Call Centres – an Innovation in Service Quality: Access is a Quality Issue

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ABSTRACT
The development of call centres has made a significant contribution to service quality through improving response times, extending the times during which services are available, making access more convenient by using telephones and extending the range of expertise available to the consumer. The potential of these centres to provide an appropriate level of service to all consumers depends on the development and deployment of all of the necessary technology to ensure that access is not denied to any group of potential customers. In particular, the technology is already available to provide a high level of service to those with a hearing impairment. However, it is essential to deploy the technology effectively to ensure that this group of potential users is not disadvantaged or excluded. This paper describes a research project which explored the extent to which the provisions of the UK Disability Discrimination Act (1995) might impact on the call centre industry and the provision made for the deaf and hearing impaired following the enactment of this legislation.

Keywords: Service Quality, call centres, disability, hearing impaired.

1.0 Introduction

The call centre industry is one of the most rapidly growing industries in the developed world today (Egan and Molloy 1998; Schwarz 1998; Bird 1998). The technological developments that are taking place are enabling much more widespread use of call centres (Staples and Minifie 1998; Saunders 1998). The call centre concept has been in existence for a couple of decades, but its use was restricted to a small number of very large organisations. These included airlines and sectors of government. The cost of entry was relatively high and the utility of the products was relatively low, as the enabling technologies had not advanced sufficiently to support a high level service at an acceptable unit cost. This meant that service encounters frequently took place face to face either on company premises or elsewhere. The rapid developments in hardware and software capability, coupled with those in telecommunications technologies has enabled the development of comprehensive services which are accessible 24 hours a day, often with what would traditionally have been unbelievable response times. These services are often provided instantaneously and incorporate a much higher level of expertise than was available hitherto (Smith 1998). Increasing price competition in the telecommunications sector has also contributed to the consumer perception that telephone access to services is a cost effective
option. In many cases, companies and other organisations are providing access via freephone numbers.

The introduction of the call centre concept has invariably improved the quality of the service encounter along all dimensions of service quality. However, that is conditional on access to telephone services, the ability of the consumer to use those services, and the operators of the services being appropriately trained to provide a satisfactory service.

1.1 The Legislative Framework

There is a significant amount of legislation which addresses the issue of discrimination against the disabled. In the USA, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) makes comprehensive provision for all disabled in an Act “To establish a clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability”. Discrimination in employment is dealt with by the Equal opportunities in Employment Commission. Title IV of that Act refers specifically to “Telecommunications”, making comprehensive provision for remedies in law, regulated by The Federal Communications Commission for those with hearing or speech impairment who suffer discrimination. In this respect, discrimination on the grounds of disability is treated in the same way as discrimination on the grounds of gender or race.

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act(1993) is “An Act relating to discrimination on the ground of disability”. This act seeks to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of disability in work, the provision of goods and services, and, in general under the law. The Act provides for there to be a Disability Discrimination Commissioner and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission is the body which is empowered to investigate and determine cases. In this case, discrimination on the grounds of disability is treated in the same way as discrimination on the grounds of gender or race.

The British Government introduced a Disability Discrimination Bill in January 1995. The resultant Disability Discrimination Act (1995) was passed in November 1995 after considerable debate. Although there was legislation in other countries which set precedents which linked discrimination on the grounds of disability to other forms of discrimination, the UK approach was different. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) established the National Disability Council which is an advisory body and is charged with the responsibility to advise the Secretary of State on measures “to reduce or eliminate discrimination against disabled people and on the operation of the DDA”.

Unlike the bodies established for race and gender, the National Disability Council was not given powers to investigate individual cases of discrimination on the grounds of disability, and the legislation was seen as weaker than that for other forms of discrimination as a result. This may, however, be redressed in forthcoming legislation. Enforcement of employment provisions was through the existing industrial tribunals, and depends on the individual bringing a case. Enforcement of the goods and services is through the aggrieved party bringing a case through the court system.

Nevertheless, the common aim of these three examples of legislative frameworks is to ensure that those with disabilities are not further disadvantaged by being treated less favourably in employment or in the provision of goods and/or services as a result of their disability. In all cases, the legislation explicitly states that the need for modifications to buildings to enable access or the need for a different approach to the provision of goods and/or services is not, broadly speaking, a defence against the failure to comply with the Act.
1.2 The UK Environment
The UK legislation is the least mature of the three examples, and represents a stand alone system of regulation. The employment provisions and the initial rights of access to goods, facilities, services and premises were implemented on 2 December 1996. The provisions as to changes in policies, procedures and practices, and the provision of auxiliary aids come into force October 99. The final removal of physical barriers is expected to be implemented in 2004. Consequently, there was a concerted publicity campaign to alert employers and others about their new responsibilities under the Act. This included information which would enable human resource managers to update their equal opportunities policy statements relating to recruitment to include discrimination on the grounds of disability and to train staff in respect of their new accountabilities. The UK Government made financial provision through its “Access to Work Scheme” to help employers make the necessary adjustment to fabric and operations to facilitate the employment of disabled workers on the same basis as those without a disability. Operations managers were also forewarned about the changes to operations and service provision requirements to enable them to adjust goods, services, buildings, plant and equipment, where necessary, to comply with the new law and thereby eliminate discrimination. Staff training was also to be undertaken to ensure that staff were appropriately informed of the changes. In particular, for call centre operators it was an opportunity to provide training for staff and upgrading of facilities to make appropriate provision for their customers whose disability involved hearing impairment.

2.0 Research programme
2.1 Aims
The research project sought to establish the extent to which the call centre industry had made adequate provision for the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), with particular reference to those with hearing impairment. There were two elements to the project, firstly relating to the employment of hearing-impaired people and secondly, relating to the provision of suitable access to facilities for hearing impaired customers, clients or potential customers or clients.

2.2 Scope
The definition of hearing impairment ranges from a slight loss of a part of the audible sound spectrum, which makes little difference to the sufferer’s functioning, through hearing loss which can be corrected using a prosthesis or other specialised equipment, to profound deafness. The scope of this research project was restricted to those who required a prosthesis or other specialised equipment, in the case of the employment enquiry, and those with a severe or profound hearing loss in the case of the customer enquiry.

2.3 Methodology
The call centre industry is viewed as an important growth industry, and is the target of economic development and employment creation organisations. Call Centres were, therefore selected from the Scottish Enterprise publication Call Centre and Supplier Directory 1997. This publication provided the names, addresses and telephone numbers of all 48 call centres based in Scotland. It was decided to use the whole population in the study. Of the 48, 11 were BT call centres, so it was decided that this should be regarded as one call centre to avoid bias resulting from the influence of one company.
Thus, the population size was 38. Of that group, one company declined to participate in the employment survey. All others companies provided a response to the telephone survey via their personnel department.

The methodology adopted for the customer survey was to have a hearing subject phone to enquire about the service on behalf of someone who was hearing impaired. In the course of that interaction, information provided was noted, operator knowledge was assessed, and the duration of the call to obtain the information was recorded. Sources of information relating to access by hearing impaired customers and client were also sought from publicly available sources.

2.3 Results

Employment Survey

A member of staff in the personnel department in each company taking part in the survey was asked how many deaf or hearing-impaired staff worked in the company. The results are shown in Figure 1. A supplementary question about how many of these staff worked in the telecommunications side of the business was asked of those companies with a non-zero return. From 38 companies on 48 sites, only 5 employees in four companies were positively identified as having hearing impairment and working in the telecommunications side of the call centre. Two organisations were in the public sector and two in the financial services sector.

Personnel Departments were informed of the “Access to Work Scheme” by a government publicity campaign. The contact person in the personnel department was asked if they were aware of the scheme. Only 19 out of 38 knew of the scheme and three of those were “only vaguely aware” of it. On further examination of the data, the evidence suggested that organisations, which were aware of the scheme, were more likely to have hearing impaired employees.

All organisations were also asked about their equal opportunities policy. A copy was requested from each. Four declined to send copies, a further two agreed, with one later writing to say this was against company policy and the second sending an employee handbook detailing only procedures for sexual or racial harassment. Twelve companies supplied copies of their equal opportunities policy and all included disability as a criterion, but only seven incorporated a discussion of the current legislation.

Customer Services Survey

There are a number of options for deaf and hearing-impaired people requiring access to Telecommunications, including call centres. The first problem is knowing when a call is coming in. There are a number of visual and vibrating devices, which provide adequate solutions. Many hearing-impaired people can be helped to hear telephone conversations with amplification devices. Analogue mobile phone systems are compatible with most of these devices, and whilst initially digital mobile telephone systems created significant interference, compatible loop devices are now being developed to enable their use with hearing aids.
For those with very severe hearing impairment or profound deafness, no amount of amplification makes any difference, and other solutions must be sought. The Teletype Writer technology was developed in the USA in the 1960’s, and that technology forms the basis of the “textphone” systems. Whilst in the standard telephone systems, there have been single standards developed world-wide, unfortunately, there has been no such standardisation of “textphone” systems, and in Europe alone, there are at least seven different standards, of which four are in use in Italy.

In the UK, there are a number of options, from fairly large unsophisticated devices through to portable advanced equipment. Those with severe impairment can use such devices to conduct business using the telecommunications system. The connection is from service user to service provider directly. An alternative service is the “relay service” which is a real-time on-line translation service converting speech to type and type to speech. Confidentiality is assured by operators being governed by the Telecommunications Act(1984). Technological developments in the fields of speech/type/speech software systems and videophones hold out improved prospects for the future.

Thus, the technology is available for call centres to provide a very similar service to profoundly deaf and severely hearing-impaired customers or clients, but modifications to the mode of access and delivery of the service are required. A researcher explained that she was calling on behalf of a hearing impaired person to enquire about access to the customer/client services available to that person. Enquiries were made about textphone access and relay service access in particular.

Textphone
Seven operators responded that the service offered was not applicable and they could see no reason for a textphone user needing to contact them. Four of those declined to answer any further questions. Of the remaining three, all replied that they did not have a textphone line available, and one said that they did not accept calls from the relay service.

There were 34 responses to a question about the existence of textphone availability. This question was followed up by a request for the number. Thirteen organisations confirmed the availability of a textphone service. A further two stated that they had a line, but no equipment to attach. In eleven of the cases, the service was offered on the same freephone or local call rates basis as for call in telephone lines, whilst the remaining two charged standard telephone rates. In eleven cases, the hours during which the service was available were standard. Two respondents requested that the caller phone in advance to ensure that the terminal was switched on!

One respondent reported problems with the system with no estimate when the problem might be solved.

Relay Service
All organisations were asked if they would accept calls from a relay service. The results for the 32 organisations, which replied, are shown in Figure 2. Further analysis of the data suggested that there were six organisations, three from banking and finance sectors, one from the energy sector, one

![Figure 2 Organisations Accepting Calls from Relay Service](image)
from home improvements and one public sector organisation which offered neither textphone nor relay service facilities to hearing impaired customers or clients.

**Operator Knowledge**

Operators were given a ranking according to their perceived knowledge of the services. Of the 33 operators who could be ranked, only one rated Category 1, with sixteen rated Category 2 and eight each rated categories 3 and 4. This measure was also supported by measuring the distribution of call duration. The results of the call duration logging are presented in Figure 3. Figure 4 indicates clearly that the less knowledgeable operator will, on average, take about five times as long to answer a query about facility availability than an operator who is well trained and well informed.

<table>
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<th><strong>Operator Categories</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1: Knowledgeable with information to hand</td>
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<tr>
<td>2: Thought there was a service – no details</td>
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<tr>
<td>3: Did not know of service availability and made enquiries</td>
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<tr>
<td>4: Did not know what textphone was and needed explanation</td>
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**Directory Listings**

The “Yellow Pages” were searched for textphone numbers for the 38 organisations studied. Only 4 had a number listed, one of which was for a company where the operator said that they did not yet have the equipment installed. One public sector organisation had two textphone numbers listed, despite the operator advising that they did not provide a textphone service.

### 3.0 Conclusions

#### 3.1 Employment Survey

The employment survey indicated that, in some cases, there was little knowledge and understanding of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) which had come into force. Many personnel staff seemed to be able to say off hand that there were no hearing impaired employees. This is surprising, since the frequency of occurrence is 14% or one in seven of the general population. Equal opportunities policy statements did not, in general, acknowledge the Act. There was little knowledge of the assistance available to employers to employ the disabled.

#### 3.2 Customer Service Survey

The customer service study indicated that few call centres are yet prepared to meet the requirements of the hearing impaired and profoundly deaf customers and/or clients. Only one
operator was able to respond with speed and accuracy to a request for rudimentary information, and the task of obtaining sufficient information to know whether the service could be accessed could be both time consuming and expensive. At a time when call centres are in an expansionary mode, and many of the necessities of life, for example, insurance, banking, tax, travel, social security benefits, etc, are being more efficiently produced by the call centre approach, it is essential that the needs of the hearing impaired are recognised and accommodated. Otherwise, a significant, and growing, subset of the population will be unable to access many of these services, or their access will be unduly restricted.

Acknowledgement
The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the ESRC in providing studentship and equipment support for this project.

References