

Working at call centres:

Of lies and deceptions

Although working at call centres is a very attractive option for first-time job seekers from poor families, exploitation is also rife, writes **Zimkhita Mbhele**. She explains the precarious conditions of call centre workers from her working experience.

To young South Africans interested in getting a job after a week's training, call centres are the place to be. Highly recognised for creating jobs in our society, and a training ground for those interested in becoming call centre workers, this career path is seen as a cheaper option for those who cannot afford to continue with their studies after completing high school or matric. The recruiting agents for the call centres raise expectations by promising more than what the students ever imagined – the elusive first job.

GOINGS-ON WITH AGENTS

You read an advert saying '10 call centre workers are needed with or without experience'. Since South Africa has a high rate of unemployment, a lot of desperate young and old unemployed people, respond to the advert by calling the advertiser. To them this is an opportunity to financially help their families. But to their disappointment, the job seekers are told that they must be trained first before they can start work.

The training is not free and the agents for the call centres will charge different fees for the courses. The lowest fee is around R1,500. A job hunter has no money to throw

around the agents but is forced to pay because she is tired of being part of the furniture at home. Some even go to the loan shark for the money.

When you start and finish the course you are clueless on what you are learning. Although you grasp only the basics, they tell you that you are ready for a job placement. By then, you have no experience in handling calls and dealing with clients, using a computer. So you are surprised when the certificate is printed detailing that you learned call handling in-bound and out-bound, computer literacy, Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint and data capturing. Yet you have never used a computer in your life!

If you ask questions, the agent tells you that what you are curious about is not important. You are reminded that your priority is on getting a job with a basic salary of R3,000 plus commission. Yes, this is true, for most of us desperate souls all we want is a job. So we are excited and can't wait to go home and break the good news. At home everybody is delighted by what the agent says, as it makes a lot of sense.

However, a big surprise awaits you when you get a job placement. The agent advises you not to start work before signing a contract, as you must know where you stand first with

your employer before starting on the job.

The employer brings you down to earth: there is no basic salary, you only get a commission. On top of that you are told that there is no contract before making sales and you have to prove that you can sell by reaching set targets. It is at that point that you will realise that you have just been fooled by the agent who played around with your desperation for a job.

Nevertheless, that does not demotivate you. Instead you want to give it a try. No one you know has died from trying. Isn't life all about trying? So you comfort yourself. This is also an opportunity to get that experience as employers are not interested in workers who are fresh from school.

You also motivate yourself: 'I can do this. I just need to be focused and put my mind and soul together. After all it's not that difficult to get two clients per day.'

On looking for clients, I discover how things have changed in South Africa. Everybody now has a mobile phone and some people spend most of their time in holiday resorts. Gone are the days when black people never went on holiday. When you start thinking of your target market you realise how the world has changed.

THE WORKPLACE

You are excited when you start work hoping to make many sales per day and telling yourself that you will beat the target. You make your first calls with this excitement and that is when you discover the different attitudes the customers have towards you. Some respect you while others do not want to talk to you the moment they hear that you are selling a product. 'Don't waste my time and yours' is the message you get. But you are not discouraged. You want to reach your daily target.

As you reach your weekly target of 10 customers you smile as you see your name going up the notice board. It means you have earned R1,000 as you get R100 per customer. You are further motivated to get more customers as it means more money. You make more calls and sell more products.

Month-end comes and your team leader calls for a meeting. You are smiling as you have made 45 sales. But the team leader tells you otherwise; you made only 18 sales. When you ask what happened to the 27 sales you are told you miscounted. A fellow worker advises you to check back with customers. When you call back, all the 45 customers confirm receipt of the product and tell you they are satisfied with it. You then inform the team leader about the customer responses. He then tells you that you have just broken company policy by confirming with the customers. In fact you could be fired and you receive a verbal warning never to do it again.

You sit down and add one and one together and you realise that your sales have just been stolen, right in front of your eyes and there is nothing you can do about it. Yet you still want the experience so you trek on. So for the love of experience you are being exploited hoping that probably in the future you will land a decent job that will give you a salary. You are at the call centre to get experience even if you use your own money for transport to get there. It is time to comfort yourself yet again as in life sometimes you have to start from somewhere; even below the ladder and go up step by step. Maybe it is also one of the ways to learn how to deal with problems you will face later in your work life.

CONCLUSION

Although the working conditions are bad and come as a shock to young workers, I still have huge expectations for my working day as I wake up every morning. But I have also learnt that sometimes what you expect is not what happens. In that case it means I have had to deal with disappointments as well. The realities at the call centres sometimes dampen the spirit of young workers who end up going to work not because they like the job but simply because the economic environment gives them no choice. **LB**

Zimkbita Mbhele works at a call centre in Johannesburg.

Local government call centres:

People first or managing illusions?

Who benefits from the services of the local government call centres? Is it the citizen/customer or municipal managers who want a public relations outfit to give a brave face to their bungling? There are no easy answers to these questions as there are many factors at play, writes **Babalwa Magoqwana**.

When South Africa shifted from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (Gear) from 1996 onwards, it adopted a market-oriented and lean state development agenda. This meant importing private sector business techniques supposedly to make the public sector efficient.

Influenced by the new public management (NPM) reforms, the South African government adopted a white paper in 1997 to restructure the public service. The white paper introduced a