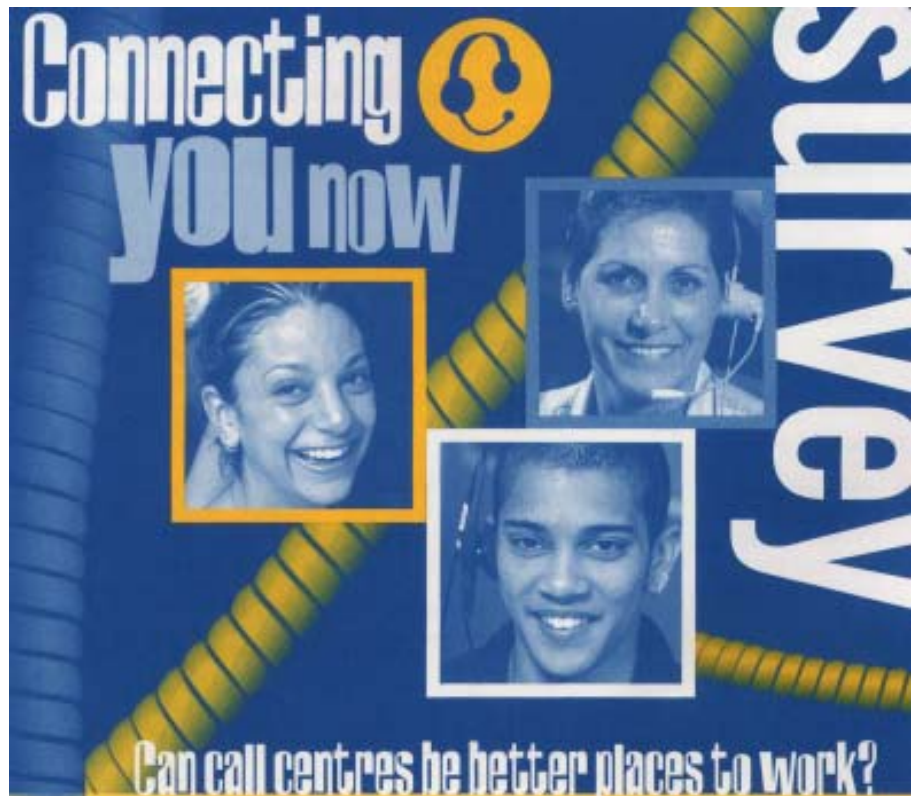




**A•S•U**  
Australian Services Union



## **A•S•U Survey Results:** **Can call centres be better places to work?**



## Contents

Acknowledgements ..... 1  
Forward ..... 3  
The Survey ..... 5  
Key Findings ..... 5  
Solutions ..... 6  
Introduction ..... 7  
Call Centre Overview ..... 9  
The ASU in Call Centres ..... 11  
Stress ..... 12  
Working Conditions ..... 14  
Solutions ..... 19  
General Comments ..... 21  
What Causes Stress? ..... 23  
A Note on the Statistics ..... 24  
References ..... 24

## Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this report. ASU officials from both the National Office and Branches participated to the designing and development of the questions in the survey. National office staff, especially Brigid Marasco, prepared and formatted the report for printing and all ASU call centre organisers are continuing to use the survey to inform workers in this industry of the findings.

The academic analysis of the survey was undertaken by Ruth Barton, a Research Fellow at the Key Centre of Industrial Relations at Monash University, Melbourne. The high quality analysis has led to informed debate in the community, at the workplace, and all levels of policy development within the ASU and beyond; this process will undoubtedly continue to occur.

By far the greatest contribution to this report is made by the ASU members and non members employed in the call centre industry. These employees gave of their time and replied to the survey in a very constructive and positive way. Without their professional approach and specialist knowledge of their industry, coupled with a great desire to play an active role in improving it, none of this would have been possible. As a result of their contribution the findings of this survey are a solid foundation from which we will accurately target further research into this dynamic and rapidly expanding industry.

COLIN LYNCH  
ASU Call Centre Campaign Co-ordinator



## **Foreword**

Work and how we do it continues to change rapidly as we move into the twenty first century. But as with other forms of work in the past, employees continue to experience problems. The ASU undertook this survey and commissioned its analysis to assess the extent and range of issues affecting employees in both existing and new areas of work in call centres.

We wanted to base our national strategy to organise new areas of employment on credible research. The research took into account the growing international and domestic literature on this industry but, importantly, also emphasised the views and opinions of our members and call centre employees. This survey marries the two bodies of knowledge together.

We believe this survey is an important tool in developing strategies and policies to assist the ASU help employees to gain the dignity, respect and recognition they deserve. The survey achieves these research and policy objectives by not only highlighting the many problems within the industry but by also pointing to solutions.

Therefore, while what we found is very worrying, the survey also helps identify the fundamentals of a vision and way forward for the industry. We found:

- over 88 per cent of call centre employees suffered stress with up to one third taking 10, or in some cases, more than 10 days off work per year as a direct result;
- that injury was very high with almost 40 per cent of people reporting they had suffered a workplace injury;
- we also found a strong link between techniques used to measure employees' productivity (such as call monitoring) and stress; and
- we found a strong link between management techniques and stress, suggesting that team leaders and managers are being required to meet unrealistic productivity and efficiency targets which are translating into high levels of stress across the workplace.

However we also found some very positive and sensible solutions to many of these problems. These included:

- that employees had ideas and solutions to make their workplace productive, rewarding and safe and wanted to be listened to about these ideas;
- we found that Management attitude needed to improve towards their employees, and if it did that this can reasonably be expected to reduce both the incidence and severity of stress; and
- we found strong evidence supporting the need for a form of productivity measurement that seeks to **coach not control** employees, something that is considered by workers as a key solution to stress.

In this way the survey gave an important insight that:

- **employees see themselves as customer service professionals and expect to be treated as such.**

In summary (there is no simpler way of saying it) - we found management needs to manage better.

In such a new and dynamic area of employment growth the haphazard nature of industrial regulation continually drives down wages as companies compete with each other. However, in any mature industry claiming to provide a fair and safe workplace, this cannot continue. High labour turnover which is a symptom of stress and a poorly managed work environment is costing employers and our members dearly.

This survey and the ASU policies drawn from this research should be viewed by all stakeholders as a positive step by the ASU to play a constructive and responsible role in what is clearly an industry that is here to stay. It will be the form of work many Australians of all ages rely on as they live and raise their families

The ASU is committed to organising this industry and will continue to play a leading role in improving wages and providing safe working conditions based on sound and relevant research and the views of members and call centre employees.

BRIAN SULLIVAN  
National Executive President

## The Survey

Call centres are one of Australia's fastest growing industries. They employ 160,000 people, have an annual worth of \$6.5 billion and are growing faster in Australia than anywhere else in the world. There are now around 4,000 call centre sites in Australia with 42% located in Sydney and 28% in Melbourne.

The conditions in call centres have been likened to the assembly lines of the early industrial era with productivity bonuses, round the clock shiftwork and overtime. These conditions have been found, by international research, to generate particular occupational health and safety problems and considerable stress in the workplace.

It is against this background that the ASU conducted a survey of 658 union and non-union call centre workers in the private, State and local government sectors. The survey was divided into a number of sections, namely

- Call centre overview
- Feelings at work
- Working conditions
- Solutions
- General comments

## Key Findings

The key findings were:

- Stress is prevalent in call centres with 88% of respondents finding their job and workplace stressful
- The five most frequent factors that contributed to stress were
  - Rude customers
  - Call monitoring/recording
  - Equipment failure
  - Bad telephone and computer equipment
  - Unsupportive managers
- Stress caused almost a third of people to take time off work.
- Stress caused people to take a median of 5 days off work.
- Almost half the people who responded to the survey believed the telephone or call centre technology contributed to stress
- Just over one third of people believed they received insufficient communication and encouragement from managers
- Almost 40% of people reported they had suffered a workplace injury as a result of their work with this being associated with a stressful job and workplace
- The most frequently mentioned injuries were headaches and eyesight
- The monitoring of people's work is almost universal. The main form of monitoring is by listening in.
- **It is monitoring as such rather than any particular type of monitoring that causes stress.**

- There is an association between call measurement and stress.
- Lack of communication and encouragement from managers, the call centre telephone and technology and a need for more training and support are causes of stress.

## **Solutions**

The survey offered three main suggestions from employees and the analysis on making call centres a better and safer place to work:

- Listen to employee's suggestions
- Decrease emphasis on statistics
- Improve management's attitude
- Over half the survey respondents felt they needed more training and support.



## Introduction

Call centres are one of Australia's fastest growing industries, reputedly growing at the rate of 25% a year. In 1999 Call Centre Research reported call centres employed 160,000 people, had an annual worth of \$6.5 billion and are growing faster in Australia than anywhere else in the world. The main reasons for the growth of call centres is they are seen as a way of lowering customer transaction costs, with globalisation making Australia's location in the Asia Pacific region and its multilingual workforce attractive.

Currently there are around 4,000 call centre sites in Australia with 42% located in Sydney and 28% in Melbourne. Although most call centres are located in cities there is a trend towards regional centres where floor space is cheaper, wages are 5% to 10% cheaper and the workforce is considered more stable, because of high levels of unemployment. Turnover in the call centre industry appears to be between 20% and 35% a year and does not appear to be reduced by bonus payments, mentors or flexible working hours. The costs of turnover can be considerable. In terms of the call centre industry the Hallis study (1999) found that the cost to replace a call centre employee is upward of \$11,000. This is consistent with other industry studies such as ACA (1998) and CCR (1999).

Knights, Calvey and Odih argue that within academic circles and in the media, call centres have often been described in distinctly Orwellian terms. In these 'white collar' factories, hundreds of employees are arranged in serried ranks to handle the seemingly endless flow of customer telephone enquiries. The new generation of monitoring technology can analyse keystrokes on a terminal to determine if employees are making efficient use of their time between telephone conversations. Employers can tap phones, read e-mails, monitor computer screens and use tracking technology to monitor personal movements. The possibility, and in some cases the coercive use, of surveillance techniques for call centre workers is dramatic, intense and secretive. This surveillance can involve not only a constant measurement of performance but other pressures associated with an intensification of work. As a result of these pressures there has been a tendency to see call centres as a contemporary version of the 19th century sweatshop or those dark, satanic mills. The conditions in call centres have been likened to the assembly lines of the early industrial era where the working conditions resemble blue rather than white collar jobs with productivity bonuses, round the clock shiftwork and overtime. Taylor and Bain conclude that even in the most quality driven call centre it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the work is intrinsically demanding, repetitive and frequently stressful.

That the call centre experience is for many operators intensive, pressurised and frequently stressful has been confirmed by a number of surveys. A 1999 report by the Deloitte and Touche Consulting Group and ACA Research found 25% of call centre workers felt stress was high or very high and 47% reported a medium level of stress. The study found stress levels were caused by technology, call centre organisation and physical environment, role definitions, life style and training. Location or industry did not influence stress levels. The study found 80% of workers had requested training in stress management, and nearly 20% would like to receive professional help. Knight and McCabe criticise studies such as these on the grounds they offer individualistic solutions such as training and education in life management, counselling and support and stress profiles covering issues such as fitness, drinking, and smoking habits. They suggest stress stems from the character defects of individuals and their inability to cope with organisational life rather than suggesting it is implicit in the way work is organised in the call centre.

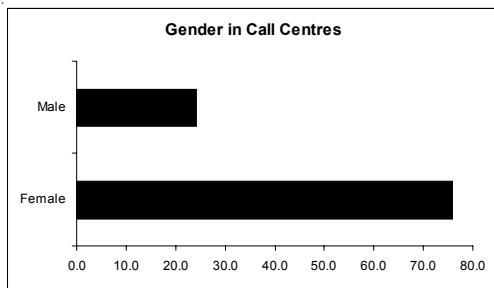
A survey conducted by Bain and Taylor in the British financial sector found 27% of call centre operators felt they were 'very pressurised' at work on a normal day with a further 60% admitting to being 'quite pressurised'. Only 12% claimed they were 'not very pressurised' and 1% 'not at all pressurised'. We must not forget that the newer forms of electronic surveillance are augmented by more traditional supervisory methods. Involvement and communication techniques, particularly teamworking, are often more concerned with the exercise of managerial control and productivity improvements than any meaningful commitment to developing employee empowerment. Flat organisational structures severely constrain opportunities for promotion and further contribute to the sector's high turnover rate. Arising from the experience of workers in call centres, British trade unions have drawn attention to the increased occupational risks of RSI, voice loss and respiratory problems. The unions have sought to widen the traditional bargaining agenda from issues such as pay and hours to include issues such as occupational voice loss, safeguards on employee monitoring and regular work breaks.

It is against this background that the ASU conducted a survey of union and non-union call centre workers in the private, state and local government sectors. The survey aimed to obtain information on

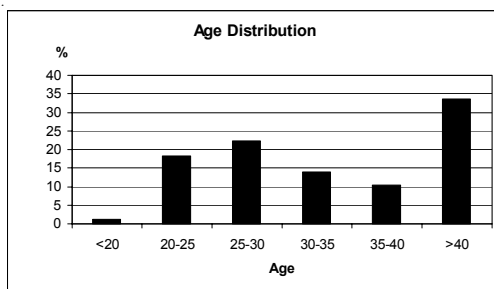
- The incidence of stress in the workplace
- The causes of workplace stress
- The consequences of stress
- The incidence of workplace injuries
- Workplace monitoring
- Solutions to these problems

# Call Centre Overview

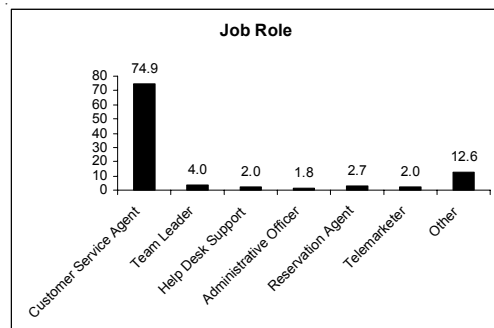
The survey revealed the call centre population is predominantly female, with women comprising 74.8% of the sample. This is depicted in the chart *Gender in Call Centres*.



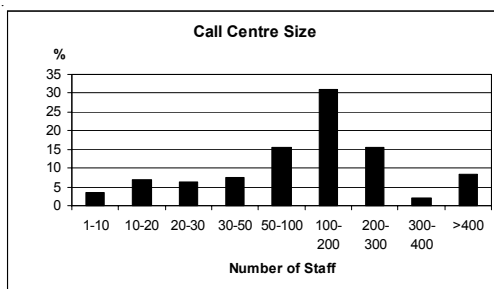
As can be seen from the chart *Age Distribution*, the age distribution has two peaks, one at age 25-30 and the second at over 40. There was not any significant difference in the age distribution of men and women.



The survey responses came from three main sectors Transport / Airlines (45.1%), Hospitality, Sport and Leisure (10.3%) and Communications (5%) with all other sectors, namely Information Technology, Finance and Insurance, Local Government, Manufacturing, Wholesale or Retail and Other, all recording individual totals of less than 33 responses or 5%. The main types of call undertaken by the survey respondents were Customer inquiries (50.5%), Inquiries from the public (21.4%) and Telemarketing (6.1%). As can be seen from the chart *Job Role*, the main job role was Customer service agent.



As can be seen from the chart *Call Centre Size*, most of the survey respondents are from call centres with more than 50 staff, including part time and temporary staff, and with 30% of people working in centres with 100 to 200 staff.



The tenure of people in the job appears to form two significant groups. There is a large group who have been in their jobs for more than five years and another group the same size with one to three years tenure. Overall 51% of people had been in their jobs less than three years. This figure is probably not surprising in an industry with high turnover rates.

The survey revealed over 55% of the sample worked full time with the rest of the people relatively evenly divided between shift work, part time and casual employment (see chart *Do you work in the call centre / By Employment Status*).

There is a significant difference in men and women's patterns of work. Significantly more men worked full time (61.9%) or shiftwork (18.1%) while significantly more women worked part time (17.4%) or casual (17.2%) (see chart *Employment Status by Gender*).

The chart *Employment Status by Age* reveals there is significant difference in working patterns between the age groups. As we progress through the age groups the amount of full time employment decreases and the amount of part time and casual employment increases. There are a number of possible reasons for these differences. It may be that as people go through different life stages the flexibility of call centre enables them to meet work and family commitments or may be that the difficulty older workers can experience in finding employment can mean they are willing to work casually or part time.

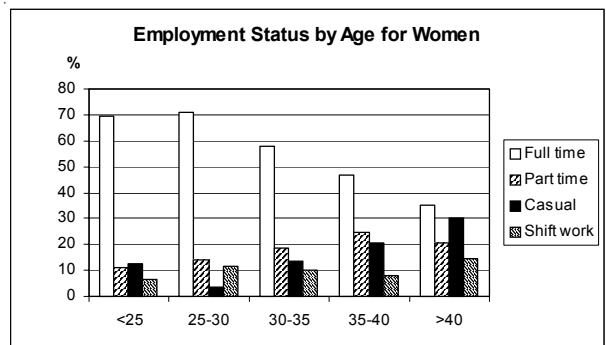
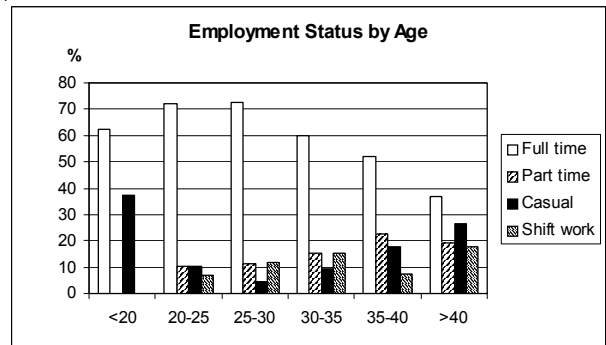
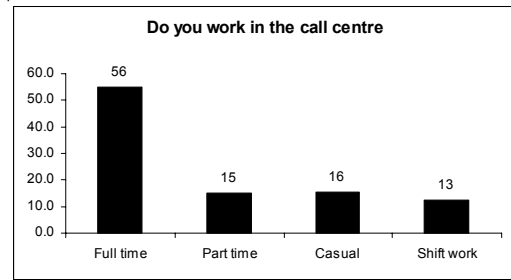
The chart *Employment Status by Age for Women* gives a picture of women's changing employment patterns as they age. Full time employment decreases whilst casual and part time increase with shift work remaining relatively constant.

The employment patterns for men are in some regards similar to women but with some differences. As can be seen in the chart *Employment Status by Age for Men* the proportion of men employed full time declines with age. The men perform, with age, increasing amounts of shift work but less casual and part time work than the women.

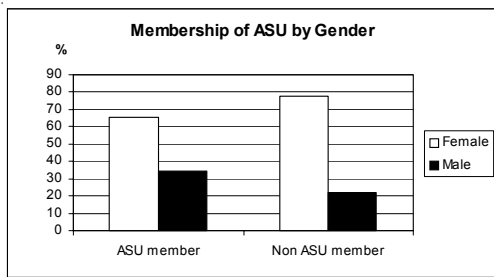
The reasons behind the apparent differences in employment patterns are not readily apparent although a number can be proposed. The decline in full time employment with age across both genders is puzzling. It may be that employers prefer to have younger people working full time or that people who need to have flexibility in their working hours are attracted to the flexible working hours offered in call centres. Stress may play a part with the possibility people opt for shorter or less working hours as they age to avoid work induced stress.

The picture we have gained of call centres is one where

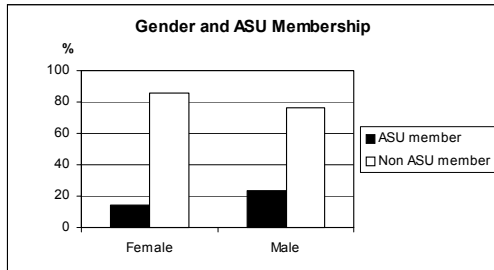
- The workforce is predominantly female
- Most people are aged over 25 years with almost a third aged over 40
- Most are employed in call centres of more than 100 people
- More than half have been in their jobs less than three years
- There are distinct differences in working patterns between men and women with women more likely to work part time or casually.



## The ASU in Call Centres

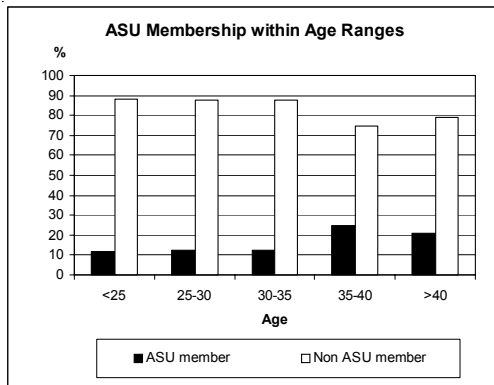


Out of a total of 658 responses 109 (16.6%) stated they were a member of the ASU whilst 27 (4.2%) stated they were not a member of any union. This leaves almost 80% of respondents as not responding to these categories. For the purposes of this survey those people who were not members of a union or did not respond were classified as non ASU members.



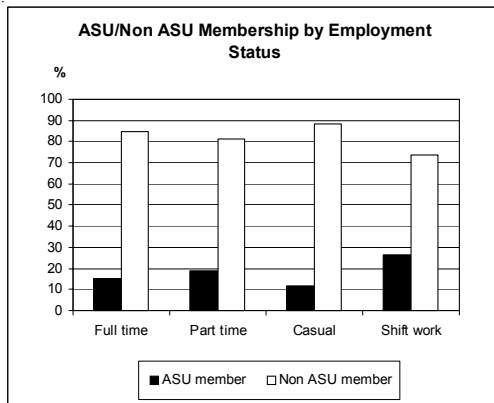
The chart *Membership of ASU by Gender* reveals a relationship between gender and union membership indicating areas of strategic importance to ASU organising. For example, women are proportionally under represented in that women comprise 76% of the sample but only 65.4% of ASU members.

This disparity in union membership levels is depicted in the chart *Gender and ASU Membership* where only 14.2% of women but 23.6% of men are ASU members.



Analysis reveals that age influences union membership with union membership increasing with age (see chart *ASU Membership within Age Ranges*). Only 12% of people aged under 25 were ASU members in contrast to 25% at age 35 to 40 and 20.7% of people over 40.

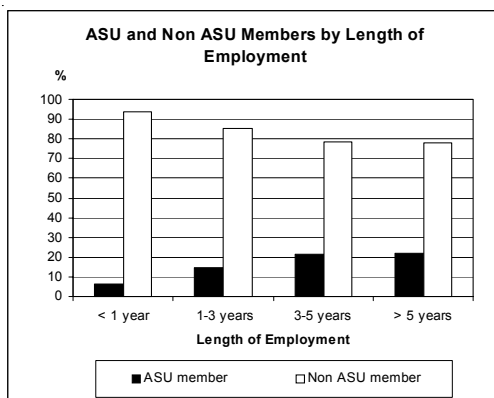
There is a relationship between employment status and ASU membership. As can be seen from the chart *ASU / Non ASU Membership by Employment Status*, casual workers are less likely to be ASU members, with 11.9% electing to join the ASU whilst 26.5% of shift workers are members of the ASU.



The chart *ASU and Non ASU Members by Length of Employment* reveals that length of employment affects union membership with ASU members under represented amongst those employed less than a year and proportionally over represented amongst those employed for more than five years

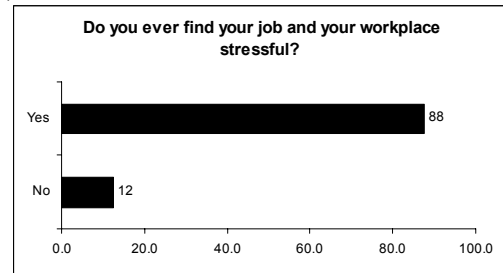
The picture we have gained of ASU members is that::

- Women are relatively under represented
- Older people are over represented
- Members are more likely to be part time or shift workers
- Members are more likely to have been employed for more than five years

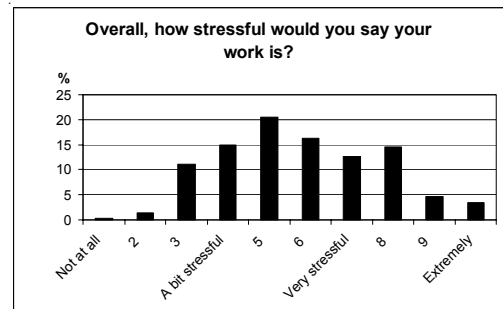


# Stress

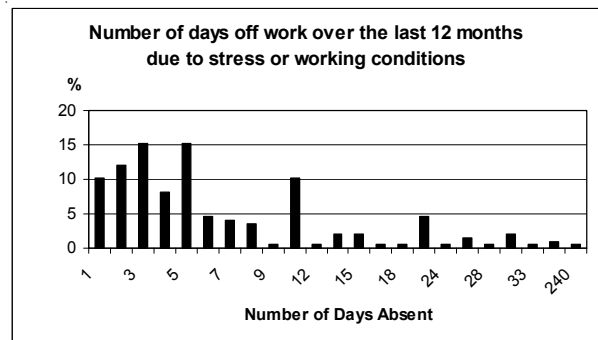
Within the survey stress, persistent feelings of tension or anxiety, were defined as feeling that 'things are out of control' or of being overwhelmed or pressured. As can be seen from the chart *Do you ever find your job and your workplace stressful?*, 88% of those who answered the survey felt their job and workplace to be stressful. Significantly more ASU members reported being stressed (94.5%) than non ASU members (86.2%). **There was not any significant difference between gender, employment status or age.**



The survey revealed 84.9% of those who responded to the survey described their job as being more than a bit stressful (see chart *Overall, how stressful would you say your work is?*). It was found that stress or working conditions had caused 37.7% of people to take time off work. Significantly more men (45.8%) than women (35.1%) took time off because of stress or working conditions.

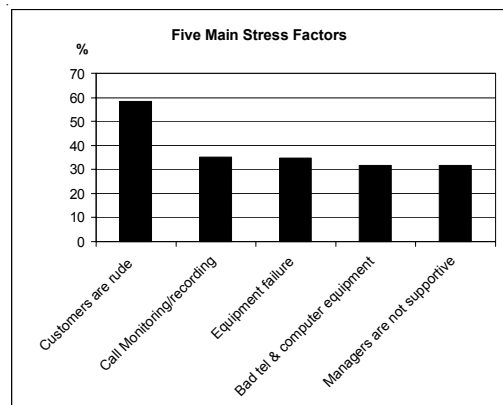


The median number of days taken off by those people over the last 12 months was 5 days with 83% of people taking up to 10 days. It was found 5% of respondents reported they took 25 or more days. The spread of days is represented in the chart *Number of days off work over the last 12 months due to stress or working conditions*.



The chart *Five Main Stress Factors* reveals the highest ranked factors chosen by respondents from a list of 19 possible factors.

The most frequent cause of stress was rude customers (58.2%), followed by call monitoring/recording (35.3%), equipment failure (34.8%), bad telephone and computer equipment (31.5%) and unsupportive managers (31.5%). Rude customers most likely are a significant cause of stress because of the very personal nature of the interaction as is call monitoring/recording, although in a more indirect manner. The third and fourth most frequent factors both related to the poor standard of equipment with management being the fifth most frequently mentioned stress factor. These factors all appear to be explained by how work is organised and poor management.



## Can call centres be better places to work?

The full list of stress factors is tabled below:

Factor .....	%
Customers are rude .....	58.2
Call monitoring/recording .....	35.3
Equipment failure .....	34.8
Bad telephone & computer equipment .....	31.5
Managers are not supportive .....	31.5
Long waiting queues .....	30.6
Inadequate pay for skill level .....	29.4
Not enough staff .....	28.8
Noisy office .....	24.4
Uncomfortable furniture .....	22.4
No desk of my own .....	20.5
Too much supervision .....	20.2
Uncomfortable work environment .....	18.5
The things I have to say over the phone .....	17.7
Working hours are inconvenient .....	11.5
Working hours are too long .....	8.5
I don't know the answers to the questions customers ask .....	2.9
Working hours are too short .....	1.5

Of interest is the fact working hours by themselves do not appear to be a significant issue in relation to stress. However, inconvenient working hours was the most frequently raised issue in relation to hours but was not related to gender, with slightly more men (12.7%) than women (11.2%) mentioning it as an issue.

Respondents who identified themselves as ASU members were more likely to say the following factors contributed to stress:

- Uncomfortable work environment
- The things I have to say over the phone
- Managers are not supportive
- Long waiting queues
- Equipment failure
- Call monitoring/recording
- Bad telephone & computer equipment

Over 20% of people gave examples of other factors that contributed to stress. Some examples of these are (verbatim):

- Stop the attitude of customer is always righter
- 7 day shifts
- Too much emphasis on statistics
- Being pressured into answering calls

- Having to try to get rid of customers in less than 2 mins - too much emphasis on stats.
- Breaks and lunch are monitored stringently
- Because of a lack of staff there is pressure to work increased hours
- AHT monitoring to determine our pay rises
- No communication from organisation
- Job security and hours worked are never secure
- Cut back breaks from working - sometimes not even a tea break
- Long standing shifts recently changed with no negotiation with manager
- 8 or 7 days straight increase stress due to loss of performance
- Controlled working environment

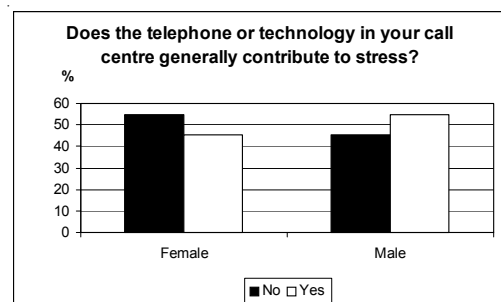
From these results we can conclude that:

- Stress is prevalent in call centres
- Stress caused almost a third of people to take time off work.
- Stress caused people to take a median of 5 days off work.
- The five most frequently mentioned stress factors were:
  - Customers are rude
  - Call monitoring/recording
  - Equipment failure
  - Bad telephone & computer equipment
  - Managers are not supportive

## Working Conditions

The survey respondents predominantly work in teams with only 14% reporting they did not work in a team or group. The median number of people in a work group was 12 with 84% of people working in teams of 20 or less people.

It was found that 47.6% of respondents believed the telephone or technology in the call centre contributed to stress. There was significant variation by gender with men (54.8%) more likely to believe this was a factor than women (45.3%) and amongst ASU/ non ASU members with more ASU members (61.5%) then non ASU members (45.2%) believing it contributed to stress.

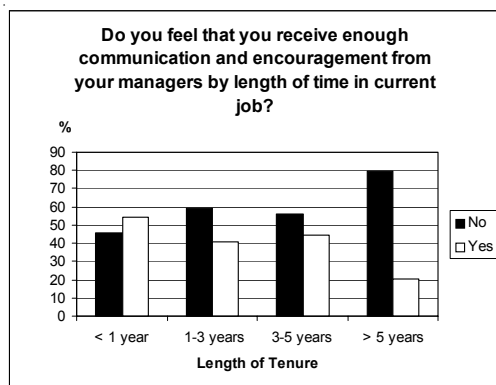


There were significant differences between the modes of working with casual (55.4%) and shift workers (54.2%) more likely to believe the telephone or technology contributed to stress. This may be related to training issues. Age seems to be a significant influence with those over the age of 35 more likely (55.1%) to agree that the telephone or technology contributed to stress than those aged under 25 (39.2%). Job tenure appears to affect perceptions with 34.4% of those with less than one year in their current job agreeing with the statement as opposed to 59.4% of those with more than five years job tenure. The size of the call centre affects peoples' perceptions with those people in small centres of less than 20 staff and those in large call centres of more than 400 people more likely to believe the telephone and technology contributed to stress. Some verbatim comments were:



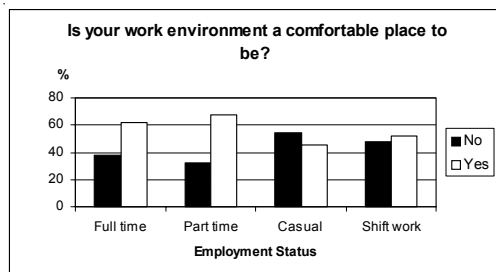
## Can call centres be better places to work?

- Bad connections/noises over phone & lines disconnect.
- Bad lines cause problems; clients become aggrieved when they can't hear.
- Can't give customer answers as answers always in computer late or never.
- Computer equipment not up to date, slow and forever going down.
- Computer slow & often crashes. Phone inadequate for all functions.
- Computer system slow, call waiting board beeping.
- Computers crash or are really slow, but we still have to take the calls.
- Dealing with angry and rude clients due to waiting queues, speed, equipment breakdown.
- Juggling multiple systems on computer whilst trying to talk calmly to customers.
- Management want brief calls but the Windows technology results in delays.
- Our computer is too slow, we have to wait such a long time to check a simple thing

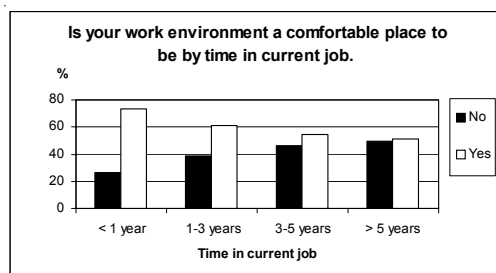


It would seem that call centre workers do not feel they receive enough communication and encouragement from managers. It emerged from the survey that 37.9% believed there was enough communication and encouragement. This result does not appear to be influenced by gender or employment status but rather appears to be influenced by length of time in their current job.

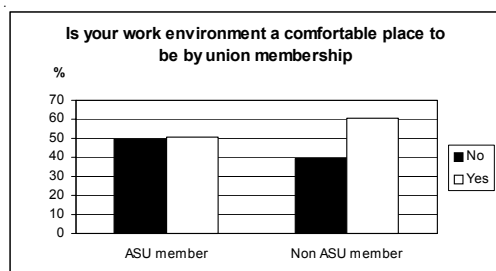
There is an association between union membership and receiving encouragement and communication from managers with less ASU members (25.7%) agreeing with the question than non ASU members (40.1%). **The type of job the person performs affects their answer with Telemarketers recording lower levels of agreement (22%) and people who worked in Public Inquiries recording higher levels of agreement (48.2). Team Leaders (57.7%) Help Desk Support (61.5%) recorded significantly higher levels of communication and encouragement while Telemarketers (7.7%) recorded significantly lower levels.**



Overall 59% of respondents reported their work environment a comfortable place to be. This result did not appear to be influenced by gender, age, the type of calls taken or the size of the centre. However, Telemarketers and those in the Hospitality industry were less likely to agree their work environment was comfortable. Therefore we conclude that, as can be seen from the chart *Is your work environment a comfortable place to be?(By Employment Status)*, employment status **did** influence people's perceptions with casual and shift workers less likely than expected to report their work environment was a comfortable place to be.



The length of time a person had been in their current job affected their perception with those people who have been employed the longest less likely to agree with the statement. This is depicted in the chart *Is your work environment a comfortable place to be?(By Time in current job)*.



As can be seen from the chart *Is your work environment a comfortable place to be by union membership* there is an association between union membership and perceptions of workplace comfort with ASU members less likely to describe their workplace as comfortable. However it is difficult to assess causality, as it could be that union membership heightens

people's awareness and therefore perception of appropriate levels of workplace comfort or that uncomfortable workplaces cause people to join the ASU.

A number of people responded with suggestions on how their workplace could be made more comfortable. A number of the responses involved the physical conditions in the workplace, namely the air conditioning, chairs, lighting, the amount of space between desks and the general condition of amenities. A selection of the comments are reproduced below (verbatim):

- More pleasant room - desks not so close together.
- A whole new office ie. new air-con, clean toilets & kitchen, new flooring.
- Furniture uncomfortable, also the air is very stuffy which makes you feel sleepy and lethargic.
- Decent chairs/better air cond/climate control and natural light. Cleaner toilets.
- Air conditioning that works, chairs that are comfortable & decent lighting.
- Too crowded
- Improved air cond, less noise, larger working space.

Other comments concerned management, with a selection of these reproduced below (verbatim):

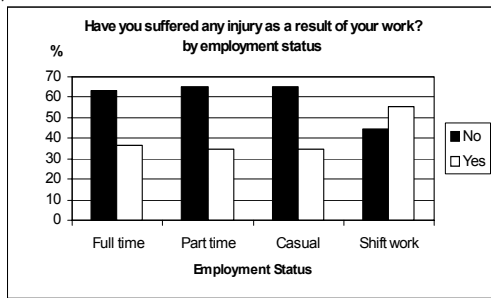
- It is like a school yard and we all sit in straight rows and the Manager doesn't allow comfort breaks, except on break time.
- The management doesn't really trust us. We always justify what we're doing.
- Every second of your time is monitored.
- Support rather than harassment from supervisors.
- If they chose supervisors and managers who have good people skills rather than fascists.

It was found that 38.6% of the people who responded to the survey reported they had suffered an injury as the result of their work. Those people who believed their workplace was stressful were more likely to report a work related injury (41.7%) than those who did not regard their workplace as stressful (13.4%). There is an association between stress associated with the telephone or technology in the call centre and suffering an injury as a result of work. The survey revealed 45.1% of people who reported finding the telephone and technology contributed to stress also reported an injury as opposed to 31.8% of people who did not find the telephone or technology contributed to stress. Similarly there is an association between taking time off work due to stress or working conditions and suffering a workplace injury. **It emerged that 51% of people who had taken time off work because of stress or their working conditions reported they had suffered a work related injury, as opposed to 28.1% of those who had not taken time off because of stress.** Length of time in the job affected the incidence of injury and, whilst the incidence of injury increased as job tenure increased, it is noteworthy that 25.2% of people employed for less than a year had suffered an injury increasing to 49.7% for those with more than five years service. Similarly age influenced the propensity to suffer an injury with 48.8% of people aged over 40 reporting they had suffered an injury at work. This is depicted in the chart *Have you suffered an Injury as a result of your work by age*.

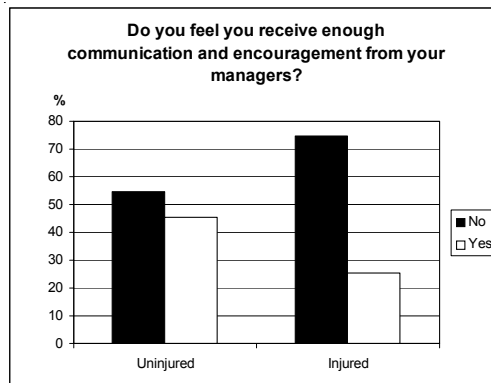


Employment status affected reported injury rates with shift workers experiencing greater rates than would be expected (see chart *Have you suffered any injury as a result of your work? / By Employment Status*).

## Can call centres be better places to work?

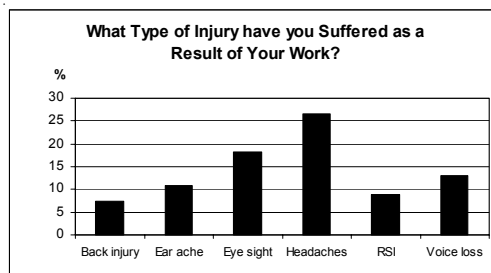


There is a relationship between people feeling management gave enough communication and encouragement and suffering an injury as a result of work with, as illustrated in the chart *Do you feel you receive enough communication and encouragement from you managers? / By Injury*, those people who have suffered a workplace injury less likely to believe they receive sufficient encouragement and communication. However we are unable to tell if a person currently has an injury and do not receive encouragement in recovering from the injury or it is in a more general sense related to work.



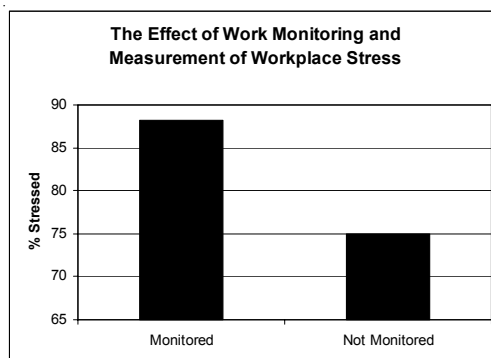
Of the people who believed they received sufficient encouragement and communication from management only 25.8% had suffered a workplace injury whereas 45.6% of those who believed they did not receive sufficient encouragement and communication from management suffered a workplace injury. **This would appear to indicate that people in workplaces with a generally supportive management are less likely to suffer a workplace injury.**

Similarly there was found to be a relationship between perceptions of comfort in the workplace and suffering an injury in the workplace but we are unable to tell if perceptions of comfort in the workplace affect workplace injury or workplace injury affects perceptions of comfort in the workplace.



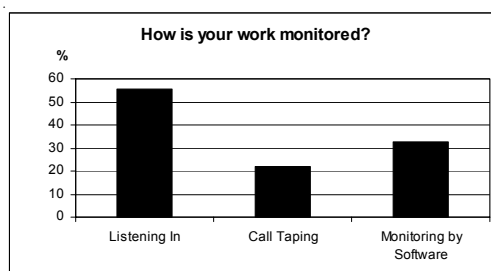
The incidence of injury was not significantly related to gender, industry sector, type of calls, size of the call centre, membership of a team or union membership. The type of job appears to have some effect with Reservation Agents significantly less likely to suffer an injury at work.

As can be seen from the chart *What Type of Injury have you Suffered as a Result of Your Work?* the most frequently mentioned injuries were headaches by 26.5% of people and eyesight by 18.2%



There were a further 48 responses that mentioned some other type of injury. These were mainly about neck strain and shoulder ache. The type of injury is not related to gender but is often related to age, the number of people in the call centre, the time spent in the job and job status, eg. full time, part time etc.

The measurement and monitoring of people's work appears to be almost universal with the survey results revealing that 95.1% of respondents had their work monitored and measured. This appeared to be uniform and unaffected by any other influences such as centre size, industry or union membership. **Noticeably, there was an association between workplace related injury and work monitoring and measurement with 39% of people who had their work measured incurring an injury as against 21.9% of those who did not have their work monitored and measured. As can be seen from the chart *The Effect of Work Monitoring and Measurement of Workplace Stress* there is an association between work monitoring and measurement with people whose work is monitored and measured more likely to find their job and workplace stressful.**



As can be seen from the chart *How is your work monitored?* the main form of monitoring is by direct listening in by someone in another room.

Whilst monitoring is pervasive the type of monitoring experienced seems to have little effect on stress with, as can be seen from the chart *The Effect of Work Monitoring on Workplace Stress*, levels of stress remaining relatively constant across categories.

As the chart *My Work is Measured by* indicates, the main forms of work measurement are largely **quantitative and individualised** with the more qualitative form of measurement, service quality, and the collective team based measurement being those that are least utilised.

There were 143 people who responded that their work was measured in other ways. The two most common responses were:

- Bookings made
- Conversion rates/sales

Some other responses highlighted the pervasiveness of monitoring (verbatim):

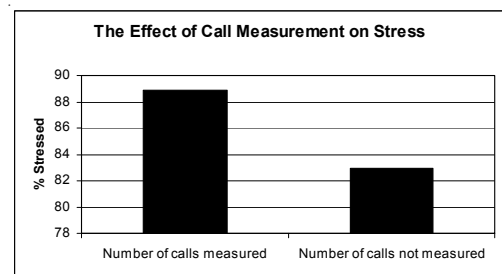
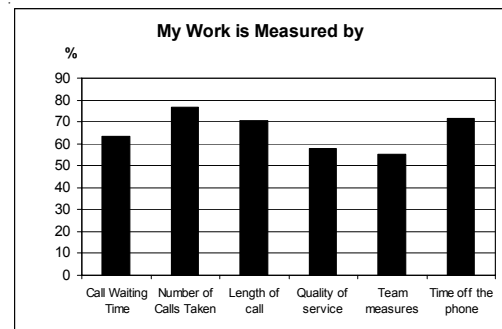
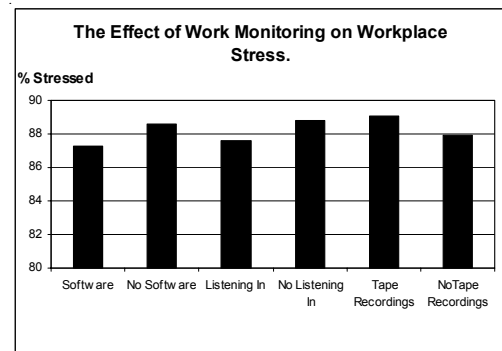
- You name it, they measure it
- Your whole day is measured in seconds - even comfort breaks
- Statistical reports of wrap time and idle time
- Every minute must be accounted for. Phone must be placed in busy mode if you leave your desk for more than a couple of minutes but max allowable is 10 minutes inc all toilet breaks (prostate problem). Impossible to meet targets.

There did not appear to be any statistical relationship between any of the work measures and stress with the exception of the number of calls taken.

We know this is the most frequently used measure and most likely this is a measure of work intensity.

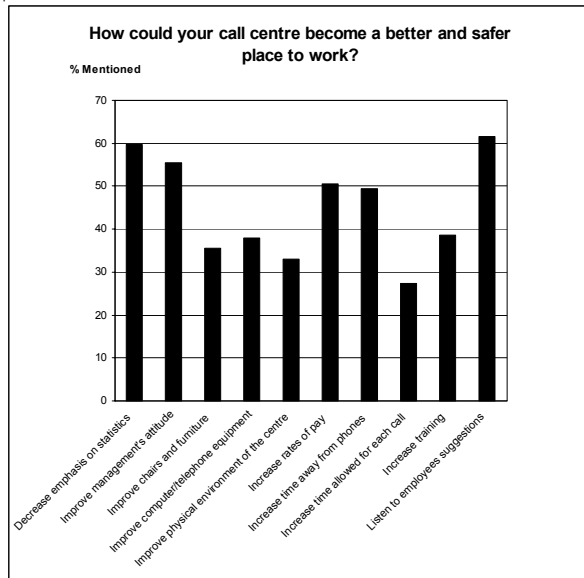
From the results we can conclude:

- Almost half the people who responded to the survey believed the telephone or call centre technology contributed to stress
- Just over one third of people believed they received insufficient communication and encouragement from managers
- Almost 60% of people reported their work environment as a comfortable place to be.
- Almost 40% of people reported they had suffered a workplace injury as a result of their work with this being associated with a stressful job and workplace
- Older workers are more likely to suffer a workplace injury
- Longer term employees are more likely to incur an injury
- The most frequently mentioned injuries were headaches and eyesight
- The monitoring of people's work is almost universal. The main form of monitoring is by listening in.
- **It is monitoring as such rather than any particular type of monitoring that causes stress**
- Most monitoring is quantitative and individualised
- There is an association between call measurement and stress.



## Solutions

The survey asked people how their call centre could become a better and safer place to work. Over 60% of people agreed with **listen to employee's suggestion**, followed by **decrease the emphasis on statistics** (59.6%), **improve management's attitude** (55.6%), **increase rates of pay** (50.6%) and **increase the time away from the phones** (49.5%). The main points can be summarised as:

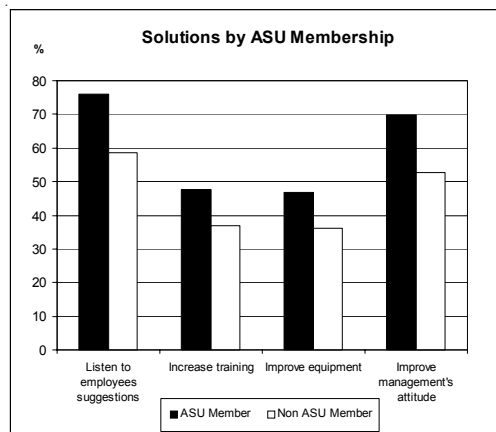


- employees wanting a voice;
- less monitoring; and
- increased pay and decreased work intensity.

There were no significant differences in the suggestions offered by ASU and non ASU members with the exception of improve the attitude of management, improve the computer and telephone equipment, increase training and listen to employees' suggestions. The differences are represented in the chart *Solutions by ASU Membership*.

There may be a number of reasons for the differences between ASU and non ASU members. It could be that people have joined the ASU because of specific grievances with management style and the workplace or conversely people may not have joined the Union

because these are not issues for them. A further explanation may be that people join the union for reasons unrelated to this but, having joined the union, then have expectations that certain changes in relation to management and the workplace will occur. **Further research is needed to separate these two explanations.**



Over 360 people described the improvements they believed should be made. Some of these suggestions are below (verbatim):

- A little bit more flexibility, empower staff more and remove hierarchy levels, stop the strictness and timing staff.
- A short break should be permitted (5 mins) every hour. Existing breaks should be more flexible and at operator's discretion. (Currently enforced time a cause of stress.)
- Ask what can be done for better and listen - instead of the exercise of "being seen to care".
- Be allowed to go to the toilet between breaks if necessary without being told should be in 10 minute break.

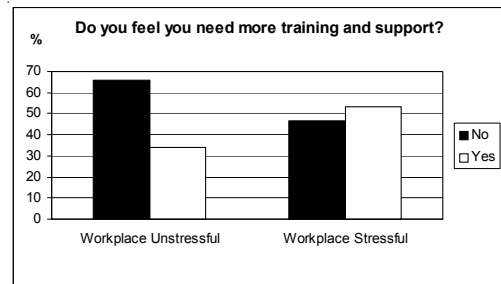
- Call after call is repetitive and boring. We need more variance in the job, using other skills and learning new challenging areas.
- Better communication between management and workers. Provide more variety in the job role.
- Emphasis on quality not quantity. Increase staff.
- Equipment should match jobs. Take the stress out of work by throwing stats away. Listen to what staff have to say.
- For a job that takes good personal, typing and memory skills it is low paid. Training is haphazard but improving. No established way of voicing concerns to management and no personal feedback, only stats.
- Increase system response time. Give emphasis to clear contracts & future in company instead of "contracts" through employment agencies. Standardise rates of pay not necessarily increase.

- Management could be a little more understanding of the stress involved with dealing with the public in such a repetitive way. Computers could be quicker in response time. Due to the repetition of the work, breaktimes should be more often.
- More desks are required.
- On a 4 1/2 hour shift have a 10 minute break, it's hard in front of a computer for 4 1/2 hours.
- Part timers only get a 15 min break up to 5 hours, we should get it every 2 hours like full timers.
- Restructure of working environment, job redesign and other duties - variety and motivations.
- Rotate staff out of area to gain background & provide a break away from the phones occasionally.
- Stats are set by people not taking 100+ calls per day! Need to be realistic, need to be allowed to interact with other staff more.
- **Telephone Sales Centres should not be looked upon as bottom end of the Company. We are high revenue earners & should be paid accordingly.** The air conditioning is a problem. We wonder how regularly it is checked or cleaned. Many suffer from hay fever & itchy eyes etc. There is dust problem as well due to poor cleaning practices.

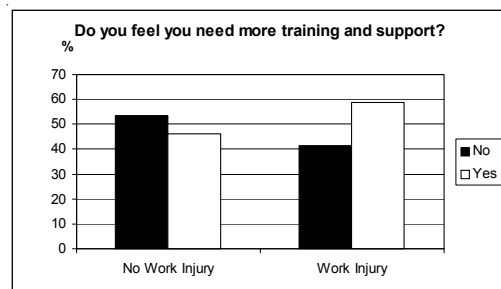
There was only a **small** number of people who expressed satisfaction with the call centre environment

- Due to moving to a brand new premises it is very difficult to say what improvements are required because everyone seems very happy and it is a lovely clean & safe working environment.
- I am very happy in my job. Sydney Water management are fantastic, pay is good, conditions are excellent.

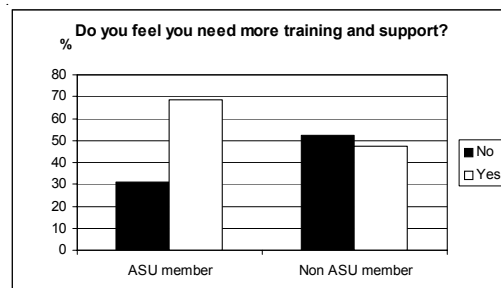
Overall 51.4% of respondents believed they needed more training and support. There was not any significant differences between full time, part time, casual and shift-workers or length of employment. However as can be seen from the chart *Do you feel you need more training and support? (By Stressful Workplace)* there is a relationship between a person feeling stressed and believing they need more training and support, with people who believe their workplace to be stressful are more likely to believe they need more training and support.



Similarly, as can be seen from the chart *Do you feel you need more training and support? (By Work Injury)*, **there is an association between a need for more training and support and having suffered a workplace injury** with people who have suffered an injury more likely to believe they needed more training and support. However we cannot establish causality as whilst suffering an injury may cause people to believe they need more training we cannot conclude that it is a lack of training and support that has caused the injury. **Further research is needed in this area.**



Similarly there is an association between ASU membership and a need for more training and support with ASU members more likely to believe they needed more training and support (see chart *Do you feel you need more training and support? / By ASU Membership*). Again we cannot assign causality as it may be that joining the ASU has heightened people's expectations causing them to expect more training and support or, conversely, that they needed more training and support and therefore joined the ASU to achieve this.



The most common forms of training and support required were:

- Computer skills
- Product training
- Refresher courses
- Sales and marketing
- Customer service

We can summarise the findings as:

- The three most frequently mentioned solutions are:
  - listen to employee's suggestions;
  - decrease the emphasis on statistics; and
  - improve management's attitude.
- Over half the respondents believed they needed more training and support. There is an association between feeling the need for more training and support and feeling stressed.
- There is an association between ASU membership and feeling the need for more training and support.

## **General Comments**

Over 265 or 30% of people made suggestions on how their workplace could be improved and, as with a number of other questions, these mentioned factors such as breaks, lack of work variety, overtime, skill development and hours of work. A selection of the comments are reproduced below:

- 4 day week, option for o/time, get rid of stats pressure, allow offline time, create variety
- An award - currently there is not O/T paid, people should be paid by age - we only have 5 days A/L and 4 weeks holiday - there should be more.
- As the work is monotonous, it would be beneficial to have a variety of duties and training to stimulate us.
- Better liason between management and employees to share ideas and decision making.
- Better pay. More recognition and respect.
- Career path. People would work better & feel more appreciated & important to the company if they had something to work toward. Convert tempo to YVW staff after probation period.
- Give us fair pay. Flat hourly pay is absolutely unfair to those who work early shift or late shift.
- Give employees a chance to develop skills & put them to use in different areas. More support & understanding from management.
- Have Worksafe experts assess items like design, OHS, parcticability, morale and audit current working conditions. More workers are needed.
- Improve the call centre managers' attitude to part time employees. More emphasis on OH&S ie exercise breaks. At present up to 3 hours in front of computer/phones with no break. In a 5 hour shift we need longer than 10 mins for our break. Can't even finish drink in this time.
- Job security, more hours - fairly distributed. A decent living wage. From casual to part time so holiday and sick days are paid.

- More fair & frequent breaks, 4 hour stretches with only one 15 min break is positively Dickensian.
- Procedures too strict. We cannot have authority to do anything. Too much pressure on stats.
- We are in desperate need of a new office. Airconditioner is forever breaking down. It is too small for 140 staff. Very stuffy/old light grilles are falling down and hurting people and we have a huge crack in one of the windows.

A few people made positive responses about their workplace:

- I believe TABCorp has worked hard to service the needs of its employees
- I think the call centre runs well most of the time and I believe it is a good place to work.
- I'm very happy with current work environment. Lots of support from different avenues.
- Since Qantas Reservations have moved to our location, our work area is so new and it has a great feeling about it. Qantas staff and management are always very positive. Qantas Reservations is a great working environment.



## What Causes Stress?

The survey has given us a wealth of information about stress in call centres. However the amount of information can make it difficult to sort out the important and unimportant factors. We can make use of statistics to help us work out those factors that are the best predictors of stress and in this case Chiad analysis enables us to discard those irrelevant factors. The analysis looked at the 88% of people who reported they found their job and workplace stressful and revealed they fell into two distinct categories

- **Segment 1 - People who believed they received insufficient communication and encouragement from managers and believed the telephone and technology in their call centre contributed to stress (98.2%)**
- **Segment 2 - People who believed they received insufficient communication and encouragement from managers, did not believe the telephone and and technology in their call centre contributed to stress but felt they needed more training and support (94.6%).**

We know from the survey that overall 88% of people felt their job and workplace to be stressful but over 98% of Segment 1 and 94% of Segment 2 found this to be the case. The analysis has revealed that lack of communication and encouragement from managers, the call centre telephone and technology and a need for more training and support are causes of stress.

## **A Note on the Statistics**

The survey produced 658 valid surveys. We have made the assumption that this is a random survey, that is the survey was distributed in a random manner in the call centres without any preference to any group, and we can therefore make reliable inferences about call centres as places to work.

The main statistic used has been the Chi Square test which determines whether or not discrepancies between observed and theoretical counts are significant and consequently if there is a relation between variables.

The level of significance used for the acceptance or rejection of hypotheses was 95%. This means that the difference between 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.

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