

# Call centres dial up the wrong recruits

MORE THAN 400,000 people work in call centres, which have created more jobs than the coal, steel and car-making industries combined. But they have also acquired a reputation as the sweatshops of modern business. Many people are repelled by their battering conditions, as employees' working lives are ruled by the endless telephone calls, constant measurement of performance and abuse from clients. Even rest breaks and visits to the lavatory are timed.

So it is little surprise that call-centre workers quit in higher numbers than in almost any other industry. Staff turnover rates generally run at about 20%-30% a year, but the TUC challenges even these figures, saying the real turnover may be twice as high.

Call centres offer so much in the way of cost savings over conventional branch outlets that such waste is bearable. But with predictions that there will be the equivalent of 665,000 full-time call-centre jobs by 2008, the costs of the labour turnover will be running into millions, says Steve Newhall, managing director of DDI, a human-resources consultancy. He says he is amazed at how little attention many employers pay to the problem.

Often, he points out, companies are not so much indifferent as preoccupied with recruiting to plug the gaps left by those who have quit. So great is the pressure, they do not have the time or the resources to do anything about the underlying causes.

Much of the problem arises at the beginning with poor recruitment practices, which mean the wrong people are being pushed into call-centre work. In a new survey, Kaisen Consulting suggests employers should shoulder much of the blame for often misleading recruits about the nature of the work. "Very little is done to tell applicants what the job is really like. The information provided tends to empha-

The industry needs to reconsider the kind of people it employs to reduce a high rate of staff turnover.

**Roger Eglin reports**

sise the positive aspects of the role, such as variety, teamwork and bonuses with little said about the emotionally draining, demotivating or frustrating aspects."

Kaisen's research concluded there were several notable omissions from call-centre candidate specification:

❑ Few checked whether candidates had the right motivation for call-centre work. This is important because of the unusual nature of the job.

❑ "Multi-tasking". A typical adviser is required to operate a computer, solve problems and hold a conversation with the customer simultaneously. People who are good at multi-tasking are better at serving the public, but few recruiters make a point of seeking them out.

❑ Empathy. Effective staff have the emotional intelligence to identify with customers by building a mental image of the person with whom they are dealing.

❑ Emotional resilience. Key to success is the ability to cope with the emotional downside of the job, particularly customer complaints and frequent rejection on sales calls.

The report accused employers of "talking up the job", which gave recruits exaggerated expectations, "low job satisfaction and a higher risk of quitting".

But Kaisen's Alex Marples says

there are people who find call centres satisfying places to work. "Some really love the job. They are the type of people who enjoy helping others. They enjoy interaction with a whole range of people. They don't want a lot of ambiguity and variety in their work. They are not massively ambitious and don't want the stress and tribulation of climbing the corporate ladder. Yet employers insist on looking for the spunky and ambitious person."

Newhall believes that the high turnover of staff needs to be tackled with a two-stage process. First, employers have to focus on recruiting the right sort of person. Second, they must get the working environment right.

Kaisen's report makes a number of recommendations. Among them is the suggestion that employers should cast their net widely, selecting people for capability rather than experience and looking for "call-centre qualities", particularly the motivational fit.

"Older people are more measured and more tolerant," says Marples. "They may be better suited to work in call centres."

Newhall thinks it is important to recruit the right sort of people for different types of call centre: someone in computer support requires different characteristics to someone in a simple contact centre. Often, though, the criteria laid down by employers come up with people who are generally capable but not especially suitable for call-centre work.

Once the right people have been hired, recruiters can concentrate on creating an attractive working environment, which ranges from good physical conditions to flexible working packages. But if call centres are going to become one of the biggest employers in the country, it is time to get it right.

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JANE GREENWOOD, above, has been working in call centres for seven and a half years, after 18 years as an NHS manager. The recommendations of her managers and colleagues, combined with the quality of her call answering at Budget Insurance's Peterborough centre have won her the title of European Call Centre Adviser of the Year.

She is living proof of the benefits of Budget's recruitment and job-satisfaction strategy, developed with DDI Consulting, which has cut staff turnover from 45% in 1999 to 30%-36%. And the company intends to bring it down further to 25% by next June.

Budget's recruiters use competency profiles to carefully screen staff who have to deal with the public. Call-centre managers are also trained in behavioural interviewing techniques and use DDI software to measure how well a candidate will fit the job on offer. Flexible working, concierge centres to help staff, and training and development programmes are all part of the benefits that have helped to improve working life at Budget.

"There are good training programmes and the company is very caring," says Greenwood, who helps to mentor new recruits.