets clean and healthy with regular maintenance and replacement where necessary.

## References

*Hazards* magazine. This excellent publication has produced many articles on call centres, voice loss, computer vision syndrome etc. It is now supported by the TUC and recommended by them to all Safety Reps. See [www.hazards.org](http://www.hazards.org) or e-mail [sub@hazards.org](mailto:sub@hazards.org) or call 01142 67 8936.

A lot of unions, including CWU, Unison, GMB and MSF have put out good information about call centres. Check with your union. The TUC has information on its web site at [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

The main government advice is contained in the HELA advice document 'Initial advice regarding call centre working practices' number LAC 94 published 1999. Available free from your local HSE office.

'Occupational voice loss. A negotiators guide. BIFU.' Unifi, tel: 020 8946 9151.