# Working the Phones

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## Control and Resistance in Call Centres

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# CONTENTS

# 1

# INTRODUCTION

*The Call Centre* is a television series which highlights a number of key themes that will be discussed in this book.[1] The publicity for *The Call Centre* describes it as a 'fly-on-the wall documentary series following the ups and downs of Swansea call centre CEO Nev Wilshire and his staff of extraordinary characters'. The first episode introduces the call centre with the narrator describing how 'over 1 million people now work in UK call centres with an average age of just 26. They are the factories of our time. But here at the 3rd largest call centre in Swansea the only thing being made are the cold calls we dread'. The camera pans over a familiar scene: row upon row of desks with workers speaking through headsets, supervisors at the end of each row, and whiteboards scrawled with targets. In contrast, Martin Scorsese's film *The Wolf of Wall Street*[2] might not at first glance seem to have as much to say about call centres. However, the protagonist Jordan Belfort starts working on the phones, sells penny stocks from a call centre, and his own company even starts with telesales. In particular the film highlights the sales ethos that permeates high-volume sales call centres. The documentary and the film are, of course, clearly designed for entertainment, rather than being a critical inquiry into the conditions of work. However, they illustrate a number of issues that offer insight into the experience of work and tie into the construction of negative views of call centres.

The CEO of the company, Nev Wilshire, is introduced in the first episode of *The Call Centre*. The narrator explains how Nev 'has developed a unique approach to keeping his young workforce on their toes'. The camera cuts to Nev: a man in his fifties with receding hair, wearing a suit with a loosened tie. He says: 'What sums up my management style? Hmm . . .'. The camera cuts to a

shot of Nev standing on a table shouting at a worker, then to Nev leading a training session. Nev shouts: 'Are you yawning at the back? Get down!'. He then proceeds to throw a board marker at the worker in question, which hits the wall above them. The camera cuts back to Nev describing his management style, concluding that his inspiration is 'probably Napoleon . . . a dictator', followed by a shot of Nev summarily sacking a worker. Nev returns to his analogy to explain that 'his troops loved him', while the camera moves to a shot of a worker saying 'he's awful, absolutely awful', and another of a worker pretending to hang herself with the cord from a headset.[3] This kind of management approach is often seen in representations of call centres in popular culture. For example, in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, when Belfort starts working on the phones, his first interaction begins with a manager telling him, 'You are lower than pond scum. You got a problem with that?' Jordan is taken over to the rows of phones as the manager explains, 'Your job is connector which means that you will be dialling the phone over five hundred times a day, trying to connect me with wealthy business owners and until you pass your series seven, that is all you're going to fucking be doing. Sit! Sit!'.[4]

The 'frontier of control' in the call centre seems firmly in the hands of management.[5] There is, unsurprisingly, no mention of trade unions or organised struggle in the call centre. Nev's self-confessed management style not only alludes to factory despotism, but even involves an approving reference to an actual historical despot. This pop-cultural glimpse into the experience of the call centre floor provides a dim view of the potential for class struggle, offering only an opportunity for amusement. The narrator summarises this at one point as the camera pans across the office: 'With a sales floor simmering with stress, sex, and success . . . there's never a dull day when you work at this Swansea call centre.' The camera moves back to show a bland industrial park, nondescript buildings with rows of parked cars. As the shot continues back to include roundabouts and grass verges, it is easy to think that this could be anywhere in the country.

The emotional dimension of working in a call centre is on display during a scene in which Nev meets a new batch of trainees. Nev,

speaking to a room of new workers, explains that 'happy people sell, miserable bastards don't. Isn't that right?! Happy people sing don't they?! It lifts your spirits. You don't sing sat on your arse, you sing standing up to project your voice'. The projector lights up with a karaoke style display and Nev signals to start: 'Ok – Mr Brightside, the Killers, C sharp! Here we go – on your feet!'. The trainees look embarrassed – both in front of the camera and at the prospect of singing – while Nev pushes on: 'Now we go for this – no messing!'. And in a mixture of different tones, abilities and levels of commitment, the music starts playing and the whole room begin to sing:

> I'm coming out of my cage / And I've been doing just fine / Gotta gotta be down / Because I want it all / It started out with a kiss / How did it all end up like this? / It was only a kiss / It was only a kiss . . .[6]

This is the first indication of the specific challenges of the indeterminacy of labour power (the difficulty faced when buying workers' time: although a capitalist may have purchased a worker's labour power by employing them, gaining the maximum benefit from this is not straightforward) in relation to the labour process in the call centre. The embarrassed workers are being forced to sing karaoke because, as Nev puts it, 'it is a challenge to motivate seven hundred people'. Again Nev's despotic management style is illustrated as he claims: 'I would sack somebody for not singing – I have sacked somebody – two people – for not singing. We have a motto here: happy people sell.' Similarly, Belfort's first taste of Wall Street involves the motivational exhortation: 'Smile and dial. And don't pick up your fucking head until 1:00.'

Emotions are used to make money in sales call centres. The hard-sell approach is enthusiastically taken up in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Belfort loses his job on Wall Street and starts at the 'Investors' Center', a small call centre located in an office along a suburban row of shops. The products on offer are penny stocks from companies that lack the capital to be listed on the stock market. Jordan discovers that they can be bought for six cents a share and asks, 'Who buys this crap?' The supervisor answers,

laughing, 'Honestly, mostly shmucks. Postmen, there's always postmen. Plumbers, um, they see our ads in the back of *Hustler*, *Popular Mechanics*, and our ads actually say they can get rich quick'. On discovering that the commission is 50 per cent, as opposed to the 1 per cent that he was making on Wall Street, Belfort decides to go for the hard sell:

> Hello John, how are you doing today? You mailed in my company a postcard a few weeks back requesting information on penny stocks that had huge upside potential with very little downside risk, does that ring a bell? Ok great. The reason for the call today John is, something just came across my desk John, it is perhaps the best thing I have seen in the last six months, if you have sixty seconds I'd like to share the idea with you, you got a minute? The name of the company is Aerotyne International, it is a cutting edge, high-tech firm out of the mid-west awaiting imminent patent approval on the next generation of radar detectors that have huge military and civilian applications. Now, right now John, the stock trades over the counter at ten cents a share, and by the way John our analysts estimate it could go a heck of a lot higher than that. Your profit on a mere six thousand dollar investment would be upwards of six thousand dollars . . . exactly, you could pay off your mortgage . . . John, one thing I can promise you, even in this market, is that I never ask my clients to judge me on my winners, I ask them to judge me on my losers, because I have so few. And in the case of Aerotyne, based on every technical factor out there, John, we are looking at a grand slam home run . . . Four thousand? That would be forty thousand shares, John. Let me lock in that trade right now and get back to you with my secretary with an exact confirmation, sound good, John? Great, hey, John, thank you for your vote of confidence and welcome to the Investors' Center. Bye-bye.[7]

Belfort wows the other workers by making this sale seemingly through the force of his own personality. All the aspects recommended by trainers at call centres are present: emphasis of key words, use of the customer's first name, questions to keep

them engaged, gesticulating to improve delivery, persistence on closing the sale and instrumental use of emotions. Later in the film Belfort explains to workers before a shift:

> So you listen to me and you listen well. Are you behind on your credit card bills? Good, pick up the phone and start dialling! Is your landlord ready to evict you? Good! Pick up the phone and start dialling! Does your girlfriend think you're a fucking worthless loser? Good! Pick up the phone and start dialling! I want you to deal with your problems by becoming rich![8]

This highlights the individualist subjectivity of sales, the responsibility of the worker to close the sale, and in doing so get rich and solve their own problems.

*The Call Centre* also focuses on a high volume sales operation. The narrator explains how 'Nev's sales team makes roughly one and half million unsolicited calls a year, with each agent making up to two hundred calls per day'. The camera focuses on one particular example, a phone call that will be familiar to many: 'Just a quick call, it's in regards to a refund you may be entitled to now for payment protection insurance . . .' As the narration continues to explain against a backdrop of unsuccessful calls, 'the most effective way to guard against the barrage of cold calls that many of us hate is to register with the telephone preference service'. However, Nev has a different view on this: 'Well, anyone has got the right to register with telephone preference services. And we would totally respect, but, er, why would they?' He continues, pointing out that 'they'd miss out on our wonderful range of money saving opportunities and products that can enhance their living and they'd miss out on speaking to chicken head'.[9] The worker in question – given the nickname 'chicken head' by Nev – explains his experience of rejection on the phone: 'I think it's quite funny when they hang up. I had an old lady once saying that [she] hope[s] I die and [she] hope[s] I get killed and that.' But despite the amusement of this worker, or Nev's insistence on the wonderful service the call centre offers, the regulators took a different view. After the programme was aired, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) fined the company £225,000 for more than 2,700 different complaints

they had received. The director of the ICO pointed out that 'while the activities of Nev and his call centre employees have provided entertainment for many, they hide a bigger problem within the cold calling industry'.[10]

These examples illustrate a number of points: first, that the action of the worker – rather than the customer – is decisive in making a sale; second, that the drive for profit in some call centre operations breaches norms about social behaviour – and sometimes even the law; and third, that sales calls penetrate into the daily lives of many people. This is a theme that we will return to a number of times, a negative experience of a labour process – both for the worker and the customer – that does not provide a social benefit, and therefore complicates the struggle for control at work.

The other side of the over-observed call-centre worker is the customer who is calling or being called. Mark Fisher argues that 'the closest that most of us come to a direct experience of the centrelessness of capitalism is an encounter with the call centre'.[11] The gaze of managers, corporations and the state is one-way. Trying to find out information or resolve a problem requires plummeting into

> the crazed Kafkaesque labyrinth of call centres, a world without memory, where cause and effect connect together in mysterious, unfathomable ways, where it is a miracle that anything happens, and you lose hope of ever passing back over to the other side, where things seem to function smoothly . . . the repeating of the same dreary details many times to poorly trained and badly informed operatives, the building rage that must remain impotent because it can have no legitimate object, since – as is very quickly clear to the caller – there is no-one who knows, and no-one who could do anything even if they could.[12]

Fisher draws on Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* which details K's struggle to gain access to the bureaucratic authorities. In one passage Kafka describes K's encounter with the telephone system in the castle:

> There is no specific telephone connection with the castle, no exchange that puts our calls through; when you call someone in the castle from here, it rings on all the telephones in the lowest departments there, or rather it would ring on all of them were it not for the fact, which I know for certain, that on nearly all of them the bell is switched off. Every so often, though, an overtired official feels the need for a little distraction – particularly in the evening or at night – switches the bell on, then we get an answer, except it's just a joke. And that's very understandable, after all. Who has any right to ring in about his private little troubles in the middle of the most important jobs, which are invariably being done in a tearing hurry.[13]

These prophetic lines seem to capture the experience of dealing with a modern call centre. The confusing and often frustrating experience is one more akin to engaging with a 'decentralized, market Stalinist bureaucracy' than 'a central authority'. The term 'Kafkaesque', often used to characterise totalitarianism, is resonant in this circumstance.[14]

At the call centre where I was an employee, the workers were able to understand this frustration in two ways. They felt the power of the management gaze constantly. The fear of a recorded conversation coming back to haunt a worker – or worse deny them of their monthly bonus – kept behaviour in check. The gaze was not fleeting as digital recording meant every encounter with a customer would be stored away, able to be recalled at a moment's notice. There was no way that all the calls could be listened into, but the presence of supervisors on the call-centre floor could be used to direct further attention onto particular recordings. In one instance I spoke with a group of workers about receiving unsolicited calls from call centres. All of us had been called from withheld numbers and told that we could be entitled to a Payment Protection Insurance refund. The conversation involved angry responses from workers about the intrusion of these phone calls: 'How did they get my number?', 'Why do they always ring at the worst time?', 'I always ask for my number to be taken off, but I still get called!'. The anger that the person feels 'can only be a matter of venting', as Fisher argues, 'it is aggression in a vacuum, directed at

someone who is a fellow victim of the system but with whom there is no possibility of communality'.[15] Even inside the call centre, moments before starting a shift of calling people who mostly do not want to be bothered, it is difficult to feel sympathy or identification with the disembodied voice on the other end of the phone.

It is this context that makes call-centre work particularly worthy of investigation. It is held in low regard by many, both as a job and as a phenomenon encountered from the outside. As a form of employment it is gendered and considered unskilled, with poor conditions and low pay, while lacking formal union organisation.[16] This helps to explain the widespread rejection of work in call centres, something well understood by managers when trying to motivate workers before each shift. There is also the pressure of having to perform emotional labour to meet targets, while additionally being expected to genuinely enjoy the experience. The issue of performance is difficult for management as it is not clear how to identify the elusive qualities that make a successful sales call. At one point in *The Call Centre* a young Welsh woman explains that she has 'to put a phone voice on the way I speak', and dropping her Welsh accent she enunciates in a blander tone: 'Phone, Don't, Calling . . . so I change my voice completely when I go on the phones.' Yet, as the narrator points out, 'Sometimes even a posh voice isn't enough to bag a sale', and the woman is shown getting cut off on the phone a number of times.[17]

We see the workers finish the song during the training session: 'Open up my eager eyes/'cause I'm Mr Brightside.' A satisfied Nev justifies this approach by explaining that 'there are a lot of unhappy people and it's my duty to get their heads up – to get them a bit enthusiastic – to get things back in perspective'. Yet, as the narrator explains, his 'passion for keeping his workforce happy doesn't stop at their professional life, it extends into their private life too'. In an astonishing scene – and it is important to note that some of this might be a performance for the camera – Nev approaches a downtrodden looking worker. He explains to her that: 'Bottom line, you've been a miserable bastard for the past couple of days.' Her relationship has recently ended and she explains that she was cheated on and that her attitude at work is 'not my fault, but

yes'. Nev explains to her how she's 'going to get your happy head on. You're going to accept the boot up the arse that I'm going to give you'. He proceeds to take her around the office, telling her: 'shoulders back, tuck your arse in, let's go!' As they walk through the office Nev shouts, 'Any single blokes here? I've got a desperate female . . . Any single blokes need a hug . . . want a date?' Yet the woman seems unable to protest, simply saying, 'I can't believe you're doing this'. The management of workers in this call centre extends from the labour process into their lives; not only in the call centre but also outside of work, as, bizarrely, Nev arranges a speed dating evening for his workers too.

The wage paid to a worker denies them the full and independent use of all their emotions and affective abilities during working hours. The notion of traditional labour is therefore extended, with the new demand to align affects with profit. As *The Wolf of Wall Street*'s Jordan Belfort reflects after his stint at the Investors' Center, 'I was selling garbage to garbage men and making money hand over fist'. Despite the low quality of the product, he uses his confidence and charisma to manipulate the emotions of potential buyers in particular ways to close the sales. Despite Belfort's overwhelming self-confidence, there is no single recipe for how workers can successfully perform these affective dimensions of the labour process. While the standardisation of scripting and the application of technology to the calling process follow in the footsteps of Taylorism, the affective dimension can create problems for management. Taylor and Bain identify the contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the labour process – in terms of the number of sales and the quality of the phone calls – that cannot be resolved, creating 'an assembly-line in the head' for the worker.[18]

The managerial problem of retention of call-centre workers is another important theme that we will return to throughout the book. Nev's company runs a recruitment drive with a local radio station to encourage interest. This leads to a unique process that sees Nev once again in his element. The camera cuts to a shot of Nev walking through the call centre with an applicant in tow. He barks out across the call-centre floor: 'Good looking Welsh girl coming through, can she have a job?' A number of workers

respond by shouting 'Yeah!', with one leering over and saying, 'There's a seat right here for her'. The parade continues with Nev asking her, 'Do you fancy this team?' Nev introduces her to a team leader. He asks 'How old are you?', she responds 'eighteen', 'What's your name?', 'Charlotte'. He shakes her hand and replies 'My name is Steve, nice to meet you. Don't worry about him [Nev], he's just trying to, er, assess your confidence levels by walking you up and down'. This overtly sexist behaviour is met with a splutter of nervous laughter. Nev interjects, '. . . and to see if any of the boys fancy you'. As if to signal the lack of options for a worker in this position, the team leader awkwardly asks, 'Where's HR [Human Resources]?'.

There is no mention of a trade union or any hint of collective organisation in *The Call Centre*. Instead, HR is identified as the force restraining the management style of Nev. In his words, 'The HR department, they don't sometimes despair of me, they totally despair of me. They're trying to do their job, trying to cover my arse [laughter], bless their hearts'. The camera moves back to Charlotte, the job applicant. Nev asks her, 'Fancy working here? Bunch of nutters, ain't they?'. Charlotte responds that she would 'fit in', and Nev offers her the job. In another gem of managerial knowledge, Nev explains, 'As easy as that, you know, they go through all this interview process, when all they've got to do is walk up and down the sales floor asking if she can have a job'.

The camera then focuses on an awkward moment between Nev and Charlotte. 'You OK?,' he asks, to which she responds, almost too quickly, 'Yeah, I'm fine'. In a moment reminiscent of *The Office*, Nev then tells her to leave, and starts loudly shouting 'Go on, get out!' The young woman looks caught in the headlights. 'This is torture,' she mutters. Following this, Charlotte talks to the camera: 'Oh, what a character [laughter], that's all I can say really. Such a character. Yeah, he's a great guy. Seems pretty cool . . . unless it carries on.' The camera lingers for a few seconds, although it feels a lot longer, before moving on to more scenes of Nev repeating his behaviour.

*The Call Centre* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* are clearly intended as entertainment. They construct a perspective on call-centre