

The Call Centre Family

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Translated into English by Patrick Carmichael, 2018

In the call centre sector, in which we intervene politically (call centres with a high proportion of precariously employed students), we are often confronted with the agents identifying with the interests of the management. This certainly applies in many other areas too. Here, however, this is mainly about the forms and causes of this identification in call centres of the type in question.

As a rule, the internalization of company goals by employees is also the result of effective management strategies. But they can only be effective if the structural conflict of interests between companies and wage earners is not openly recognized and discharged. Therefore, I will first address conditions that, regardless of management strategies, result in a poorly developed culture of joint enforcement of interests (against the management) among the call centre agents. After that, I will explain how the management tries to identify with the company's interests. Finally, I will say something more about how these strategies are designed to disguise agents' real interests.

Lack of awareness of common interests

For three reasons in particular, many agents lack the awareness that as agents they have interests that are incompatible with management:

- Most agents come from the middle class. As a result, many of them have never come into direct contact with the tradition of the labour movement. Moreover, they usually see their work in the call centre only as a transitional situation. Therefore, they do not understand themselves primarily as call centre agents or as members of the precariat, but as budding professionally successful academics or as students.
- In this area, the organized workforce is almost completely absent.
- Flat hierarchies, the generation and milieu identity of agents, supervisors, and management, as well as a correspondingly casual tone (everyone is addressed by "du" [rather than the formal "sie"]) help mask the structural conflict of interests between management and call centre operators.

Integration strategies

Identification of the agents with "their" call center is mainly achieved by the following two methods in the relevant call centres:

1. Creating a "family" climate

Agents should not only be made to talk openly with supervisors and management, but also their problems and concerns are taken seriously. The means used to create such an atmosphere of trust are manifold: these include leisure activities organized by the management such as: at *adm*, a joint visit to a football game; or even regular cocktail evenings, food, parties, at *workXL* especially when there is a business success to celebrate.

There are also institutions such as the so-called "Problemzettel" [feedback forms]. These are forms designed specifically for the agents to communicate their suggestions and criticisms to the management. An important role in this context also plays the "We-are-one-family" rhetoric, with which the management bombards their agents in many call centres, for example at company meetings, hearings and through the (internal) intranet. In one case, the management of *adm* announced on such an occasion that a certain contract, which would involve losses for the call centre, was accepted only because no co-workers would have to be terminated. The generation of a "family climate" is also supported by the already mentioned direct, open, informal style of communication, which prevails in many call centres and which, for example, was illustrated

at Asdirektmarketing where the boss sits not in a locked office but stays in locations where the agents are, such as in the smoking room.

Such patterns go well with the usual self-portrayal of call centres as modern, flexible, and conversational. This self-expression often plays a role in the polemic against works councils and unions, which are presented as old-fashioned, rigid and bureaucratic. In doing so, the rhetorics of family and modernity are linked: we do not need an apparatus that influences “from outside”. Problems in the enterprise are rather internal family affairs, which can be addressed directly and openly with “us”. This was, for example, the tenor of a campaign that led the management of *Hotline* against agents who wanted to establish a works council there and subsequently dismissed. In this context, the following statement from the management:

"We know, however, that these [the agents who wanted to establish a works council] are people who use a so-called 'call center offensive' to try to give the union access to modern businesses that they normally do not enter, because they communicate in a team these days - not in formalized opposition."

The other side of the "family climate" is an increase in the pressure on the agents to behave in accordance with corporate interests. This becomes clear, for example, when the management uses the relationship of trust with the agents in order to incite them to denounce “lazy” colleagues or, as happened with *adm*, for example, to layoffs, justified on the grounds that the person who has been dismissed disturbs the company's peace.

2. The promotion of identification with the quality of one's own work

These include the incentive systems that exist in many call centres, such as performance-based pay components, the rewarding of particularly hard-working agents, the publication of comparative data on the work performance of the individual agents, which was common practice at *Emnid* for some time, and so on.

The inbound [customer service] area also includes the usual service improvement rhetoric. It aims to portray the work as a commitment to the well-being of the customer. The fact that the agents associate such a sense with their otherwise rather monotonous, highly alienated and stressful activity makes them more bearable for them. As a result, service rhetoric directed towards the agents often falls on fertile ground. This is also helped by the fact that they themselves are potential call centre customers.

Conflict of interest between agents and call centre management

Management strategies that seek to capture the subjectivity of workers often operate not only on a purely symbolic level. Rather, they often seek to create conditions under which workers can, in a certain way, generate their own business interests. On the other hand, in the call centres we are dealing with most of the time, it's all about ideologically packaging what are miserable working conditions in an appealing way. This is also the case with the integration strategies just described.

The First Strategy

In many employment relationships, the appeal to a common interest of companies and employees has at least some minimal correspondence with reality. So, it may be rational for a skilled worker at *Opel* with a comparably well-paid and secured full-time job, who has the potential of continuing to work until retirement, to contribute to the business success of *Opel* through acceptance of wages restraint, in order to maintain their employment.

This is not the case with a typical precarious call centre agent. She only wants to work in the call centre for a limited time and because of the prevailing hire-and-fire practice in this area, she has to expect to be out of the door anyway. In addition, she can easily get a comparable job in another call centre should she be dismissed.

In the case of *adm*, the ideological character of the appeal to a common interest connecting agents and management was particularly obvious. In an interview with members of the CCO, the local director pointed out that only six agents had been laid off at his call centre over the past two years to make clear how much he cares about the well-being of "his" agents. A few days later, more than 70 agents were terminated there for "operational" reasons. A large proportion of those who had been dismissed had previously demanded their legally guaranteed right to a proportionately paid holiday to the management.

The Second Strategy

Modern management methods ("Toyotism"), which are particularly common in the New Economy, aim, among other things, to mobilize the creativity and commitment of employees to increase corporate profits. This makes the work more varied and interesting. However, wage earners then actually have a reason to identify with the quality of their work. In call centres with mainly precariously busy students, however, the work is largely characterized by dull, stressful, strictly regulated routine activities that leave little room for initiative. Therefore, it does not make sense for the agents, beyond the monetary incentive, to strive to make good phone calls.

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