Global or National? An International Comparison of Call Centres

Date: 02-25-2008 05:41 PM CET
Category: **Business, Economy, Finances, Banking & Insurance**
Press release from: **Austrian Science Fund FWF**

In spite of globalisation, working conditions in call centres around the world are still governed by national regulations. That was the result of a major study supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF, which looked at 2,400 call centres in 17 countries. As a follow-up to this study, the FWF is now funding further international analyses and case studies that will compare conditions in Austrian call centres with those in other countries.

Throughout the world, the number of call centres is growing. These facilities offer companies aiming to achieve effective forms of customer care a great deal of flexibility. Working conditions are often atypical with staff being employed on a temporary or freelance basis, for example, and cutting-edge technologies mean that operations can easily be outsourced to other locations, at home or abroad.

The employment conditions in call centres throughout the world have now been investigated as part of the Global Call Center Industry Project, coordinated by Cornell University (USA), the Institute of Work Psychology (UK) and FORBA (the Working Life Research Centre, Austria). This international project set out to analyse whether the global spread of call centres is being accompanied by a growing convergence in working conditions. Or whether the opposite is the case, i.e. whether working conditions at these call centres continue to be shaped by national standards and rules. The study has found that call centres are perhaps not as "global" as one might assume. For example, working conditions at call centres in coordinated market economies such as Austria, Germany and Denmark are significantly better than in liberal market economies such as the UK and USA.

IT'S BETTER TO BE COORDINATED

"In the coordinated market economies, 41 percent of call centre jobs can be classed as comparatively high quality in terms of flexibility, internal monitoring of the workforce and pay. An analysis of working conditions placed 24 percent of jobs into the low quality category. In the liberal market economies, however, the situation is reversed, and therefore less appealing. Almost half of all employees are closely monitored and have low-paid jobs, with only one in five workers enjoying favourable working conditions", explains Dr. Jörg Flecker, Project Manager responsible for Austria. The fact that there are more good call centre jobs in the coordinated market economies can be put down to the more comprehensive vocational education system, harmonized employer / employee relations and stricter labour market regulations that are in place in these countries.

Nevertheless, even in Continental Europe, there is little prospect that call centre jobs will become skilled, sustainable service employment opportunities that offer long-term job security and good pay. Dr. Ursula Holtgrewe, a member of the project team, explains: "The more regulated a labour market is, the keener companies and organisations are to outsource call centre work to operations with more favourable collective agreements and industry standards. As a result, outsourced call centres overall have worse working conditions than their in-house counterparts. Wages there are on average 18 percent lower and the quality of work is also lower in over 50 percent of outsourced call centres. The growing outsourcing of call centre operations gets in the way of the development of good, high-quality work here."

GLOBAL CALL

The Global Call Center Industry Project has only been able to produce these international research results thanks to the efforts of a network of 40 interdisciplinary researchers from 20 countries. The findings are based on a study that was carried out at 2,400 call centres in 17 countries and that consisted of a standardised survey, business case studies and expert interviews.

Dr. Flecker's team from FORBA was responsible for research work in Austria, and received funding from the FWF. This support is now enabling work to continue on further international comparative analyses based on the current study. Moreover, there are plans to implement case studies designed to compare conditions at call centres in Austria with their international counterparts.

Further information on the Global Call Center Industry Project can be found online at: www.globalcallcenter.org

Image and text will be available online from Monday, 25th February 2008, 11.00 a.m. CET onwards: www.fwf.ac.at/en/public_relations/press/pv200802-en.html

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Vienna, 25th February 2008

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