



A.S.U.
Australian Services Union

It's your call.



**IMPROVING AUSTRALIAN
CALL CENTRES FOR WORKERS**

**2009
Survey
Report**





A•S•U
Australian Services Union

Published in November 2009 by the Australian Services Union
and written by Dr Ruth Barton, School of Management,
RMIT University

Australian Services Union
Ground floor
116 Queensberry Street
Carlton South, Victoria, 3053

T: +61 3 9342 1400
F: +61 3 9342 1499
E: asunatm@asu.asn.au
W: www.asu.asn.au

© Australian Services Union 2009

This publication is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the
purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as
permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced
by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be
addressed to the National Secretary, Australian Services Union.
Copies are available from the address above.

Authorised and printed by Linda White, ASU Assistant National
Secretary, Ground floor, 116 Queensberry Street, Carlton South,
Victoria, 3053, Australia

Printed and bound by On Demand Pty Ltd,
323 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, Victoria, 3207, Australia

It's your call:

Improving Australian call centres for workers

2009 survey report

Index

Foreword from the Australian Services Union	2
1. Introduction	5
2. Methodology and demographics	8
3. Industry characteristics	12
4. Workplace issues	15
5. Industry hazards	26
6. Conclusions	42
References	44



Foreword from the Australian Services Union

Call centres are one of the fastest growing areas of employment in Australia, accounting for a quarter of a million jobs. However, they are an area of work that is clearly 'hidden from view'.

This major research report into Australian call centres provides a view from the 'other end of the phone'. If you ever wondered what the person providing you with advice or assistance felt about their job, then this report provides a national picture of a now vital Australian industry.

Almost ten years ago, in 2000, when the Australian Services Union launched the results of our first call centre employees survey "Can call centres be better places to work?", many thought that call centres would be a passing phase and that the Internet would take over the role of personalised phone based customer service.

The pundits were wrong. Instead, we have seen call centres grow into a major employer in Australia, with **more than 250,000 employees working in over 3,800 call centres Australia wide** and year on year growth projected for the future.

As a major union for call centre employees, the ASU has long focussed on making Australia's call centres the best they can be by working with our members and their employers to develop world's best practice in occupational health and safety, workplace consultation and recognition of the vital role customer service call centre staff play in a company's business.

Our survey results and report nine years on tracks the growth of our nation's call centres and the aspirations and workplace experiences of the workers in them. As our report shows, new issues emerge and some things stay the same.

Stress was prevalent in 2000 and it remains present in our call centres today.

The way in which work is organised in call centres has a bearing on the relative stress levels of the staff in them. Workers reported increased levels of job dissatisfaction and stress where there was no opportunity for staff to have input into the setting of targets and KPIs. In addition, many respondents reported that every minute of their day was accounted for through call monitoring, sometimes at the expense of customer service.

New stresses have emerged like job insecurity fuelled by the threat of offshoring of these valuable and important jobs in our economy.

While the ASU is working on solutions to minimise stress in our call centres, the threat of offshoring can only be relieved by government intervention recognising the valuable jobs that call centres provide. No longer can our politicians say offshoring of call centres is part of globalisation – what we must hear them saying is that Australia can lead the world in this industry and the economic and policy incentives and settings must be right to attract more work, not less.

As with our 2000 survey, the ASU focus is on solutions to the issues that are raised and working with our members to make Australian call centres great places to work.

It is clear we are having some impact on this front. Our results show that unions make a positive difference to the experience of workers in our call centres. The new Fair Work Act provides the ASU with more opportunities to work with our members in call centres and this can only maximise the positive outcomes for this important industry.

We have been fortunate to work again with Dr Ruth Barton, now of RMIT, who wrote our first survey report. Her expertise in assisting us with framing our questions and analysing the results has been invaluable and contributes significantly to our understanding of the workplace issues and solutions for Australia's call centres. We also thank AustralianSuper for their support and assistance in this project.

We are pleased to add this report to the body of knowledge about the call centre industry both in Australia and globally.

Linda White

Assistant National Secretary
Australian Services Union

November 2009



1. Introduction

In the past 20 years the Australian call centre industry has expanded from approximately 8,000 people to more than 250,000 in 2008. In 2008 there were around 3,820 call centres with 191,000 seats with this number estimated to grow by 7% in 2009 to 205,000 seats. The industry is responsible for handling 77% of all customer interaction which equated to around 16 million calls a day. It is estimated the industry contributed around \$15 billion in value a year with \$9.1 billion of this in wages and other HR expenses (ATA, 2008).

Although the call centre industry employs large numbers of people, makes a significant contribution to the economy and can offer people the opportunity of working in a satisfying environment where they assist customers, this same environment can be characterised by repetitive and intensive work, targets and tight supervision and monitoring (Taylor et al, 2003). Indeed this environment has given rise to the “sacrificial HR strategy”, where the enthusiasm and motivation of call centre staff are sacrificed by management to resolve the tension between efficiency and servicing, leading to emotional burnout and high turnover (Wallace et al, 2000).

Stress is the most common call centre OH&S issue (Hannif and Lamm, 2005) and there have been suggestions that the quantitative statistics used to measure a call centre’s performance are in opposition to employees’ desire to deliver quality calls and that this contradiction has resulted in high staff turnover and stress levels. Holdsworth and Cartwright (2003) found that call centre workers were unlikely to believe they are making a difference to their organisation, found their jobs more stressful and less satisfying than the general population and had lower level of

‘The industry is responsible for handling 77% of all customer interaction which equated to around 16 million calls a day.’

emotional well being and high levels of physical stress related symptoms. They reported they were under pressure because of conflicting demands, frustrations over a lack of personal growth, the duties associated with their job, a lack of participation in decision making, flexibility within the role and the appropriateness of supervision. Deery et al (2002) found that call scripting, excessive workloads, unfair pressure to minimise wrap times and the effect of abusive and difficult customers caused emotional exhaustion which is characterised by feelings of tiredness, a lack of energy and the depletion of the person’s emotional resources.

Performance monitoring tends to be pervasive with Holman et al (2002) finding it had an uneven impact. They found that when clear performance criteria are developed and regular positive feedback is given, this is associated with greater well-being in the individual. This would indicate that monitoring can play a part in improving a person's well being by improving their skills and abilities and therefore their ability to cope with the demands of their job. However the perceived intensity of monitoring can have a negative impact on well-being as it causes people to place greater attention and effort on tasks that would otherwise be performed effortlessly and was associated with emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression and lack of job satisfaction. Further Deery et al (2002) found that emotional exhaustion was linked with absenteeism with those people who experienced higher level of emotional exhaustion more likely to take one or two day absences. Holman et al (2002) concluded that performance monitoring should be linked to a system that develops employee's skill and performance and is closely linked to support and development practices such as coaching and, if this occurs, then monitoring is likely to be accepted and be positively associated with well being. Holman (2002) found that employee well being is associated with having a high level of control over work methods and procedures, a low level of monitoring and a supportive team leader. Thus there are a number of aspects of call centre work organisation that are associated with stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and depression but many, if not most, of these can be ameliorated and turned into factors that produce employee well being.

‘Call centre workers should be provided with a variety of tasks and roles and monitoring should be minimised.’

The hazards in call centres are often not immediately obvious and injuries tend to occur as a result of the cumulative effect of a number of factors rather than any one single factor or combination of factors (Hannif and Lamm, 2005). The difficulty with many of the health issues in call centres, such as stress or RSI, is that they are difficult to detect and are therefore less likely to be seen as legitimate health and safety concerns and are more likely to be contested or dismissed as psycho-social. However rather than seeing these issues in isolation, the circumstances that generate occupational health and safety risks can be understood through the interlinking of three interrelated aspects of any work system. They are:

- the social environment eg work organisation, job design and managerial control systems
- the proximate environment eg work technology and workstation design
- the ambient environment eg the work building, lighting, air conditioning and acoustics

When at least two of these aspects are mis-matched workers may experience that strain as physical discomfort or ill-health. This model suggests that an integrated examination of the workplace needs to be undertaken to identify the factors contributing to occupational ill-health especially in the case of non-specific complaints such as stress (Taylor et al, 2003).

Holdsworth and Cartwright (2003) argue that the solution lies in empowerment which can achieve improved job satisfaction and health, increased productivity and a potential reduction in associated costs. They suggest that to achieve this call centres need to provide decision making autonomy, offer training and development, create a supportive organisational climate and culture and to design jobs that are meaningful to employees and allow them to have involvement in decision making and provide open, two-way communication. This is supported by Holman (2002) and Deery et al (2002) who suggest that for call centre employee well being to occur, job control should be maximised and practices such as excessive call scripting and the requirement for calls to be dealt with in a specified time frame should be minimised. Call centre workers should be provided with a variety of tasks and roles, monitoring should be minimised and effective performance appraisal and training should occur with team leaders skilled in giving performance appraisal and monitoring practices and with a supportive style.



Thus there are aspects of call centre work organisation, design and environment that contribute to emotional exhaustion, stress, anxiety and depression. Paying scant attention to employee well being can have serious consequences for employers and can produce increased absenteeism and turnover which can lead to higher staffing, recruitment and training costs and may decrease customer service quality and increase mistakes (Holman, 2002). However it would appear that many of the factors that contribute to stress and exhaustion can be minimised by undertaking a comprehensive examination of the workplace and involving the workforce in arriving at solutions.

2. Methodology and demographics

Methodology

The survey was distributed in paper form by the ASU to both members and non-members in union and non-union call centres Australia wide and by an online survey accessed through the ASU website. The survey period opened on 20 November 2008 and closed on 28 February 2009. At the end of the survey period 445 online surveys and 1,104 paper surveys were completed, making a total of 1,549 responses, which were analysed using the SPSS statistical package.

Demographics

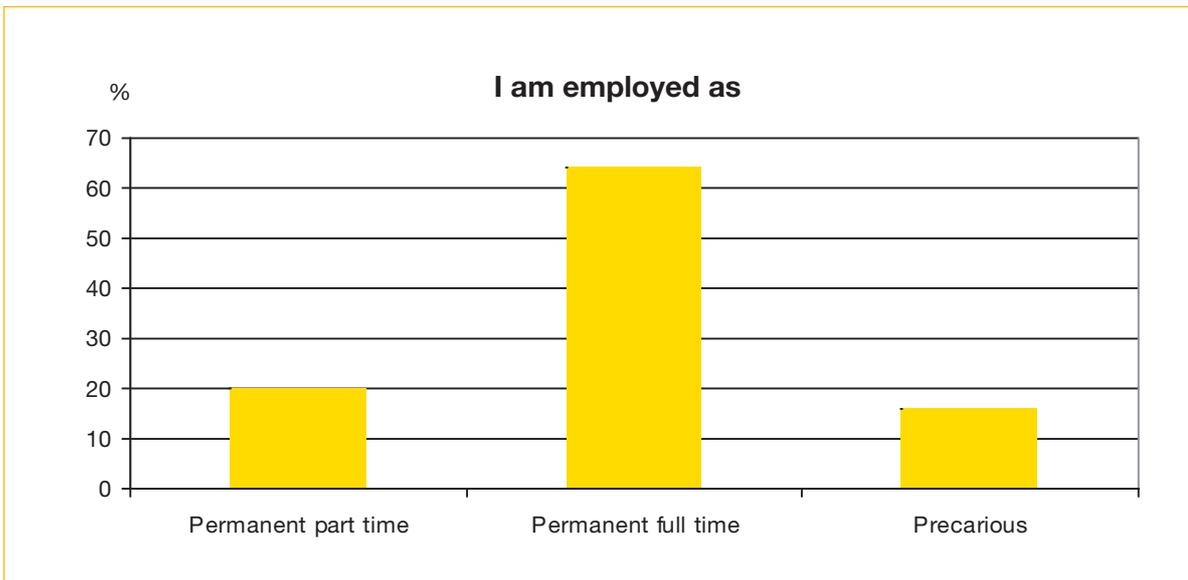
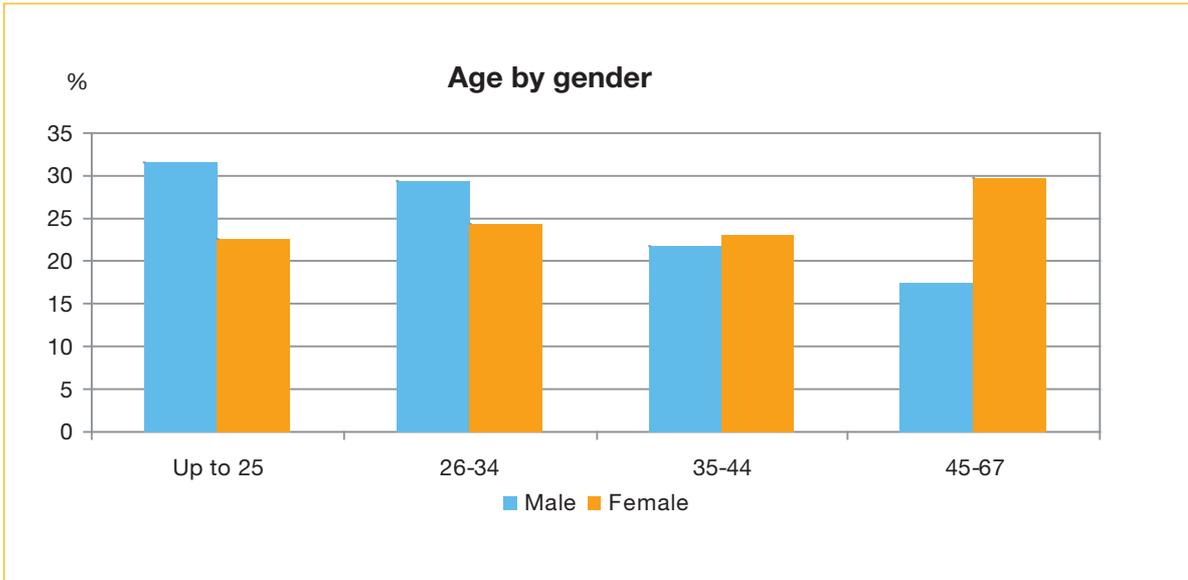
It emerged that 61% of those who completed the survey were women and 38% men. This represents a change from the last survey when 74.8% of respondents were women. The average age of the call centre workers surveyed was 35 years and with 39% of the workforce aged 29 or less. The average age of the women was 37 and the men 33 years. Further analysis revealed that 25% of respondents were aged up to 25, a further 25% were aged between 26 and 34, another 25% between 35 and 44 and the remaining 25% were aged over 45

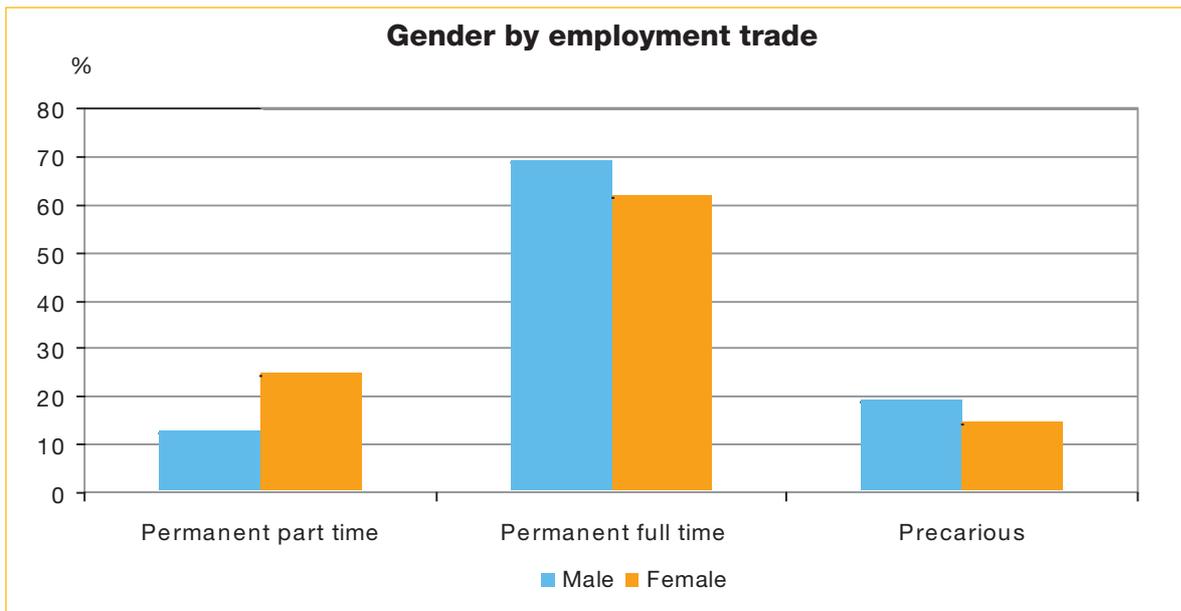
They had spent an average of 6.2 years (median 4 years) in the industry with 19% having spent 1 year and 13% two years in the industry. It emerged that 25% of respondents had worked between 0-2 years, a further 25% 3-4 years, another 25% 5-9 years and the remainder from 10-40 years. As can be seen from the chart, *Age by Gender*, employment patterns vary significantly between men and women. The number of men peaks in the under 25 age range and thereafter declines whereas the number of women peaks in the over 45 age range. This perhaps suggests that there are dual careers for men and women with a call centre position representing a first job for men but for women the flexibility offered by call centre work means they can leave and then re-enter the workforce often on a part-time basis. This means women can have a career in a call centre and satisfy their domestic responsibilities.

It emerged that 47.1% were union members and, as can be seen from the chart *Union Membership by Gender*, significantly more women than men were union members.

As the chart *I am Employed as* reveals, just over 60% of respondents were employed as full-time permanent staff, with the next largest category permanent part time and those in precarious employment, that is agency workers, casual and full time temporary, the least common form of employment.

‘61% of those who completed the survey were women and 38% men.’





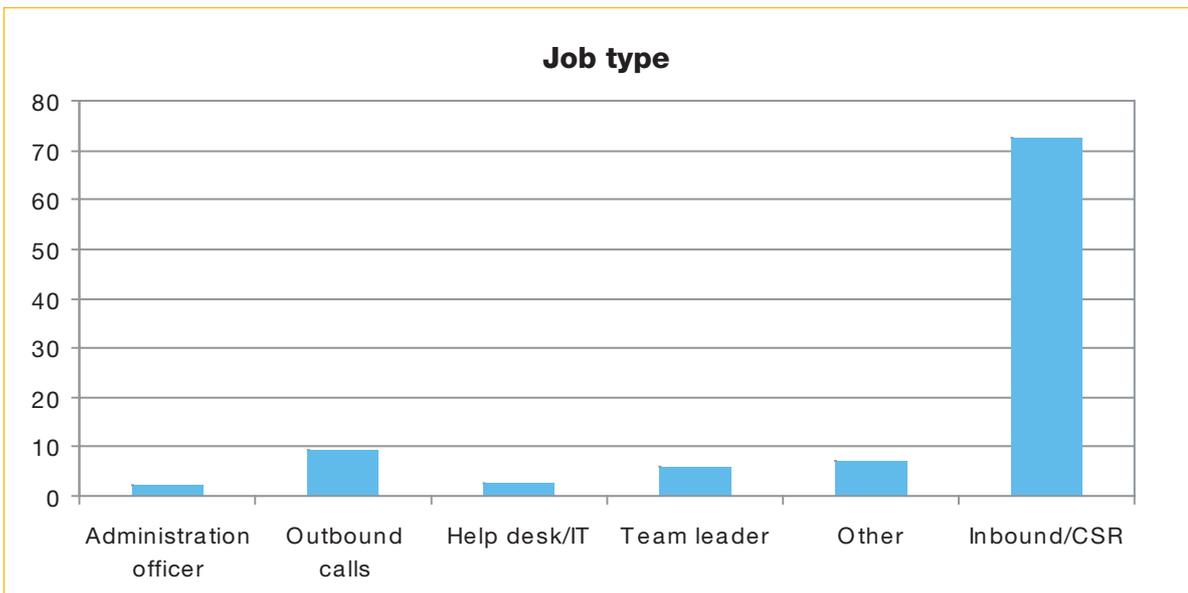
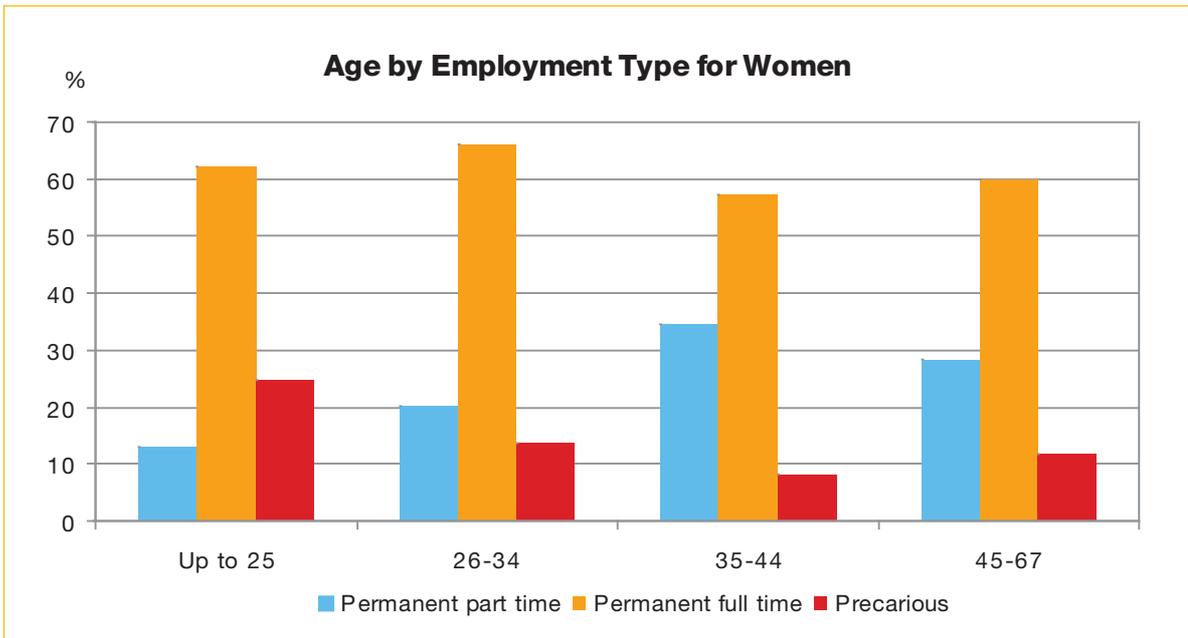
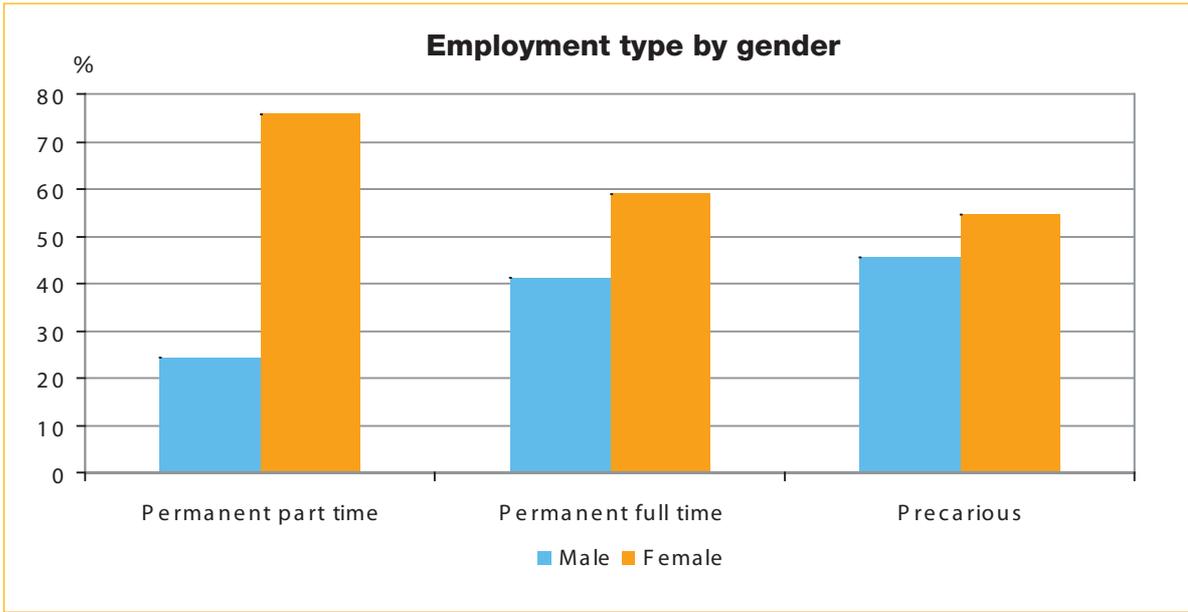
This represents an increase from the 2000 survey where 56% of people reported they were full time workers. Just over 38% of respondents were men but, as the chart *Gender by Employment Type* reveals, men and women have different patterns of employment with men over represented in full time permanent and precarious work and under represented in permanent part time work.

Although men and women continue to have different patterns of employment, this does represent a change from 2000 where 54% of women and 62% of men whereas at present 69% of men and 62% of women are employed full time. Thus the proportion of men and women employed in call centres has changed, more people are employed full time and men and women experience different employment patterns.

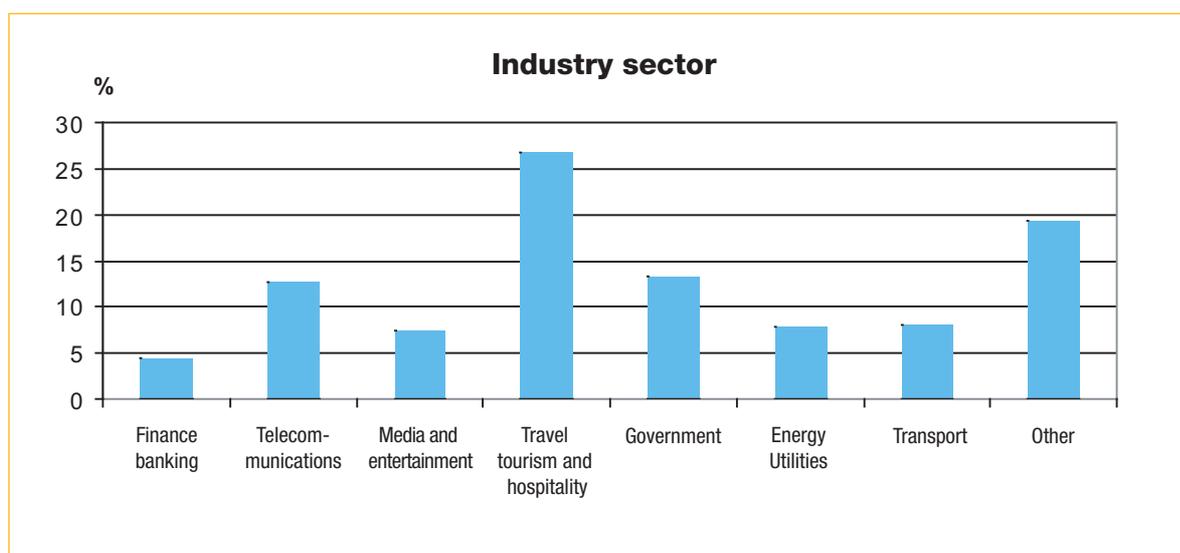
This can be presented another way where we look at the relative proportions of men and women in each employment category. Here we find, in the chart *Employment Type by Gender*, that although men represent 38% of respondents, women are over represented in all the employment categories, especially the permanent part time category. This shows there are significant differences in the employment patterns of men and women. More women than expected are employed in permanent part time work and less than expected in the other employment categories.

We can shed further light on this if we just look at the employment patterns of women as in the chart *Age by Employment Type for Women*. This shows that the proportion of women employed full time remains largely constant through the age ranges, the variation occurs in the permanent part time and the precarious areas. Age does influence employment type, with young women more likely to be employed precariously and the proportion of women employed in a permanent part time capacity increasing through the age categories.

It emerged that 33% of respondents worked for a contract call centre and 67% in an in-house call centre. As the chart *Job Type* reveals, the respondents worked in a number of jobs but almost three-quarters worked as either a customer service representative or an inbound calls operator. This remains largely unchanged from the 2000 survey where 74.9% of people occupied this role.



3. Industry characteristics



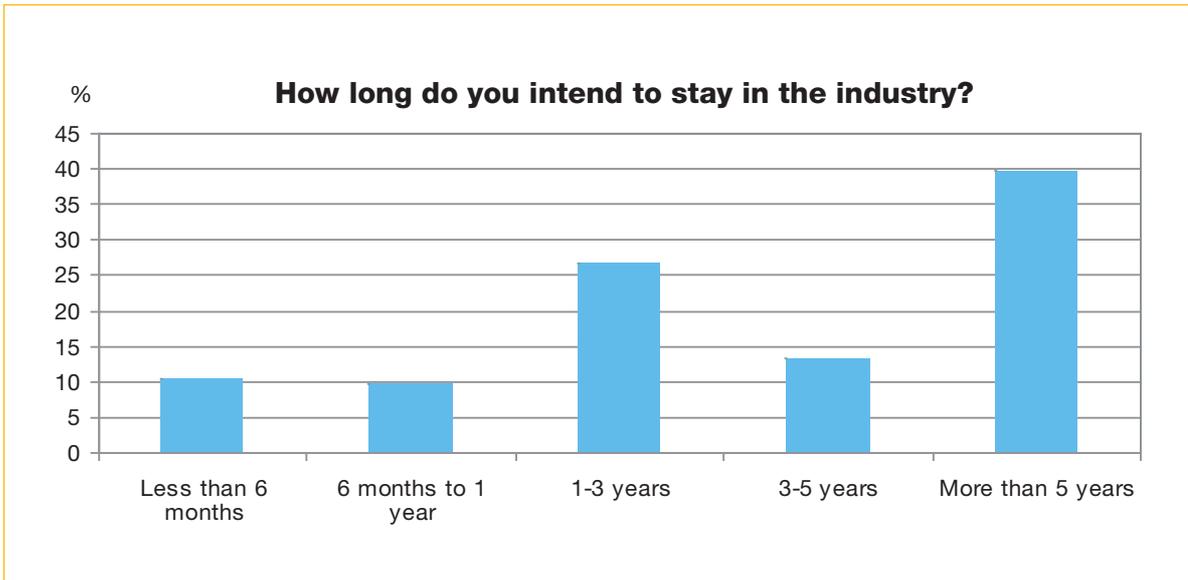
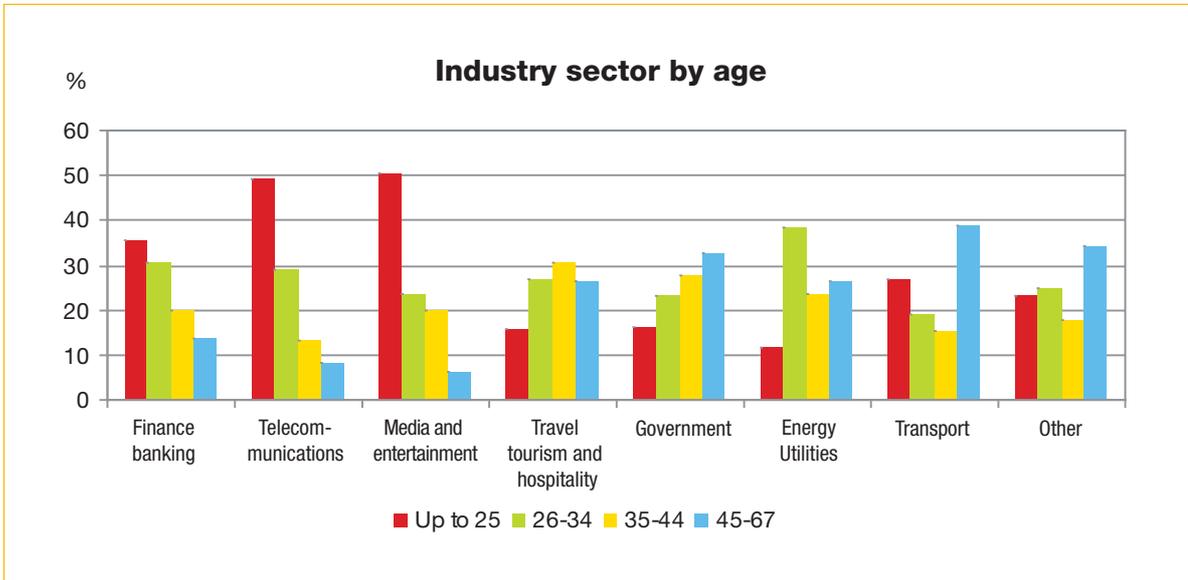
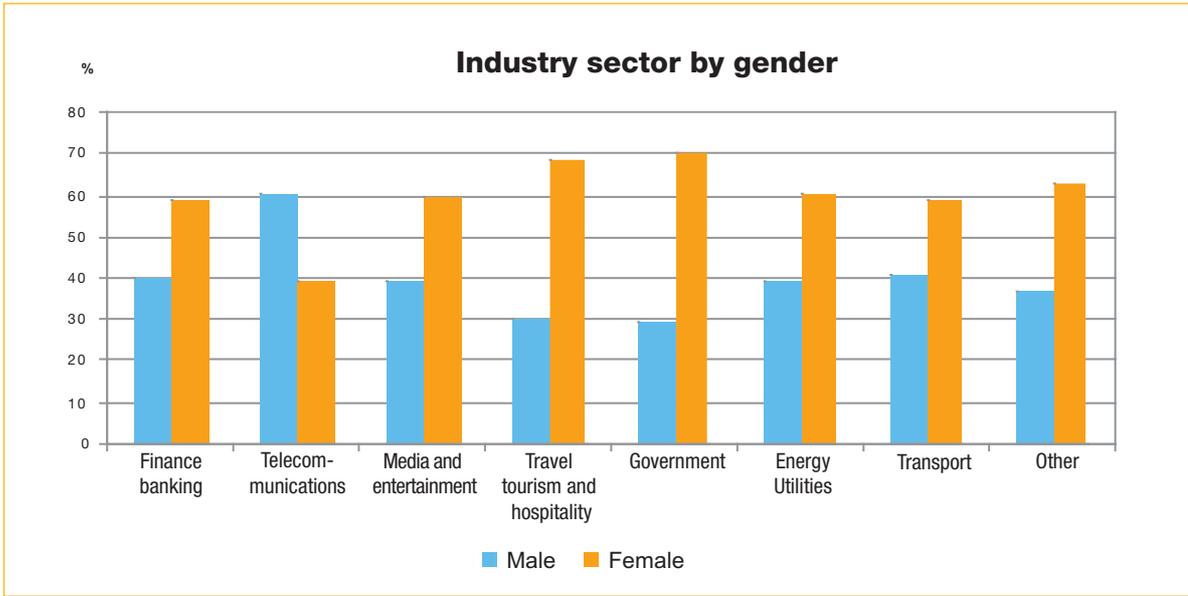
As can be seen from the chart *Industry Sector*, 52.9% of respondents worked in three main industries namely Travel, tourism and hospitality (26.8%), Government (13.3%) and Telecommunications (12.8%).

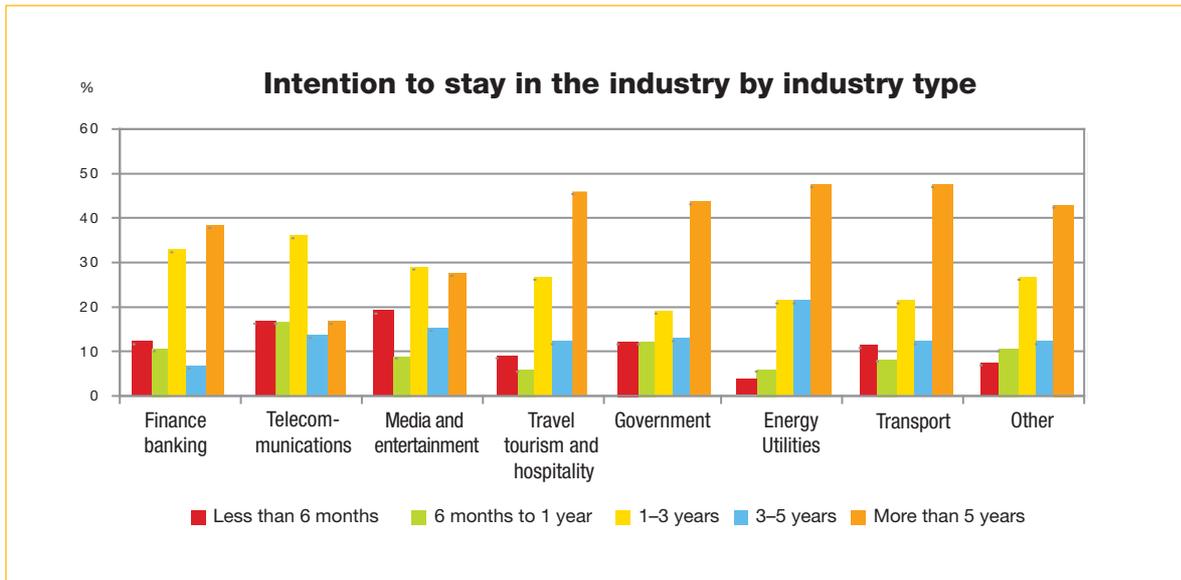
The chart *Industry Sector by Gender* shows that there were significant differences in the distribution of men and women between industry sectors, with more men than expected working in Telecommunications but less than expected in Travel, tourism and hospitality and Government.

As well there are significant differences in the age distribution of respondents in the different industry sectors. The chart *Industry Sector by Age* shows that there were significant differences between industry sectors, with Telecommunications and Media and Entertainment having a younger workforce than expected while transport was over-represented in the 45-67 age range.

As the chart *How Long do You Intend to Stay in the Industry?* shows, almost 20% of people expected to be in the industry no longer than a year.

‘Almost 20% of people expected to be in the industry no longer than a year.’





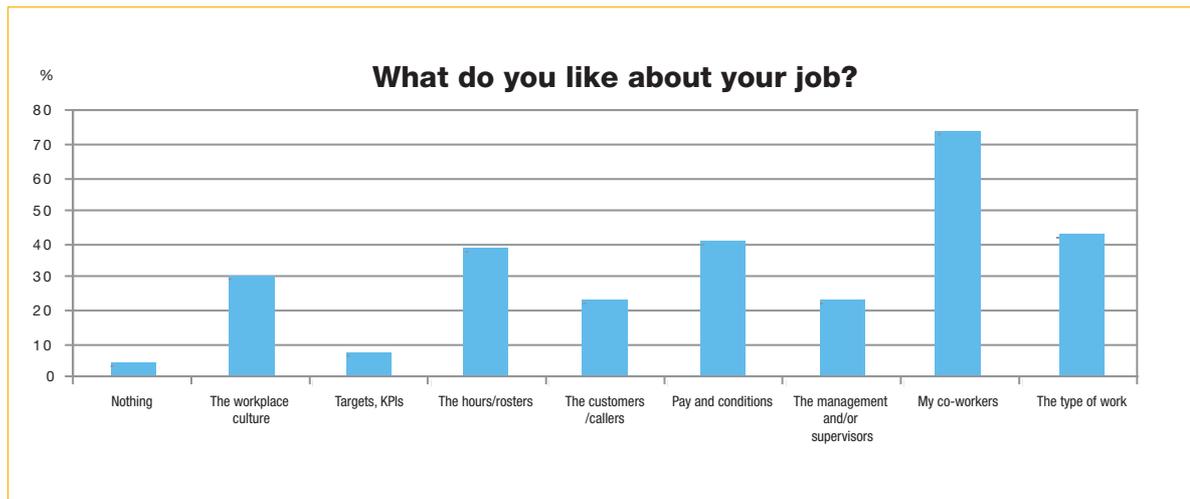
As can be seen from the chart *Intention to Remain in the Industry by Industry Type*, there were significant differences between industry sector and intention to stay in the call centre industry. Respondents working in the Finance and banking, Telecommunications and Media and entertainment sector were less likely to stay in the call centre industry than those in other sectors.

The picture we have gained about call centres is one where:

- The average age is 35 and almost 40% of the workforce is aged 29 or less
- Half have been in their jobs more than 4 years
- More women than men are employed
- Men and women have different employment patterns with women more likely to be employed permanent part time
- There is variation between industry sectors, with some highly feminised whilst in others young people predominate.
- Almost 20% of those people surveyed intended to stay in the industry less than a year
- Intention to remain in the industry varies between industry sectors

‘The average age is 35 and almost 40% of the workforce is aged 29 or less.’

4. Workplace issues



What I Like About My Job

As can be seen from the chart *What do you like about your job*, the most frequently mentioned aspects were my co-workers, the type of work and pay and conditions.

Some of the comments people made about liking their job were:

- Enjoy the travel industry
- Everything- really is a great place to work
- I have a sense of my work being important. As my job is to give advice to callers I have a high level of job satisfaction.
- I like working in the cutting edge of my industry (we work with the first home based call centre in Australia).
- Opportunity for career progression, education options (cert 3 in contact centre, cert 3 and 4 in contact centre management)
- Solving problems for people
- That I can fit it around my study as needed, as my lecture hours change several times per year.
- Using my native language Japanese
- Trying new challenges
- Travel benefits

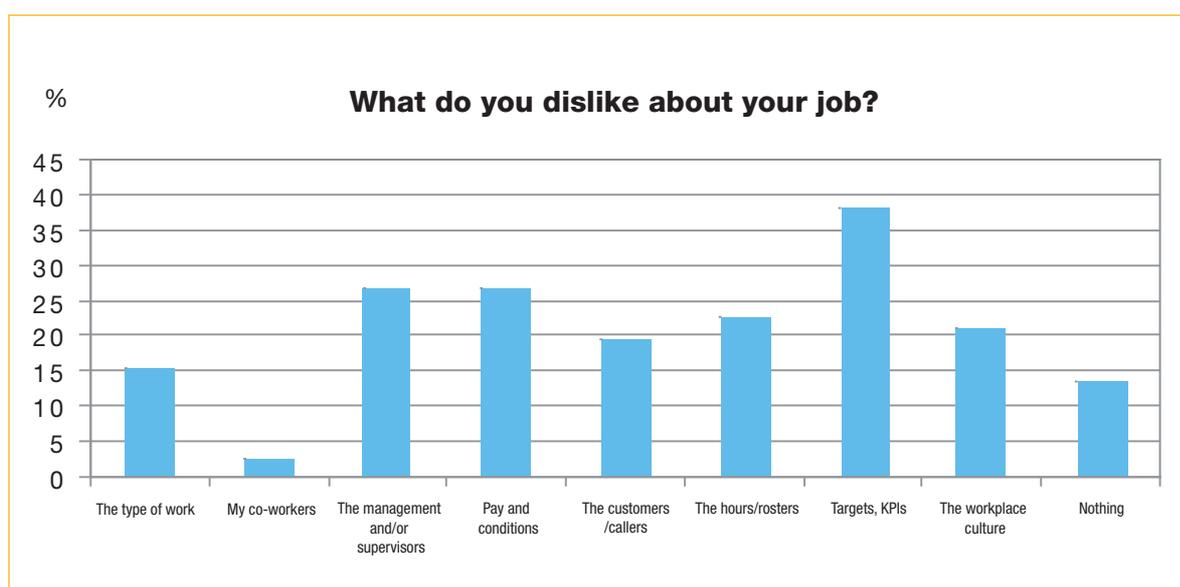
Women were more likely than men to like their co-workers, pay and conditions, the customers and callers, the hours/rosters, while men were more likely to like nothing and the targets/KPIs. Those in Media and entertainment were more likely to like their manager and/or supervisor while those in Energy and utilities and Government were more likely to mention pay and conditions as aspects they liked about their job. Energy and utilities and Travel, tourism and hospitality were more positive about their customers/callers than other industry sectors and Finance/banking, Media/entertainment and Energy/utilities were more positive about workplace culture than other industry sectors.

More Team Leaders and Help Desk/IT than expected were positive about the type of work they performed while the Team Leaders liked the managers and/or supervisors they worked with and the workplace culture. The permanent part time workers were more positive than expected about their co-workers and the hours/rosters while the precarious workers were more likely to like the targets/KPIs and the workplace culture.

Thus when it came to liking their jobs it emerged that:

- Co-workers are important
- Women were more positive than men
- The Energy/utilities sector appear to be more positive about aspects of their jobs than other sectors

What I Dislike About my Job



When people were asked *What do you dislike about your job* as the chart shows, the three most frequently mentioned items were targets/KPIs, the managers and/or supervisors and pay and conditions.

There was little difference between men and women with the exception that women were more likely than men to dislike targets/KPIs. Those in Government were more likely to dislike the type of work they did and were more likely to report that the hours/rosters were an aspect of their job they disliked. The Government and Travel, tourism and hospitality sectors were more likely to dislike the manager and/or supervisor. Whilst the Finance/banking, Telecommunications and Transport sectors were more likely to dislike their pay and conditions. The Finance/banking, Telecommunications and Transport sectors were more likely to report that the customers/callers were an aspect they disliked about their job. Targets and KPIs were universally disliked in all industry sectors, with there being no significant difference between the industries, while workplace culture is an issue for the Travel, tourism and hospitality and Government sectors.

Permanent full time workers were more likely to dislike their managers and/or supervisors. Those in precarious employment were more likely to say that the customers/callers were an aspect of their job they disliked but were less likely to

say that they disliked the workplace culture. The permanent part time workers were more likely to say they disliked the KPIs/targets but less likely to say that hours/rosters were an issue.

There was some variation between the age ranges in terms of the aspects of their jobs they disliked. It would appear that the older a person is, the more likely they are to say that management and/or supervisor, the targets/KPIs, hours/rosters and the workplace culture as aspects of their job they dislike. Those aged 26 to 34 were more likely to dislike the pay and conditions associated with their job whilst those aged up to 25 were more likely to say they disliked the customers/callers.

Around 10% of respondents mentioned that there were other reasons they disliked the job. A selection of those responses is reproduced below:

- Abusive customers, not getting credit for the good work I do, not getting supported during the hard aspects or challenges. A culture (which I think is changing) where new management placed very oppressive performance targets on operators yet they were the ones who made all the stuff-ups and it was unclear if [company name] knew this. The impression was one of big salaries and low accountability. But things have improved now.
- Agents made responsible for defending customer unfriendly decisions
- Empty promises of promotion, favouritism, extra workload for no extra pay.
- Feel management do not have call centre staff interests as priority

‘We are treated like school children in a monitored 24/7 environment that makes it feels like we are not trusted or treated as adults.’

- High level of Acoustic Shock and no support. Treated like a criminal if you experience one and dare to report it, so some don't.
- I seriously hate the culture which is all about appearing happy even when staff hate it
- Lack of variety and impossibility of career advancement
- No penalty rates for night work, lack of mental stimulation, fatigue, patronising management culture.
- Specifically the agency that is my direct employer, their practices and management.
- Split days off. Finishing 7 am on day off

- The management can be ok – but they are trained by company standards to turn to cold target driven zombies once they cross the management threshold. Targets are way too high – and I believe that \$19 is not enough for the 4 hour min talk time and 60-80 calls per shift of four hours we have to make and the 10 new sales we have to get a week to “keep our job” – it can be a good job if they just back off a little – that’s all..
- Volume of callers, repetition.
- We are treated like school children in a monitored 24/7 environment that makes it feel like we are not trusted or treated as adults.

Thus it emerges that

- Over a third of respondents mentioned they disliked Targets and KPIs especially women and older workers
- Over a quarter of people mentioned that they disliked managers and/or supervisors especially full time and older workers
- Over a quarter of people disliked their pay and conditions with this belief more prevalent amongst those aged 26 to 32 and to be in the Finance/banking, Telecommunications and Transport sectors

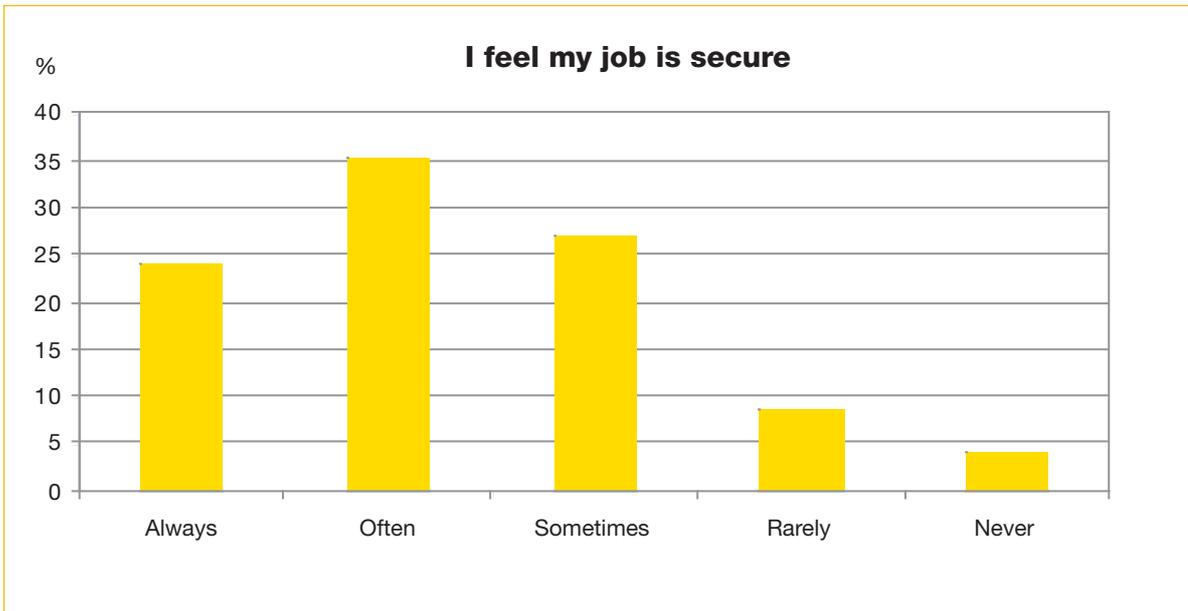
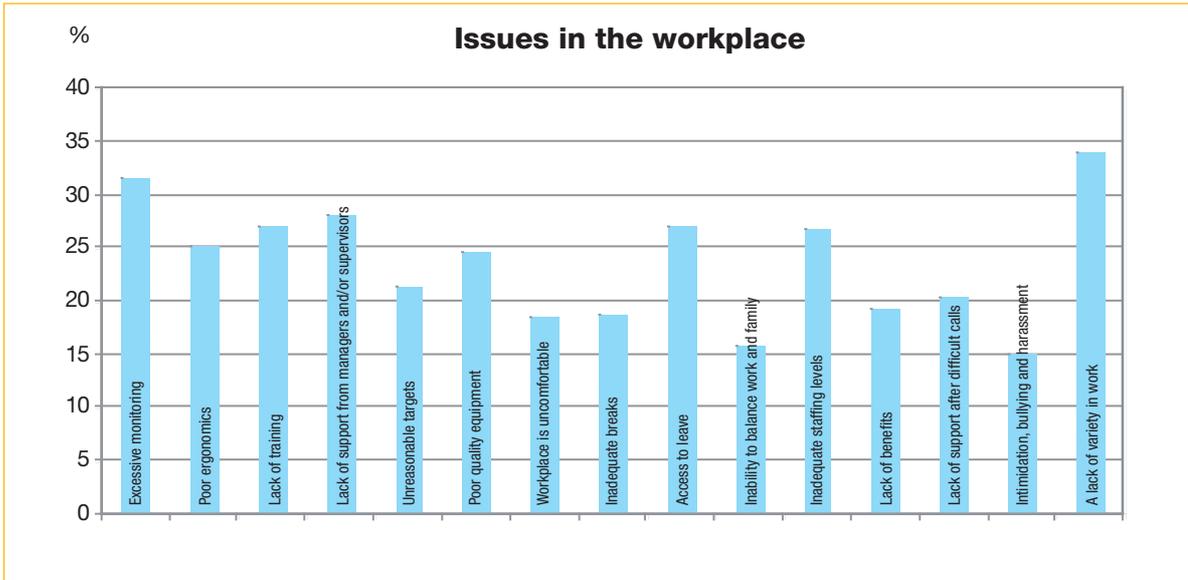
Workplace Issues

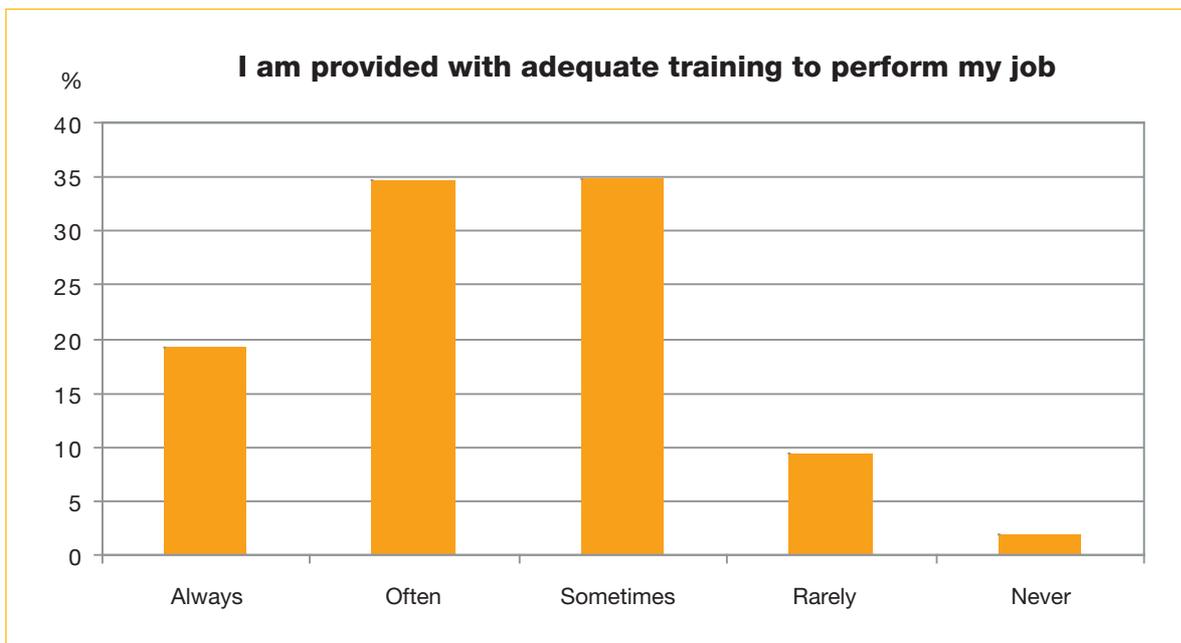
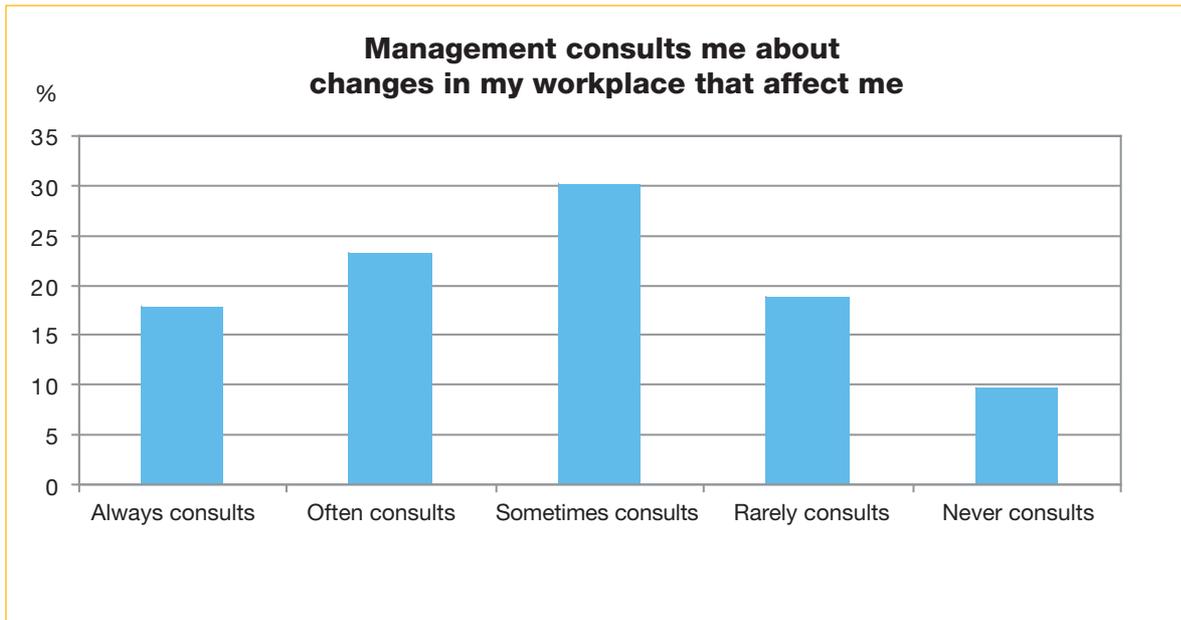
As the chart *Issues in the Workplace* reveals, the six main workplace issues are a lack of variety in work, excessive monitoring, lack of support from managers and /or supervisors, lack of training, access to leave and inadequate staffing levels.

Men were more likely to indicate they were excessively monitored, lacked training, targets were unreasonable, and there was a lack of benefits. Women were more likely to indicate poor ergonomics was an issue, a lack of support from management and/or supervisors, the workplace was uncomfortable, access to leave such as holiday or sick leave and that intimidation, bullying and harassment were an issue. All age groups believed a lack of variety in work and a lack of training was an issue while for the rest of the issues the older age groups were more likely to believe they were an issue.

As can be seen from the chart *Management Treats Me With Respect*, it emerged that 67% of respondents agreed that they were always or often treated with respect. There is an association between age and agreeing that you are treated with respect. The survey found that 78.5% of people aged up to 25 agreed that they were always or often treated with respect whilst between 60.9% and 68.8% of the remaining age groups agreed they were treated with respect. There was not any statistical difference between men and women.

The chart *I Feel my Job is Secure* reveals that over 55% of respondents agreed that their job was secure. However there were significant differences between age groups with 69% of those aged up to 25 but between 52.9% and 58.1% of the remaining age groups agreeing that they always or often feel their job is secure. Those who are in a workplace where the union is active are more likely to agree or strongly agree that their job is secure whilst conversely those who strongly disagree that the union is active in their workplace are more likely to never feel their job is secure.

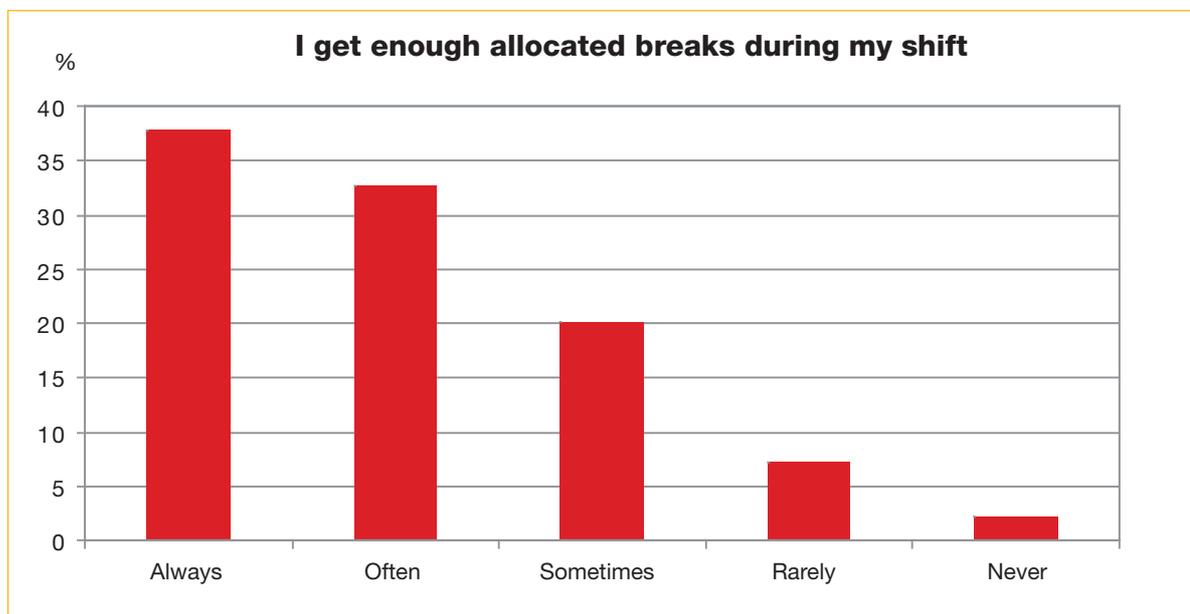
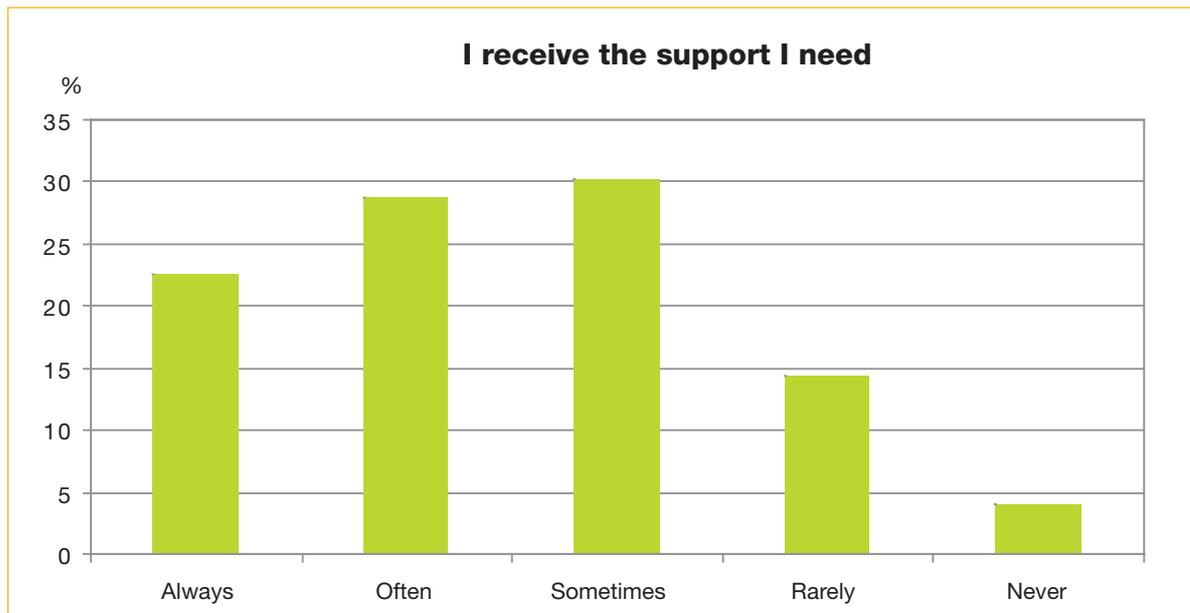




The chart *Management Always Consults me About Changes in the Workplace That Affect me*, shows 51.1% of respondents agreeing that they are always or often consulted. Again age is associated with agreeing that you are consulted, with 57.7% of those aged under 25 as opposed to 31.6% of those aged 45-67 agreeing that they were always or often consulted.

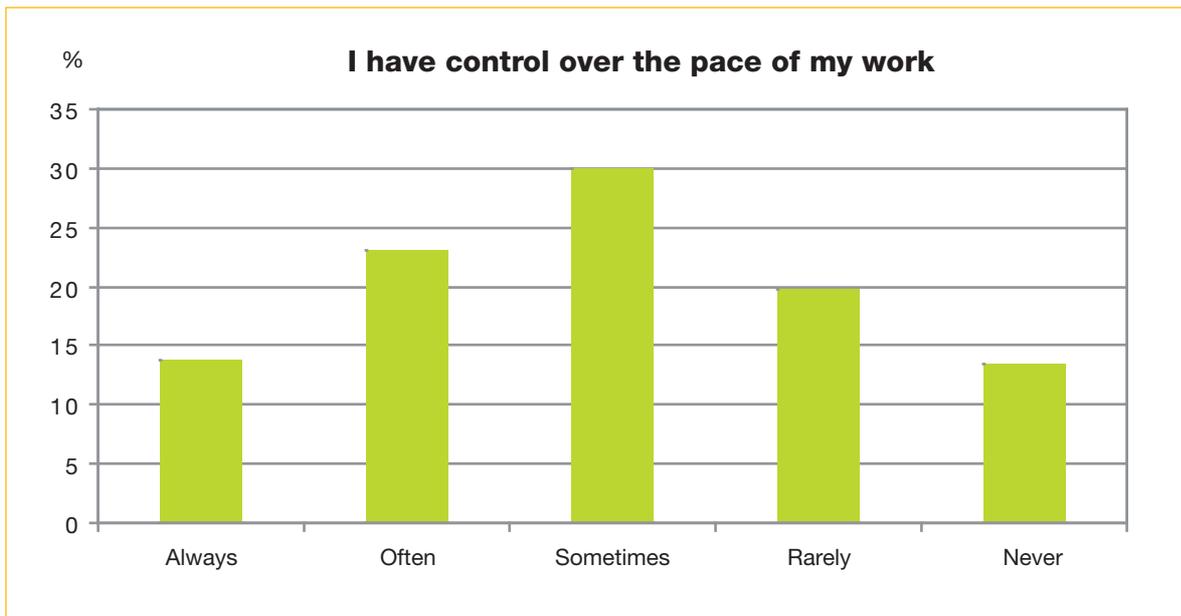
A similar story in terms of union activism emerges in terms of consultation, where those people who agree the union is active in their workplace are more likely to say that are always or often consulted than those who believe that the union is not active in their workplace.

It emerged that people were more positive about training with, as the chart *I am Provided with Adequate Training to Perform my Job* illustrates, 53.8% agreeing they were always or often provided with adequate training. Age has an effect with those aged 45-67 less likely to agree they were provided with adequate training.



Again the people who responded to the survey were more positive about receiving the support they needed in circumstances such as after difficult calls, as the chart, *I Receive the Support I Need eg breaks, debriefing after difficult calls* illustrates. This was associated with age with 66% of those up to 25 always or often receiving the support they needed.

There were some positive results, with the chart *I Get Enough Allocated Breaks During my Shift* illustrating that 70.4% of respondents agreed they always or often get enough allocated breaks during their shift. Age again has an effect with fewer people than expected over 35 agreeing they always received enough allocated breaks.

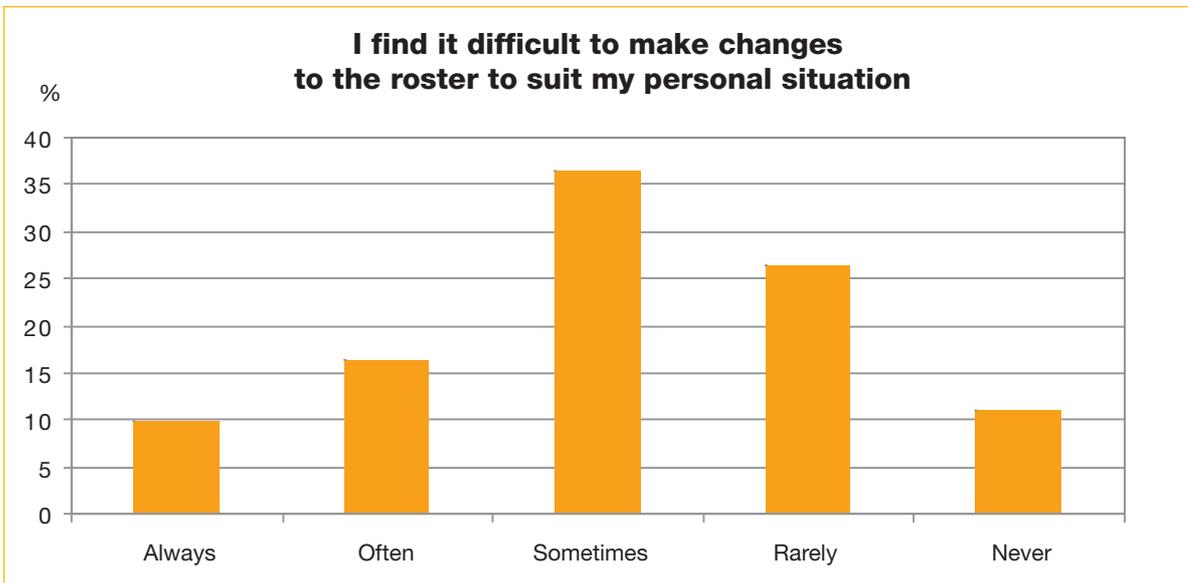
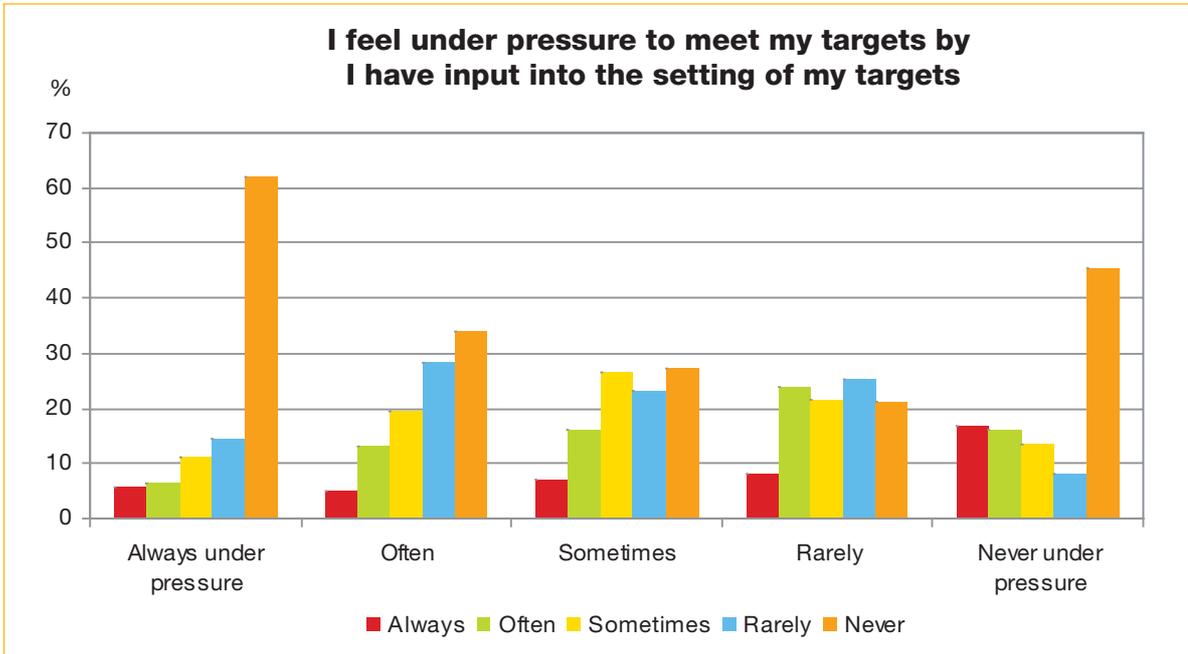
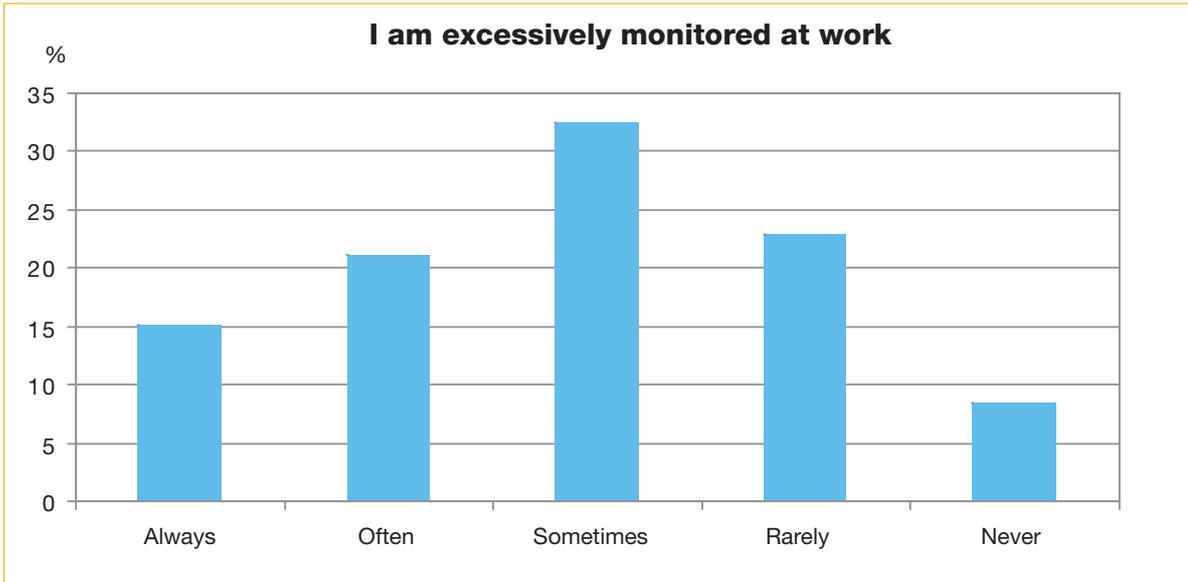


We know that lack of control over the pace of work, which seems especially prevalent amongst call centre workers, has been recognised as an important factor in occupational stress (Taylor et al, 2003) and, as the chart *I Have Control Over the Pace of my Work* reveals, almost 35% of people surveyed agreed they rarely or never had control over the pace of their work. This was associated with age, with those over 35 more likely to say they rarely or never had control over their work whilst men were more likely to agree that they always had control.

But as the chart *I an Excessively Monitored at Work* illustrates, over 36% of respondents agreed that they were always or often excessively monitored. This was uniform amongst the age groups but influenced by gender, with men less likely to agree they were excessively monitored. We know (Holman et al, 2002) that intense monitoring can be associated with exhaustion, anxiety, depression and lack of job satisfaction.

It emerged that 36.1% of people who answered the survey always or often felt under pressure to meet their targets while under a quarter (22.9%) always or often had input into the setting of their targets. When we look at these two questions together in the chart *I Feel Under Pressure to Meet my Targets by I Have Input into the Setting of my Targets*, an interesting picture emerges. There is an association between having input into the setting of targets and having difficulty meeting targets with the chart showing that 62% of those who were always under pressure to meet their targets never had input into setting their targets as against 45% of those who never felt pressure. This latter figure appears unusually high when compared with the often, sometime and rarely under pressure figures and may be an anomaly.

The survey found, as can be seen from the chart *I Find it Difficult to Make Changes to the Roster to Suit my Personal Situation*, 24.4% of respondents found it always or often difficult to make changes.



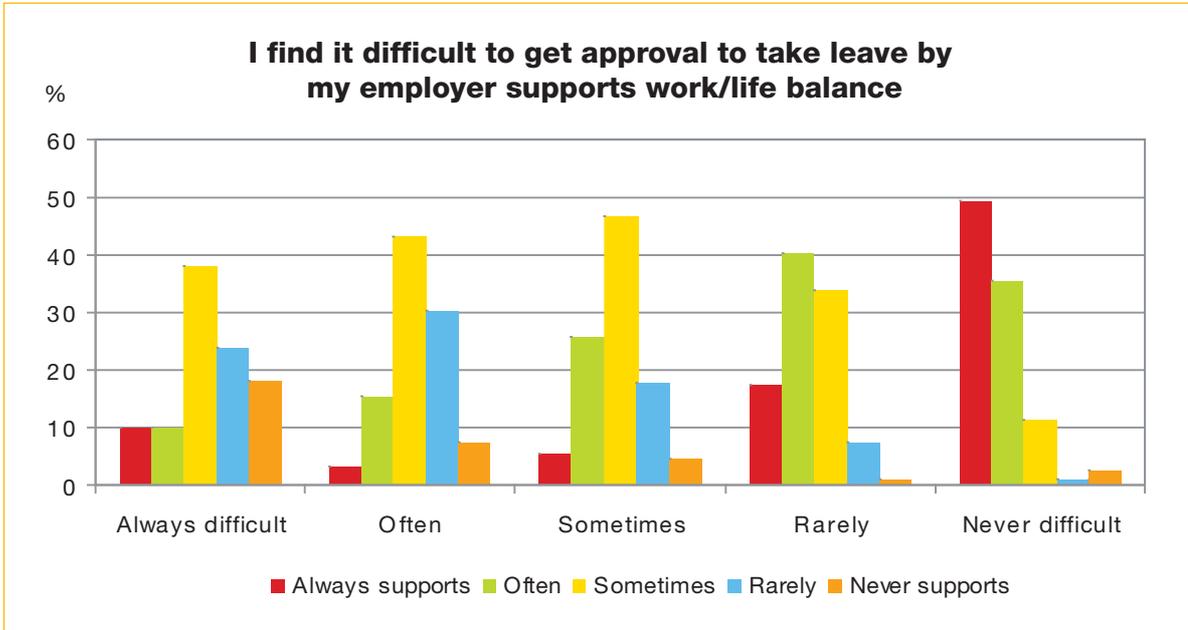
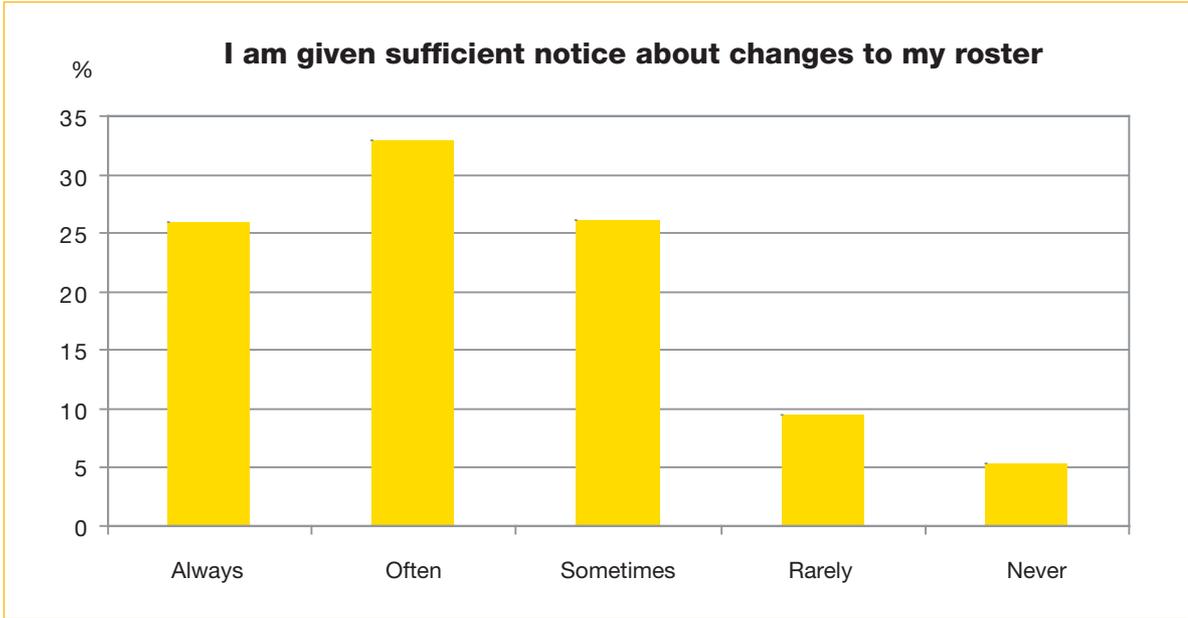
As the chart *I am Given Sufficient Notice About Changes to my Roster* shows, over 60% agreed that their employer gave them sufficient notice.

The survey revealed that 43.7% of people agreed that their employer always or often supported work/life balance. This was influenced by employment situation, with those in precarious employment less likely to say they found it difficult to take leave while those aged up to 25% more likely to agree their employer supported work/life balance with this declining through the age categories. Perhaps not surprisingly, as the chart *I Find it Difficult to get Approval to Take Leave by My Employer Supports Work/Life Balance* reveals, those who did not find it difficult to get leave were more likely to agree that their employer supported work/life balance.

Some of the key points to emerge are:

- The main workplace issues are a lack of variety in work, excessive monitoring, lack of support from managers and /or supervisors, lack of training, access to leave and inadequate staffing levels.
- Over a third of people agreed they rarely or never had control over the pace of their work.
- Over 36% agreed they were excessively monitored and the same number agreed they felt under pressure to meet their targets.
- Almost a quarter of the people who participated in the survey found it difficult to alter their roster.
- Those who rarely or never found it difficult to change their roster were more likely to agree that their employer supported work/life balance.

‘The main workplace issues are a **lack of variety in work**, excessive monitoring, lack of support from managers and /or supervisors, **lack of training**, access to leave and inadequate staffing levels.’



‘Over 36% agreed they were excessively monitored.’

5. Industry hazards

Stress at Work



As can be seen from the chart *I Feel Stressed at Work* around a third of respondents reported they were always or often stressed at work.

This did not appear to be influenced by age but was influenced by length of time in the call centre industry, with those who had been in the industry for 0-2 years more likely to report they never felt stressed at work than those who had been in the industry for 10-40 years.

Almost 75% of respondents offered comments about what made them feel stressed or pressured in the workplace. A selection of comments are reproduced below.

- 30 seconds average KPI for each call, calls instantly dropping in one after the other with little to no time to so much as take a breath. Attempting to meet these targets.
- Abusive customers
- Abusive calls, we are held responsible for customers irrational or aggression behaviour.
- Aggressive customers coupled with continual computer problems
- A lack of control over anything. Subjected to inbound calls, with no ability to control pace or expectations. No control over future training or development.
- Always being watched. everything is timed
- Angry Customers, high volumes
- At times, the unrelenting continuous calls
- Boredom, monotonous work
- Call monitoring, 10 calls per month of more if not achieved. Pressure to be perfect for RCM and constant calls in red. Only 10 minute break in 5 hours. Rigid and excessive guidelines when speaking to customers
- Call quality, customer abuse, KPI's
- Call volumes

- Constantly being timed
- Constant changes on a weekly basis
- Constant reference to targets and stats. We are told that call quality is first priority but stats are ALWAYS the main subject of coaching and team meetings.
- CULTURE AND LACK OF ASSISTANCE FOR MENTAL HEALTH ALWAYS DEPRESSED ANXIOUS POOR I.T. SOFTWARE
- Customers
- Dealing with aggressive and abusive clients. Physical assault from clients. No debriefing after such incidents. Total lack of knowledge of my job by Management. No Security at all for front of house staff with cashiers carrying thousands of dollars. No support from Management if an incident does occur. Working in isolation from Head Office with few, if any visits from Management. Often hear of changes to my job through the 'grapevine' without any consultation with Management. An attitude of 'If you don't like it find another job' from Management.
- Difficult callers
- Excessive monitoring and unrealistic KPI's
- Excessive and pedantic monitoring. Unbalanced workloads.
- Excessive monitoring, the inability to have decent equipment, management style and tone of emails, unrealistic expectations

‘Almost 75% of respondents offered comments about what made them feel stressed or pressured in the workplace.’

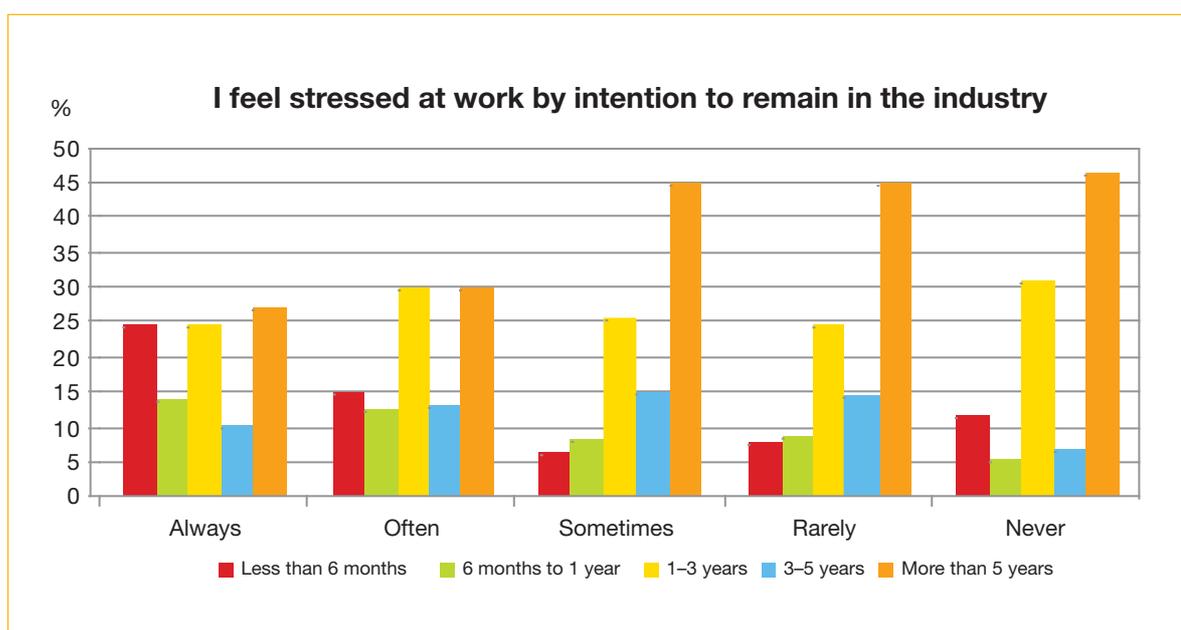
- Hard calls that I don't know the answer
- High call queues, pressure to get through those queues when they occur. Lack of support from the top when we try to report major issues.
- High call volume. Staff shortages. New computer programs all the time with very little training. Angry customers and no support from management.
- High call volumes
- I sometimes feel like a robot KPI's are not a complete measure of how you service customer
- If my stats don't meet the minimum required.
- Inadequate training and feeling 'abandoned'.
- Job insecurity – having to wait for the roster to come out to see how many hours may be allocated to you this week
- Knowing the amount of targets or KPI I must achieve. The call handling time.
- KPI's
- KPI's, receiving in excess of 80-100 calls a day, being expected to never make mistakes.
- Lack of support from management; abusive callers; no career development or work variety

- Lack of time given to read updates & Lack of time allocated for training. Lack of compassion by management for family matters & not being given access to flex when needed.
- Lack of variation; doing the same thing over and over
- Lack of variety, threat of monitoring/failing calls, lack of work/family balance, long hours
- Making sure I make my KPI's
- Meeting my targets
- Management/work processes i.e. – blinds issue/air cond/seating/use of internal ph not permitted chairs/desks uncomfortable
- Not being able to take sick leave entitlement without it affecting targets and kpi's for the month/year/pay reviews
- Not being provided with enough information to successfully complete my duties
- Performance targets set too high and customer service expectations monitored and yet short staffed
- Pressure to take calls continuously. Attitude of customers
- Sometimes the targets set and if get long calls that day & are unable to meet targets we are always asked “why”
- Sometimes when I have a difficult call, and there are times when I feel under pressure to meet my KPI's

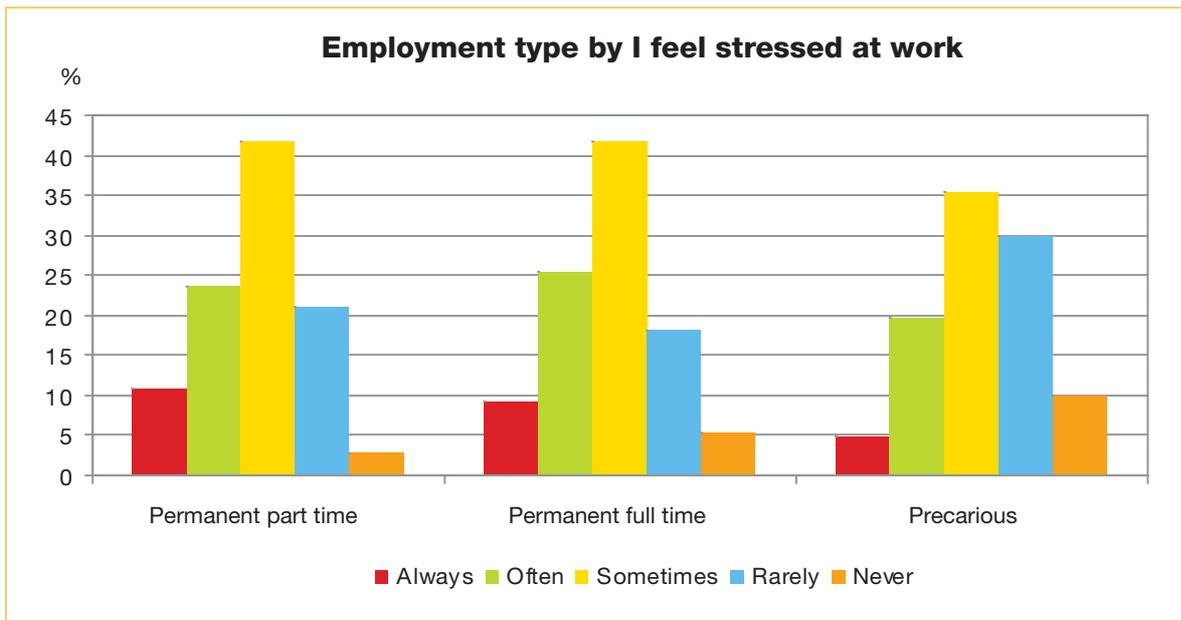
‘Not being able to take sick leave entitlement without it affecting targets and kpi's for the month/year/pay reviews.’

- Targets
- Targets and not providing me with enough access to leave. No work life balance
- Talking and concentrating for long periods of time
- Team leaders pacing up & down behind you constantly, you may be on target yet the person along side you is not & you feel the pressure in the room
- That I am unable to meet targets – although I get positive feedback about my customer service, I have never met the targets and therefore the company cannot make money. I fear I may lose my job because of this. It is always on my mind.
- The excessive monitoring including them placing screen capture software on my pc.
- The feeling that you are being watched and judged the whole time
- The inability to make arrangements for leave, meeting AHT benchmarks, attempting to achieve high call ratings, not enough variety of work, there seems to be no work variety as per OH&S guidelines.

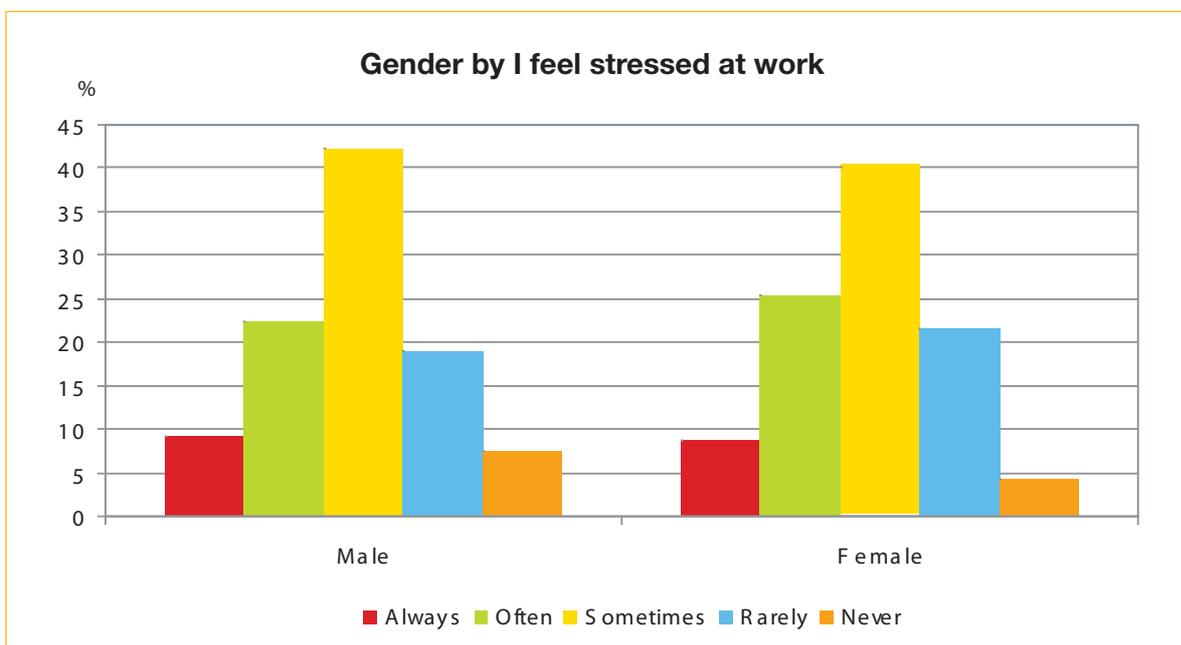
- The pressure to take call after call and adhere to allocated break times
- Too many calls without a regulated break(s). Not always staffed adequately – too much emphasis on cost cutting now.
- Too much to do in too short a time
- Unrealistic targets, Long hours of monotonous work and no motivation or career growth signs
- Unreasonable targets, KPI's and the pay conditions
- Unreasonable targets, treatment of staff who do not meet targets during certain jobs.
- Unsupportive and often nasty supervisors – extremely rude and aggressive bordering on bullying
- Volume of calls
- When leave is not granted or is difficult to obtain, especially when things arise with my children
- When the supervisor screams across the call centre your calls taking too long and all you are trying to do is help the customer
- When there is a queue of waiting calls and the supervisor advises you how many calls are waiting
- When unable to answer calls banked up
- When unable to get sales
- When we are short staffed
- Work load



Stress at work was related to intention to remain in the industry with, as the chart *I Feel Stressed at Work by Intention to Remain in the Industry* reveals, those who reported they were likely to leave the industry in the next six months more likely to say that they always or often felt stressed at work. As the level of reported stress declined, the intention to stay increased. Thus it is likely that higher levels of stress lead to higher turnover levels.

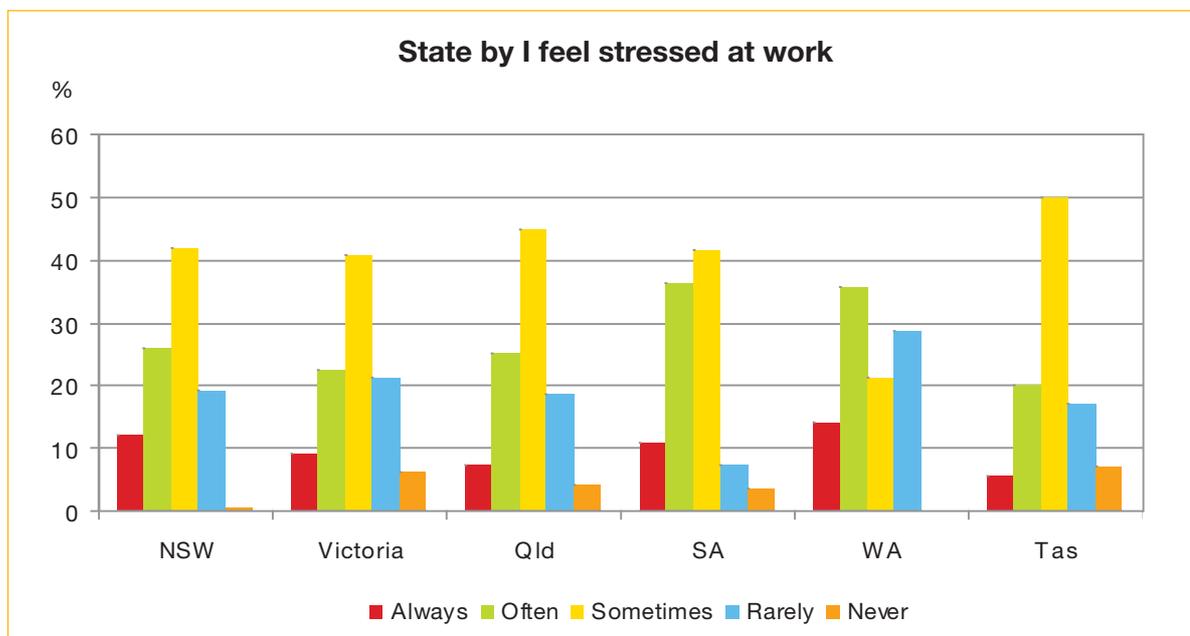
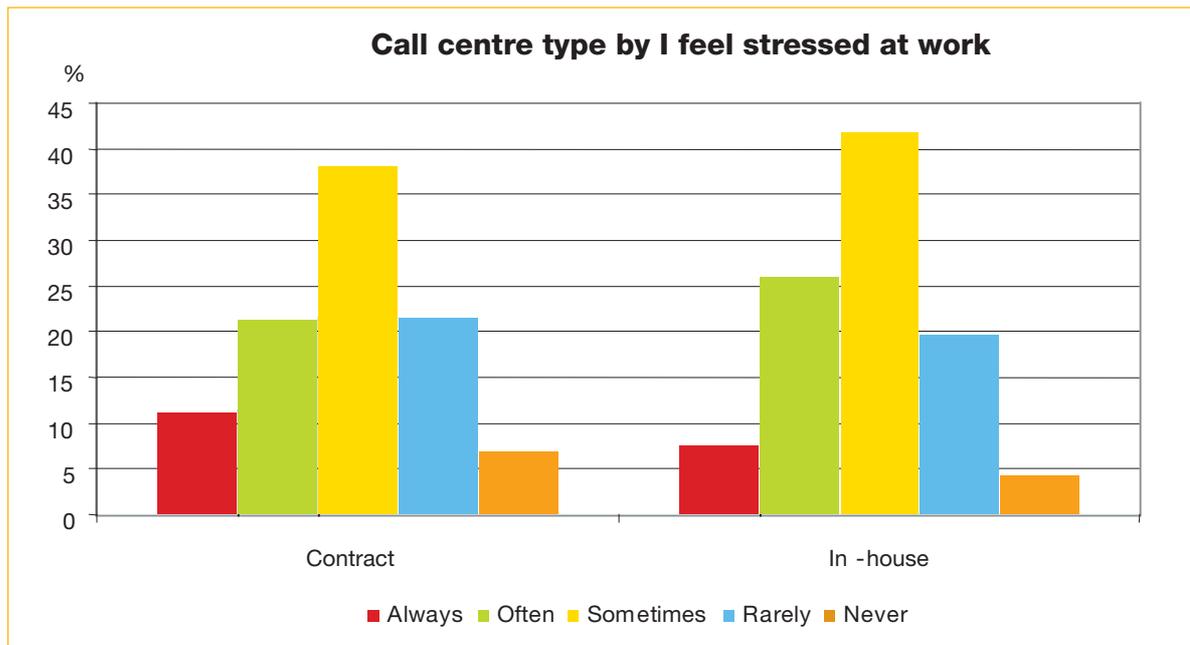


As the chart *Employment Type by I Feel Stressed at Work* reveals, employment type does appear to influence stress levels with those in precarious employment, such as agency workers, casuals and temporary workers, more likely to report that they never feel stressed. This may be because contingent workers spend less time in the workplace or have less engagement with the workplace and are therefore less likely to feel stress.



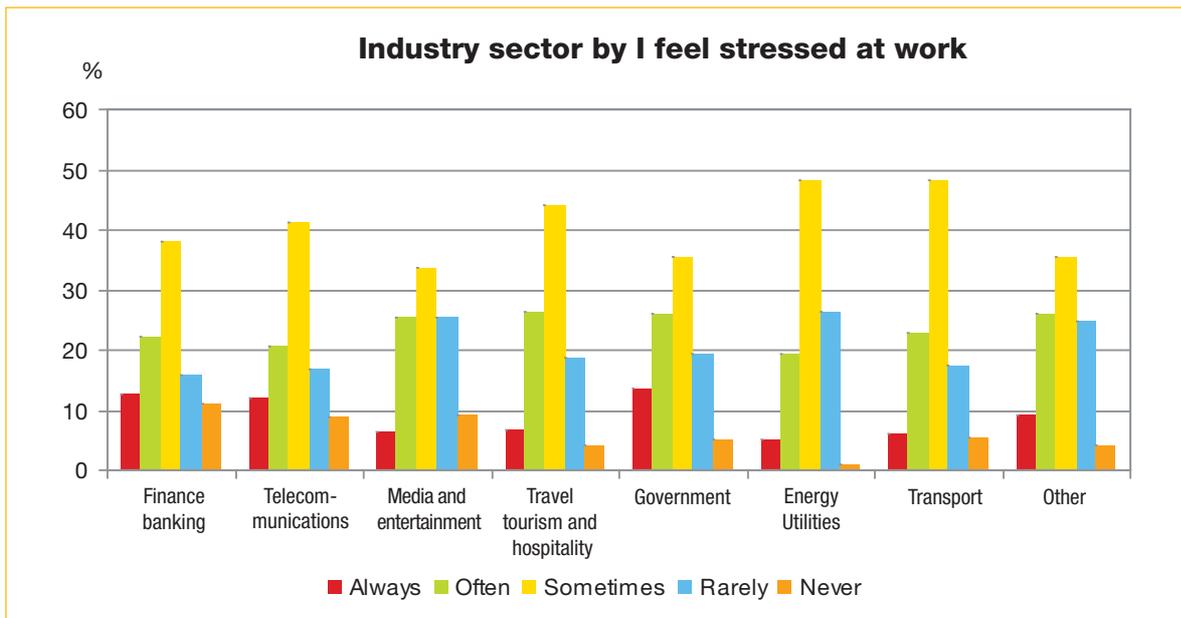
As the chart *Gender by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, there was significant difference between men and women, with men more likely to report they are never stressed.

As well, as the chart *Call Centre Type by I Feel Stressed at Work* illustrates, the type of call centre appears to influence stress with contract call centres more likely to report they are always stressed or never stressed.



As the chart *State by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, there were some differences between the states but small sample sizes in some of the less populous states, such as Western Australia and South Australia, makes it difficult to draw any strong conclusions.

‘Casuals and temporary workers are more likely to report that they **never feel stressed.**’

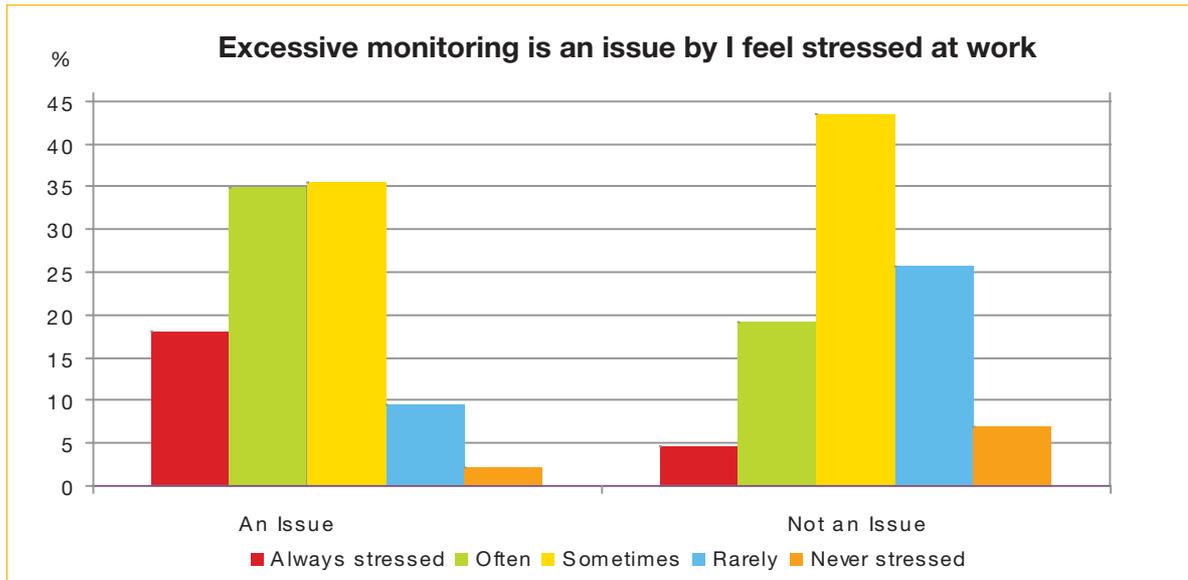


In terms of in the industry sector that most of the respondent’s calls were made, a complex picture emerges. The chart *Industry Sector by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows that in terms of reporting stress, sectors such as Finance/banking and Government have high levels of people reporting they always feel stressed but lower than expected levels of people reporting they often feel stressed. Given the complexity of the picture, we can gain further illumination by looking at the results for the rarely and never feel stressed at work. Here it emerges that in the Energy/utilities and Media and entertainment sectors, more people than expected reported they rarely or never felt stressed.

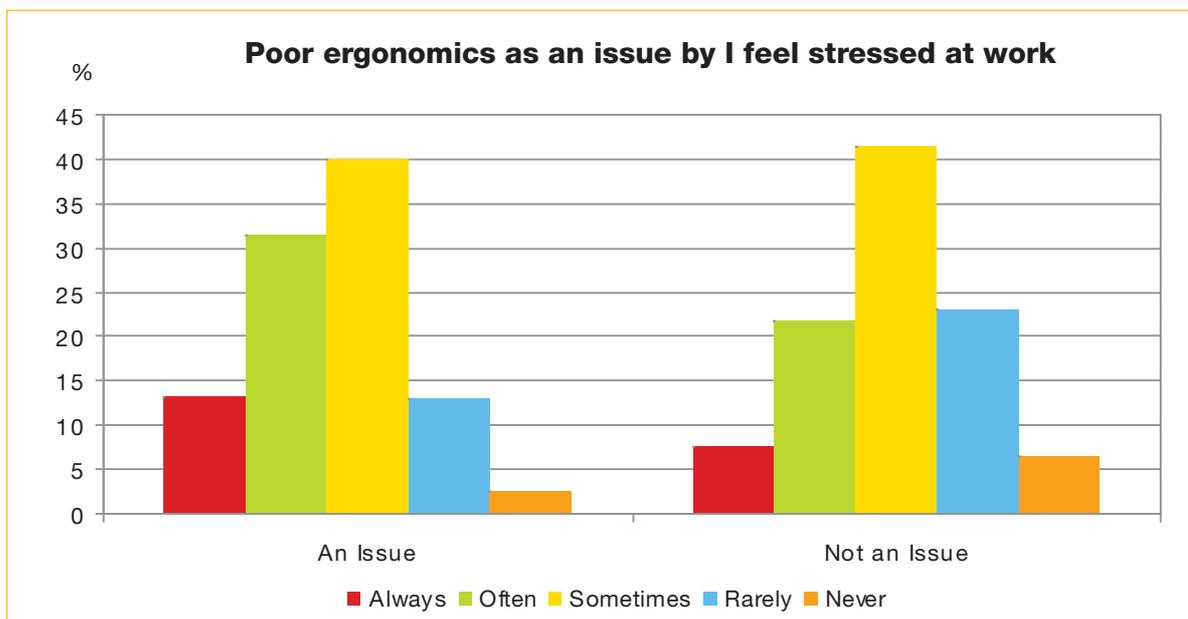
There is an association between respondents’ perception of the level of union activity in their workplace and their reported levels of stress. As can be seen from the chart *The Union is Active in my Workplace by I Feel Stressed at Work*, only 8.9% of those who reported that the union were active in the workplace said they were stressed as opposed to 19.6% of those who disagreed that the union was active in their workplace.

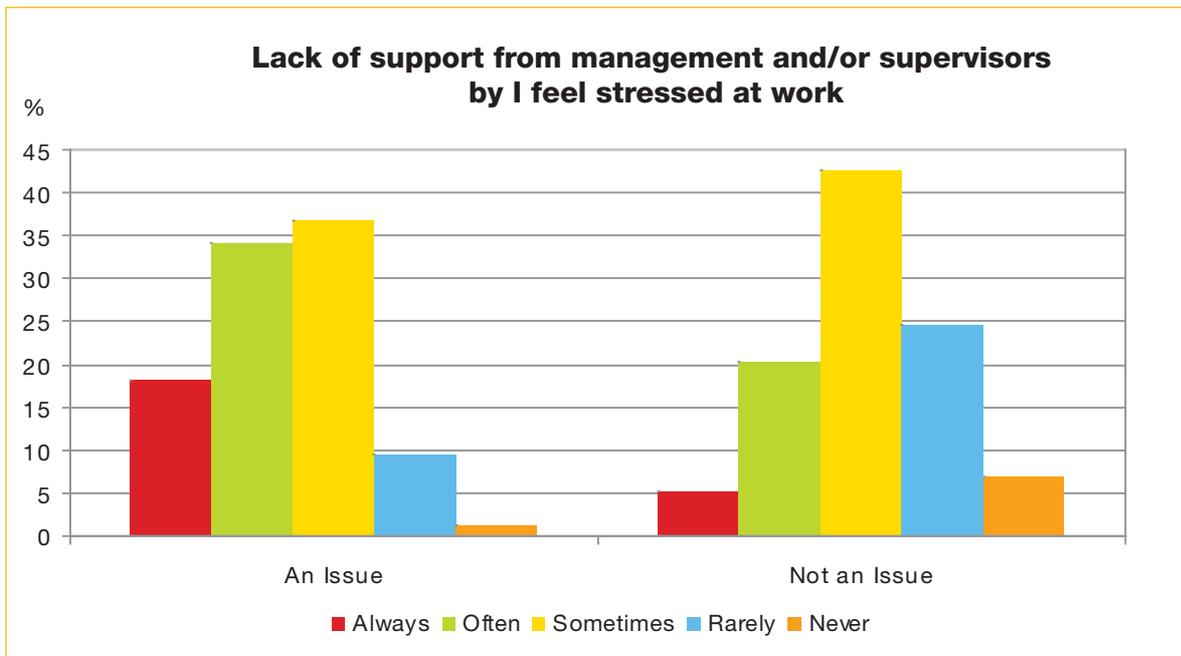
We can gain an insight into some of the possible factors related to stress if we look at the relationship between issues in the workplace and reported levels of stress. For the sake of brevity only those issues that more than 25% of people reported were a concern have been included, and they have been compared against those people who did not report the issue as a significant factor to gain some insight on the effect of that issue on patterns of stress.

The survey found that 31.4% (n=486) of respondents said that excessive monitoring was an issue and, as the chart *Excessive Monitoring is an Issue by I Feel Stressed at Work* illustrates, there are significant differences in levels of reported stress between those who believe excessive monitoring is or is not an issue.



The survey found that 25% (n=386) believed poor ergonomics was an issue at work and as the chart *Poor Ergonomics as an Issue by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, they were significantly more likely to indicate they were stressed with 44% always or often stressed as opposed to 29% of those who did not feel ergonomics were an issue.

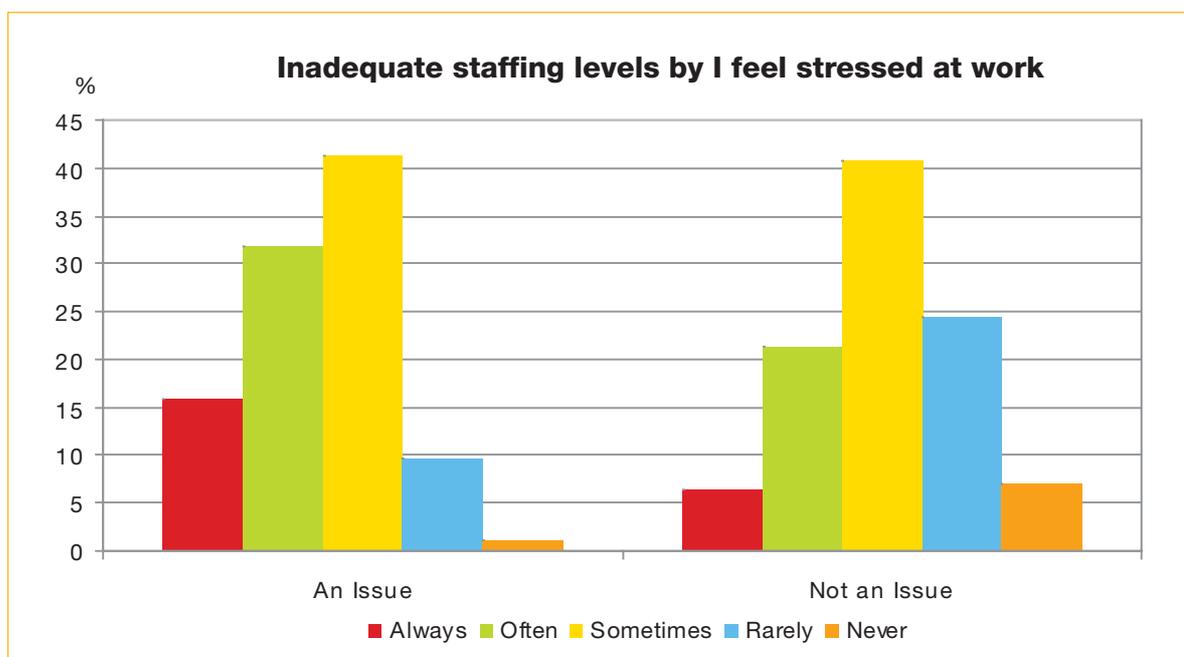
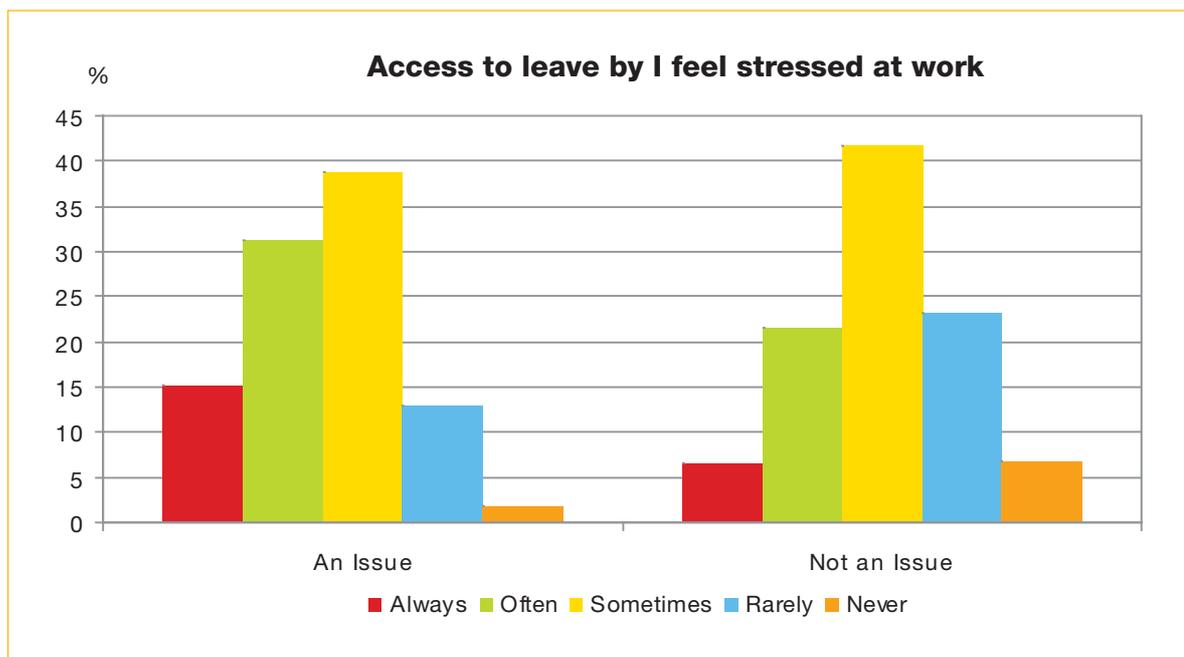




Over 26% (n=414) of respondents believed lack of training was an issue and, as the chart *Lack of Training as an Issue by I Feel Stressed at Work* reveals, over 51% of these were always or often stressed.

The survey found that 28% (n=428) of respondents agreed that lack of support from managers and or supervisors was an issue and, as the chart *Lack of Support from Management and/or Supervisors by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, these people reported higher levels of stress with over 52% reporting they were always or often stressed as opposed to 25% of those who did not believe this was an issue

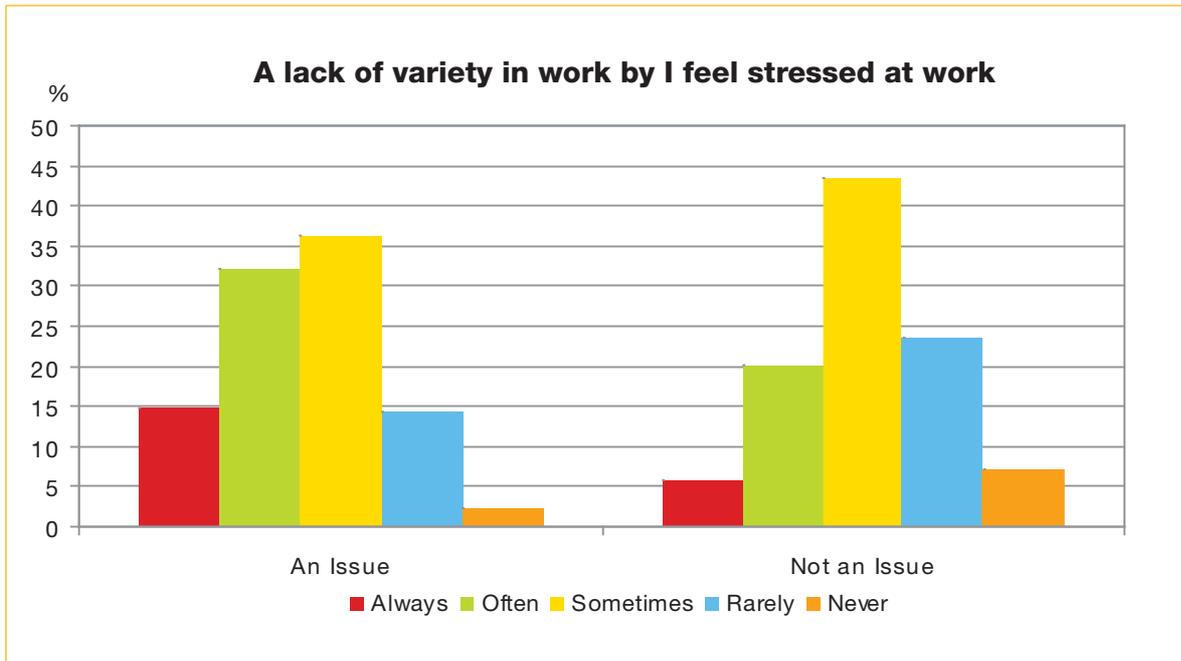
It emerged that 27% (n=410) agreed that access to leave, such as holiday or sick leave, was an issue in their workplace and of these people, as the chart *Access to Leave by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, 46% were always or often stressed at work as opposed to 28% of those who did not feel it was an issue.



It emerged that 27% (n=411) of respondents nominated inadequate staffing levels as an issue and, as the chart *Inadequate Staffing Levels by I Feel Stressed at Work* shows, of these over 48% were always or often stressed at work.

The survey revealed that 33.6% (n=520) agreed that a lack of variety in work was an issue and as the chart *A Lack of Variety in Work by I feel Stressed at Work* indicates, of these over 46% were always or often stressed at work.

It must be kept in mind that although the people who nominated an issue in the workplace had higher levels of stress, those who did not nominate a particular issue as affecting their workplace, more than 20% reported that they were always or often stressed at work. This suggests, as Taylor et al (2003) argued, that stress is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to being caused by just one factor.



The survey found that 32.6% of respondents reported stress from their call centre work had caused them to take sick leave in the last 12 months. It emerged that the people who answered the questions ‘Stress from my call centre work has caused me to take sick leave in the last 12 months’ took an average of 8.21 days off and most frequently took 3 days off. Some of the comments made were:

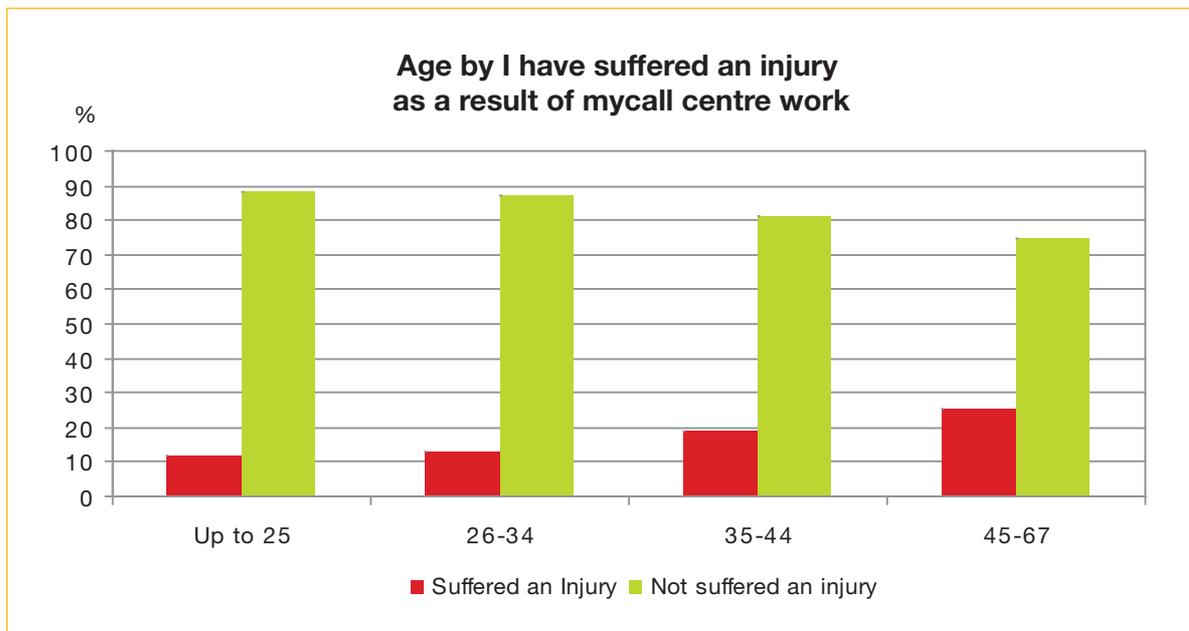
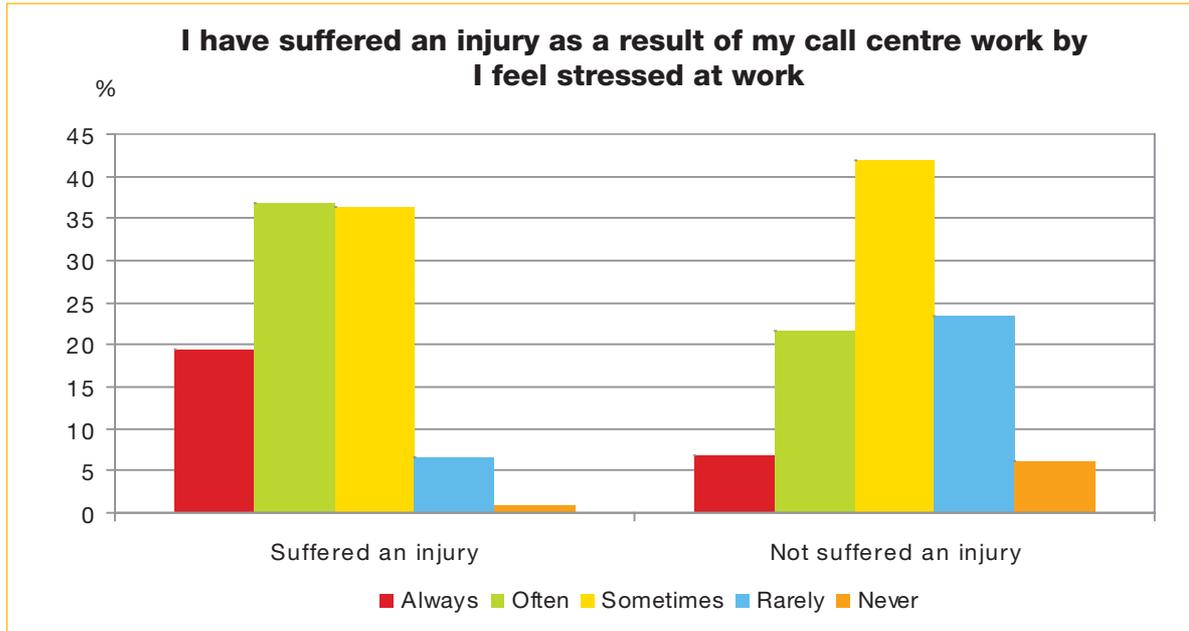
- 3 months – casual – so had to use long service leave
- all sick leave I had remaining plus leave without pay
- Countless days over the time I was in the call centre. I took 6 months leave without pay for a break.
- Stress related to Acoustic shock injury -months

The picture that emerges of stress in call centres is:

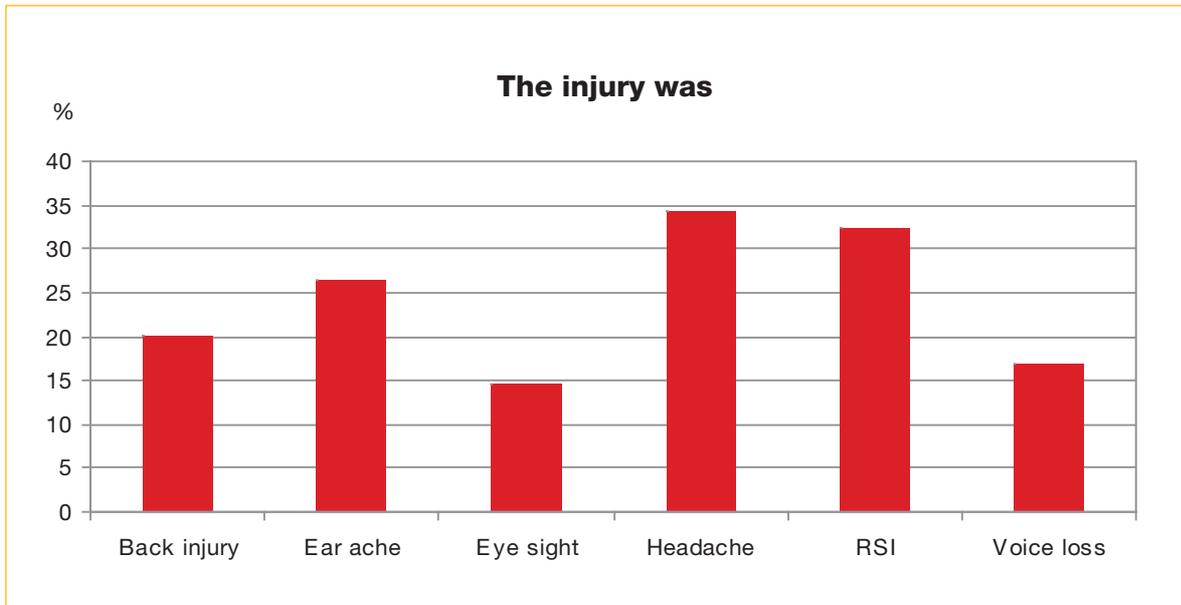
- Around a third of people reported they always or often felt stressed at work.
- Permanent fulltime workers were more likely to be stressed while those who had been in the industry for a significant length of time less likely to report they felt stressed.
- Those who reported they were always or often stressed were more likely to say they would remain in the industry less than six months. It would therefore seem that higher levels of stress are likely to lead to higher levels of turnover.
- The Energy/utilities and Media and entertainment sectors were less likely to agree they were stressed.
- A workplace where the union is seen to be active is less likely to report high levels of stress.
- A lack of variety in work, excessive monitoring lack of support from managers and/or supervisors, lack of training and inadequate staffing levels contribute in a significant manner to feeling of stress.

Workplace Injury

The survey revealed that 17.1% of respondents had suffered a workplace injury as a result of their call centre work. This represents a decrease of over 20% from the last survey in 2000 where 38.6% reported a workplace injury. There is a relationship between suffering an injury at work and feeling stressed at work with, as the chart *I Suffered an Injury as a Result of my Call Centre Work by I Feel Stressed at Work* reveals, over 55% of those who reported an injury always or often stressed as opposed to 28% of those who had not suffered an injury



As the chart *Age by I Have Suffered an Injury as a Result of my Call Centre Work* shows, there is an association between age and suffering a workplace injury whilst there was variation between industry sectors with Finance/banking and Government and Transport recording higher than average reports of injury.



Overall it emerged that of the total respondents 5.8% suffered headaches and 5.5% RSI. The chart *The Injury was* reveals a breakdown of the different types of injury.

The causes of many of these injuries have been isolated. Musco-skeltal disorders such as back injuries are caused by long periods of repetitive routinised and sedentary work at PCs without sufficient breaks. Voice loss is associated with the prolonged use of vocal cords in repetitive patterns in non-supportive ambient environments while earaches appear to be directly related to problems with headsets and poor audial environment (Taylor et al, 2003). We know from our survey that almost 35% agreed that there was a lack of variety of work, 25% of respondents said that poor quality equipment was an issue and around 18% agreed that their workplace was uncomfortable and inadequate breaks were an issue. It is highly likely that these factors have contributed to these workplace injuries.

Some of the other injuries people suffered were:

- Acoustic shock
- Anxiety and stress leading to a severe mental breakdown and thoughts of suicide
- Concussion due to falling out of a chair due to an unsafe work place
- Could not sit comfortable on any chair in the office except for the ones in the boardroom which are similar to what I have at home. I do not have a fixed desk so I am unable to even bring my chair in from home to use at work! I am quitting this job as a result of not having my own desk
- Electric shock due lightning coming through my headset
- Illness caught from sick person who has been pressured not to take sick leave
- Neck injury. Due to the fact that we do not have head sets and have to use hand sets. The muscles on the one side of my neck shortened and I needed to see a doctor as I could not move my neck and was in extreme pain.

- Panic attacks, anxiety, depression, stress. Sense of not coping & no one wanted to listen. I took a 5k decrease to a lower APS level to get out.
- Shoulder and neck pressure which requires regular visits to chiro and masseuse to help alleviate discomfort.
- Some of the joints affected by the arthritis are my wrists. My doctor has advised me to try & have at least a couple minutes break (preferably longer), between calls but my KPI's are such, that to achieve them, I have to make at least 70 outbound calls per 8 hour shift, which means constant typing/clicking of the mouse, etc., during the whole shift, without even a few seconds break between calls.
- Started drinking alcohol in 2006 and 2007 as I couldn't cope with being over rostered during our busy times. Was using alcohol to sleep and get through all my commitments.
- Stress anxiety-took unpaid medical leave
- Stress related rash
- Weight increase and depression and stress increase

The picture that emerges about workplace injury is:

- The 17.1% of people who reported a workplace injury represents a decrease of over 20% from the 2000 survey.
- There is a relationship between feeling stressed at work and suffering a workplace injury.
- Headaches and RSI were the most frequently reported injuries.

‘Almost 35% agreed that there was a lack of variety of work, 25% said that poor quality equipment was an issue.’

Offshoring

Analysis of the survey results revealed that 18.4% of respondents said they had negatively affected by a decision to off shore services and 81.6% had been unaffected.

As the chart *Industry by Affected by a Business Decision to Offshore* reveals, there is a significant difference between industry sectors with those in Telecommunications and Travel, tourism and hospitality more likely to have been affected by offshoring than the other industry sectors.

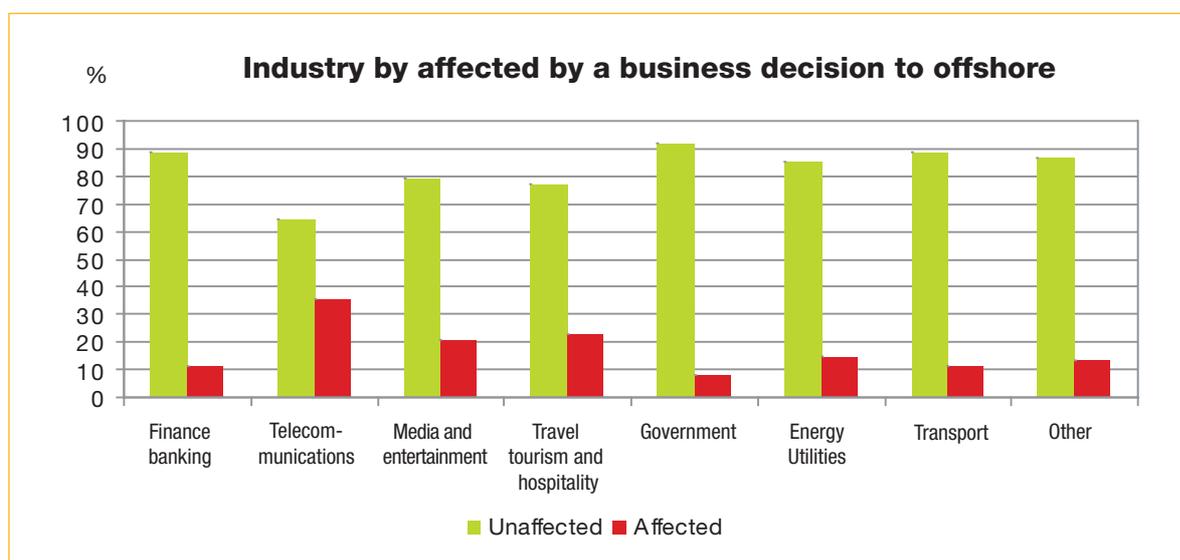
The chart *State by Affected by a Business Decision to Offshore* illustrates, there are differences between the states with Victorian and Tasmania more likely to agree that they had been negatively impacted by offshoring whilst Queensland was less likely to agree they had been negatively impacted.

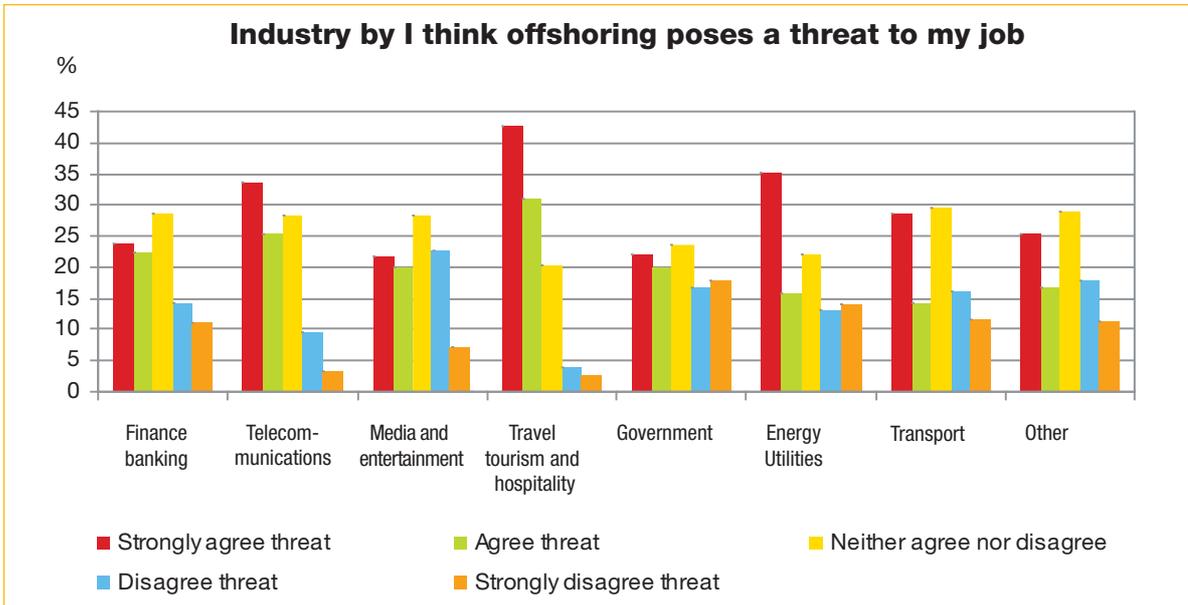
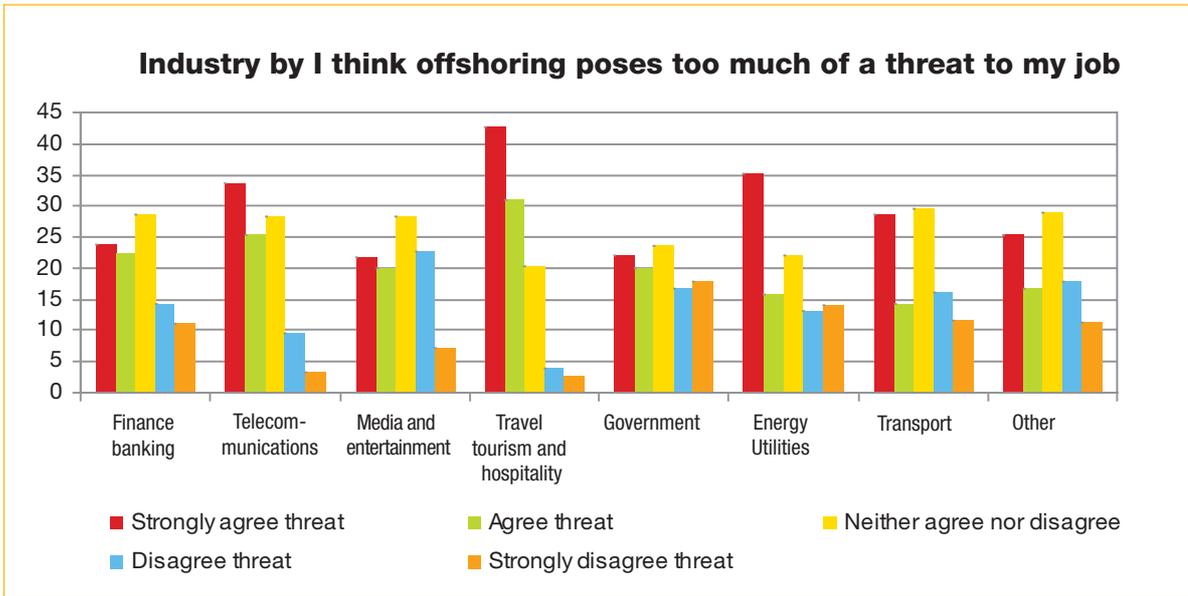
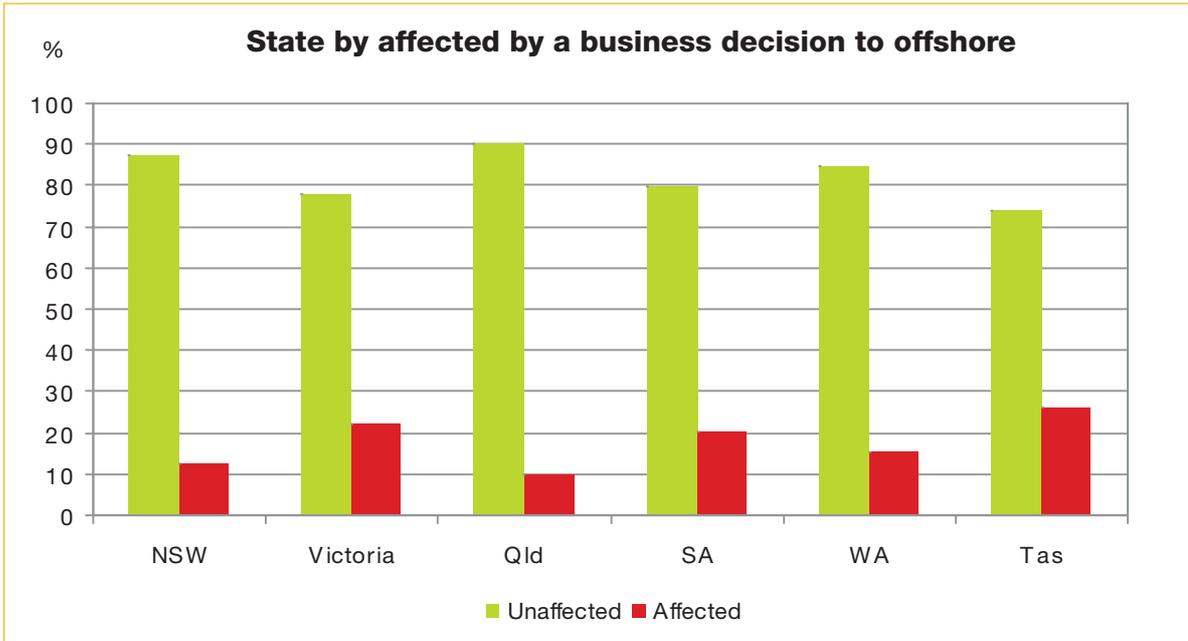
As the chart *Industry by I Think Offshoring Poses a Threat to my Job* shows, those people working in Travel, tourism and hospitality and Telecommunications were more likely to agree that offshoring posed a threat to their job.

There is an association between a person feeling stressed at work and thinking offshoring poses a threat to their job. It emerged that 48.5% of people who always felt stressed at work strongly agreeing that off shoring posed a threat to their job whilst 26% of people who never felt stressed at work strongly agreed with the statement that off shoring posed a threat to their job.

The conclusions we can draw from this are that:

- Almost 20% of respondents had been affected by a decision to offshore.
- Telecommunications and Travel, tourism and hospitality were the industries most affected and were more likely to agree that it posed a threat to their job.
- There is an association between thinking offshoring poses a threat and stress.





6. Conclusions

The survey brought out some significant issues for call centre workers and management. Whilst many call centre workers liked the type of work, their co-workers, the hours/rosters, the workplace culture and the pay and conditions, they disliked the targets/KPIs and agreed that a lack of variety in work, excessive monitoring, lack of support from managers and /or supervisors, lack of training, access to leave and inadequate staffing levels were all issues in their workplace.

There was concern over job security, lack of consultation over change, a feeling of lacking control over the pace of work and a belief that they were excessively monitored, a feeling they were under pressure to meet targets but often had little input into the setting of those targets. Around a third of respondents were always or often stressed at work and this was more often felt by those who were relatively new to the call centre industry. The feel of being stressed was directly related to intention to leave the industry with almost 25% of those who were always stressed saying they would leave the industry in the next six months. This has important implications for call centre staff and the associated costs of separation, recruitment, induction and training. Stress appears to be associated with excessive monitoring, poor ergonomics, lack of training, a lack of support from management and/or supervisors, difficulty accessing leave, inadequate staffing levels, a lack of variety in work and a belief that offshoring poses a threat to their job.

The survey found that over 17% of respondents had suffered a workplace injury as a result of their call centre work which represents a decrease of over 20% from the 2000 survey. The most frequently mentioned injuries were headache, RSI and ear ache and these workplace injuries appear to be associated with stress.

The survey results support much of the findings from other research into occupational health and safety in call centres, namely that call centre jobs are stressful and that call centre workers suffer from stress, anxiety and depression and this is associated with, amongst other things, the amount of control over their work, monitoring, training and team leader support. The solution to this appears to be twofold. Firstly there needs to be an empowerment of call centre workers and for this to take place, as Taylor et al (2003) suggest, in the context of a thorough examination of:

- The social environment
- The proximate environment
- The ambient environment

The first steps towards this are for call centre management and workers to work together to solve the issues that this survey has highlighted and which come as such a great individual and organisational cost.

A Note on the Statistics

We have made the assumption that this is a random survey, that is the survey is distributed in a random manner in the call centre industry and we can therefore make reliable inferences about workers experiences in call centres. The main statistic used was the Chi Squared test which determines whether or not differences between observed and theoretical counts are significant and consequently if there is a relationship between variables.

The level of significance used for the acceptance or rejection of hypotheses was 95%. This means that the observed and theoretical counts was sufficiently large that we would expect it to occur less than 5 times in 100. This is the equivalent of tossing an unbiased coin and it landing heads seven consecutive times.

For more information on call centres visit
www.callcentreunion.com.au

References

- ATA (2008) *Australian Contact Centre Industry key statistics*, <http://www.ata.asn.au/imagesDB/news/ATAcelebrates20yearsIndustryFacts.pdf>
- Deery, S, Iverson, R and Walsh, J (2002) 'Work Relationships in Telephone Call Centres: Understanding Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Withdrawal', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39 (4): 471-96.
- Hannif, Z and Lamm, F (2005) 'Occupation Health and Safety in the New Zealand Call Centre Industry', *Employment Studies Centre University of Auckland, Working Paper No 2005/8*.
- Holdsworth, L and Cartwright, S (2003) 'Empowerment, stress and satisfaction: an exploratory study of a call centre', *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 24(3): 131-40.
- Holman, D (2002) 'Employee wellbeing in call centres', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 12 (4): 35-50.
- Holman, D, Chissick, C and Totterdell, P (2002) 'The Effects of Performance Monitoring on Emotional Labor and Well-being in Call Centres', *Motivation and Emotion*, 26 (1): 57-81
- Taylor, P, Baldry, C, Bain, P and Ellis, V (2003) 'A Unique Working Environment': health, sickness and absence management in UK call centres', *Work, Employment and Society*, 17(3): 435-58.
- Wallace, C, Eagleson, G and Waldersee, R (2000) 'The sacrificial HR strategy in call centres', *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 11 (2): 174-84.



A.S.U.
Australian Services Union

© Australian Services Union November 2009

www.callcentreunion.com.au
callcentreunion@asu.asn.au

