Emotional labour in call centres - arlie hochschild

The shift away from manufacturing industries in Britain towards service sector industries within the late 20th century, has led to a considerable growth within employment in the service sector (Hough, 2004), with many employees now involved in front-line service interactions with clientele or customers. Call Centres in particular has experienced a growth up to 400, 000 employees; more than coal, steal and car manufacturing industry put together (Toynbee, 2003). As a result of their rapid growth, it has provided a fascinating field of study for academic research into the human component of the working environment, with the process of work and its associated control and employment relations at the centre focus of most debates (Fernie&Metcalf, 1997). Given that Call Centre employees are working in an environment where tasks are often decidedly scripted and performance is closely controlled and monitored, academics have pointed to the similarities of this work to Tayloristic style production lines (Taylor&Bain, 1998). However due to the labour and product of call centre work being relatively intangible, unlike the distinct process of product and service delivery in factory work, the emphasis within Call centres is almost exclusively on the quality of communication. In conjunction to the physical demands, cognitive requirements also need to be considered, whether an operative is dealing with a complaint, or a customer service call, they all demand emotion from staff. The increasing demand for client-centred services in a highly competitive business environment, has recognising that service workers are able to carry out emotional work which can be used as a vital part of the capitalists labour process (Hoschild, 1979, 1983), to produce customer satisfaction. Therefore it is in an organisations' interest to comprehend the

impact of emotional labour on staff, in order to enhance the effectiveness of service and well-being of workers, ultimately decreasing costs such as stress, burnout, turnover and absenteeism (Lewig&Dollard, 2003). Thus this writing will outline the concept of emotional labour and discuss generally the costs and benefits for front-line service employees within Call Centres and for the organisation itself, before looking at the ways call centre can help support employees.

Emotional labour was a term constructed by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in her revolutionary study named ' The Managed Heart'. The term describes the control of a person's behaviour to display appropriate emotions, within a situation (chu, 2002), suggesting that certain emotions felt or not felt by an individual are suppressed or expressed in order to conform to social norms. Despite Hochschild's widely accepted definition, some researchers have defined and conceptualised emotional labour in different ways. However, the underlying assumption within organisational settings, is that emotional labour is to regulate both feelings and expressions in accordance with occupational or organisational display rules to achieve organisational goals (Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000). For example, there is little doubt that emotional work in a Call Centre for staff can be demanding, boring, exhausting, tedious and stressful (Carrim et al, 2006).   Yet to clearly display these feelings to management or customers would be in appropriate. As call centre staff are expected to appear cheerful and welcoming. Therefore from these ' rules', which can be learnt from our everyday interactions, through education, socialisation and fine -tuned by individual experiences and

socially regulated settings, we learn when and where to look sad or glad, fearsome or fearful (Payne&Cooper, 2001)

Many organisations have display rules concerning the emotions that employees should demonstrate in encounters with customers, clients, or members of the public (Hochschild, 1983). These display rules stipulate the content and range of emotions to be displayed, along with the frequency, intensity and duration that such emotions should be displayed (Morris&Feldman, 1996). These display rules may be explicit in organisation training materials, or they may be implicit in organisational norms (Sutton&Rafaeli, 1998). For example, Call Centre operatives engage in work interactively with customers on either inbound or outbound calls on actions such as sales and telemarketing, product or service information, and customer queries and complaints. These employees perform an important role in the management of customer relationships. As a consequence, service sector organizations have sought to specify the way in which employees ' present themselves' to their customers. This has led to particularly invasive forms of workplace control as operatives are now generally monitored for service quality as well as productivity. In most call centres there are constant efforts to increase the number of calls taken per employee and reduce both customer call time and wrap-up time (Taylor&Bain, 1999). Yet rules are also enforced to be cheerful happy, sociable, inoffensive and polite, despite the customer's behaviour. As the manner in which operatives display their feelings towards customers has a critical effect on the quality of service transactions (Ashforth&Humphrey, 1993). Undeniably, the quality of the interaction is often the service provided

(Leidner, 1996). The behaviour of the employee is therefore central to the success of the service transaction. These contradictory but asymmetrical pressures both create role conï¬‚ict for employees yet provide a high quality service (Knights&McCabe, 1998). To control these conflicting pressures management invents ever more imaginative ways to extract the maximum, and most sincere, performances from emotional workers ' smiling and meaning it' being the aim (Payne&Cooper, 2001).

From a similar observation Hochschild (1983) noted how 'emotional dissonance' can occur when an employee's true feelings are different from their expressed emotions. Moving further to suggest how individuals deal with emotional dissonance by either ' surface acting' or ' deep acting'. Surface acting being the effort to achieve only the expression of emotion, such as one call centre agent admitted, ' I make the right noises saying sorry…I don't really care' (). While deep acting is a conscious attempt to produce and communicate the required emotions, and to manage the situation appropriately, by working to truly relate, believe and live the customers anxiety. Continually, academics such as, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) have noted that when employees deep act, there may not be any emotional dissonance, but there is still exertion involved in achieving the appropriate emotions to follow display rules.

Despite, huge efforts to sustain expected behaviours of calm, courteous and supportive behaviour, regardless of how operatives are really feeling, or being treated by a customer, either through surface or deep acting there may come a point of illness, exhaustion and burnout, through continual

emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Suggestively, more so when an operative is continually surface acting. This is supported by Schaubroeck and Jones (2000) in an examination of adverse employee health outcomes, found that pressures to express positive emotion within a person's job was positively related to physical symptoms. With over 20% of a Call Centre interactions, containing anger and verbal abuse from a customer (Grandey, Dickter&Sin, 2004). Which is often maintained throughout the duration of the complaint, despite an operatives efforts to placate the consumer (Scherer&Ceschi, 1997). Undeniably facing hostile behaviour and abuse could lead to physical indications of unhappiness emerging as workplace stress such as hypertension, heart disease, even exacerbate cancer (Mann, 2004) due to suppression of an operatives true feelings, which may cause a burnout. Which eventually may lead to an extended struggle to care and illustrate feelings ` (Mann, 2004).

One explanation is that employees may find it more difficult to sustain higher levels of expressed positive emotion while surface acting, that this creates tension within the individual. Form this employee may then ' break character' by allowing their true feelings to ' leak' into the telephone conversation (Totterdell&Holman, 2003). The high control system employed in a Call Centres i. e. scripted working of responses and the wide knowledge and expectation from customers suggests that if this does occur customers recognise this and feel the power to ' reinforce managements control efforts reprimanding workers.... complaining to employees superiors when service [does] not meet their expectations' (Leidner, 1996, p. 40) as customers are now able to distinguish the difference between genuine ' quality service' and

' feigned quality service' (Taylor, 1998, p. 87). This in its-self leads to higher stressors within the job. In discussing her similar findings, Grandey (2003) suggested that emotional dissonance exhausts operative's resources, leaving them with too little resources to keep from ' breaking character'. This depletion of resources may also cause the individual to adopt a strategy of ' withdrawal behaviours' in order to cope with work demands to conserve resources: indeed, emotional exhaustion has been found to be associated with higher rates of employee absence (Deery et al, 2002), as control pressure from several angles becomes too much to control.

The correlation continues when looking at cognitive health cost, related to sustained emotional labour, Strazdins (2002) focuses on the cognitive processes involved, suggesting than an employee may find that their own mood becomes changed to mimic the another's negative mood, around them in the team set up of a call centre floor. This process is known as 'emotional contagion' (Pugh, 2001). The employee's cognitive processing may become negatively primed, stimulating recall of distressing events, or the employee may selectively process negative information relayed to them on the telephone, which in turn comes to affect decision-making. Negative emotions can then carry over and ' contaminate' subsequent interactions with clients, fellow workmates or employees. Recent organizational research shows that employees working in team formats such as call centre staff do, are likely to share opinions, attitudes, thoughts and moods as well as behavioral patterns and general outlooks (Salanova, Llorens&Schaufeli, 2011). Moreover, group level job characteristics have shown to affect individual burnout levels. This means that shared group feelings of burnout can be described either in

terms of comparable reactions to the same working conditions (VanYperen&Snjiders, 2000) or as the result of a process of emotional contagion (Bakker&Schaufeli, 2000). In this perspective shared burnout within a team can be interpreted as a form of collective mood. Employees evaluate themselves through comparison with similar others. Observing similar others to succeed or to fail is likely to influence another emotional contagion which may have negative as well as positive influences on self-efficacy (Gist, 1987). To positively control this successfully as a call centre manager would be hugely beneficial to all parties however for employees to perceive yet more control may simply have a negative effect.

Since Hochschild's (1983) claims that emotional labour can lead to a sense of inauthenticity, loss of feelings, diminished self-esteem, stress and burnout, other authors have supported this suggesting that emotional labour is associated with higher work stress and psychological distress (Pugliesi, 1999). Controversially, Wharton (1993) agreed that factors such as interactions with customers, self-perceptions of inadequate skills can and does adversely affect employees, however she also suggested that these weren't the only work factors contributing to the incidence of emotional exhaustion, which may not always be linked to emotional labour, including job autonomy, tenure, and working hours, high workloads, lack of variety of work tasks and low promotional opportunities; importantly, the support and help of team leaders was associated with lower emotional exhaustion (Deery Iverson,&Walsh, 2002). Amy Wharton's (1993) examination of front-line service workers found that, emotional labour may actually enhance the employee's self-efficacy, make interactions more predictable, help avoid

embarrassing disruptive interpersonal situations, and allow authentic self-expression where there is some latitude for occasional deviations from the display rules (Ashforth&Humphrey, 1993).

Morris and Feldman (1996) agreed that emotional labour is not consistently damaging or equally damaging to all employees, asserting it is emotional dissonance, not simply emotional labour, that is associated negatively with job satisfaction. Furthermore, Lewig and Dollard (2003) found that emotional dissonance is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion, feeling emotionally drained and depleted from work, is the core component of the employee stress syndrome of " burnout" (Cordes&Dougherty, 1993) which has a range of consequences for employees' health, performance, motivation, absenteeism and turnover (Schaufeli&Enzmann, 1998). Therefore the identified associations between emotional labour, emotional exhaustion and burnout are of critical importance for organisations, although admittedly they are hugely interlinked, one does not necessarily cause the other.

If emotional labour carries such a high risk for call centre operatives working for the organisation, why do nearly all call centres and other service organisations insist on enforcing such a tool? The reasoning for this is, the manner in which employees convey their feelings over the telephone can have a critical effect on the quality of service transactions (Ashforth&Humphrey, 1993). In a practical examination of these propositions, a study of Taiwanese employees found that when a " psychological climate for service friendliness" was higher, employees

displayed more positive emotions toward customers that were associated with an increased customer willingness to return with follow up custom and pass positive comments to friends. Other articles published on the topic propose that appropriately-displayed employee emotions would result in three positive consequences for organisations: immediate gains (customers would immediately co-operate), encore gains (customers would go back), and contagion gains (customers would pass positive comments to friends) (Rafaeli&Sutton, 1987). Further, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) proposed that compliance with display rules facilitates task performance. However doubt surrounding great customer employee action directly relating to purchase decisions has been raised (Tsai, 2001). As a customer simply may not be interested in the service they have been telephoned for; a current example being PPI claim back marketing call, many of thousands of people receive these calls who despite polite conversational call centre operatives, organisations may not experience immediate gains from most customers.

Therefore it can be said that although emotional labour can be damaging for both parties involved it can also be beneficial. Examining some techniques to facilitate emotional labour managers should be mindful of the costs involved in performance as well as emotional contagion, with this Egg credit cards created provision of time-out and a quiet staff-only space for staff to recover from stressful or distressing customer interactions, surrounding their call centre floor. Within this change came new job design, roles that incorporated emotional labour yet staff had some variety, autonomy, prospects of promotion, and reasonable working hours and workloads, with a culture of celebration, and support from all office members to help cope in all areas of

each other's working life. Increased by the ' community' spaces purposely built and designed within the building (Citex, 2001). The engineered culture egg brought in to the call centre supported staff. Further suggestions to help reduce the effects of negatively perceived emotional labour, is through training in 'emotional intelligence' as it enhances skills of self-awareness and self-management and in particular, can be said to enhance the performance of deep acting, eliminating performance leak. Furthermore, focus is begging to be placed on the recruitment of staff members, upon their competency of their personality, with some call centres looking upon mount et al's big 5 theory to gain the correct personalities for the job, enforcing tests and application techniques usually reserved for higher positioned jobs (Callaghan&Thompson, 2002) as HR manager managers attitudes are now aimed ' to select staff with the required attitudinal and behavioural characteristics, induct them into a quality culture . . . selection often focuses on attitudes to flexibility and customer service rather than skill or qualiïcation levels' (Redman&Mathews, 1998, p. 60). One manager went on to state ' some people are maybe not as fast round a keyboard, so they may struggle in achieving peer group average handling time for calls. But we can do something about that, we can use team coaches or leaders or training teams when available to develop that individual in those areas. It's very difïcult to change somebody's attitude. With a combination of all can achieve or at least minimise the decrease of emotional labour for all. You can tell by talking to someone during interview whether they smile, whether their eyes smile. If you smile during your interview and you are enthusiastic, you'll be okay' (Callaghan&Thomphson, 2002 p. 240)

Over all Fineman (1993, p. 1) argued that " the management and mobilization of emotions are pivotal" in " the way organizational order is achieved and undone." However, the organizational culture in Western society is heavily influenced by the rational traditions of theorists such as Weber, Taylor, and Fayol (Sashkin, 1981) and therefore strives for the cognitive " dehumanization" of organizations. As a result, much of the research on organizational phenomena has focused on the rational side of functions, issues, and components of organizational life. This results in the removal of the emotional elements of organizational life from our understanding of organizational phenomena (Fineman, 1993). In the last few decades, however, scholars have attempted to study the emotionality inherent in organizational life (for example, Hochschild, 1979; Fineman, 1993; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). From this is a growing body of research indicates that the performance of emotional labour may entail serious negative outcomes for employees, including stress, distress, decreased job satisfaction, burnout, and withdrawal behaviours such as absenteeism and turnover. It is in the organisation's interest to understand and mitigate these negative outcomes, as the effective performance of emotional labour is generally beneficial for organisations. The manager of front-line service employees can draw on recent research findings to identify a number of practical techniques to facilitate the performance of emotional labour.