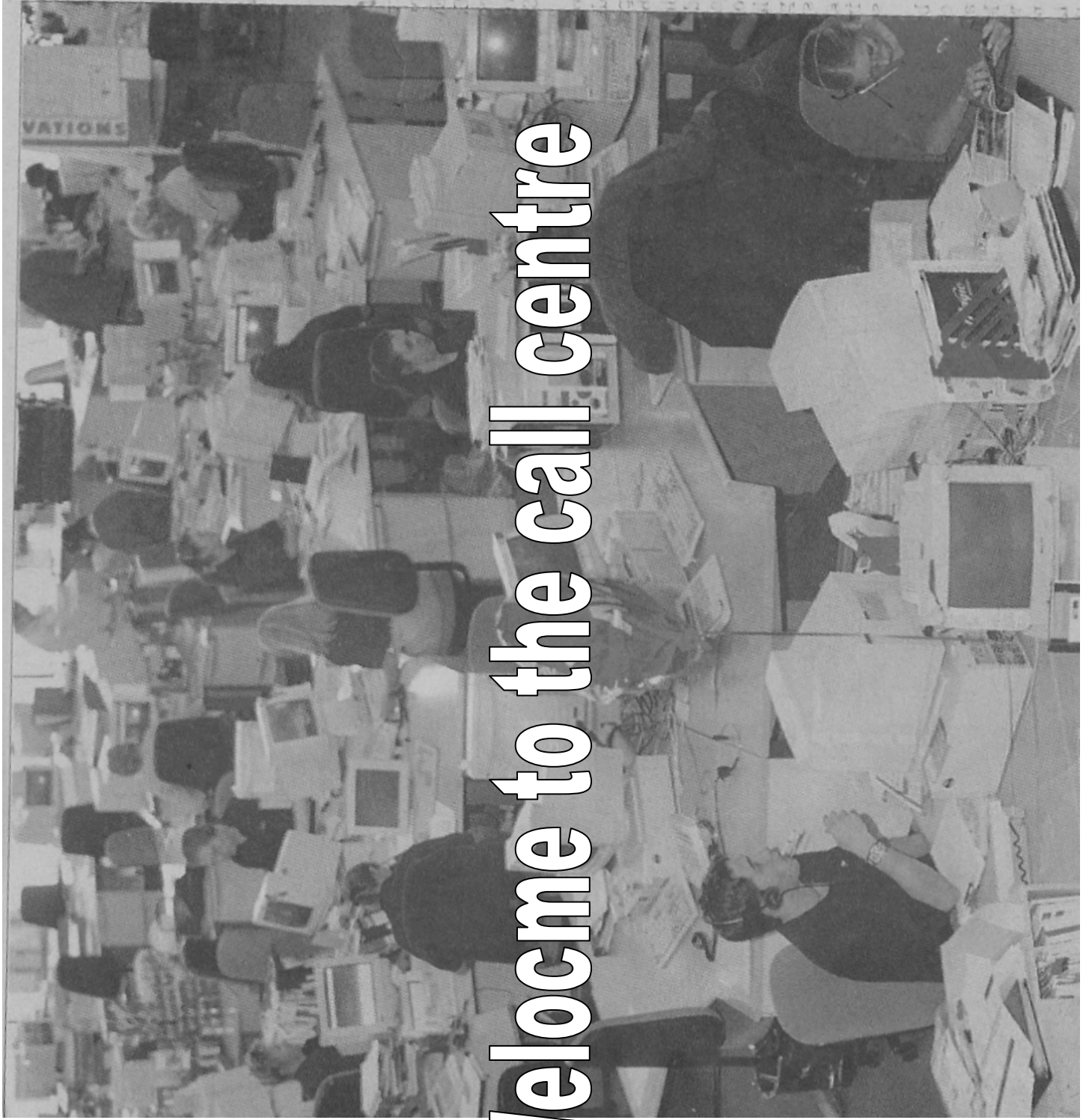


# Contemporary service sector work: Customers and call centres

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Welcome to the call centre

# Why call centres matter

- An increasing **share** of employment in many countries
- An increasingly common work experience for many more people (because of high turnover, no formal qualifications etc)
- Show some key features of contemporary service sector work generally

# Overview

- Customer facing work
- Call centres
  - » New forms of supervision
  - » New virtualisation of work
- Variety and commitment

# Customer facing work

- Three relationships:
  - » Management- Worker
    - Management supervises and controls workers
  - » Worker-Worker
    - Workers co-operate with each other (and sometimes co-operate in order to resist management)
  - » Worker-Customer
    - What the worker produces involves social interaction with the customer (e.g. waiter, hairdresser, teacher)
- Customer initiated
  - » The customer starts the interaction and can always go away again (or not return next time)
  - » 'Customer is always right'

# New management of the customer relationship

- Depersonalised (scripted) personal work
  - » ('Hello I'm Tracey')  
Workers interact with customers, but this is 'scripted' and planned in advance
  - » Customer 'people skills' replace product or process knowledge; these are much quicker to acquire and are not based on long experience
- Marketised work
  - » The individual employee is now brought to see the 'market value' of his/her work
  - » Individualisation – individual workers contribution can be identified through new forms of individual output measurement, usually built into the work process and involving ICTs and this is then linked to pay and evaluation
  - » The customer 'sees into' the organisation, workers can no longer hide behind impersonal rules, letters, buildings, organisations, so are pressurised to develop new commitment to their customers.

# The call centre: triple ring of supervision

- Taylorisation and technology
  - ACDS: Automatic Call Distribution System
    - » Any agent, any call
    - » Bureaucratic Deskilled
    - » Virtualised
- Emotional labour
  - » Smiling down the phone
  - » People skills
  - » Taylorised service work
- Surveillance through panoptic power:
  - » Visual: open plan workspace
  - » Aural – Listening in
  - » Physical – footprints
  - » So surveillance is in-built, not added on

# The call centre: Making work virtual

Traditional white collar work involved physical files

- Can only be in one place at one time
- Can only be examined by one person at a time
- File moves through work process in defined sequence
- Workers generate contextual knowledge of each specific case

Contemporary 'white collar' work involves databases

- Virtualised – workers don't necessarily know where database 'is' and its location is irrelevant
- Multiple access: several people can access the case at the same time
- De-sequenced: work does not necessarily follow defined order
- Searchable by anyone with permission and knowledge

So ICTs enable 'time/space compression'



# Quantity and Quality in virtual work

- Some virtual work is complex and personal work and so is difficult to automate, for example
  - » Holiday sales (Lankshear)
  - » Software help centre (Poli)
- Quantity-----Quality

We can place all call centre work on a continuum ranging from 'quantity' (where work is predictable and easily monitored) to 'quality' (where work is inherently unpredictable and more difficult to monitor) (Taylor & Bain)

From Quantity to Quality?

Most call centre work today is 'quantity' but arguably this work is easily automated (so the customer just interacts with the database directly, as in internet banking) or easily off-shored, since the operatives do not need any detailed contextual knowledge of the customer. Call centre work may therefore increasingly be only 'quality' work.

# Commitment and new service work

- Rosenthal (supermarket study):
  - » Not all employees accept management 'meaning' – they resist, are cynical or withdraw
  - » However most employees do **share** management meaning – for them compliance is voluntary and not experienced as manipulation or constraint
  - » New control **on management**: precisely because (most) workers share management's meaning, this gives workers a new control over managers who now have to live up to the standards that they have set for everyone
- New careers
  - » New routes for committed individuals into management, less restricted by gender, ethnicity and occupational skills