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Arzbächer, Sandra; Holtgrewe, Ursula; Kerst, Christian

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Sandra Arzbächer, Ursula Holtgrewe, Christian Kerst

Call Centres: Constructing Flexibility

Sandra Arzbächer, Tel. ++49-(0)203-379-2266, arzbaecher@uni-duisburg.de

Dr. Ursula Holtgrewe, Tel. ++49-(0)203-379-3179, uholtgrewe@aol.com

Dr. Christian Kerst, Tel. ++49-(0)203-379-3399, kerst@uni-duisburg.de

Post adress: Gerhard-Mercator-Universität Duisburg
Fachbereich 1
Lotharstr. 65
D-47048 Duisburg

1. Introduction

The development of call centres as a flexible interface between firms and their environments has been seen as exemplary or even symptomatic of flexible capitalism (Sennett 1998). We are going to point out that they do not just stand for organisational change but also for changes of institutions towards deregulation. Employers and managers hoped for gains of flexibility, decreasing labour costs, and market gains by an expanded 24-hour-service. Surveillance and control by flexible technology would be based on clearly structured communication work. Low skill requirements would make an easy hiring and firing of employees possible. On the other side, unionists and workers representatives feared the loss of worker participation and co-determination (*Mitbestimmung)*, a decline of working conditions not protected by collective agreements, low payment standards without bonus payment for night work and weekends, and even breaches of health and safety regulations, e.g. for on-screen work.

In this paper, we argue that de-institutionalisation is only part of the story. A close examination of organisational and institutional change in the emerging organisational field of call centres reveals that initial moves of de-institutionalisation are followed and complemented by tendencies of re-institutionalisation. We are presenting preliminary results from the project „Call centres in between neo-taylorism and customer orientation"[1] which explores the establishment and development of call centres on the levels of institutions, organisations and work. As research methods we employ interviews with institutional and management experts and with call centre agents, six case studies of call centres in contrasting industries, and a survey of call centre workers' demography, careers and work experience. In this paper we present an initial institutional analysis and draw on case studies of two banking call centres, both of which belong to large banks in Germany. They handle telephone requests for their banks' branches, operate a support hotline for online banking, and offer direct

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[1] The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). It started at the University of Duisburg in April 2000 and runs until March 2002. Members of the project team are Hanns-Georg Brose, Ursula Holtgrewe, Sandra Arzbächer, Christian Kerst, and Julia Althoff.

brokerage services by phone. Bank 2 offers telephone banking as well. Both employ between 300 and 600 call centre agents.

At first, it is important to stress the strong dynamics of this field of economic activity. The dimension of time and timing is decisive for researching of call centres. Of course, it has frequently been said that call centres as such are no new phenomenon, because they have existed since the beginning of the nineteen-eighties at least. This view is true, but neglects that – in Germany – the diffusion of call centres beyond operator services, mail-ordering and direct marketing and the expansion of the call centre sector has taken place since the mid-1990s. The first direct bank (the former Bank 24) started operations in autumn 1995. The liberalisation of the telecommunication and energy markets, the strong growth of mobile telecommunication and the diffusion of internet access into private households - all occurred during the second half of the nineties. With this technological and institutional change new markets, new information needs and new types of customers (e.g. the customer for electricity) emerged. The falling prices for telecommunication services and the fast economic change stimulated each other and lead to the boom of telephone-based services.

Data on the number of call centres in Germany or employment are difficult to obtain. The problems of representing new sectors of the economy and of capturing inhouse-call centres are responsible for the insufficient data. For 1998, a total of 1,500 call centres in Germany has been reported[2], while in 2000 the number has increased to 2,450 (Datamonitor, quoted by Focus 51/2000). Also, estimates of call centre employment differ. They range between 100,000 and 225,000 jobs in German call centres in 2000. Because of the prevailing part-time employment in call centres this would mean a total of approximately 200,000 – 400,000 call centre employees. Because of the rapid growth of call centre businesses and employment, the lower figures may indeed be underestimated.

Internationalisation of call centre operation in Germany is limited because communication services are language based and customers appear to require native speakers on the phone.[3] Therefore, competition for call centre investments takes place within the national boundaries between German Regions (*Länder*). Nearly every region facing structural change and losses in industrial employment sees a chance to gain employment opportunities in the call centre boom.

Looking at the regional distribution, about 25% of the call centres in Germany are located in North Rhine-Westphalia (which indicates a slight overrepresentation in relation to the total population). Other strong locations are around Bremen and in the northern part of the former GDR[4]. The main reason for this regionalised pattern of locations is that call centres seek locations with two major properties: a large labour market with low labour costs, and vicinity to universities[5]. Bremen as well as the Ruhr area seem to meet both conditions excellently.

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[2] Most data in this paragraph come from a useful meta-study of call centres by the IAT, Gelsenkirchen (Bittner/Schietinger/Schroth/Weinkopf 2000).

[3] Exceptions can be found in Ireland where some German-speaking agents live (also in some hispanic tourist areas), and in the Netherlands close to the German border. In the latter case, German employees are mobile and commute to Dutch locations.

[4] Two main development paths can be distinguished: In the eastern regions (*neue Bundesländer*, former GDR) call centres include the more simple services (retail, simple information desk and marketing services). More complex and qualified services are located in the western part of Germany.

[5] Most nationwide operating call centres are located in the middle and the north of Germany. In the southern parts local dialects are seen as obstacles for the delivery of nationwide services.

Especially the very dense university landscape in the Ruhr area provides call centres with a large number of student part-time workers. In these cities, call centres are also seen as an important element of (and indicator for) structural change from an industrial towards an innovative service economy. Duisburg, Essen, Bochum and Dortmund as major cities in the Ruhr area all have many call centres. In Duisburg alone, 3.600 employees work in about 30 call centres. Comparably high numbers of employees can be found in Dortmund and Essen. Among these neighbouring cities, some specialisation has developed. Duisburg has a main focus on call centres in the financial industry, while Dortmund's focus lies on technical support services.

In this paper we shall:

- at first outline a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of institutional flexibility of organisations,

- secondly explore the double flexibility of call centres: both the organisations' flexibility related to market environments and their internal flexibilisation correspond with institutional flexibility. Since call centres frequently are young, recently established firms, they present themselves as innovative and are perceived in this way. Both as external and internal attributions, norms and expectations of innovativity enable them to position themselves in and act strategically upon their newly emerging institutional environments.

- Thirdly, we shall demonstrate the shaping of institutional flexibility empirically through three exemplary subjects: industrial relations in and around call centres, the management of internal flexibility through personnel policies, and call centres in their regional context.

2. Theoretical framework: Organisational fields and strategies

The theoretical perspective on call centres in this paper uses concepts of neo-institutional organisation theory (cf. Meyer/Rowan 1977; Powell/DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995) to explore the integration and (re)constitutive role of call centres in the larger context of an organisational field under construction.

From an organisational perspective, the establishment of call centres or use of call centre services answers to organisations' need to balance flexibility and stability which is inherently dilemmatic for any organisation. Call centres promise both increased openness to customers' needs and protection of the organisations' core practices and routines. While they thus produce flexibility for their internal or external customers, they are embedded with institutional arrangements and contexts which they in turn seek to change.

Referring to the concept of organisational fields raises the question, whether call centres as a new type of service organisation are located in existing organisational fields or establishing a new organisational field (DiMaggio/Powell 1991)[6]. Neo-institutionalism argues that new organisational forms are established not only due to their superior rationality or technologically excellent efficiency. Without positioning themselves in an institutionalised

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[6] "By organizational field we mean those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar products or services" (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 64f). The structuring and empirical existence of a field is plausible, if there are intensive interactions between the field organisations, "interorganizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition" emerge, organisations face an field specific information density, and a mutual recognition exist of being involved in an common doing (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 65).

organisational field and answering to its perceptions and expectations, they are not viable. The attribution of an organisation to a specific field by the organisation itself and by relevant other organisations and actors provides the organisation not only with the necessary legitimacy, but also gives certainty in mutual expectations and works as a source of meaning. Such institutionalised expectations are grounded on cognitive, normative and regulative pillars (Scott 1995). Of course, this should not be misunderstood as a model of pure adaption to existing institutions. Organisations enact their environment and strategically act upon it, contributing to the creation and change of institutional environments. Organisational change and institutional change are thus interdependent. Also, organisational change for relevant others means a change in their environment, e.g. for unions, politics or education organisations. Hence, institutional flexibilisation is to be seen as a doubled-sided construct, in which organisational and institutional enactment of relevant environments, attempts at strategic action and negotiation of expectations interrelate[7].

Oliver (1991) especially draws attention to the point that organisations are not pure victims of institutional pressure. Instead, she suggests a continuum of organisations' strategic responses to institutional pressure which ranges from passive acquiescence over compromise, strategies of avoidance, escape, and defiance to very active strategies of manipulation, influence or control of institutions[8]. Young organisations in an emerging organisational field have chances to gain access to a broader range of these strategic options[9]. During the constitution of a new organisational field then processes of (re)institutionalisation occur and narrow the available range of strategic options.

3. Flexible positioning in institutionalised organisational fields

In many cases, call centres have been founded as new firms or as result of an outsourcing decision. The emergence of an original and relatively clearly defined population of call centres can be described as a form of vertical desintegration of business organisation structures. Even if call centre operations remain part of a larger business group instead of being outsourced, as often in the telecommunications and financial sectors, organisational boundaries in the context of an organisational network multiply due to this differentiation.

The choice of distinct institutional arrangements of intra- and interorganisational relations may be explained by transaction cost theory. Following transaction cost logic, call centres that work with sensitive data and require broad, maybe strategically important knowledge, will tend to remain part of the firm or the business group (Nippa 1999). Therefore, for call centre

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[7] In so far, it would be misleading to refer only to the tendencies of organisational fields towards isomorphy. Institutional theory enables us to acknowledge that organisational decisions and institutional constraints are looesely coupled. Understood in such a structurationist sense, institutional theory offers far more than a simple theory of diffusion and adaptation. It has its strength in covering the whole range of evolutionary processes which may lead to innovative social practices as well as the reproduction of well established routines and institutional structures.

[8] For her argument she draws on both resource dependency and neoinstitutional theory. Therefore, she avoids to underestimate power in interorganisational relations. But the excercise of power is contingent on the institutionalised acknowledgement of a certain position within an organisational field. That is the advantage of her proposal: It mirrors the double face of institutions to be both resources and restrictions.

[9] This is not necessarily an advantage because uncertainty is generally higher. Stable institutionalised expectations (rational myths, Meyer/Rowan 1977) relieve organisations from the search for case-to-case solutions.

overflow and for information gathering operations which are more removed from an organisation's core competencies and knowledge bases, external call centre service providers will be used. Also, the question of coverage by collective agreements (as a sonsequence of an outsourcing decision) may have noticeable effects on transaction costs. But the trade-off between lowering cost by getting rid of collective agreements and the loss of trust and legitimacy may be anything else than clearly evaluable[10].

It is typical for the early developmental stage of a new service that more options for institutional choice between market, hierachy and network appear to be realistic. Obviously superior solutions[11] have not yet emerged. As a consequence, initial choices have frequently been modified or even reversed. For example, some companies have already begun to re-integrate formerly outsourced call centre services. Thus, there is no unilinear tendency from hierarchy to market. Moreover, institutionalists argue that institutional choices as well as institutional and organisational change are not determined by crude transaction cost economics, but strongly influenced by the logic of appropriateness (March/Olsen 1989) and the maintenance of social legitimacy.

The question of the emergence of an institutional field is mirrored by the debate whether call centres constitute an new industry branch. Parts of the call centre population understand themselves as a branch, namely the call centre service companies. Other call centres count themselves as parts of existing branches (e.g. retail, financial service, telecommunication, tourism). However, outside observers have tended to view call centres as a more or less undifferentiated type of organisation. Because of this divergence of internal and external observation the semantic of an industry branch or an industrial sector became, at least temporarily, dominant. For this semantic, call centres as a collective, a new type of service organisation have become compatible to and addressible by (*anschlussfähig*) the routines of training institutions, agencies for business promotion, employment agencies or governmental policies. In turn, this institutional perspective on call centres opened up new options for them. The acceptance of a unifying perspective enabled them successfully to claim public and political support. And this again put the question of the newly constructed industry's image and reputation on the agenda. Therefore, it is legitimate to talk about the organisational field of call centres, even if the connotation of a classical industry branch is not quite justified[12]. An open question then is whether this field is stabilizing in the long term or will be disappearing again.

Flexibility and flexibilisation in and of the organisational field thus works on distinct levels or arenas.

(1) Flexibility against market environments means increased permeability of organisational boundaries. Viewed from the point of the customer, call centres multiply the possibilities to

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[10] For an overview of criticism of transaction cost economics see Ortmann/Sydow/Türk (1997: 25ff). Especially, in front line service work it may be very difficult to distinguish between production (service) cost and transaction (information) cost.

[11] Or, more exactly: Solutions that have been evaluated as superior by a majority.

[12] This does not mean that organisational field and industry branch are the same concept. The field approach is broader because it emcompasses numerous organisations that are not covered by the branch concept. But in many cases a classical branch (that can maybe be found in statistical classification systems) is a kind of field core. In the case of call centres this core is less stabile and institutionalised. It has weaker boundaries. These are typical properties of newly emerging fields that can take different development paths, either to hard institutionalisation or change or disappearance.

contact the firm. In the temporal dimension, service time is extended and reaction to communicative demands sped up. Materially services are becoming more differentiated, socially more communication channels and media are accepted and communication is informalised. The organisation presents its flexible side to the environment. From the perspective of the organisation, new marketing strategies and possibilities emerge (value-added services, direct marketing, cross-selling, data mining, telephone-internet-combinations), that are to allow more flexible reactions on perceived customer demands.

(2) Internally, organisations are faced with the task of managing flexibility. Apart from flexible information and communication technology, routines of recruitment, training and coaching are developed which balance expected flexible work and control needs. The possibilities of the emerging call centre specific labour market have to be made compatible to organisational needs. High employee turnover rates ("churn rates") can in the long run turn out to be a major organisational problem or a major mechanism of maintaining flexibility.

(3) Call centres show flexibility with respect to institutions (e.g. industrial relations and system of collective agreements, specific labour markets, education and vocational training). Of course, call centres do not act in an totally uninstitutionalised field. Law, formal education and technological standardisation absorb uncertainty and transform it into certainty of expectations. However, call centres are less exposed to strong, formalised expectations than organisations in old and well established fields. Call centres can develop alternative behavioral strategies against institutional pressure and indeed, they have been established to widen the range of strategical options (cf. Oliver 1991). The positioning of call centres in the industrial relations system can be described as escape and defiance. Here, outsourcing has widely been used to escape from existing collective agreements and challenge them. With respect to other environmental segments the strategic response has been based on avoidance. For example, call centres have widely dismissed the institutions of vocational training and occupations within the German dual system.

Nevertheless, processes of re-institutionalisation occur through the circulation of information. Call centre fairs and journals structure and organise the communication within the organisational field. Call centre associations emerge. Recruitment shows clear isomorphic tendencies towards a mix of university students and working mothers. Also, recruitment instruments like assessment centres are spread via journal articles and the evolving consulting scene. Another example of institutionalisation is pricing, where rules of appropriateness develop. Buyers of call centre services learn to assess standards for a fair relationship of prices, performance and quality. The effect is a narrowing of the competition because the initial robber-barons using untrustworthy calculations, free-lance labour and occasional cheating on agreements are exiting from the market.

These examples show: Institutional flexibility is not unbounded, and the levels of flexibility are interdependent. While organisations and institutions move through stages of de- and re-institutionalisation, windows of opportunity open up which enable processes of both social opening and social closure. Our argument is that the call centre sector in Germany after a period of social opening is gradually shifting to social closure and institutional consolidation. We will illustrate that in more detail for different areas of institutional life: industrial relations, managing internal flexibility, call centres in regional contexts

4. Regulating flexibility: Industrial Relations

Industrial relations in Germany are, similar to other Northern European countries, characterised by the vertical system of trade/industrial unions who find their counterparts in corresponding industrial employers'associations (cf. Weiss 1992). The representatives of both sides also join umbrella organisations.

The system of industrial relations works on two levels, the collective level and the plant level. The legal base of the collective level are different laws within labour legislation. Most relevant is the „collective agreement law" (*Tarifvertragsgesetz*) which defines unions and employers' associations as social partners and commits them to collective bargaining. Collective agreements are usually negotiated for industries and regions. They may only regulate so called social issues like wages, working time and working conditions, while economic issues stay in the responsibility of each company. Collective agreements formally apply only to their members. This is why companies may leave employers' associations or establish subsidies outside these associations in order to avoid the industry-wide agreements. To meet this tendency, collective agreements increasingly contain frameworks for company-specific regulations.

The legal base of industrial relations on the plant level is the „Law on Labour Relations at the Workplace" (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*) which regulates co-determination. In companies with five or more employees, both unionised and non-unionised workers are represented by an elected works council with information, consultation and co-determination rights. Works councils co-determine payment systems (but not wage rates, which are negotiated on the collective level), work-schedules, qualification and – very important in the case of call centres – new technology that could be used to control workers performance and behaviour. Works councils must be informed and/or consulted over issues of work organisation, job content and personnel policy and -planning. Management must negotiate with the works council over all issues considering co-determination; arrangements are fixed in „plant-specific agreements" (*Betriebsvereinbarungen*) and apply to all employees. Such councils are not mandatory, but elections can be called by three employees or by a union with at least one member in the company. The law binds them to exercise these rights in the interest of social peace within the company and in order of labour legislation being obeyed by the employer. Their work is honorary but done during regular working time. For plants with more than 300 employees, a certain proportion of works council members are exempted from their regular jobs.

As the two levels of industrial relations complement one another institutionally securing workers interest representation in general and plant-specific affairs, they are also interdependent in another way: On the one hand, works councils need the structure and knowledge of unions to be successful, on the other works councils are the first step for unions to organise employees and establish a bargaining positions for collective agreements.

When call centres were beginning to be established, unions were not very quick to identify new demands and respond to them. At the beginning, they were rather indifferent towards call centres. Suffering from a decrease of members at that time, they retained their focus on the interest of their traditional clientele of (male) full-time workers preferably employed in large companies and failed to perceive the development of this new organisational field. Emerging new markets demanded considerable changes from unions, who were at the time struggling with their own, internal structure and competing with one another over the organisation of new industries.

German unions operating in service industries were faced early with call centres or similar plants. For instance, the „Union for trading, banking and insurance"(HBV) was in charge of companies offering mail-ordering. When trading companies in the 1980s extended the times for mail-ordering in order to improve customer service they started to rout certain calls to small, external service companies. Works councils and the union kept silent to avoid the politically delicate issues of work at night and on Sundays in those companies they represented.

> „It began that they routed overflows to external services. We didn't talk about it. We were glad that it wasn't necessary to work in company XY on Saturdays and Sundays. Looking back from today, you can say we externalised problems." (Union rep. HBV)

Such a policy of preserving privileges (not-in-my-backyard policy) can be described as avoidance of environmental pressure on the unions' side which ignored the multitude of small service companies hard to unionise. In a certain way, unions underestimated the potential and the development of the service sector and the repercussions of these changes on their traditional strongholds and thus missed to influence and shape it at an early stage.

In contrast, the telecommunications union which traditionally had been a public sector company union (*Betriebsgewerkschaft)* of the German Post could not afford such an avoidance strategy and had to change considerably when the telecommunication sector was deregulated in the 1990s: From the public to the private sector, from a single company to an industry and from very co-operative industrial relations to a more flexible approach. Their tradition, however, is both a constraint and a resource: They play a crucial role in call centre organising since they traditionally have had to regulate round-the-clock shift work and have experience in co-determining shift patterns, staffing levels etc. which are new to other industries.

With the opening of the telecommunication market and the founding of the first direct banks, reorganisation and new forms of labour were no longer limited to small plants in a perhaps growing but basically rather obscure sector of „new services", but they invaded into a traditional union field. While unions then were trying to have works councils elected in the call centres of these sectors, different industrial unions and the white collar union (DAG) competed over domination in each new company. Which union succeeded in which company depended either on traditional co-operative relations or on unions' willingness to compromise in order to dominate the company. [13]

Currently, unions' position in the organisational field has improved. Call centres are increasingly seen as both a challenge and an opportunity to gain inroads in new and traditionally weakly unionised industries:

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[13] In March 1998 four different white-collar-unions of the DGB and the DAG decided to amalgamate to form the world's biggest service union by spring 2001. The „unified service union" (*Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerk-schaft*: ver.di) will distinguish fourteen different fields along business sectors. Compared to the usual structure of German unions it is intended to be organised in a more de-centralised way, in order to represent the interest of all participating unions independently from their present size and power. This intended structure contains risks and chances: On one hand ver.di may turn out to be overly bureaucratic and inefficient, on the other hand the division into small units which act autonomously in questions such as collective wage agreements is an adequate reaction to the flexibilisation and deregulation pursued by employers (cf. Keller 1999). At least during preparation of the foundation of ver.di unions have been able to establish common projects on call centre issues as well as to act strategically themselves. In this flexible and co-operative project framework, call centre specialists in the unions planning to form ver.di are discussing and practicing new instruments of regulation like "frame collective agreements" leaving space for company specific arrangements.

> "Where else do you have 300 and more people with similarly problematic work situations?" (Union rep. DPG)

The presence of works councils distinguishes call centres closer to established industries from those in new ones. In-house call centres are covered by the works council of the mother company. When they are outsourced, rearrangements are necessary. They depend on the exact status of the outsourced and/or newly founded company. On the other hand, the exact terms of outsourcing may be influenced by the mother works council.

The most problematic areas in the view of unions are "new" call centres, especially in marketing and services but also in telecommunications. In telebanking and telecommunications the respective unions made co-ordinated efforts. This was made easier since such companies were established fairly simultaneously: in response to competitors' actions in the case of telebanking and in response to deregulation in the telecommunication sector. As far as we know, these efforts have been fairly successful and in these industries a considerable share of call centres have elected works councils with at least some union influence.

In banking, this has frequently been a struggle and it seems that the unions' success frequently was based on failed management schemes to prevent it. In bank 1 in our sample, a works council was established by a small active group "just like that, without a need or particular incident" (works council chair, bank1) a few month after a project of a telebank has started. In bank 2, which also started as a new telebank enterprise, after a chaotic start disappointment with working conditions set in. "On the night shifts, the idea was born to make appointments with the union" to get advice on the establishment of a works council (works council chair, bank2). Here, management tried first to delay talks with the union on their part. Then they announced a plant assembly for the organisation of works council elections themselves in order to beat the unionised employees to it. In the election, both union and non-union representatives were elected, but further on, the management-oriented faction resigned under the misapprehension that that would dissolve the works council. So they ended up with a complete union works council, which now is fairly well established and successful but in quite a conflictual relationship with management.

In marketing, the unions have targeted the market leader with branches all over Germany first, a company which used to be fairly notorious in the industry for wage dumping and using self-employed workers. This has had the double advantage of setting a warning example and gaining more or less silent support from the company's competitors.

> „We said at the start let's take on the bad guy. And were sort of supported by the other call centres, they smiled and said, go ahead and good luck to you." (Union rep. DPG)

The provisions of the Law on Labour Relations at the Workplace in Germany theoretically give works councils considerable power. These powers are rooted in the tradition of German industrialism and the question is how useful and appropriate they are to new(ish) fields of employment. The use of these powers is limited by the specific conditions of call centre work and the workforce. The high share of part-timers with different obligations obviously means that interest and involvement in workplace participation are often low. Even where works councils are established, their members are not necessarily unionised and the largest amount of their constituency is not either. But also where the prerequisites for interest representation are in place, the competent use of these powers in negotiation and bargaining requires a certain expertise and experience with the rules of the game. Unions currently are faced with

inexperienced actors on both sides, and representatives suggest that part of management's anti-union stance results from that as well:

> "Both sides ... don't know how to handle co-determination. Both sides are young. Often students doing business courses and thinking they have to show the boss what's what, or law students practicing exemplary learning" (Union rep. DPG).

Also, for established works councils, call centres with their working times, specific skill demands and workforces are a new matter. In both cases, the need for union support and consultation is high.

The right of works councils to co-determine over new technology and work organisation is especially useful in the face of the continuous organisational experimentation we find in call centres. It may also be used to bargain over other points. The most successful issues for the works councils in our experience have been wages and the exclusion of individual performance monitoring. They often have succeeded in increasing wages by a few Marks per hour, establishing premiums for night and weekend work in between 20 – 40% and are influencing the modes of control and quality management as well. In the banks we know, individual measurement of performance in terms of call times, sales figures etc. is limited. Works councils are also working on online rights and trying for agreements which limit the monitoring of e-mail and internet use.

There is some insecurity among different works councils over the regulation of working times. The traditional Fordist approach, as manifested in the policy of Telekom works councils f. i., is a limitation of anti-social working hours, an even distribution of loads and compensation. This however has even traditionally been complemented by informal arrrangements, swapping shifts etc. (Kutzner/Pantel 1993). With workforces with diverse working time needs and preferences, the question arises anew what to regulate and where to establish corridors of self-determination by teams and workers themselves, and to avoid self-exploitation in the process.

Quality management and coaching however is generally accepted both by employees and works councils. Works councils and unions are aiming for appropriate recognition of qualitative dimensions of work. For instance, performance-related pay systems in their view should mirror demonstrable competences rather than measured performance. This may also be related to projects agents are working on and in which they use these competences.

In sum, there is no denying that employers have moved ahead when it comes to flexibilising labour conditions by escaping established systems of industrial relations. Still we would like to point out that the phase of de-institutionalisation was also favoured by the condition of the institutions surrounding the organisation at the time. Since trade unions have reorganised and flexibilised themselves, their influence has improved and co-determination has increased again. The flexibilisation of industrial relations thus turns out to be a process of trial and error with actors approaching each other and defining new limits rather than pursuing a unilateral strategy.

5. Managing flexibility: recruitment and coaching

On the organisational level, flexibility may be seen as a key product of call centres. In order to deliver that product, a considerable part of the flexibility/stability dilemma is transferred to the actual work situation of call centre agents. Even if their work is highly regimented and

strictly controlled, they have to articulate both sides of bureaucracy and customer-orientation (Korczynski 2000): standardisation and empathy, swift task completion and competent problem-solving. Organisational control thus can and does not dissolve the flexibility/stability dilemma. While "doing flexibility" is left to agents' agency, organisational control works on it, frames and shapes it. We are going to address the issues of recruitment and on-the-job training in two banks from our sample here, which show how organisations are modifying the initial logic of de-skilling in the light of labour market pressures. Recruitment addresses the prerequisites and quality management the outcomes of agents' work performance in multiple and subtle ways.

This, in our view, explains why control in call centres has so aptly been described as "info-normative" (Frenkel et al. 1999), performed both through 'hard' measurements and 'soft' cultural and normative controls, a careful cultivation of informal work cultures. However, this distinction is fluid in itself. The figures of capacity, performance etc. often are a matter of interpretation and management is about contextualising them and assessing their relevance. On the other hand, communicative quality is translated into sophisticated evaluation systems. Managing flexibility thus means to combine performance data, quality evaluation, training and control and to continuously modify this combination according to (perceived) need and demand.

Recruitment

Firstly, a considerable part of the workforce consists of the typical part-time workers, i. e. mothers returning to work and/or students. Both these groups have particular temporal needs and their skills and demands do not need to be fitted smoothly into the traditional German model based on formal training and recognised occupations.[14] The escape from traditional industries thus gave companies an opportunity to tap a different type of labour market.

In an institutional perspective it is worth noting that in Germany, university students are such an attractive workforce for call centres. This is a result of de-institutionalisation and deregulation in the organisational field of higher education from which call centres (and possibly other new service industries) profit. Traditionally, working students are exempted from social security payments and provisions and thus present cheap labour. In recent years, cuts in student grants have increased the need to earn a living. The length of university courses in Germany and their often fairly un-regulated character especially in the humanities give students the time and motivation to work during their studies. On the subjective side, a university education is frequently less a distinct phase in the lifecourse but an extended lifestyle in which studies, work and other commitments are pursued simultaneously, eventually leading to degrees and/or a regular career or not. This is especially true in the Ruhr area, where the opening of new universities in the 1970s was part of a government policy towards structural change, working-class students can't afford not to work and also mature students holding down jobs are frequent.

Call centres have come to find out through labour turnover and training cost that call centre work requires particular skills and competences for which demographic characteristics of their

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[14]   This model does not just apply to industrial labour but to clerical and service work as well. However, the recruitment of skilled women for routinised jobs here is a fairly traditional means of flexibilisation, both downgrading work and keeping skill in reserve (Gottschall et al. 1985, 1989).

prospective workforce are not sufficiently predictive.[15] Thus, sophisticated recruitment procedures have been established. Phone interviews are an obvious means of screening applicants, but they are followed by often one-day recruitment events involving group presentations, phone simulations and other assessment centre exercises. The evaluation criteria are continuously evaluated and modified in the light of anticipated changes in work roles and demands. Such changes are seen in the inclusion of e-mail and prospectively multimedia communication and in an increasing orientation towards sales (cf. Knights/McCabe 1999).

> "Eventually we are required to reconsider employees' profiles. This is not a problem as all our instruments are designed to allow for short-term success evaluation. ... If we find that through recruiting we do not get the right kind of people we adapt the instrument immediately. The questionnaire for the phone interview is refined continuously. We used to strongly distinguish between inbound as less sales-oriented and outbound. Now we set great store by customer-orientation in inbound as well, the readiness to actively approach customers" (Bank 2, Personnel).

Recruitment for the right skills and personality traits is thus geared towards the selection of an employee *habitus* (Bourdieu 1982; Lüde/Nerlich 2000) which enables agents to move between tight regimentation and flexibility, matter-of-factness and friendliness, subordination and responsibility (cf. Holtgrewe 2000). The exact emphasis on these respective elements is left open to continuous modification which mirrors the call centre's perceived position in both the market and the strategic outlook of the organisation.

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[15] It is worth noting that the traditional ascription of social skills and graces to women, while still existant (cf. Taylor/Tyler 2000), does not appear natural any longer.

Coaching

The shaping of the day-to-day performance of these balancing acts is the domain of quality management. Firstly, training and coaching sessions are scheduled to fit in with the immediate demands of incoming calls. Orientation towards quality is thus pursued in the slack periods and "pores of the working day".

Bank 1 is currently implementing a coaching system which simultaneously evaluates and trains workers against detailed quality criteria which have been laid down for each service specifically. Each agent is to be coached ten times per year with each session lasting 50 minutes and feedback given immediately. The results will be part of the pay-relevant performance appraisal as well.

Here, agents are expected to see evaluation under the perspective of self-improvement (cf. Grey 1994; Newton 1996; Bröckling 2000) and as a chance for organisational recognition of their competence (cf. Holtgrewe 2000). This view is supported by agents' statements. Accordingly, they take over parts of training and quality management as well. Agents are put in charge of certain subjects for which they offer their colleagues training and "fresh-up" sessions. Trainers also are recruited from the ranks of agents with psychology or education courses or degrees. Beyond coaching and training, the density of communication and reflection of quality in this bank is quite impressive. There are quality circles, round tables with management and workers etc.

This kind of job enrichment ties up with students' extrafunctional skills or skills which they are currently learning. It also ties up with a willingness to consider exams and evaluations as an integral part of skill formation and personal development, which is shaped in university socialisation. The recruitment of students enables the organisation to mobilise the norms and disposition of (future) highly-skilled and professional workers in a less than professional field.

Managing flexibility in terms of personnel selection and quality management thus positions employees in such a way that they are able to move competently between regimented work, customer empathy and an 'entrepreneurial' perspective on the demands of the organisation. The way they do this is in turn closely observed and evaluated by the organisation, and control and technologies of the self are interlaced. Such relations of control are somewhat paradoxical: Agents are not just exhorted to "be natural" in the sense of the company but also told when they are acting autonomously in the right or wrong way.

6. Locating flexibility: The case of North Rhine-Westphalia

We argued above that different observational perspectives on call centres could be strategically exploited by them to gain public support and resources. Here, regional sources of support were most important.

Today, nearly all German federal states (*Bundesländer*) have their own regional policies to support the development of a vital call centre scene. Among the first to set up such a programme was North Rhine-Westphalia. In 1997, here a governmental programme called "Call Center Offensive" was started. It consists of three different services to call centres: communication, qualification and training, and locational promotion. Each has different implications for institutionalisation.

The establishment of communication structures among persons and organisations interested in call centres presents a rather weak form of institutionalization. Nevertheless, in the early stages of the development of the organisational field the organisation of meetings and workshops was important in order to lay seeds for a professional community[16]. At the same time it advertised the new public policies. So, many round tables and workshops at local level were organised and quite successful. An official of the governmental programm comments:

> "The call centre practicioners were happy that someone looked after them and offered them a communication platform" (CCO-Official 2: 2).

Also, the publication of brochures, a website, and visits of government representatives in newly established call centres intensified the public awareness of the booming sector but also skepticism about the quality of the new jobs. Consequently, the relatively bad image of call centre work was early perceived by politicians and call centre managers as a major obstacle for the growth of call centres. Therefore, the interests of call centre companies and politicians are meeting in the improvement of the image. Nevertheless, the case of Citibank's closure of the Bochum call centre caused considerable loss of trust among employees and the public.

The certification of training institutions was a second important element of the Call Center Offensive. The training centre of the Chamber of Commerce in Düsseldorf in cooperation with local call centre representatives developed a first curriculum for a six-week-training for call centre agents in 1997. On the basis of this curriculum the Call Center Academy North Rhine-Westphalia (CCA) has been founded to disseminate the curriculum to training institutions all over North Rhine-Westphalia. This was regulated by a contract between the training centre, the CCA, and the local Chambers of Commerce that hold the examination and gives out a certificate[17]. So far in 21 North Rhine-Westphalian cities local training centres offer these courses, especially to the unemployed. Approximately 3000 people have successfully attended them. The rate of successful entry into call centre jobs is obviously high. Experts estimate it up to 70 per cent.

The concept of CCA was to achieve comparable training standards across the country[18]. In some cases the network between employment agency, local training centres and call centres worked very quickly and successfully. E.g., in Dortmund and Siegen, large call centres have been set up and during a few month some hundred employees were trained and recruited.

While some call centre managers criticise the curriculum for not providing the necessary skills up to their company's standard, the CCA-courses appear to fulfil important functions for call centres as well as for political actors. They take over part of the personnel selection

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[16] The integration of the "Call Center Offensive" into the the much broader programme of "media nrw" was another important element of the communication strategy. This programme focuses the goverments efforts to initiate innovation and give support in new media and information technology applications. Hence, call centres are (at least) symbolically connected to other parts of the so-called high-tech industries. Connotations to modernity, innovation, and long-term prospective investments were marked while call centres still retain the additional charm of offering larger amounts of medium-skilled jobs.

[17] In many cases the Chamber of Commerce's training centres also run the courses.

[18] The approach of standardisation is not restricted to the *Bundesland*. The national Chamber of Commerce (*Deutscher Industrie- und Handelstag, DIHT*) also adopted the curriculum and offers it to the training centres of its member chambers. A distinct feature of the North Rhine-Westphalian CCA is the attempt to control and evaluate the correct transformation of the curriculum into course schemes. Yet there is some controversy over the success of this evaluation.

especially for those call centres with relatively low skill requirements[19]. In cooperation with local employment agencies, the training centres scan the local labour market, especially the unemployed for those who could be interested and suited for call centre jobs. Political actors, on the other side, are interested in such creation of employment. And for the employment agency call centre training opens up another option to offer their clients and to demonstrate activity.

In terms of institutionalisation call centre training is on its way into the formal German system of vocational training and advanced training. The first step was the certification of call centre agent training involving the chambers of commerce. A second step is now the institutionalisation of training for supervisors and middle managers and the accessibility of vocational and advanced training in clerical occupations for experienced call centre agents. The awarded certificate of the Chamber of Commerce is formally comparable to those in other occupations. The third step, namely the call centre agent as an occupation within the German dual system of a three-year vocational training is discussed. Pilot projects have been started.

The third element of the North Rhine-Westphalian Call Center Offensive (in cooperation with local agencies for business promotion) is the concrete support of call centres that are willing to locate in the *Bundesland*. It offers an initial business consulting for potential start-ups. More than 600 companies and entrepreneurs have had contact to the Call Center Offensive.

Here, the usual means of local business promotion (especially buildings, traffic connection) are used. Additionally, in some parts of the Ruhr area investment aids from EU funds are available[20]. In this respect, call centres were treated like companies from other branches willing to base themselves in North Rhine-Westphalia. Interviewed call centre managers and relevant representatives from the institutional context agree that these financial subsidies play only a minor role for locational decisions. In their view, the location service itself is more important with respect to labour market, traffic infrastructure and the quick availability of suitable office buildings.

There is one remarkable example of direct pressure from call centres in North Rhine-Westphalia for „hard" institutional change. This concerns the deregulation of legislation on work on sundays and holidays which is relatively strictly reglemented by law. Exceptions have to be confirmed individually, under participation of union representatives. In May 1998 the Government of North Rhine-Westphalia granted call centres a general exemption from this rule and allowed them to work on sundays and public holidays. This gave the government a welcome opportunity to demonstrate the seriousness of their committment to call centre development. Other federal states showed isomorphic tendencies and followed suit, but for a while this was a significant advantage in the regional competition for call centre employment. However, work on these days still comes under co-determination by works councils.

Not accidentally, the unions were relatively kept out of the "Call Center Offensive", at least in the beginning. This is maybe surprising in a region were unions are traditionally strong and under a social-democratically-lead government that in other fields works very close with unions. A reason may be that the structural change of the North Rhine-Westphalian economy

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[19] Call centres with more complex tasks recruit often from the student labour market. Also, internal training is more important here.

[20] A special situation in Eastern Germany sharpens regional competition. In the Eastern *Länder* not only EU investment aids were granted but additionally wage subsidies.

generally lowers unions' influence. The promotion of young, technology- and media-based entrepreneurship, of media industries, advanced technological application in microelectronics, software and e-commerce is hardly compatible with traditional union structures and attitudes. On the other hand, government may have strategically excluded them to initiate a development path outside the traditional locked-in clusters of heavy industries. As we pointed out (cf. ch. 4), in the early stages of the call centre boom the unions themselves underestimated this development.

In terms of regional economic change the institution building related to call centre growth is clearly discernible. Probably the most important institutional effect is the emergence of a call centre specific regional labour market (Scott/Storper 1992: 18f). For a regional labour market it is particularly important to develop a common "fund of knowledge that help participants screen and evaluate the information they receive" (ibid.). Interviewed experts confirmed this argument. They consider the local labour market to be the main reason for locational decisions of call centres. After early-stage aversions against the call centre field, employment agencies have also learned to assess local labour market potential for call centre employment. This labour market works in the interest of workers as well who tend to change jobs according to pay and conditions. In bank 1, about one third of all agents in a banking call centre had prior experience in other call centres. We have some evidence that agent's information networks are particularly centered around universities. In bank 1, about half of 160 call centre agents responding to our survey are university students. Agents were asked how they had heard of their current job. The student agents mostly heard about it from friends or relatives (55%). Their second important information source were job advertisements (33%). Non-student agents ranked job advertisements first (48%) and second information by friends or relatives (23%). This suggests that universities really are the place of a vivid exchange of information on call centre jobs.

Other institutional effects of call centre growth in the Ruhr area remain somewhat speculative. For a traditionally very strong agglomeration of the old economies (steel, coal mining, construction) the change from industrial production clusters to service clusters is perceptible and may have extensive consequences in the future. The fact that thousands of university students in the Ruhr area have direct experiences in service work may contribute to changed cultural attitudes towards service work. The rapid growth of call centres has given many student workers the chance to move into middle management positions for which staff used to be recruited internally. For the first generations of call centre agents their jobs may turn out to offer a long term perspective. Whether this leads to a career path remains open at the moment.

The outlined shaping of a call centre specific landscape in the Ruhr area and the considerable investments in personnel could in turn contribute to a stronger territorial integration (Asheim 1992: 59) of a supposedly very mobile industry. Another incentive for a not only functional but also territorial integration of call centres is the discovery of potential "forward linkages" of call centres to existing important clusters (Coffey 1992: 142). In Duisburg, linkages between logistics (another important sector of the economy with Europe's largest inland port) and call centres are discussed; Essen is traditionally strong in retail and wholesale; and Dortmund has discovered connections between its university, its considerable software sector and some call centres specialising in technology-oriented services. Hence, institutional interdependencies may emerge and tighten the territorial integration of call centres or their respective embeddednes in local economies.

7. Conclusion

The construction of flexibility both in call centres and in and through the emerging organisational field thus does not constitute a linear move towards deregulation. Rather, we find interlaced loops of de- and re-institutionalisation, of discontinuity and continuity through which standards, actors, employment and work relations are structuring one another. The examples we sketched show that the departing point has frequently been a breach with traditional arrangements: Organisations and their subsidiaries escaping from collective agreements and occupational structures, the NRW government yielding to the pressure to exempt call centres summarily from the regulation of Sunday work. Unions found themselves in the unattractive role of defending previous arrangements while constrained by their focus on traditional full-time skilled work.

So the establishment and diffusion of call centres indeed shook up the foundations of work and employment relations. It effectively challenged traditional status rights and limitations to flexibility and forced workers both in call centres and in companies employing call centres to make concessions both through actual outsourcing and the threat of outsourcing. It was firmly brought home that any rearrangements would amount to a *status quo minus* (cf. Bode/Brose/Voswinkel 1991) and improvements from there have been mostly relative.

Afterwards, re-institutionalisations on more flexible terms set in. *Companies* are learning, often by default, that call centre work can't summarily be deskilled without incurring cost at other points. Thus skill and its development and certification are becoming focal points for the organisational field to negotiate – as well as the image of call centre work.[21] In turn, a not-unskilled workforce enables call centres to add value to their services and extend their fields of operations in order to utilise a larger share of agents' skills.

Call centre *managers* have accumulated an amount of experience with call centre operations – including the high reflexivity of reorganisation – which may empower them to claim strategic expertise in customer relations management in relation to their parent organisations or to customers. The orientation of a part of call centre management towards service quality and innovation thus has strategic reasons. They are coming to control a "relevant zone of uncertainty" (Crozier/Friedberg 1979) for their organisation or customers.

Assumedly contingent *workers*, confronted with dire working conditions and tightened control are frequently coming to see the uses of interest representation. *Unions* are getting the point that boundaries between core employees as their clientele and contingent labour are eroding and their traditional focus on the full-time/skilled/breadwinner groups is becoming outright dangerous. *Politicians* attributing job gains to their successful attraction of call centres find themselves questioned as to the quality and sustainability of these new jobs.

These instances contain the makings of a "modernisation alliance" of unions, progressive management and consultants and politicians, of which academic research is likely to become a part. The actual implementation of a high-quality path of call centre development along the lines of skilled work, sophisticated interest representation, worker participation and state-of-the-art workplace design is contingent upon specific conditions and organisations' enactment of these conditions: A closeness of call centre operations to organisations' core competencies and thus a strategic relevance, a critical mass of call centres in a region which leads to a

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[21]   This is quite usual for a-typical industries and occupations cf. Voswinkel/Lücking 1996 for the building and restaurant trades.

functioning labour market offering job alternatives and career prospects, opportunities for circulation of knowledge and communication of experiences among both management and workers, political, public and academic attention to the field, an encompassing system of company-internal and external training including options for further training, the exploration of networking with customer branches and attention to service innovation.

This is by no means a naturally emerging process of organisations isomorphically drifting towards the high-quality path of service innovation. The development of identifiably good practices, of standards and guidelines has been the result of conflictual and political struggles (at least) as well as of state-moderated discourses. Bad examples (e. g. Citibank cf. Holtgrewe 2000; Bibby 2000) and public outrage over closures and escape from collective agreements (*"Tarifflucht"*) have played their part in these processes as well.

Thus this sketch should not be taken to suggest that all is well in the German call centre scenery. The outlined modernisation alliance represents the possibilities of the bright side of the picture. Embracing it too euphorically as researchers has its own dangers. We need to be especially attentive to processes of segmentation in the field (along gender, ethnicity and class lines and industry lines as well) which may come to exclude bad jobs and their holders further from the high-quality road. The enlightened management and interest representation discourse is not purely ideological, though. We are arguing that it is becoming institutionally and organisationally effective through *leitbilder* of quality and competence, through the struggles around them, and through actors' reflexive self-positioning in the field.

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