



Customer relationship management in call centers: The uneasy process of re(form)ing the subject through the ‘people-by-numbers’ approach

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Abstract

Real-time technology has the capability of symbolising both customers and call center representatives (and the moment of interaction), purely by/as numbers, or forms. The pinnacle of this data processing is customer relationship management (CRM), where the digitised data is assembled so as to reproduce a mimetic model of the customer. This could be seen as a metamyth (Adams & Ingersoll, 1990) that, in its concealed appearance within corporate databases, seems to cut loose from any critical inquiry. In this paper, we offer an embryonic form of such a critique through the analysis of a number of original call center case studies. It seeks to analyze the nature of abstraction at the heart of IT-based CRM practices, and the contradictions that such abstraction can foster.

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1. Introduction

In the UK alone, the call center industry now employs more people than the coal, steel and automotive sectors combined. Call or contact centers are the fastest growing new form of work organisation. ‘Estimates vary, but industry experts suggest there are around 5500 UK call centers employing almost 400,000 workers (DTI, 2004, p. 1). While the speed of

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this growth in both the UK and the US has slowed down as a result of the expansion of global off shore outsourcing (Mirchandani, 2003, 2005; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2006; Odindo, Diacon, & Ennew, 2004; Taylor & Bain, 2005), call centers remain of considerable interest for students of new forms of work and especially those focusing on the use of advanced information and communication technology. In this paper, we address an aspect of call center activities that we believe has major significance for the future – the use of customer relationship management (CRM) and its effects upon customer service representatives (CSRs) and, more limitedly, customers. Our objective is to examine customer relationship management (CRM) in a call center in order to demonstrate its potential to colonise the identities of both call center workers and customers. We elaborate this later but briefly it is about how individuals’ sense of themselves can be appropriated in the service of management concerns to secure organisational objectives. Technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988a, 1988b) are expected to transform call center staff into self-disciplined subjects of sales and service who, in turn, facilitate a parallel self-disciplined consumption on the part of customers. Overall, the paper seeks to analyze the nature of abstraction at the heart of IT-based CRM practices, and the contradictions that such abstraction can foster in a way not dissimilar to Kallinikos (1995) when he speaks about the architecture of the invisible.

The paper is divided into two main sections the first of which describes how the pursuit of high levels of service quality and the use of data in managing relations has changed the nature of work for call center staff. It is clear that surveillance of staff continues through the electronic boards and the automatic distribution of calls (ADC). However, the *content* of the customer service representatives (CSR’s) activities and not just the framework of the activity has become the locus of management monitoring. The objective is to convert this content into electronic data that can be manipulated for the purposes of improving performance. Customer relationship management (CRM) involves a re-appropriation of management control over the sales activity in a way not dissimilar from how scientific management re-asserted control over shopfloor production through separating conception from execution in the early part of the 20th century (Braverman, 1974; Taylor, 1911). Since we are not IT specialists, we take an ensemble, multi-layered, multi-actor, and processual view of CRM. In doing so, we aim to avert the pitfalls of either an excessive focus on the technology-as-tool and information processing capacity with little reference to the social relations that are its condition and consequence, or a purely nominal view in which the technology is taken for granted and only invoked in name but not in fact (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001, p. 128). Orlikowski and Iacono conceptualise the ensemble view of technology with four variants: technology as a development project, production network, an embedded system and technology as a structure but all converging on ‘the dynamic interactions between people and technology, whether during construction, implementation, or use in organisations’ (2001, p. 126). We pursue a conceptualisation of the interactions between the numerous material and human entities: CRM technologies, techniques, data, call center staff, managers and customers, and forms of monitoring and control. This monitoring and control could be seen as loosely allied to the technology as embedded system enmeshed with the conditions of its use.

The second section focuses on some of the responses of management and CSRs to CRM and staff monitoring in our case study organisations. Questions are raised about the effectiveness of CRM and its inexorable pursuit of a technologically simulated, mimetic model of the customer. Space permits only a few examples of where the mimetic

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