

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.

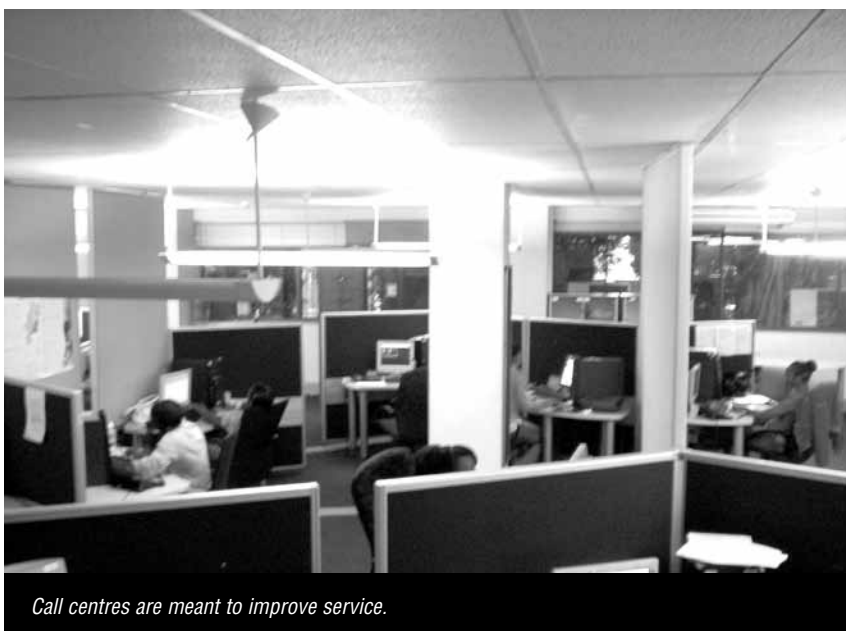
Local government call centres:

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



Call centres are meant to improve service.

Batho Pele (people first) policy in which the government shifted its service delivery thinking in public administration to give more priority to citizens.

NPM reforms that have been adopted are characterised by a shift in emphasis from policy-making to management skills. This shift from public administration to public management has meant the introduction of private sector business principles, such as competition in the public services.

Though deemed as an illusion, the citizen was now a 'sovereign customer' entitled to 'consultation on service standards, courtesy, value for money and access to information'. These reforms meant restructuring of government departments into 'agencies' which operated like private companies. For example, the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality has 15 private companies that include Johannesburg Water, City Power, Pikitup, Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department, Johannesburg Zoo, City Parks, and so forth. These semi-autonomous agencies provide basic services to the customer/citizen and came out of a highly criticised neo-liberal strategy called Igoli 2002, which sort to 'rescue' the

Metro from its financial crisis in the mid-1990s.

Performance management systems and auditing culture became a must for municipalities so as to improve organisational and individual performance to enhance service delivery. However, NPM reforms have been criticised for 'customising the citizen' who struggles to get basic services.

Neo-liberal 'sovereignty' is enjoyed only by customers with money. This is why Philip Wenzel says 'there are simply too many poor and unemployed households with too limited purchasing power to make markets work for them'. Therefore the citizens are segregated between those with money and those without.

Furthermore, NPM reforms are motivated by the neo-liberal agenda to cut government spending without taking into account the citizen who is caught up in the illusion of being a customer. These reforms have introduced the customer-centred workplaces within the public sector, namely call centres where the customer complains through a call centre number that will log in the query and also give feedback on unsatisfactory 'service'.

The call centres are designed to open up access to the geographically disadvantaged. Through working in the secured white-collar environment, call centres are generally perceived as a low status, standardised and routine job. Although call centres in the private sector have been criticised as the 'sweatshops of the digital era, white collar factories and assembly lines' this is not the same in the public sector where the centres are small and designed for customer satisfaction, rather than cost reduction.

The advantages of the call centres are that they reduce large volumes of enquiries so that front-line staff can concentrate on delivering services. They also reduce travelling costs for citizens and save time for customers as they do not have to queue or spend time in face-to-face interaction. It is also easy to monitor both quality and quantity of contact with service users and to better control the nature of the advice given to customers. Although call centres are characterised by precarious work conditions, South Africa's unemployment levels make it a 'privilege' to work at the call centre.

In Johannesburg where 57% of the call centres are concentrated they serve the banking and telecommunication industry. In the municipalities, call centres are more visible in the metropolitans such as City of Cape Town, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan, Johannesburg Metro, eThekweni, Ekurhuleni Metro, Buffalo City and Mangaung Metro.

JOBURG CONNECT

The Johannesburg City Call centre, Joburg Connect (Revenue Section), which was established in 2001, is the biggest local government call centre in the country. It operates every day around the clock including public holidays and weekends. Equipped with a headset and a computer in open plan blue cubicles the call centre has more

than 100 work stations. Call centre operators answer calls from the city's community enquiring about accounts, water and electricity, street lights, refuse collection, bus services, etc. Joburg Connect's main purpose is to bring services together so as to improve access for customers and to make telephone communication easier through customers dialling fewer numbers for assistance.

Call centre operators, mostly young black women, take up to 200 calls per agent per shift. Each call is about three minutes. The calls are queued by software called the Interactive Voice Response and transferred to the next available agent by yet another software called the Automatic Caller Distribution. This software can also serve as a monitoring tool for the managers, as it records the number of calls and time spent on each call.

In 2007, the call centre employed more than 100 workers, but by 2011 the figure had dropped to 70. Like most public call centres this centre started as a helpdesk with operators from each department. However, Joburg Connect operators do not deal with queries, but refer them to the relevant department or back office.

Call centre operators are employed on a standard municipal contract with no individual performance rewards. Recruited with a minimum of a matric certificate, good communication skills and customer orientation, some call centre operators have post-matric diplomas or certificates. Most receive two-week customer service training and are also expected to learn on the job.

However, under the Programme Phakama's 'one city, one number, one vision' which aims to integrate city's services under one roof, the revenue call centres are moving to the city centre. This means further training for operators so that they are able to deal with calls for different agencies.

COMMUNICATION DISCORD

Recently the call centre and the municipal council attracted media attention due to the billing woes that hit the Johannesburg Metro. Technological lapses under the Phakama Programme inflated water and electricity bills. As citizens/customers could not afford to pay the high bills, this led to service cut offs thus causing an outcry. To make matters worse the poor technological system did not connect the call centres to the back offices leading to a communication breakdown.

Suffering from the illusion of 'sovereignty' status the customer then intimidated and lashed out at the call centre operator who was also clueless about the billing situation. As call volumes increased operators, unable to deal with the anger and having 'run out of lies', resorted to absconding from work. This meant a shortage of staff and thus, 'the operators at work were outnumbered by those absent'. As a result more than 66,000 calls went unanswered between January and June 2011.

Poor communication became common as the communications department made public statements without informing the call centre. Hence the customer became the source of information for the call centre operators. 'You will hear something from the customer, and pretend that you knew about it, and when you run to the supervisor he knows nothing as well', said Kholiswa, an operator.

A call centre manager agreed. 'It is hard to conduct meetings with call centre operators because of the nature of the job, they have to take calls otherwise one will experience high call abandon rate' (the percentage of calls not answered by the operators, which measures the performance of the call centre). However, some managers who talked to the *Mail & Guardian* last year said there was no crisis: 'It is not really accurate to say we have

a billing crisis, but rather to say we have a customer-service challenge... If you say billing crisis, you get the impression we have cash-flow problems, and that was never so... until we re-establish our credibility with customers, that will remain a problem'.

According to Thobela, another manager, the software problems put the municipality in a mess. 'The whole municipality is in a mess, they ordered this software and the client designed exactly what they wanted but now, they discover that it does not have what they wanted... The billing is not the problem here... the whole customer value chain is the problem'.

In an attempt to connect the 'disconnecting', the operators avoided the calls or became 'creative' as they 'didn't know what to tell the customers anymore'. The billing crisis put the operators in a difficult position. 'I know that we are supposed to be the face of the municipality... for us to take the bullets, we need to be provided with information which is our bullet-proof vest so that we can do our job', said Ronda, another manager. The problems stem from the isolated nature of the call centre from the departments they serve, which can be resolved by housing the back office and the call centre under one roof.

EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

Joburg Metro puts city customers into three groups: citizens (non-billable customers), billable customers (paying for the services) and third parties (i.e. developers and conveyers). Serving mostly those who cannot 'afford' to queue (by phone or walk-in centres) the call centre is designed for customer convenience. Poor communication, including the technological system and leadership of the municipality, has led to doubts about the sovereignty of the customer within local government. 'Citizens are not customers... we provide the basic

services here... and sometimes the customer is just used as a pawn, we harass her and cut her off if she does not pay for water or electricity', added Thobela.

Batho Pele seems to raise customer expectations through a faceless service provided by call centre operators. While the customer is frustrated by the long queues to get through the call centre line, the operators are also stressed by their working environment. Not surprising that insults are traded. Operators are accused of lack of knowledge, which is a 'normal insult' from the customers and in return they call the customers 'uninformed'.

Operators also suffer from 'racialised' insults of incompetency and are often blamed for unmet expectations. 'Customers are always angry. They have told me that I am a bush monkey. Some even asked me if I know when the Dutch colonialist Jan Van Riebeeck arrived in South Africa', added Kholiswa.

Both operators and customers were frustrated. However, they dealt with their stress in different ways. For operators the most common strategy was to put the angry customer on hold or work-to-rule. Others resisted the insults simply by sharing what the customers were saying amongst themselves. This is what Merek Korczynski termed 'communities of coping'. Despite the resistance operators expressed the shame of being associated with the incompetent call centre system. As put by Karabelo, an operator: 'Even when I see a billboard advertising Joburg Connect's numbers I feel like hiding'.

Operators' low morale also came from lack of career development, which is a common feature of this kind of workplace. 'After two years you hit the ceiling and you want to leave', said a Amandla, a supervisor. Some explained the low morale and lack of career upward mobility as the lack of ambition. 'Some of the people in the call centre are over qualified... but some are suffering from an

entitlement attitude'. They feel they have worked for a long time and so they deserve to be promoted', said a former manager who added that new staff often performed better than experienced staff and this is why they got promoted faster.

Although stress led to ill-discipline of some operators this did not dampen their fighting spirit as discovered by a manager. 'When I tried to discipline the operators I was taken to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration by the union, it ended up being such an expensive exercise'.

When asked about their relationship with the unions, managers accused the latter of being part of the call centre problem. 'Labour intervention is ridiculous in local government. It's like unions are trained to fight against management all the time, but the unions are supposed to be my eye and shop stewards are supposed to be assisting me. I think unions don't understand their role. For example, when I hired temps last year they were so productive, and performed well because they understood the no-work-no-pay rule, and were paid according to their productivity', said Amandla.

South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) defended themselves saying that as the representatives of the workers the union is obliged to represent the needs of its members. They accused the poor training received by workers and software hiccups for the woes of the call centre. 'Those people have not been trained properly in this new system,' said a Samwu official, Denson.

This worsened a culture of work relations known for low morale and lack of trust as the operators felt 'not trusted' by the managers. This was not the only complaint by the managers, as they also blamed political interference and low levels of trust within the call centres. At the end of the day, poor communication and workplace

relations badly undermines the Batho Pele policy.

CONCLUSION

NPM reforms have forced restructuring of work practices in local government with new managerial practices, customer culture and elevated customer expectations. This created new public sector customer-centred workplaces similar to those of the private sector. However, call centres in local government are created for customer satisfaction and not for profit.

The chaos at the Johannesburg City call centre, which has been criticised by the media for its inefficiency and poor customer service, were caused by bad communication, slack technology and poor working conditions for operators. The motive for customer satisfaction has been questioned: 'is it simply a means to an end, not an end in itself'. Maybe customer satisfaction is also just a means to promote revenue collection and thus promote Gear's cost recovery rather than citizen/customer satisfaction within the South African municipal arena.

The myth of customer sovereignty continues to reign in the local government structures, who have 'defaced' their services through these call centres. The call centre operators on the other hand will continue to suffer a silent death as the media bash them for inefficiency without making efforts to understand how the call centres work. It is important to know that call centres, created under the banner of 'People First' and customer satisfaction are merely designed to 'manage the illusion' of customer sovereignty as they are poorly 'equipped' to put people first. ¹⁸

Babalwa Magoqwana is a PhD candidate at Rhodes University, this article is part of an on-going PhD research on local government call centre labour processes with a special focus on Joburg Connect.