



# The contradictions of CRM – A critical lens on call centres

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the contradictions of CRM systems and their use in call centres and in doing so contribute to the literature on critical information systems research. By invoking a critical perspective our analysis shows significant contradictions between system objectives and outcomes in practice. With reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist and critical social theorist, we highlight the powerful theoretical lens that his work can provide for information systems researchers. Using an empirical study, which draws upon Bourdieu's key concepts of field, habitus, logic of practice and symbolic violence, we illustrate how these processes of contradiction operate at the local level in the context of the field.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs), stories abound relating to the transformation of work arising as a result of the application and use of such technologies. A recent example of this so-called transformation is the setting of call centre work, specialized offices that have been established by organizations with the

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intention of delivering a range of services to customers over the telephone. Employees or agents<sup>1</sup> spend their time in near constant contact with customers, making or receiving calls and processing the information. These call centres utilize a range of ICTs which are seen to maximize efficiency and productivity (Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 2000). Call centres are often portrayed as knowledge intensive working environments employing skilled, semi-professional workers recruited for their strong interpersonal skills (Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski, & Shire, 1998). Yet despite these positive images, call centres are often fraught with contradictions. The objective of this paper is to explore these contradictions and oppositional tendencies in our analysis of CRM in call centres, by invoking a critical perspective to help understand the context of the field and the response of the social agents within the field.

In order to aid our critical analysis, we will use the conceptual tools provided by Pierre Bourdieu. The critical social theory of Bourdieu provides intellectual foundations useful in the critique of information systems and organizational research where individuals are often marginalized (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), as is often the case in call centre employment. Bourdieu shows appreciation of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the world they inhabit. He discusses the unity and regularity of systems and their practical coherence on the one hand, yet also describes their ‘fuzziness’ and irregularities on the other. Both of these elements are equally necessary and inscribed into what he terms the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). This is an important aspect to consider when looking at CRM system use – often embedded in notions of transformation, in terms of organizations in a global knowledge economy, of new ways of working, and of virtuality central to communication amongst ‘stakeholders’.

The paper shall proceed by firstly outlining the research objectives. We shall then introduce the environmental context and the nature of call centre work. Following this, Bourdieu’s key concepts of field, habitus, logic of practice and symbolic violence and their roles in the ‘circuit of reproduction’ (Bourdieu, 1990) will be discussed. These concepts are then applied to the empirical material arising from the field study. Finally, conclusions are drawn that stress the important contribution that the ‘theoretical scaffolding’ (Walsham, 2001) of Bourdieu and – more generally – empirically based critical research has made to the study of organizational practice in the context of information systems research.

## 2. Research objectives

The objective of this research is to explore the tensions and contradictions that exist within call centre work. We also aim to add to the small, but steadily increasing literature on critical IS research by specifically drawing on the conceptual tools provided by Pierre Bourdieu to provide insights into the empirical study discussed below. The process of conducting critical research means disrupting ongoing social reality in order to question what is often ignored or taken for granted and gain a critical and richer insight into issues raised. It has been noted elsewhere (particularly in Critical Management Studies) that much of the research into organizational life has tended to conform or reproduce dominating institutions and interests (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Indeed, one of the greatest criticisms levelled at critical research is the lack of extended empirical studies (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Boudreau, 1997). More recently, a number of empirically grounded critical IS research studies are beginning to emerge (Alvarez,

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<sup>1</sup> Customer services agent is probably the most commonly used term in the UK (Belt et al., 2000, p. 9).

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