

**Call-centres as a vehicle to improve customer satisfaction in local
government: A case study of front-line workers in the Nelson
Mandela Metropolitan Municipality**

Thesis

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

MASTERS in INDUSTRIAL SOCIOLOGY

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

Babalwa Magoqwana

G03m5108

January 2009

Supervisors:

Dr Darlene Miller

Professor Greg Ruiters

ABSTRACT

This dissertation provides an account of '*Batho Pele*' (People First) and 'new public management' as applied in two government call-centres in the Eastern Cape. Focusing on the workers at these call-centres, this research examines the workplace organisation of these call-centres based in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. The study involved interviews with managers, call-centre operators and trade unionists.

The findings show how the work environment is not conducive to the goals of customer satisfaction as presented in the *Batho Pele* policies. The research investigates the conditions of workers as one explanatory factor for poor call-centre service. If workers are a key element in the success of the 'new public management', their work environment and conditions have to facilitate their job satisfaction and their improved customer service. The research demonstrated the evident lack of professionalism in the call-centre, customer care designed as a matter of compliance rather the need to change the culture and the persistent lack of discipline and supervision. The call-centre operator's experiences include issues of surveillance, stress, emotional labour, lack of training, internal conflicts and bad 'customer service' as perceived by the citizens of the Metro.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was a team work with many contributing directly and indirectly. Firstly, I would like to thank the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality Management for granting me access and facilitating interviews with call-centres operators. In particular the call-centre staff both at Munilek and Budget and Treasury units, you were marvellous. South Africa and Netherlands Programme for Alternative Development (SANPAD), National Research Foundation (NRF), Ernest Ethel and Eriksen Trust, without your financial assistance the whole project was not possible. To ISER staff (particularly Ms Debbie Bruinders) and Sociology Department (Ms Juannita Fuller) thank you for your patience. To a friend, colleague and tutor Sandra Matatu, you've taught me a lot, thank you. I am also grateful to my friends for their constant motivation and support, Enkosi.

For guidance, discussions, advise and theoretical insights I would like to thank Dr Darlene Miller and Professor Greg Ruiters. Without your input, stimulation and encouragement none of this could have happened. To my number one fan my mother, Thembela Magoqwana thank you for your love, and endless prayers. My whole family (too many to mention) you are my inspiration thank you. Finally to the One Who sits on the Throne and unto the Lamb, the Glory belongs to You alone. Now I know that "All things work together for the good to those who love God..."Romans 8-28.

ACRONYMS

ACD	Automatic Caller Distribution
ASGISA	Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa
ATTP	Assistance to the Poor
B&T	Budget and Treasury
BCM	Buffalo City Municipality
BPeSA	Business Process enabling South Africa
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
CBD	Central Business District
CCA	Call-Centre Agent
CCC	Customer Care Centre
CDC	Coega Development Corporation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COB	Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
CSR	Customer Service Representative
EC	Eastern Cape
ECSECC	Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council
ET	Eric Tindale
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDP	Integrated Development Plan
IVR	Interactive Voice Recorder
MEC	Member of Executive
MPCC	Multi-Purpose Community Centres
NMBMM	Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality
NMM	Nelson Mandela Metro
NPM	New Public Management
NSM	New Service Management
OPSC	Office Public Service Commission
PE	Port Elizabeth
PEDU	Port Elizabeth, Despatch and Uitenhage municipalities
PSC	Public Service Commission
SA	South Africa (n)
SAMWU	South African Municipal Workers Union
SEF	Strategic Economic Framework for NMM Council

Make your own notes.
NEVER underline or
write in a book.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Acronyms	iv

Chapter 1: Thesis Introduction

1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 <i>Batho Pele</i> and the Eastern Cape.....	4
1.3 Electronic-government and call-centres.....	6
1.4 Two call-centres in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality.....	8
1.5 Goals of the research	9
1.6 Thesis outline.....	10

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework: 'Customerisation' in the Public Service?

2.1 Introduction.....	13
2.2 Call-centres – the white collar factory?.....	13
2.3 Public service call-centres.....	16
2.4 New Public Management	17
2.5 Restructuring of work in South Africa: the apartheid workplace regime....	18
2.6 Customer service in a call-centre.....	20
2.7 Gendered spaces and e-government.....	21
2.8 The 'sovereign' customer and the citizen.....	23
2.9 Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy in the front-line service work	26
2.10 Implications of COB Theory in front-line work	32
2.11 Conclusion	34

Chapter 3: The Eastern Cape Context and Research Methodology

3.1	Introduction.....	36
3.2	Eastern Cape background	39
3.3	Call-centres in the Eastern Cape.....	41
3.4	Pilot study.....	43
3.5	Semi-structured interviews	44
3.6	Observations.....	46
3.7	Data analysis.....	47
3.8	Ethical considerations	47
3.9	Research challenges in the field.....	48
3.10	Conclusion	51

Chapter 4: Towards a Customer-Centred Bureaucracy: Policy Restructuring in the Nelson Mandela Metro

4.1	Introduction.....	52
4.2	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality: Background	53
4.3	Improving service delivery and customer care.....	54
4.4	General policy developments since 2001	56
4.4.1	Customer care policy and performance management at NMM.....	57
4.4.2	The NMM Customer Care Centres	61
4.4.2.1	Physical features.....	63
4.5	Conclusion	64

Chapter 5: Working in a Metro call-centre (Budget and Treasury)

5.1	Introduction.....	66
5.2	Call-centre A (Budget and Treasury).....	67

5.2.1 Physical organisation of the call-centre	67
5.2.2 Worker profiles, recruitment and career advancement	69
5.2.3 Training in the call-centre.....	71
5.2.4 Discipline and surveillance in the workplace.....	73
5.2.5 Health and well-being of call-centre workers in the Metro.....	78

Chapter 6: Working at the Munilek call-centre

6.1 Physical organisation of work.....	82
6.2 Worker profile, training and recruitment	84
6.3 Discipline and surveillance	87
6.4 Well-being and perceptions of workers and managers	89
6.5 Career advancement and labour turnover in a municipal call-centre	94
6.6 Resistance by call-centre workers at Metro call-centres.....	96
6.7 The persistent apartheid workplace regime	99
6.8 Conclusion	100

Chapter 7: The role of call-centres in the Metro

7.1 Introduction.....	102
7.2 Trade union views on the Metro call-centre	102
7.2.1 Public sector call-centre perceptions.....	105
7.3 Customer experiences in the Metro	107
7.3.1 Customer complaints and customer service.....	111
7.4 Persistent 'bad' organisational culture	114
7.5 The role of call-centres in local government.....	117
7.5.1 Representing the image of the Metro.....	119
7.6 Conclusion	122

Chapter 8: Thesis Conclusion

8.1	Introduction.....	125
8.2	Conclusion.....	125
8.3	Criticisms and recommendations for the Nelson Mandela Metro Customer Care system.....	130
8.4	Further research.....	133

Bibliography.....	135
--------------------------	------------

Appendices

Appendix A: Interviewee list.....	146
Appendix B: Interview questions for Managers.....	147
Appendix C: Interview questions with call-centre operators.....	149

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map showing all the district municipalities in Eastern Cape.....	40
----------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

List of Tables

Table 1: Basic features of Customer Care Centres.....	62
-------------------------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER 1

Thesis Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The South African call-centre industry is concentrated in Gauteng, Cape Town and Durban with Port Elizabeth and East London sharing the small number of these call-centres. Nelson Mandela Metro (NMM) and Buffalo City Municipality (BCM) are the only municipalities in Eastern Cape with call-centres, both of which are small and designed to improve customer satisfaction. The main object is to reduce queues and open access to geographically disadvantaged customers in the province. This industry is identified by ASGISA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa) as one of the key sectors in eradicating unemployment among the young people of South Africa.

In the 1970s welfare states came under intense pressure resulting in a wave of transformations in the thinking and practice of management in the public sector in advanced and developing countries. By the 1990s new terms began to emerge: public administration became 'public management' and then 'new public management' (NPM). 'Entrepreneurial government' (Hughes, 1998: 4) came to mean the use of private sector managerial techniques to overcome inefficiency and improve the quality of service provision. This resulted in modified working conditions and experiences of work for public sector employees. For example, instead of secured 'jobs for life', work was now 'contract and performance based'. Constant monitoring by managers through elaborate performance management systems (i.e. auditing) became the norm. Customer satisfaction was the overriding goal in the public service (Wilkinson et al., 1997: 89).

The South African government, strongly influenced by NPM and the 'Third-Way neo-liberalism' of Blair and Clinton (see Fraser-Moleketi, 2003; Harrison, 2006) adopted *Batho Pele* (People First), a modified version of John Major's "Citizen's Charter". This sets out the vision for high quality public services run on private sector lines. Introduced in 1997, *Batho Pele* highlighted government's commitment to "customer-centred" service delivery which stated that "customers" should be consulted about service quality and standards; customers should be provided with *equal access* to information; be treated with courtesy; be entitled to an apology and get *value for their money* (my italics). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or 'electronic-government' complemented *Batho Pele*. Many local governments saw ICT as a tool for promoting accountability, openness, efficiency, responsiveness, and citizen participation. Electronic government (e-government) refers to the "use of technology to enhance the access and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees" (Basu, 2004: 110). This form of governance is also said to promote integration and single-user access through internet, call-centres, e-mails and customer charters (Sealy, 2003: 337).

It is mandatory that *all* South African municipalities adopt customer care and performance management systems to ensure improved service delivery (see section 95 and 108 of the Municipal Systems Act and *Batho Pele*). The legislation seeks to transform the organisational culture of local government to support the principles of *Batho Pele*. This culture has to promote responsiveness to the needs of the community served. *Batho Pele* also states that local government must develop strategies to eliminate distance as an inhibiting factor in service delivery. Central to these reforms in the civil service has been the shift to call-centres within civil

service departments, mostly occupied by already established civil servants (Fisher, 2004).

Call-centres are relatively new in South Africa but are currently perceived as a growing source of employment with large amounts of money being invested in this industry. Recognising that the potential for job creation in the call-centre industry is huge (albeit that previous jobs might be lost), the research asks how “decently” is call-centre work perceived? Little academic work has been done on this topic in South Africa (Omar, 2005) with even less investigation at local government level in the Eastern Cape (Carrin et al., 2006). Port Elizabeth and East London are increasingly becoming the home for both private and public sector call-centres. This is informed by the Department of Trade & Industry’s report which considers both cities as potential spaces for the future of this industry (<http://www.thedti.gov.za/>).

This Masters thesis explores the relationship between the government’s goal of customer satisfaction and the organisation of call-centre workplaces in the Eastern Cape local government in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. The investigation of the role of call-centres in the public sector is the main focal point for this study. I then ask to what extent these call-centres improve customer service in local government. It is important to note that this research does not focus on consumer perceptions of call-centres but only on call-centres as a vehicle to improve customer satisfaction at local government.

In a typical call-centre, employees receive inbound and outbound telephone calls through an ‘Automatic Call Distribution’ programme. In local government, they process complaints and enquiries by using instant access to customer data from

computers. Telephone operators are managed in teams with each team assigned to a particular supervisor and they are compensated according to their performance i.e. reaching targets (Omar, 2005: 267). Call-centres have been labelled as “new sweatshops of the service economy” or “white-collar factories”, driven by standardisation and rationalisation (Knights and McCabe, 2003; Fernie and Metcalfe in Omar, 2005). On the other hand, the advantages of call-centres are that they reduce large volumes of enquiries, they reduce travelling costs and distance for citizens, they reduce queuing, and they reduce the time spent in face-to-face customer interaction. These call-centres are established to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as a means of reducing costs.

1.2 *Batho Pele* and the Eastern Cape

Modelled on the United Kingdom’s ‘Putting People First’ campaign, *Batho Pele* introduced a customer discourse with reference to customer charters and call-centres (Ruiters, 2005: 129). This laid a foundation for a transformed public service delivery system. It highlighted government’s commitment to customer-centred service delivery which stated that customers should be consulted about service quality and standards; customers should be provided with equal access to information; be treated with courtesy; be entitled to an apology if appropriate, and get value for their money.

To show commitment to *Batho Pele* an Office Public Service Commission (OPSC) was set up to promote and monitor the *Batho Pele* eight values in the SA public administration. In 2004 *Batho Pele* was revitalised because of a lack of implementation in public services, this is made clear in the statement made by the then Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, when she said “*Batho Pele* cannot be owned by a few and ignored by

many" (Moleketi, 2007: 4). This statement was followed by the *Batho Pele* Revitalisation Programme in 2006, which commenced with the Public Service week (the first week of November) focusing on implementation of these eight principles.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or 'e-government' is also seen as complementing *Batho Pele*. Many governments see ICT as a tool for promoting accountability, openness, efficiency, responsiveness, and citizen participation.

Batho Pele has to be understood as the initiative aiming at service orientation, excellence in service delivery and continued commitment by municipal employees to service improvement. This is one of the national government tools to change the organisational culture and thus the behaviour of municipal employees. The state of compliance to *Batho Pele* by public servants has been identified as unsatisfactory according to the Public Service Commission (PSC) report (2007). PSC found that out of 131 national and provincial departments approached for the survey only 64 had service standards (service charters) in place, and none of the Eastern Cape departments had service standards at the time of the survey (PSC Report, 2005).

The *Batho Pele* principle of access states that all citizens should have equal access to the services to which they are entitled. Seventy per cent of the national departments have identified call-centres as one of the mechanisms to promote access to their services, compared to forty-four per cent of the provincial government (PSC, 2007). However, PSC found that accessing government

services was largely through physical interaction and warned against reliance on ICTs as the main tool for access. This was indicated by 90% of national departments compared to 71% of provincial departments using the internet as the main mechanism in promoting access to their services. Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCC) were very low on the list of measures to improve access (33% in provincial governments and 65% in national departments). This can be a disadvantage to the so-called rural provinces.

Few Thusong Service Centres (or MPCC) have been rolled out in the EC province, with three more to be built in BCM, Alfred Nzo and Engcobo by 2014. In the Eastern Cape, the Office of the Premier has developed a customer care unit to improve access throughout the province (EC Annual Report, 2007). In the latest HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey Report provided in the HSRC Review (2008), *Batho Pele* was assessed in different municipalities according to the eight principles. The only improvement noted by citizens was increased access to government services, with no improvement relating to the other seven principles.

1.3 Electronic-government and call-centres

E-government is set up to remove these disadvantages to the information poor. One of the biggest questions asked for effective e-government is “which is the most appropriate channel that can be utilised by public sector to communicate with its citizenry and deliver its services efficiently?” (Effective e-Government, 2005: 27). This is in line with the notion of e-government as more than just a “government website on the internet” (Basu, 2004: 109). Most South Africans have limited or no access to the internet and therefore the use of call-centres is deemed the obvious option, since half the South African population have

telephones in their households, thus telephone is a key channel in government's electronic service delivery. Contact centres are the main initiatives to advance the *Batho Pele* vision. It is believed that through e-government, the business of governance will work 'faster and smarter' and assist in fast-tracking people-centred service delivery.

These reforms meant the increased use of technology to advance customer needs, importing private sector styles of management, instilling discipline amongst public servants, and 'corporatising' government's departments into executive agencies with managers who have the 'right to manage'. Central to these reforms is the concept of 'choice' but in terms of e-government this has mainly focused on access channel for citizens, whether through call-centres, face-to-face, web, email, etc. (Sealy, 2003).

SA local government call-centres account for only 9% of the whole industry, most of them in Johannesburg (Joburg Connect, Joburg Water and City Power), Cape Town (Calling the Cape) and Durban (Benner, 2006). Working conditions in call-centres in the private sector have created the view that call-centres are "sweatshops of the digital era" but this is not the case in local government. Most of these municipal call-centres are occupied by experienced civil servants, and this means call-centres are not different from front-line office workers' working conditions, as they are mostly in-house call-centres. The number of call agents is very small compared to the private sector, which makes time pressure less relevant in this sector. These call-centres are established to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as a means of reducing cost (Fisher, 2004).

The Housing MEC in Limpopo, Nkoane Mashabane, when opening the call-centre on 6 February 2007, said this was in line with the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy's target of increasing customer satisfaction from 34% to 80% by 2009 (Government Digest, 2007).

The main difference between private and public call-centres is the concept of choice. This means the public has no choice in contacting the service provider, whereas in the private sector quality is enhanced through competition, and the onus is on the service provider to serve well. This has formed the main criticism of the new public management, where citizens have no choice in contacting the municipality about basic needs. Though call-centres have been haunted by negative identity (as sweatshops of the digital era), municipal call-centres have been identified as currently assuming a high quality form, one which has served to promote positive views of working conditions in call-centres among call handlers and trade unionists (Fisher, 2004).

1.4 Two call-centres in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality

Two call-centres in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality were chosen as the primary case studies, but information from BCM and Joburg Connect were also used to enrich the primary study. Interviews supplemented by observations, and semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 'customers', municipal top officials, front-line workers and trade union representatives were the main form of data gathering.

The primary research area was the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality, for the following reasons: firstly, this is the largest and most developed municipality in the Eastern Cape. Secondly, NMM has applied the principles of

Batho Pele in service delivery since 2003. Thirdly, NMM has seven customer care centres with more than 60 front-line staff workers: NMM forms the heart of call-centre industry in the Eastern Cape.

The main reason for focusing on B&T and Munilek call-centres is that (through water and electricity issues) customers rather than citizens make most contact with the municipality. This project focused on the “customer-centred workplace” in the public sector which makes these two call-centres the obvious choice.

The introduction of call-centres in the public service has symbolised the beginning of customer-focused work. The main function of these public call-centres was said to be “the way of building a partnership and interaction between the government and community for better service delivery” (Government Digest, 2007: 15).

1.5 Goals of the research

The broad research objective is to investigate whether these call-centres have been an effective service delivery mechanism in the Metro. The nature of the customer call-centre workplace within local government and the reported effects on worker well-being will also be explored.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the nature of call-centre workplaces and the experiences of front-line workers.
- To investigate how the system of customer care centres, re-organisation of the workplace, including the call-centres, can improve service delivery.

- To assess the perceptions of the new public management by front-line workers in local government.
- To investigate what kind of training/support is offered to the front-line staff in order to meet the *Batho Pele* vision.

1.6 Thesis outline

Chapter 2 provides a review of the academic literature on the topic, both globally and in SA. It provides a critique of the notion of sovereign customer in the public sector. The features of call-centre workplaces as described by different scholars are discussed. The chapter goes on to look more closely on the role of these call-centres in the public sector. The chapter later draws on the concept of 'algocracy' (by Aneesh) and customer-oriented bureaucracy (Korczynski) to explain the transformation of front-line workplace in the local government.

In Chapter 3 I provide a description of the methods and techniques used in conducting this research. The focus of the study was based on two call-centres in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality, where more than 26 staff members were interviewed, including call-centre operators, trade union representatives, managers and supervisors. These interviews were supplemented by a further nine interviews from a Johannesburg City call-centre (Joburg Connect) and three from the Buffalo City Municipality. This qualitative study seeks to understand and describe the meaning attached to the experiences of being a 'call-centre operator' in the local government.

In Chapter 4 I describe the Nelson Mandela Metro background and policy restructuring since 2001 that led to the new customer care system with call-centres as one of the techniques to improve service delivery. The key element of

this chapter was the development of customer strategy and e-government policy in 2005, when citizens were officially recognised as 'customers'. This chapter looks at the physical features of the walk-in centres (or Customer Care Centres) in three different areas of the Metro to illustrate the differences between call-centres and walk-in centres. The establishment and role of the call-centre are also discussed.

Chapter 5 and 6 are the key chapters of data analysis, where call-centre operators from Budget and Treasury (Chapter 5) and Munilek call-centres (Chapter 6) speak out about their experiences in the municipal call-centre. This chapter looks at the organisation of work, technologies of monitoring, health and well-being of call-centre operators, training available, and resistance strategies employed by workers in racialised customer and worker relations. It is in these two chapters that I note that call-centres in the municipality are more than call handling centres, they act as buffers between angry customers and uninformed council decisions.

In Chapter 7 I look briefly at different views from managers, trade unions, workers, and customers. This brings in a brief discussion about the customer service in the metro call-centres. This chapter looks critically at the role of call-centres in local government and explores the idea that different call-centres provide different experiences, with specific reference to size, orientation and purpose of the call-centre. I discuss the underlying reasons behind the failure of the customer culture in the Metro.

The final chapter briefly summarises the findings of the research project. This chapter concludes that call-centres in local government have been designed to

mimic the characteristics of the private sector. The new public management has produced worsening work conditions for the front-line workers, who seem to act more as "fire extinguishers" for the rage against poor service delivery by the municipality than operatives for customer satisfaction, for which the centres were designed. Finally I make tentative observations on how to improve the customer care system of the Nelson Mandela Metro Municipality and functioning of the call-centre to put the customer first.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Framework: 'Customerisation' in the Public Service?

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I look at international and South African literature in trying to understand the development of call-centres in the public sector. The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for the case studies. This chapter also provides some critical analysis on the concept of 'customer' sovereignty in the public sector. Using the concepts of 'Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy' and 'Algocracy' the chapter seeks to make sense of restructuring in the front-line of the Nelson Mandela Metro call-centres.

2.2 Call-centres – the white collar factory?

Call-centres are business operations designed to receive incoming telephone calls and to initiate outgoing calls or a blend of the two; telephone calls are just one type of transaction. A call-centre is a workplace where "a managed group of people is physically working in a computer-automated environment. It is a large room with workstations that include computers, voice terminals connected to an automatic call distributor (ACD) and supervisor station(s)" (Els and De Villiers, 2000: 5). Call-centre work is characterised by standardised responses which are provided through a computer script. Supervisors constantly monitor the time spent on each call and the number of calls processed. This is usually accommodated in the open-plan office, which is similar to a 'Panopticon' (Taylor, 1997). Most call-centre workers are young, educated and female (Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Mulholland, 2004). Gendered spaces are evident in this service sector that is dominated by

emotional labour, with supervisors as men and telephone operators as women (Spain, 1992: 17).

The researcher is aware of the new term labelling call-centres as “contact centres” based on different functions that now have been added to call-centres, including faxing, text messaging, emailing, etc. Some have gone as far as naming a call-centre a ‘customer care centre’. Blunden (2003: 11) argues that this is trying to do away with bad connotations associated with call-centres, however in the course of this research the term call-centre will be maintained.

Inbound call-centres are the dominant type of the call-centre in South Africa. Most of the SA municipality call-centres are designed to answer queries from the citizens about accounts, water bills, emergency services, natural disasters, electricity cut-offs, etc. An ACD distributes calls to the available agents or puts the calls in a queue so the caller will get a message that tells her to hold for the next available consultant. Calls are processed by means of an interactive voice recorder (IVR) which prompts the customer to choose from a list of options e.g. press 1 for accounts, 2 for life threatening emergency...etc. Call-centres started 35 years ago when the travel and hospitality industries decided to centralise their reservation centres to cope with growing consumer demand. Today they have become the norm in retailing, telecoms, the entertainment industry, travel trade, and public sector (Taylor, 1998: 89).

Call-centres have always been associated with the private sector. Working conditions at call-centres have become a source of interest and concern in this growing industry. On the one hand, call-centres have been labelled as “new sweatshops of the service economy” or “white-collar factories”, driven by

standardisation and rationalisation (Ferne and Metcalfe in Omar, 2005; Knights and McCabe, 2003). Workers are increasingly treated as “human robots” in these ‘McJobs’ (Korczynski, 1995: 79).

Some have portrayed the contemporary service work as fake, invasive, demeaning and highly routinised (Korczynski, 1995: 80). This leads to more and more of the sense of self from service workers being taken over by the company. This use of emotional labour means a “friendly tone of voice, displaying empathy with customers and remaining calm and courteous even when customers are abusive” (Omar, 2005: 272). Front-line workers have feelings of “emotional alienation” since they are required to hide their unpleasant emotions and put the customer first (Taylor, 1997). As *Batho Pele* puts it, the public needs “not just a smile but to put oneself in the shoes of the customer” (*Batho Pele* booklet, 2000). Negative concerns about call-centres include repetitive strain injury, sleeplessness, voice loss, hearing problems, low pay, close supervision, surveillance, monotonous work, boredom and unsociable hours (Richardson, Belt and Marshal, 2000: 363). Some scholars see high turnover and employee absenteeism in call-centres as coping or resistance strategies against these ‘dehumanising’ working conditions (Mulholland, 2004; Scott, 1985).

On a different level, many have referred to call-centres as ‘deskilling’ what was ‘a complex set of tasks’. Call-centre workers appear to lack contextual knowledge (Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Tyler, 2002; Appelbaum and Albin, 1989). This increases the popular view that these workers know little, thus increasing the telephone agents’ stress. The algorithmic form of organisation (pre-programmed rules of decision-making that routine data entry) requires no knowledge of the firm’s business lines and products, only basic computer skills and language proficiency

(Appelbaum and Albin, 1989: 252). It is this perception among the customers that make people not to want to deal with a call-centre because of poor customer service. Whether it is a public or a private call-centre, consumers have always complained about bad service received in call-centres, which forms a challenge to call-centre workers.

2.3 Public service call-centres

The number of call-centres has risen dramatically since 1990s. Public services have welcomed the use of call-centres to promote responsive and efficient service delivery. Operating from what used to be a 'general enquiries office' or 'switchboard', the local government call-centres are smaller than private or outsourced call-centres. Although call-centres have been described as the "sweatshops of the digital era or white collar factories of information economy" because of their standardised and routinised nature, they provide a different perspective in the public services (Ferne and Metcalfe in Omar 2005: 269). These call-centres are established to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as means of reducing costs. This seems to confirm Taylor et al (2002) views on distinctions of call-centres. They argue that not all call-centres are monotonous and deskilling: some are based on a quality service initiative which stresses employee discretion in decision-making.

This was further confirmed by Benner et al. (2007: 5) as they suggested that in-house and small call-centres give their employees more discretion in decision-making in their jobs. Throughout this chapter I argue that call-centres in local government should provide better working conditions because of their customer service orientation, size, market conditions, the nature of operations (inbound), and management style (Taylor et al, 2002). Call-centres in the public services are

the result of new managerial values dominating public services. Managerialism, as Pollitt (in Hughes, 1998) dubbed it, changes the sphere of public administration into public management.

2.4 New Public Management

In the pursuit of efficiency by global institutions like the World Bank, managerialism was seen as the answer to governments reinventing themselves, and also as promoting transparent and efficient use of government resources. This means the set of beliefs and values that assume that “better management will prove an effective solvent for a range of economic and social ills” (Pollitt, 1993: 1). The latter has been supported by the advocates of neo-liberalism whereby “states have to do more for less” (Sealy, 2003: 336). Managers in the public sector have become the drivers behind the social progress, with the use of technology (e-government) to achieve increased productivity by a disciplined labour force. This is not a simply a matter of reform or a minor change in management style, but a change in the role of government in society and the relationship between government and citizenry (Hughes, 1995: 1).

This meant that citizens were deemed ‘customers’ and therefore entitled to: efficient and quality service provision by the state; an apology should the standard of service not be met; easy access to government information; courteous treatment by service providers; and a forum for feedback on the type and quality of service rendered (Clarke and Newman, 1997: 109). Privatisation, decentralisation, quality management, consumer responsiveness and performance management were at the heart of these reforms. Many initiatives were taken to promote quality and efficient services, including the Citizen’s Charter and customer care centres in the public services. These elevated the

citizen's expectation from the public services. John Major's administration in the United Kingdom was one of the pioneers in setting up of Citizens Charters to ensure that a quality service is provided by the state, and this approach was adopted by developed countries including New Zealand, Australia and America (Nolan, 2001: 171). Developing countries were not "excused" from public sector reforms but were compelled to apply market principles in delivering their services. In the 1990s, the government's role was no longer minimised (through the Structural Adjustment Programme) but was improved through new public management policies (Hughes, 1998: 218). Indonesia, Korea, Argentina, India, Malaysia and now South Africa have since applied market principles in their service delivery policies (Hughes, 1998: 219).

Call-centres are a conduit between the public and the services of the local government. The advantages of call-centres seem to be that they reduce large volumes of enquiries so that front-line staff can concentrate on delivering services; they reduce travelling costs for citizens; they reduce queuing; and they reduce the time spent in face-to-face customer interaction. They also make it easy to monitor both quality and quantity of contact with service users, and better control the nature of advice given (Fisher, 2004). They can improve the corporate image of the municipality thus increasing credibility. They also increase equality in access for, for example, disabled people who are not able to walk to the municipality.

2.5 Restructuring of work in South Africa: the apartheid workplace regime

Much of the literature on the South African workplace is concentrated on the private sector work space, with very little done in the public sector. The South African labour process is best explained by Von Holdt's (2005) concept of

apartheid workplace regime in describing the post-apartheid 'restructured' workplaces. Based on his study in the Highveld Steel Company, Von Holdt insists that the post apartheid workplace is still characterised by certain features from the past which he termed as the apartheid workplace regime. Omar and Webster (2003) argue that the concept of "apartheid workplace regime" could not be applied in an unqualified way since the formal demise of apartheid, which involved among others, the severing relationship between the workplace and the apartheid state. They all agree that certain features of the "apartheid workplace regime" persist.

The effects of this regime are characterised by low trust, low levels of skill, reluctance to identify with the goals of the enterprise, and the persistence of the racial division of labour which was a feature of the apartheid regime (Webster and Omar, 2003: 3). According to Von Holdt (2005: 7) this regime was dominated by racial division of labour with monopolisation of skill and managerial positions by whites. This meant technical positions and skilled jobs were considered to be 'white' jobs. Racial assaults were considered to be 'oil' in the machinery of the apartheid workplace.

This was also observed by Omar (2001) when she conducted a research in two Telkom call-centres. She noted that racist customers; the transfer of black customers to language section of the call-centre; the abuse of workers because of their accent; tokenism in managerial positions and authoritative managerial styles, were all signs of the persistent 'apartheid workplace regime' in the service sector. Von Holdt (2005) also observes the persistence of these features in the new SA, where income and company benefits are racially divided.

Though an apartheid workplace seems to be recognisable even in the public services workplace, discipline or lack thereof was also observed by Von Holdt and Maserumule (2005: 448) in public workplaces, and this was induced by lack of managerial capacity to discipline the offenders. In the Chris Hani Hospital workers blamed management for 'floating discipline and of supervisory apathy'. SA labour studies have tended to focus on the manufacturing industry labour process which makes it hard to analyse the new customer centred workplace in the public sector. The process of transforming the public service workplace using customer satisfaction surveys seeks to reorganise and measure the productivity of this space. This has been accused of trying to gain greater control over service workers through standardisation and routinisation of professional services (Manley, 2001: 158). Whether these form part of 'the persistent apartheid workplace' in the local government call-centres remains to be seen.

2.6 Customer service in a call-centre

Service quality varies across the industry, depending on the size, the sector, the nature of functions, etc. Call-centres are associated with bad customer service (Blunden, 2003). As quoted in *Business Day* (23 April 2007) "Any company serious about customer service would never consider a call-centre as a means to interact with its clients. They are nothing but glorified-message taking units. Agents do not actually deal with your queries and you battle to get hold of the same person when following up on these queries". According to this quote, quality means personal service and feeling like the only customer interacting with the 'person'. This is best described by Omar (2005: 272) when she says good service is frequently associated with 'personal service and customisation, and standardisation is likely to cut quality in interaction between people'.

This is not peculiar to private sector call-centres. A citizen from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality wrote *"I honestly don't know why the municipality has the electronic help desk if you can't get any help. Try to speak to the consultant and they are always busy and you are told to leave a short message they will get back to you, which they will never do. You have to call them again...I called and I followed the voice prompt and I got cut off...some of us work far from the CBD we cannot drop in for issues that can be sorted over the telephone...talking about Batho Pele (People first) I'm sure the majority of them do not even know the meaning to the concept"* (*The Herald* (PE), 17 April 2007).

The main reason for consumer dissatisfaction with the call-centre service is derived from the depersonalisation of service and IVR system. Kjellerup (2000) (in the first Local government call-centre conference in Asia) argued the same when saying *"...customers and citizens hate talking to machines. The proliferation of IVR (Interactive Voice Recording) in Call-centres has become synonymous with bad customer service"* (Kjellerup, 2000:1).

This de-personalises service delivery, according to citizens who prefer face-to-face interaction with the service provider. Customers do not want to be treated like the "next customer" and therefore the call-centre agents have the task of making them feel like the only customer. This is emotionally draining for the call-centre agents, who are expected to suppress their emotions to accommodate the customer because the "customer is always right" (Korczynnski, 1995). Call-centre front-line workers are recruited according to their customer focused personality, for good customer service. As the result the majority of call-centre workers are females as they are assumed to possess a 'caring' personality towards customers (Taylor and Tyler, 2000).

2.7 Gendered spaces and e-government

The growth of service occupation has persisted with women coming into this sector providing services that are usually carried out in households, such as caring and servicing. Spain (1992: 1) argues that women and men do not only perform different tasks but also perform them in different spaces: women are usually associated with private spaces whereas men are well-known for their public space. These spatial differences have relegated women to lower paying jobs and most of the time to private spaces such as homework, which is usually considered less important in society (Spain, 1992).

In Europe, call-centre operators are predominantly young, flexible and female. This could stem from the use of emotional labour in this kind of job, which is associated with females. It is argued that women are more inclined to study language skills than men. Women constitute more than 70% of call-centre operators, which makes this a gendered workspace (Richardson, Belt and Marshal, 2000; Breathnach, 2000; Korczynski et al., 2000).

In SA, most municipal call-centres are also staffed by women, with more than 60% of the call-centre agents being women in Joburg Connect (Joburg Connect Assistant Director, 2007).

E-governments opponents argue that the 'digital divide' between those who already have access to computers and those who will not gain access for a long time may result in long-lasting and widening economic gaps between ICT haves and have-nots, as the result the service provision is biased in favour of urban educated residents (Effective E-governance, 2005: 19). This form of governance

undoubtedly improves the quality of services provided by the government and reduces inconsistency and errors in duty calculation.

Some have been very critical of the effectiveness of e-government to deliver services to the needy. Neville (in *Effective E-governance*, 2005) makes it clear that most of the services the government offers cannot be delivered by the internet. These include building houses, building roads, catching criminals etc. "Most government service provides real benefits when some physical action takes place" (*Effective E-government*, 2005: 30).

In the culture and perceptions of 'uncaring' public servants by the public, e-government tends to put 'citizens' or 'customers' at the centre of delivery, which is in line with *Batho Pele's* vision of citizen-centred service delivery. E-government is perceived to be the answer to slow and inefficient service provision in local government in South Africa, as it promotes self-service in which customers take on the administrative tasks on a 24/7 basis. This is possible when multiple channels of communication are encouraged to enhance public and government interaction. E-government has created new forms of customer-focused work in some SA municipalities to improve customer satisfaction (Sealy, 2003).

2.8 The 'sovereign' customer and the citizen

The growth in the service sector and the emphasis on enterprise culture has led to the introduction of "omnipotent party – the customer" (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Taylor, 1997; Korczynski, 1995). Though sometimes absent in many accounts of service work, the customer is nevertheless present. This 'presence' have been generalised under the term "sovereign customer", who has become

the moral centre of the enterprising universe and a sweeping force for restructuring organisations and changing employees' behaviour, especially that of the front-line service worker. Consumers have now become commanders in their visit to the market place: "they are judges, critics and choosers" (Knights and McCabe, 2003: 58). The delivery of quality can only be evaluated through customer feedback. Now in both private and public organizations 'customer satisfaction is the overriding goal'. Customer-focused bureaucracy or customer-oriented bureaucracy, as Korczynski (1995: 81) dubbed it, has led to a change not only in managerial models but also in front-line worker's behaviour.

Smith argues "new radical consumers by their good taste are restructuring work lives in capitalist labour process" (Du Gay and Salaman, 2000: 82). In the service sector customers take the role of management and civil culture has become consumer culture, with citizens reconceptualised as sovereign customers who have "the power to control workers and mid-level managers through customer feedback". This was observed by Omar (2001) in the Telkom call-centre where customer complaints were used directly in managing the work of Customer Service Representatives (CSRs). This is why some have gone as far saying that the authoritative position appears to have been removed from upper management's hands and redistributed to a company's clients, customers, patients, etc.

Webster and Omar (2003: 200) point out that "customer feedback obtained through surveys of customer perceptions (in Telkom call-centres) was used mainly to inform the development of annual business plans rather than in direct management of Customer Service Representatives". Also through customer satisfaction surveys management exert control over employees through

customers. In the call-centre industry, the algocratic organisation of calls has been designed to reduce random elements of behaviour both to the customer and the worker (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 689). This serves as the controlling force not only for front-line workers but also for the “sovereign” customer.

The focus is on managerial attempts to reconstruct work organisation in ways which are defined characteristically, and are commercially- and customer-focused (Du Gay and Salaman, 2000: 83). Since the introduction of customer sovereignty in call-centres, employees have been labelled as docile service providers offering de-personalised care and attention to aggressive consumers. This is apparent where call-centre workers have to be efficient and at the same time customer-oriented with regard to quality and quantity. Thus, workers are faced with the dilemma of satisfying customer needs in a limited time period set up by the company (Korczynski et al., 2000).

Call-centre staff has to create the impression of individualised treatment to the customer, to make them feel different from the next customer. This has been created through massive marketing and elevation of the customer as sovereign which led to high expectations among customers concerning their role as service consumers (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 670).

In these algocratic organisations customers have to familiarise themselves with various routines and information, they have to be prepared to follow instructions carefully. Should they not comply then the offer of a service is withdrawn until they do (Aneesh, undated: 15). Not only service workers recognise the mythical role of customers as sovereign consumers but consumers also know it. Both service workers and customers are victims of the system – algocracy. The

interaction between service workers and customers is so brief, which leads us to question the 'sovereignty' of the customer. The call-centre system restricts any emotional involvement through the use of scripts which restricts any deviation from the system. Customers become irritated by the experience of de-personalised service which disrupts their expectations as 'sovereign' consumers. In the end, Bolton and Houlihan (2005: 680) saw customer sovereignty as mythical, and neither call-centre workers nor consumers believe the myth, however this will be investigated.

Clarke and Newman (1997:116) seem to concur with the argument of the myth of customer sovereignty by saying "the introduction of markets and charters has created something less than a sovereign customer in public service". This resulted in public servants reinventing themselves as entrepreneurs competing for consumer business. The concept of consumer culture in public services offers a positive attitude in designing services according to what the "customer" wants.

This then changes the previous perceptions of the service user as a passive and unresponsive citizen, into an active customer (Desai and Imrie, 1998). Public service customers appear to lack choice in terms of contacting the local government, which makes the concept of customer very hard to grasp in the public sector (Clarcke and Newman, 1997). Though there are doubts about the sovereignty of the customer, the real influence it had on employee's behaviour and attitudes is of importance. This form of organisational change is not confined to private companies which operate within a clear defined market, it is also apparent within the public sector (Du Gay and Salaman, 2000: 80).

2.9 Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy in front-line service work

The concept of 'Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy' (COB) was developed by Marek Korczynski in the new school of thought 'New Service Management' (NSM). The COB theory is used to make sense of the call-centre workplace in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. The key concept underpinning NSM is "customer satisfaction-workforce satisfaction mirror". This simply means customers will receive higher quality service and be more satisfied when the front-line workforce themselves are satisfied in their jobs. The key part of the mirror is the interrelatedness of the satisfaction of the two parties. Basically customers are satisfied by the manner in which they are treated by the satisfied front-line workforce (Korczynski, 2002:20).

Based on this new school of thought, COB theory is founded on two contradicting logics in service work in the front-line: "customer orientation and bureaucracy".

This concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy captures the requirement for the organisation to be both formally rational, to respond to competitive pressures to appeal to customer's wishes for efficiency and to be formally irrational, to enchant, responding to the customers' desire for pleasure, particularly through the perpetuation of the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty (Korczynski, 2002: 64).

This means organisations should be efficient and empathetic towards customers. This theory sees customers in contemporary service work as the most influential restructuring figures of 'authority' in the front-line. It is underpinned by the 'inherent' contradictions in front-line work where workers have to be rational

and irrational at the same time. This is why Korczynski (2002: 65) says COB is about "Taylorism coupled with Tailorism". This means organisations are faced with these contradictory principles of rationalisation and standardisation whilst needing to capture the unpredictable and various needs of the customer at a high level of quality.

Labour Process

When service workers interact with customers they have to be rational – abiding by company rules/targets and at the same time building these relationships through empathy. For example, in the call-centres workers have to spend a certain limited amount of time in their interaction with customers while at the same time being 'patient' with customers.

According to the COB theory model or 'ideal type', service workers have to deliver their services as quickly as possible whilst maintaining the 'myth' of customer sovereignty. During a front-line worker's labour process 'pseudo-relationships' are formed in which management is trying to create social order out of these contradictions. This social order is maintained through the use of technological programmes that create a file for individual customers and make interactions smooth and more 'personal' at the same time. This is very popular in the call-centre front-line where certain company technological programmes are installed to store historical interactions between the organisation and that particular customer. Some companies also make use of company statements or visions to give 'power' to complain about unsatisfactory service from the front-line workers (Korczynski, 2002: 69).

The basis of control

The basis of authority in COB theory is based on two cornerstones: rational legal rules and the customer. Bureaucratic rules are in place for the achievement of company goals of efficiency whilst maintaining the myth of customer 'sovereignty' through customer feedback and complaints. The bureaucratic rules are sometimes maintained by technological devices, such as Interactive Voice Response in the call-centre: this is a machine which records the amount of time for each call, the number of calls taken and the number of calls abandoned. This not only controls the front-line workers but also the customers themselves, as they have to follow the voice prompts on the phone and 'wait for the available consultant'. Aneesh (undated: 15) also recognises the power which lies in the computer codes or algocracy by arguing:

Armed with programming technologies, the algocratic systems are able not only to point out the incorrect steps taken by the user but also suggest a correct method to the ignorant user. Unlike the unlettered machines of the industrial age the smart machines have the ability to communicate commands as an authority in addition to fruitfully carrying commands of the user. The ability of the computer to assume the role of controlling authority -apart from being object of use- turns the unidirectional relationship with industrial machines on its head (ibid, 15).

This then not only promotes efficiency but also controls the behaviour of both the front-line worker and the 'sovereign customer'. In the call-centre workplace this is evident through the use of both Automatic Caller Distribution programmes (ACD) and IVR systems. The former distributes calls according to the availability of operators logged on to the system. On the other hand customer satisfaction surveys are also used to gain perceptions of customers about a company's

customer service. This gives 'power' to the customer to influence the behaviour of the front-line workers as they are rated accordingly.

This customer control begins during the recruitment stages as companies are increasingly looking for people with a positive "customer service attitude". This filters down during induction and training as front-line workers are encouraged "to put themselves in the shoes of the customer" (Korczynski et al., 2000). The employer-employee-customer triangle is increasingly controlling the workplace, rather than the employers only. This is why Leidner (in Hodgson, 2001: 120) argues that "customers are increasingly incorporated as a disciplinary device in modern business". The customer requires a set of positive emotions that are 'suitable' for the business interests.

Affectivity

Though Weber's rational bureaucracy discourages "emotional expression" in an organisation, the COB theory requires front-line workers to deliver "rationalised emotional labour" (Korczynski, 2001; 2003). This simply means organisations need these workers to deliver empathy in a more *efficient* manner. The emotional labour has to be used to benefit the company and create social order between the customers and the organisation. These emotions have to be managed in a manner that will enchant the myth of customer sovereignty. This is very common in the call-centre front-line as the workers have to be 'emotionally efficient' when dealing with irate customers, and when they interact with customers they have to be friendly but not spend too much time with a customer. The front-line worker has to make sure that this interaction is structured and elevate the customer beliefs of sovereignty at the same time (which makes the customer believe that she is in control of the conversation). This 'positive emotional

expression' is one of the contributing factors in this popular stressful job, as "management wants an efficient display of emotions" (Korczynski, 2001: 91).

Division of labour

In Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy, the ideal division of labour is twofold, based on efficient task completion and the customer relationship. Scientific management principles break tasks down into minute sets of tasks to foster efficiency. This is what Ritzer (2000) termed "McDonaldization", and this process offers "consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability and control" (Ritzer, 2000: 16). In the call-centre workplace this is encouraged through standardisation and routinisation of tasks by using 'scripts' and technological programmes. IVR and ACD systems make sure that customers queue and answer according to the machine's commands. COB theory believes that through technological programmes such as IVR and Customer Relations Management, front-line workers are able to make the interaction with customer 'more personal' as these programmes display the history of interaction between the customer and the company.

According to this theory the customer becomes the source of pain and pleasure for the front-line worker. This is derived from research results conducted in Australia, Japan and United States of America call-centres by Korczynski and others, demonstrating that workers derive satisfaction from being of assistance to the customer and at the same time suffer from stress through irate and sometimes abusive customers. This theory uses the term 'socially embedded relations' to explain these contradictions. This simply means the front-line staff tend to relate to customers in a 'social and personal manner rather than being a

customer', for example, when referring to an irate customer call-centre workers may say 'that old white man' or 'young black female' (Korczynski, 2002; 2003).

Unionisation in the front-line

According to COB theory the presence of abusive and irate customers calls for the formation of informal 'communities of coping' to assist one another in this contradictory environment. These 'communities of coping' are embedded in the 'collective emotional labour' shared by these front-line workers. These 'communities of coping' then form a potential solidarity from which trade unions can emerge (Korczynski, 2003: 71). This theory believes that trade unionism in the front-line should not only be based on bread-and-butter issues of pay and conditions but also "acknowledge the enmeshing of consumption and production that occurs in the service work" (Korczynski, 2007: 579). This simply means that trade unionism in the front-line can bud out of "customer service" issues which then ease the pain on the front-line and therefore on customers, since worker-customer satisfaction is interrelated, "seeking to create not only decent jobs, but also decent customer service to deliver to the customer" (Korczynski, 2007: 579). This was echoed by Silver (2008) in her research on four call-centres: she observed 'informal networks' made by call-centre co-workers on the job more empowering and they contributed positively to job satisfaction.

2.10 Implications of COB theory in front-line work

The new forms of front-line work are based on the dual logic of customer orientation and reduction of costs. The customer is now at the centre of service delivery in public sector. It is now the "sovereign customer" who evaluates the quality of the service and exerts 'power' over front-line workers through

customer surveys and complaints. But the sovereignty of the customer in the public sphere is thwarted by 'choice'. These changes have a considerable effect on the shift in the nature and content of work in the public service (Beynon, 1997:31). Though there has been a shift to service jobs, most of the characteristics of manufacturing jobs are still engraved on the walls of these new service jobs (Beynon, 1997: 31).

This was predicted by Braverman when he argued that "computers will be to administrative workers even at lower to middle management level, what assembly line was to manual workers" (Thompson, 1985: 80). This has resulted in Braverman placing the clerical and service sector workers in a large pool of a "new form of proletariat". Job tasks are now fragmented between operators who are required to know less, and more conceptual knowledge is placed in the hands of a few "programmers", thus extending the process of deskilling upwards (Thompson, 1985: 79).

Algocracy in service work

The use of computers in service jobs has been compared to automation in the manufacturing industry. The production process resembles Tayloristic principles of work organisation. At every level, jobs were fragmented and functionally specialised, with simpler tasks performed by less skilled workers (Wood, 1989). This is termed as "Algorithmic organisation" because of routinisation, reduced decision-making due to a set of self-contained rules (algorithms) by the computer. The goal of this approach is to reduce the role of human knowledge and judgement in the production process by designing self-regulating systems that require little input from the human operators who work with them.

The algorithmic organisation requires no knowledge of company products, only computer basic skills not related to the firm's business lines (application of algorithmic decision rules to fully anticipated situations). Algorithmic uses of computer technology appear to be an extension of Tayloristic forms of work (Appelbaum and Albin, 1989). This form of work is dehumanising for both customers and workers. Call-centres have been compared with this kind of work, based on public perceptions of the small amount of knowledge of the company operations possessed by call-centre agents.

Haw (in *Business Day*, 23 April 2007) concurs with this view by arguing "too many companies fail to empower call-centre staff with a good understanding of the bigger picture". The use of computer scripts to enhance standardised quality across customers has been a main source of criticism in the call-centre industry, as it is seen as 'deskilling' because workers have to follow it even if the customer does not need the information. On the other hand, customers have to familiarise themselves with the voice prompts when calling the call-centre or they will have to restart the whole process. Public sector reforms have introduced customer care centres as the centralised point of access to reduce referrals in the bureaucratic organisation. Although SA call-centres are growing in the public sector, very few have captured the transformation of public sector workplace.

2.11 Conclusion

Influenced by New Public Management, South Africa introduced *Batho Pele* which changed the identity of the citizen into a 'customer'. Through in the Municipal Systems Act (95) 2000, customer care and performance management is now a necessity in all South African municipalities who have the capacity to set

them up. Central to these reforms in the public service has been the introduction of call-centres within civil service departments, and this has changed the nature of work in the municipal front-line. Call-centres have been the main direct invention of these reforms, forming the neo-Taylorist customer-centric workplace occupied by experienced public servants. These are designed to promote efficiency and responsive local government and thus increase customer satisfaction amongst the citizens.

Though call-centres have been daunted by negative identity (as sweatshops of the digital era), municipal call-centres have been identified as currently assuming a high quality form which has served to promote positive views of working conditions in call-centres among call handlers and trade unionists (Fisher, 2004). This stems from the nature (inbound) of these call-centres, their size, sector, and orientation (customer satisfaction).

The next chapter looks at the methods and techniques employed in the research investigation of local government call-centres in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality.

CHAPTER 3

The Eastern Cape Context and Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the context of the case study, methods and research design of the study. I look at the techniques applied to collect data and the ways in which data was analysed. Secondly, I provide a brief picture of ethical considerations which confronted the researcher in the field. Finally, the research difficulties encountered in the field are listed.

The tools employed for the data gathering included semi-structured interviews, observations, and telephone interviews. The key informants of the study were call-centre operators, supervisors, call-centre managers and customer care management.

The research is concerned with process, perceptions and interpretations of work experiences in two Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality call-centres. This project used a qualitative approach because the aim was to understand and describe the meanings and interpretations of experiences in the call-centre workplace to pursue the goal of customer satisfaction. The researcher relied heavily on interpreting data in context. Thus the study includes “developing a description of an individual or setting, analysing data for themes or categories” (Creswell, 2003: 182).

The research initially started with two cities. Preliminary interviews and background research were undertaken in NMM and Buffalo City Municipality. I

also visited Johannesburg City call-centre (Joburg Connect) which served as a benchmark to observe the operations of the EC municipal call-centre. Joburg Connect is one of the pioneers of call-centres, and considered a well-managed call-centre in the country. Joburg Connect serves the Joburg Metro Municipality call-centre and employs more workers than the Nelson Mandela Bay. In the end the BCM case study had to be dropped because there were too few workers and accessing the BCM call-centre was impossible as managers refused to grant me access. Only a few interviews were done in BCM, with mostly managers. The NMM call-centres became the crucial case study. I also found a Municipal call-centre in the Nelson Mandela Bay, which focused specifically on Electricity and Energy Services. Taking two call-centres from the NMM made it easy to compare and evaluate the customer care system in general

Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data, since this research looks at the experiences and perceptions of workers. Interviews were done with 'customers', municipal managers, call-centre operators and trade union representatives. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to respondents for comparative analysis of the two call-centres. The survey sought data to provide a comprehensive picture of the nature of a customer call-centre workplace. In accessing further key informants, the snowballing technique was used.

This was supplemented by participant observation and spending time in the call-centre and with call-centre workers. The entire fieldwork took close to a year, mainly because of the reluctance of the authorities to allow the researcher to interview them. This will be discussed later in this chapter under research challenges in the field.

Gorman and Clayton (2005: 129) suggest that “if you are undertaking research in an organizational setting, there is a good reason to interview a full range of staff stratified within the organisation in order to ensure a representative range of views is heard”. My sample was representative of people from different organisational levels, trade union representatives and “customers”. This was intended to gain various perspectives on the problem and to enhance the reliability data of the study. Though different people were consulted from different levels of the organisation, the interviewees (participants in the study) also assisted me in identifying relevant people.

In Johannesburg the researcher telephoned customer service managers who referred her to the call-centre director and other respondents. In NMM the researcher interviewed the manager telephonically, and was later taken on a tour into the call-centre where she was introduced to department managers. I was then granted access to call-centre workers through official channels. Setting up interviews with supervisors and union representatives was also facilitated by the call-centre manager in NMM.

Due to the limited academic literature on call-centres in South Africa, the researcher decided to ask both basic questions as well as those related to the international scholarly literature. This research is designed to present a picture of call-centre workplace in local government and experiences thereof in an attempt to facilitate a customer-centred workplace. A basic question for example is “who is the call-centre worker? What is the nature of job conducted in these municipal call-centres” and how has the municipality prepared them for the new customer culture? Investigating the experiences of call-centre operators in local government in the province of Eastern Cape it is hoped will add to the body of work.

3.2 Eastern Cape background

Eastern Cape is one of South Africa's nine provinces, and is home to 14,4% of the total population of South Africa. It is the second largest province in SA and is one of the poorest in the country. In terms of racial groups it is overwhelmingly African (88%), with coloured (7%), Whites (5%) and Indians (1%). More than half (55%) of the population is aged 0-22 (Provincial Growth and Development Plan, 2004). There are five significant cities in the province, namely Port Elizabeth, East London, Queenstown, Mthatha and Grahamstown. The Eastern Cape is divided into 46 local municipalities, with six district municipalities and one metropolitan municipality. Nelson Mandela Metropole and Buffalo City Municipality are situated at the eastern coastal area in the province, and form the economic heart of the province. This province is the largest contributor to export growth in manufacturing sector (Radian, 2004).

Socio-economic conditions

The economy of the Eastern Cape is dominated by the public services with virtually no mining compared to the national economy. NMM and Amathole district (ADM)¹ form the economic centre of the Eastern Cape with both dominating the secondary sector (NMMM 72% and ADM 22%). Whilst the NMM and Amathole dominate the industrial sector, Bisho/King William's Town area forms the seat of the provincial government. In the Eastern Cape almost half the population is poorly educated, with only 6% with Higher Education. Amathole (28%) and NMMM (63%) account for three-quarters of the skilled labour in the province including senior managerial jobs (PGDP, 2004).

¹ ADM is where Buffalo City Municipality as a local municipality is located.

Eastern Cape Municipalities

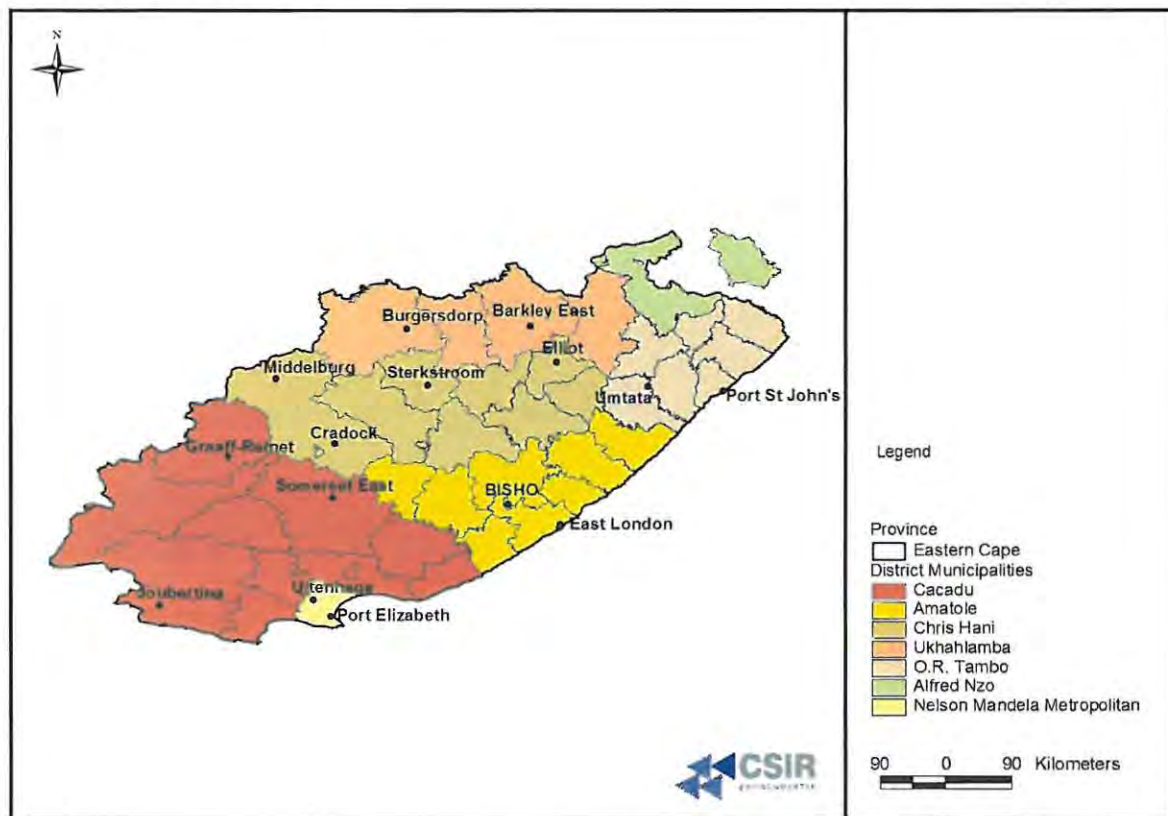


Figure 1: Map showing all the district municipalities in Eastern Cape

Source: PGDP (2004)

In terms of communications the highest telephone density is concentrated in NMM with 19% compared to the provincial average of 7%. Cellphones show a stronger presence in the eastern parts of the province (NMM and BCM). 13% of the Eastern Cape population have no access to a telephone, particularly the more rural parts of the province. For example, 29% of the population of Alfred Nzo Municipality has no access to a phone. NMM saw a slight improvement in the telephone access from 1996-2001. Poverty (67,4%) in the province has increased from 1996 to 2001, compared to the national level (34,3%). The NMM and Cacadu district Municipalities are the only two areas with a poverty rate below 50% in the province. According to the Department of Labour Survey (2006), the EC's

unemployment rate has dropped from 32% to 22,2% in the past two years. This has been questioned by ECSECC statistics which shown higher margins of unemployment (53,5% in 2005 in the expanded definition). By looking at the above statistics, BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) call-centre industry in the Eastern Cape could be beneficial in assisting to reduce unemployment.

3.3 Call-centres in the Eastern Cape

There is very limited academic literature on call-centres in Eastern Cape, only a research report by Radian Report (2004) trying to assess the prospects for the market. Call-centres are perceived as the new niche for the creation of jobs in South Africa, but most of these are situated in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape. There are currently at least 22 call-centres operating in Port Elizabeth, East London and Uitenhage. All these are in-house call-centres: there are, as far as the above-mentioned study could discover, currently no outsourcing call-centres (RADIANT Report, 2004). Currently the province seats 22 call-centres with NMM hosting the majority, followed by East London. The size of call-centres ranges from 5-110 seats with an average of 10-20 seats. This will change when the BPO Park constructed by Coega Development Corporation (CDC) in NMM will house more than 1,500-2,000 seats for call-centre agents. This new Industrial Development Zone is looking to attract foreign investors to this industry by its 'state of the art' technology.

The Coega Development Corporation was the proud recipient of the Business Process enabling South Africa (BPESA) CEO's award at the 2007 National BPO Awards on 13 October 2007 in Durban. According to BPESA, the objective of the award was to "showcase the contact centre industry in South Africa and draw

attention to examples of excellence in the sector"². This was followed by the regional call-centre awards (7 September 2007) for which Port Elizabeth was the host in Eastern Cape. The regional awards were to showcase the call-centre industry and its importance to the local economy, and also recognised the region's call-centre staff for their dedication and hard work throughout the year³. The EC has the potential to lead in supplying the human resources needed for this industry as it has more than six higher education institutions. ECSECC (in NMM 2007) identified the lack of call-centre managerial skills in the province which can be supplied by these education institutions.

Most of these call-centres are designed for customer care. "Customer service is the most significant functional activity in the South African call-centres" (African Analysis Report, 2005: 16). The government call-centres have been created for this reason and to improve customer satisfaction. They are also seen as the tool to improve efficiency in the running of government services. "Setting up of customer care service units by all provincial departments and call-centres also facilitates quick turnaround times in addressing and responding to queries and complaints by citizens"⁴.

At the time of writing this thesis, the province had no formal strategy for setting up this industry, although the former premier of the EC, Nosimo Balindlela, has encouraged government entities to set up call-centres. "The vision of government is the establishment of seamless one-stop service centres anchored by comprehensive information and technologies in each local municipality by the

² <http://www.coega.co.za/NewsView.asp?NewsID=931&id=333&node0id=79> (22/11/07)

³ *The Herald* Newspaper 11 September 2007 (Business Herald)

⁴ Nosimo Balindlela at the launch of public service week 06/11/06.

end of this decade" (State of the Province address in April 2005). Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality has installed state-of-the-art mini call-centres and customer care system to enhance efficiency and public participation. Though almost all provincial government departments have customer care units, most of them are not yet developed. The Nelson Mandela Bay call-centres were running for longer than five years. The Metro has tried to implement a version of New Public Management that focuses on the citizen as a customer.

This is one of few studies done on public call-centres in the local government which I hope can provide understanding on the challenges faced by call-centre operators in pursuing efficiency, democracy and good governance in service delivery.

3.4 Pilot study

A pilot study can be used to improve both reliability and validity of the study (Neuman, 2003: 181). The pilot study was conducted through repeated visits and interviews with a few workers and managers to remove any ambiguities or leading questions and to observe the chronological order of the questions. Re-phrasing of the questions and a balance between quantitative and qualitative questions was attempted after the pilot study was done. The challenge of phrasing was overcome by re-wording to make it easier for the respondents to understand and answer the questionnaire.

Questionnaires were split into two types, for the managers and call-centre operators. They were all hand-delivered and filled in face-to-face, to avoid a low return rate. The semi-structured questionnaire had a mix of both closed and open questions designed to give choice, opportunity to explain respondents' answers

and not be too restrictive as is common in an interpretive approach. The questionnaire was designed not to be too long to avoid wasting respondents' time. It had fewer than 30 questions, and took less than an hour to complete. The interview guide that I had prepared beforehand contained themes such as the nature of work, experience of the call-centre workplace and relationship between customer service and these experiences (see Appendices).

3.5 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone and in informal meetings. All the call-centre managers were interviewed, as were supervisors, call-centre operators and trade union representatives. Altogether 37 interviews were conducted (3 customers, 19 workers, 4 call-centre managers, 4 directors/general manager, 4 supervisors and 3 union members). An interview schedule was constructed to suit the relevant participant but with the main points that the researcher wanted to cover.

The data gathered in the field provided useful insights in my understanding of how the participants of this study experience, attach meanings to and respond to the daily grind and challenges of the new customer-centred workplaces in the public sector. During this process the main test for me was to stay as objective as possible while making sure that I guided my participants to talk about relevant themes for my study. The latter was stirred by my own experiences with the call-centre as a citizen of the Nelson Mandela Metro. I struggled with balancing the common beliefs of 'lazy and uncaring' public sector workers with understanding their position and well-being in the municipality. Interviews were mostly done in isiXhosa, the researcher's and respondents' own mother tongue language, to allow them to express their feelings and experiences as they know how.

Telephone interviews:

Owing to the geographical location and unavailability of some of the respondents, the researcher was forced to consider telephone interviews. During the fieldwork a rapport was developed with the respondents which made it easier for the researcher to conduct this sort of interviews. They proved to be efficient, as the researcher had specific questions listed before the interview. They took up to 30 minutes with the researcher scribbling notes and asking questions at the same time, conducted with the understanding that this type of interview cannot be long. "Telephone interviewing is employed when the interviews are simple and brief" (Sarantakos, 2005: 283). Two managers from Johannesburg and BCM call-centres and one shop-steward from NMM were interviewed in this manner.

Some telephone interviews were conducted before the face-to-face interviews in order for the researcher to introduce her topic and build a relationship. Berg (2007: 109) also promotes the use of telephone interviews as a step in "developing a kind of a relationship and rapport and the opportunity to convince the individual to participate in the study". Two of the challenges in using this kind of interview are the inability of the researcher to record the interview and the expensive nature of telephone calls in South Africa. Sarantakos (2005: 285) also highlights the inability to observe non-verbal behaviour as another limitation of this kind of interview.

Informal interviews:

This type of interview was used in interacting with citizens or "customers" from both NMM and BCM during the fieldwork. There were no listed questions to

guide the interviews but the interviewer started the conversations with relevant questions. Anger and frustrations witnessed in the queues allowed 'customers' to raise some important points unanticipated by the interviewer. Berg (2007: 95) concurs and points out that "unstructured interviews permit researchers to gain additional information about various phenomena they might observe by asking questions". This was conducted anonymously as the researcher posed as the customer in the queue with a group of citizens complaining about the services.

3.6 Observations

Call-centre events and activities were recorded and the interaction with members was on a social basis and in a relaxed environment (Ritchie, 2003: 35). The use of observation in the study allowed me to study the phenomena as they arise in the field, but also provided the opportunity to gain additional understanding through experience for myself (Ritchie, 2003: 35). The researcher observed call-centre workers at work and listened to electronic recordings of calls. Attending meetings on call-centre workers performances, where call-centre operators are provided with feedback on customer service, was forbidden. The researcher also called the call-centre several times to observe the customer service in practice. This proved what some of the customers observed, as I lost up to R50.00 without getting any proper solution to my enquiry.

I felt that my presence in the call-centre definitely impacted on the way of answering calls by the front-line workers, as they tried to be 'professional and friendly' to customers, and this proved to be different from the calls taped by managers where front-line workers showed irritation with callers. Observing the call-centres in NMM and Joburg Connect assisted me to understand the nature of

call-centre work and challenges faced by the call-centre operators in local government.

3.7 Data analysis

Data was taped, translated and transcribed. It was analysed using themes and coding of data for generalisations. According to Kelly (1999: 143) "coding means breaking up the data in analytical relevant ways". Data was coded and themes identified which helped the researcher to draw conclusions. Staying close to the data during the whole period of data collection made this much easier as notes were taken and transcribed after every visit.

Whilst collecting data, analysis was conducted to assist in further development of research questions and narrowing the research. Data collection was thus merged with data analysis. After the completion of data gathering, qualitative analysis was conducted to refine and confirm early analysis. It was at this stage that the researcher decided to re-listen to the tapes and re-read the transcripts to draw final conclusions. This data was compiled, analysed and summarised into two chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) of this report.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The dilemmas, concerns and conflicts that were encountered by the researcher were expected. Government officials are not easy to convince when it comes to asking for interviews. Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 66) suggest that "giving too much [prior information] may deter potential participants or curtail their spontaneous views by being over-specific about the objectives and subject matter". Ryen (2004: 232) concurs, saying "much information may increase the risk of withdrawal" and bias.

Jacklyn Cock (1980: 20), who researched domestic workers during the height of the apartheid, noted how employers became suspicious of her. This was reduced when she introduced her research as focusing “on the position of women and organisation of home” rather than domestic work. I encountered a similar experience with municipal officials and focused on the broader theme of the “organisation of work in the call-centre workplaces” when I introduced myself.

All the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, what participation would be expected of them and how the data would be used to further academic knowledge. Consent for participation of call-centre workers was granted by the managers and research officers. All respondents were given a choice in terms of time and place suitable for them. Anonymity and confidentiality for the participants was guaranteed (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 527). Lee (1993: 98) states that “privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude are important in providing a framework of trust”: this was very important as the workers were constantly asking why I was doing the study. This was prompted by the way managers introduced me as the “researcher” and this opened a door of suspicion and lack of trust. I had to re-assure the participants of confidentiality and privacy of my study to encourage them to open up. Their confidentiality and anonymity was assured although demographics and job titles would be revealing as there were few workers and managers involved. Although photographs were taken during the fieldwork, the pictures do not identify participants.

3.9 Research challenges in the field

Initially this study included Buffalo City Municipality (in East London) but this was changed based on the refusal to access the call-centre which was in the process of being outsourced. Several letters, telephone calls and emails requesting access all met with no success. Thus although a few (BCM) top managers were interviewed, without the worker's voice I had to abandon the BCM study. At this point I decided to include another call-centre (solely focused on electricity) from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality –Munilek. Through chain referral from NMM top managers the access was fairly easy with this call-centre as they proved my student status and motives for the study.

In the Budget and Treasury call-centre access to the premises was not easy as I was dressed too informally. The security guards looked at me (on my first visit looking at my sporty gear) as if I was insane when I said I was there to see one of the top managers. They didn't allow me in until she came herself to pick me up, "are you sure you are here to see Mrs ...?". One security guard continued to describe her big car which indicated my position from her mind. The next time I visited I had to dress semi-formally as I was meeting the managers. This is a reminder of Gorman and Clayton's injunction: "dress codes are unstated but nevertheless real, they often reflect one's status within the system" (2005: 115). However, this did not apply when it came to the call-centre operators who were comfortable with my casual look.

Call-centres are generally restricted places as it seems workers fear for their lives. "Those people can be killed there, it's dangerous...you get angry customers wanting to jump on you on the phone...that is why they are far from people"

(Call-centre Agent from BCM- Mandisa). The call-centre is a protected space with signage at the door and signs on the walls “NO ENTRY FOR THE PUBLIC”.

Setting up interviews with call-centre workers was tough as they were only eight of them at the main call-centre. I overcame this by including two other call-centres in NMM and a few additional interviews in Joburg Connect. Workers were interviewed on duty because their lunch was only 30 minutes. With so many interruptions from calls I had to switch the recorder on and off all the time. This affected the flow of the interviews as the phone kept on ringing.

Asking the workers about their earnings was hard as they were older than myself and married people. Cock (1980: 19) also mentions this challenge of asking domestic workers about wages in a racist and fearful environment, and she puts this down to fear. I also experienced this I was conducting the research based on cultural beliefs ‘not to ask elders how much they earn’. Workers would say “no man it’s not much but it pays the bills”. I resolved this by asking the trade union representatives because workers kept on deviating from the subject whenever I brought it up.

The managers’ refusal to be recorded was a problem as most municipal officers said “I’m a politician I can’t be recorded or photographed” (CCA-1 Siyabonga). I was forced to take notes all the time and to transcribe them after each visit. Though this initially seemed to be a problem, I found that it was beneficial in getting the interviewees talking and comfortable with me.

One of the major limitations of the study was getting SA literature in public call-centres. This was countered by using private call-centre's literature from abroad and relevant SA work conducted in call-centres. Another challenge was getting a bigger sample of customers from different backgrounds. The research sample in on public opinion was biased towards the poor who visited the municipality, not different users of the call-centres. This only gave information about the general service and *Batho Pele* principles without directly reflecting on call-centres. I had to rely on an official customer satisfaction survey to get the public opinion about call-centres. However this was noted in chapter one, when the researcher argued that public perceptions of call-centres were not part of this research scope but the experience of workers working in the call-centre. This was decided with time constraints and financial costs of the study in mind.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methods and techniques used for data gathering in the call-centre study. The variety of data-gathering techniques included semi-structured interviews, (participant) observations, a pilot study, open and closed ended questionnaire and non-participation observation. Research difficulties during the fieldwork of the study were identified, with access being one of the major difficulties experienced.

The following chapter looks briefly at the restructuring policies of the Nelson Mandela Metro in the context of municipal restructuring in South Africa. A key element in this chapter is the focus on improved customer care and service levels through a range of processes including the development of call-centres.



CHAPTER 4

Towards a Customer-Centred Bureaucracy: Policy Restructuring in the Nelson Mandela Metro

4.1 Introduction

This chapter looks briefly at the background of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. In an attempt to assess the motivation behind the call-centre establishment I look briefly at the history of the Interactive Voice Response system and the importance of customer call-centres in Metro. Thirdly, I describe the general policies building up the customer care system.

A key element in this chapter is the focus on improving customer care and service levels through a range of processes including the development of call-centres and customer care centres (CCC). In this chapter the account of the CCCs serves as background information that demonstrates how the municipality is restructuring the administration of its service delivery to improve its stated objective of efficiency.

A call-centre is not the same as a customer care centre. The call-centre allows NMM residents from “anywhere” to call in but the customer care centres are walk-in centres where NMM services can be found located in different parts of the metro. In order to illustrate the differences between the walk-in centres and call-centres in the municipality I look at the role of the customer care centres, which form part of the basic institutional system that supports the call-centres in trying to improve access and customer satisfaction.

4.2 Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality: Background

The Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality (NMBMM), formerly known as Port Elizabeth Municipality, consists of Port Elizabeth (PE) city, Uitenhage and Despatch. The area has a population of approximately 1,1 million residents and was established in 2001 through the incorporation of PE with Despatch, Uitenhage and surrounding townships. This is the fifth largest of SA's seven Metropolitan cities and forms the only dominant Metro in the Eastern Cape.

The NMM is spatially highly divided along race and class. The African population dominates in the Metropole as it does in the other districts. It has almost 19,0% of whites (the biggest concentration of the Eastern Cape). There is a relatively large coloured presence (23,5%). The spatial segregation is largely similar to that under apartheid except that the CBD is almost exclusively inhabited by blacks with a significant number of black foreign nationals, and increased number of black residents in the suburbs (NMM, 2006). 37% of the population is under the age of 20, which means job creation and education need urgent attention. Only 29% of the residents over the age of 20 have Matric or higher education qualifications despite the number of higher education institutions (Gaffaney's Local government in SA, 2007-2008: 252).

Housing is one of the big problems in the metro today. Several housing riots and xenophobic attacks took place between 2005-7. "The protestors were complaining about slow housing delivery, cracked and collapsing metro houses, a lack of toilets, and filthy conditions" (*The Herald*, 2005: 17). NMM still suffers from a high unemployment rate (41,6%) which hinders the citizens from reaping the

benefits of this best 'service delivery performance' mentioned above (NMM, 2007).

Though the Metro has the highest HIV prevalence rate (34,5%) in the province, it has made some strides in the provision of basic services: 92% of Metro households have access to water on site, which is above the 41,8% norm in the EC. Some 90% of the households in Metro use flush toilets, well ahead of the provincial average of 31,1% in 2006; and 89% of Metro households have access to electricity at least for lighting (ECSECC, 2007). However this glossy picture hides the reality: 53,7% earn less than R1,500 per month. An increase in informal dwellings from 2,033 to 28,729 in the past ten years is the result not only of urbanisation but internal metro movements. In a recent survey by NMM Development Partner in 26 areas in the metro, 94% of dwellings had no telephone landline connected (NMM, 2006). The increase in geographical size of the Metro has increased the burden on the municipality and thus service delivery needs are of high expectation.

4.3 Improving service delivery and customer care

The collection of amounts owed to municipalities for property rates and service charges has been a significant challenge facing all municipalities including the Metro. The total outstanding debt owed by the citizens of the Metro account for R1,164 billion (NMM, undated). In his address before the implementation of the customer care by-law in July 2003, the metro's Chief Financial Officer, Mr Odayer, saw the link between improved customer care, cash collection and long term service delivery (Odayer, 2003). After the municipality was criticised for lacking the proper credit control strategy, NMM had to show evidence of debt collection and negotiating strategies (Tsatsire, 2001). Operating under the

department of Budget and Treasury Office an “Interactive Voice Technology” system was set up in 2001 as one of the main strategies to encourage the culture of payment. One of the key responsibilities of Budget and Treasury office is to “implement credit control policy and effective and efficient debt collection mechanisms as required by the municipal manager” (Council Minutes June 2001: 22).

This very controversial system interactive voice response (IVR) was finally set up in April 2001 with Unihold Business Solutions (Pty.) Limited as the service provider. The latter was then merged with Siemens Business Limited (Pty.) in 2001 into Siemens Business Limited (Pty.) UBS was to provide an IVR system which would enable members of the public to contact NMMM telephonically for the purpose of obtaining information and to pay accounts. Previously this company was also going to assist the municipality in credit control service in enabling the municipality to collect debts from the public (Council Minutes May 2001). The total cost of this deal was R19,5 million excluding the expansion to the telephone system, upgrading of workstations, communication expenditure and billing system programming to support installation.

The clear vision behind this expensive technological installation was therefore credit collection from the public, rather than customer care. This is clearly seen in the exclusion of costs of training telephone agents to handle queries. This IVR system was never designed for customer care but only for account payments and credit collection. “That call-centre is only linked to payment not to the holistic needs or services of the municipality” (Top Manager 1 NMM - Tsatsire). The history of the IVR system, which was only changed in principle into a call-centre, helps to explain the nature of work conducted in this call-centre. This will be

discussed in detail in the later chapters of the study. Budget and Treasury call-centre workers also recognise the commencement of the call-centre in 2001, which clearly shows a link between the IVR system and the establishment of call-centres in NMM.

4.4 General policy developments since 2001

After the 'dis-establishment' of the old PEDU (Port Elizabeth, Despatch Uitenhage municipalities) and emergence of NMMM a document called "Strategic Economic Framework for NMM Council" (SEF) was adopted in 2001. This aimed at guiding and directing the council's operations and strategic economic programmes (Council Minutes June 2001, Annexure A). This also provided guidelines for transformation of the NMM institutions for period of five years. Three core principles of this document of 'change' were: "Strategy as drivers of structure and programmes; Partnerships as fundamental requirement at various levels; and a Market driven approach" (Council Minutes June 2001, Annexure A)

It was in the latter principle that a customer-centred, lean staff and value-driven transformation emerged. According to the IDP planning framework (Council Minutes April 2001, Annexure E), key values for restructuring the municipality were listed for both Human Resources and the Corporate Service Unit. These included efficiency, competency, discipline, a strong work ethic and participation. These form the core values of the customer care system in any organisation. Customers want their needs to be met with little time spent in a queue. It is then these principles that promoted the establishment of a Customer Care Policy and Performance management system in the Metro.

4.4.1 Customer care policy and performance management at NMM

The Customer Care and Revenue Management by-laws of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality became effective on 21 October 2003 without any objections from the public⁵. These by-laws were advertised for public comment for a period of 21 days from 25 July to 15 August 2003 at all municipal pay points and libraries. No written objections were received.

According to the policy, customer management has a strong cost recovery element. The by-laws understand customer care to “mean the focusing on the account holder's needs in a responsive and proactive way to encourage payment and thereby limiting the need for enforcement” (NMM, 2003). Furthermore, the NMM policy aims “to create a more harmonious relationship between the municipality and the community through the acknowledgement of reciprocal rights and duties, and these by-laws are designed to regulate and implement, within the scope and spirit of the Act” (NMM, 2003). This element may be understood as a response to the so-called culture of rebellion and non-payment. Through this by-law customers were now to be “cared” for rather than “forced” to pay their debts. The main objective of this by-law is to improve the collection levels through a “humane approach” (Odayer, 2003).

The “Customer Care and Management System” contained in the by-law further seeks to

- establish mechanisms for an account holder to give feedback to the municipality regarding the quality of the services and the performance of the municipality;

⁵ http://www.mandelametro.gov.za/frameset_residents.aspx (23/08/06)

- ensure that reasonable steps are taken to inform an account holder of the costs involved in service provision, the reasons for payment of service fees, and the manner in which monies raised from the services provided, are utilised;
- ensure, where the consumption of services has to be measured, that reasonable steps are taken to measure the consumption by individual account holders of services through accurate and verifiable metering systems;
- ensure that an account holder receives regular and accurate accounts that indicate the basis for calculating the amounts due; (fit) to provide accessible mechanisms for an account holder to query or verify a municipal account and metered consumption and appeal procedures which allow the account holder to receive prompt redress for inaccurate accounts;
- provide accessible mechanisms for dealing with complaints from an account holder, together with prompt replies and corrective action by the municipality, and provide mechanisms to monitor the response time and efficiency of the municipal's actions; and
- provide for accessible pay points and other mechanisms for settling an account or for making pre-payments for services (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality Customer Care and Revenue Management By-Laws, 2003).

The NMM decided to establish in 2003 Integrated Service Centres (effectively customer care centres), designed to assist the newly invented “customer” through the municipal bureaucracy. Objectives for the centres were to:

- develop mechanisms and processes to ensure that all municipal processes are *efficient and effective*-in line with the developmental local government objectives;
- promote an integrated approach to customer service;
- transform administrative systems, especially in respect of its relevant customer service impact, through enhancing municipal transaction/s and business processes in this regard;
- develop mechanisms to ensure that the municipality is *customer oriented and customer driven* in its service delivery approach/endeavours;
- create a *customer oriented organisational culture*;
- develop processes and mechanisms to build and retain good healthy relations between the institution and its customers (keep customers);
- make *customer value* the driver of the municipal business;
- establish and drive a customer service indexing system as part of the normal operations of the NMMM customer relations programme;
- enhance access to equitable municipal services by customers;
- ensure general provision for customer requests for general information;
- make provisions for customer requests for general information;
- make provision for customer support focusing on problem solving e.g. automated options (IVR, websites, automated sms responses etc.);
- establish a distinctive approach and system in order to ensure ongoing integration of the reviewed systems down to the individual level (micro level).

In 2005, a more elaborate customer care strategy was drawn up which sought to outline the practical implementation of the Customer Care Policy. The policy framework for NMM (NMM, 2005a:5) commits

to treat citizens as customers meaning: listening to their views and taking account of them in making decisions about what services should be provided; treating them with consideration and respect; making sure that the promised level and quality of service is always of the highest standard and responding swiftly and sympathetically when standards of service fall below the promised standard.

The CC policy was given further impetus by the formulation of an “e-Government Strategy” in 2005 (NMM, 2005b). The NMM e-Government Strategy (2005b: 2) argues that for the municipality to provide the most efficient and cost effective services, municipal administration has to improve. ICT has to be used to increase access to municipal information and allow municipal employees to do their work as easily, efficiently and effectively as their counterparts in the commercial sector. The two main aims of this strategy were to:

- Make it easy for citizens to obtain service and interact with the municipality, and
- Improve municipal government responsiveness to citizens by increasing the effectiveness of service delivery through a high quality process that ensures correct implementation and minimises failures (NMM, 2005b).

This e-Government project launched in 2005 was named “The Digital NMMM – Bridging the Digital Divide”. This aimed at “opening up ICT access to the communities of the NMMM” (NMM, 2005b). It was followed by a digitising approach termed “NMMM Connecting the People” whereby computer stations are located in specific libraries with free internet access and email for a certain limited time for members of the public.

4.4.2 The NMM Customer Care Centres

Twelve Customer Care Centres (seven in Port Elizabeth, two in Uitenhage and three in Despatch) were set up in 2005, with the belief that "A satisfied customer is happy to pay for services rendered" (NMM, 6 September News 2007). In the planning of Customer Care Centres it was agreed by the council that *all* services of the municipality (see list below) should be provided in each Customer Care Centre for the convenience of the customer:

- Application for municipal services
- Cash receipting
- Assistance to the Poor (ATTP)
- Account enquiries
- Credit control enquiries
- Levies
- Traffic offences and payment
- Licensing of cars
- Hall bookings
- Holiday resort bookings
- Sale of grave plots
- Electricity vending – prepaid electricity
- Dog tax
- Booking of sports facilities
- Water leaks and faulty meters
- Electricity faults
- Building plans (submissions, not approval)
- Application for Grant-In-Aid
- Rates assessment
- Procurement information

- Environmental services
- Housing applications

Four customer care centres are described below. Although different from call-centres, which are not accessible to customers, the customer care centres are part of the wider municipal restructuring that seeks to enhance access and customer satisfaction for the citizens of the Metro. The study only covered four of the CCCs (Eric Tindale, Zwide, Cleary Park shopping centre and Walmer Park) for observations and comparisons with the call-centres. These centres are interesting because the facilities differ markedly in the range of services on offer, the quality, appearance and racial groups that are served.

Table 1: Basic features of Customer Care Centres

Centre	Main race group served	Location	Household types	Services available	No. of front-line workers
Eric Tindale	Mixed but largely African township	In CBD downtown PE, in main road	Mixture of middle and low income household	All	More than 30
Zwide	Exclusively African	Zwide township, 10 km from CBD	Low income household	Partial	Less than 5
Cleary Park	Mainly coloured	Bethelsdorp 15 km from CBD	Mixture of middle and low income household	Partial	Less than 7
Walmer Park	Mainly white suburban	9 km from CBD	High income household	All	Less than 10

4.4.2.1 Physical features

Compared to Eric Tindale (ET) which is bigger, all the other three centres were small, single office spaces. The offices were not part of other municipal offices. In Cleary Park the office was in a mall (the Cleary Park Shopping Centre).

Zwide CCC had one point of enquiry that also acted as a cashier, while the CCCs at Cleary Park and Walmer had only two or three cashier points and four or fewer enquiry points, whereas ET has 10 cashier points and five enquiry windows excluding the seven on the teller side for reconnections, ATTP, disconnections and arrangements.

In the **Walmer Customer Care office**, situated 9 km from the central city area, catering mainly for the white middle class, queues and professional service were observed. When the researcher visited the centre before 12:00pm this CCC had serviced more than 60 customers. This office performs the same duties as the Eric Tindale Customer Care office, which acts as the head office of the Customer Care Centres. "We do municipal enquiries, payments, arrangements, everything that is done in Eric Tindale building" (Supervisor 1 – Van der Merwe), echoing the customer care policy which states that all services should be provided at all Customer Care Centres. Catering for more than 200 customers a day, the supervisor complained about the shortage of staff and resources in catering for customers.

These customer care centres existed before 2001 as "Rent Offices" where people paid their service charges and electricity rates. "This customer care existed before at an old clinic building but since two years ago it has been renamed into Walmer Customer Care Office" (Supervisor 1 – Van der Merwe).

Zwide Customer Care is not new, the supervisor said “This office existed as Zwide Rent Office, nothing has changed except for the technological system we now use to enter queries” (Supervisor 2 – Lulama). Situated in the township of Zwide, this CCC had only one front-line staff member at the time of my visit. Attending to both general queries and cash transactions, this CCC provides services to +/- 200 citizens a day (Supervisor – Lulama).

The **Eric Tindale** Customer Care Centre is in Govan Mbeki Street in what is perceived to be a run-down and decaying CBD where white flight has rendered the area racially homogeneous. This centre, the busiest of all, services more than 800 people a day and was officially launched in March 2005, although it was well known as The City Treasurer to citizens before 2005 (*Staff Newsletter*, July/August 2005). This centre, the biggest in the Metro, caters for all the citizens of the metro but mostly African and Coloured citizens. “As much as we have the CCC we needed to cater for those who cannot visit these customer care centres and thus call-centres were deemed to be the tool for this” (Top Manager 3 – Buntu).

4.5 Conclusion

The restructuring strategies adopted by the metro, parallel to the national transformation programme of local government, have seen the set-up of an increased number of customer care centres across the Metro. This transformation of local government has introduced private sector styles of referring to citizens as ‘customers’ and has therefore encouraged ways of improving service delivery efficiency and responsiveness. More important has been the development of customer care systems to improve information flow between the customer and

the Metro. One of the tools used to promote information flow was the establishment of call-centres and walk-in centres to improve customer satisfaction among the metro citizens and improve debt collection methods.

The next two chapters are concerned with some related issues – organisation of work in the call-centre, worker well-being, customer service and the experiences of call-centre workers in two of the Metro call-centres.

CHAPTER 5

Working in a Metro call-centre (Budget and Treasury)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the research findings of the study conducted in Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality (NMBMM). This chapter and the following one seek to describe the selected case studies --- two municipal call-centres that have been established in Nelson Mandela Bay to improve the customer care system: Budget and Treasury (B&T) and Electricity and Energy Services (Munilek). This chapter describes the nature of work and experiences of call-centre workplaces as reported by workers and managers.

Managerial, customer and workers' perspectives are also examined with specific emphasis on the reorganisation of work to facilitate more effective customer service. Their comments highlight issues from surveillance, stress, emotional labour, lack of training, internal conflicts and perceptions about the nature of the public call-centre among the workers.

The first call-centre studied (A) is housed in the Budget and Treasury office at the Eric Tindale Building (Customer Care Centre) in Govan Mbeki Avenue. It is seen as the "flagship" of the customer care system. The other (B) call-centre is at the Electricity and Energy Services department – Munilek (Municipal Electronic Services and Energy) and is situated less than a kilometre from the first.

5.2 Call-centre A (Budget and Treasury)

5.2.1 Physical organisation of the call-centre

“Customers” are not allowed in either this call-centre or in the second centre. The call-centre can only be accessed by calling 041 506 5555, which gives you three language options (isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans), and other departments including the Electricity and Energy Call-centre option. Within the open space of the main building there are signs saying “call-centre staff only: no members of the public allowed”. This was explained by one worker saying “you get threats from the public so we are endangered” (CCA-1 Siyabonga). The worker explained that angry “customers” have repeatedly abused and threatened them on the phone.

Inside, there are 10 maroon-walled cubicles each occupied by a call-centre agent who is equipped with a headset, telephone system and a computer. Next to these workstations there is a separate office opposite the 83 cm bulletin screen that faces the call-centre agents. This little corner office belongs to the call-centre manager who has two computers, one for his daily work and the other for call-centre monitoring.

Two sets of technology are used in this call-centre: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automatic Call Distribution (ACD). This technology allows the company to measure how many times the phone rings before being answered, how many calls are answered, who is on the phone, who is not, and how long each agent took on each call? The manager explained the role of this electronic monitoring system:

This here (pointing at the electronic monitoring programme) tells me who is idle? How many calls has she taken per hour? Who is occupied? Who left her desk without reporting? (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani)

Municipal call-centre workers take calls from customers about general enquiries, complaints, electricity, water disconnections or reconnections, and account balances, on water and electricity. Each call-centre worker receives on average 80 calls per day. Call-centre performance is not measured by the number of calls answered, but they have to answer all calls. Calls are sent to the next available operator, they either push the button manually or the call may be pushed automatically.

Answering calls is not the only function call-centre operators perform, they also fax, file, and do follow-ups. This means that the NMM call-centre can be called a contact centre since there are other functions in addition to call handling. “We also fax or email, depending on the nature of the enquiry” (CCA 3 – Josephine). Though this call-centre qualifies as a contact centre, it has not reached that stage yet. Contact centres interact with customers using multiple channels such as telephone, email, fax, sms, and instant messaging (Hart et al., 2006: 18). This call-centre prioritises in-bound call handling and therefore little focus is given to sending text messages and using other channels of communication.

All workers have been rotated between front-line work (physical), the back office and the call-centre since 2001. Managers explained this rotation of workers by saying “Employees are rotated so as to acquire knowledge and expertise in the

different municipal jobs” (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani). Most of the workers are female and married.

In this in-house call-centre, there is no standardised way of answering a call and no scripted responses. Throughout the eight-hour day of telephone work, call-centre operators aim to answer as many enquiries as possible and relieve the back office of telephone work. Talking about scripting in the call-centre, a manager said, “I think this standardisation is something to be considered because there is a lack of discipline to these workers, though they have worked since I got here” (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

5.2.2 Worker profiles, recruitment and career advancement

This call-centre is mainly a workplace for black women over the age of 40, although there are two black male agents, one coloured male, one coloured male female and one white female. The 10 agents have been working for the NMMM for over 12 years on average. The average level of education is Matric. The South Africa call-centre report shows more young people are employed in this sector (Benner et al., 2007) but this was not the case in this CC. The manager was a 50-year-old black male with the corner office, who reported to a 43-year-old white female. This was interesting in terms of control and discipline desired by the latter.

There is no set criterion for recruitment, as long as candidates have knowledge of the job. Customer care front-line workers are rotated around the budget and treasury component of the municipality.

There has to be some form of recruitment strategy...focusing on customer care personality and telephone etiquette...but none of that is happening at the moment" (Top Manager 3 – Tsatsire).

Call-centres within the civil service departments are mostly occupied by already established civil servants (Fisher, 2004: 157). This shows that SA municipal call-centres are no exception to the rule, as these call-centres are in-house and negotiated with the union. One manager expanded on the above response by saying "we need to recruit fresh minds and fresh blood and professional people who are specifically trained for answering telephones" (Accountant – Zamikhaya). MacDonald and Sirianni (in Sturdy et al., 2001: 7) seem to agree with the above statement when they argue that

an empowerment approach, based on the careful recruitment, selection, training and motivation of employees who are likely to make decisions in the service encounter, means managers must first select the right kinds of people for the job, often using gender, class, age and other status markers to serve as a proxy for required personality types.

Most of the managers interviewed seemed to think that age was a big problem in call-centre operators, as they have worked in the "old culture of the organisation" which poses as a challenge to the now "customer-oriented" municipality.

the biggest challenge is changing the attitudes of the employees towards this new customer oriented approach...and it is easy to deal with new recruits but the old staff has to be re-trained and it is hard to re-train those people (Top Manager – 1 Tsatsire).

We want to change the attitude and image of front-line staff quality (Accountant – Zamikhaya).

One of the most common and effective ways of changing the attitudes and culture of an organisation is "extensive training and development, which recognises and acts upon the idea of front-line staff being crucial to organisational success" (Nickson et al., 2001: 173).

5.2.3 Training in the call-centre

According to the NMM Communication policy (2001: 7), in order to improve the quality of information given to citizens, the role of front-line personnel is essential. "They play an important role in the promotion of Council's image and it is at this first point of contact that the image and service should be improved. Front-line personnel should be trained in public relation and service orientation skills and empowered with knowledge of Council and services rendered" (ibid.: 7). Though the policy recognises the need for training, little has been done to put this into practice.

The B&T call-centre highlighted the three programmes that they have used to equip their front-line staff: different departments come in and present their functions to the call-centre agents, they attend a course at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and computer training is provided by the municipality. One of the forms of training observed for call-centre operators in the Metro was the installation of Property Evaluation software functioning. Each worker received individual attention from the consultants who installed the programme, and some were taught by others who had already been taught. This took not more than two hours as workers were moving around trying to observe one another. For me this was not training but a demonstration of how to operate the software rather than what the call-centre manager termed "training".

On the other hand, workers showed no knowledge of this as they confidently said "There was no training we received in this job" (CCA 3 – Josephine). One of the top managers agreed with this statement, saying

these people are administrators, clerks, not customer care consultants
they are not trained into customer care (Top Manager 3 – Tsatsire).

This could be explained by the recruitment of knowledgeable workers from within the municipality who have not been trained in customer care. This approach is not unique in the Metro: according to Fisher (2004: 157) United Kingdom local council call-centres are also occupied by existing civil servants who have the background knowledge of the service provided.

Trained in the new customer care approach were mostly managers who are not at the front desk dealing with customers every day. This was observed as the top management showed awareness and understanding of the concepts (e.g. *Batho Pele*) which did not filter down to the bottom. This seems not to be peculiar to the Metro only, as one of the BCM ex-call-centre puts it:

It's only management that attends these customer care workshops which does not make sense because we are the ones at the front-desk. (Pointing at the customer care strategy workshop document dated 2003) this I received when my manager could not attend this workshop or training in customer care services (BCM: CCA-19 Mandisa).

One supervisor told me that "they send supervisors for training so that they can teach their subordinates" which threatens the image of the Metro customer service. This seeming lack of training on *Batho Pele* values was evidently

displayed by three workers in the B&T municipality who had no idea what the concept meant. This became clear when one of the call-centre workers looked lost when asked about *Batho Pele*, saying “is that something on TV or newspapers...what is that *Batho Pele* I have no idea what it is” (CCA 6 – Nancy).

According to Omar (2001: 117) Telkom management tended to focus training on “functional” (staff behaviour, attitude and tone of voice) rather than “technical” quality, which means teaching more about product and operational knowledge. This was also very apparent in the NMM call-centres as the staff employed were assumed to be experienced enough about the municipality, the only training they received was on “customer service” which included how to answer the phone. Although they received training on “how to be professional” on the phone, call-centre operators seemed to want to boost their self esteem and lower stress levels. Nickson et al. (2001: 179) argue that in recruitment organisations are looking for the “right sort of appearance and disposition before any technical skills” (ibid.: 179). In the hospitality industry this was explained by one manager in Nickson et al. (2001: 180) as follows: “we want people that had personality more than the skills because we felt we could train people to do the job”. This was different in these call-centres as the municipality was looking for more experienced workers rather than the ‘right personality’.

5.2.4 Discipline and surveillance in the workplace

According to the customer care managers, this call-centre was designed “to relieve the back office from telephone work and to centralise and monitor customer access to the municipality” (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine). “Before the call-centre people used to call the switchboard and telephone operators and now the call-centre is here to expand that and provide an efficient service to the

residences of the metro and improve customer satisfaction” (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani). This then makes the call-centre the first contact for the citizens of the metro, and it therefore plays a big role in enhancing the image of the municipality.

When I first visited the call-centre there was no bulletin board screen in front of the call-centre agents and no electronic monitoring system in the Customer Care Manager’s office. When asked why the electronic monitoring system was introduced the manager answered:

There is a lack of discipline with call-centre workers, there are so many complaints from the public about this call-centre...and now I decided to set up this electronic system. The public is complaining about lack of knowledge from staff member, unattended phone calls and irritating IVR system (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

She also went on to blame the space arrangement of the call-centre, arguing “That call-centre set up it is just wrong; supervisors should be at the back, facing the operators not in the corner office” (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine). When asked about the use of the recorded telephone calls, she said

we try and evaluate the performance using them and assess where one needs training...they do not get paid according their performance in the call-centre” (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

On the other hand the supervisor from B&T call-centre argued that “the bulleting screen helps to show who is logged in or not...because people sometimes just login and leave without saying” (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani). Workers in the B&T call-centre tended to blame their ‘supervision’ with regard to the lack of professionalism (or discipline) found in this call-centre.

You see the difference here, you've got MTN's call-centre and ours, and I would say MTN 100 percent in their customer service, because the manner that you are attended to as a customer when calling to query about an account is very different to this one here...Perhaps the supervision in those companies is 100 percent, as I said that we as municipality, our rules and supervision in call-centres differs to those of the private sector. Maybe one of the reasons there is that difference is the nature of the sector. You understand. Because in the municipality I can say I have a right not to do whatever my supervisor must go to hell (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

This apparent lack of discipline in this call-centre confirmed what Von Holdt and Maserumule (2005) observed in one of the public hospitals in Johannesburg due to lack of leadership and supervisory apathy which demoralised the hardworking staff members. One of the call-centre operators in Joburg Connect explains the cynicism: "some people in the call-centre do not like you because you are a hard worker" (CCA 21 – Faniswa).

When one call-centre agent was asked about the bulletin board attached to the ceiling just in front of him, he said "this is our new police in this job" (CCA 1 – Mlungisi) pointing to the 83 cm bulletin board that shows who is occupied and who is not. This electric system with bulletin boards monitors calls waiting, the duration of each call and calls abandoned. It was not warmly welcomed by the call-centre agents, and one of them referred to it as "our police". This bulletin screen, facing the call-centre agents not the manager, induced an element of "self monitoring" amongst workers. One of the call-centre operators who asked to be rotated back to the back office said

one reason that makes me want to leave is that everyone is always conscious of what you are doing as a result there is so much politics among call-centre agents (CCA 3 – Josephine).

Nickson et al. (2001: 171) confirm this by saying “it is peer pressure and self-surveillance, rather than management, which then acts to enforce any organisational aesthetic⁶ code”. This self-surveillance creates individualised workers rather than well-known call-centre teamwork based work.

I also listened to the recorded interactions between the customer and a call-centre agent. The call-centre agent was a black female interacting with a white male caller (judging from his accent). He wanted a direct number to the City Treasurer to discuss his property issues. The call-centre agent answered with minimal enthusiasm, giving him apparently the same number he had and which did not work. This man screamed at her for incompetence and lack of knowledge. She never replied but insisted on the same number and he dropped the phone. At this point the agent had no idea that the manager had this electronic monitoring system in her office.

After I listened to this intense interaction, the manager was embarrassed and said “there is a need for communication skills training, telephone etiquette and customer care service because this is the image of our municipality” (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine). This form of intervention has been labelled as trying to “govern the soul of employee” through managerial interference on the labour process of the call-centre operator (Wray-Bliss, 2001: 45).

⁶ See Nickson et al. 2001. Aesthetic code refers to appearance code or how employees come across, the way they dress, their mood, their personality and demeanour.

From what the researcher observed this expensive electronic system was not used against the workers as the supervisor insisted that “when there are complaints about an agent I always try and talk to them about it” (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani).

Though customer-agent interaction is recorded there is no evidence of the use of this process in the Metro to discipline workers. There was no scripted way of answering the telephone except for the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) programme used to retrieve customer information on the computer, although managers and supervisors insisted that recording was a regular routine to keep up the quality of calls. “We keep the number of calls taken and monitor after a month or so and show the workers their way of answering the calls” (Supervisor 3 – Phumlani).

At this inbound call-centre, calls may either be pushed automatically when the agent is on ready status or picked up manually. Call-centre operators receive and deal with calls from customers wanting to enquire about their accounts, balances, electricity cut-offs, refuse collection, water billing, account payments, water drainage, etc.

The only priority for us is to handle incoming calls and to be there when the phone rings, also we have to call customers and get back to customers. But like I said the priority for us is to answer this phone when it rings (CCA 4 – Lauren).

5.2.5 Health and well-being of call-centre workers in the Metro

Stress caused by aggressive “customer” behaviour is a major burden for workers. Management of tone and emotion is thus the key to call-centre customer service. Voice and accent of employees seems to be one of the key contributing factors in stress experienced by call-centre operators (Nickson et al., 2001: 180). This was also the case in NMM call-centres, operators identified their accent as the source of attack and abuse by the customers who immediately accuse them of incompetence. “When they listen to your name and accent then you get it” (CCA 1 – Siyabonga). This was also highlighted by the B&T customer care manager as she argued for voice training and telephone etiquette workers. One of the operators explained to me when she complained about the lack of training “you know us hey from disadvantaged education background when you get here and deal with English and Afrikaans speaking customers you tend to be intimidated and not want to answer the calls” (CCA 15 – Bessie).

This masks the emotional pressure the call-centre operators work under (Wray-Bliss, 2001: 42). Emotional management in call-centre work is the direct cause of stress from what the researcher observed.irate customers were identified as one of the greatest causes of stress in this call-centre:

racial customers and accusations of knowing nothing about your job irritates me and sometimes you want to give the customer a piece of mind but you decide to cool down because this is a customer after all (CCA 3 – Josephine).

Another agent said

I just drop the phone on those irritating customers (CCA 2 – Mlungisi).

The most stressful part of the job is the fact that “customers treat you as if you know nothing...when you go out of your way to help a customer” (CCA 2 – Mlungisi).

Another agent agreed with the above statement, when she said

racist and abusive customers will say...you are all fools there and you know nothing in that municipality...another stressful aspect will be dealing with mistakes from other departments and suffering for council decisions that are not favoured by consumers (CCA 3 – Josephine).

At the end of the month when customers seek to pay their accounts, and when there is electricity cut-offs, numbers of irate customers/citizens call in. This is usually due to the inefficient billing system inherited from PE municipality. “Wrong meter readings get customers angry and that comes to you as an agent not knowing that the problem is the billing system itself” (CCA 5 – Lauren). One of the top managers concurs with the above statement when he says “we are now introducing the new billing system because that one affected our customer services badly” (Top Manager 3 – Tsatsire).

The lack of integration between the back office and front line workers is one of the stressful aspects of call-centre work in the Metro: “When there are delays in fixing burst water pipes, wrong meter readings and other things like information delays from the back office” (CCA 3 – Josephine). When asked about pressure at work one agent answered “there is no pressure here, you know when you are dealing with public service there is no pressure, if customers are not satisfied it is not our fault but Council’s” (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

Call-centres are designed to reduce telephone enquiry work from the back-office so as to carry on with service delivery.

The benefits of having a call-centre is to relieve the back office of the call congestion so as to deliver the services to the community, and also the centralisation of the access makes it easier to monitor and control the quantity of public contacts (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

Though the call-centre is in place, citizens still form long queues in the municipal centres. This can be explained by lack of trust from customers in the small offices and technology (Top manager 2 – Lorraine). Call-centres were designed to reduce long queues in municipal offices and improve service quality for all customers. This seems to be ineffective from the long queues observed in NMM.

In this call-centre the three things that seemed to be most stressful than were managerial control, irate and racist customers, and lack of communication by the management.

“Stress, stress ja most decisions taken that management take we have to answer and account for them... The real stressful aspect of my job though is the mistakes that are made by other departments, but at the end we at the call-centre are held accountable... and also decisions that are taken by council. Because we have to represent what ever decision the council makes”. (CCA-1 Siyabonga).

Out of 10 call-centre operators interviewed in the B&T call-centre, seven of them singled out “managerial lack of communication” as the most stressful aspect of the job followed by the irate customer. This was mainly observed in the pilot study conducted in this call-centre.

One factor that influenced job satisfaction in this call-centre was being of assistance to the customer.

It is always nice when you get a call from a customer appreciating and complementing you on the job you have done (CCA 3 – Josephine).

The next chapter is an extension of this one but dealing with the Munilek call-centre operators.

CHAPTER 6

Working at the Munilek call-centre

6.1 Physical organisation of work

Located next to the Metro's Electricity Control space, this inbound and outbound call-centre (which means receiving and calling the customers) has been existence for 10 years. Started as the citizen's helpdesk with two operators in 1998, this call-centre inevitably experienced major changes in terms of space developments, technological changes and staff increases.

Staffed by 100% female staff, who are housed in the blue walled cubicles (some with family pictures on them), the 15 call-centre operators answer more than 90 calls each per day. One call-centre trainee male operator at Munilek said "this job is not only for women but it needs people with lots of patience...and where I come from women worked as technicians so I don't see gender making any difference" (CCA 16 – Max). This operator was only trained in the call-centre with females to get to know the programmes that are used in answering the calls but was on his way to the control room, which is male dominated. This was explained by Taylor and Tyler (2000: 80) when they said "emotional labour cannot be regarded as gender neutral", based on the fact that most of what requires emotional labour is dominated by women.

This call-centre takes calls from customers regarding everything concerning electricity faults, reconnections, traffic lights, load-shedding, and despatching artisans. The call-centre operates 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, with calls being transferred to the control centre (which is situated behind the call-centre

and caters for high voltage business electricity faults) after 10:30 p.m. The main task is to listen to customers reporting faults in different areas of the Metro, usually gathering information about the customer and the fault and trying to resolve this over the phone by asking the standard questions provided, and if necessary dispatching the fault to the relevant technical officer. Call-centre workers sit in the call-centre and work 8-hour shifts. Night shifts take calls from Emergency services, e.g. the fire department, and affected customers.

Call-centre operators are informed by the supervisor about problem areas and thus the same answer will be given to all the callers who are screaming with rage “Yes Ma’am, we are aware of the problem, and we are working on it”. When there is a power cut (load shedding) or wet weather the call-centre becomes a madhouse with calls, and this is when call-centre workers experience all sorts of calls which contribute to their stress levels.

The call-centre operators are expected to communicate with customers and record their conversation on the computer program called “Progress”. This computer program can track the customer interaction with the department and faults usually reported by the customer. The operators will just punch in the street address and the information regarding the customer contact will pop up. This system is called Customer Relations Management (CRM) and is designed to improve customer satisfaction.

The time spent on each call was emphasised in the Munilek call-centre meeting of 16 March 2008, when operators were reminded about the manner in which to answer calls and the importance of keeping to time frames. According to the “customer time frames” pasted on the cubicles of each operator:

- 85% of incoming calls should be responded to within less than 15 seconds;
- Lost calls should be fewer than 2%;
- 90% of calls should be dealt with within 5 minutes;
- The Supervisor should be notified if the call is not dispatched in 1,5 hours.

In this call-centre, operators work from Monday to Sunday with one day off in the middle of the week. The call-centre is open from 8:00-10:30 p.m. which means they work in shifts. After hours, the customers can leave a voice message on the IVR machine to be attended by the supervisor the next morning. The supervisor checks the voice messages every morning, and workers take calls and dispatch to artisans. "Our duty is to answer every call that comes in and dispatch to artisans" (Supervisor 3– Juannita). "Our system is linked to the Metro accounts call-centre (B&T) which provides us with information about reconnections and customer history. This is why we can never outsource the call-centre" (Manager – Nombulelo). "We are here to answer calls, nothing else, and dispatch artisans in the faulty areas" (CCA 7 – Kago). Teamwork is the key in getting the call-centre running smoothly. Each worker has to report what has been happening while others were not in i.e. problem areas and number of dispatched calls to be done. This usually happened when one worker goes for a break or during changing shifts.

6.2 Worker profile, training and recruitment

Ninety percent of the operators in this call-centre are less than 35 years old, with mostly matric and post-matric diplomas. The Munilek call-centre is 100% female up to the manager. When the manager was asked about this she said "there is no particular reason but it so happened that we employ women" (Manager 4 – Nombulelo). Behind the supervisor there is a white board indicating daily

changes and shutdowns so as to facilitate communication between the control centre and the call-centre. This call-centre is supervised by an experienced coloured female seated at the corner of the call-centre facing the operators. There are standardised questions to be asked from each customer but from my observation the operators deviated from them, choosing to ask the supervisor who seemed irritated.

Recruiting customer oriented personnel is our way of saying people first (Manager 4 – Nombulelo).

Most of the workers in this call-centre were younger than those in the B&T call-centre. They had previous experience in customer care in the private sector, for example First National Bank front-of-house, Vodacom call-centre, Telkom call-centre, etc. This exposure contributed to what was observably a 'professional' call-centre although workers had their concerns. Most of the call-centre operators started as temporary customer care workers but were recruited through a Port Elizabeth recruitment agency. The manager emphasised the importance of looking for people with strong personalities "as one tends to deal with angry customers more often".

This was echoed by almost all the workers as they kept on saying "this is not an easy job, you don't need light-hearted individuals" (CCA 13 – Bongiwe). Matric is the general qualification, but communication skills and customer care attitude were also mentioned to be part of the recruitment criteria in the Munilek call-centre. Before she answered my question about training, the customer care manager at this call-centre said

We can't just take anyone, people have to have a matric at least and be able to communicate on a professional level as we are dealing with customers from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Workers undergo a week of training in telephone etiquette (at the Walmer Training Centre) and basic electricity terminology to be able to communicate with artisans. These workplace terms were communicated through shadowing the technicians in the field for a day. All the workers (11 agents) in this call-centre seemed dissatisfied with the training programme provided.

If the municipality prides itself on the customer care why not equip your employees...because we deal with people from different levels that require professionalism...because this will affect the image of the municipality...the lack of training makes you feel inadequate" (CCA 15 – Bessie).

When asked about the type of training they would prefer, the majority (80%) said:

2 weeks of formal training and one week on the job training would be enough as this job requires your own thinking as the questions are different every day.

One of the operators went on to compare their training with that at the call-centre in which she used to work:

(Vodacom) would train people for the whole month because this was important for their image as the company (CCA 8 – Caroline).

The lack of training creates pressure and further adds to the stressful nature of the job environment.

when I got here I didn't want to answer calls, scared to make mistakes because you know our education system has robbed us of the accent

in English...and thus I had low self esteem and hated my job, couldn't wait for the end of the shift (CCA 15 – Bessie).

Though the manager is confident in terms of recruitment of customer service personnel, this consistent lack of training in the municipal functions affect the workers' self-esteem. This then makes the high tech in use in these call-centres very ineffective because the personnel behind the technology are not well equipped. "In the local government we do have technology necessary for efficient service delivery but we under-utilise such because of lack of skill and training" (Top Manager BCM – Ongezwa).

6.3 Discipline and surveillance

Disciplining and worker monitoring takes two forms: direct supervision and technological monitoring through the IVR system. The supervisor faces a mirror which gives her an indication of who is working and who is not. When asked why the mirror she whispered "these people are lazy they come here and sit on a computer and play games" (Supervisor 3 – Juanitta). This was different from what the workers felt, as one confided in me with anger in her voice:

we are treated like children here...we know what we are doing here and we are not consulted about our own work but we are the ones working here, we are the ones knowing what's going on here...they come early and leave at 16:00 they don't know what's happening after hours we are the ones sitting here (CCA 7 – Kago).

Even in this public space most workers felt that they are treated as 'disempowered objects' with no capacity to negotiate and be consulted by the managers.

As mentioned, this is a 15-seater call-centre with 11 workers and 4 empty seats. One call-centre operator tried to explain the role of the mirror facing the supervisor:

that mirror is for communication with the supervisor whilst seating down on this dispatching desk, to check out for those making use of their cell-phones for private calls, sleeping on duty and yha...man its for observing '*yonke I angaan*' (which means everything that's going on) (CCA-15 – Bessie).

On my first visit to the call-centre, one operator was complaining jokingly to the one dispatching calls (facing the mirror) and said "si bhizi thina kaloku nje ngoba wena ulibele kulala apho" (which means we are busy working here while you are sleeping on that side). This shows that as much as the mirror is used by the supervisor 'workers also observe each other' through it. This could be the cause of what seemed infighting, not visible until the workers get comfortable around you.

Idling around in this call-centre is a major difficulty as the supervisor can see on her screen the status of every agent but when she leaves for lunch workers find ways to take a break: "When I'm not here during lunch time there seems to be a huge number of calls neglected" (showing me the statistics and voice messages on her computer) (Supervisor 3– Juanitta). The IVR and ACD produced statistics that are used only when the manager receives a report about a certain problem with customer service. "Going through these call records everyday it's a lot of work, this is why when there is a problem we go and check the date and person reported by the customer" (Manager – Nombulelo).

In this call-centre workers seemed to be a 'little bit' under pressure compared to their B&T counterparts. This was mainly caused by the timeframe set by management in dispatching the calls and returning to the customers. One call-centre worker explained by saying "this is an emergency call-centre...if we take time to respond someone could die (making an example of a fire caused by heavy rains and fallen 'live wires' in one of their nearby suburbs)" (Supervisor 3 – Juannitta).

6.4 Well-being and perceptions of workers and managers

As in the Budget and treasury call-centre, workers at Munilek said

This work is stressful; people ask me how do I manage but you can lose it. Thank goodness I used to work in a call-centre [and she mentions the company] so you get used to it (CCA 8 – Caroline).

Though one gets used to the call-centre noise one cannot get used to the racist and abusive callers who form the biggest threat to the well-being of workers:

The one customer called me a baboon... (Quoting a customer) 'with your Thabo Mbeki government you don't know what you doing', immediately after they listen to your accent" (CCA 8 – Kago).

Besides being called names and being abused by customers, call-centre operators seem to identify the lack of appreciation and recognition as demoralising factors.

Another most irritating aspect of this job is when you go all out for the customer and they still accused you of incompetence...the customer is not always right...and the sad thing is the managers side with customers...what can you do...you suffer for the managers to smile" (CCA 13 – Bongiwé).

Ear problems were common phenomena among the call-centre workers, with two operators citing the month before my visit as the most recent time that they had experienced ear problems.

In the past month I had ear problems and had to go and see the doctor because of the noise in this call-centre (Supervisor – Juanitta).

In this call-centre three workers identified managerial control, strict supervision and racist customers as the major causes of stress in their job. When one call-centre worker replied about job satisfaction she said

I would not miss this place if I were to leave, they don't appreciate us here you work only because you have family to look after, it only a job (CCA 8 – Kago).

The majority of the operators mentioned one of the causes of stress as being 'politics' amongst themselves. The infighting was explained by many as being the 'girls only' environment, whilst others generally thought it was personality clashes.

You know what if you are not a team player and your attitude sucks you can never work in this kind of environment...because when you are working ladies they always take things personal...I like working with boys (pointing to one coloured male who was still on training) because they are here to work and do just that when they get here (CCA 15 – Bessie).

Another call-centre operator saw this differently, she said

I have worked with ladies only before but it was never like this...there is so much favouritism by management...I promise you I will never miss this place when I leave here, people are so pretentious here (CCA 8 – Kago).

The stressful nature of the job is exacerbated by the shortage of staff in the call-centre.

When we experience terrible weather customer care front-line staff are forced to come up stairs and assist us, because ever since the resignation of two operators they were never replaced (CCA-15 Bessie).

This is further exacerbated by the 1,5 hour period which is required for dispatching of artisans and lack of communication by these artisans. According to my observations, the call-centre not dispatching calls is the major issue because that increases the number of calls from unsatisfied customers.

Lack of internal communication (within the municipality) is one of the major causes of stress amongst the front-line workers. The metro's Communication Policy (2001: 3) acknowledges that

if the internal communication is ineffective, it does not enable the projection of a positive image...which mainly depends on the informed personnel. Informed personnel have a positive mindset and are better equipped to provide an improved service.

This was supported by one of the BCM top managers, who said

front-line office should work well with back-office but there is lack of communication between the two which makes call-centre work very difficult...people work in silos here (Top Manager – Ongezwa).

This apparent "silo structures of management", as Von Holdt and Maserumule (2005: 442) dubbed it, was demoralising and stressful towards the workforce in the public sector.

This is a serious issue in this call-centre as workers panic when 2 hours or even a day passes without a customer being attended to. Sometimes the technician or an artisan does not report back from the field on whether job has been done or not, which make the operators sound and feel stupid to the customers.

This was observed in a situation where the Munilek Director himself was on a radio programme the night before I visited the call-centre. He was addressing a nation-wide but Port Elizabeth based radio station about Electricity, and he apparently gave the call-centre number for more enquiries. This was not about electricity faults but about service delivery from people outside the Metro, calling about their lack of access to electricity. After answering one of these calls, looking lost and shocked at the same time the supervisor was so embarrassed when she did not know about this: "when did Mr ...(his name) go to this station? How come he never told us about this (shaking her head)?" (Supervisor-3 Juanitta). This is also common with the technicians in the control centre and call-centre itself and thus workers will receive calls from angry customers who blame them for the fault.

Surprisingly, only 45% of the workers mentioned salaries as a cause of dissatisfaction with their job.

Apart from abusive and irritating customers, wages are ridiculous...now we are in middle of negotiation with management we just found out that the control officers who are doing the same job as we do they get paid three times more than us...I don't know why maybe is because we are all females or black and those are males and white hey I don't know....here wages do not match the pressure (CCA 15 – Bessie).

Though it was a challenge getting the answer, I went on to ask them about the total remuneration per annum, some started asking questions by saying “I would love to know what everyone is getting because there seems to be inequality (amongst workers) in that one” (Supervisor – Juannitta). On the other hand some appreciated the little they had: “we get more or less R92, 000 per annum, it is reasonable because it pays the bills” (CCA- 8 Caroline).

In two call-centres visited (Joburg Connect and Munilek) workers complained about their safety in travelling at night as there is no public transport where the call-centres are located. One call-centre worker went as far as to say

this job is for the rich people because you can't work here if you don't have your own transport...most people staying in the townships like Soweto can never work here...they resign within first few months(CCA 20 – Paul).

The late night shifts form another threat to the health and well-being of the call-centre workers. This was identified by some workers who stayed in the townships and did not have their own transport.

I don't have much problems with transport because I stay here...[in town] unlike the people from Zwide and other townships because the public transport is finished by the time we knock off (CCA 15 – Bessie).

Though call-centre work has been deemed as ‘de-skilling’ what was a complex clerical job, workers had mixed feelings about this.

This job is emotionally draining but not mentally or physically challenging...ja picking and putting down the phone strenuous but ever since these (pointing to the earpieces) we are doing well...you

need to be alert in this job because you don't know what to expect as the problems are different every day (CCA 16 – Max).

Half the number of operators interviewed said the only thing they liked about their job is that "it pays the bills" or "at least I have the job". Though they seemed dissatisfied, they still had control over their job tasks even if it means irritating the supervisor with lots of questions.

6.5 Career advancement and labour turnover in a municipal call-centre

When the respondents were asked about their future in the call-centre workplace, this was a typical response "OHH! There is no such a thing in this place". Call-centres have two layers in the career ladder – supervisor and manager, which limits career growth in this job.

One just applies for the relevant post that one sees fit his responsibilities otherwise there is no promotion whatsoever here (CCA-1 Siyabonga).

Most of the call-centre operators involved in this study would love to work in another position. "I'm not supposed to be here..." (CCA 1 – Siyabonga) He then went on about his career telling me about himself and his dropping out of Rhodes University whilst doing commerce. Small call-centres are not popular as stepping-stones in this sector as they tend to limit career advancement for young and ambitious workers: "there is less opportunity for advancement in smaller call-centres" (*Business Day*, 15 April 2008).

On the other hand though Metro's brochures and official documents seem to term some of the call handlers "call-centre operators", workers in the B&T call-centre refuse to be called as call-centre operators. "I don't belong here...I'm not a

call-centre operator, I'm a senior clerk" (CCA 1 – Siyabonga). Being a call-centre worker seemed to be associated with inferior status by this call-centre operator. The Electricity call-centre shop steward talking with one call-centre operator jokingly said "I have moved from this dumb place, now I'm working downstairs, one day you'll also be where I am I started here in this call-centre as well" (Shop Steward – Glenda). From the other corner of the call-centre one of them replied loudly "happy are you for your promotion" (CCA 8 – Caroline).

This attitude towards call-centre jobs was also observed in Joburg Connect where one worker said

call-centre work is just an entry point to the municipal jobs, otherwise no one can do this for more than two years (Joburg Connect: CCA 18 – Lee).

This was also supported by the supervisor in the Joburg Connect call-centre when she said

two year contracts now, but the city gives out five year contract, so we're still negotiating that one. The reason why we didn't want to stretch the five year contract is because we just feel that after two years in a call-centre environment you kind of want to move so generally the life span of a call-centre agent is two years so the move into other areas or supervisory levels or whatever, so we don't like to say people must be confined into being call-centre agents for five years that's not how we do it. So that's why we make our contracts two years but the city it has to be five so we're working on that one (Joburg Connect CC Manager – Lerato).

This seemingly high turnover of call-centre agents was also witnessed in the Metro. All the call-centre agents interviewed tended to be rotated after a year or

two into other customer care duties such as walk-in centres. This was explained by a former call-centre agent as being caused by the stressful environment.

Infighting, nosy colleagues and stress are the reasons for me to ask to be rotated to another section (CCA 3 – Josephine).

When one of the call-centre workers explained this infighting, she said

I don't believe it's the fact that we are women here, I think some people are just generally difficult to work with (CCA 7 – Kago).

6.6 Resistance by call-centre workers at Metro call-centres

In both call-centres, operators seemed to deal with job dissatisfaction in similar ways. Though managers seek total control of workers there is still a space for resistance by employees in the absence of supervision (Taylor, 1997: 198). Dropping the irate customer and working to rule and thus restricting emotional labour are the most common forms of resistance. Two operators described techniques they use:

Racial customers and accusations of knowing nothing about your job irritates me and sometimes you want to give the customer a piece of mind but you decide to cool down because this is a customer after all (CCA 3 – Josephine).

I just drop the phone to those irritating customers" (CCA 2 – Mlungisi).

From the conversations that I have listened to, workers tend to restrict the type of information they give to customers or limit their friendliness. This confirms what Taylor and Tyler (2000: 89) discovered as the most common form of resistance: when workers 'work to rule' they limit information to rude customers.

Call-centre operator: I'm sorry this is the only number you can use to get to the City Treasurer...Sir, please try this number again

Customer: I have been given this number over and over and it does not work (CCA 3 – Josephine).

On the other hand, Electricity call-centre workers also used the same techniques by dropping the phone or putting it on loudspeaker and letting the customer talk unattended.

How I deal with irritating customers is to put them on loudspeaker so that everyone can hear and afterwards I'll ask him are you done and if he says yes I'll drop the phone (CCA 8 – Neliswa).

This was highlighted by Korczynski (2001; 2002; 2003) as the *collective emotional labour* which acts as a 'coping' strategy amongst front-line workers.

After a caller or customer has been put on loudspeaker call-centre workers will mumble and rumble sharing their stories of similar situations. Without any formal structure to deal with painful moments, call-centre workers seek refuge from each other, as Korczynski (2003: 58) puts it "these communities of coping are likely to be informal...occurring during the labour process or off-stage". The manager of this Munilek call-centre seemed to understand this call-centre operator behaviour, saying

These are human beings as well, they get tired of being insulted"
(Manager 4 – Nombulelo).

Though there was a lounge area at Munilek CC opposite their workstations for workers to refresh themselves, this was not used by the workers. They would go

outside and walk to supermarkets in their breaks. One call-centre worker, when asked how she dealt with irate customers, said

I take a smoke break and walk to town, when I come back I'll be all refreshed" (CCA 4 – Lauren).

This individualised nature of the call-centre job was a contradiction of what COB theory deemed to be the budding "solidarity" for these front-line workers.

Another strategy that was used by Munilek call-centre workers was not to log on to the systems when they come in. This prevented the manager from tracing the problems to one call-centre worker, or sometimes escaping the distribution of calls by the ACD programme.

They have been very persistent in terms of not logging in but I always tell them to [showing me on the screen who is logged in and who is not] (Supervisor 3 – Juanitta).

All the call-centre workers in the Metro have been abused by customers. At Munilek call-centre, workers share the abusive language and irritation of the customers by putting them on loudspeaker "which makes them feel stupid" (CCA 13 – Bongiwe). This was mainly experienced when dealing with rural (business or farming) customers. These informal 'resistance' strategies "may produce a more flexible and decentralised organizational structure, allowing employees to feel empowered and thus, influencing their feelings of job satisfaction" (Silver, 2008: 95).

6.7 The persistent apartheid workplace regime

In addition to frequent racial abuse by the “sovereign customer”, the Munilek call-centre workers saw themselves as being undermined by the managers who do not trust them to do anything right or listen to them. They constantly questioned the sovereignty of the customer or citizen. The shop steward reported that in the dispute launched by the call-centre operators they demanded the same wages as the control technical staff who were mainly white and male. They argued

we are doing the same thing as those people...why can't we get the same salary? Or is it because that unit is full of white males? This is what we are fighting for...equality! (CCA 15 – Bessie).

Omar (2003) referred to the ‘apartheid wage gap’ in Telkom call-centres. From the tone of the CC operator’s voice, racist attacks from customers, and managerial control worsen the lack of trust of the call-centre operator’s abilities to deliver good customer service. These ‘racialised relations’ between workers and customers were also noticed by Webster and Omar (2003: 12) in Telkom call-centres, and they argue that “at workplace level, employment equity policies have been implemented, but racialized relations between managers, workers and customers persist”. One supervisor openly puts it

These people they don't want to learn...and they are lazy that's why we have that corner mirror because they sleep on that corner and so I moved them on this side so I can see them (shouting at one CCA she asks her...Kago how long have you been working here and still you don't know this?) (Supervisor – Juannitta).

This lack of trust is contradicted by the lack of training given to these workers who seem to be hungry for it. Although B&T call-centre workers show a lot of control in their job tasks, management wanted them to do more. This was best

illustrated by the white female CCC Manager when she complained about the call-centre set-up that should be rearranged to stem discipline in that space. She insisted that call-centre workers were lazy and ill-disciplined and that they needed the supervisor to sit behind them and monitor the whole workplace.

6.8 Conclusion

It is clear that the customer care system was incorporated to the already running IVR system which was re-named a call-centre in the B&T. Zamikhaya agrees with this statement when saying "this was not a call-centre it was an IVR but was converted to a call-centre" (Accountant – Zamikhaya). The IVR system was designed not for customer care but for debt collection in 2001. This then is one of the main reasons behind the failure to achieve the goal of customer-centred culture within the municipality. The tendency to only comply with government requirements makes it difficult to implement the *Batho Pele* principles.

This is echoed by the BCM top manager when she says "it's about compliance, not a genuine desire to restructure the system in the local government" (Top Manager – Ongezwa). The IVR system has thus become synonymous with questions about account balances, payments and cut-offs. This should be used for holistic enquiries about the Metro, which is why I recommend an integrated system where any questions about the Metro could be answered in one place.

As most managers and call-centres operators seem to agree, lack of professionalism, training, supervision and poor recruitment strategies contributed to the failure of the municipality to attain the goal of customer-centred service delivery in the call-centre. Nickson et al. (2001: 173) agree with this statement by saying "extensive training and development, which recognises

and acts upon the idea of front-line staff being crucial to organisational success" is essential in ensuring an improved customer care system. This then 'dilutes' the old ways of doing things in the municipality and brings about a new perspective among the customer care workers such as call-centre operators.

In the Munilek call-centre workers are younger than in the B&T call-centre. The call-centre was formed in 2006 though operated from 1998 as the 'enquiries centre'. This call-centre, though not as technologically advanced as the B&T call-centre, performed better in terms of attending to customer queries. Though this was a source of pressure to the workers, their experience from the private sector call-centre gave them an advantage regarding customer values. The Munilek call-centre has a lot to offer the Metro, and based on their leadership and recruitment strategies, this call-centre can be utilised as the benchmark for an integrated Metro call-centre. On the other hand, both these call-centres have shown similarities and differences in terms of organisation of work, the role of technology in monitoring, worker well-being and their reaction towards the 'sovereign customer'.

CHAPTER 7

The role of call-centres in the Metro

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set the context for consideration of customer care improvements in the NMM. This chapter focuses on a critical analysis of the failure of the Metro to achieve this customer-oriented service delivery through call-centres. This chapter opens a brief discussion on different views expressed by trade unions, managers, workers, and customers on call-centres as the mechanism to serve the people of the Metro. The 'sovereignty' of the customers at local government tends to be a myth both observed by workers and felt by customers. Finally this chapter examines the relationship between the customer care workers and customers.

7.2 Trade union views on the Metro call-centre

The South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) is the majority union in both these call-centres. Only one call-centre operator was able to attend SAMWU meetings in the Metro call-centres, because of time constraints. According to Benner et al. (2007) unionised call-centres in SA tend to pay more and offer better working conditions. Non-unionised call-centres earned 4,5% less than unionised call-centres. Autonomy and training was also available to the call-centres with unions in the SA call-centre research. Though they had more control over their job tasks, they tended to be less productive than the non-unionised call-centres.

Though this seems to be relevant in these two inbound and small NMM call-centres, worker stress levels are still high. SAMWU call-centre staff members

were not treated differently to other general membership as they were municipal workers. This resulted in the unique workplace challenges of the call-centre not being attended to by the union e.g. working hours, late night transport home, workplace conditions etc. When asked about the role of call-centres in the Metro for service delivery, the SAMWU organiser seemed to taking more of the customer sympathetic view:

We are trying to compete with the first world, in South Africa most people are poor and need government support...Government institutions are now transformed from being service providers to service authorities...In SA people cannot afford R10.00 prepaid electricity, how do you expect these people to call a call-centre and wait for a long time without money? Call-centres are a convenience for the rich and a nightmare for the poor...How can you become a customer still struggling for the basic needs? Water is not a luxury it's a necessity (SAMWU Rep – Chumile).

When I asked the SAMWU official about the scenario where a call-centre could be privatised or outsourced, he said vehemently

we will never allow that, they [municipality] will have to discuss with the union because it means laying off these workers and further worsens the conditions of work, those people are concerned about the profit not people (SAMWU Rep – Chumile).

According to Omar (SASA Presentation 2008) it is very difficult for call-centre workers to strike due to “individualised” nature of the job. Collective action is constrained by individualisation of employment contracts and the nature of work conducted (Benner, et al, 2007). Although this was attempted by call-centre workers from Telkom in one of their call-centres, and thus the calls were

redirected to another call-centre within Telkom. This is a disadvantage for the call-centre industry as the impact of a strike can be easily avoided (Omar, 2008).

We do strike but only during lunch time and picket but we can not leave our workstation as this is considered as the emergency services (CCA 14 – Rhoda).

In Joburg Connect workers managed to participate in a strike organised by SAMWU in October 2007 though leaving call-centre operating with 50% of the staff.

Customerisation worsens the working conditions of municipal workers because they now seek to maximise profit with less workers to increase revenue and impressive fiscal policies. For example we've got this case now here [showing me a document about the working hours and conditions in the local government] library workers are now required to work on Saturdays as well and given that day during the week without pay. This was done without consultation with the union but we oppose that. Workers are suppose to be given a choice whether to work on a weekend or not and paid for the overtime they worked. This business rule of more with fewer workers is wrong (SAMWU Rep – Chumile).

The above scenario was confirmed by a call-centre operator in the Electricity call-centre when she said

we work Monday to Monday and sometimes get the day off during the week, when you start questioning this they just say read the contract (CCA 7 – Kago).

Though Webster and Omar (2003: 22) saw a threat to collective bargaining by the individualising nature of performance management and reward systems at Telkom, this is different in the local government, as operators have a standard or fixed wage and not a performance-based wage.

This confirms what has been argued by Du Gay and Solomon (2000) that “the introduction of a customer in the service sector has transformed the attitudes and the behaviour of the front-line workers”. Though call-centres have been introduced in the Metro to improve customer satisfaction, the difficulties for workers that the unions highlight raises questions about how efficient such workers would be.

7.2.1 Public sector call-centre perceptions

In the process of conducting interviews with different people from the Metro comparisons were made between their call-centre and private call-centres.

This is not a professional call-centre...there is no telephone etiquette, the tone...patience and language...it's not professional at all (Accountant – Zamikhaya).

From the speaker above it is clear that what defines professionalism in a call-centre is the right tone and accent.

You see the difference here, you've got the MTN's call-centre and Metro, and I would say MTN 100 percent, because the manner that you are attended to as a customer when calling to query about an account is very different to this one here...Perhaps the supervision in those companies is 100 percent, as I said that we as municipality, our rules and supervision in call-centres differs to those of the private sector. Maybe one of the reasons there is that difference is the nature of the sector. You understand. Because in the municipality I can say I have a right not to do whatever my supervisor must go to hell, same applies in private sectors, but in private sectors you get about 99 percent of the people that are working there the condition of employment is strict as they have signed a particular agreement and if that particular individual doesn't go with the agreement they will tell him that sorry because you broke one of the conditions in the

agreement out. Then you get that whether a person wants to or not, he has to comply, on the basis that he is hired and he is getting paid. Subsequent to that persons performance the company's image grows, because I would say to my friend "hey man drop your Vodacom go to MTN because the service that you get from MTN is better then the service that you get from Vodacom" (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

The speaker above seems to equate the good service offered on the phone by call handlers with improved company image. This seemingly lack of professionalism in the government call-centre seems to make it 'lesser of a call-centre' compared to the private sector according to these interviewees. One of the male trainees in the Electricity call-centre compared working conditions in the private sector with those in the Metro call-centre:

Here there is no professionalism, where I was working I had my own office and there was a lot of care for employees...here it's a different story (CCA 16 – Max).

Many respondents point to the lack of professionalism at the government call-centre. Another senior manager also pointed out that private sector call-centres are professional and well-run compared to this one.

Let's apply private sector principles in the call-centre, If they work there surely they will work for us as well...private sector call-centres are dedicated to customers not to citizens, in the metro that cannot happen because everyone is a customer (Top Manager 3 – Buntu).

The contradiction with the above speaker is the desire to have this 'private-sector-like' call-centre yet the he realises that these two cannot be compared because they cater for different people (customers versus citizens).

The case studies suggest that the government call-centres have not departed from the poor service culture that is notorious in the Eastern Cape municipalities. Call-centres are judged by the tone and unfortunately by the accent used to answer the call. The accent has to be 'professional', and I assume the quality of customer service is compromised if this is not the case. This was also observed by Omar (2001) when call-centre workers identified accent as one of the contributors to attack and abuse by the customers. A worker defended this by arguing

Low self esteem and fear to answer calls due to insufficient training makes you to make mistakes especially with the English trained from disadvantage schools (CCA 15 – Bessie).

The workers are at the 'tension-ridden' position where rubber-hits-the-tar and thus customers are expecting the promised service delivery which puts them 'first'.

7.3 Customer experiences in the Metro

When the researcher asked a Metro customer (or the citizen) why she did not use the call-centres she said

Calling the municipality is a waste of time and money, one has to go in person and make sure that they fix whatever problem there maybe" (NMM customer – Nomhle).

This was echoed by the union representative:

How is the person who can't afford R10 prepaid electricity is going to call a call-centre which takes so much money to wait for the right person to get information?. These people don't even own phones you only see the phone wires crossing over their houses but they don't have credits. They've got electric lines without electricity, you'll never

see the poor calling...they come here and stand in those long queues (SAMWU Rep, PE – Chumile).

At the end call-centre workers seemed to concur with Clarke and Newman (1997: 11) when they said “the introduction of markets and charters has created something less than a sovereign customer in public service”. One call-centre agent put it clearly when he said

We do not classify the people we serve as customers...we do classify them in terms of relations for business transactions that you are a customer...but in reality that is just a business term (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

Customer sovereignty was seen as mythical and neither call-centre workers nor consumers believed the myth, confirming what Bolton and Houlihan (2005: 680) termed “the myth of customer sovereignty”.

On the other hand, citizens are looking for quality in service rendered by the Metro. This can also improve the culture of payment of service charges and rates as customers will be satisfied. One manager concurs with this statement by saying that

We want to change the attitude and image of front-line staff quality...people do not mind paying for quality...how you deal with customers and how you listen is important (Accountant – Zamikhaya).

But the respondent goes on to argue that “the community also should take responsibility and stop moaning about service and pay their municipality debts” (ibid.). At the Munilek call-centre workers shared a view that when the ‘customer messes up they (the customer) must face the music’. This was experienced as the Zwide and Soweto communities dumped rubbish next to the power station

(10/09/08), as the result of which there was a power cut for a day. This was followed by hundreds of calls from these two townships. The response from the call-centre workers on the shift that I observed was "let's teach them a lesson", as a result they were punished by the lack of electricity supply for a day until they removed the rubbish from the station. This shows the power and control that call-centre workers have over the 'sovereign customers'. This confirms what Taylor (1998) saw as power over interaction which management cannot control.

Queues in NMM were a constant reminder that 'not all citizens are customers though all customers are citizens'. These queues consisted of the African poor population as they could not afford the costs to telephone the call-centre.

How are you supposed to call a call-centre for R10 if you cannot afford electricity of the same amount...? Poor people are queuing not calling (SAMWU Rep PE – Chumile).

Queuing was seen by Crotty (2007) as one thing that defines poor people.

Nothing defines these people better than their familiarity with queuing...queuing to buy something...to return the faulty something...to check in an airport...and now the interminable holding on a while a disembodied voice constantly assures you that you customer is hugely appreciated and that you will get the treatment you so richly deserve any minute now...the rich don't queue (*The Star*, 24 January 2007, p. 18)

The walk-in centres were also accustomed to these long queues from early morning. The Eric Tindale Customer Care Centre has become synonymous with long queues from poor citizens who cannot access the electronic desk or who are looking for ATTP (Assistance to the Poor) from the municipality. Though the call-centre has been put in place ordinary citizens still come and queue in the

customer care centre. When one of the Zwide Customer Care customers was asked why she queued in the Eric Tindale building, she said

the people here [pointing to Zwide Johnson Road] they are so unprofessional and tell you that you are not poor, you do not deserve municipal assistance...that is if you are applying for municipal assistance...they always refer me to the City Treasurer [Eric Tindale] and now I just figured that I should go straight to main street [Govan Mbeki where Eric Tinadale is situated] (Zwide Customer Care Customer – Nomboniso).

One front-line worker at Zwide concurs with the customer when he says

The reason why people do not come here it is because of poor service, because people will come here for few minutes hoping to get help and they will end up queuing for hours...that is because we lack resources and staff though (Customer Care front-line worker – Mongezi).

On the question of not using the IVR system one customer said

You have to go yourself to the municipality to receive help you'll never get help over the phone (Zwide Customer – Nomboniso).

Waiting in long, slow queues is a characteristic of poor service. If these call-centres fail to demonstrate fast and efficient service, they do not suggest any new kinds of public management. Instead, the old inefficient government bureaucracies are still in place despite the new rhetoric.

One of the call-centre operators also believed that the service that the municipality renders can improve their image as well as customer satisfaction. Comparing the service with the private sector he pointed out that

Because of the service, it changes attitudes from the public, but here in local government you don't have a choice because if you have a house, you are forced and bound to deal with the municipality...that's why I say the definition of a customer differs in terms of the sector. That's why I say in terms of the business transaction with the municipality you are a customer but your relationship is bound that you have such a relationship by virtue of you having the property (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

This apparent poor customer service has made call-centres synonymous with angry and disgruntled customers.

7.3.1 Customer complaints and customer service

I honestly don't know why the municipality has the electronic desk if you can't get any help. Try to speak to the consultant and they are always busy and you are told to leave a short message they will get back to you, which they will never do. You have to call them again...I called and I followed the voice prompt and I got cut off...some of us work far from the CBD we cannot drop in for issues that can be sorted over the telephone...talking about Batho Pele (People first) I'm sure the majority of them do not even know the meaning to the concept (NMM Citizen in *The Herald* (PE), 17 April 2007).

This sudden reality from the customer 'clicks' the fact that 'people first' is just a lip service which really lacks application. This is why Korczynski (2003a: 57) says "it is when enchantment turns to disillusionment that the customer may react angrily". This is a typical reaction of customers using a call-centre almost everywhere in any sector. People hate the IVR system where one has to wait for a consultant after waiting listening to music with a message telling you that 'your call is important, please hold'.

The entire management in the Metro also agree that citizens hate the IVR system.

People hate the IVR system, they want to talk to consultants (Top Manager 2 – Buntu).

This was echoed by Lorraine when she says

One persistent complaint by the public is the use of IVR system as they struggle to get through (Top Manager 3 – Lorraine).

This *de-faced* or *depersonalised* customer service has dissolved the individual uniqueness of the customer (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005) into a mere 'statistic' (Wray-Bliss, 2001: 53). This is why Aneesh (undated: 14) argues that "under algocratic mode of power the behaviour is controlled by shaping the environment where there are no alternatives to acting as prescribed". This algocratic system provides pre-programmed steps to follow for the customer, which creates a sense of poor service by the customers. This was also echoed by a Sunday newspaper:

Few people who've phoned a call-centre will not have been put on hold. And to hear the phrase "all our agents are currently busy, your call is important to us", is calculated to infuriate rather than placate. If all your agents are busy, get more agents — it's not rocket science...Then there are the irritating voice prompts that callers have to go through in order to navigate to the service they require. On some menus there are nine options. Waiting for option nine is tedious, to say the least. (The Sunday times, 26 April 2007).

Call-centres are designed to reduce telephone enquiry work from the back-office in order to carry on with service delivery. But this is thwarted by the number of call-centre operators in the Metro, where 1,1 million citizens have to be serviced by only a few workers. This is the reason for the above customer complaint "consultants are always busy".

The benefits of having a call-centre is to relieve the back office of the call congestion so as to deliver the services to the community, and also

the centralisation of the access makes it easier to monitor and control the quantity of public contacts (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

Call-centres were designed to reduce long queues in municipal offices and improve service quality for all customers. This seems to be ineffective from the long queues observed in NMM. This was explained by one supervisor:

Service offered by the customer call-centres are limited, and also most of what you can do is to come physically to the municipality (Supervisor – Phumlani).

This then explains why people say

calling the municipality is the waste of time and money, one has to go personal and make sure that they fix whatever problem there maybe (NMM customer – Nomhle).

This was echoed by the union representative

These people don't even own phones you only see the phone wires crossing over their houses but they don't have credits. They've got electric lines without electricity, you'll never see the poor calling, and they come here and stand in those long queues (SAMWU Rep, PE – Chumile).

One call-centre agent at the Munilek call-centre justified these complaints from customers:

We deal with the same problems over and over and it is so stressful because the municipality just temporary fix the problems not replace the old material...the only problem that seems to mess up the customer service here is the lack of feedback from the guys on the field [technicians] (CCA 16 – Max).

This apparent lack of communication between the back office and the call-centre in both B&T and Electricity call-centre forms the source of criticism by the citizens and ruins the image of the metro.

7.4 Persistent 'bad' organisational culture

The SA public service is notorious for bad organisational culture, inefficiency and ineffective ways of service delivery (Miller, 2007: 10). With these public sector reforms (*Batho Pele*, Municipal Systems Act 95, 2000) it was believed that a new customer-oriented and responsive attitude would change these negative perceptions about public service. The culture in the organisation is not only influenced by the change in the legal framework but also by the active involvement of leadership and social support from co-workers. When Silver conducted a research study in four SA call-centres on the impact of organisational culture on the call-centre agent's satisfaction levels (2008: 91) she found out that there was a clear relationship between call-centre worker job satisfaction and organisational climate.

This was echoed by Robbins et al. (2001) in Silver (2008: 93) who argued that the link between these two is based on leadership perceptions, customer outputs, employee output and business productivity. The influence of leadership and co-worker support also affects the well-being of workers (Holman, 2003 in Silver, 2008). The culture which the municipality call-centre attempts to introduce 'drowned' in the pool of notorious bad leadership in the local government. This is illustrated by long queues in customer care centres and rudeness reported by customers. The consistent lack of 'professionalism' reported by both customers and top management also seems to be the expression of the culture in existence within the municipality, not only in the call-centres.

The failure of the municipality to change the organisational culture that seemingly spills over to this customer-centred workplace makes it hard for the Metro to put 'people first'. Workers have already highlighted above the difference between the private sector workspace, mostly focusing on lack of pressure and productivity measures in the municipality. This translates to call-centre workers not identifying with the municipal customer service by complimenting the private sector call-centre, and thus questioning the professionalism of supervision in the call-centre. Eating in the call-centre and answering private cellphone calls whilst in the call-centre was not an uncommon practice although it was discouraged (Munilek call-centre Minutes, 16 March 2008). Though the call-centre workers seemed willing to serve their community this was thwarted by poor supervision and the culture of "no pressure in public service". Motivated, committed and hardworking staff contribute to effective service delivery (Dollar, 1998: 67), and this should be supplemented by social support within the organisation. This new push for customer-oriented service delivery should focus on restructuring front-line attitudes towards the same goal.

Self (1997) argues that "service orientation has to be ingrained into the organisation" from the top to bottom. This would perhaps improve the culture of payment of municipal accounts by the citizens, and seems to confirm what Odayer (2003) saw as the link between service delivery and debt payment in the Metro. The front-line workers form the key link between the public and the organisation, which means proper training and communication is integral to the success of customer care system in the Metro. This was evident from the fact that

management received training on key customer service ethics but not front-line workers, especially in the customer care centres. When the interviewees were asked about the training of supervisors and front-line staff, they said (looking hesitant):

Yha...there is some sort of training but it's only for supervisors, if they were to train not only supervisors who are expected to teach their front-line staff in return but focus on front-line staff it would be better for customer care service...because the way the supervisor grasps might be different to the original intention of the teacher (Supervisor 2 – Lulama).

Though not bluntly put by the supervisor, there was no customer care training received by the front-line staff who have been working in this office for more than 10 years.

It is therefore not enough to put up banners about *Batho Pele* without front-line workers knowing what it means, both in principle and practice. This cultural change can only be achieved through proper recruitment, training, leadership and education of the employees about “people first”. The recruitment of old staff members into the new customer-centred workplace influenced the lack of training amongst the call-centre workers who seemed to be experienced in many things but not in the call-centre job. As much as there are policy documents guiding the customer care system, there seems to be no mention of training or recruitment criteria for customer care workers. The use of experience and long term service in the municipality does not assist the customer care policy of “putting the customer first”.

The constant complaint about the call-centre's lack of knowledge and rudeness also points to the need to recruit and train young and fresh blood. This was evident when one of the top managers said

The problem is with the old generation...it is hard to re-train those people...but the young fresh ones are easy to train" (Top Manager 1 – Tsatsire).

To instil the new customer-oriented culture in the Metro it is necessary to retrain the old generation of employees and emphasise the role of good customer service to the image of the Metro.

7.5 The role of call-centres in local government

Inasmuch as the call-centres in the public sector are designed to open access to the 'disadvantaged by distance', these centres seemed to limit the access to the 'affording few' as these calls usually take a long time and are expensive. This confirms Clarke and Newman (1997) when arguing customer-oriented service delivery will negate the poor and focus more on the wealthy customer. The electronic government system seems as if it is closing off the citizen and individualising the nature of contact with the municipality (Clarke and Newman, 2007). Many Africans and Coloured people are still queuing in the Metro, with SAMWU representative explaining it well when saying "you can't call with only R10.00...those people have telephone connection but they have no credit to use to call the municipality". This is why in most cases CCC numbers are free so that people may have access to the information.

It is clear from the empirical evidence provided by this research that call-centre workers in the municipality are 'not just answering the phone', they have

become what I call “fire extinguishers” or “shock-absorbers” who tend to harmonise the relationship between the customer and the council. Due to an inefficient billing system and Eskom (South Africa Energy Company) power problems, workers are now bearing the brunt and have to be the “spokespersons” of the Metro to irate customers.

This was evident in the article in the *Daily Dispatch* 01 July 2008 when Eskom increased tariffs by 30%: call-centre operators in the Buffalo City Municipality had to answer for both municipality and Eskom, which ended up not answering the calls. This was worsened by the lack of communication between the back office and front-line workers:

When the council makes a decision that is very unpopular we get more frustrated callers off-which we understand but it's not our fault (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

Working conditions were worsened by service delivery expectations from the council. Local government call-centres, though small and unionised, are dynamic and stressful to the operators, because they are not seen as call handlers but the ‘face of inefficient service delivery’. This abuse then is not based only on ‘bad customer service’ from IVR but also the service delivery itself. This is worsened by the lack of communication between the back-office and the call-centre. The latter have to answer for things that they are not informed about, and they end up looking or sounding ‘inefficient’ to members of the public. Working short-staffed and working under threats from angry customers, call-centre operators act as middleman between the municipality and the ‘customer’. One call-centre worker seems to have accepted these relations with customers by saying

Threats and angry customers are part of our job (CCA 3 – Josephine).

7.5.1 Representing the image of the Metro

The organisation via its front-line staff has to 'get it right the first time' in order to ensure a flawless performance which results in the customer returning to any given service business (Nickson et al., 2001: 173). Customer service has a lot to do with promoting company image. "Customer service agents are traditionally couched as the mouthpieces of the organisation" (Armistead et al., 2002: 253). One of the aims of these call-centres is to improve and centralise information given to customers. One manager highlights the importance of front-line telephone staff in improving the Metro's image:

The lack of professionalism and interpersonal skills can ruin the image of the municipality (Top Manager 1 – Tsatsire).

Through training of workers in customer care and company values, especially the new customer approach, employees develop an awareness and a sense of ownership of the organisation. This confirms what Nickson and others have argued, that "organisations are increasingly viewing their employees as not only offering competitive advantage in relation to the service encounter but also as becoming integral to the image of the company" (2001: 177). The customer care manager of the Metro also recognises the importance of training call-centre staff in terms of voice, communication and interpersonal skills so as to improve the image of the municipality:

These are the people that our citizens first talk to about our organisation, if they answer like this [pointing to the interaction of the call-centre worker with a customer] then our image to the public is at stake (Top Manager 2 – Lorraine).

Nelson Mandela Metro Municipality has not yet conducted Customer Satisfaction Surveys to assess the satisfaction levels of its customers/citizens. It was only in 2008 that this process has started, through a mini questionnaire at the Eric Tindale Customer Care Centre which focused on the service experienced by customers with regard to timeliness, staff helpfulness, facilities and access, and communication. Conducted by Budget and Treasury, this three (1=Poor; 2=Average; 3=Good) Likert scale client survey is intended to provide the Metro with information that will assist in improving services rendered to the client. One of the 15 questions in this client service survey asks whether staff serving the client "looked professional"? In this regard, the questionnaire recognises that front-line workers play a significant role in the image of the municipality not only by serving with a smile but also by looking professional (Nickson and others have termed this 'aesthetic labour').

Though call-centres are designed to increase customer satisfaction, in the Metro's survey nothing was asked about the quality of service provided by the call-centre staff. This seems to confirm what Omar (2001) observed in Telkom call-centres, where 'customer feedback in these surveys was used to draw up business plans' rather than to improve customer satisfaction. The only question about service in the questionnaire is about the awareness of citizens of the use of the call-centre to contact the municipality (in terms of payment of their accounts). This means walking to the municipality is encouraged, though the Metro has set up the call-centre to reduce these long queues. The main purpose of the call-centres established in the public sector is to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as a means of reducing costs (Fisher, 2004).

It is worth noting that these call-centre workers are not only “answering calls” but they are used as what I term “fire extinguishers” to harmonise customer-council relations. As customers call the municipality angrily looking for answers and irritated about services, they are met with a smile and a voice that has to assure them that “all is going to be well”. Having to deal with irritated customers and protect the council’s decisions makes this job stressful for the workers. As one call-centre operator put it:

99 percent of the people that phone us are angry because if you don’t get an account for you to do your budget for the payment of expenses in the month you are not going to know what to pay the municipality...Subsequently the municipality is going to come and turn off the electricity. You don’t pay not because you did not want to or you couldn’t afford, but you did not receive your accurate account statement...Now you call because there is a particular need that you as an individual want to address which is electricity, because you want to cook, you want to switch on the TV so you can watch Generations. Do you understand what I’m saying? So as I say 99 percent of the time...They call already angry, but it’s the language and the manner this person is speaking in...but generally in terms of fearing to be shot at while sitting here it won’t happen as you are only speaking to that person over the phone. But if you go out the community might look at you differently as they now see you as if you are the municipality. Because for me to be paid, they must pay for the services they get from the municipality (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

Another speaker said

They are (customers) upset with the municipality so you understand their anger (CCA 13 – Bongiwe).

Both speakers above showed empathy for the customers but at the same time they recognised that in order for them to be paid customers need to pay. These call-centre workers have been associated with the public sector as a whole, not

only the municipality as they get customers swearing at the government service delivery.

This country is going down the drain with your black government (CCA-15 Bessie).

All the workers in the Munilek call-centre termed these insults and abuse as racist as they were accused of inefficiency and blamed for the national government's faults.

All of you Thabo Mbeki government people you don't know what you are doing there...you are so incompetent (CCA 14 – Rhoda).

According to almost every call-centre operator interviewed, these insults and abuse came mainly from farm owners (with high electricity usage) and suburban residences.

7.6 Conclusion

Call-centres are designed for convenience of the citizens. In the Metro it seemed as if queuing is one way of getting things done by the municipality. Lack of professionalism and trust in the satellite walk-in centres was identified as one of the reasons behind long queues in the Eric Tindale Customer Care Centre. The role of call-centres in local government was discussed, focusing mainly on the image of the municipality as these call-centres are associated with inefficient service delivery and thus racialised power relations between customers and workers. It is then that call-centre workers have to be 'fire extinguishers' between the rage of customers and the council decisions.

Customer sovereignty was seen as 'mythical' by customers, trade unions and workers as they compared customer service with that of call-centres in the private sector. Customer complaints consistently focused on the IVR system and telephone manners of the telephone workers. The latter was justified by the existence of 'bad organisational culture' which seems to undermine the customer-oriented attitude promoted by *Batho Pele* principles.

The reality of recurring service problems suggests that municipalities do not need more workers to field complaints but need to deal with complaints in a more lasting way. Why are problems only temporarily fixed? In the case of telephone services, the theft of copper telephone cables is a frustrating reality for telephone companies. The context of generalised poverty and theft can limit the ability of a state to effectively render services, pointing to the need for more substantial solutions to social problems rather than more polite workers to field complaints.

As Omar (2000: 113) noted, customer feedback in Telkom call-centres was not used in "direct management of customer service representatives...and suggests that management was not presenting itself as an agent of the customer, but tended to invoke licence obligations imposed by the government". Due to apparent lack of supervision this was also apparent in the Metro call-centres, where customer complaints were not used as the 'authoritative figure'. This then questions the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy theory' where customers are now the source of authority with management. "As a result management appeared to Customer Service Representatives as direct authority figures" (Omar, 2001: 113).

Clearly management regarded themselves as the 'guardians of the myth of customer sovereignty' without properly emphasising the importance of the customer in the Metro front-line, as workers tended to complain about training. This was clearly articulated by one call-centre agent in Chapter 5 of this study:

If the municipality prides itself on the customer care why not equip your employees...because we deal with people from different levels that require professionalism...because this will affect the image of the municipality...the lack of training makes you feel inadequate (CCA 15 – Bessie).

However this lack of training directly impacts on customer service, as the speaker above rightly puts it. This concurs with Clarke and Newman (1997: 11) when they say "the introduction of markets and charters has created something less than a sovereign customer in public service". One call-centre agent put it clearly when he said

We do not classify the people we serve as customers...we do classify them in terms of relations for business transactions that you are a customer...but in reality that is just a business term (CCA 1 – Siyabonga).

Customer sovereignty was seen as mythical and neither call-centre workers nor consumers believed the myth (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 680).

CHAPTER 8

Thesis Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I summarise the main features of the research study including the literature, methods, and main research findings about the nature and experiences of call-centre workers in their efforts to improve the customer care system in the Metro municipality.

This study has described features of the local government call-centres through a case study of two call-centres in NMM. I made use of a qualitative approach since my research looks at the experiences and meanings behind the new customer-centred service workplace. Interviews, observation and review of the Metro's restructuring policies were key research techniques employed to describe the nature of work and well-being amongst the call-centre workers in their pursuit to improve the customer satisfaction in the Metro. This formed an explorative and inductive study as knowledge was built up through fieldwork.

8.2 Conclusion

In this study I have argued that the 'sovereign customer' has produced nothing more than 'another form' of worsened conditions of work under the banner of "customer care" designed to 'corporatise' the image of the municipality rather than improving the customer satisfaction. This is derived from the NPM's notion of importing a private sector style of management into the public service to improve the business of running the public service. Established to enhance efficiency in the public service, ICTs are now used to advance managerial control

and exert more pressure on front-line staff through IVR statistics. Both the customer and call-centre operators seem to have fallen victim to the electronic IVR “cage” which allows no alternatives to the customer.

In the local government, the call-centre’s overriding goal is customer satisfaction rather than reducing the costs, and creating easy access to municipal services. These call-centres used to operate as general enquiries offices with 2-5 workers operating the centre. As municipalities were geographically restructured, the number of people making general enquiries increased and government sought to restructure the manner in which services were rendered by the local government. This new customer orientation introduced by New Public Management centralised the access area to the municipality and ‘corporatised’ the image of the local government. In these call-centres, operators provide information about water accounts, electricity, traffic licences, dog taxes, disaster reports, disconnections and reconnections and all the services provided by the municipality.

Call-centre operators receive calls using technological programmes to solve customer requests and dispatch the relevant artisans within a minimal time. Though call-centre work is famous for its routine and standardisation in nature, this was not the case in the local government call-centres, as the workers had no scripts to follow when answering the customer queries.

Though Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy theory has its own weaknesses, it confirmed many issues identified in the Nelson Mandela Metro call-centres. The dual logic and tension inherent in this front-line work was evident as call-centre workers in the electricity call-centre had to balance quality and quantity measures set up by the organisation. They had to answer the phone within three

rings, dispatch the call within 1,5 hours and answer whatever enquiry within five minutes with 95% without referrals. This was also present in Joburg Connect where call-centre operators had to spend an average of not more than three minutes on each call. "We can't let operators talk until forever...it'll be a mess in this place" (CC Manager – Lerato). In the end productivity and 'customer care' was the key dilemma as COB theory also noted.

In the local government the concept of the 'customer' having power to be both the source of "pain and pleasure", as the COB theory points out, seemed applicable to a limited extent. Stress levels and emotional labour played a big role in the workplace. As much as the front-line workers complained about irate customers being the source of pain, they also highlighted some other factors – managerial control, infighting, and to a limited extent salaries. Many call-centre agents pointed out clearly that infighting amongst them was one of the major contributors to stress.

Discipline and surveillance were carried out by a combination of direct supervision, technological instruments and peer pressure. The latter seemed to be one of the main causes for infighting amongst the call-centre operators in both call-centres. Electronic monitoring was only used during customer complaints and there was no proven record of any disciplinary action taken against workers for poor customer relations.

Though in both Metro call-centres studied here, customers were the source of 'pleasure', this was not sufficient reason to improve satisfaction levels for front-line staff. This differs from what COB theory suggests, where the interests of front-line and customers seems to impact on each other's satisfaction. This has

been the major criticism of this theoretical base, where customer and workforce satisfactions mirror each other (Brook, 2007). Critics of the theory identified customer interests as different from front-line worker interest as the latter always seek good quality service/product at a lower price compared to workers wanting good salary with good working conditions.

Though call-centres have been complemented by walk-in centres, there is a strong class bias for call-centres to be used by middle class citizens. As one participant put it "the poor queue whilst the rich call", this is the result of expensive waiting period on the call. As I have mentioned above that I also tried to use the call-centre and lost up to R50.00 without getting any proper solution to my enquiry. This was also proved by citizens who called the call-centre but without any follow-up on the call. "If you want them (municipality) to solve your problem you'll have to go personally to the municipality" (Customer – Nomboniso). Thus the call centre strategy may be an ineffective way for delivering municipal services to the citizens of the Metro and SA if call costs fall to users.

The lack of professionalism both in customer care centres and call-centres noted by managers, workers and customers promotes a bad image of the culture of the municipality. The persistent lack of professionalism in the customer care system is exacerbated by the lack of communication (internally), customer care as 'part-of-the-process' rather than the new culture of the municipality. The persistent culture of inefficient and rude municipal workers needs to be rooted out through proper recruitment strategies, selection of the 'right' people for the job, and training them in customer care as well as functional training. This was echoed by a Joburg Connect CC worker who said "it is easy to deal with young workers

from the call-centre and because they are properly trained into *Batho Pele*...and ja those people are an asset to this municipality” (CCA 20 – Paul).

Though the NMM seems to be one of the most technologically advanced municipalities in the Eastern Cape, the lack of sufficient use of this technology undermines the purpose of *Batho Pele* in promoting quality service encounters with customers. This is why top managers felt that the customer care management system has been established as a matter of compliance with national regulations rather than 'to improve the customer service'

SAMWU was the majority union in the call-centres but they seemed ill-informed about what was going on in the call-centre as they were treated as part of the 'general' municipal workers. Named 'SHOP-STUPIDS', this was a clear view of what some call-centre operators thought of the trade union representing them. COB theory suggests that trade unions need to focus on customer service if they are to improve the working conditions of their service workers but this was not the case in the Metro call-centres, as SAMWU was more concerned the accessibility of the call-centre to the citizens of the Metro.

In this study I have also highlighted the challenges under which the call-centre workers work. These include lack of transport services for late night shifts, racial insults from angry customers, infighting, managerial control (Munilek call-centre), lack of internal communication, and insufficient training on both technical and functional training. These factors also contributed to the high stress levels experienced by the call-centre operators. This then thwarts the effectiveness of the call-centre to improve customer satisfaction. This then confirms COB theory where satisfaction of workers directly impacts on the

quality of service received by the customers. Basically customers are satisfied by the manner in which they are treated by the satisfied front-line workforce (Korczynski, 2002:20).

8.3 Criticisms and recommendations for the Nelson Mandela Metro Customer Care System

Though NMM seems to be one of the most progressive and growing economies in the Eastern Cape, customer service leaves much to be desired. Close examination of this municipality reveals a pro-customer orientation initiative is a must-have, addressing issues such as call charges for the call-centre number, lack of proper complaints channels, lack of productivity measures among staff members and the use of the customer care system to 'corporatise the image of the municipality' rather than to service the citizens of the metro.

Though not implemented, the Customer Care Policy gives customers a voice, empowerment, and access to information, complaint mechanisms and accountability. The Metro's customer care system seeks to empower customers (citizens) through customer by-laws while at the same time promoting the culture of debt payment. Trying to improve channels of communication and public participation, electronic government tools such as call-centres and internet access for citizens are an obvious choice. Created as a debt collection mechanism but now used to implement the customer care strategy to increase customer satisfaction, the call-centre relieves the back office of telephone work.

The Metro's customer care policy rightly 'puts the customer first' but does not mention the front-line workers as a means to that end. It is not only through setting up the legislative framework that the Metro can improve customer

service but employee involvement is the key. Front-line workers form an integral part of the customer care system, yet this is the least 'important' component of the customer care strategy. According to Self (1997) the only way that companies can accomplish good customer service is through their employees. Customer call-centres are fundamental in improving the quality of service in the public sector. The Mayor of the Metro (Nondumiso Maphazi) agreed in her state of the Metro address (2008) when she said "A happy, safe and contented workforce is a catalyst for effective service delivery". Putting front-line workers back at the centre of customer centred service and equipping them with customer care training makes the realisation of this vision a reality for the customers.

There is a need to restructure the customer system as whole, as this tends to undermine the customer care as "just a non-core" function of the municipality. This is why Self (1997) argues that "more than the lack of competition in government, results in poor service in the public sector. This is mainly because government has not made the customer service a priority". The mayor of the NMM in her executive summary also notes the need to restructure the customer call-centres into a single unit under corporate service. This can also include the e-government strategy that currently seems isolated to formulate a coherent customer care system where one call-centre is utilised to link all the services of the Metro (IDP Draft, 2008: 13). The customer care management system has been established as a matter of compliance rather than 'to improve the customer service'. This was echoed by one of the Buffalo City Municipality top managers:

For us at local government, customer care is just a matter of compliance rather than a genuine willingness to change our approach in dealing with the citizen...people work in silos here, there is no

integrated strategy to improve the customer service (BCM Top Manager – Ongezwa).

It is crucial for the municipality to provide a transparent complaint system. This could reduce the weight of “banana skins” in the suggestion boxes. This was observed by the researcher in both Eric Tindale and Zwide Customer Care.

Though emphasised by national government as the most important aspect of service delivery, customer care tends to be relegated to non-core activities of the municipality. The number of front-line workers and the lack of training experienced by these call-centre workers give evidence of the ‘insignificant role’ which this call-centre plays in the local government.

Although call-centre working conditions are relatively better than outsourced or private call-centres, public call-centres experience unique and significant challenges. They are seen as the face of ‘inefficient’ service delivery and therefore act as ‘fire extinguishers’ to many sometimes justifiable complaints raised by citizens. Working conditions are worsened by high levels of stress and the lack of leadership and training, but call-centres in local government provide better working conditions compared to what was termed “sweatshops of the digital era”. This confirmed what Taylor (2002) argued when he said that not all call-centres are monotonous and deskilling, there distinctions based on their customer service orientation, size, market conditions, the nature of operations (inbound), and management style. These include wages, benefits and the limited control they were observed to have on job tasks.

In the new Customer Care Model suggested by Mayor Nondumiso Maphazi in the Metro IDP Draft for 2008, both walk-in and call-centres are seen as the part of the tools to digitalise the Metro and open access to the public. Tsatsire also suggests that “in the new customer care model the Metro will restructure the call-centres and focus on the human resource occupying the call-centre” (Top Manager 1 – Tsatsire).

The participants all recognised the need to improve the call-centre in order to provide a holistic picture of the municipal services, not only account enquiries. “We are working on a plan to integrate all the municipal queries in one central area so that whatever one wants to know about the Metro we have it under one roof...our call-centre is still geared towards Budget and Treasury issues, we have not extended to the bulk of Metro services ” (Top Manager 3 – Buntu).

8.4 Further research

This research has explored and described the questions around the workplace organisation of local government call-centres in improving service delivery. The length and time of a Masters thesis cannot sufficiently capture all the relevant questions and answers for this topic, therefore much still needs to be done for a holistic understanding of the topic. I have highlighted the re-organisation of the workplace environment at the local government to enhance the customer-centred service delivery, but an in-depth understanding of customer views about the use of call-centres to deliver services to the communities needs to be investigated.

Also the challenges faced by the labour movement in dealing with the new public workplace need further investigation. What are the ways in which unions can contribute in improving customer service in the customer call-centres? I also

suggest an investigation that focuses on experiences of local government front-line staff (face-to-face) or walk-in centres in the new *Batho Pele* culture. Finally an examination of managerial perceptions of the new customer culture promoted by the Municipal Systems Act (2000) will help in understanding the challenges faced by municipalities in efficiently delivering services to their citizens in SA.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adesina, J. O. 1991. "Labour Process and Labour Relations". In Dafe Otobo (ed.) *Labour Relations in Nigeria* Vol. 1. Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- African Analysis Report. 2005. *South African BPO and Contact Centre Industry, 2005: Market Overview and Value Proportion Analysis*. Prepared for The Department of Trade and Industry.
- Aneesh, A. (**undated**) *Technological Modes of governance: beyond Private and Public Realms*. Stanford University. Available at www.ifz.tugraz.at/index_en.php/filemanager/download/108/aaneesh.pdf (Accessed 30/01/2007).
- Appelbaum, E. and Albin, P. 1989. "Computer rationalisation and transformation of work: lessons from the insurance industry". In Wood, S. (ed.) *The transformation of work? : Skill, flexibility and the labour process*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Appelbaum, E. and Batt, R. 1994. *The new American workplace: transforming work systems in the United States*. IRL Press.
- Armistead, C., Kiely, F., Hole, L. and Prescott, J. 2002. "An exploration of managerial issues in call-centres". *Managing Service Quality*. Vol. 12. No. 4. pp. 246-256.
- Babbie, E. R. 1979. *The practice of social research*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
- Babbie, E. R. and Mouton, J. 2001. *The practice of social research*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Balindlela, N. 2005. *State of the Province Address*. Eastern Cape: Available at www.ecprov.gov.za

- Basu, S. 2004 "E-government and Developing Countries: An Overview"
International Review of Law Computers & Technology. Vol. 18 No. 1. pp. 109-132.
- Batho Pele Booklet: *Service Delivery Improvement Guide*. 2000. Available at
http://www.dpsa.gov.za/batho-pele/docs/BP_HB_optimised.pdf (Accessed 10/08/07).
- Benner, C., Lewis, C. and Omar, R. 2007. *The South African Call-centre Industry: A Study of Strategy, Human Resource Practices and Performance*. Part of The Global Call-centre Industry Project. Johannesburg: Wits University SWOP.
- Benner, C. 2006. *South Africa On Call: Information Technology and Labour Market restructuring in South African Call Centres*. Taylor and Francis. Meta Press.
- Berg, B. L. 2007. *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Beynon, H. 1997. "The changing practices of work". In Brown, R. (ed.) *The changing shape of work*. London: Macmillan.
- Blunden, D. 2003. *Music to Your Ears: The Impact of Call-centres on Public Library Service*. Masters Thesis, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. Available at http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dissertations/2002-03/External/Blunden_David_MALib.pdf (Accessed 12/06/2007).
- Bolton, C. S. and Houlihan. M. 2005. "The (mis)representation of customer service". *Work, Employment and Society*. Vol. 19 (4) pp. 685-703.
- Breathnach, P. 2000. "Globalisation, information technology and emergence of niche transnational cities: the growth of the call-centres sector in Dublin"
Geoforum 31. pp. 477-485 (Jstor source)

- Brook, P. 2007. "Customer Oriented militants? A critique of the 'customer oriented bureaucracy' theory on front-line service worker collectivism". *Work, Employment and Society*. Vol. 21 (2) pp. 363-379.
- Brown, D. 2005. "Electronic government and public administration". *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. Vol. 71 (2) pp. 241-254
- Brown, R. (editor) 1997. *The changing shape of work*. London: Macmillan.
- Carrin, N., Basson, J. and Coetzee, M. 2006. "The relationship between job satisfaction and locus of control in South African call centre environment" *South African Journal of Labour Relations*. Vol. 30 (2) pp.66-79.
- Clarke, J. and Newman, J.1997. *The managerial state: power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare*. London: Sage.
- Cock, J. 1980. *Maids & madams: a study in the politics of exploitation*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Creswell, J. W. 2003. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (2nd edition). London: Sage Publications.
- Crotty, A. 2007. "Service suffers because the rich people don't queue" *Star newspaper*. 24 January. pp. 18
- Daily Dispatch* 2008. *BC residents scramble to beat electricity hike* 1 July 2008 (pp-5).
- Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) 2000. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Desai, V. and Imrie, R. 1998. "The New Managerialism in Local governance: North-South dimensions". *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 19. No. 4. pp 635-650
- Dollar, D. 1998. *Organisational culture in a South African non-governmental organisation : the challenge of a changing environment*. M.A. Thesis, Rhodes University.
- Du Gay, P. and Salaman, G. 2000. "The culture of customer". In Grint, K. (ed.) *Work and society: a reader*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Eastern Cape *Provincial Growth and development Plan (PGDP)*, 2004. Bhisho. Republic of South Africa.
- Effective E-government. 2005 *South Africa's essential guide to public sector transformation through technology*. Cape Town: ITWEB Informatica.
- Els, L. and de Villiers, P. 2000. *Call-centre effectiveness*. Lynwood Ridge (Pretoria): Amabhuku.
- Fisher, M. 2004. "The Crisis of civil service trade unionism: a case study of call centre development in a civil service agency" *Work, Employment and Society*. Vol. 18 (1) pp. 157-177.
- Gaffaney Group. 1999. *Gaffaney's local government in South Africa*. Johannesburg.
- Gorman, G. E. and Clayton, P. 2005. *Qualitative research for the information professional: a practical handbook*. Facet: London.
- Government Digest. 2007. *Umsebenzi Keeping you informed*. "Housing call-centre launched in Limpopo" Vol. 26. no.7
- Hart, C. 1998. *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage.
- Hart, M., Fichtner, B., Fjalestad, E. and Langle, S. 2006. "Contact centre performance: In pursuit of First Call Resolution". *Management Dynamics*. Vol. 15 (4) pp. 17-28 (UCT).
- Haw, P. 2007. "Customers keep singing the call-centre blues." *Business Day* newspaper 23 April.
- Hemson, D. and Roberts, B. 2008. "Batho Pele: Season of Discontent" *HSRC Review*. Vol. 6. No. 4. pp. 12-14.
- Hodgson, D. 2001. "Empowering customers through education or governing without Government"? In Sturdy, A. et al. *Customer Service: empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- Hughes, O.E. 1998. *Public management and administration: an introduction*. London: Macmillan.
- Kelly, K. "Interpretive methods" In Terre Blanche, M. and Durrheim, K. 1999. *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences*. South Africa: University of Cape Town Press.
- Kirkpatrick, I. and Martinez Lucio, M. 1995. *The Politics of Quality in the Public Sector*. London :Routledge.
- Kjellerup, N. 2000. Customers don't like talking to machines. Available At <http://www.callcentres.com.au/Customer%20Research%20UK.htm#IVR%20&%20Customers> (Accessed 16/04/07).
- Knights, D. & McCabe, D. 2003. *Organization and innovation: guru schemes and American dreams*. Maidenhead, Berks. Open University Press.
- Korczynski, M. 1995. "The Contradictions of service work: Call Centre as Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy" in Kirkpatrick, I. & Martinez Lucio, M. (eds.) *The Politics of Quality in the Public Sector*. Routledge: London. Pp. 79-99.
- Korczynski, M. 2001. "The Contradictions of Service Work: Call-centre as Customer-Oriented Bureacracy" in Sturdy, A. et al. *Customer Service: empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Korczynski, M. 2002. *Human Resource Management in Service Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Korczynski, M. 2003(a) "Communities of Coping: Collective Emotional Labour in Service Work". *Organization* Vol. 10 (1) pp. 55-79.
- Korczynski, M. 2003(b) "Consumer Capitalism and Industrial Relations". In Ackers, P. and Wilkinson, A. (eds) *Understanding Work and Employment*, pp. 266-277. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Korczynski, M. 2004. "Back-office service work: bureaucracy challenged? *Work, Employment and Society*. Vol. 18 (1) pp. 97-114.
- Korczynski, M. 2007. "Service work, Social Theory, and collectivism: a reply to Brook". *Work, Employment and Society*. Vol. 21 (3) pp. 577-588
- Korczynski, M., Shire, K., Frenkel, S. and Tam, M. 2000. *Service Work in Consumer Capitalism: Customers, Control and Contradictions*. *Work, Employment & Society* Vol. 14. No. 4. pp. 669-687.
- Lee, R.M. 1993. *Doing research on sensitive topics*. London. Sage.
- Manley, J. E. 2001. "The Customer is always right? Customer Satisfaction surveys as Employee Control Mechanisms in Professional Service Work". In Sturdy, A. et al. (eds) *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Maphazi, N. 2008. *State of the Nelson Mandela Bay Adress*. Port Elizabeth.
- Milani, C. 2005. "FEDUSA – what is Batho Pele achieving?" *South African Labour Bulletin*. Vol. 29. No. 1 pp. 20-24.
- Miller, K. 2005. *Public sector reform: governance in South Africa*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate.
- Moleketi, F. G. 2003. *Investing in Human Capital in the Public sector: Recent innovations in Human Resource Management Frameworks*. Paper presented at the Fifth Global Forum in Reinventing Government, on November 5 Mexico.
- Moleketi, F.G. 2007. "Building professionalism and competence in the public sector". *Service Delivery Review*. Vol. 6 No. 2 pp. 1-5
- Mulholland, K. 2004. *Workplace Irish call-centre: Slammin', scammin' smoking an' leavin'*. *Work, Employment and Society* Vol. 18. No. 4. pp. 709-724.
- Munilek call-centre minutes meeting. 16 March 2008

Nelson Mandela Metro 2003. *Customer Care and Revenue Management By-laws*.

Available at www.mandelametro.gov.za (Accessed 02/05/07).

Nelson Mandela Metro *Staff Newsletter*, Vol. 1 July/ August 2005

Nelson Mandela Metro. 2007. *Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality constantly improving Customer Care*. Available at

<http://www.mandelametro.gov.za/News.aspx?objID=4&cmd=view&id=438>
(Accessed 08/10/08).

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality *Communication Policy*. 2001.

Available at www.mandelametro.gov.za/documents/ (Accessed 06/07/08).

Nelson Mandela Metro. 2005a. *Customer Care Strategy*. Port Elizabeth.

Nelson Mandela Metro. 2005b. *E-government Strategy*. Port Elizabeth.

Nelson Mandela Metro. 2006 *Integrated Development Plan*. Port Elizabeth

Nelson Mandela Metro. 2008. *Integrated Development Plan Draft*. Port Elizabeth.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality *Growth Development summit*, 2007.

Prepared by Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council. Bhisho.

Available at www.mandelametro.gov.za (Accessed 15/02/08).

Nelson Mandela Metro. (Undated) Annexure C: *Response to the auditor report on consolidated financial statement for year ended June 2006*. Available at

www.mandelametro.gov.za/documents/ (Accessed 15/03/08).

Neuman, W. L. 2003. *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Nickson, D., Warhurst, C., Witz, A. and Cullen, A.M. 2001. "The Importance of Being Aesthetic: Work, Employment and Service Organisation" in Sturdy, A. et al. *Customer Service: empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Nolan, B. C. 2001. *Public Sector Reform: An international Perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

- Odayer, M. 2003. Presentation on *Customer Care and Revenue Management By-Law and Management Imperatives*. Tuesday, July 08. Available at www.mandelametro.gov.za (Accessed 11/06/08)
- Omar, R. 2001. *Call-centres in Telkom: sweatshops of the digital era?* MA Dissertation, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Omar, R. 2005. "New Workplace Order or More of the Same? Call-centres in South Africa". In Webster, E. and Von Holdt, K (eds) *Beyond the apartheid workplace: studies in transition*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Omar, R. 2008. *Callcentres: a new contested terrain for unions in South Africa*. Paper Presented South African Sociological Association (SASA) Conference 7-10 July in Stelebotch University.
- Portfolio: *Municipalities in SA*, 2005. In Association with SALGA Provincial Growth and Development Plan. 2004-2014. Eastern Cape. Available at <http://www.ecprov.gov.za/index.php?module=pgdp> (Accessed 09/10/07)
- Public Service Commission Report on *Evaluation of performance and Compliance with the Batho Pele principle of Access*, 2005. Available at <http://www.psc.gov.za> (Accessed 11/06/07)
- Public Service Commission Report on *Management of the Poor Performance in the Public Service*. 2007. Available at <http://www.psc.gov.za> (Accessed 11/06/07)
- RADIAN Research Report Prepared for Eastern Cape Development Corporation. 2004. *Prospects for the Call-centre Market in the Eastern Cape*. <http://www.ecdc.co.za> (Accessed 30/03/07).
- Richardson, R., Belt, V. and Marshal, N. 2000. "Taking calls to Newcastle: the Regional Implications of the Growth in Call-centres". *Regional Studies*. Vol. 34. (4) pp. 357-369.

- Ritchie, J. and Lewis, J. 2003. *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage.
- Ritchie, J. 2003. "The applications of qualitative methods to social research". In Ritchie, J & Lewis, J (eds.) *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage Publication.
- Ritzer, G. 2000. *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge.
- RSA. 1997. White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (*Batho Pele*). Pretoria.
- RSA. 2000. Municipal Systems Act (32). Pretoria.
- Ruiters, G. 2005. "Public services: transformation or stasis" In *Beyond the market: The future of Public service*. Public services yearbook 2005/6, TNI / Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU).
- Sarantakos, S. 2005. *Social research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, J.C, 1985. *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of resistance*. New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press.
- Seale, C ... [et al.]. 2005. *Qualitative research practice*. London: Sage.
- Sealy, W. 2003. "Empowering development Through E-Governance: Creating smart Communities in Small Island States". *International Information & Library Review*. 35 pp. 335-358.
- Self, J. T. 1997. *Improving Customer Service*. Issues #1-70 Available at <http://www.sideroad.com/cs/column4.html> (Accessed 02/08/08).
- Silver, M. 2008. *Organisational climate, Job satisfaction, Life satisfaction and Self-Esteem: A Call-centre Study*. MA Dissertation. Wits University. Johannesburg.
- South African Cities Network. 2007. *State of City Finances*. Available at <http://www.sacities.net> (Accessed 20/07/07).
- Spain, D. 1992. *Gendered spaces*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Sturdy, A., Grugulis, I., and Willmott, H. 2001. *Customer Service: empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Taylor, P., Mulvey, G., Hyman, J. and Bain, P. 2002. "Work organization, control and the experience of work in call-centres". *Work, Employment and Society* Vol. 16. (1) pp. 133-150.
- Taylor, S. 1997. "Empowerment or degradation? Total quality management and Service sector" In Brown, R. 1997. *The changing shape of work*. London: Macmillan.
- Taylor, S. 19998. "Emotional Labour and the New workplace". In Thompson, P. and Warhurst, C. (eds) *Workplaces of the future*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Business pp. 84-101.
- Taylor, S. and Tyler, M. 2000. "Emotional labour and sexual deference in the air line industry". *Work Employment & Society*. Vol.14 (1). pp. 77-95.
- The Herald* 11 September 2007 (Business Herald)
- The *Sunday Times* 2007. *Ability to deliver on queries is key*. Available at <http://www.sundaytimes.co.za/article.aspx?ID=448287> (Accessed on 29/04/07).
- Thompson, P. 1985. *The nature of wok: an introduction to debates on the labour process*. London: Macmillan.
- Thompson, P. and Warhurst, C. 1998. *Workplaces of the future*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Business.
- Tsatsire, I. 2001. Masters Theses on *Investigation of the Municipal Credit control Policy, with specific reference to Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality*. Port Elizabeth Technicon (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University).
- Uwe, F. 2002. *An introduction to qualitative research*. London. Sage.
- Von Holdt, K. 2005. "Political Transition and the Changing Workplace Order in a South African Steelworks". In Webster, E. and Von Holdt, K. (eds) *Beyond the*

- apartheid workplace: studies in transition*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Von Holdt, K. and Maserumule, B. 2005. "After apartheid: Decay or Reconstruction in a Public Hospital?" In Webster, E. and Von Holdt, K. (eds) *Beyond the apartheid workplace: studies in transition*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Webster, E. and Omar, R. 2003. "Work Restructuring in Post Apartheid South Africa". *Work and Occupations*. Vol. 30 No. 2 pp. 194-233.
- Webster, E. and Von Holdt, K. 2005. *Beyond the apartheid workplace: studies in transition*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Wilkinson, A., Redman, T., Shape, E. & Marchington, M. 1997. *Managing with total quality management: theory and practice*. London: Macmillan.
- Wood, S. 1989. *The transformation of work? Skill, flexibility and the labour process*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Wray-Bliss, E. 2001. "Representing Customer Service: Telephones and Texts" in Sturdy, A. et al. *Customer Service: empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Appendix A: Interviewee List -* Pseudonyms!

Interviewee*	Job Title	Race	Gender	Date
Chumile	SAMWU Eastern Cape Organiser	African	Male	11/09/07
Lorraine	B&T Customer Care Manager	Coloured	Female	11/09/07
Tsatsire	NMM Chief Operating Officer	African	Male	03/04/08
Buntu	NMM Assistant Director Corporate Services	African	Male	22/02/08
Siyabonga	B&T CCA	African	Male	08/08/07
Lauren	B&T CCA	Coloured	Female	08/08/07
Nancy	B&T CCA	White	Female	22/02/08
Josephine	B&T CCA	African	Female	08/08/07
Mlungisi	B&T CCA	African	Male	08/08/07
Zamikhaya	B&T Accountant Customer Care	African	Male	21/10/07
Phumlani	B&T Call-Centre Supervisor	African	Male	08/08/07
Nomhle	NMM Customer	African	Female	21/05/07
Nomboniso	NMM Customer	African	Female	04/04/08
Bessie	Munilek CCA	African	Female	11/08/08
Rhoda	Munilek CCA	African	Female	11/08/08
Bongiwe	Munilek CCA	African	Female	11/08/08
Max	Munilek CCA (Trainee)	Coloured	Male	11/08/08
Kago	Munilek CCA	African	Female	25/07/08
Caroline	Munilek -CCA	African	Female	25/07/08
Glenda	Munilek CC Shop Steward	African	Female	10/09/08
Juanitta	Munilek -Supervisor	Coloured	Female	25/07/08
Lulama	Zwide -Customer Care Centre Supervisor	African	Male	03/04/08
Mongezi	Zwide Front-line Staff	African	Male	05/04/08
Van der Merwe	Walmer-Customer Care Centre Supervisor	White	Male	05/04/08
Mandisa	BCM -CCA	African	Female	06/03/08
Ongezwa	BCM Top Manager	African	Female	18/02/08
Lee	Joburg CCA	African	Male	03/10/07
Lerato	Joburg Connect CC Manager	African	Female	03/10/07
Faniswa	Joburg Connect CCA/SAMWU Rep	African	Female	04/10/08
Paul	Joburg Connect CCA/Supervisor	African	Male	04/10/08

Appendix B: Interview questions for Managers

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you worked for this Municipality?
3. How long have you been working in the job title mentioned above?
4. What does Customer care mean to you?
5. How many call-centres are there in this municipality?
6. What are the main functions of customer call-centres in the Metro?
7. What was used before the introduction of call-centres/ customer care by citizens to contact the municipality?
8. In your view what was the purpose of introducing customer care centres in the municipality?
9. What have been the challenges faced by these call-centres since inception?
10. What has been the benefit of introducing call-centres to the citizens?
11. What kinds of problems have been introduced by call-centres?
12. Since the establishment of call-centres have you noticed any improvements in customer service?
13. How have you measured these improvements?
14. What mechanisms do you use to evaluate the customer satisfaction within the Metro?
15. Has the new customer driven system of service delivery affected relations between management and workers? If Yes How?
16. How have the municipal workers reacted to the new customer driven service delivery?
17. What has been the community's response to the customer driven service delivery?

18. How has the *Batho Pele* principles changed the ethos of the municipality (organisational culture)?
19. How has the municipality equipped its workers and managers to meet the *Batho Pele* vision?
20. What has the Municipality done to enhance the *Batho Pele* and customer Care awareness among the customers?
21. Usually people have a negative experience of the use of call-centres, in your view what were are the causes of this?
22. How did you improve this amongst municipality customers?
23. What are you doing to improve the customer experience of the call-centres in the Municipality?

Appendix C: Interview questions with call-centre operators

Workers experience:

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been working in NMM?
3. How long have you been working in the above mentioned position?
4. How many are the call-centre workers? Gender breakdown?
5. How many hours do you work per week?
6. Would you say that there is a difference in working conditions and wages of call-centres workers and other municipal workers?
7. Do you perform different functions at work? If yes-what are those functions?
8. What are the other tasks that you perform except for call handling?
9. How long a customer does has to wait for the phone to be answered?
10. How many calls do get per day/ week/ month?
11. Do you believe that you are in control of your work task especially the pace of work? If yes how? No why do think so?
12. How do you know that there is a call waiting for you?
13. How many calls is one expected to receive per hour?
14. Do you have targets on how much call have to be made? Who is setting targets management or with workers?
15. Do you think that there is variation in your work? If yes what is it?
16. How do you deal with irate customers? Or abusive customers?
17. Which health risks do you see for yourself in this job?
18. How often in your job do you have to display unpleasant emotions towards customers?
19. How often in your job is it of importance to know how the customer is feeling at moment?
20. Do you take pride and satisfaction in your work?

21. How often in your job do you have to suppress emotions in order to appear 'neutral on the outside?
22. What would you say are the most stressful aspects of the call-centre job?
23. What would you say are the aspects of the job that contribute to job satisfaction?
24. What makes you proud about this job? Or not dissatisfied about this job?
25. What do you like about this job? Or do not like about this job?
26. Do you control time for breaks or is it management dictating that for you?
27. How long are you supposed to be in a break?
28. Do you require any pre-planning for work? If yes what kind of planning?
29. How many workers take sick leave per term?
30. When you are at work do you feel as if you part of the team? If No why not?
31. Would you say that there is a career structure in your job?
32. What do you think are the benefits of being a call-centre worker?
33. What are the costs of working in a call-centre for the workers in your own point of view?
34. What are the benefits of having call-centres in your department?
35. How many of you consumers are willing to use the call-centre to enquire about service?
36. How would you describe the relationship between management and call-centre workers?
37. As a worker do you see any need to join the trade union? If yes/no why?

