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Call centres ring the changes

Call centres – sweatshops or hubs of fun? **Jane Charnley** finds out how the industry is trying to give its workplaces a better buzz to stem the tide of staff departures.

Illustration: **Nicky Taylor**

HAZEN UP for toilet visits, managers breathing down minutes' necks and chase from cubicles, all are part of life for call centre workers, providing images of a day in the life of a stressed call centre operative that are more of horror stories.

Even though a report by the Health and Safety Executive last month refuted the accusation that call centres are sweatshops, there seems to be no alternative in the rote or which staff are alleged to be treated like machines.

And furthermore, the existence of the titles industry – once hailed as the key to the economic regeneration of former industrial towns and cities – is now under fire on the internet. Although the Call Centre Association (CCA) vigorously denies the accusation that it exists to help its paid members rids any – the absence of HF's 100 call centre in York most would has been blamed on increased use of the internet.

So presumably it is with these issues ringing in its ears that the live call/building industry has embarked on its clean-up campaign.

Last week, the Yorkshire branch of the Glasgow-based CCA, which has been in the city for a year, forum – and the topic at the top of the agenda was recruitment. Because, although not divulging specific figures to reveal the full extent of the problem, it emerged her companies, CCA regional manager Martin Gilbody admitted, have been hit by recruitment them with a "significant proportion" of staff.

In fact, estimates for the churn rate – or rate of attrition, as the CCA prefers to call it – are as high as 30 per cent, but the average figure was nearer 25 per cent. This figure is still considerably higher than with the annual average for the rest of the country, or other industries.

"It is important to have a high attrition rate," states Gilbody, who is the director of recruitment at Contact Centre in Cleckheaton. This is a new, £2.m, 360-seater centre operated by the global recovery services arm of Cleveland-Schlumberger Sema, which provides companies with call/billing facilities in the event of a crisis or their customers experiencing problems. New York facilities were used within four hours of the World Trade Centre collapse on September 11.

"The industry is focusing on it and wants to reduce it," continues Gilbody. "Today is about highlighting the positive aspects of the industry and getting it on the beginning you are in difficulty." Gilbody explains that his company is willing to £1,000 to recruit, train up and then lose a member of staff.

The key presentation by psychologist Professor Cary Cooper from Manchester Business School group, MSL, attracted 40 regional CCA members, with the forum ensuring the large range of sectors which now have call centres at the heart of their customer service operations.

Cooper said the number one has the fourth largest number of people employed in direct line call centres in the UK, with 30,000 workers out of a national figure of 1.5m.

Gilbody, a consultant and co-Centre employee who works part-time for the CCA, also presented a most non-sophisticated methods such as these to recruit the right staff – who should have "unique, people skills".

Yesterday's forum delegates visited a call centre operated by manager at Kingston Income, the 10-year-old centre in Kingston upon Hull, and she would be heading the call centre model to look for people with the required skills once in the field.

"We have found we have no problem attracting people to work in make sure we don't have problems with staff," she said, explaining she had recently visited an Leeds and there was a neutral church, with one name moving from one centre to another. But we are looking for people who are flexible and potential.

And then there's training – an area where CCA chairman, Colin MacKay says most radical change is needed. The subject takes priority in the CCA's new Framework for Excellence, which is a benchmark to result from the CCA's drive for more coherent self-regulation.

The record, which also covers health and safety, employee feedback, dispute resolution and customer service levels, was launched at Leeds Town Hall