

Workplace Relationships and Perceptions of Job Quality: What Does it Matter

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This paper looks at the relationship between workplace relationships and the quality of working life. It is based on exploratory research conducted in two Australian call centers using a case study approach. The case studies: Govtco and Salesplus differ significantly on a number of measures, including organization size, ownership, structure, and culture. Therefore, fittingly, the nature of workplace relationships also varies significantly. The study records two quite different approaches to people management, alongside two very different outcomes where the QWL is concerned. It offers important insight into the relationship between workplace relationships and the QWL phenomena.

Field of Research: QWL, Call centers.

1. Introduction

The concept “quality of working life (QWL)” is a dynamic and multi-dimensional construct that incorporates any number of measures relating to employment quality and the well-being of the worker (Brown et al. 2004). The QWL issues raised in the extant literature are therefore, wide and varied, including concerns such as training and development, work life balance, pay, working hours, and occupational health and safety. To narrow the scope, this paper will focus on examining one key element of the work environment in relation to its impact on the QWL: *workplace relationships*. The findings reported in this study are based on empirical case study research conducted in two call centre settings. Call centres epitomize the shift towards technology-based work, and have emerged as critical elements of the business cycle of organizations in the new economy. Although these organizations have grown in prominence, the job quality issues that have emerged in the broader Australian socio-economic context, particularly with the transition to the new economy, are also highly relevant to these workplaces (Green 2006). Green (2006) has highlighted the value of capturing the experience of those in the frontline, given their tendency to be the most intimately acquainted with the work, and thus, their potential to produce the most reliable data. For these very reasons, the subjective accounts of workers of their own lives are the foremost source of information. This paper will commence with a brief literature review on the relationship between the QWL, and workplace relationships, drawing on both the call centre and QWL literatures. An overview of the research methodology will be provided, and this will be followed with an explication of the key findings. The paper will close with a brief discussion.

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2. Literature Review

When referring to *workplace relationships*, this paper refers to two particular interactions: firstly, the relationships that exist in the work environment between customer service officers (CSOs), and secondly, the relationships that exist between CSOs and their managers/ supervisors. This paper will focus explicitly on co-worker relationships.

To date there has been little research that examines the relationships between employees in call centre workplaces. There is, however, a growing body of call centre literature that examines how employers have introduced 'fun' in to the call centre work culture to deal with some of the negativities associated with the monotonous and repetitive nature of tasks. Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (2000) suggest these measures have been brought in by management as a means of meeting the somewhat paradoxical goals of efficiency and high quality service. Team formation, for example, is a widely used strategy within call centre workplaces to improve cohesion between workers, and increase employee commitment and productivity (Kinnie et al. 2000; Russell 2004; Townsend 2004).

Case study research conducted by Kinnie et al. (2000) on two UK based call centres, suggests that team bonding activities can be associated with improvements in employee morale and satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and higher quality customer service. In Australian context, Russell (2004) found team-work to be an integral aspect of work organization in three of the call centers. Team building activities were common in these workplaces, and were partly indicative of the high commitment/ high performance goals of the organization. Townsend (2004) on the other hand, derives an example from an Australian call center of how team-formation and cohesion can be used to improve employee power and positioning. The teams involved in this study were found to use their cohesion as a means of manipulating and resisting managerial prerogative, by essentially rejecting team leaders, and calling on the union to intervene when attempts were made by management to break down the cohesiveness of the group. Townsend (2004) notes that throughout the duration of the study, this team faced ongoing attacks from management, and each time responded in "an active and disciplined manner" (p.122), highlighting the amount of influence teams potentially have in improving working conditions and employee standing in the workplace. Van den Broek et al. (2003) on the other hand argues that teams largely exist as a tool for assuring normative control – the benefits of which are more apparent to management.

The issue of workplace relationships has been more rigorously covered in the general QWL literature. Ellis and Pompili (2002)'s study of aged care nurses in 2002 revealed that relationship-based factors played the biggest part in their job satisfaction. The informal culture of the working environment was identified, with workers emphasizing the 'non-clinical, home like' environment as a positive aspect of their working lives. Roan and Diamond (2003) also confirmed the value placed on work-place relationships by young workers. The young workers, particularly those from the hospitality industry, indicated that their relationships with co-workers and the 'fun atmosphere' at work played a key role in improving their working experiences. There were similar findings in the comparative study of clerical, sales

and service workers and professionals undertaken by Bearfield (2003). The importance of working-relationships is also highlighted in Considine and Callus (2001)'s survey, which showed that 76 per cent of Australian employees were satisfied with the way their colleagues got along with each other at work. From these studies, it appears that Australian workers place great importance on the relationships they have with their co-workers, and that these experiences have a significant influence on the quality of their working lives. This in itself, is a justification for the inclusion of this indicator in the list of QWL components to be investigated in the call centre context.

Although these studies highlight how employees perceive their relationships with their co-workers, they fail to explain how much value employees place on this component in relation to other components that determine their overall quality of working life. The impact of these factors on employees general working life experiences is therefore difficult to gauge. This paper will attempt to narrow this gap by examining these dimensions. This paper will also examine how call center employees' relationships with co-workers influence the quality of their working lives, given the highly individualized nature of the work. The amount of value employees place on these relationships, and steps taken by management to either facilitate, or impede social interactions will also be examined.

3. Methodology

Research took place in two call centres, one public and one private sector referred to in this paper as Govtcall and Salesplus respectively (See table 1). Govtcall is located in a regional city on the east coast of Australia while Salesplus is located in a capital city on the east coast of Australia. Although these organisations are by no means intended to represent the total population in their respective sectors, it was considered important to examine both sectors as there are significant differences in working conditions between the two (Burgess et al. 2005).

A qualitative case study methodology was adopted as it catered for the multiplicity of 'reality' captured through subjective experiences, and allowed for examination of the experiences of CSO's in the context in which they occurred (Marshall and Rossman 1995). A comparative element was also adopted into the research design to facilitate comparisons between the case studies.

Table 1: Call Centre Type and Location

	GOVTCALL	SALESPLUS
LOCATION	Newcastle	Melbourne
SECTOR/ INDUSTRY	Public/ Government Services	Private/ Outsourcer
TYPE	In-house/capacity as outsour	Outsourcer
SIZE	226 seats	1400 seats
AGE	13 years	14 years
TYPES OF CALLS	Inbound & Outbound	Inbound & Outbound
UNION PRESENCE	CPSU – 49per cent unionised	No presence on site
TURNOVER	Under 10per cent	Under 10per cent

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As Table 2 indicates, semi-structured interviews were conducted on site or over the phone with CSO's, supervisors/ team leaders, and managers. A total of 65 interviews were conducted in the two call centres; 27 from Govtcall and 38 from Salesplus. The length of each interview varied depending on the amount of detail given by interviewees, but generally ranged from 30 to 80 minutes in length. These interviews were supplemented with workplace observations, archival analyses, and document reviews. The triangulation of interviews across CSO and managers and the use of documentary information assist in improving the validity of the interviews undertaken.

Table 2: Interviews in the Two Call Centres

	GOVTCALL	SALESPLUS
Call Centre operators	18	26
Supervisory staff	6	8
Managers	3	4
Total	27	38

4. Empirical study

All the CSOs interviewed from Govtcall stated their relationships with their work colleagues were one of the more important determinants of the quality of their work lives. Nine of the 18 CSOs also identified their relationships with their co-workers as one of the three things they liked most about their work. CSOs indicated that because most of the work was done over the phone, there was very little interaction with co-workers during the shift. However, being able to have lunch with someone they got along with, or being able to be seated alongside them during the shift made it easier for them to go to work, and deal with the frustrations encountered in the call centre environment. CSOs highlighted the value of being able to share their work related problems with their co-workers, being able to 'vent' with people who can also relate to the stress and frustrations, and having a shoulder for support. Six of the 18 CSOs suggested they would be less inclined to come to work everyday if they did not have good co-workers alongside them.

"I think they have a big influence because if you enjoy the company of the people you work with you are happier and less stressed – because a lot of the calls we deal with can be stressful and demeaning". (Govtcall, CSO 2).

28 per cent of CSOs also highlighted their work in the call centre as a social experience. These CSOs suggested that some of their closest friends were the people they worked with, and attributed much of their social lives to their employment in the call centre.

"I spend nine hours or more a day with my workmates than I do with people outside of here. I work with some of my best friends. To be completely honest - if it wasn't for that I don't think I would still be here". (Govtcall, CSO 8).

There was a mixed response to how Govtcall managed co-worker relations in the call centre. Some of the CSOs noted that the organisation had a well-being committee, a charity committee and a social club on the work site that was

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involved in organising team building events and social functions such as after work drinks, trivia nights, the annual Christmas party, raffles and other events throughout the year. They did however acknowledge that this was more of a CSO led initiative.

All the CSOs interviewed except one stated that while the work itself really did not require team work, work teams were very important to them as they provided a supportive environment in the call centre. Here work teams were described by CSOs as existing at two levels. Firstly, as formal teams defined by the business line; and secondly, those teams that developed informally – and were comprised of those individuals *within* business lines who were seated immediately next to one another. 33 per cent of CSOs stated being part of a larger business line team made it easier for them to achieve individual goals. CSOs stated that their informal within-business line teams had a comparatively more positive impact on the quality of their work lives as these teams were far more personal and intimate. Many CSOs described these teams as their good friends who generally made it more enjoyable to come to work and made them feel like they ‘had a place’. CSOs stated these teams mitigated the feeling of isolation that was often experienced when being on the phone all the time. The support of team mates was also considered invaluable during the initial three month probation period which was described by all CSOs as a ‘high pressure’ and ‘high stress’ time. CSOs noted that while these teams were split up once probation ended, many people continued to make contact.

“A lot of my original teams meet outside of work, have tea meetings and sit together. It makes it much more liveable”. (Govtcall, CSO 18).

Although CSOs were encouraged to be sociable during the training and probation stage, they indicated that this changed once employed. Team work, particularly on an informal level was not actively encouraged. CSOs largely worked independently, and were discouraged from speaking to or seeking assistance and advice from their co-workers as it may reflect negatively on their statistics. Special systems were set up that dictated that all questions and queries were directed to technical support officers within the call centre. There was evidence of CSOs defying these systems and taking matters into their own hands. For example, although CSOs were required to be ready to take calls at all times during the shift, the technology allowed them to elect when they wanted a call to come in. 55 per cent of CSOs indicated they often disable calls in order to have a much needed chat with members of their informal work team between calls. These CSOs identified this as necessary particularly ‘when the stress builds up’.

CSOs also indicated that informal teams were often moved around by management to ‘stop people from getting too comfortable’. There was an overwhelmingly negative response to this by all the CSOs interviewed. Team leaders indicated that while the job itself was not conducive to team-work the organisation used teams in order to maintain structural control.

“Work teams influence how I feel about work a great deal because most of the time you become good friends. The problem we have here is that they tend to like moving the teams, so you can lose that person that you can vent to. They do

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it to boost performance, because we won't talk as much if you don't know the people around. As soon as we get comfortable they move us around again. It makes me pretty angry because I can't see their reasoning behind it – although they say it's for our benefit I don't think it is". (Govtcall, CSO 5)

In terms of whether team work was valued and encouraged in the organisation, all the team leaders stated that team work was of high importance, particularly as a means of ensuring performance goals were reached. Team leaders suggested they personally promoted team work as they were judged on the performance of their team. They also stated that individuals were more likely to focus on their performance if they were judged as a team.

All the CSOs interviewed from Salesplus also highlighted their relationships with their work colleagues as one of the more important determinants of the quality of their work lives. Relationships with co-workers was the most highly cited answer to the question "name the three things you liked most about your work" with all 26 CSOs identifying it as either number one or two on their list. CSOs in Salesplus identified the same benefits of having positive relations with co-workers as those identified in Govtcall. However, they also identified the strong link that existed between positive co-worker relations and overall job performance.

"Its different from other call centres. You always want to come to work, there's always someone happy. If you are in a bad mood, someone will always try to cheer you up and make you laugh. That in itself makes you want to be here and I'm sure that reflects in our work." (Salesplus, CSO 11).

CSOs from Salesplus suggested they had developed strong relationships with their co-workers, and were encouraged by team leaders and managers to bond with other co-workers both socially and in a work context. Overall relations between CSOs in the call centre were described as being very positive, both within and between campaigns. CSOs described the call centre as having a very social and up beat atmosphere and spoke of regular get-togethers (e.g. Friday night drinks at the pub) and various events throughout the year (e.g. family park days, concerts, competitions, mid year and end of year parties, team dinners etc).

In terms of team work, CSOs noted that while most of the work was done over the phones they relied on the support and encouragement of their team members throughout the day. Unlike Govtcall, CSOs in Salesplus were able to openly interact with co-workers if they experienced problems or wished to discuss any issues. CSOs also stated that they were able to "have a little bit of fun between the calls" as long as they were not "loud or obnoxious".

"It does make quite a bit of difference, you can talk about it to each other, and you can have a whinge if you need to. It's good therapy to have a gripe every now and then. It's because they all understand – we've all been there." (Salesplus, CSO 16).

CSOs and team leaders also described the concept of 'chairs in', whereby any CSR can call their colleagues together to share an idea or problem. This not only encourages communication between CSOs, but also facilitates the transfer of knowledge. 67 per cent of CSOs in Salesplus also highlighted the increased

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motivation they gained through their team. These CSOs felt a strong sense of 'team spirit' and openly related their own performance to the performance of the team.

"If the team is working well – you are getting your work done, and achieving the service level and in that way you're meeting the clients needs. I get a sense of motivation working in a team. I think if you've got people who are motivated around you – than you're motivated as well." (Salesplus, CSO 6)

All 26 CSOs confirmed that team work was strongly encouraged in the call centre, and was considered a high priority. Instead of a Human Resources Management unit the organisation had a Team Development unit run by the Team Development Manager and six co-ordinators who were responsible for developing and implementing strategies for team development.

Team leaders and managers also described teams in terms of their impact on CSO performance. For instance, they stressed the importance of a 'team' culture in the organisation, and highlighted the importance of ensuring CSOs were aware of their 'connectedness' to others. The supportive and nurturing managerial and supervisory approach was identified by sixteen employees as one of the three things that impacted most positively on the quality of their working lives. While "relationships with co-workers" was identified as the number one contributor to the QWL by CSOs overall, it was the presence of an encouraging and accommodating supervisory and managerial culture that facilitated the development of such relationships.

5. Discussion

The relationships that CSOs had with their work colleagues been one of the more important determinants of the QWL in the two call centres. In Govtcall, the work was designed so that there was no inter-dependency between CSOs in relation to the job tasks, and thus, no reliance on team work where the functions of the job were concerned. This appears to be a common finding where call centres are concerned (Frenkel et al. 1998; Paul and Huws 2002; Townsend et al, 2006). The question therefore remains: why then did this organisation continue to deploy work teams? The findings from this study suggest work teams were utilised as a means of maintaining structural control. Structural control in this case refers to the use of team structures as a means of organising the work environment into smaller, and thus, more easily manageable and controllable units. Work teams also allow the break down of the larger organisational goals into smaller more specific team-based goals. Although these goals are team-based, these are largely achieved through a focus on and control over individual performance.

Furthermore, these formal work teams were not used by this organisation as a means of facilitating social relations between co-workers in the workplace. CSOs were not permitted to interact with team members during phone-time. This however, did not prevent CSOs interacting whilst out of ear-shot of team leaders. This led to the natural development of 'informal work teams' which emerged as a utility of the spatial proximity of workstations, and as 'sub-teams' within the tightly

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controlled work-teams. These informal teams were identified by CSOs as being an invaluable network of social support, particularly when dealing with difficult calls. They provided CSOs an opportunity to 'vent' and release the stress associated with the work. These informal group cultures that were formed autonomously by CSOs represented an important subtext to the formal rules and regulations that governed the workplace. Furthermore, they provided CSOs with validation and recognition in their working lives (Roy 1952 in Russell 2004). Despite the positive impact that these informal teams had on employee well being, the organisation deliberately split these groups up as a means of realising further control and created a major hindrance to job quality. This was a confirmation of Parker and Slaughter's (1988) depiction of the team phenomenon, which was described as a concept that was used to sever the cohesion and teamwork "of natural work groups that develop on the shop-floor by trying – usually unsuccessfully – to channel that sentiment into formal, highly controlled, company-designed team structures" (pg.44).

Conversely, team work was emphasised as an important aspect of the job functions in Salesplus. CSOs exhibited a strong sense of loyalty to their team leaders and team members, and could be seen to internalise the impact their performance had on the team output. The use of work teams as a means of gaining team loyalty has been discussed by Townsend et al. (2006), and rendered an exploitative tool that is most successful in organisations that "engender a collectivist approach towards the goals of the team and hence, the organisation" (pg.6). The findings from this study pointed out that these work teams also facilitated knowledge sharing between CSOs which helped improve the job functions and assisted in skill development. As Belt et al. (2002) also determined through their research, the development of a 'team spirit' and sense of collectively achieved through team working was instrumental in creating a committed and motivated work force. Teams were used as a means of facilitating positive and collaborative social relations between CSOs, and were viewed as a social network; the primary objective of which was to support team members in their day-to-day activities. These relationships represented the greatest source of satisfaction for CSOs, and were thus the most important determinant of the quality of working life in this case study. Drawing further symmetry with Belt et al.'s (2002) findings was the discovery that interactions between CSOs were actively encouraged by the organisation through the deliberate recruitment of 'sociable' individuals, and the organising and funding of regular team based activities. Combined with the development of a supportive coaching culture, these factors formed the basis of why CSOs most enjoyed working in the call centre, and why they continued to work there (Cross et al 2006; Frenkel et al 1998). Another important element of team work was its contribution to organisational culture. Russell (2004) maintains that the main role of work teams does not rotate around the technical organisation of work, but rather, around the construction of a specific workplace culture. This held true for both Govtcall and Salesplus. In Govtcall, the culture that was constructed was one of performance, and in this context, was reinforced through the work-team concept (Parker and Slaughter 1988 in Townsend et al, 2006). In Salesplus on the other hand, work teams were used to reinforce the culture which revolved around the three 'F's': 'fun, focus and fulfilment'. In this case, the social value of

work teams were emphasised above all, and used as a means of driving the other elements of the organisations culture.

6. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Whilst the findings reported in this paper offer important insight into the relationship between workplace relationships and the QWL phenomena, adopting a qualitative method, broad generalization of the research findings to a large number of call centres implies certain risks. A large scale study comprising a larger number of call centres of varying sizes across a range of industries is necessary to establish a more credible understanding of the correlations between workplace relationships and perception of job quality.

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