Control and social relations in a small contact-centre

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the managerial control mechanisms used in a small Greek contact-centre parallel to the role of social relations in obscuring or promoting employee consensus. The research findings are inconsistent in many respects with findings from previous studies on call and contact centres, especially those originating from liberal market economies (LMEs). The study shows how inter-personal conduct may create a paradox that serves both management and employee needs in a conflicting yet complementary way. In particular, it shows how management achieves social cohesion through fraternal strategies by giving CSRs responsible autonomy aiming to secure moderate employee commitment.

Keywords: contact centre; call centre; work organisation; management control; SME; Greece.

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1 Introduction

Call and contact centres are the front-line of the customer-company relationship. Whilst these two terms are frequently used interchangeably they do relate to two different types of centres, with contact-centres using a wider array of customer communication forms. The exploratory work presented here forms parts of a wider research project, where six contact-centres of dissimilar size, nationality, and sector were studied. It draws qualitative evidence from a small size contact-centre in the Greek telecommunications
sector with the aim to examine the control mechanisms used in this workplace and the role of social relations in obscuring or promoting employee consensus.

The rationale for conducting this study is twofold. First, much has been written about contact-centre work in large firms (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2006; Wickham and Collins, 2004) but very little from a small firm perspective (Kinnie et al., 1999), especially outside LMEs. This tendency in research is interesting in the light of claims that 20 million small-to-medium size enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the European economy, representing 99% of all enterprises in the EU and providing around 65 million jobs (EIRO, 2006). Second, this body of work has often focused on the more negative aspects of centre operations by emphasising the cost-reduction logic in production-line call-centres (Bain et al., 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2006). A gap in this literature is the lack of interest in the way social relations may shape the contact-centre labour process. This study stresses the role of customer-orientation and social relations in shaping a non-Taylorised contact-centre environment.

Some management studies in SMEs have pointed out the role of social relations in influencing day-to-day work practices (Clear and Dickson, 2005; Dundon and Wilkinson, 2003). Similar to the contact-centre literature, this strand of research is predominantly Anglo-Saxon driven and has largely exemplified the patriarchal and autocratic SME (Holiday, 1995; Rainbow, 1989; Saini and Budhwar, 2008). This study shows how management can be complex, informal, and contradictory in a distinctive setting, that of a contact-centre, where there is scarcity of research from an SME perspective. To this end, Holman et al. (2007) work showed that CSRs in larger size contact-centres tend to have lower levels of job discretion and higher levels of performance monitoring. However, that research relied only on management’s views, thus it isolated any potential discrepancies between formal managerial strategies and the informal organisation of the contact-centre. This study considers the experiences of CSRs parallel to management’s views and looks at both formal (managerial control strategies) and informal (social relations) processes in the contact-centre labour process.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by elucidating the concept of managerial control, then reviewing research into contact-centre employment, and subsequently introducing the theoretical/empirical insights from the debate on management approaches in SMEs. The next sections present the methodology of the study and then the research findings. Finally, a series of implications and a research agenda for the development of further work in this field is outlined.

2 Control

Within the labour process, control refers to the managerial strategies used in determining the organisation of work in the pursuit of organisational objectives (Thompson, 1989). It can be a ‘focus of conflict’ and ‘a basis for achieving cooperative effort’ that management may use in an overtly way or through means of ideological persuasion [Child, (1984), p.169]. In this respect, Fox (1974) proposed two managerial strategies. Coercion where management relies on an overt exercise of naked power to force workers to do its will; and consent where management exercises power in less direct ways to
engineer voluntary compliance to a decision/policy. Coercion is usually embodied in low-trust and low-discretionary job roles through direct supervision, quality control, discipline, standard operating procedures and stringent rules. In contrast, a consent strategy rests upon reciprocal goodwill. Management exercises a diffuse concern over its employees by taking into account their moral/physical welfare, and workers return a diffuse loyalty.

Similarly, Friedman (1977) posited two types of managerial strategy. Responsible autonomy attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm. In contrast, direct control aims to limit the scope for labour power through Taylorist techniques. Edwards (1986) also distinguished between detailed control (who controls all the decisions about the details of work tasks) and general control (compliance and consensus). Edwards (1979) also identified three necessary elements of detailed control: pace/direction of work, monitoring/evaluation of performance, and reward/discipline of workers. These elements are associated with three types of control: simple control (the owner-manager exercises personal power through the enforcement of strict discipline and the absence of formal rules); technical control (the machinery directs the labour process); and bureaucratic control (hierarchical power directs the social structure of the labour process).

The next section contextualises the concept of control within the contact-centre literature.

3 Contact-centre work

Contact-centre work can be designed to maximise job discretion or it can be turned into a set of repetitive, routinised, and highly scripted tasks. This depends upon the organisation’s objectives: should the firm maximise call volume and minimise costs or should the firm compete on the quality of its service? Korczynski (2002) argued that contact-centre work is infused with two competing logics: a requirement to be cost efficient and a desire to be customer-oriented. He noted that though variations exist there is a trend away from cost minimisation. Frenkel et al. (1998) stressed the customer-orientation element, believing that the need for quality of customer interaction renders restrictive management control strategies redundant. Shire et al. (2002) also believed that the need to be customer-oriented does impose real limits on the degree of service standardisation/routinisation.

Other studies have presented quite a different image of contact-centre work and drew parallels to assembly lines in the head with Big Brother management exercising total control (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Here work is characterised as ‘low-discretionary’ and ‘low-trusted’ due to high levels of ‘technical’ (through ACDS technology), ‘bureaucratic’ (institutionalisation of hierarchical power) and ‘detailed’ control (work tasks are standardised) [Koskina, (2006), p.171]. This strand in the literature emphasised the cost-reduction or profit-maximising logic. It recognised that while there are differing levels of heterogeneity in contact-centres, Taylorised production-line call centres proliferate within Anglo-Saxon economies (Bain et al., 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Taylor et al., 2002; Wickham and Collins, 2004) and even within developing economies, like India (Taylor and Bain, 2006).
The Taylorist argument is also supported by the contact-centre management models proposed by Batt and Moynihan (2002) and Hutchinson et al. (2000). These models stress the inescapable tension between customer-orientation and cost-efficiency, suggesting that these two logics are prominent in the marketplace and co-exist within a common low-discretion regime. Here, CSRs are subject to tight qualitative/quantitative monitoring and the imposition of performance targets of all kinds. The pessimistic line of reasoning in contact-centre research derives largely from studies of the atypical (large size and Anglo-Saxon) contact-centre. Indeed, much has been written about contact-centre employment in large firms but very little from an SME perspective (Kinnie et al., 1999); although here little attention has been devoted to the control and organisation of contact-centre work. To this end, previous research has shown that control in different workplace cultures is afforded different meanings and may become an issue in negotiations over everyday practice in contact-centres (Ball and Margulis, 2011). This tends to be atypical of the management approaches employed in most SMEs.

4 Management approaches in SMEs

Much of the 1980s/1990s literature in SMEs tended to oversimplify the management approaches found among these firms into one of two polarised perspectives (cf., Wilkinson, 1999). The first has been described as small is beautiful (Bolton, 1971), in which close, friendly and harmonious working relationships are facilitated through informal communication flows, greater flexibility and low levels of conflict. This perspective sought to take issue with the industrial harmony thesis, suggesting that employees in SMEs exhibit a high degree of attachment to the workplace predominantly for non-material reasons. The second perspective, that small is not beautiful (Rainnie, 1989), argues that the image of harmony serves to obscure exploitative practices in small firms. Goss (1991) maintained that management style in SMEs fuels an illusion of social harmony and proposed four types of employer control: fraternalism (employers act as first amongst equals); paternalism (inegalitarian and hierarchical relationships based on duty and obligation); benevolent autocracy (clear differentiation between employer-manager and employees); sweating (direct and coercive control upon the workforce).

Ram (1994) and Holiday (1995) focused on the importance of the family in shaping social relations in SMEs. Here managerial ideology, market conditions and a familial culture are of particular importance in shaping day-to-day life in the workplace. This has been described as negotiated paternalism because owner-managers are often dependant on employees, and demonstrate an important and contested frontier of control through forms of direct and individual bargaining. Ram and Holiday (1993) explained that informality is the key to understanding the co-existence of high-trust and struggle in SMEs. Ram et al. (2001, p.846) defined this informality as “a process of workforce engagement, collective and/or individual, based mainly on unwritten customs and the tacit understandings that arise out of the interaction of the parties at work”.

Recent work identified a continuing informal approach to the way in which employees are managed in SMEs (Marlow, 2002a, 2002b; Taylor, 2005). There is evidence to suggest that informality can be associated with feelings of both good and ill. On the positive side, empirical studies have stressed the advantage of implicit as opposed to explicit contracts (Guest and Conway, 1999; Nadin and Cassell, 2007) as well as the benefits of high-trust relationships (Goffee and Scase, 1995) in SMEs. Some other reports
have highlighted the positive perceptions of workers in SMEs in relation to job satisfaction, job discretion, and work intensity (Forth et al., 2006; Guest and Conway, 1999; Kersley et al., 2006). The case against this optimistic account is that SMEs may manage workers in ways that are authoritarian, dictatorial and exploitative (Holiday, 1995; Rainnie, 1989; Saini and Budhwar, 2008). Research has shown that in the absence of formal procedures managers are able to fashion working relationships to their own advantage through highly informal working practices and poor implementation of employment legislation (Burtless, 2001; Edwards et al., 2003; EIRO, 2006; Forth et al., 2006; Ram et al., 2001; Saini and Budhwar, 2008).

Despite a resurgence of interest in SMEs over recent years, research outside the Anglo-Saxon regime has said little about these firms (Ram and Edwards, 2003), especially in relation to employee perceptions and attitudes (Forth et al., 2006). Given this, the aim of this study is to examine how work is managed and experienced within a small size Greek contact-centre, from the perspective of both management and CSRs. In particular, the study looks at the managerial control strategies employed in the case-study and the role of social relations in shaping the contact-centre labour process.

5 Methodology

The exploratory nature of the research sought for a case-study design in order to get a holistic and in-depth understanding of the dynamics present within a real life context (Yin, 1994). The case-study organisation, Telnet (fictitious name), is a rapidly growing Greek internet service provider, which is currently ranked in the top ten national telecommunications companies. It has a total of 28 employees, of whom the vast majority (86%) is engaged in CSR roles. It consists of three main divisions, customer care (D1), technical support (D2) and billing (D3).

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with different levels of management and CSRs. Management interviews aimed at eliciting background information on the company and the contact-centre in line with issues pertaining to the control of CSRs. Employee interviews aimed at collecting data on the CSRs’ job and their views on a number of areas, like their supervisors, the work environment and their job. Each interview lasted about one hour (some interviews lasted longer), was tape-recorded and took place in a private room at Telnet’s premises. Given the exploratory case-study design of the research non-random self-selection sampling was used and all participants were contacted directly by the researcher. In total, 23 interviews were completed: four interviews with different levels of management (two with senior management and two with line management); nineteen interviews with CSRs (13 CSRs in D1, two CSRs in D2, four CSRs in D3).

Data were analysed in line with King’s (1998) template analysis. The research findings were grouped into a hierarchical order (high-order and lower-order codes) with the aid of themes that were identified in the literature and covered in the interviews and questionnaires. Prior to this, the evidence from interviews was initially analysed with the aid of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) data reduction technique. This process enabled data condensation through selecting, focusing, simplifying and abstracting the evidence according to relevance of the analytical codes in the thematic template. Next, by using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) flip-flop technique data were turned upside-down to obtain a
different perspective on relevant themes (e.g., employee attitudes were initially categorised into positive, negative, and neutral).

6 Findings

The findings are structured around five themes. The first theme outlines the context in which CSR work is performed. It presents the variety of CSR roles in Telnet and explains the nature of service that employees are required to deliver to customers. The second theme looks at the extent to which CSR roles are discretionary in relation to scripting rules and efficiency mechanisms. The third theme focuses on the degree to which CSR work is monitored and controlled in terms of qualitative and quantitative performance. The fourth theme presents CSR perceptions of job satisfaction and fairness. The final theme portraits the nature of Telnet’s familial culture.

6.1 Context of CSR work

6.1.1 CSR role

As depicted by the contact-centre literature it is important to recognise from the outset that there is considerable variety in contact-centre work. The major determinants of this variety are the extent to which calls involve responses to quantitative and/or qualitative customer transactions. At Telnet, calls in D1 involved predominantly qualitative responses, in D2 quantitative, and in D3 a mixture of qualitative and quantitative responses. CSRs in D1 and D2 received inbound calls in relation to customer care (e.g., internet packages and services, upgrades, complaints) and technical support (e.g., set up dial-up/broadband accounts, connection/browsing issues). CSRs in D3 were in charge of customer accounts through outbound (e.g., chasing outstanding balances) and inbound (e.g., billing enquiries) calls. CSRs’ work also involved non-telephony interaction with customers (e.g., post, fax and web) and administration.

6.1.2 Customer-orientation versus cost efficiency

All Telnet employees and irrespective of their role were expected to pay particular attention to the provision of service that meets customer needs and requirements. When different levels of management were asked whether efficiency or quality was preferred, though they presented various factors on the list of their priorities, one point kept recurring. This was that there is a need for a customer-oriented service within all departments. The Senior Manager stressed the company’s expectations for all employees to be quality-oriented:

> The way you approach the customer plays a significant role not only on keeping the clients satisfied through the provision of efficient technical support and the resolution of conflicts but also on chasing outstanding payments and retaining both bad creditors and unhappy customers. (Senior Manager)

Quality was seen as being really important in all forms of transactions and especially in complex situations, like customer complaints and outstanding balances. Here CSRs, as the two team-leaders commented, were expected to ‘spend time with the customer’. CSRs across all divisions emphasised that “it doesn’t matter how long a call lasts … what it
matters is how you deal with a customer”. These remarks in line with the following comment emphasise the importance of CSRs’ role in shaping customer attitude and action in line with the organisational objective described by the Senior Manager above.

> It is up to us whether customers will be convinced or dissuaded … happy or dissatisfied. With good ones you have to be pleasant and helpful … with bad ones you need to show empathy … be patient and apologetic … with really bad ones you have to be assertive and if required intimidated! (CSR3:D3)

It follows from these accounts that Telnet CSRs are expected to take ownership of customer transactions and to adapt to situations in a manner beneficial to the firm. It is interesting, however, how CSRs handled customer queries in a manner beneficial to them rather than to the firm. CSRs appeared to be selective in the provision of service according to personal judgement and preference. For example, CSR5 and CSR1 below chose not to spend time with the customer, thus to lose potential new clients and even existing ones.

> If [new] customers are polite, I’ll spend time with them … if customers are picky then I tell them that we do not offer what they want. (CSR5:D1)

> This morning I had to deal with someone who doesn’t have Internet provision for the past four weeks … he was really angry and requested for immediate resolution of the problem otherwise he would switch to another provider … I just told him that this is what he should do. (CSR1:D2)

On the other hand, ‘efficiency’ was seen as being important only in those occurrences where CSRs had to deal with simple issues, like directory enquiries. Here CSRs, were expected to engage in ‘brief conversations with customers’ (Team Leader 1) and ‘deal with a large number of calls if possible’ (Team Leader 2). CSRs also stressed the need for customer interactions of a short duration in straightforward enquiries. As CSR12 in D1 commented, “you don’t have to spend more than five minutes for straightforward enquiries, like updating customers’ records … it is often no more than a simple thank you”. Furthermore, those CSRs who engaged with inbound calls emphasised their discretion on the number of customer queries that they dealt with. As CSR2 in D2 suggested, “we receive numerous calls … of course we do not always respond to all calls … customers are put in a queue … we are left to get on with our job … we take our time!” The issue of job discretion is discussed in more detail below.

### 6.2 Control and job discretion

#### 6.2.1 Customer-orientation (qualitative CSR work)

In all the departments, scripting rules were virtually non-existent and far from distinguishing CSRs’ spark of self-direction and spontaneity. The following kind of remark was common amongst managers and employees alike.

> You have to decide how to present yourself … how to handle a particular call … how to answer a question … how to lead a discussion … it’s up to you really how to deal with customers! (CSR13:D1)

CSRs in D3 used a transcript ‘only’ during their induction and then it was at their discretion whether to use their judgement and take responsibility for meeting customer needs:
I’ve never worked in customer services before … transcripts in my case are more of a threshold to give me an idea on the key questions that need to be asked, such as flexible payments, rather than stringent guidelines that need to be followed in my interaction with customers. (CSR2:D3)

In D1 and D2 there was no transcript. In D2, CSRs utilised an electronic system that included a customer database and guidelines on technical related issues. In D1, CSRs used the same customer database in line with a printed manual with all the products/services provided by Telnet. The rational behind the no use of transcript is that ‘customer requirements are highly variable, thus, they cannot be met by standardised and tightly scripted conversational rules’ (Team Leader 1). In management’s view, scripted dialogues and routinised responses may not only impair the service that is provided to the customer but also undermine individuals’ ability to perform efficiently in their role:

Scripts do not allow employees to think … they underestimate their ability to provide a high quality service … our people are not broadcasters but individuals, who need to communicate freely with our customers … we have faith in their ability to do their job effectively … scripts are not necessary.

This comment signifies a rather unusual managerial mindset that acknowledges, values and, most importantly, trusts employees in exercising judgement and using subjective interpretation to meet customer needs. In employees’ view, the emphasis on customer-orientation meant care/empathy about customers and their needs/problems as well as an indication of what management and other colleagues would perceive as a ‘good’ CSR. The most representative comments in this regard are presented below.

My job is to response to customers’ individual needs … you need to be compassionate and able to understand their needs and problems. (CSR12:D1)

I don’t see the point of reading a script when I have to deal, for example, with a customer complaint … each customer is different! Scripts are for those people who do not have a genuine interest in their work or whose ability to do the job is questioned. (CSR4:D1)

If follows from these accounts that the lack of scripting rules at Telnet aims to provide CSRs with greater autonomy, to enable them to display wider skills, and to utilise discretion to meet customer demands. This suggests that management gives employees authority and responsibility to deal with customer transactions.

6.2.2 Efficiency (quantitative CSR work)

Regarding efficiency, there were no restrictions on the ‘length’ of calls, ‘wrap’ and ‘idle’ time:

Calls may vary from a couple of seconds to over half an hour … each customer is different … each customer transaction is different … there is no need to put time pressures on our people … they know how to handle each call and how much time to spend with each customer … if there are any problems me and Helen are always here to help. (Team Leader 1)

When CSRs were asked whether they felt constrained by time pressures they responded:

That’s a rather funny question you’re asking … I don’t see why I should feel this way … I am not afraid to leave my desk … when I need to go to the toilet or for a coffee break I just go as long as there is someone else to cover my calls and there’s always a colleague to do that for me. (CSR6:D1)
It’s up to you really how long to spend with a customer … there are no such things as time limits. (CSR11:D1)

How quickly you handle each call really depends on your experience and not on management’s pressures. (CSR1:D2)

These comments highlight once more the relative high job discretion of Telnet’s CSRs as flexibility is not only associated with virtually non-existent scripting rules but also with relaxed call handling times and autonomy on how they extol the virtues of customer service. This stresses the high level of control that CSRs have over the timing of their work and the methods they could use. The next section examines the extent to which CSR work and performance is monitored.

6.3 Control and performance

6.3.1 Qualitative work

In respect to qualitative performance, phone calls were not monitored and CSRs were not generally conformed to prescribed call conventions and stringent behavioural rules. Management did not make formal evaluations of CSRs’ attitudes, manners and behaviour neither assessed systematically the extent to which they succeeded in servicing customers. Though phone calls were not monitored the team-leaders could informally observe employees’ qualitative performance as they shared the same open-plan office with CSRs.

Indeed, the presence of the two team-leaders in the room was welcomed by all CSRs and it was seen in a positive way. As CSR9 in D1 commented, “George and Helen’s [team-leaders] role is to provide ‘support’ and ‘guidance’ if things with customers get tight”. What this interviewee implied was that: “when employees do not display appropriate emotions [e.g. aggression] they are asked politely to change their attitude [e.g. tone of voice] or even to have an early finish” (CSR3:D1). As both team leaders explained:

Sometimes customers can be of a problem, especially when they’re trying to avoid outstanding payments … it’s quite expected then our people to become frustrated … this is rare … when it happens we have an informal chat about the incident and we ask them to take a break or even to leave a bit earlier from work if they want to … we have to be flexible and understanding … we know our people and we trust them. (Team Leaders)

The majority of CSRs were also keen to emphasise that their approach to customers was largely dependant on their own perceptions on how to deal with a customer and that team-leaders rarely intervened. The following kind of remark was commonplace across all divisions:

George and Helen are here to help and not to patronise us. They do not interfere with our work and they do not spy on us. The only time they raise their concerns is when people shout at customers, which is again unusual. Even then they are offering help and support to anyone who might be stressed or frustrated. (CSR9:D1)

Here, the emphasis was on supporting and coaching CSRs rather than disciplining and directly controlling them. Management also appeared to take into account the psychological welfare of employees.
6.3.2 Quantitative work

Quantitative performance monitoring involved a series of individual informal meetings where employees in D1 and D2 had to report verbally on the number and nature of calls that dealt with, whereas employees in D3 had to present their quantitative performance in a written report. This differentiation is owed to the fact that any specific quantitative targets were non-existent, with the only exception those CSRs working in D3, who were given a fixed number of calls to attain at the beginning of each month.

In D1 and D2, management felt that ‘formal control’ over quantitative indicators of performance, such as average handling time and number of calls taken, ‘can harm CRSs’ morale’ (Senior Manager) because:

People work best when they are trusted … if you tell them what to do and how to do it their drive for work disappears … they know that business stands or falls by our collective efforts! (Team Leader 2)

In relation to CSRs in D3, management displayed a similar attitude and explained that monthly targets did not serve any performance or control purposes:

These targets serve purely administrative purposes … it is a monthly list of our debtors … [CSRs] are given this list so as to chase these customers … this list is just an indication of how many customers they need to contact. (Senior Manager)

One of the team-leaders also explained that these targets were used as a carrot and that there was no stick:

There’s a fixed number of calls every month but in reality this is an estimate figure … if they manage to clear all accounts is great … if not the outstanding ones are transferred to the next month’s list … the expectation is to clear up to 50% of these accounts and if they manage to clear more I buy them a drink! (Team Leader 1)

The flexible and informal approach of monitoring quantitative work at Telnet indicates how dependant management is upon the trust of its employees, in the sense of doing a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay. This dependency, however, appears to derive from management’s deliberate attempt to create and sustain high-trust relationships through collaboration and informed choice. These relationships are believed to contribute to high levels of commitment and performance. The next section presents CSRs’ perceptions of their work, management and Telnet.

6.4 CSR perceptions

6.4.1 Job satisfaction

Relations with fellow workers and a sense of responsibility to colleagues were important factors contributing to job satisfaction. Working as a team was a particular source of satisfaction:

We’re all in the same boat … for better or worse … we stand by each other. (CSR13:D1)

You’re not on your own … there’s always somebody to help! (CSR2:D2)

We do all work together … this makes the work so much easier and more pleasurable. (CSR4:D3)
The fun factor was another important component in job satisfaction. Jokes were often made over customers and over supposed romantic relationships between CSRs.

We have a laugh … we get on well … we share problems with each other. (CSR9:D1)

The people I work with are not only colleagues but also friends … we make jokes … humour makes work more interesting … cements good relationships with people at work. (CSR3:D3)

Besides the quality of relationships at work nearly two-thirds of CSRs referred to satisfaction gained from their work or from providing a good service to customers.

I like the idea of dealing with people and trying to find a solution to their problems … I love lousy customers as they make my job pleasurable. (CSR1:D3)

I like what I’m doing and I’m good at it! (CSR1:D2)

My role is pleasurable … dealing with demanding customers is challenging and in most cases entertaining. (CSR2:D1)

Nearly all the interviewees also referred to their interaction with line management as being an important determinant of job satisfaction. The relationship with team-leaders was associated with perceptions of fairness and justice. Such perceptions were often tied to the team-leaders’ behaviour during stressful/busy periods and their level of sympathy/support towards particular work/personal circumstances of CSRs. This is discussed in more detail below.

### 6.4.2 Fairness, trust and commitment

For all interviewees, perceptions of fairness were a key influence on feelings of trust. Perceptions of fairness pertained largely to two key issues. The first concerned management’s compliance with contractual arrangements. In this respect, most employees indicated some level of commitment by stressing their willingness to stay with Telnet. CSRs felt a sense of comfort and security and subsequently perceived Telnet as a good employer. On this basis, a change of job could be a daunting prospect:

I wouldn’t leave [Telnet] even if I was offered a higher salary somewhere else … I feel more secure … if I go somewhere else then I’ll be on the edge of a cliff again. (CSR1:D2)

My mind is peaceful here! (CSR3:D3)

I was never asked to stay later than the time my shift ends … I was never forced to do extra work [and] blackmailed that if I don’t then I have to resign … this is how it works in most other companies. (CSR8:D1)

At the beginning of each month you know that you’re going to get paid … no matter what … without arguing with your boss and begging for your money … I left my previous job cause they didn’t pay me … I wasn’t even insured … they still owe me six months’ wages. (CSR1:D1)

The second aspect of fairness and trust concerned the relationship with line management. A good relationship with the team-leaders was largely dependent on the degree to which they exhibited a sympathetic/supportive attitude to CSRs’ personal circumstances (e.g., allowing employees time off to deal with family responsibilities, and other personal
business) or during busy periods. This in turn led to an engagement with Telnet, which was based on gratitude and reciprocity. This is captured by the following quotes:

When it gets busy it’s really chaotic … though I love that because time flies … sometimes it stresses me out … both of them are helping out by sharing the calls though this is not their job … I am really grateful and it makes me feel really good about working here. (CSR10:D1)

Management is fair and cares about you … when I needed to look after my sick mother they did let me have quite a few paid days off … they see you as a human being and they treat you like one … they respect you. (CSR1:D3)

Yesterday morning my girls got a volleyball match and I wanted to go … I just said to George and Helen about it and they said it was OK … I said I’d work an extra shift next week … I don’t like letting people down. (CSR2:D2)

There was an instance once when I had reached my limits with fussy customers … I spoke to George and Helen and they let me leave work much earlier and gave me an extra paid day off as well … it felt good because they listened to what I said and they did care. (CSR3:D1)

The supportive and caring role of line management also encouraged a ‘hassle free working environment’ (CSR3:D1) as the next section explains.

6.5 One big family

CSRs in Telnet had employed informal, yet formally known to management, strategies to eliminate work and/or refrain from customer interactions that they perceived to be unpleasant. These strategies mostly included the employees’ deliberate distraction from work (e.g., paper/magazine reading, notepad sketching or even taking off the headset). As CSR13 in D1 explained, these ‘strategies enable us to distance ourselves from unpleasant situations’. In dead-end situations, however, CSRs’ strategy was either to refer the customer to one of the team-leaders, even if the customer had not requested it, or to hang up the phone to the customer.

I do not like dealing with lousy or rude customers … In such cases, I pretend to listen but in reality I don’t … I keep myself occupied with other things, like reading the news or texting my girlfriend. (CSR5:D1)

When I had enough I just cut off the line! (CSR1:D3)

The paradox here is that Telnet’s managers were not only aware of CSRs’ informal strategies but also frequently witnessed and accepted them:

We’re one big family here … like all families we have to accept good and bad behaviour! (Senior Manager)

These are the rules of the game … if you understand them then you can play … if not then you will be stressed, exhausted [and] damage your health … this comes with experience and the right attitude towards work, which I guess is also part of how you deal with difficult issues in personal life! (Team Leaders)

7 Discussion

This study explored how contact-centre work is controlled within one small size contact-centre in the Greek telecommunications sector. The overall picture generated by
the case-study organisation is inconsistent, in many respects, with findings from previous research relating to contact-centre employment, but consistent with findings from previous research emphasising the positive aspects of labour management in SMEs.

In contrast to those studies on contact-centres, which emphasised the prime role of cost-reduction in the Taylorised production-line call centre (Bain et al., 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2006; Wickham and Collins, 2004), this study stresses the role of customer-orientation and social relations in shaping a non-Taylorised contact-centre environment. The findings echo Korczynski’s (2002) argument that though variations exist, there is a trend towards service quality. Despite Telnet operating in a highly competitive sector customer-orientation found to be at the forefront of management’s agenda. Telnet’s customer-oriented service was intertwined with the construct of jobs that provided employees with sufficient levels of discretion.

In line with other work (Frenkel et al., 1998; Shire et al., 2002) that stresses the role of customer-orientation in contact-centres, Telnet’s CSRs found to have a lot of influence over the pace at which they worked and how they did their job. Scripting rules were virtually non-existent. There was no evidence of ‘use of scripts’ as an attempt to structure the ‘speech of workers into a series of predictable, regulated and routinised queries and responses’ as Taylor and Bain’s (1999, p.109) work has indicated. In this study, CSRs’ interaction with customers was markedly distant from the tightly scripted dialogues and highly detailed instructions described in other contact-centre studies (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Taylor et al., 2002; Wickham and Collins, 2004). Telnet’s CSRs also possessed great flexibility on when to take or make a call and how long to spend with a customer. In contrast to other empirical work on contact-centres (Bain et al., 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 2006), at Telnet there were no restrictions on the length of calls, wrap and idle time.

Regarding the monitoring and performance review of CSR work, Telnet’s informal and non-conformist procedures contradict the findings from previous research that showed that CSRs are subject to stringent managerial control mechanisms and performance targets of all kinds (Bain et al., 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2006; Thompson et al., 2004). Quantitative indicators of performance were non-existent for most CSRs and where they existed did not serve any explicit managerial control purposes. Monitoring of quantitative performance was largely informal and there were no specific or detrimental consequences in case of failure to meet quantitative targets. In respect to qualitative performance, there were certain implicit expectations of the way CSRs interacted with customers (e.g., politeness) but even this did not involve any penalties in case of malpractice. Managerial control over qualitative performance was tacit and emergent and when imposed it appeared to support employees rather than to discipline them (e.g., paid early finish from work). It can be said that the lack of stringent monitoring and controlling practices in the case-study organisation was used in an empowering way. This empowering way aimed at sustaining trust in the workplace, which in turn could be used as a tool of gaining employee consensus.

Telnet’s labour management approach was flexible and loosely structured revealing a much higher degree of informality in comparison to other studies in SMEs (Marlow, 2002a, 2002b; Taylor, 2005). Similar to previous research that emphasised the positive experiences of workers employed in SMEs (Cully et al., 2002; Forth et al., 2006; Kersley et al., 2006) Telnet’s CSRs valued informality as well as the simplicity and openness of
communication amongst organisational members. In particular, employees’ positive perceptions pertained to issues relating to CSR work, social relations in the workplace and management’s compliance with contractual arrangements.

For most CSRs, interaction with customers was seen as a key determinant of job satisfaction. Engagement with fellow workers was also found to be a source of job satisfaction. Teamwork and shared humour were important in this respect and emerged as one way of cementing relationships with fellow CSRs and making work more pleasurable. As Collison (1988) noted, humour can be a useful tool in smoothing interpersonal relationships, promoting trust and social cohesion, and breaking out organisational routine. On the other hand, the nature of the relationship with team-leaders found to have a significant impact on commitment, motivation, and trust as well as CSRs’ perceptions of fairness. Line management’s sympathy towards the private/domestic circumstances of workers led to a sense of obligation that was based on gratitude and loyalty.

Perceptions of trust and fairness were further associated with management’s compliance with contractual arrangements. Indeed, a few reports have revealed cases of infringements of social security, violation of working hours and non-payment of wages in Greek SMEs (Burtless, 2001). This evidence perhaps justifies CSRs’ positive perception of Telnet and their reluctance to move to another employer even on a higher salary. It extends Schalk and Van Rijckevoorsel’s (2007) finding that contract characteristics play an important role as determinants of intention to leave in contact-centres. It can be suggested that not only the conditions of the contract but also management’s compliance with these conditions play an important role in employee loyalty and turnover. This finding further contradicts earlier research stressing the poor implementation of employment legislation in SMEs (Edwards et al., 2003; EIRO, 2006; Forth et al., 2006; Ram et al., 2001; Saini and Budhwar, 2008).

The emphasis on developing good social relationships in the present study is consistent with previous research identifying the importance of high-trust relationships in small firms (Goffee and Scase, 1995). This, in turn, could be linked to the challenges of managing employees in such firms, where usually more emphasis is placed upon the need to ‘fit in socially rather than the ability to do the job’ [Nadin and Cassell, (2007), p.433]. In this study, management tried to achieve social cohesion through fraternal strategies by giving CSRs responsible autonomy aiming to secure moderate employee commitment.

Management’s fraternal approach involved notions of team working and limited or no supervision. It also implied an egalitarian ethos that was founded on mutual obligations and high-trust relations, which frequently extended beyond the cash-nexus. Scase (2003) explained that under fraternalism there is a high degree of mutual understanding of work processes and the difficulties and constraints that workers often face in the accomplishment of their tasks. At Telnet, team-leaders acted as first amongst equals working with and alongside CSRs. Line-management also witnessed and accepted employees’ informal strategies to eliminate work and/or refrain from unpleasant customer interactions. This was done despite senior-management’s expectations for CSRs to provide high-quality service and retain all customers.

Strategies of fraternalism are said to be appropriate in particular market conditions. They are most likely to be used by SMEs when there are highly competitive product markets and when employees are able to shift from one employer to another (Goffee and Scase, 1995). While the former might be true for the Greek telecommunications sector the latter might not be applicable to Telnet’s case. The country’s high unemployment rate
and educated/skilled workforce (cf., Eurostat, 2008) coupled with the precarious employment conditions in most Greek SMEs (Burtless, 2001) may suggest that the employer in this study is in a much stronger bargaining position in the labour market than employees.

Under these relative favourable circumstances on the part of the employer, Telnet’s management exercised a diffused concern over its employees by taking into account their well being, especially during difficult or stressful work/personal situations (e.g., workload share, early finish from work and extra paid day off due to perceived fatigue/exhaustion, paid time off for family commitments). On the other hand, CSRs occasionally returned a diffuse loyalty (e.g., work extra shift in return of a morning off without loss of pay). The core of Telnet’s managerial strategy appeared to rest upon reciprocal goodwill. Under this strategy, Fox (1974, p.47) suggested that “workers fully legitimise management’s rule by offering full consent to it”.

But in this study, CSRs frequently handled customer interactions in a manner that was not always beneficial to the firm. They appeared to be selective in the provision of service according to personal judgement and preference and potentially not to retain existing or gain new customers. Illustrative examples of this included CSRs’ reluctance or even refusal to spend time with customers, instances where CSRs hang up the phone to clients and occurrences where CSRs advised the customer to switch to another supplier. Indeed, this comes into sharp contrast with Telnet’s objective to compete on customer service quality and questions the extent to which workers fully legitimised management’s rule by offering full consent to it.

Telnet’s management had given employees authority, responsibility, leeway and perceived them as individuals worthy of responsible-autonomy treatment. Edwards (1979, p.79) argued that this strategy is followed where “management fear that the introduction of Taylorist controls would risk a loss of what they see as necessary goodwill”. In this study, necessary goodwill pertained largely to notions of employee trust and moral both of which were seen as key determinants of performance. A manifestation of this was the minimal imposition of quantitative performance indicators and the absence of tight monitoring of qualitative performance. Telnet’s management attempted to cultivate a familial culture (Holiday, 1995; Ram, 1994), which promoted a degree of employee trust and alignment towards organisational goals; yet afforded room for counterproductive performance (e.g., loss of customers, delays in chasing outstanding accounts) and occasional deterioration of customer service (e.g., senior manager’s acceptance of CSRs’ unprofessional/bad behaviour).

8 Conclusions

The exploratory work presented here suggests that the conditions associated with being a small company and focusing on customer-orientation impact upon the control of contact-centre work in substantial ways. A first point of contrast is between customer-orientation and cost-efficiency in terms of job discretion with customer-orientation to foster higher levels of job influence and autonomy. A second point of contrast is amongst CSRs’ positive and negative attitudes towards their work and their workplace. In agreement with Ball and Margulis (2011), it can be suggested that improved social relations, in particular social trust, may lead to more positive attitudes, even towards different forms of managerial control. A third point of contrast is amid
small and large size contact-centres in terms of detailed and general control with smaller firms potentially imposing lower levels of technical and bureaucratic control and higher levels of simple control.

SMEs are also more likely to make obligations implicit through informal procedures. Following earlier assertions (Guest and Conway, 1999; Nadin and Cassell, 2007) on the importance of implicit contracts in small firms, this study suggests that CSRs in contact-centre SMEs might experience several features related to the psychological contract, such as perceptions of trust, fairness and reciprocal goodwill, which may be characteristic of social harmony. A fourth point of contrast is between Anglo-Saxon institutional contexts (including former Anglo-Saxon colonies) and European Mediterranean countries, like Greece, in terms of management style. Telnet’s management approach is far distant from the authoritarian, dictatorial and exploitative SME described in other studies (Holiday, 1995; Rainnie, 1989; Saini and Budhwar, 2008). It fuels a social harmony that combines elements of Goss’s (1991) fraternalism, Fox’s (1974) consent approach, and Friedman’s (1977) responsible autonomy strategy. The four points of contrast address the complexities in a particular device, such as contact-centre work, and the need to locate these within specific contingency and institutional contexts. They also stress the importance of social relations in fostering or obscuring control and consensus on the shop floor.

The work here was intended to be exploratory and was based on one in-depth qualitative case-study, which is part of a wider project. However, the issues raised by the participants of the research are of significance to the management of contact-centre work within small firms. Given the current lack of attention paid to SMEs in the contact-centre literature, it appears that there are some interesting avenues in which research in this field could be developed to contribute both to our further understanding of contact-centre employment within small firms, and the approaches of labour management in SMEs outside Anglo-Saxon nations more generally. One proposition would be to look at the control and organisation of contact-centre work in other small firms and within countries where SMEs form the backbone of the national economy. Another proposition would be to compare contact-centre employment between SMEs and large firms across different industries within a single national context and outside the Anglo-Saxon regime. Further research could examine the influence of institutional factors upon work organisation in contact-centre SMEs in European Mediterranean countries.

References


