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Emotion in a call centre SME: A case study of positive emotion management

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Summary Much has been written about the negative emotional experiences of customer service representatives (CSRs) within large Anglo-Saxon call centres and very little is known about the potential positive emotions involved in this form of employment. Our research, which is based on a case study of call centre CSRs within one small-to-medium sized enterprise (SME) in the Greek telecommunications sector, challenges the ‘vocal sweatshop’ image and constructs a different type of story about call centres. We explore the nature of emotion management in this workplace by looking at the context and control of emotional performances and the conditions that would guide positive work feelings. The findings illustrate the ways in which supportiveness, caring and nurturance intertwine to form a ‘humane’ and ‘understanding’ workplace. They indicate a call centre environment where work feelings are expressed as philanthropic emotions and emerge from the reciprocal social exchange in the workplace. This paper emphasises the positive side of emotion management and suggests that emotions in this study identify with work feelings rather than emotional labour.

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Introduction

Research on emotions in call centre organisations has generally centred on the role of emotions as forms of labour or as means to instrumental ends. Most of the studies available on the subject share Hochschild’s (1983) pessimistic concerns with the negative consequences of organisations’ attempts to

shape and control employees’ emotions (cf. Deery et al., 2002; Holman et al., 2002; Mulholland, 2002; Taylor, 1998; Taylor et al., 2002; Wickham and Collins, 2004). Their emphasis on ‘management attempts to seduce employees into loving the company, its product and its customers, creates an illustration of emotionally crippled actors’ (Bolton and Boyd, 2003:290). These accounts stress CSRs’ requirement to express organisationally desired emotions during service transactions and to display their emotional dispositions under standardised and tightly controlled work processes. They frequently draw parallels to ‘vocal sweatshops’ with ‘Big Brother’

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management exercising total control (Taylor and Bain, 1999) and note the negative emotional experiences of call centre CRSs.

This pessimistic line of reasoning, however, derives from studies that have focused on: (a) the coercive employment systems adopted in the call centre industry (cf. Mulholland, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999); (b) the commercialisation of emotions in the workplace (cf. Holman et al., 2002; Taylor, 1998) ignoring the concept of bounded emotionality as well as the potential philanthropic dimensions of emotion management in call centre employment; and (c) the performance of emotion work in large call centres originating from Anglo-Saxon institutional contexts (cf. Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Korczynski, 2003; Thompson et al., 2004; Wickham and Collins, 2004). Our research, which is based on a case study of CSRs within one call centre SME in the Greek telecommunications sector, challenges the ‘vocal sweatshop’ image and constructs a different type of story about call centres. We explored the nature of emotion management in this workplace by looking at the context and control of emotional performances and the conditions that would guide positive work feelings.

Our study contributes to the current literature pertaining to emotion management in voice-to-voice interactive service work. It paints the picture of the studied call centre in a far more positive light than most of the current literature tends to. The findings indicate a ‘humane’ and ‘understanding’ workplace, which is far distant from the traditional tightly controlled and monitored ‘sweatshop’. Our research also provides valuable insights into the performance of emotion management within one SME. Despite the plethora of studies on the emotions of front-line staff (cf. Holman et al., 2002; Korczynski, 2003), to date, CSRs’ emotions in SMEs have largely been neglected, even though there may be reasons to suggest that emotion work in SMEs may be performed quite differently. This might be due to the loosely structured employee relations (Marlow and Patton, 2002; Ram, 1994) and the culture of openly expressing and sharing feelings (Jayasinghe et al., 2008) in such workplaces. Our findings highlight an environment of caring where the demands of differing values and goals are comfortably accommodated within a fluid structure. The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by elucidating the theoretical insights of emotion in organisations and then reviewing contemporary research into call centre employment. Subsequently, the methodology employed in this study is discussed, leading to the presentation of the findings of rich qualitative data. The article culminates in a series of implications and the identification of a number of potentially fruitful avenues for further research.

Emotion in organisations

This section presents the theoretical background of this study that is embedded within three conceptual frameworks: emotional labour, bounded emotionality and philanthropic emotion management.

Emotional labour

Emotional labour refers to the ‘management of feelings’ (Hochschild, 1983:7) or ‘behaviour’ (Ashford and Humphrey,

1993:90) creating a publicly observable embodied display. It is the ‘effort, planning, and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions’ (Morris and Feldman, 1996:987). Hochschild (1983:119) was first to popularise the concept of ‘emotional labour’ in an attempt to describe emotion management with a ‘profit motive slipped under it’. Her study of airline cabin crew indicated how emotional labour is increasingly becoming an essential part of those occupational categories that: first, require contact with the public; second, require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person; and, third, allow the employer, through close supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees.

Ashford and Humphrey (1993), who were more concerned with emotional labour as an observable behaviour than as a management of feelings, suggest that in front-line roles employees have to follow rules about organisationally desired emotional displays. They differentiate between explicit rules that are part of a company’s policies and implicit rules that are unwritten codes. In this respect, Morris and Feldman (1996) suggest that emotions are expressed in, and partially determined by, the social environment. They report two organisational factors that may affect the level and type of emotional labour in which employees engage: job autonomy or discretion (negative relation to emotional exhaustion and positive relation to job satisfaction) and supervisor and co-worker support (positive feelings about the social environment mean that less emotional labour is necessary). They also propose attentiveness (intensity and duration of emotional display) to required rules as one of the key constructs of emotional labour. They conceptualise that the more attentiveness to rules is required, the more effort is demanded by the role occupants, thus the more emotional labour is displayed.

Related to this, Hochschild (1983:33) distinguishes between two ways that employees may perform emotional labour: through ‘surface acting’, where one regulates the emotional expressions, and through ‘deep acting’, where one consciously modifies feelings in order to express the desired emotion. Guerrier and Abid (2003:1415) address this issue by considering the extent to which front line workers are authentic in their work. In their study, they identified tour reps, who engaged in surface acting as ‘surface inauthenticities’ and reps, who were able to buy into a lifestyle that reflected their ‘authentic selves’. Their study suggested that the ability of employees to express their authentic selves through work reduces the negative consequences of emotional labour.

In this context, Hochschild proposes the distinction between the ‘true’ and ‘false’ self. The manner in which she constructs this distinction is important as, in her conception, deep-acting workers have ‘little or no sense of a false self’ (Hochschild, 1983:187) and their efforts to conjure up sincere performances result in altering one’s self – ‘by pretending deeply, she alters herself’ (ibid. 33). At the other hand, cynical performances in the form of ‘surface acting’ result in ‘alienation’ from one’s ‘true self’ when one lacks control over his/her work (ibid. 187). Either way, emotions are believed to become ‘transmuted’ by the organisation and the ‘smile’, ‘mood’, ‘feeling’ or ‘relationship’, ‘comes to belong more to the organisation and less to the self’ (ibid.

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