Ethical dilemmas in call centres: how to survive in the modern sweatshops?

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Abstract: In this paper, we attempt to discover links between emotional labour and ethical challenges at the bottom of the hierarchy based on a research project in a utility company’s customer services department. Based on 80 in-depth interviews, we also investigate and identify those narratives and tactics that the customer service employees use in order to cope with ethical problems and emotional labour, on individual and on group level. Finally, we outline some of the possible leadership patterns connected to reducing emotional burden, reframing the situation and practicing moral imagination as a potential way out of the ‘emotional and ethical trap’.

Keywords: call centres; CCs; emotional labour; burnout; business ethics; ethical dilemmas; moral imagination.

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1 Introduction

Call centres (CCs) have recently been labelled as ‘toxic’ workplaces (Stein, 2007),
‘electronic sweatshops’ (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Moss et al., 2008), ‘the modern
day equivalent of dark satanic mills’ (Wray-Bliss, 2007). The work here is
typically emotionally demanding, high pressured but routine, boring and repetitive.
Employees have performance targets based on the number of customers served, with
little or no control over the allocation of their work. There is little time and chance for
interactions among staff members, making customer service work an alienating,
negative and suppressing experience (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007). On the other hand
CCs are considered as high-tech workplaces of the future, symbolising the close and
value creating interaction of information technology and human beings (Moss et al.,
2008; Altieri et al., 2002). Anyway the tendency remains: numbers of customer service
jobs are rapidly growing worldwide: e.g., according to estimation, in Hungary by 2012
more than 200.000 people (6% of the working population) would work in customer
service jobs.

CCs are challenging workplaces in another sense as well: in CCs employees have to
perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) to a substantial degree in order to produce
the desired positive emotional states in customers. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) differentiated between ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ as compared to ‘genuine acting’, when there is no need for emotional labour. Both surface and deep acting requires suppressing negative feelings, like aggression, guilt, hate, shame, etc. – those feelings which could easily and naturally develop in CC jobs when employees are repeatedly dealing with angry, aggressive or difficult customers.

Various thinkers point out that modern organisations – including CCs – apply all manner of bureaucratic and cultural mechanisms to control employees’ behaviour and use their display of emotions in order to eradicate unpredictable behaviour. One of the results of these organisational pressures towards uniformity and conformity could be that the individual’s free choices are more and more limited and as a result, individual ethical responsibility is practically squeezed out of the organisation (Bauman, 1993; Wray-Bliss, 2007). An example of such ‘corrosion of character’ (Sennett, 1998) could be that employees accept the real or perceived (im)moral expectations of their workplace roles or corporate culture, and tend to apply different moral standards at work than outside the workplace. We suggest that this process – together with the high level of emotional work – could lead to the escalation of ethical tensions, and finally to moral burnout, either on individual level, on group level or on organisational level.

In a recent research project, we collected data about commitment, emotional labour, stress, ethical dilemmas and moral imagination within the CC organisation of a multinational network-based service-provider company in Hungary. The company went through a major restructuring five years ago; by splitting up and centralising its small regional units. We have collected 370 questionnaires and conducted 80 in-depth interviews about the above mentioned research topics.

Based on the empirical data, we identify two dominant types of ethical problems that CC employees of this company are experiencing:

1. problems related to employees’ relations to the organisation (e.g., bureaucratic control mechanisms and overregulation, that diminishes personal conscience and responsibility; impossible performance targets, that encourage employees to cheat)

2. problems related to their relations with customers (e.g., telling lies as part of the workplace role) leading to burnout, alienation and moral distancing.

Connected to those phenomena, we also investigate and identify the self-defence narratives and tactics CC employees use in order to cope with ethical problems and emotional labour, on individual level and on group level as well. Finally, we outline leadership patterns connected to reducing emotional burden, reframing the situation and practicing moral imagination, as a potential way out of the ‘emotional and ethical’ trap.

At the end of our paper, we would like to point to the ethical challenges of management research: how is it possible to incorporate ethical views in a (basically) manager-oriented research process, and explain to the management that ethical problems do exist, and they are caused by the system, reinforced by the culture of the corporation which is being lead by them? We strongly believe that this could be one form of public engagement on the part of the research community: a commitment to show the importance of ethical aspects and to explore ethical traps, with the use of ethical vocabulary in today’s increasingly amoral world of business.
2 Theoretical background

In this part, we are going to introduce shortly certain aspects of the theoretical concepts of individual ethical behaviour at the workplace (Crane and Matten, 2007; Trevino and Weaver, 2003), emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and moral imagination (Werhane, 1999, 2005). Finally, we draw links and connections among these constructs.

2.1 Individual ethical behaviour at the workplace

Individual ethical or unethical behaviour – as the micro level of business ethics analysis – has been studied intensively for 30 years in the area of business ethics (Trevino and Weaver, 2003). Most theoretical and empirical studies have concentrated on the information processing and decision-making process, and have aimed at revealing mainly cause-effect correlations [Reynolds and Ceranic, (2009), p.18] connected to and affecting individual moral behaviour. The logic of the studies has been dominantly cognitive, drawing mainly upon Kohlberg’s (1964) theory of cognitive moral development, as it is one of the most referred theories of the field, emphasising the importance of rational thought. As various thinkers point out, this stream of research often excludes other possible elements related to individual moral behaviour, like affective (emotional), creative (imaginative), intuitive (reflective, automatic or not-aware), or biologically determined factors (De Cremer, 2009; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2009).

The question emerges here: is individual moral thinking, moral behaviour (and moral action) purely rational? Among others, White (2002) refers to basic psychological experiments that were performed by Asch, Zimbardo and Milgram between 1960 and 1975 (and have been repeated several times since then), where conformity, rigid hierarchy, fear (in addition to other factors) proved to be basically stronger in defining the actual behaviour than rational processes, individual moral principles or moral character. More recently, Trevino and Weaver (2003) call the attention to guilty conscience and shame, which are connected to ethical behaviour through the concept of assuming responsibility and care for others; and to the inter-relation of empathy, positive emotional states and ethical decision-making. In addition to accepting the importance of cognitive elements, we need to discover other factors (e.g., feelings, emotional states, and the forced masking of emotions) as well. Furthermore, we need to analyse the interactions between individuals and their context – in our case the workplace environment.

There is a variety of models focusing on factors influencing moral behaviour, concentrating on:

1. individual factors
2. context-related factors
3. issue-related factors (Crane and Matten, 2007).

According to business ethics literature, environmental (context-related) factors, like the compensation system’s characteristics (e.g., perceived justice, transparency and fairness; regulation and sanctions related to unethical behaviour) influence the ethical behaviour of employees. Also authority (i.e., rigid hierarchic relations); bureaucracy (Bauman,
workplace roles and characteristics (with their relevant moral expectations and conflicts) can have fundamental effects on individual moral behaviour. Furthermore, Trevino and Weaver (2003) point out the effects of job characteristics and direct environment in addition to workplace roles and conflicts. They underline inter alia the phenomena of the too extensive job pressure, forced performance and time pressure, which can unambiguously increase probability for unethical behaviour. On this level, beliefs and behaviour of the reference group that is present in the direct environment may also exert critical effects. Trevino and Weaver (2003) calls attention to the significance of research works built on network analysis (e.g., the expansion of unethical behaviour within the organisation), and on the potential significance of the moral approbation theory (Jones and Ryan, 1998). Ethical or unethical behaviour is deeply embedded in and influenced by the workplace environment, more broadly by the culture of the whole corporation or the subculture of the given department.

Other stream of research – in order to identify and measure the unethical conduct of individuals – create long lists of possible unethical behaviour, e.g., lies, theft, or misuse of information (Trevino et al., 1998; Trevino and Weaver, 2003). Generally, these studies refer to unethical conduct as some kind of deviant individual behaviour (other frequently used terms are ‘antisocial behaviour’, ‘workplace aggression’, or ‘organisational misbehaviour’), defined as “voluntary behaviour that violates significant organizational norms and, in doing so, threatens the well-being of the organization, its members or both” [Trevino and Weaver, (2003), p.300]. Trevino and Weaver (2003) suggested that deviant behaviour can be categorised into four categories:

1. personal aggression (e.g., mobbing and sexual aggression)
2. political deviance (e.g., gossiping and favouritism)
3. property deviance (e.g., stealing from the company and cheating about hours worked)
4. production deviance (e.g., wasting).

It is evident that the fields of deviant and unethical behaviour overlap significantly, but not completely. The question is: who decides what deviancy is in a certain organisation or in a given situation? If, for example, certain lies are expected by the organisation as part of a special work role, then, according to the definition, telling lies is not an employee deviance (because it does not violate organisational norms, at least the norms in use). In that context telling lies is perceived as a legitimate action. Still, it can be considered unethical behaviour (depending on the applied definition of ethics). But without doubt, when the same employee lies about his/her hours worked, it is considered as a deviant action (property deviance) and he or she will be punished. Cardy and Servajan (2006) showed in their empirical research that the perception of unethical conduct is in negative correlation with performance, i.e., the ‘more successful’ someone is to a lesser extent unethical conduct is perceived (or communicated). So, the performance of the individual can also influence the perception and understanding of unethical (or deviant) action.

Organisational environment, certain practices and their perceived legitimacy, transparent differentiation between ethical and unethical practices, ethical and deviant action can heavily influence the perception and understanding of (un)ethical behaviour.
2.2  An emerging concept: moral imagination

In the field of business ethics the concept of moral imagination has been established by Werhane (1999, p.99) as “the ability in particular circumstances to discover and evaluate possibilities not merely determined by that circumstance, or limited by its operative mental models, or merely framed by a set of rules or a rule governed concepts”. Without applying moral imagination one can easily be trapped by the given aspect, viewpoint, role, narrative or thinking, and this can then fundamentally distort also the individual’s moral decision-making (and moral behaviour). Werhane (1999, 2005, 2008) suggests that the mental models we use are not all and not exclusively cognitive: our emotions, passions, motivations also influence them. At this point, she unambiguously goes beyond the cognitive development model (and those who argue exclusively in favour of the cognitive character of moral behaviour), and claims that several mental models are simultaneously living in ourselves but they are only partly determined by the characteristics of the given individual, as they are partly constructed by acquired, cultural, religious, social, socialisation and family effects, and contain both cognitive and not-cognitive elements alike. “We also colour our experiences through our passions, feelings, intentions, interest and foci, so that we each have an idiosyncratic of shaping our experiences. In selecting, focusing, framing, organising, and ordering what we experience, conceptual schemes bracket and leave out data, and emotional and motivational foci taint or colour experience” [Werhane, (1999), p.57].

Werhane (1999, 2005, 2008) distinguishes among three types or qualities of moral imagination: reproductive, productive and creative moral imagination. Reproductive imagination consists of the awareness of:

1. the context, character, situation, event or dilemma at hand
2. the scheme and script that are functioning and role relationships in that context
3. the moral conflicts that might arise from the context, including dilemmas created at least in part by the dominating script or the situation itself.

It entails self-reflection about one’s situation, about one’s role. However, the human mind seldom rests on the particular; we almost always generalise about the concrete on the abstract level, so there is a second factor called productive imagination, that is triggered by the impartial spectator or the thin self in its critical mode. Usually there is some kind of ‘disengagement’ from one’s organisational or professional roles with the ability (and the possibility) to re-frame the situation, to imagine new possibilities within the scope of the given situation or role. Being imaginative entails not only awareness of a moral conflict but also awareness of a different mental model. Creative imagination or free reflection consists of developing morally acceptable alternatives, to envision and actualise possibilities which are not context-dependent, project a fresh scheme beyond the particular script (and the resulting biases) and critically evaluate our own and others’ points of view to generate adequate alternatives.

Indeed, there are different moralities in terms of professional roles, organisational roles and ethical principles of non-work-related roles and identities (like nationality, gender, religion, generation and social group) that may diverge. So, the fundamental question emerges: are there (no) moral principles outside of our roles? Could the practice of moral imagination offer a possible way out of the trap of (real or perceived) immoral expectations of our work roles?
2.3 Emotional labour

The term ‘emotional labour’ was coined by Hochschild (1983). In the ‘The bleeding heart’, Hochschild argues for three conditions for emotional labour to occur in a job.

1. the employees have to have face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with customers during work

2. there are certain emotional display rules that regulate key aspects of the interaction with the purpose of producing certain desired emotional states in customers – usually positive ones, like happiness, joy or hope, but perhaps eventually negative ones, like sadness or fear

3. the employer has different means for controlling these display rules, like training or performance evaluation systems.

Emotional labour is concerned with behaviour (acting) consistent with the emotions that are expected in the organisational role, usually related to situations where services are delivered to other persons (external clients or internal customers). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) differentiated between ‘surface acting’, ‘deep acting’ and ‘genuine or spontaneous acting’. Both surface and deep acting requires suppressing negative feelings, like aggression, guilt, shame, etc. Workers are told how to behave when customers are angry, or being rude to service staff; how much time they should wait before hanging up the phone, etc. The difference is, however, that acting on the surface requires one to suppress or consciously control his or her real feelings; in deep acting the service agent also evokes similar feelings in him or herself through using conscious manipulation (e.g., remembering previous personal experiences with the expected emotional content). ‘Genuine acting’ is defined when there is no need for emotional labour, because, in the situation, the naturally felt emotions coincide with those expected by the organisation.

But sincere expression of emotions and the latitude for self-expression will be positively associated with personal well-being. Customers’ perceptions of good service usually depend on more than a mechanical conformity to display rules, and whether the service staff conveys a sense of genuine sensitivity and concern. The establishment of such an emotional rapport (or resonance) cannot be mandated by the organisation. Often the ability of providing this service is constrained by resource limitations, quantitative demands, conflicting and ambiguous role demands from customers, peers and management.

Emotional reactions serve also a signal function, helping someone to make sense of and connect to the situation. Deep acting may distort these reactions, impair one’s sense of authentic self, and negatively influence well-being by ultimately leading to self-alienation as one loses touch with this authentic self. In the long run, this may impair one’s ability to experience genuine emotions (Ashforth, 1989). Even the perceived need to mask and rework authentic emotions in the workplace was positively associated with overall stress (Rutter and Fielding, 1988). Negative emotional effects often derive from the discrepancy between what is expected and what is experienced. Frequent repetition also tends to blunt emotions (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989). Prolonged surface and deep acting (emotive dissonance as a result of emotional work, inconsistent with a central, salient and valued social identity/ies) may corrode both the willingness and ability to perform emotional aspects of the work and undermine its functions. We suggest that the
constant high level of ‘surface acting’, ‘deep acting’ would eventually create a kind of emotional mask, which also blunts ethical sensibility.

2.4 Theoretical links among concepts – research presumptions

There are many characteristics of CCs (e.g., forced performance and time pressure, limited interactions, over-regulation and high level of control, etc.) that possibly generate ethical challenges for employees. These ethical difficulties and dilemmas are generated by the system and various organisational processes through the individuals’ role conflicts, and create negative emotional reactions, like ambiguity, fear, anger, shame and frustration. As those ‘undesirable’ emotions have to be controlled in CCs, employees have to perform emotional work, have to wear a ‘mask’. This kind of forced and controlled surface and deep level emotional work is causing further emotional difficulties, possibly leading to burnout, depersonalisation and alienation. In order to cope with these pressures, individuals and groups unconsciously develop coping mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms and practices applied to increased levels of burnout – alienation, corrosion of character (Sennett, 1998), and moral distancing – conserve and reproduce the systemic, ethical problems on cultural and individual levels, reinforcing the existing ‘culture’ in a vicious circle, creating special legitimacy for themselves.

The way out of this circle could be based on individuals (and small groups), who seek real solutions (instead of rationalisations) and are able to creatively reframe the situation, understand their mental models and emotional burden, and are able to support their direct environment, practicing moral imagination and offer potential ways out of the ethical traps. However the functioning of the moral imagination presupposes a sort of ‘deviance’, as it “allows us to be aware of both the conventional ways of being proscribed by our own culture (the standard ethical norms within an industry), as well as possibilities other than those that exist within our own culture (potential for deviation)” [Arnold and Hartman, (2005), p.346]. This has two important consequences:

1. we stated earlier that unethical behaviour may not be considered as deviant, now we may add that even deviant behaviour may be seen as ethical
2. moral imagination requires the individual to step out of the comfort zone – at least mentally – and to tolerate the frustration because of this.

But not everyone is willing to or able to do so.

Based on these presumptions, in our empirical study we would like to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the most characteristic ethical challenges, dilemmas connected to CC work of the given company?
2. What kind of relationship (if any) does exist between emotional labour and ethical dilemmas?
3. What kind of possible solutions do exist on individual and group level?
3 Research field – the brief history of the customer centre of the organisation

The company of this study underwent a major restructuring few years ago, by merging different regional companies in Hungary and combining their local networks, building a shared information system, standardising procedures and centralising different functional areas. The project targeted a new and unified organisational culture. The mergers and the subsequent structural reforms were intended as preparations for future industry deregulation and increasing market competition. The essence of these changes was that the production of services was targeted to be completely separated from their distribution and a physical network of a certain size and expertise needed to be developed as key competitive advantages.

The previously independent companies used to have a territorial monopoly and served mainly private customers with local personal customer services centres. Also, there was a direct and almost personal relationship among different organisational units (e.g., customer services and maintenance staff). The restructuring created separate legal entities for network planning and surveillance, network services (repair and maintenance), and customer services as main units. Sales and operational regulations were also separate entities, as well as some other common functions. The new units were managed by business objectives, KPIs, which often contradicted each other, with the main goal of pushing down operational costs (e.g., low inventory levels for network surveillance and short breakdown time for repairers), creating a very competitive climate among the different units.

Customer services were also restructured and centralised into a call centre and a few regional service offices, where personal contact with customers was still possible, though many local offices were closed. The call centre handled all incoming calls to the company’s helpline and the majority of mail and e-mail messages. Customers, who were used to local service staff, often could not imagine that they are talking to someone in another part of the country who does not know, for example, the name of the main street in their village.2

Customer service lost its connection not only to the customers but also to other local units within the company. The computerised work-flow and sophisticated IT systems which de-personalised decisions on maintenance or on establishing new points of service made personal contacts redundant and even impossible. Competition among different units as an unintended outgrowth of the performance targets created a lack of cooperation and frequent ‘scapegoating’. Call centre staff was seen as negligent, as not providing the necessary information, unreachable and unreliable. Throughout all this, the call centre had the lowest status in the organisation, as it was perceived a ‘dead-end street’ in terms of career paths. Call centre employees felt powerless towards the rest of the organisation, and frustrated because customers’ problems were not handled correctly, thus the same problems were happening repeatedly. They felt they had no influence on how procedures are run and new regulations put out. The call centre had the highest fluctuation rate in the company.

According to management diagnosis, high level of stress and low level of commitment were the main reasons for the terrible state of customer services. Our research group was asked to explore, explain the processes and offer possible solutions.
3.1 Research method, sampling

We use qualitative research methods (mainly interviews) in order to understand ethical aspects of CC work from different points of view. We conducted 80 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Taking part in the interviews was voluntary: we decided on certain locations (regions of the country, mixture of big cities and smaller towns), departments (specialised on some special customer groups or work tasks), and paid attention (also) to diversity (gender, age, lengths of time worked in the company), but otherwise we invited those employees and group leaders who had something to say. In spite of this invitation, distrust and fear were still present, as some of the interviewees have asked us not to tape-record their interviews.

Analysis of interview transcripts (whenever applicable) was related to their relation with customers and on their perceptions on how the organisation regulated and handled the ethical issues emerging in this relation. In our coding process first we identified 8 to 10 broad, general concepts as codes (e.g., emotional labour, burn-out, stress and ethical problems) based on the literature and on our experiences. With the help of these general, basic codes, we coded ten transcripts, and defined further sub-codes related to the basic codes. Some of them were still reflecting the concepts of the literature (e.g., the types of emotional work, as surface, deep, honest); some were truly generated by the interviews (e.g., types of ethical problems, as quotas, tricking of state regulation, bonus recalculation process). During and after the coding process we also wanted to find the patterns connecting our concepts.

4 Research results

4.1 Ethical dilemmas and problems connected to call centre work

When we started the research, we had some assumptions concerning the difficulties of CC work in general and the possible ethical dilemmas. During the interviews, step by step, we started to realise that those ethical tensions were very often present explicitly or implicitly when employees were talking about their workdays, their emotions, the stress experienced or the actions of others. We identified two groups of the antecedents of the typical ethical problems:

1 bureaucratic control mechanisms, quotas perceived as unrealistic, rules perceived as impossible
2 problems of communication with clients.

4.2 Bureaucratic control mechanisms, unrealistic quotas and impossible rules

The customer service work of a service provider company is strictly regulated by state laws in Hungary: for example there is an official deadline for answering incoming letters from customers (15 days), or a maximised waiting time at customer service offices (20 minutes). The company faces serious state penalty if it does not meet those requirements. Sometimes, though, these standards are impossible to meet under the given circumstances. The management acknowledges this fact as well. According to management rhetoric, complying with the law perfectly, without tricking would mean an
impossible financial burden to the company. There are calculations (frequently referred to by the management and also by the employees) that in order to provide the prescribed customer service the company would have to employ 30% to 50% more customer service employees. There are several strategies to cope with the lack of resources: there are tricky rule bending solutions, e.g., writing a postponing letter on the 15th day; or manipulating the time registering machine at the customer service offices, or opening the doors for shorter periods, not allowing the queue to get any longer. These various little routines are applied almost everywhere, it is a ‘natural part’ of the work to find creative solutions and produce the ‘figures’ expected by the state. In that sense, tricking the state regulation is an immanent part of the daily operation. Unattainable goals lead to unethical behaviour, which is not considered as a deviance.

But, interestingly enough, we witnessed a ‘spill-over effect’ as well. The unattainable goals allow the employees to start thinking about the demands, and to create a personal opinion about the achievability of certain goals. Sharing these opinions may lead to a mutual consent regarding the attainability of a variety of standards. As a consequence, even attainable goals may be perceived as impossible – and, as a coping mechanism, unethical behaviour arises. Thus, unrealistic goals may lead to unethical behaviour regarding the realistic goals as well. Employees are used to referring to some special cases (which are in fact a small minority of all cases), e.g., a very complex customer case which takes a long time to solve – to prove that the given law is ‘irrational’, so it is absolutely necessary and normal to bend it. This self-rationalisation process and rhetoric are present at employee and management levels as well.

Sometimes it is not the goals and standards themselves that are relevant regarding unethical behaviour, but their changes. Organisational processes and the organisation as a whole are frequently being altered: there are new procedures and regulations which even at the time of their creation were seen as being out of date or not fitting the existing practices – so the majority of employees ignore them. Some employees are willing to improve or correct these ‘not applicable’ regulations, but time pressure and ignorance by the environment/would/eventually force them to give up.

“I try to pay attention to complying with the regulations and standard procedures because it bothers me if I do not comply with them. The first part of the problem is that there are so many of them that you are not able to read or memorize them, so you cannot apply all of them. The flip side is that my efforts are in vain if the other departments of the company do not keep them. E.g. there were problems with public lighting, somebody wrote a regulation about the matter. I was glad about it and called the person who wrote it to ask for some clarification, but he told me that he could not help because it existed only in a written form, but in practice it would work differently. So they create a procedure which is rigid and alien from practice and everybody applies it differently (call centre employee).”

The most typical ethical problems are connected to performance norms (which are closely linked to the compensation-system). Customer service work is usually measured by performance quotas (e.g., expected numbers of certain procedures finished in one hour), which are calculated (and recalculated regularly) by the so-called support departments. Significant parts of time-norms are considered to be not only ‘challenging’, but also impossible to reach (e.g., it is only theoretically possible to complete the given procedure in the calculated time). This general perception is strengthened by the fact that the process of norm-calculation is not really clear (not accepted as just and fair), so
employees do not consider the process of determining norms just (clearly, they perceive it as procedural injustice).

At the other end, there are ‘easy’ performance norms: employees consider them as ‘just’ compensation for the impossible quotas and protect them from recalculation (and in that way they withhold their performance). Tricking with norms is perceived as ‘natural’ or ‘ethical’ to a certain level, but this exact point, the borderline of ethical or unethical action seems to be blurred and creates constant ambiguity.

“There are extreme quotas, which can be compensated for by other tasks. If somebody is given these impossible procedures, they just grin and bear it: it is just one of those days... (call centre employee).”

During our research there were some sudden dismissals at the company because of cheating. There was a questionable practice discovered that had been used in order to boost performance: the phones were dropped back ‘accidentally’ so customers had to start the whole process of calling all over again. First, the dropping back of the telephone receiver had happened genuinely by accident, but some workers discovered that there was no punishment after it. It actually ameliorated statistics, so it has become a practice among some of the call centre employees. When the management suddenly discovered it, anxiety and fear about further disciplinary procedures was evident. Employees were asking themselves: do I act, trick and behave in the accepted zone, or would I be punished for something? The cheaters were good performers, so good performance itself (and reached performance quotas) was questioned: are they the result of new and efficient tricks, personal luck or real performance? Management considered the cheating (e.g., tricking with phone calls) as simple employee deviance, without realising the overall pattern created by the organisation itself, i.e., the relativisation and corrosion of norms and rules in organisational processes.

“There are employees who could perform more, but they think that quotas are too high already, if I they performed better, the quotas would be raised further. So they are afraid of appearing to perform well, so it is a vicious circle (group leader).”

“So, after all, I’m (still) uncertain about myself: what will happen to me? Since the first termination I’ve been wondering if I have made some big mistake or something; but I couldn’t think of anything so I just cross my fingers and hope for the best (call centre employee).”

The ‘bad’ or ‘relative’ nature of rules was further strengthened by a recent (but not exceptional) modification of bonus payments. According to employee perception, the management changed the conditions and calculation of bonus payments ex-post, in order to pay employees less. Again, reasons and procedures of modification are blurred, so employees perceive that rules are flexible and can be changed any time as dictated by the management.

“They implemented such a strict bonus-rule that I think everybody feels that the main goal is to get out of paying people at all. Goals are absolutely impossible. In addition to that, we worked very hard last year and, at Christmas, they told us the news: for financial reasons bonuses were reduced to 25% [instead of the original 100%]. We were working like slaves, we were sweating, and after (all) that: ‘Sorry, you have worked in vain’. Although the company was still profiting... That’s all their thanks: after expecting us to sacrifice our family, take weekend shifts help in emergency situations (call centre employee).”
4.3 Problems of communication with clients

The other field of ethical problems is closely connected to the way information was provided to customers. It was a frequently recurring feeling among employees that when communicating with clients withholding information, providing misinformation or telling lies was an inmanent and natural part of their work. The main motivation behind that were loyalty (lies believed to be expected by the company), the cover up for other departments (their personal mistakes and failures, overburden and problems of different systems, e.g., billing system).

In order to handle these problems, individual (in some cases group level) coping patterns have developed.

“I believe that there are occasions at every company when you simply have to lie, you just cannot tell the truth... Just a very insignificant example when servicemen are late for an appointment for some reason. There might have been an unexpected failure somewhere (and that is the real reason of delay), but we automatically say that there is a serious transformer problem nearby and that servicemen have to stay there. These are patterns we use daily and automatically, so you don’t even think about it... (call centre employee).”

“So we had to beat around the bush. We lied, but finally the customer asked if I knew what had happened or not. So finally we lied and said that there was a system failure, instead of just admitting our stupidity (call centre employee).”

Behind these practices there are also self-protection processes: these lies are ‘/good/white’ or ‘merciful’ for everybody: customer service employees can hang up the phone, get the next one and reach the performance target, the customer calms down.

“We have to lie. Otherwise I could never hang up, and deal with the next call...because we have to meet the quotas... It’s not a good feeling, but it is our job... In practice, people learn to lie here... (call centre employee).”

“We have to come up with an explanation... With these lies I quiet them down, it’s good for me as well, because they don’t shout at me, so I try to calm them. It is the best thing for everybody (call centre employee).”

For some people, telling lies is not a problem (any more): alienation from customers could be one way to reach this ‘state’. People become ‘cases’; empathy is replaced by efficient case-handling (‘android feeling’). Others refer constantly to negative characteristics and behaviour of customers (e.g., they are cheating, they want to deceive them, they are rude) as a generalisation, and justify their own behaviour (e.g., telling lies to them). These self-defence mechanisms may protect them in the short term, but they erode moral sensibility step by step. For example, being rude to the customer directly is considered deviant action (the company is experimenting with a software tracking rude or unacceptable expressions used by CS staff) – but after you hang up, it is ok to shout and curse.

“Not telling the truth doesn’t cause me any problem or difficulty. If I constantly try to see the world from the customer’s point of view, we would never be able to work efficiently. So I understand them, I am emphatic, but this is the situation and that is it.”

“Step by step you become resistant. You have to hush up, lie and mislead all the time, you have no other choice. We have to be smart and cover ourselves in order to avoid failing (call centre employee).”
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“Because of the crisis and lack of money people are evil, malicious, envious, scornful, arrogant, and we get all of this from them. They treat us very badly, they don’t ask, they command... One customer said that I was a servant, a customer servant, so I should behave like one and serve him. I should jump to it if he says so... (call centre employee).”

As part of their daily work customer service employees face typical and recurrent situations which very often include ethical dilemmas (although not all of them identify those issues as moral dilemmas or explore the moral side of the dilemma). The most characteristic issues are connected to respect for rules, norms (and situations in which they are expected to disobey and trick) and also to the provision of information (or misinforming and covering up). Those practices are considered a natural part of the work. In order to protect themselves, to ease tension, reduce ambiguity and anxiety employees create explanations (moral rationalisation) and behavioural patterns (as practical application). But step-by-step, they are losing their sensibility and creativity. After a while, they give up on ethics and follow the procedures without any doubts. This is a kind of ‘moral burn-out’. As another side of the phenomenon, information channels between management and employees are blocked by a lack of trust: managers are not aware of the ethical tensions, and the naturalisation of rule breaking. Employees at the bottom of the hierarchy and their group leaders perceive that they haven’t got tools to change the situation or to modify rules and procedures.

4.4 Emotional work and its effects

The constant pressures in emotionally and morally demanding situations, the necessity to practice emotional work often leads to emotional outbreaks. Customer services employees talked about recurring situations when someone ‘could not take it any more’, and ‘lost control’, the others just acknowledge that he/she has to stop for a while and go to the back room and be alone for a while. Usually colleagues or managers respect these private ‘time-outs’, but usually this is what they call ‘social support’.

“Our telephone conversations are recorded and, in theory, there is this new system, watching automatically whether a CC staff member is getting angry. It may have been introduced last month. Actually, we haven’t had any feedback yet... We hear every day in this room that someone’s voice from the group can be heard, because he or she cannot take it anymore. It’s not about behaving more rudely to customers; I’m sure they would fire him or her immediately. But the tone of voice will be somewhat different, loath and louder.... Losing temper is something that happens here everyday... (call centre employee).”

The dominant mode is surface level emotional labour, with consequences like burnout sooner or later. We have found many early signs like depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion.

“You can get used to it after a while (or just find your way around it), but after a while you experience a certain apathy or lethargy, which makes people so isolated that they talk to each other about nothing but work... (call centre employee).”

“At the beginning, when I cut someone off, she just cried and told me about her problems and I felt: ’This is so terrible! I cannot help her!’ Well, I try to do something. But it wears off after a while. I feel numb now... (call centre employee).”
“We have ups and downs; sometimes it is very stressful, especially when I am blamed and it is not my fault and I cannot do anything about it. I can hardly wait to go home and cry or something (call centre employee).”

According to our hypothesis, the lack of creative emotional work together with ethical dilemmas also contributes to the mechanisms of burnout; they poison the time for leisure and recreation, as the suppressed, personally rooted negative feelings are taken home. How these tensions caused by ethical dilemmas at the workplace transgress work/life boundaries – and the way they are (subsequently) enacted in private settings depends on the personality of the employees (disturbed sleeping, spill-over to family members, etc.).

“When I go home and they see that I am tired and I just sit down and just stare ahead. I’m not tired physically at all, just mentally.”

“How long can this go on? I don’t know. I have been doing this for a year and a half. There is this colleague who has been doing it for 6 years already. It depends on your character and background. I have a very supportive family background. If I am crazy when I go home, they just let me be. This is a really big difference; if someone goes home into a family where things are upside down or to a family where they see that something is wrong and they help. Because if you go home irritated and then you get peeved there, too, you come to work irritated the next day and that can be fatal... (call centre employee).”

4.5 Patterns of moral imagination among group leaders

Group leaders of call centre units (usually leading 10 to 30 people) are often between two fires. They do not feel like a part of the management because they do not feel (and they are, in fact, not) involved in decision-making. But they are expected to stand for management decisions towards workers. At the same time, they are part of their small community, very often doing the actual call centre work in some part of their working time and experience the emotional burden and tensions.

“So I am in a vise. Although I do not agree personally with everything coming from management, I have to communicate it on the shop floor. So even if I could shout to top management that this or that is such a nonsense, you will see it later on, I also have to tell the workers later with a stone cold glare that this is our shared decision. Instead of motivating our staff we are taking away what little they have left (group leader).”

“Sometimes I feel that we are fighting for so many things that are invisible to them [the staff], because I also have my battles. I go from one wall to the other, and then, in the end... You know what’s the worst of all? At the end of the day you go there, and say, “I’ve done my best, here you are,” and the answer is: ‘Well, it’s high time! (group leader).’”

During our research we identify group leaders, as those employees who could possibly be able to produce morally imaginative solutions. Practicing moral imagination is very hard when there is only a little (or practically no) room for decision-making authority or for free choice. For the lowest level in the hierarchy, the individual’s opportunities to critically relate to one’s role and to previously existing patterns are quite limited. However, there seems to be more strength at community level, and leadership within the group can provide role models, reframe the situation and develop new patterns. In the last part of the research results we introduce three (although not entirely successful) emergent patterns of what we would call ‘morally imaginative group leadership’.
4.5.1 A leader who re-shaped the identity of the group

One solution to break free from the ethics trap is to re-frame the function of the call centre and develop new patterns. One of the coordinators when received his appointment, as a condition of accepting it, asked for special licenses for his group (e.g., a different and more flexible performance management system, based mainly on qualitative measures, special selection processes and flexible shifts). He defines himself mainly as a leader (focusing on relationships, not on tasks; emphasising his supportive function as a mentor), and he encourages his team to share their problems. He says “these 17 people are my customers”. Based on his efforts and some special allowances, he has managed to change the subculture of his group, provide genuine community support, and alter some characteristics of the customer service function (e.g., he emphasises long-term, quality relationships).

“In my group there was a woman – I could say that she has a lot of experience (she is relatively old). She had a really terrible time; she had depression and was taking medication. But I wanted to have her in my group, because I knew that she had enormous professional knowledge and she was very precise. So I chose her. She changed completely, took a 180-degree turn and has no more problems, gave up the medication, too. Now she is /part of/ the heart and soul of the group... The climate is very good and you can work much more efficiently in a happy and healthy group... The other point is that when I felt that a decision (that came from management and which I had to represent) was not acceptable, I tried to change it...It is not a problem for me to let someone go home earlier if he/she has something important to do. In other groups, it is impossible to leave half an hour earlier. I trust them – they will make up for it later. I do not have to control everything. Trust is vital here.... I believe that one of the main tasks of a group leader is to provide service to his/her employees, so I always try to grant their requests, search for alternatives, influence decisions in order to give them support... (group leader).”

Paradoxically, although he and his results are acknowledged (he was awarded various prizes for outstanding performance), his methods are not implemented elsewhere. He perceived that management treat him as an ‘exotic experiment’, and accept his results. But his group (and his patterns) remain separated.

4.5.2 A leader who tried to re-shape the group quota

Some months before the interviews took place the performance appraisal system changed in a way that the group quota would then be based on the monthly average number of calls. The reason for this – according to some of the employees – was as follows: with an absolute norm workers were less efficient, i.e., once they had reached their quotas there was no incentive to exceed the norm. In the new system those who exceeded the average of the group by 10% could earn 10% more than those who were below 90%. As a consequence, the question of quality versus quantity has currently become more of an issue in the call centre. One of the coordinators – who had recently returned from maternity leave – explained the situation as a vicious circle created by performance pressures.

“We cannot meet customers’ expectations because of the quantitative criteria and this way we generate a lot of surplus for ourselves... If we listened to customers properly, they [customer service staff] would not complain because it would be only 10 out of the 90 calls a day that would ‘shout’ and that’s it.
This should be our target and it would return gradually as we would not have to write letters three times and they would not call about the fourth... There was a customer who told us that if he did not get the answer by the promised date, he would send an email every hour. And he started sending emails every hour...

(group leader).

Some of the employees also shared this attitude. They usually belonged to the less outstanding and lower-paid performers on the basis of their statistics in the group. The group leader – who is responsible for a group of 30 people – silently (unofficially) agitated group members to go back to ‘real customer service’ standards and spend as much time with customers as they actually needed in order to re-define the quota based on the number of calls actually well-handled. She was aware that this act was against the word of policy and maybe even company interest, but she was convinced that this solution would be more in line with the primary task of customer services.

“This could be evidence that the quota cannot be kept anymore.... But how are people really? ‘I have to do it, I have to do it! They do not say: “OK, let’s sacrifice two weeks’ or a month’s (work and wages), form an alliance in the group and strive for quality together. (Let’s) measure what we can do properly, without cutting corners, and let that be the quota and work accordingly (group leader).”

Interestingly, the main resistance came from the group itself. People in the group who took advantage of the current situation were hesitant. Others feared the retaliation that was expected to come when top management discovered the coup. They were afraid that top management would not see any short-term, positive effect in customer satisfaction, but would measure declining numbers of calls per employee and ultimately fire members of the group.

“What do they see? We go this way, we go that way, one day they shall do this and the next the opposite. Usually, they do not see that we make these changes because they were complaining about the process and made some suggestions. They tend to see that things are changing again but do not want to know why, even if they were the ones who requested it. They do not want to understand the reasons. So I feel that they have lost faith in the managers after all these constant changes and they do not see the positive side (group leader).”

As an attempt to go against the main trend, it seemed to be a morally courageous and revolutionary step. She tried to convince her fellow coordinator colleagues to advocate the same in their respective groups and she was surprised by the apathy found among them as well.

4.5.3 A leader who actually was not a group leader

A more optimistic pattern was discovered in a special role of another group. His job involved a kind of internal help-desk or support. As one of his colleagues stated: if customers ‘insist on talking to a manager’, he is usually the one to whom they are transferred. As it turned out from the interview with this colleague of his, he has a ‘knowledge sharing forum’ every Friday morning, one-on-one, (as the service has to go on undisturbed) which has been found to be very helpful for the group. He was introduced as a very modest person to us and actually he did not mention the above-mentioned meetings himself; we had to ask about it at the end of the interview.
“Yes, this is my initiative and I’m the one who is facilitating it but I hope to invite more people as I’m not the only one who has some knowledge to be shared with others. Actually, I was bored with telling things one-on-one and then we came up with this. We agreed with my boss and finally the head of the CS department authorised it. And this is really useful. I do not really understand why it didn’t exist before – it could do no harm to other groups – but we really needed it because it is tremendously difficult otherwise...Although we said it before, we probably needed the sky to fall on our heads before they finally agreed and now it is clear that we should have done it before. Our group works very well now, if other groups worked like this group, CS would not be a bad job at all... (call centre employee).”

He was very ambivalent regarding the role of a manager; he defined himself as an informal leader who has to consult with his formal leader in situations that require a formal decision. He described his role in terms of finding new and creative solutions for the dilemmas that customer services workers face daily, finding some workable and ethically acceptable solutions for paradoxical problems when, for example, legal regulations contradict internal rules, internal communication problems, etc. Part of his hesitation to thinking about becoming a manager was that without all the details of the problems as well as the information he perceived to be needed to understand the complexity of the situations (similarly to his perceiving his own boss), he would not be able to help in finding solutions. As we talked about it further, it turned out that he did not want to become part of the culture of the organisation and did not intend to pursue a career in it. So this seemed to be an ethical issue for him.

“And we would need similar talks among our departments and organization to the ones we have at these ‘knowledge sharing meetings’. What should be accepted, how far should we go or how to understand the law and our own policies in the practice, what our position should be on certain issues that have appeared in calls recently. It is really important that we have a unified position on that. It is difficult, but when they ask back and they are encouraged to ask back, I can say that I do not know something yet, or that this is a very good question, let’s ask further questions and go higher... Dialogues like this do not happen at this company at other levels (call centre employee).”

What he meant by ‘higher’ was about taking responsibility and authority, to empower themselves more fully, because they are the ones that have all the necessary information and can put it together. He was also aware that there are certain boundaries in terms of ratification, but they have to prepare the proposal for decision-makers at strategic levels. For him, the goal was to establish a dialogue and initiate a creative thinking process. Exactly that was what the previous manager was lacking. What makes the difference seems to be social support in terms of dialogue and reflection on emotional and ethical dilemmas together, which ultimately makes moral imagination possible.

5 Summary

Finally, we would like to summarise the interpretations, learning points concerning our original research questions.
5.1 What are the most characteristic ethical challenges, dilemmas connected to CC work of the given company?

In our research we identified two characteristic groups of ethically questionable issues: they are:

1. problems based on bureaucratic control mechanisms (e.g., overregulation diminishes personal conscience and responsibility; the impossible performance targets encourage employees to cheat; situations in which they are expected to disobey and trick)

2. the problems of communication, provision of information (e.g., telling lies as part of the workplace role, misinforming and covering up).

The identified phenomena are clearly reflecting the suggestions of the literature (Crane and Matten, 2007; Trevino and Weaver, 2003). First, the lack of transparency is clearly present in the quota calculation process (e.g., performance norms are often impossible to perform, and are calculated by outside experts), in the regulation process (e.g., some regulations are not applicable in practice) or in the arbitrary modification of the compensation system. This obscurity influences the acceptance of the explicit requirements of the systems and, at the same time, it legitimises the manipulation of these requirements, the possibility of bending the ‘rules of the game’. This perceived legitimisation is further supported by the management’s rhetoric about the ‘inevitable economic necessity’ to evade state regulation. The subculture of the direct environment, the everyday practice of peer groups strengthens this perception further: everybody is doing the same, so tricking and rule bending is normal. Furthermore, the definition of ethical or unethical behaviour, the moral expectations of call centre work (e.g., helping customers vs. efficient case handling) remain unclear and unexplained and, based on that, the possible rewards for ethical behaviour, or sanctions for unethical (or deviant) behaviour are incalculable, uncertain and unpredictable.

Secondly, job characteristics as constant time pressure, dependence on other departments, autocratic control mechanisms, and little room for individual choice are clearly strengthening the feeling of powerlessness and are eroding the perception of personal responsibility. There is little room to voice their concern, so they are basically left alone with ethical dilemmas (or guided by the compensation system which emphasises quantitative performance targets).

Thirdly, (but not independently from the previous arguments) there is an evident conflict in the nature of the call centre job itself: contradiction between the help and support function of customer service work (which would mean quality service and complete solutions to customers and qualitative performance expectations of employees) and regulation (to provide the most efficient and cost effective level of service while avoiding state penalties). This basic paradox is reflected by the performance management system, which has emphasised mainly quantity (number of incoming calls, customers or e-mails answered). The incentive system rewarded only superficial treatment of customers (creating personal and system level ethical dilemmas, as mentioned before). These ethical dilemmas were breeding further unethical solutions like falsifying records, tricking the telephone system and telling lies to customers).
Individual ethical dilemmas are very often left unsolved, masked, put aside and reproduced later. On the basis of that, some stages in the relationship of ethical dilemmas and emotional work could be identified. At the first stage, questionable ethical practices increase tension, uncertainty, ambiguity, which have to be masked again increasing the level of emotional work. At that stage the individual might try to find some creative solutions, looking for support from his/her peers or leader, and/or tries to reduce the tension (e.g., by shouting, or bringing problems home). But if he/she is not able to solve the problem adequately and the same situations, actions come again, the semi-solutions (e.g., tricking, telling lies) become habits. At the second stage, the intensity of tension is reduced step by step; the questionable practice becomes the normal part of everyday work reflecting implicit norms of the subculture of the group. This could lead to the final stage where the applied defence mechanisms (e.g., rationalisation, naturalisation and acceptance of role morality) become socially accepted ways of coping, leading to the loss of ethical sensibility and creating a kind of moral burnout: the one-time ethically questionable practices become unquestionable.

5.3 What kind of possible solutions do exist on individual and group level?

We identified various forms of individual defence mechanisms. Employees very often rationalised their actions explaining in detail that they had no choice. The case of ‘white’ or ‘merciful’ lies is a good example: they explained that telling a lie was basically useful for everybody: customer service employees can hang up the phone, get the next one, and reach the performance target, the customer calms down, so it is a good solution. They usually accepted and used management’s (as authority) rhetoric, arguments (as ‘truth’) about the economic necessity of rule bending. In fact, the majority of call centre employees accepted the inevitability of role morality of their work and spoke about unethical practices as immanent and natural part of their work.

In emotionally demanding situations we identified the tactics of demonising customers (i.e., referring constantly to negative characteristics and behaviour of customers) alienation of customers (human beings have become ‘cases’; empathy is replaced by efficient case-handling), which, in the end, causes a kind of moral distancing.

Looking for more optimistic strategies we investigated group leaders’ morally imaginative patterns. We could identify some group-level solutions in which group leaders were able to redefine the identity of the group, modify the repressing conditions, provide real social support, reframe problems and fight with burnout and loss of moral sensibility. The question remains: how is it possible to develop those group level solutions into corporate level solutions and, in the long run, modify the culture of lies?

6 Final chapter – is there a ‘happy ending’?

Employees in our study often ironically referred to themselves as ‘androids’ that do not need to feel much, and to their work as something that will eventually be replaced by computers. Although CCs are typical workplaces of our days, do they necessarily have to
be inhuman and amoral places as well? The question remains to be answered: how is it possible to survive there as human beings?

In our paper, we intended to show how ethically questionable organisational practices of CCs are leading to relativisation of ethical standards, moral burnout and the conservation of the unethical side of organisational culture. But does top management know about these practices and processes, do managers sense the ethical dilemmas and care about them, or really treat employees as androids?

In our research project the situation was especially tricky: the question of ethical dilemmas was not in the focus of the top management of the company. As a first reaction they treated it as a kind of ‘academic fancy’ of ours. At the end of the research project they were truly shocked for several reasons. They were shocked by the fact that we defined ethical issues as a significant phenomenon; discussing moral issues in management meetings was definitely not part of the organisational culture [the company was definitely ‘morally mute’, as Bird (2005) addressed it]. At the conclusion of our presentation they were emotionally moved by the quotations of employees (e.g., ‘not telling the truth doesn’t cause me any problem or difficulty’) and by our interpretations about the system level reproduction of ethical dilemmas and moral burnout. Still, their willingness or readiness to change the main cause of the situation is questionable.

We felt a strong sense of responsibility (and a need for moral imagination in terms of redefining the original scope of the research) to include the voices of employees who have very little chance or willingness to speak up for themselves, the voice of thousands of CC employees at other companies feeling treated as androids, and also our responsibility to voice ethical issues in management research and facilitate ethical awareness in the management. There is some hope that the positive patterns of group leaders who could preserve their moral imagination will finally reach top management and, based on their messages, they could initiate a different dialogue with the organisation. Maybe identifying these phenomena, pointing to those unethical features of corporate culture helps to create a more ethical and still productive organisation.

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References


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Notes

1. The research was conducted during 2010, at Corvinus University of Budapest. The company in which the research has taken place has asked for anonymity, so without defining the business field it should be stressed that its services are so important that the possibility of lacking them (due to the disruption of the network or switching off services as a sanction for not paying bills) affects deeply the well-being of customers and elicits high levels of stress and anxiety from the customers.

2. One frequent administrative mistake was ‘main street’ being entered into the computer system and maintenance not being able to find such street in the village.

3. All quotations are from the transcripts of interviews: they are translations of the original Hungarian text.