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**ATTRACTIVENESS IN A NEO-TAYLORISTIC WORKPLACE  
– THE CASE OF NORWEGIAN CALL CENTERS**

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# ***ATTRACTIVENESS IN A NEO-TAYLORISTIC WORKPLACE - THE CASE OF NORWEGIAN CALL CENTERS***

*Children are frequently asked the question: "What do you want do when you grow up"? And full of the idealism of youth, they eagerly replay that they are going to be an astronaut, a fashion model, a footballer or maybe a computer games designer. Years later, when they are adults, the question is rephrased to: "What do you do"? They are more likely now to mutter that they are in insurance, on the check out at the local super market, teach at the local college, or maybe work in a call centre. (Noon & Blyton, 2002, 49)*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Perspectives on modern work life**

Call center work is a form of work on the rise in the last decade or two. Many people are working in Call centers, but as the quotation above indicates, it was not their dream job. Entering into working life is about individual dreams, and what we consider to be an attractive job. However, as the above quotation indicates, getting a job is adjusting dreams to reality and the devising strategies in order to get closer to those dreams. Research on modern working life presents us with differing empirical realities and perspectives about the trends in work life. We have the grim description of Rifkin (1995) in "The End of Work" as well as Beck's (2000) "The brave new world of work". These studies tend to focus on macro and structural level of work, and effects of globalisation and modern capitalism. For call center work (as well as other forms of modern work life) we also have analysis on individual (micro) level. For research on call centers typically these studies focus on the negative outcomes of this type of work in relation to quality of work, work environment and health (Norman, Toomingas, Nilsson, Hagberg, & Tornquist, 2001); (Richardson & Belt, 2001); (Korczynski, Shire, Frenkel, & Tam, 2000); (Warhurst & Thompson, 1998); (Taylor, 1998).

Both macro and micro level of analysis are rather concerned with the negative trends in working life. However we also have studies focusing on individual actors and how they devise strategies in order to position themselves in working life (Giddens, 1990) and thereby trying to achieve their dreams. These studies emphasise that individual actors are not necessarily victims of structural development, but are actively shaping their own future.

### **1.2. What makes Call center work attractive?**

In Call center work it is relatively easy to see the negative aspects of modern working life. But if we apply an actor perspective- why do employees seek to work in Call centers? What are their hopes in working life? What is attractive about Call centers? These are the questions we intend to focus on in this paper.

In order to discuss what makes Call center work attractive we need to define attractiveness. Attractiveness of a job will here be defined as the jobs:

- Long time ability to hire and keep workers
- A reasonable level of job satisfaction among workers

Employers need employees. You can not run a Call center without Call center workers. If we define attractiveness of a job as the ability to get a sufficient number of applicants to fill the position, and keep the employee there at least long enough to learn to do the job properly, over a prolonged period of time, then Call centers are attractive work places. Certainly some of them do have high turnover, but vacancies are filled with out much trouble. And while they have turnover there also are some who continue in their jobs over years. Why, if the quality of these jobs is so poor?

An obvious answer would be the need for a job, any job at all to provide some income. Lack of jobs and income or poor social security will of course make it easy to find workers even if working conditions are bad. That could certainly be the case in many economically depressed regions all over the world. We already know that people will take a lot of hard and dangerous jobs in order to survive.

However, if the only source of attractiveness of Call centers was the need for a job we would not have any job satisfaction in such places. Hence we add a reasonable level job satisfaction as a criteria for attractiveness. If we cannot find that Call center work simply is not attractive as a job, only something you do to avoid starvation. In Norway we had the feeling that there had to be some other attractiveness in addition to having a job.

### **1.3. *The special case of Norway***

When we started this research in 2001 Norway was not a economically depressed region by any reasonable standard. Employment was overall very high, with more than 75 per cent of the total population between 16 and 67 employed, and an unemployment rate at 3.6 percent. This was not a situation unique for 2001, the last 5 years employment had been rising. It remained at these levels also throughout 2002<sup>1</sup>. There were regional differences, the capital area around Oslo had more jobs relatively than the rest of the country. Norway also had a relatively well developed welfare system. No one eligible for work, including Call center work was without unemployment benefits and social support. Long term unemployment benefits are not so good that you would not want to work after some time. However, you had time to find a job to your liking.

As we shall see in this paper, paid work in itself has attractiveness, but we wondered if there were any other attracting people to Call center work. Broadly speaking the attractiveness of Call center work in Norway could be the result of one, or a combination of these two hypotheses:

1. Call Center work in Norway (as opposed to other European Call centers) does not have a poorer quality of working life compared to the rest of the Norwegian working life.
2. Call Center work has some attractiveness for those working there, as well as prospective employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Employment statistics are produced quarterly at Statistics Norway, and are available for all interested at their web pages: <http://www.ssb.no> For a summary of the last 6 year see Ny praksis. (2002). *Det gode arbeidsliv- narmet vi oss* (STF 38 A02021). Trondheim: SINTEF Teknologiledelse.

We thus want to investigate the quality of working life for Call centers in Norway, and what (if any) attractiveness Call center work had for the workers.

## **2. RESEARCH ON CALL CENTER WORK IN NORWAY**

### **2.1. Existing research**

Norway has its Call Centers. We knew as much, because we meet them as customers. However, very little research on Call Centers in Norway had been conducted when we started our study in 2001. No one knew how many people were employed, where they were employed (regional differences), what kinds of Call Center work were done or what the working conditions for Call Center employees were.

It was not only the scientists that lacked this knowledge. In interviews in magazines Call Center owners/ managers themselves stated that: We don't really know how many works in Call Center, where they work etc. But we know that the business is expanding<sup>2</sup>. Working conditions were not specifically discussed in interview in the paper, but the managers said they ha a certain level of turnover.

### **2.2. Our research design- exploratory case studies**

With this very limited knowledge we entered the field in 2001. We were able to get funding from the National Confederation of Business and Industry for an investigation in work environment of Call centers in Norway. We decided to do an exploratory case study because of the lack of previous research. We identified three enterprises with Call centers:

- Helpdesk in a large IT-company (also selling helpdesk functions)
- Newspaper customer and marketing center (included telephone sale)
- Call center company (Both customer support and telephone sale)

The Call centers were picked both partly because we knew of them, partly through advice from the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Norwegian Association of Direct marketing. Sources of data in the companies were:

- Interviews with management (2 in each enterprise)
- Interviews with groups of employees (including safety delegates), 3 sets of interviews in each enterprise, 9-12 employees in each enterprise
- Technology survey (SUMI), N= 70, response rate 37 per cent
- Work environment survey, N= 82, response rate 43 per cent
- Documents from the enterprises describing the organisations

The Call center employees were young (two out of three 30 years or younger), mostly female 60 per cent female (but all companies employed both sexes). They had an education level

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with call center management in Økonomisk Rapport 09/2001, p 29-30

lower than the Norwegian Work Life in general, but still more than 30 per cent had post high school education, and 60 per cent had high school.

We have a large amount of data. We must assume a positive bias in the answers. We have only volunteers, both among the companies and the respondents in the companies. There is not much we can do about that, we can not force participation in a research project on somebody. We wished for a higher response rate, but had limited resources to improve it. The data from work environment survey fit very well with the data from the interviews. Therefore we conclude that the description of the work environment is valid for these 3 enterprises, however we do not know to what extent the findings can be generalised to the Norwegian Call center business.

The work environment survey was based on a large representative survey on work environment for Norwegian working life in general. This survey was carried out in 2001 and reported in (Torvatn & Molden, 2001). In figures and tables the results from this survey are simply called NWL, short for Norwegian Work Life.

### **3. WORKING CONDITIONS IN NORWEGIAN CALL CENTERS**

#### **3.1. Neo- Tayloristic or not?**

Empirical research on Call center work has focused on descriptions of the boring, repetitive, low (or no) skilled routine work. Call Center work is frequently described as Tayloristic or neo-Tayloristic. Fredric Taylor himself in his famous essay on “The principles of scientific management” wrote that “*The most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least a day in advance*” (Taylor, 1911 s 39) It is unlikely that any manager will try to plan all the work of their employees for the next day. However, a Tayloristic system should be expected to divide work in small (probably repetitive) tasks, set the pace (demands) as fit and reduce the workers control of the work as far as possible.

It could be said that most work will have some elements of Taylorism. There will be some repetitiveness, control over work will not be complete and we will all meet various demands in our jobs. It is all a question of degree. To describe Call center work as neo-Tayloristic we should be able to say that it has a higher degree of Taylorism than the rest of the work life. In the following we therefore compare Call center work with a representative survey of Norwegian work life, carried out in 2001 and reported in (Torvatn & Molden, 2001). In figures and tables the results from this survey are simply called NWL, short for Norwegian Work Life.

**Fehler! Keine gültige Verknüpfung.**

**Figure 1: Ergonomics of Call Center compared with Norwegian Working Life Percentage exposed half of the time or more**

As we can see work in Call Centers is ergonomically worse than Norwegian Work Life in general. There is more repetitive work, more pressure on the back, and more monotonous work. The differences are quite big, and even though Call Center employees do not lift their

hands above shoulders as often as NWL the total ergonomical burden is bigger in Call Center. This confirms findings in other European studies of Call centers.

Using the demand/control model developed by Karasek (1979) we also found the work to be more demanding than Norwegian work life in general. Building on Karasek we measured job control on a four-item scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was low degree of control, 5 high degree. In Call Center the average of this index was 2,9 (std 0.85), while Norwegian work life scored 3.68 (std 0.87). For job demands we employed a 5 item scale, from 1 (low demands) to 5 (high demands). In Call center the average was 3.56 (std 0.91), in Norwegian Work life 2.94 (std 0.89). Thus the Call Center workers had lower degree of control and higher demands than the average Norwegian worker, a situation which, according to Karasek, is likely to produce stress and health problems.

The interviews with the Call Center workers confirmed this description. Their work tasks were given them by their managers, were routine work, further limited by the technology. There were few possibilities for variation and problem solving (those few were however highly regarded).

To summarize it very briefly: Compared to the Norwegian Work Life in general Call Center work could indeed be described as neo-Tayloristic. This description of Call center thus fits previous European research.

### **3.2. *Social relations between employees***

Since Call Center work is done in front of a computer while speaking in the telephone larger parts of the day one could believe that Call center work was lonely work, with little or no interaction and support from the other workers. Such a belief would be completely wrong. Call Center workers, including telephone sales persons on provision, were in fact quite supportive towards each other, as indicated in Figure 2 below:

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**Figure 2: Social support, comparison Call center and NWL; percentage "often"/"very often"**

Compared to the Norwegian work life the social support is very strong in Call centers. Especially the level of support and assistance from colleagues were much higher in Call Centers. Mutual support is the way the workers learn to do their job. (The mutual support was also found in European research on Call Centers.) This was confirmed in the interviews, and management encouraged this cooperation and social support. Actually they talked so much to each other (and the customer of course) that 26 per cent complained of the noise level, and the companies had to develop strategies for voice use.

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**Figure 3: Management in Call centers, percentage "often"/ "very often"**

Management was also supportive in the Call center. 72 per cent of the Call center workers felt that closest supervisor provided assistance and support "often/ very often". This is much

higher than the Norwegian work life in average, where 41 per cent did so. Again, this reflected a deliberate management style, employing a special type of leaders called “coach” (also in Norwegian!) working closely with the workers to support and improve them<sup>3</sup>.

Managers in call centers were also seen as good in passing on important information (57 per cent often/ very often), and solving problems in a constructive way (57 per cent often/very often). However, managers did not delegate much (23 per cent often/ very often). Again, this fits with the picture of a Tayloristic organisation where the workers have limited control over their work.

### **3.3. *Relations with customers***

Call center work is service work. What are the relations with costumers? In general the relations are very good. In the interviews the Call Center workers stressed that they did service work, and the importance of being able to provide the necessary service. For the Call center workers their customers provided them with variation, challenges, positive feedback and opportunities to demonstrate their working skills. The relationship between Call center workers and their customers were quite friendly as seen in Figure 4:

**Fehler! Keine gültige Verknüpfung.**

Figure 4: Feedback from customers, frequency

Call Center workers had a much higher frequency of positive compared to negative feedback from their customers. Harassment from the customers rarely took place, although those who had some experience frequently did have some tales to tell. However, they all stressed that such experiences were rare.

### **3.4. *Attractive or not?***

Regarding turnover this varied among the three Call centers. Management in all enterprises agreed that this was a problem. However, none of the Call centers had any problems hiring people. Even pure telephone sale positions had 4 times the necessary number of applicants. So, although the jobs were seen by both managers and workers as temporary, not long term jobs (it differed what temporary and long term jobs were among the enterprises) they were attractive enough to get new applicants.

When interviewed the respondents claimed that they were quite satisfied with their work. Several expected to change job in some years, but that did not indicate any dislike on the job on their part. The overall job satisfaction (6-point scale) was on level with the Norwegian work life in general, 71 per cent was satisfied in Call Centers, compared to 75 per cent in general.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal development is rarely seen as a feature of Taylorism, but actually Fredric Taylor emphasised managers responsibility for individual training of workers. Of course only in areas scientifically chosen for him /her to be trained in (Talyor, 1911 (1961 ed) p 36).

Further we asked the Call center workers whether or not they would have taken the job today (given what they now knew about the job) and whether or not they would have recommended the job to friends. The results are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Job evaluation and job recommendation among Call center workers and in Norwegian Working life in general. Numbers in per cent**

<i>WOULD YOU HAVE TAKEN THE JOB TODAY, WITH THE INFORMATION YOU NOW HAVE?</i>	<b>Call Center</b>	<b>NWL</b>
With out hesitation	67	60
Thought about it	26	35
No	7	6
<i>WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THE JOB TO A FRIEND TODAY, WITH THE INFORMATION YOU KNOW HAVE?</i>	<b>Call Center</b>	<b>NWL</b>
Without hesitation	61	56
Thought about it	28	33
No	11	11

The table clearly shows that Call center workers would have taken the job today, and recommended it to others too. The positive job evaluation is at the same level as Norwegian working life in general. Call center work seems to have the same attractiveness as other Norwegian work.

#### **4. SOURCES OF ATTRACTIVENESS IDENTIFIED**

Call Center must hold some attractiveness. No problems in hiring, and workers were content. But they were content in a neo-Tayloristic work place. Traditional Human relation source of motivation (variation, control of work etc) could not be the source of that attractiveness. What did we find?

##### **4.1. The general attractiveness of being in work**

Simply to have a job is attractive in itself. Like any other job, Call Center work provides the employee with some extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. The extrinsic reward off (at least these Call Centers) is simply good wage. In all three cases the respondents agreed that the wage level was comparatively high. They did not know any other jobs open to them, given their education and work experience with so high wages.

The intrinsic rewards were primarily a very supportive social work environment. Both managers and their co-workers supported each, on a much higher level than Norwegian work life in general (See Figure 2). When asked which elements in the job that gives them “energy to function in other spheres of life” 86 percent agrees that social milieu is one source (73 per cent in NWL). Further 65 per cent agrees that positive feedback from their co-workers is

another such source (59 in NWL) and 54 agrees that positive feedback from managers (45 in NWL). All these factors can be considered intrinsic factors, which gives the job attractiveness.

Such extrinsic and intrinsic job rewards are not necessarily unique for Call centers. We also found other sources of attractiveness, more unique for Call centers. We classified along a time-dimension: Present and future attractiveness of working in Call centers.

#### **4.2. Present attractiveness**

Work is not everything in our lives. Outside work most of us have friends, family, a place we belong etc. We found that Call center work was easily adapted to the rest of a workers life, both student life and family life: Many of the Call center workers wanted a job which:

- Had flexible working hours (both working length and time)
- Was easy to combine with studies
- Could be left easily (almost on the spot)
- Did not require formal training/ qualification (learn the job while doing it)
- Located geographically where they presently were living

In short, Call center work was available where and when it suited them. They could “come and go” in the job as they wanted. Many of them wanted a job for a short time, and were quite happy with a job they could easily leave.

It should be mentioned that age and gender influenced which one of these aspects was most important. For example elderly female workers with little or no other job possibilities emphasised the importance of the geographical location. The younger emphasised the flexibility of the work more, and the temporariness of the work. The younger did not plan to stay for the rest of their working lives.

All of them had done some kind of overall assessment of the job, which included more than an assessment of how the work was carried out. They were, to some degree acting strategically.

#### **4.3. Future attractiveness**

The strategic element is even stronger for another source of attractiveness mentioned by the respondents: *skill building*. Call center work is actually a place to build (and demonstrate) valuable skills for future work. As one of the respondents said: “*I want to work with sales in the future. Telephone sale is the toughest form of sale there is. If I can do that, I can do any sales work.*” The skill building element was not limited to sale. Those working in various forms of customer support claimed similar skill development. Having worked in customer support you have learned what the customers really want, what their problems were and so on. And while Call center work did not necessarily give them any external social recognition while they were there, having been there did.

Call center work was in many ways an exam to pass. Having done a certain amount of Call center work you gained a sort of “service craftsman certificate”, some proof of your

willingness and ability to work with demanding customers. Call center work was good to have on your “CV”.

## **5. *CALL CENTER WORK IN THE LONG RUN***

The empirical results of this research show that Call center work does indeed have some attractiveness. It is a good place for many start a career. We also found that some considered it an acceptable place to end their careers. It was a place where those who had skills in customer relation could employ them.

Existing research on Call center has focuses extensively on the negative aspects of the work environment. Basically the focus has been on how the work was carried out. While we agree that the work is carried out in a neo-Tayloristic way, we also argue that it is necessary to include other aspects of the work which would give a better overall picture of Call center work. The workers are also strategic actors, who choose to work in Call center after a total assessment of the work in their present and future life. Also the research needs to take into consideration that many of the workers are not looking for a job for life. Many wanted a (part time) job for 2 months, half a year, three years. However, the fact that many workers consider the temporality of the work attractive, does not exempt the managers from developing a sustainable working environment.

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