

**Work Opportunities for Women in the
Information Society: Call Centre
Teleworking (WOWIS)**

FINAL REPORT
Part II - Scientific Report

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Executive Summary

We live in an era in which technological and organisational change in the workplace is widespread. Increasing numbers of people across Europe are now employed in occupations that centrally involve the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). At the same time as these changes take place, women are entering into the labour market in growing numbers. We know little, however, about the implications that the development of an 'Information Society' has for the position of women in the workplace.

'Work Opportunities for Women in the Information Society: Call Centre Teleworking' (WOWIS) has addressed this issue, focusing specifically on a new area of work in which women are particularly well represented, namely teleservices. **Teleservices** is a term that is used to describe the increasing range of service activities that are now carried out over the telephone in a range of industry sectors. These services are delivered from specialised offices known as telephone **call centres** - the locus of the WOWIS study.

WOWIS has been centrally concerned with the question of whether the rapidly growing teleservices 'industry' is providing women, who make up the vast majority of its employees, with new opportunities for work, training, and career development. A key objective of the research has been to identify 'good practice' working arrangements in the industry that encourage women to develop their skills and careers.

For over a year, the project team has studied women's employment in the teleservices industry in three European countries - Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the largest call centre markets in relation to total population size in Europe. We have paid attention to the similarities and differences in call centre employment practices between these national contexts, and their implications for women's career opportunities.

Call centres are used across a range of industries, and in order to reflect the complexity and diversity of call centre employment, the study has focused specifically on three sectors - financial services, computer services and 'third-party' or outsourced call centre specialists. These sectors were chosen for the following reasons:

- 'Telebanking' and insurance are changing the face of retail financial services. In 1996 it was estimated that there were over 50,000 European workers employed in financial services call centres (Datamonitor 1996). Traditionally, this sector has employed a large number of female workers, many at relatively low levels. A key aim of the WOWIS study was to examine whether the development of call centres in the financial services is offering women new career opportunities.

- The computer services sector is one of the most advanced areas in teleservices. The emergence of technical 'help-desks' in areas such as software support has meant that a significant number of new skilled jobs have been created. We wanted to examine whether women are entering into these jobs, or whether they are male dominated in line with the IT sector as a whole. Another important reason for focusing on this sector is that it is in the forefront of the move towards pan-European teleservices.
- The third party specialist sector, which undertakes teleservices work on behalf of other firms, is also leading the way in pan-European call centre operations. We wanted to examine the specific character of work in these settings. As many of these firms are owned by US companies (where the teleservices market is more advanced), we also wanted to investigate whether this had an influence on systems of management and work organisation.

This report presents the main findings of the WOWIS research. Due to the recency of the call centre phenomenon in Europe, we know little about the nature and quality of the work that takes place within them. Very few in-depth empirical studies have been carried out far by academic researchers. The WOWIS project, therefore, makes an important contribution to our knowledge of this new form of employment. Although we have been primarily concerned with examining good practice in terms of **women's** work opportunities, many of the issues that we discuss in this report clearly apply to *all* call centre employees. We refer, therefore, to 'employees' or 'agents' (a term commonly used in order to describe call centre staff) when we are talking about both female *and* male call centre workers and to 'women' when we wish to highlight issues of particular significance to female employees.

The findings we discuss in this report are based upon the following research:

- A thorough **literature review** of specialist call centre literature;
- Forty telephone **interviews with teleservices industry 'experts'**, including representative bodies such as the Call Centre Association and trade unions;
- **Thirteen 'best practice' call centre case studies** involving 59 one-to-one face-to-face interviews with managers, supervisors and agents and 7 group interviews with female agents in each of the three sectors and target countries;
- One hundred responses to a **postal survey** sent to call centre managers in the three target countries and industry sectors;
- Information gained from two meetings with an '**Employment Forum**' of call centre industry representatives, brought together as a part of

the project to discuss key issues about women's employment in call centres.

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings of the WOWIS project are summarised here under the following subject headings: employment issues, work organisation, staff/management relationships, training, career development and equal opportunities.

Employment Profile

As well as examining women's personal development and career prospects in the call centre industry, a main aim of the WOWIS project was to build up a 'profile' of the workforce in each of the three target countries and sectors. We focused in particular on the gender, age and contractual situation of call centre employees. Our key findings in this area are as follows:

- Approximately 70 per cent all staff in the call centres surveyed were female, mirroring the findings of other recent research. There was little variation between countries in terms of the proportion of female employees.
- However, women do *not* make up the majority of employees in *all* forms of call centre employment. The WOWIS survey revealed some important differences between **industry sectors**, with the financial services call centres employing the most female staff, and the computer services call centres the least.
- The survey confirmed our expectations about the young age of the call centre workforce. The vast majority of agents in the call centres surveyed were aged between 20 and 40 years, with approximately three-quarters of respondents claiming that the average age of the agents employed in their call centres was between 20 and 29 years. The financial services call centres are more likely to have a more 'mixed' staff profile in terms of age, employing a larger number of women aged between 30 and 39 years than the two other sectors.
- Twenty-nine per cent of all staff in the firms surveyed were employed on a part-time basis. Women made up the bulk - 73 per cent - of the total number of these part-time employees. The highest numbers of part-time staff were found in the Dutch call centres, where 66 per cent of the workforce were employed on part-time contracts. This compares to 22 per cent of Irish staff and 27 per cent of British employees.
- The survey also found some variation in the proportion of part-time employees between industry sectors, with the outsourced call centres

employing the most part-time staff, and the computer services the least.

- Thirteen per cent of all agents were employed on temporary contracts either by the call centre itself, or an employment agency. Sixty-seven per cent of these temporary employees were female. The employment of temporary staff appears to be widespread in the call centre industry, with the majority of firms in our survey employing at least *some* of their staff on a temporary basis.
- The survey revealed large differences between countries in terms of the proportion of temporary employees, with the highest numbers found in the Dutch call centres. Here, 33 per cent of agents were employed on a temporary basis, compared to 27 per cent in Ireland and 9 per cent in the UK.
- In terms of industry sectors, the computer services call centres employed the most temporary staff, with 42 per cent of these agents working on temporary contracts. The outsourced call centres were close behind, with 39 per cent. The financial services call centres had the lowest numbers of temporary staff, with just 9 per cent of agents in this sector employed on a temporary basis.
- Popular perceptions of call centre employment portray it as an industry with very high levels of staff turnover or 'attrition'. In this context, many of the call centres that responded to our survey reported lower than anticipated annual rates of staff turnover. Nearly a third of managers stated that their call centres had a turnover rate of between 5 and 10 per cent per year. A further 23 per cent reported rates of less than 5 per cent per annum. There were some differences in turnover rates between countries, with the Irish call centres showing the highest levels.
- The WOWIS survey revealed that, whilst the rates of turnover were generally lower than anticipated, there is *some* truth behind the image of call centres as working environments with staff retention problems. In 14 per cent of the call centres surveyed, for example, annual attrition rates were at 30 per cent or over.

Work Organisation

The distinctive form of work organisation used in call centres has recently become a focus of concern amongst media, academic, policy and industry communities alike. The WOWIS project team were keen to investigate the nature of work organisation in the teleservices industry and gather the views of *employees* on this topic. Our main findings in this area are as follows:

- Agents in the majority of the case study call centres were working on a narrow range of tasks. The majority spent all of their working

hours on the telephone, with very few combining this with other types of work.

- There was a widespread desire amongst agents to 'just get off the phones'. This was due to the lack of variety involved in the work, and also because of the stressful nature of telephone based work. Agents in all three sectors spoke of the phenomenon of 'burnout', caused by the pressure of working exclusively 'on the phones'.
- The issue of 'burnout' was also recognised by some managers. It was pointed out that managers face an *inherent conflict* between the need to reduce staff boredom and labour turnover, and the pressure to concentrate staff energies on telephone based work.
- Many agents and supervisors stressed that although they disliked the repetitive aspects of their work, they did enjoy the 'culture' of the workplace, claiming that their call centres had 'energy' and 'buzz', and were 'sociable' working environments.
- "Teamworking" was central to the management of employees in all of the case study call centres. However, in the call centre environment, the term "teamworking" has a rather narrow meaning, tending to refer to employees working in physical proximity to other members of their "team", carrying out similar tasks, with shared productivity targets and rewards, a shared supervisor, and sometimes socialising with each other outside office hours.
- However, the nature of the work and work organisation in call centres leaves little room for interaction within the "team" *within* working hours. Call centre agents spend the vast majority of the working day *in isolation* from their fellow employees. There is little in the way of team-based problem-solving in areas such as product and process improvement which are usually associated with teamworking in other employment contexts.
- 'Communications skills' and 'customer service skills' were deemed by survey respondents to be the most important skills for call centre employees. Indeed, in the majority of the case study call centres, these 'personal' qualities were regarded as *more important* than the possession of any technical skills.
- Outside of the computer services call centres, our case study interviews revealed that it was generally felt that women were more likely than men to possess the required communications skills for call centre work.

Staff/Management Relationships

It has been claimed that call centres use some of the latest staff/management communications systems, many of which have been imported from management thinking currently predominant in the United States. The question of staff/management relationships was central to the

WOWIS interviews, and we were keen to examine employee views on this issue. Our key findings in this area are listed below:

- Only 28 per cent of the call centres surveyed had trade union representation. Interestingly, *all* of these companies were in the financial services sector. In total, 53 per cent of the financial services companies that replied to the survey were unionised.
- Although trade unions were represented in a minority of call centres, we found a range of staff/management communications systems in place, including staff suggestions schemes, employee forums and working parties.
- The vast majority of call centres that replied to the survey claimed to hold regular staff meetings or 'team briefings'. However, the case studies revealed that these were not always *two-way* processes, and they were frequently 'cut short' due to the pressures of work.
- Ninety-four per cent of the call centres that replied to our survey claimed that they encouraged good communications between staff and management by providing 'one-to-one feedback' to their agents about their work performance.
- In order to gather information about the work performance of agents call centres heavily monitor their employees. This is done in two main ways. Firstly, supervisors regularly tape-record or 'listen in' to agents whilst they are taking calls in order to monitor the quality of the service provided. Secondly, the technologies used in call centres are designed to ensure that managers and supervisors are aware of how agents are occupied at any time. Calls are also timed, and this information is often used as a basis for bonus payments.
- Contrary to our expectations, the majority of agents we interviewed did not particularly object to the heavy monitoring of their work *in principle*. Most seemed to accept the heavy monitoring carried out in call centres as a 'part of the job'. In fact, some agents stated that they *preferred* their calls to be recorded or listened to because it protected them from customer complaints. It was the focus on the *timing* of calls rather than the *quality* of the service provided which agents found de-motivating, and not the principle of call monitoring itself.

Training

As the WOWIS project has been chiefly concerned with issues of career development, the subject of the nature and quality of the training received by call centre employees has been of central importance. Our findings in this area are listed below. As we were interested in the experiences of all levels of call centre staff, we distinguished between the training provided to agents, *and* that received by supervisors and managers.

Agents

- The vast majority of survey respondents provided introductory training to new agents. Around one third claimed that introductory training lasted for between 2 and 4 weeks. A further third claimed to provide induction training for longer than 4 weeks. However, twenty per cent of respondents said that their introductory training for agents lasted for *less* than one week.
- The most striking differences in introductory training provision for agents were found between industry sectors. The shortest training was provided in the outsourced call centres. Here 60 per cent of firms gave new agents introductory training for a period of one week or less.
- A number of the case study companies were actually in the process of *restructuring* their agent training programmes in order to make them longer and more in-depth. The primary reason given for this was that the provision of good training played a vitally important part in *retaining* staff and cutting down turnover rates.
- Despite the lengthy introductory training periods found in many call centres, most agents confessed to being extremely nervous during the initial period of working 'live' on the telephones, and many felt that their introductory training had not fully prepared them for the job.
- Most of the call centres surveyed provided on-going training of some form to their agents. This was overwhelmingly focused in the areas of product knowledge and customer service and sales. Most of the case study organisations also offered some training in personal and interpersonal skills. On-going training in ICT systems was much rarer in the case study call centres than training in product knowledge or communications skills.
- Forty-one per cent of the call centres surveyed claimed that they encouraged agents to take relevant qualifications. There were, however, wide variations here between the three target countries, with 60 per cent of the UK call centres stating that they encouraged this compared with 51 per cent of the Irish call centres and just 14 per cent of the Dutch companies.
- It was clear from our case study interviews that the actual *take-up* of further education at agent level was very low. Very few of the women we interviewed were taking or had taken qualifications whilst working in a call centre. In fact, most claimed that they were not interested, simply too tired at the end of the day to bother with studying, or were not prepared to dedicate their time to it due to family commitments.

Supervisors and Managers

- The survey findings indicated that a substantial amount of introductory training is provided to supervisors. However, these findings were *not* supported by our case study interviews. Here, four

out of nine of the case study companies provided *no supervisory training at all* to either their 'team leaders' or supervisors. The main reasons given for the neglect of training for staff at supervisory levels were the rapid growth of the industry, and the pressures of work.

- Ninety-two per cent of survey respondents claimed to provide on-going training in some form to team leaders and supervisors. Ninety per cent stated that they offered team leaders and supervisors management training. Once again, the survey findings on training for supervisors were *not* supported by our case study interviews. The vast majority of supervisors interviewed told us that they had received very little, *if any* on-going management training.
- A significant proportion of survey respondents - 43 per cent - claimed that they encouraged supervisors and managers to take relevant industry qualifications. As was the case with qualifications at agent level, call centres in the UK were more likely to encourage their staff to take qualifications than the other two countries, with just 9 per cent of the Dutch call centres claiming that they did this. This is likely to be due to the lack of specialist teleservices industry qualifications in the Netherlands at the time of the survey.
- In Ireland and the UK, however, survey respondents claimed to encourage supervisors and managers to take a number of qualifications. These included various managerial and marketing courses, MBAs, and specialist financial services qualifications. In the UK a number of call centre industry specific qualifications for supervisors and managers have recently been developed.

Career Development

The key question which the WOWIS project team set out to investigate was whether call centres are working environments in which women are able to develop their skills and careers. Our key findings in terms of career development are as follows:

- Flat organisational structures were viewed as the main barrier to career development, with many agents commenting upon the restricted opportunities open to them. The routine nature of the work was also perceived to make it difficult to demonstrate a range of skills and abilities.
- Our survey findings revealed high rates of internal promotion from agent to supervisory level. Sixty-five per cent of respondents claimed that supervisors were most frequently recruited internally from the *existing* agent population.
- The vast majority of the agents we interviewed felt that there was no discrimination against women in their call centres in terms of promotion. The general view seemed to be that 'ambitious individuals'

could move up the career hierarchy if they were determined to 'prove themselves'.

- Career development was viewed to be more difficult for part-time staff than full-time employees. Most of those employed on a part-time basis, despite enjoying their work, said that they had not seriously considered a career in a call centre because they assumed that it simply wasn't an option for them because of the input in terms of hours expected of those in management roles.
- Women made up 69 per cent of all of supervisors in the call centres surveyed, which is in proportion with their representation within the industry as a whole. However, women were less well represented at managerial levels, making up 53 per cent of all managers. It is important to emphasise, however, that the representation of women in managerial positions in call centres compares favourably to that found in other industries.
- Managers are more likely to be recruited externally than supervisors are. Thirty per cent of call centre employers usually recruit managers from *outside* of the call centre, and a further 27 per cent most frequently recruit managers from elsewhere within the company.
- Thirty-eight per cent of survey respondents claimed that agents leaving their call centres most frequently moved to jobs elsewhere *within* the same company. However, the proportion of staff moving into roles in the wider organisation was considerably lower in the Irish call centres than in the two other countries.
- The high amount of movement of staff between the call centre and the wider organisation found in the survey was, however, *not* mirrored in most of the case study companies. In fact, in most cases it was stated that only a *minority* of employees moved into roles in the wider organisation.

Equal Opportunities

As we have been particularly concerned with women's experiences of work in call centres, the WOWIS project has paid special attention to the issue of equal opportunities. We have been particularly interested in the difficulties faced by women combining employment with domestic commitments. Our findings in this area are summarised below:

- The call centre employers in our study could not be said to be at the 'cutting edge' of equal opportunities thinking and practice. Most tried to avoid discriminating against their female employees, but few expressed consciousness of the specific problems which women face in employment and career terms, or saw any need to put into place schemes to overcome such problems.