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# Flexibility and Customer Orientation: Where Does the Slack Come From?

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## 1. Why Taylorism in call centres is limited

In the discussion on call centres as customer oriented organisational boundary spanning units the question of the return of Taylorism has been central. Where call centres employ Tayloristic technologies of control (Ferne/Metcalf 1998) and recruit low-skilled personnel with temporary contracts or as contingent workers, they have been seen as both promoters and exemplars of atypical employment (cf. Flecker 1998: 214) and a general lowering of standards for service work and employment. Indeed, the establishment and growth of call centres, whether as newly established firms or as the result of outsourcing, has often meant organisations “escaping” from institutional contexts, especially from collective agreements. Call centres often have located in areas and drawn on labour markets where establishing powerful forms of collective interest representation has been a problem (cf. Taylor/Bain 1999; 2001). With respect to flexibility, this would suggest that call centre work is a typical case of external flexibility.

Of course, this “pessimistic” stream of the debate addresses relevant problems of call centre employment. Yet it cannot claim unrestricted validity for the whole of the call centre landscape. Especially recently the focus of the discussion has shifted to the large variety of call centre services and the tensions and dilemmas of customer interaction under more or less restrictive working conditions. For this reason, the concept of a direct return of Taylorism has frequently been challenged.

Empirical studies – in Germany and elsewhere – point towards the complexity that is inherent in considerable parts of call centre work (cf. Frenkel et al. 1999; Korczynski et al. 2000; Wray-Bliss 2001; Holtgrewe 2001a; Rieder/Matuschek/Anderson 2002; Alferoff/Knights 2002). The variety of call centre services alone, ranging from standardised information services or order entry to professional consultancy services, is contraindicative to an unilinear trend towards Taylorism. Also, the work force is often skilled, and training is comprehensive. Not least, employees themselves perceive their work situation in a way that underlines relatively complex patterns of work organisation.

In our project,<sup>1</sup> a survey of (until now) 491 agents in 5 call centres shows that agents perceive mainly the uncertainties in their work situation at the organisational boundary (“deal with new or unanticipated problems”) that leads to a large variety of customer interactions.<sup>2</sup> Secondly follows the autonomous processing of uncertainty (“try out new ways to solve problems”). Nearly to the same degree, agents perceive the necessity of routinised action (“always act in the same prescribed way”). Not surprisingly, creativity (“come up with new ideas”) plays a minor role for call centre work. It is mainly seen where services are in development and organisations grow quickly. According to the argument of neo-Taylorism routinised action should be rather more characteristic of call centre work. On the contrary, agents stress the uncertainty at the boundary and they are very conscious of the problem of coping with uncertainty (cf. Figure 1, p. 2).

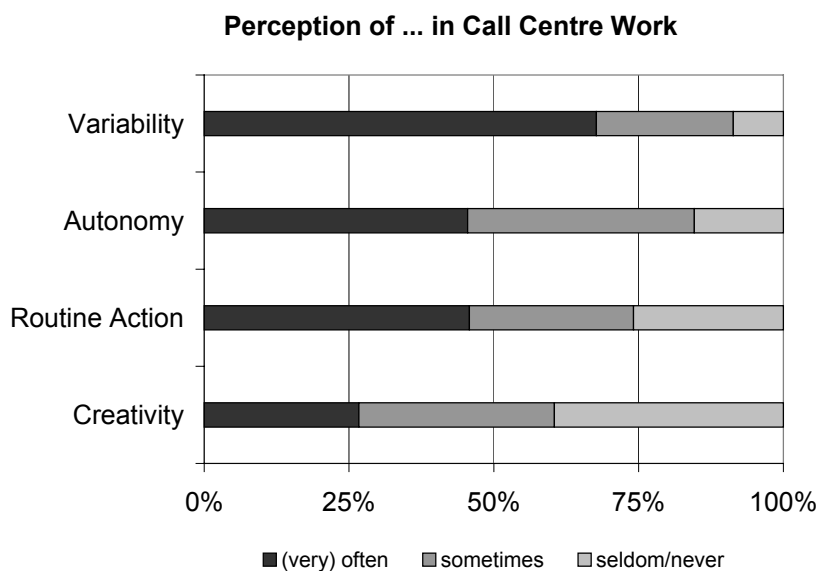
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<sup>1</sup> The project „Call centres in between neo-Taylorism and customer orientation“ at Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg is funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and runs from April 2000 – March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> These items have partly been adapted from Frenkel et al. (1999).

In this paper, we argue that the empirical evidence that the Tayloristic option of call centre organisation is limited, has its reasons in structural organisational dilemmata that cannot be solved but only worked upon by call centre organisation. Organisations that use call centre technology may increase their efficiency. But at the same time they must import and produce *organisational slack* in order to deliver the expected and promised flexibility. Our point is that they face this problem in a strategic and self-reflexive way especially by recruiting certain types of employees. The status and biographical situation of these employees provides the organisation with useful skills, subjective potential and commitment. Organisational patterns of and employee contributions to slack production vary with different services and customer expectations.

Figure 1: Perception of Call Centre Work (Source: Own survey, n=491)



## 2. Flexibility, slack and customer orientation

Organisations quite basically have to balance flexibility and stability. Organisational theory addresses the dilemma: Organisations have to absorb uncertainty (March/Simon 1958). This means that organisations as social systems have to maintain a lower level of complexity within their boundaries, as compared with the complex environment. Yet they have to be able to react to this environment as well. Classically, organisations divide these tasks between a “core” and a range of “boundary spanning units”. The organisational core in such a setting works with a well known and manageable technology of stable routines. Boundary spanning units around the core seek to buffer and prepare environmental effects so that the organisational core is able to work. This is Thompson’s classical model of organisation (1967). Flexibility in this organisational world is required chiefly at the organisational boundaries.

Indeed, call centres can be viewed as classical boundary spanning units that should buffer environmental uncertainty. Then, the boundary spanning units (*Grenzstellen*) as “intermediary systems” (“*Zwischensysteme*”, Luhmann 1964) are directly faced with the dilemma of flexibility (Kühl 1994). Boundary spanning units have to maintain organisational boundaries,

perceive environmental variety and deliver defined inputs to the organisation and outputs to the environment.

In a tayloristic – or, concerning services, mcdonaldistic (Ritzer 1996; Voswinkel 2000) - paradigm this is managed by a successful closure of boundaries. By means of technology or strictly standardised work behaviour everything is rejected that does not fit to defined patterns of customer interaction. Of course, empirically such closing activities (see above the routine action) do take place. Even then, at the boundary not closure but *doing the closing* or rejecting is performed.

But this represents only part of the actions at the boundary. Our survey shows that workers more often are required to cope autonomously with the variety of problems in the environment. The focus of the action is then mainly problem solving. An important function of boundary spanning work thus is the *standardising* of the customer interaction. Principally, organisational environments and customer demands are unanticipable. Therefore, call centre agents have to keep structural flexibility “in reserve”.

### 2.1. Organizational slack

Organisations have a principal need for slack. Slack is required in order to cope with contradictory demands and dilemmatic situations at the boundary and thus to buffer environmental uncertainty (Cyert/March 1963). Especially, capacities and competences of employees enable the organisation to react flexibly. Slack has the double effect of stabilising and adaptation.

“Organisational slack encompasses all those activities within an organisation that are not directed to immediate goals and therefore represent surplus meaning that is not only a platform for the assessment of goal achievement activities, but also able to keep ready alternatives for those moments when goals are shifting or should be attained in other ways” (Baecker 1994: 151, own translation).

Cyert and March deny that “slack is deliberately created for such a stabilising purpose” (1963: 38). We are arguing, that organisations try reflexively to develop such dimensions of slack to gain flexibility. Slack is an internal resource of organisation that is delivered partly by the organisation and partly by organisational members. In this sense, slack is more than the disposal of material buffers or financial resources. Also, surplus skills, time flexibility of employees or their biographical resources are dimensions of organisational slack. The degree and range of their mobilisation – as part of the transformation of labour power into labour – is of course contested between workers and organisations.

To ensure that the potential flexibility of employees can be realised is a case of the basic transformation problem of the labour process. Through recruiting call centres open up potentials of structural flexibility that have to be transformed into the necessary concrete situational flexibility. Regarding working time, the allocation of employees to time slots dependent on demand behaviour of customers is impracticable unless corridors of flexibility, have been roughly agreed over. Also, the utilisation of skills and interests cannot be simply ordered. Thus in every distinct customer interaction slack has to be generated to hold promises of customer orientation.

### 2.2. Customer orientation

The needs for slack and the reflexion on slack increase when organisations communicate the opening of boundaries in order to react more quickly and sensitive to environmental demand. This would be meant by the notoriously ambiguous topos of customer orientation in an

organisational perspective (duGay 1996; Neuberger 1996; Fournier/Gray 1999; Korczynski 2001; Holtgrewe/Voswinkel 2001).

Customer orientation is doublefaced. On the one hand customer orientation is related to the demand mechanism of markets. Organisations are dependent on customers' demand. This simply means resource dependency and is thus quite trivial. On the other hand customer orientation has become a widespread management fashion. Here, customer orientation is used as the central and somewhat tautological explanation for economic success (cf. for the operationalisation of management fashions Kieser 1996). Customer orientation then becomes a rationalised myth in the sense of Meyer and Rowan (1977)<sup>3</sup>. This means that institutionalized organisations are compelled to follow the expectations inherent in the myth of customer orientation. Within this theory, the development of call centres can be seen as institutional isomorphy (DiMaggio/Powell 1991).

Thus, customer orientation cannot be merely rhetoric, because it establishes expectations in organisations' institutional and technical environments (Scott/Meyer 1991). To a large part, however, it consists of talk and impression management, because organisations jeopardise their autonomy if customer orientation is realised too extensively. The "cult'ure of the customer" (DuGay/Salaman 1992) has its organisation theory parallel in the notion of organisational hypocrisy (Brunsson 1989), the taking apart of "talk" and "action". Only by setting boundaries against environmental demands autonomously can organisations build up and retain their capacity for action<sup>4</sup>. The organisation must decide which customer demand is permitted to cause organisational action<sup>5</sup>. Otherwise an organisation will be torn up or crushed by environmental pressures. The spectrum of permitted environmental demands is, of course, not static. The organisation needs to be able to learn from new demands as well. But the transformation of demands into organisational actions means that resources have to be available and prices must be fixed, i.e., certainty of expectations and stability have to be created.

However, while a gap between organisational rhetoric and "real" performance is necessary, the rhetoric itself generates „real“ pressures. By promising customer orientation, something has to be delivered. Customers' expectations are increased and the organisation most of the time will not be able to control these expectations and the possible disappointments. This is the reason why customer orientation inevitably enhances the dilemma of stability and flexibility, even if organisations establish specialised organisational units like call centres, or contract with specialised service providers.

Opening organisational boundaries to the variety of the customer environment, and communicating this opening, organisations then increase the demand for flexibility and slack. Customers may confront organisations with "surplus meaning" in communication and customers goals may shift, e.g. from ordering to a general complaint. Organisations need slack to catch that. The neotayloristic-bureaucratic pattern of boundary management is challenged, mainly

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<sup>3</sup> We prefer this notion of organisational myth to Korczynski's (2000) concept of customer orientation as an „enchanted myth“.

<sup>4</sup> Kühl (1994: 82ff) addresses the organisational problem of maintaining boundaries while communicating openness and boundarylessness as the dilemma of flexibility.

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, customer orientation as purposive programme (*Zweckprogramm*“, cf. Luhmann 1973) in organisations is not sufficient.

because the telephone-based services gain momentum and develop into a type of “intensive technology” (Thompson 1967: 17f). Such organisational technologies have to import environmental uncertainty into the organisational core in order to be able to produce the good (e.g. tailor-made tool machines) or service.

Our central argument is that work at organisational boundaries cannot be seen only as an execution of organisational flexibility (a contradiction in terms), but is itself characterised by the management of dilemmata and contradictions. To bring out patterns and processes of the organisation of boundary work explains why call centres gain their flexibility more through mobilisation of internal potentials than through usage of external labour market flexibility – contrary to the widespread perception of call centre work.

### 2.3. Flexibility, employment relations and labour markets

Modern management concepts, discussing virtual organisations or network arrangements tend to see flexibility as a central factor in organisational innovation and for economic performance (for a critique cf. Kühl 1994). But, of course, this is an old subject of organisation theory. Even Burns and Stalker (1961) emphasise the superiority of organic, flexible management systems under conditions of uncertainty.

Central sources of flexibility for organisations are the employment relations and the employees. Organisations draw on specific labour markets to gain flexibility. In the 1980s, industrial sociologists widely discussed the concept of flexible specialisation (Piore/Sabel 1985) that differentiates between a flexible production paradigm and a paradigm of mass production. With respect to the flexibility of organisations, the concept of flexible specialisation points to a scenario of flexibilisation that is based on skilled work, flat hierarchies and network synergies. On the one hand, this has been read as an alternative to the logic of de-skilling and taylorisation. On the other, the objection is correct that tayloristic organisations have possibilities of flexibilisation (Sengenberger 1978; Flecker 1998, Smith/Gottfried 1998: 96ff.), too, namely those that rely on external labour markets.

The distinction of internal (functional) and external (numerical) flexibility then implies a range of options for firms to use internal and external labour markets. Internal flexibility is based on high skills and broad usability of the work force, on time flexibility and high commitments of employees, that are created by granting them status rights. In contrast, external flexibility draws on contract (Streeck 1986) and its potential reversibility. This flexibility is attained through quick recruitment chances and replacement options. Preconditions are low requirements of skill, internal experience and knowledge. Looking at this line of thought, different patterns of organisational flexibilisation come to the foreground instead of the distinction of flexibility versus rigidity. Flecker (1998) f. i. distinguishes the “breathing company” and the “McJob”-Organisation (cf. Voswinkel 2000).

Call centres show combinations of contract and status, of external and internal flexibility. They are often outsourced or newly established units whose employees have a weak position at the margin of the core company, earn lower wages and lack the rights of the core employees. Especially greenfield sites aim to gain external flexibility. That is facilitated by de-regulation and the lacking of collective agreements and stable industrial relations. We have found, however, that after the early stages of call centre development the generation of external labour market flexibility is complemented by internal flexibility.

This organisational flexibility is on the one hand institutionally framed and at the same time being enabling and restrictive (Arzbächer, Holtgrewe, Kerst 2000). On the other hand it

depends on microflexibility in the concrete working behaviour. The basic problem of labour transformation and the “manufacturing of consent” indeed is about the mobilisation of microflexibility. Institutional, organisational and microflexibility are interdependent.

Our argument is that increasing requirements for high quality communication services for customers decrease the opportunities to exploit options of external flexibility. Instead, the potential of internal flexibility becomes more important. However, call centres have not yet developed established institutional paths that provide other organisations with internal flexibility, e.g. specialised occupations, related training institutions and career paths. Also, management practices in new organisational fields are developing (Arzbächer, Holtgrewe, Kerst 2000) and are only gradually gaining experience in the usage of internal flexibility options.

Therefore, there is no simple replacement of external by internal flexibility. But combinations of both are emerging. The organisational type of “customer-oriented bureaucracy” (Korczyński 2001) indicates that call centres are specialising in the management of dilemmatic requirements. Organisational flexibility then is not the solution but confronts the organisation with the permanent problem of balancing the rationales of flexibility and stability/rigidity on the levels of institutions, organisations and work behaviour. Looking at the way organisations manage this challenge may yield answers to the question, how the “customer oriented bureaucracy” as a contradictory type of organisation may work.

In the following sections we deal with the organisational production of slack with respect to employment (recruiting, structure, working time) and work requirements at the boundary. These are main areas of action and decision that enable organisations to gain and hold access to the resources that their employees possess. This slack cannot be gained without any cost, even if it is partly a by-product of working of which the usage by the organisation cannot be completely refused by employees (e.g. linguistic competencies of students, tone of voice, gender). Flexibility has to a certain degree to be exchanged and controlled, especially with respect to working time.

Empirically, we draw on interviews in nine German call centres (in the following called Bank1, Bank2, Bank3, Ordering, Trafficline, Marketing, Infoline, Techline, Medline). Interviews were conducted with management, works councils (exist in seven of nine call centres) and agents. A survey of call centre agents was carried out in five of the nine call centres (n=491).

### 3. Structural flexibility by employment

Recruiting certain groups of employees provides call centres with considerable flexibility. Employment in the call centres of our study is based mainly on two key groups of employees: Students (nearly all in part-time) and other, not-studying part-time workers. Full-time work is in most call centres in our sample is rather marginal. We have found full-time workers mainly where higher quality services are produced which require high skills. It is also concentrated in inhouse call centres.<sup>6</sup> Most managers we interviewed see full-time work as not reasonable and efficient because of the high strain of call centre work, especially in outbound services.

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<sup>6</sup> There is also some evidence that full-time call centre workers have moved up the ranks to become supervisors.



The ratio of the respective employee groups varies strongly in the call centres studied. The most common property seems to be the high share of part-time workers (students and non-students together). About 75 per cent of the agents in the nine call centres are part-time workers. This result exceeds clearly the findings of another recent study (Schietinger/Schroth 2001) that found 43 per cent part-time workers in 18 call centres<sup>7</sup>. Another study in Bremen yielded an average of 33 per cent part-time workers of all employees (agents and other staff) (Baumeister 2001). Even these results clearly exceed the German part-time rate of 23 per cent all over<sup>8</sup> and are close to the figures for the sectors with the highest part-time rate (retail: 30 per cent, catering trade: 40 per cent).

Yet part-time rates vary. The highest rates are shown by Ordering, Trafficline and Marketing with between 75 and 100 per cent part-time workers, and also the banking call centres (70 to 75 per cent). Both higher level services, Techline and Medline, have only 25 and 44 percent. Infoline is an inhouse-call centre to which many full-time workers have moved. The difference to the other mentioned studies indeed appears to be due to the fact that inhouse-call centres play a more important role there where employment is (yet?) more similar to the whole parent organisation.

The findings regarding students' employment are heterogenous as well. Our average of 40 per cent is much higher than that in Schietinger's and Schroth's study. They found 17 per cent, under the realistic assumption that students are employed only as agents, the rate increases to 23 per cent. Our much higher rate is caused by the three banking call centres where 50 until 60 per cent of all agents are students. Otherwise, students are only represented at a considerable rate in Ordering (35 per cent) and Trafficline (26 per cent).

All studies converge in the finding that most part-time workers are women. We confirm this with our survey where 86 per cent of the non-studying part-time workers are female.<sup>9</sup> The small portion of full-time workers (together about 20 per cent) has a slightly overrepresentation of men (54 per cent), while male and female students are equally distributed.

In addition to the type of employees the type of contracts is a further indicator of flexibility. Prevalent temporary contracts or labour contracts that exclude workers from most social security benefits (so called "*geringfügige Beschäftigung*") would signal that external flexibility is preferred. But such labour contracts are rather rare<sup>10</sup>. Some companies have a few older contracts of this type, but they do not actively conclude new contracts. The reason is that the working time of these employees is too short related to training efforts. Flexibility can be gained otherwise. This finding is insofar remarkable because call centres show a distinctly different employment pattern compared to other simple services like retail and catering which are based strongly on this type of employees.

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<sup>7</sup> However, the exact share of part-timers only for the agents is not given. Assumed that in the organisations mostly agents work part-time, the share increases to 57 per cent.

<sup>8</sup> In the western regions. In eastern Germany the rate is only 16 per cent (Leber 1999: 3).

<sup>9</sup> This means, however, that the rate of part-time working, not-studying men is also above the German average.

<sup>10</sup> Baumeister (2001) find in 14 call centres in Bremen 5,6 per cent employees with such a contract, Schietinger und Schroth (2001) 1,3 per cent, no agent of our survey works under such a contract.

Temporary employment is not prevalent either<sup>11</sup>. A few call centres use this form of labour contract regularly. Ordering is one of them. There, every new agent gets a temporary contract for one year that is afterwards terminated for an second year. After the second year, according to legislation the contract must be made non-temporary or terminated. Yet this usage offers the organisation two additional points in time to evaluate and possibly terminate employment.

These differences indicate that call centres address the problem of slack generation and the attainment of personal flexibility in different ways as the three types of employees have different flexibility potentials and patterns.

### 3.1. Students

The time flexibility of students is restricted by their obligations at the university, which, however, may be interpreted in a flexible way as well. Nevertheless, they are willing to group the call centre time around their core times at university. Students are used to work at unusual times, for example in the evening or night or at weekends. In the banking call centres, students' contracts run over between 12 and 20 hours per week, while actual working times may be longer<sup>12</sup>. The companies agree to take the student's university obligations for the personal planning into account. On the other hand, at university, students need to develop competencies of self-organisation regarding time table and time management, even in subjects with a relatively close time structure. They are also trained in the flexibility to cope with temporary requirements and changing workloads, f. i. around like exams. Work in the call centre thus fits into their time structures and experiences. As opposed to seasonal work, it guarantees a permanent income. The attractiveness of call centre work to students is underlined by the fact that half of the student agents switched into the banking call centre from another students' job or from other call centres with worse working conditions . Students evaluate the income from call centre work as sufficient. 81 per cent of the interviewed student agents are content with their income while only 47 per cent of the full-time-workers are.

The fact that most students need income from work is caused by massive changes and deregulation in the organisational field of higher education, from which call centres (and possibly other new service industries) profit. In recent years, cuts in student grants have increased the need to earn a living. Indeed, for call centres one of the most important locational factors is the closeness to a university that indicates a large and flexible studentical work force. In addition to monetary motivation students also expect relevant working experiences in call centres. Many of them anticipate a career in the service sector. Experience in call centre work and especially the acquisition of so-called extra-functional skills (service orientation is not imparted at the university) are expected to support the start into their professional career.

The length of university courses in Germany and their often fairly un-regulated character especially in the humanities also 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 pur-

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<sup>11</sup> We found 3,5 per cent temporary workers in the sample, Schietinger/Schroth (2001) 10 per cent.

<sup>12</sup> Labour contracts of students must restricted to maximum half-time work. Otherwise they loose their special social security status that is for employers lucrative.

sued simultaneously, eventually leading to degrees and/or a regular career or not. Also, in recent years of call centre growth the start into a management career has been a real option for interested students. For the organisations, the students represent an important reservoir for junior managers and trainers. Students offer the slack for long-term organisational development, for quality management, the building of knowledge bases and for job-enrichment through projects along these lines.

Students are mostly not temporarily employed<sup>13</sup>, but their status restricts the duration of their employment to the time at university. After the final exam a natural end of employment is probable. Organisations avoid long-term obligations. Instead, the permanent (but sufficiently slow) labour turnover provides them with new and highly motivated employees. Hence, with extensive students' employment a limited external flexibility is structurally build in as well.

Furthermore, with students call centres can draw on the university cultures of fast acquisition of knowledge and of mutual help and support. Obviously, call centres manage to recruit not just single students but also parts of studentical networks and cliques. More than 50 per cent of the students in the survey came to call centre work via friends or fellow students. The resulting dense social relations within the student employees can become an important resource, at least if organisations appeal successfully to helpfulness within those networks.

### 3.2. Part-time workers

The interest in part-time work meets a basic need of call centre organisations. Different to the students' situation, other part-time workers mostly have less disposal over their time because of family duties. The least flexible are the mothers of young children who are able to work only when child care is organised (in West Germany, typically for children above the age of 3 in the mornings). Therefore, reservations exist, and both Bank1 and Bank3 do not recruit those employees any longer. Obviously here, the flexibility demands of the organisation and a particular group of potential workers are not accommodated. Women with older children who are starting work again after a family phase have a higher time flexibility but often they refuse to work at weekends or at night. We find both groups of women in the call centres, but the first is smaller. Indeed, most women work in call centres when the demands of child care are becoming less intensive and flexibility increases. With an average over 36 years, the part-time workers in the survey are significantly the oldest group of call centre agents. 42 per cent of them are older than 40 years, but only 20 per cent younger than 30. From the full-time workers, in comparison, only 16 per cent are older than 40, but 54 per cent younger than 30. And more than 60 per cent of the part-time workers are married, but only 20 per cent of the full-time workers. Nearly two thirds live together with children in a household, but only a quarter of the full-time workers. These findings indicate that part-time worker's role is mainly to provide a supplementary income.

Many female part-time workers then seek call centre work to return to work after a distinct family phase. While women generally tend to shorten the time spent at home after having children (cf. Gottschall 1989) in order to maintain skills and retain chances to work in their original occupation, call centres could be attractive especially for those women returning to work who have spent a longer time with family duties. They hope to avoid further devaluation of skills. Compared to de-skilled alternatives (simple services in retail or cleaning) call centre work seem more attractive:

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<sup>13</sup> Except case Ordering with numerous temporary employees..

“We have housewives who were for years in maternity regulations. Now they have the ideal entry in their occupation or generally: to work. For this reason alone they are highly motivated, focused and keen to learn. They have reached a super performance level in a very short time .“ (Bank1, Quality Manager, p. 8)

In the interviews, older agents sometimes showed a little surprise to get the chance yet to work with new technology. Faced with only limited alternatives motivation increases and strengthens engagement with a feeling of gratefulness. These women are also recruited to gain access to the supposed skills and competencies of femininity (cf. Taylor/Tyler 2000; Belt 2002). For example, personnel managers observe positive, integrative effects on work climate and team work when some older women are employed in the teams.

### 3.3. Full-time workers

Full-time workers are the exception in most call centres , because full-time telephone work is seen as too stressful. In the nine call centres of our sample only 25 per cent of the agents are full-time workers. Full-time workers are deployed in knowledge-intensive services (Techline, Medline, investment advisors in Bank2 and Bank3). Often, such employees spend only a part of their working time directly on the phone. Additionally they take over organisational tasks or responsibilities for training and coaching. Full-time employees are clearly career-oriented. The time flexibility of this employee group is restricted. In contrast to students and part-time workers these employees have fewer opportunities to choose their working time according to their preferences. Plausibly the answers in the survey show that this employee group is least content with working time flexibility.

The combination of these three different employee groups then provides organisations with structural flexibility. Important are recruiting procedures in order to identify those employees who are both flexible and willing to mobilise their structural flexibility on behalf of the organisation (Arzbächer/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2000).

## 4. Types of organisations flexibility at organisation's customer boundaries

The specific needs of flexibility and patterns of securing flexibility vary according to the type of call centre services . We are distinguishing three patterns of call centre service among the nine cases studied<sup>14</sup>. The types differ with respect to kind of service, market position, and customer properties of services as well as the structure of their agent personnel. Most companies, however, are not pure types but have mixed forms.

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<sup>14</sup> The typology is probably incomplete. To cover the whole range of call centre services two other types seem to make sense: Product support (case Infoline would partly fall into this category) and selling. Then, we would come close to a proposition made by the INCCA-Project, Stuttgart (cf. <http://www.incca.iao.fhg.de/>).

#### 4.1. Skilled expert services

The cases Medline, Techline<sup>15</sup> and those parts of Bank3 that specialise in skilled investment consulting represent the type of skilled expert work in call centres. These call centres employ mostly full-time workers with high qualifications. In Medline, a third of employees are medical professionals (specialist doctors), in Bank3 we find qualified bank clerks and investment advisors, in Techline there are application experts for computer networks and software. They are experts in the sense that they produce “symbolic-analytic services” (Reich 1991) based on expert knowledge. The flexibility of this work is traditional, namely directed to competent problem identification and/or solving. Slack, in the sense of Baecker’s “surplus meaning”, here is the result of expert knowledge, expert cultures and their experience-based capacity to analyse situations.

The medium telephone, or its combination with Internet or mobile communication services, makes no systematic difference for the expert service. It only restricts the service spectrum, e.g., because the physician cannot fully diagnose and treat patients or the computer expert cannot physically change a defective hardware component. But with the opening of the new telephone communication channel the organisation of services changes: Services will concentrate in call centres as own organisational units. Sporadic telephone services integrated with the regular face-to-face work of physicians, computer experts or banking advisors is developed to a distinctive service in an specialised organisational framework. Because the basic character of the services remains unchanged, it is organised in well-known and proven institutional arrangements, e.g., as full-time work. Relatively long call and handling times as well as the recognised necessity of research work and permanent further training emphasise and reproduce the expert character of work – also in the face of the environment’s expectations and frequent scepticism.

Experts in call centres are today still a kind of pioneers, computer experts probably least, physicians mostly. Pioneers carry the risks that occur with the use of new communication and organisation forms. They leave well-established and for others easily recognisable career paths in order to become members of young organisations the development perspectives of which must remain uncertain. Also, work at the telephone has a doubtful image and may negatively influence the further career. Another disadvantage may be that call centre work is done at unusual times, e.g. for banking experts who are not used to work at weekends. Hence, risks as well as advantages and perceived chances are balanced in ways based on personal perceptions, calculations and identities.

- Specialist physicians that give up work in a hospital and move to Medline can profit by fewer demands on their time flexibility. Instead of the extensive overtime and long times on call which are typical in hospitals their work-time is becoming both shorter and much more calculable, without a considerable loss of income. They remain specialists in their area and are required to keep their knowledge up to date.
- Some employees of Techline worked as service technicians before who had to be mobile nationwide. By moving to Techline they could reduce spatial flexibility, which they noted to have positive impacts on the compatibility of work and family and on the quality of their lives in general.

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<sup>15</sup> To Techline’s organisational unit belong also the company’s switchboard. This part would represent services of type 2, simple information services.

- Bank3 offers an acceleration of careers for young qualified bank clerks who work in the call centre. Young sale-oriented bank clerks can take over the position of an private investment advisor earlier compared to the traditional career path in a branch. In return they must accept shift work and changing desks. Employees as well as call centre managers perceive work as private investment advisors in the call centre as an interesting temporary position from where career options in the wider company context emerge for these young and relatively mobile clerks.

These examples demonstrate that employees of this type can acquire individual advantages by moving into a call centre context. Organisations can expect only limited flexibility, and frequently, their demands on experts' flexibility turn out to be even lower than in the traditional contexts of professional/expert work. Flexibility potentials in full-time work are generally lower, and experts have a relatively strong bargaining position because they control relevant zones of uncertainty.

The knowledge base of expert work so far remains untouched even in a new communication environment. Therefore, reflexive slack-production depends on a recursive reference to the status and performance as expert. The normative reference to standards and appropriate procedures of the profession is still decisive. Experts generate slack to solve new problems from permanent further training. For that, organisations have to keep necessary resources. Also, experts are given coaching and communication training, but compared to the "really important" subjects of their field of expertise, training for the task of communication is less important (and might even be seen as degradation).

#### 4.2. Simple information services

This type of service specialises in mediating (inbound) or ascertaining (outbound)<sup>16</sup> information. The cases Ordering and Trafficline belong to this type, as well as some services of Marketing. The employment structure of these call centres is quite similar. All have at least a high share of, if not exclusively part-time workers. Students are relatively rare. Nevertheless, employment strategies differ considerably.

- Marketing employs nearly only women, preferably with some business or sales experience. If such skills are not available at the labour market, sales orientation and attitudes are decisive. Most employees are part-time working mothers with older children who have returned to work in this call centre. Many of the women are older than 35 or 40. The services of Marketing require relatively low time flexibility, because mainly business people are talked to. Calls concentrate in the normal office time. Smaller inbound services that require enhanced service times are offered in cooperation with another call centre that takes the call overflow. Hence, Marketing's employees see their working time as attractive. Customer interaction for sales support tasks are at most semi-structured and semi-standardised. Agents are expected to convince with personality and life experience. Specific knowledge is less important. Agents get short trainings for the sometimes rather complex investment goods where they are supporting sales. Compared to Trafficline and Ordering, work at Marketing shows the relatively highest complexity of

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<sup>16</sup> In a narrow sense this holds only for outbound services like address verification. Time scheduling for sales representatives (an important service of case Marketing) is maybe example for sales action.

communication, not least because of the expectation to collect encompassing data that help supporting marketing and sales. This requires flexible call handling.

- Information services at Traffiline are characterised by low skill requirements. Customer interaction is mainly standardised (timetable information), more complex calls are rare (e.g. details of complicated tariffs or complaints). The part-time workers at Traffiline must contractually agree to do overtime. Regularly they work more than the 20 hours of their contracts, usually 30 or even 40 hours per week. During times of low utilisation of the service fewer working hours are expected. Hence, flexibility loads are chiefly carried by the employees. At least once the company has had to dismiss agents to compensate a varying order situation. The system of order-dependent working-time organisation should buffer against such measures of external flexibility, but apparently has limits. Few mothers with young children are employed. Instead, young employees without family duties are recruited who accept the conditions regarding working time. In the call centre's region that is characterised by a high unemployment rate, those employees can be found. A special characteristic of Traffiline is the employment of some disabled persons who are very motivated by the opportunity to work. Additionally Traffiline profits from state subsidies.
- Ordering is characterised by standardised communication patterns and low complexity of calls. The company employs only part-time workers, of whom one third are students. Because of an elaborated system of shift planning women with younger children and family duties have opportunities to work. Interestingly, in recent years the employment structure has shown a massive change. The number of students decreased clearly from initially over 80 per cent while has the number of part-time working mothers increased. A possible explanation is that with these women, a higher degree of empathy, commitment and "seriousness" can mobilised. Because of the low skill requirements, a rather boring service, and the products (household devices and decorative knickknacks), students tend to articulate critical distance to the expected standardisation of communication and may even perform in a too-ironical way. Also, they resist attempts at control through coaching and call monitoring, perceiving the standards and scripts as too narrow and senseless. Possibly, the obvious social differences between students and Ordering's (often elderly and/or lower class) customers play a role. The part-time working mothers from working-class backgrounds have been found to be culturally more familiar with the type of customer addressed by the service. Also, they tend to accept the standards of Ordering without dissent. Ordering then has been able to commit part-time women more easily and effectively to control through "customer-related norms" (Korczyński et al. 2000).

The exchange of flexibility potentials between workers and the organisation and the generation of slack in these three call centres happen on two levels. Most important is the issue of successful consent production regarding working time and shifts. Ordering and Marketing offer working times that are very attractive for working mothers. Every call centre has its own mechanism to bring individual time preferences and organisational needs to correspondence. Furthermore, these organisations are successful in the production of customer empathy and engagement. One reason is that they recruit groups of employees with a weak labour market position (disabled people, young unemployed, young mothers, older women after a family break). They are also able to draw on employees' alternative roles as customers and consumers and to a social expectation of helpfulness. Agents then on the one hand handle calls in a standardised way, while on the other the uniqueness of the customer

contact and the individuality of customers are emphasised. Practices of “info-normative control” (Frenkel et al. 1999) integrate reflexivity into the work process, because the balancing of and coping with contradictory expectations at the boundary remain in the realm of concrete agent behaviour. The normative component seem to have superior importance. Quantitative performance indicators are not used extensively. Also, agents perceive them as inferior. It is the required balancing of contradictions that confirms the agents in the turning to the customer’s needs which is both normatively expected and valued by agents themselves.

#### 4.3. Banking call centres

Similarly to the skilled expert services the establishment of banking call centres is based on the extension of communication channels between organisation and customer. Even though the call centres of Bank1 and Bank3 serve only the customers of these traditional private banks, the mother organisations decided to establish the new telephone channel outside their organisations for reasons of cost savings. That means that the call centres are not subject to the collective agreements of the banking sector. Bank2 call centre is part of a new direct bank and serves a completely new stock of customers. Nevertheless, this direct bank is part of a large bank, too. All banking call centres have developed differentiated their services in a short time. Services include simple information services as well as expert services. In between there is a variety of support services (e.g. for telebanking problems or discount brokering). In sum, the development of the banking call centres seem to lead to a high road path. Services become more complex and of higher quality.

For banks establishing the telephone channel reveals a dilemma. On the one hand customers should have access to modern, cheap and effective services. On the other hand the bank’s image as serious and trustworthy firms can be put at risk if call centres damage the brand name or counteract marketing strategies (e.g. the promise of best quality advising). That is why quality play a major role for banking call centres.

The characteristics of banking call centres are so unique that they in our view represent a distinct type. The major difference is the high share (50 per cent and more) of students in banking call centres. Remarkable is also the fact that knowledge is more important here than at the simple information services.

A quarter of the 200 students in the survey working at Bank1 or Bank2 have completed vocational training in business as well or even are qualified bank clerks. These students use work in the call centre to maintain existing skills. Often they work in brokering units where some banking knowledge is useful. Some work even as private investment advisors. Students of economics (about a third of students) have relevant economic knowledge as well.

Our argument is that only the employment structure strongly marked by student agents enables the organisations to offer high quality services at a low cost level. Students carry not only the above mentioned skills and extra-functional qualifications. Furthermore they develop an affinity to the organisation and its services. E.g., it is appreciated in the ordering service of Bank1, if agents their interest apply practically and manage their own portfolio. Approximately 80 per cent of agents do this. They get special conditions for trading. At the computers in the call centre a software is installed that allow agents to trade before or after shifts or during breaks. Interest and own experience lead to positive impacts for further training. Also, the usage of the unit’s library with books and special newspapers and journals is high (“Those guys sometimes grab a book and read 300 pages on chart analysis”, Team Manager, Bank1). It is obviously intended that private and organisational interest should merge and stimulate



each other. Hence, both agents' commitment and stock exchange knowledge increase (though obviously they will not always be happy with their portfolios).

In banking call centres, clearly more discretion and self-direction in acting and deciding is expected than in the "simple" services. Agents must quickly estimate which kind of customer in what situation they are faced with. Then, competent acting is required. Most customers of Bank1 and Bank3 have incomes over average and considerable assets. Agents need considerable social skills confronted with those customers. They have to represent the seriousness of the bank credibly. Bank2, the direct bank, has younger customers with comparably high incomes. Here, student agents are culturally and from their university background close to the customers. In all bank cases, a kind of habitual fit between customers and agents emerges. This is comparable to Ordering's affinity of customers' and agents' working-class background, although class and habitus are different.

Coping with contradictory requirements at the organisational boundary gives the reflexive generation of slack high significance. Therefore, coaching programmes are most important in the banking call centres. The normative commitment to service quality is directed towards the products and services the customers obtain as well as to the image the bank's agents are to represent.

In short, the flexibility agreement of banking call centres is: Offering relatively interesting and responsible work that stimulates and expects the development of both banking and extra-functional skills and helps to finance students' education. Indeed, students see the usefulness of combining work and learning opportunities. In exchange they put their relative freedom of time management as well as their extrafunctional and social skills to the organisation's disposal and are willing to represent to the customers "more" than they really are: skilled banking services without being qualified banking clerks.

## 5. Conclusion

The context of organisational slack production and slack consumption we have addressed here is the issue of customer orientation. This leads organisations into typical dilemmatic constellations because uncertainty is necessarily imported. Maintaining both flexibility and stability is decisive in coping with uncertain customer environments. The establishment of new call centres and outsourcing has originally led observers to expect higher external flexibility and thus more precarious labour. We have pointed out that for reasons of organisational (system) rationality this has to be complemented by the generation of internal flexibility.

External flexibility thus changes into internal flexibility. By developing internal flexibility societal resources become organisational resources that are subject to specification and negotiation. Organisations can employ supplied social (labour market) resources without being involved in its generation. But with students and career oriented skilled full-time workers an structural element of external flexibility is built in again (cf. Bellman et al. 1997: 3).

Table 1: Concluding Overview

	Skilled Expert Services	Simple Information Services	Banking Call Centres
Full-time workers	✓		✓
Part-time workers	✓	✓	✓
Students	✓	✓	✓
Reflexivity	Further training, knowledge	Info-normative control	Coaching
Flexibility Agreement based on	Knowledge	Working time flexibility & Habitus	Social Skills & Habitus

Different types of call centres recruit specific work forces to deal adequately with customer requirements (Table 1). Expert services rely on skilled full-time workers or professionals. The flexibility agreement we have found is the exchange of better working conditions (e.g. lower workload by shorter working time or less requirements of mobility), career opportunities and possibly some profit of being pioneers against competent and flexible action at the customer interface based on knowledge.

Simple information services employ mostly female and semi-skilled part-time workers. They are offering attractive working-time agreements for working mothers and manage successfully to mobilise normative commitment. Employees' demands on the job are limited because of other obligations, a lack of alternatives and the experience of a devaluation of skills. In mail-order companies they also bring experience as consumers and housewives to the job which, as we have seen, is even specified along the lines of class-specific taste and consumption patterns.

Banking call centres are characterised by the highest share of student employees, working part-time. Not only student's flexibility of working time but also their social networks, communicative skills and, again, habitual closeness to customers are attractive for the firms. They appeal successfully to student's interest in learning and self-improvement. This is the reason why coaching is the main instrument here to foster reflexivity and slack generation. This may even reflect the importance of debates around customer orientation and service quality which has become part of a wider social discourse that has also addressed the universities (cf. DuGay/Salaman 1992). Banking call centres profit parasitically from cultures, ambitions, life style and interests of employees who are preparing for working as professionals. Those employees "on the move" can afford and accept temporarily restricted job standards. Moving between social spheres, students working in call centres may become promoters of service and customer orientation in the university as well – or, conversely, they may bring claims to recognition and professionalism into their workplaces (cf. Holtgrewe 2001b).

The production of slack takes place with limited resources, even if expectations are specified situationally. According to the economic paradigm of scarce resources slack is always a

matter of conflict – between management and employees, between organisational units or between organisation and their shareholders. Flexibility then is always limited on both sides. Agents cannot be expected to offer unbounded flexibility. Its availability is bounded by other everyday-life obligations or roles and by the agent's willingness. Flexibility cannot be realised by bureaucratic routines or hierarchic command. Being ordered to "be flexible!" may result in the contrary. Instead, flexibility is integrated with the labour politics of performance, domination, control and autonomy. To defuse these latent conflicts is a precondition of delivering flexibility. We have found that in call centres the typical "contested terrains" are working time, skills, and workplace behaviour. The flexibility "agreements", which may be more or less explicit, are grouped around these issues that canalise and institutionalise conflicts and support bargaining efforts.

The attained balance of individual and organisational demands then only a precarious, temporary pacifying of conflict. Slack is not the solution but generates permanent problems. We have seen indicators for individual or collective conflict when the balance of flexibility contributions is challenged and working conditions are bad or seen as deteriorating. Agents do not hesitate to change: Nearly a third of the agents in the survey had previous call centre experience and had changed jobs voluntarily. Agents complain explicitly when flexibility is not appreciated enough. Also, conflicts may arise between the different employee groups and their aspirations. In Ordering, we have seen the decreasing share of students resulting from a structural conflictual constellation between students and housewives and between students and managers. But conflicts often appear not openly and are hidden by high labour turnover rates which in turn enable call centres to continuously modify their hiring strategies and move between groups of less and more "suitable" agents within the limits of the labour market.

We may well expect that the clear consolidation tendency in the call centre service sector and f. i. the further restructuring of the German bank sector will have considerable impact on organisational resources and arrangements. This could come into conflict with established routines and exchange patterns of flexibility and even with successfully attained status rights.

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