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**What is a skilled job?
Exploring worker perceptions of skill in two UK call centres**

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Abstract

A current theme within debates over interactive service work is that many routine service jobs are 'skilled' because they require workers to perform 'emotion work' and 'articulation work'. Drawing upon workers' views of their skills in two 'mass market' call centres in the UK, the paper questions the use and validity of these new skill concepts. It is argued that these concepts overplay the amount of task variation, discretion and control that is available to such workers. Even more problematic is the tendency to equate skill with the ability to cope with badly designed jobs and stressful working conditions. The findings suggest that there is a need for a thorough and rigorous debate about what is meant by a 'skilled job' in an expanding service-based economy.

Introduction

Current policy and academic debates around the ‘high skills’ and ‘knowledge-driven economy’ have at their heart a fundamental, if often un-stated, question: what is ‘skill’ and what do we mean by a ‘skilled job’? The concept of skill has always been notoriously complex, elusive and hard to define (Grugulis 2007a&b). Even in the past when ‘skill’ tended to be equated with the ‘hard’ technical abilities and ‘know-how’ of the unionised craft worker (Keep and Mayhew 1999), the concept was ‘saturated with sexual bias’ (Phillips and Taylor 1986). Disentangling what Cockburn (1983: 113) identified as the skill of the person doing the job, the skill required of the job itself and the social construction of skill has never been straightforward (see Attewell 1990, Grugulis *et al.* 2004). Matters are becoming even more complicated as references are increasingly made to a far broader range of ‘skills’, including ‘thinking skills’, ‘team working skills’, ‘communication skills’, ‘basic skills’, ‘motivation’, ‘discipline’, ‘enthusiasm’ and even the ‘willingness to work hard’. There appears to be a widespread trend to re-label as skills what in the past would have been considered personal attributes, attitudes, dispositions or behaviours (see Keep and Mayhew 1999). Not surprisingly, some commentators worry that the concept has been stretched so far as to divest it of any real meaning (see Payne 2000, Lafer 2004).

Others, however, argue that there is considerable merit in moving beyond a traditional and overly rigid definition of skill (see Bolton 2004, Korczynski 2005, Gatta *et al.* 2007). The shift that has taken place in western societies towards an increasingly service-dominated economy, where many more jobs involve face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with customers, is said to require a new appreciation of the emotional and aesthetic labour skillsⁱ used in interactive service work. The key concept has been that of ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1979, 1983) and the requirement for workers to manage their feelings as well as those of the customer. Such emotion work is now claimed to be a form of skilled labour requiring a range of quite complex and sophisticated abilities (see Bolton 2004, 2005, Korczynski 2005). Others have recently claimed that interactive service workers also possess ‘articulation work skills’ – the skills of coordinating and integrating the different elements within the job, including those of emotion management, which help to support and maintain work flows (see Hampson and Junor 2005, also Gatta *et al.* 2007). Although routinised service jobs rank low in terms of standard measures or

proxies for skill, namely educational attainment, training and learning times, these authors argue that they should not be dismissed as 'low skilled'.

In this paper we argue that rather than clarifying our understanding of skill, there is an increasing confusion over what counts as a 'low skilled job' and indeed whether it is an appropriate label for *any* form of interactive service work (see Korczynski 2005). Skill is clearly a relative concept however and the question of how skilled and in relation to what remains largely neglected within these debates (see Payne 2006). We seek to open up a critical discussion of interactive skills by exploring workers' perceptions of skill in two UK call centres. The choice of call centres is appropriate as they have figured prominently in attempts to construct the service worker as a 'multi-skilled emotion manager' (Houlihan 2000, Callaghan and Thompson 2002, Bolton 2004, Bolton and Houlihan 2007). The first part of the paper reviews the arguments of those commentators who appear to be claiming that even routine service jobs involve quite high levels of skill in terms of their emotion work and articulation work components. The main part of the paper presents evidence from interviews undertaken within two call centres and attempts to assess skills levels using both traditional proxies and self-evaluation by call centre workers. The final section highlights the problematic nature of the ever expanding definition of skilled work.

Skill in Interactive Service Work

In recent years, a number of commentators have sought to address the skills required in service work. Intellectual skills, knowledge skills and technical skills have all received heightened attention in the critical service work literature (Thompson *et al.* 2001, Korczynski 2002). However, much of the effort has been directed at trying to render visible the 'hidden skills' that front-line service workers exercise when interacting with customers, particularly in relation to jobs that have frequently been described as 'low skilled'. A key feature has been both a desire to reject Ritzer's (1996) portrayal of a 'deskilled' service society and a concern to recognise the 'invisible skills' of the mainly female workers who occupy these jobs (Tancred 1995).

Many of these attempts have drawn on Hochschild's concept of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1979, 1983) and the demands placed on workers to display appropriate emotions during service interactions. In her path-breaking study, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild showed, for example, how flight stewardesses were

required to 'smile for the customer' and abide by a series of organisational 'feeling rules' or scripts. For Hochschild, emotional labour was hard, demanding labour but it was not explicitly claimed to be a skill. Commentators have since argued that 'emotion work is indeed a form of skilled work and deserves to be recognised as such' (Bolton 2004: 22, also Rafaeli and Sutton 1987, Noon and Blyton 1999, Steinberg and Figart 1999, Korczynski 2005, Gatta *et al.* 2007). Bolton (2000, 2004: 20) has perhaps gone furthest in this respect. Her argument is that emotion work satisfies two of the main criteria that have commonly been used to distinguish 'skilled' work – notably task discretion and employee control over the work process (Littler 1982). Korczynski (2005) adds a third key dimension – job complexity – which, he argues, is implicit in Bolton's wider argument.

Bolton (2004, 2005) follows Goffman (1959) in arguing that *all* social interaction requires sophisticated social actors who are capable of managing their own and others' emotions in accordance with a complex diversity of 'feeling rules', conventions or rituals. In this view, all social interaction is complex and requires a quite sophisticated form of social intelligence. Front-line service workers must also perform emotion work during service interactions, managing their emotions and those of the customer. However, this emotion work is different from that performed in private life because it is carried out on a 'material stage' in which the status and obligations of the participants is unequal (Bolton 2004: 25). When the 'customer is king' (Hochschild 1983: 86), service workers have to be pleasant, polite and calm with customers even when the latter are rude and abusive.

Crucially, for Bolton (2004, 2005), service workers are not simply passive enactors of managerial requirements. Because they 'own the means of production' (Bolton and Boyd 2003: 293, Bolton 2005: 60), it is they who *decide* how much sincerity or effort to invest in their emotional displays. Thus, service workers can offer insincere superficial performances, whilst at other times they may *choose* to relate to customers as people offering sympathy, kindness and understanding in acts of 'philanthropic emotion management' – the call centre worker who takes the time to chat with lonely callers being one oft-cited example (see Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 250). In this way, service workers are said to be 'an active and controlling force in the labour process' (Bolton 2004: 30). For Bolton, the skill of the 'multi-skilled emotion worker' resides in their ability to juggle multiple roles as well as discern customer needs and select the type and level of emotion work which is required to

meet them (see Bolton 2004, also Korczynski 2005). Moreover, these acts of conscious emotion management take place in a context of material constraint where managerial imperatives to increase efficiency, cut costs and prescribe suitable emotional displays ‘violate’ the social interaction and make it harder for workers to deliver what they consider to be ‘good service’. Service workers have to balance these conflicting demands and, as the public face of the organisation, deal with customers’ anger and frustration when the service provided falls short of expectations and the ‘*myth of customer sovereignty*’ is laid bare. In this way, a successful service interaction is said to be a ‘fragile accomplishment requiring high levels of skilled emotion work’ (Bolton 2004: 33, for a critical discussion, see Payne 2006).

A further development that seeks to uncover the ‘hidden skills’ of routine service work has been the adaptation of the concept of articulation work (Strauss 1985). Hampson and Junor (2005: 176) describe ‘articulation skills’ as ‘a blend of emotional, cognitive, technical and time-management skills, performed often at speed’. These skills involve the simultaneous tasks of managing self, the customer and the IT system within a framework of time constraints. While each task may appear to be at a low skill level, the challenge and complexity arises from doing them all at the same time or ‘juggling’ different aspects of a job within a demanding work environment. Hampson and Junor counsel *against* ‘the tendency to conflate “low level” (low paid, low status) work and “low skilled” work’ and *for* gaining recognition of ‘articulation work skills’ (2005: 176). As with the discourse around skilled emotional work (see Bolton 2004, Korczynski 2005, Gatta *et al.* 2007), the aim is to recognise such abilities as real skills so that they might then be properly remunerated.

Not everyone is convinced, however, that we should cease referring to all interactive service jobs as ‘low skilled’ and are keen to retain a ‘sense of proportion’ (Grugulis 2007a: 168, Payne 2006). Speaking in relation to mass market, high volume call centres, Rose and Wright (2005: 144, *emphasis added*) contend that the work ‘require[s] varying degrees of *relatively low level skill* along the diverse types of knowledge...cognitive and communicative ability, emotional labour and endurance...*albeit at a fairly basic level.*’ Similarly, Grugulis (2007a: 168, *emphasis added*) insists that a range of routine service jobs may involve complex interactions or tacit knowledge: ‘But this does not alter the fact that the skill levels demanded in these jobs are *minimal.*’ Bradley *et al.*’s (2000: 129) critique also stresses that many

‘[j]obs commonly retain a low-skill characteristic, especially in the fastest-growing sectors.’

A key area where these debates over skill definitions have been played out is in relation to call centre operatives. Although call centre work varies considerably, it is generally accepted that the majority of UK agents are in mass market call centres where technical skill requirements are relatively low (see Taylor and Bain 2007). Despite the apparent routine nature of much of the work, the call centre agent has been presented as the archetypal example of the ‘skilled emotion manager.’ Frenkel *et al.* (1998: 963) refer to a range of social skills, or ‘emotional labour’ capabilities, including the ‘...ability to remain calm under pressure...having a friendly, positive and tactful attitude...active listening...being patient and empathetic particularly when customers are upset...’. For Houlihan (2000: 234, *emphasis added*), ‘Agent work is a *complex* blend of knowing, sensing and rule applying...agents use a *complex*, largely unacknowledged set of personal skills.’

Research showing that some call centre employers go to considerable lengths to recruit and mould people with the ‘right personality’ or ‘social skills’ (see Callaghan and Thompson 2002, Belt *et al.* 2002) is taken as a further indication that emotional labour skills are critical for call centre work. Belt *et al.* (2002: 32), in their study of call centres in the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, argue that such skills are decidedly gendered, with management often looking to recruit women on the basis of their ‘natural’ feminine abilities and aptitude for ‘people work’. More recently, Bolton and Houlihan (2007: 258) have insisted that call centre work ‘involves extensive but under recognised discretionary skills in terms of constructively managing the call process and coping with the work.’ These skills include dexterity, judgement, telling stories, multi-tasking, dealing with large volumes of information, selling, seducing, coping with complex and competing demands, not taking things personally, managing one’s own reactions, reinventing ways of seeing things, and managing stress.

Hampson and Junor (2005: 177) also use call centre work as a classic example of ‘articulation work skills’ in action, as agents are required to micro-manage ‘complex articulations’ between computer work, customer needs, supplementary work processes (what is referred to as ‘after call work’ or ‘wrap-up’) and emotion management. The ability to ‘work under...stressful conditions to maintain information flows and to keep work routines functioning smoothly requires more than

emotional labour: it requires articulation work skills' (Hampson and Junor 2005: 177).

They note that:

Such work may not be knowledge work, but the interactions and articulations among its cognitive elements, its technical computing skills, its expertise in emotional management of self and others and its finely honed time management skills suggests that another dimension of skill is in play. This is the skill of combining skills including those at lower levels (Hampson and Junor 2005: 178).

Other writers, although keen to reject the labelling of call centre workers as professional 'knowledge workers' (see Frenkel *et al.* 1999), also wish to 'resist the use of the term deskilling in a call centre context' (see Thompson *et al.* 2004: 148). Thompson *et al.* (2001: 937, also Callaghan and Thompson 2002) emphasise the importance of social skills and competencies, the need for 'social and tacit knowledge; workers must be able to consciously and continually manage their emotions.' Following Bolton, they see call handlers 'as active and skilled emotion managers in their own right' capable of inserting their own definitions of appropriate emotional labour (Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 248). Their primary concern, however, is to illuminate the tensions and conflicts at the heart of the labour process and the way workers actively contest managerial attempts to control the use of emotions during service exchanges. This is seen to act as an important counterweight to Fernie and Metcalf's (1998) earlier depiction of 'call centre employees as self-disciplined subjects of electronic surveillance' (Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 350). They are rather more ambiguous when it comes to the actual level of skill or competence involved, appearing nevertheless to accept Becker's argument that these skills 'are of a *basic* human character that are *ubiquitous* in their everyday lives' (Thompson *et al.* 2001: 938, *emphasis added*). They go on to state, 'the most generous spin that could be put on the situation of CSRs...is that they are developing or enhancing a set of generic, transferable social skills that make them more employable in other call centres or service work settings' (see Thompson *et al.* 2001: 939, see also Thompson *et al.* 2004: 148).

Evaluating the level of skill involved in specific call centre jobs is a difficult matter as traditional measures of skill are rejected as inappropriate. Instead skills are identified through interviews with managers and workers, combined with observation of the work process, and then subject to (re)interpretation by the researcher. On this basis, Belt *et al.* (2002: 31) conclude that there is a 'widespread conviction that call

centre jobs are indeed “skilled jobs”, yet they provide very few examples of agents themselves explicitly claiming this to be the case. Hampson *et al.* (forthcoming 2008) present the perspective of one telephone sales agent as follows: ‘[When you’re] taking 50 to 100 calls a day, everybody is throwing questions at you, so you’ve constantly got to be thinking [although] sometimes you answer the same thing day in day out’. The researchers then report that the work only ‘looks like ‘routine’ responsiveness to stimuli from callers’ and instead *really* illustrates ‘the cognitive skills of managing a relentless stream of tasks that may be routine, but that nevertheless require constant alertness.’ Other accounts that present a clear worker perspective, such as ‘I don’t think there is a skill involved, you can train a monkey’ (call centre agent cited in Callaghan and Thompson 2002: 242), tend to be passed over without comment.

Rather than clarifying the meaning of skill, this type of research has added a further layer of confusion and ambiguity. It is hard to establish whether these authors would classify all interactive service *work* as ‘skilled’, all interactive service *workers* as skilled (or only those who perform their jobs ‘well’) or whether they are simply insisting that these jobs/workers are *not* ‘unskilled.’ Our purpose is to add a new dimension to the debate by focusing on workers’ own views of the skill *levels* of their jobs. Asking workers whether they are ‘skilled’ and are doing a ‘skilled job’ certainly raises a host of difficult methodological issues (see Attewell 1990). Do workers know what skills they are using and are they able to articulate this? Might workers internalise dominant societal understandings of ‘skilled work’? If so, proponents of the ‘emotional-labour-as-skilled-labour view’ might argue that there is a danger that workers may simply conform to a traditional view of skill as *technical* skill and neglect, or simply take for granted, other emotional labour skills that they may be using? Equally, however, as the managerial discourse of skill changes to include notions of ‘social skills’, ‘interpersonal skills’ and ‘customer handling skills’ might workers themselves redefine what they do as skilled? Notwithstanding such methodological problems, we would argue that there is still merit in giving voice to call centre workers’ perspectives on skill levels.

The View from Two Call Centres

The research formed part of a wider study of low wage work in the UK, sponsored by the US-based Russell Sage Foundation, which looked specifically at five industries,

one of which was call centres. Eight case studies of call centres were undertaken. Here we focus on two of them which were specifically chosen because they contained jobs that were of the lowest technical complexity and appeared to be the most routine. In doing so, our intention was to try to exclude technical skills from the discussion, thereby enabling a focus on the interactive parts of the job.

In total, 44 face-to-face interviews with senior managers, team leaders and call centre operators were conducted across the two call centres, which we label C1 and C2. The interviews were recorded and ranged in length from one to two hours with managers and team leaders to 30 to 45 minutes with individual agents. At C1 about one hour was also spent observing the work process, listening to calls and talking informally with agents about their work. As part of the interviews, management were asked about recruitment and selection criteria and the skills required for the job, while team leaders and agents were also invited to reflect upon whether they regarded the agent role as being skilled and, if so, in what sense.

In terms of the research settings, C1 was owned by a large US multinational company specialising in the provision of call centre services. Operating in the increasingly competitive outsourcing market, the UK division was struggling to make a profit, although C1 was one of the more successful centres, maintaining a range of short and long-term contracts. Over 200 call centre agents were employed across two closely located sites situated on the outskirts of a small, prosperous town in the Midlands. Women made up 60 percent of the workforce and one third of the call centre agents worked part-time. The research focused on two sections of the call centre's overall operations which together employed the majority of agents.

The utility section at C1 was devoted to managing an appointment-making system on behalf of a large utility company. Around 100 agents received calls from members of the public seeking a quote for a new heating system and, less frequently, from company engineers who were at a customer's home and were recommending upgrades or renewal. Agents were required to follow a standard script which involved obtaining the customer's name and address and asking a few simple questions about their current heating system. The agent would then bring up the diary of the technicians and fit individuals into specific time slots. In addition, agents were encouraged to gather 'leads' of callers who might be willing to switch energy suppliers. Most customer calls took between 3 and 4 minutes, with calls from engineers lasting slightly longer.

The general section operated a wide range of short-term and longer-term contracts for commercial clients predominantly in the retail, finance and the leisure sectors. Scripts were normally used, either computer or paper-based, and agents could be working on one contract all day or on five or six simultaneously. Typical calls included taking down names and addresses, giving out flight arrival times, dealing with credit card applications or processing payments for goods. On average, calls lasted around two to three minutes, with specific targets on call length only applying to a small minority of contracts. During busy times of the year, agents were expected to handle between 100-150 calls per day, although this could drop to under 30 during periods of low demand.

Both groups of agents were closely monitored, with targets applied to call quality and productivity. Productivity was measured predominantly in terms of maximising 'logged in time', that is on a call or waiting for a call. Qualitative measures varied according to the specific requirements of the contracting company, but typically included using the correct opening statement and branding message, repeating the name and address of the caller, and so on. Agents were evaluated every three months against targets, including days absent and team working contributions, with the results linked directly to a pay matrix in which pay could go down as well as up.

C2 was an in-house call centre belonging to a major foreign-owned financial organisation that had recently entered the UK savings market with some considerable success. Located on the periphery of a large town in Southern England, C2 had expanded rapidly and was employing 130 agents of whom 64% were women and nearly half were part-time. Pay rates were significantly higher at C1 compared with C2 (where starting rates were only 30 pence above the National Minimum Wage), reflecting the higher wages locally for this type of work and management's decision to be a top quartile payer.

C2 only dealt with one product - a straightforward 'no catches, no restrictions' direct savings account. Consequently, agents' tasks were limited to answering inbound calls relating to the opening and closing of accounts, processing deposits and withdrawals, setting up regular savings plans, and dealing with routine customer queries. Scripts were available but were only required to be followed when specific financial operations took place. Because the company had decided to register with the Financial Services Authority (FSA) as 'non-advisory' providers of financial products,

agents were specifically prohibited from offering any sort of financial advice to callers. Call volumes varied between 40 and 120 calls per day, with an average cycle time of around three or four minutes. A range of targets were in place relating to minimising after call work and maximising ‘logged-in’ time, attendance, call quality and the number of customers signed up to a fixed saving plan. Calls were recorded and evaluated on a regular basis, with agents’ call quality measured against fixed criteria. These targets formed the basis of a performance management system which could lead either to monthly and annual bonuses or disciplinary processes and, ultimately, dismissal.

Recruitment, selection and skill requirements

To what extent can these call centre jobs be described as skilled work? We first turn to traditional proxies for measuring a skilled job (see Ashton *et al.* 1999), such as the requirement to have particular qualifications or experience when recruited, the use of lengthy training programmes equivalent to a craft apprenticeship or the number of years it takes to learn to do the job well. At C1 recruitment was undertaken mainly through temporary work agencies located in nearby towns. Some of these agency workers were used for short-term contracts but the majority were part of a ‘temp to perm’ route whereby if they reached adequate levels of performance after 13 weeks they were moved onto ‘direct’ permanent employment with the call centre. Workers were also recruited directly into permanent positions, responding to local press adverts or simply from ‘word of mouth’ or casual callers. The selection process was the same in both cases. In contrast, C2 rarely used temporary agencies, recruiting predominantly through local newspaper adverts.

Neither call centre specified that applicants should have previous experience of call centre work or even customer-facing work. Managers at both organisations stated that they were looking for applicants who held five GCSEs, including Maths and English – stipulated at grades A* to Cⁱⁱ in C2. Nevertheless, potential candidates were not rejected if they did not meet these formal educational requirements. Evidence of an indifference to qualifications and experience was reflected in the profile of those interviewed. Some workers had degrees, others had prior work experience in call centres but there were also a number of workers who had no qualifications and had not worked previously in customer-interfacing jobs.

At both call centres, applicants were given a short telephone interview and if they passed this test were then invited for a formal interview at the company. Basic numeracy and literacy tests were used at both call centres, although these were generally regarded by agents as ‘quite straightforward’. At C1 there was a group interview and assessment, while at C2 individual interviews and simple role play scenarios were used. The total process took no longer than two hours and was far less rigorous than the selection system outlined by Callaghan and Thompson (2002). When asked what they looked for in new recruits, managers at C1 emphasised the ability to communicate well, while at C2 attitude and behaviours featured more prominently (see Table 1).

Table 1: What managers are looking for in recruitment: key phrases

C1	C2
‘talk on the telephone well’	‘tenacious’
‘good manner’	‘stable’
‘life skills’	‘resilient’
‘listening’	‘empathy’
‘good communications’	‘attitude to do the work’
‘confident’	‘reliable’
	‘worked before’
	‘mature in outlook’
	‘not vivacious and outgoing’
	‘women returners’

Once recruited, off-the-job training was relatively short; between three and five days at C1 and two weeks at C2. Training was focused on induction into the company, using the IT systems, becoming acquainted with products and how to handle conversations with customers. Following the initial training period, new agents at C2 entered an ‘Academy’ for two weeks where they were dealing with real calls but with close access to trainers. Estimates by management and workers of the time taken to become fully competent in the job ranged from a week to a couple of months at C1 and around a month at C2.

There is no denying that on traditional measures of skill, such as formal educational qualifications, training times, and time taken to reach full proficiency, these jobs are, at best, ‘semi-skilled’ (EMIRE 2008). They require some sort of

training but this is counted in days rather than years and educational requirements do not extend beyond some basic literacy and numeracy ability. The level of technical competence is limited to familiarity with a keyboard and the ability to input information into a computer. There is little need for agents to have much in the way of product knowledge. Agents booking appointments at C1 are not expected to know anything about the equipment, pricing or workings of the products being sold, while those at C2 are simply required to familiarise themselves with a single savings account and know how to set up a regular savings plan. Judged in relation to such criteria, these are clearly not skilled jobs. The question, then, is whether this type of analysis misses out on the emotion work or articulation work skills used in these jobs. If so, what weight might one afford to such abilities *vis-à-vis* technical skills and knowledge when forming an assessment of the skill level of the job itself? First, we report on how managers rated the overall skill levels of operators' jobs.

At C1, the managers agreed that the technological, computer and general skills required for the job were fairly limited and that the main demands were in terms of the agent's ability to interact with the customer. However, these demands were considered to operate at a fairly basic level. The operations manager stressed that it was about 'coming across with a good manner and you know, just a good customer service rapport'. The HR manager agreed, but also went on to question whether customer-service was really a skill as opposed to a particular kind of personality:

I guess the skill level it would be fairly basic... in terms of their ability to talk to people and understand the importance of the way they talk to people on the phone, I don't know that you can describe that as a skill or as an inherent trait and that's almost one of the things that we need to try and get to. It's people with an understanding, it doesn't matter how many times you tell them but if they don't actually feel it, you can't really give them any training to get that.

One team leader described the jobs as requiring 'common sense but not actual skills', while another stated:

I wouldn't describe it as high-skilled... I think it's, as long as you are, you know, generally a nice person and you know, reasonably intelligent and [have] the ability to learn, take on new skills, be able to adapt quite quickly, then you can manage it.

By contrast, managers at C2, where the work was if anything even more routine, were more inclined to describe the job as skilled. The call centre manager admitted that the product was very simple, that agents were 'very limited' in terms of what they could do within the role and that one of the 'biggest challenges' was finding ways of dealing

with their boredom. Nevertheless, he still insisted that it was a relatively skilled job in terms of how agents dealt with customers.

You need to be a good communicator and one of the things that distinguishes the really good from the not so good is their ability to control a call... and that's something that isn't that common.

The HR manager agreed, emphasising the need to provide customers with a positive experience while remaining within the regulatory requirements:

I think anyone can answer the phone but it's how you answer the phone and how you deal with the customer, the experience that that customer has, how they feel about that experience and being able to talk knowledgeably within the guidelines for compliance.

Two of the three team leaders interviewed at C2 also considered the job to be skilled, one commenting for example:

Yeah, it's a very skilled job, it takes a lot I think to inject enthusiasm and warmth and we've got very high standards within C2 and we are quite renowned for that externally... we expect quite a lot, we expect consistency on the phones, we expect them to be 100% with the customer and really focused on giving the customer as much help and support as they can on that call. It's hard to keep that level up. (team leader1)

Skills levels were, therefore, perceived to be quite different at the two call centres.

The next section considers whether agents also reported similar contrasting viewpoints.

Worker perceptions of skill

Turning to worker perceptions of skill, the research uncovered a diverse range of views. Five workers stated that certain skills were required to do the job but did not see their job as being 'skilled' as such (these were classified as ambiguous responses). These skills were described as customer service and communications, the ability to talk and listen, confidence, product knowledge and problem solving. Another five workers across the two call centres (out of the 23 who were asked) argued that their work was skilled, referring broadly to the same kind of abilities.

I think it's a skilled job... You've got your computer skills, but I think you need lots of skills in talking to people and dealing with people, the general public because everyone's different you speak to. You've got to have a way of dealing with them assertively but in a proper manner. (agentG1, C1)

Well you've got to be positive on the calls, you've got to listen you've got to put the things in correctly on the key board, if you have any errors they

come back you see... Oh yes, I think it is quite skilled. To be pleasant and positive and help really. (agentG2, C1)

Yes, it is [skilled]. ... Because to be able to deal with customers because you never know what is going to be at the other end of the phone. Could be a young person, old person, angry, deaf, with a problem. And dealing with those kind of people is a skill. Being able to empathise with them, being able to communicate, to be able to give them instructions in a way that they understand because for each one it could be slightly different so that is a skill. And to be able to communicate with the customer, deal with the procedure on our side as well and to be able to have the professionalism and knowledge to sort of be able to take the problem on board, fix it, resolve it and communicate that back to the customer with a degree of professionalism and trust... And for the CSA to be able to do that time and time again that is definitely a skill. (agent5, C2)

I think it's a highly skilled job... You get for example, elderly customers you have to be very patient with them or someone who is deaf or disabled. You know, you use all sorts of interpersonal skills. To me it's a highly skilled job. (agent16, C2)

I would say yes, you need to be able to communicate well with people... Also dealing with customers, if you can't handle speaking with people all day, then it is not a job for you. Customer service as well, you need to be able to kind of just sit there if they start swearing and shouting you, you kind of need to rise above that rather than start swearing and shouting back at them. You need to, you know, just let it go over your head. ... (agent 1, C2)

Technical and procedural elements were of minor importance compared to the interaction with the customer. In these accounts, skill is being able to deal with people in a positive and appropriate manner, it involves recognising that customers have different needs, it is about being 'pleasant and helpful' as well as letting customer anger 'go over your head'. These accounts are, in many ways, consistent with the existing studies on 'skilled emotion work' and, to a lesser extent, 'articulation work skills'.

At C1 both workers who described the work as skilled were employed in the same area where contracts were changed frequently, they were older on average, had few qualifications and liked their jobs. By contrast, the three workers at C2 having argued that their jobs were skilled, went on to stress the highly repetitive and monotonous nature of their work. Agent5 (above) who was extremely articulate in expressing the need to distinguish different customer needs, and was consistently exceeding targets, went on to describe the despair he felt:

after doing the same process several thousand times, even several hundred times in a day, it gets overly repetitive and it definitely loses the challenge

and any interest... every day your core job is being chained to your desk and having to listen to the same kind of people in my case for 10 or 12 hours a day... there is very little to get your mind working. Most of the day I am actually sitting there on auto-pilot looking out of the window, talking to someone'. (Agent 5, C2)

The majority of agents that we interviewed (13 agents) explicitly rejected the idea that theirs was a skilled job, explaining that it was 'just' about the ability to talk and listen or be polite, something that lay well within the capabilities of most people.

I don't think you need any [skill]. I mean, you have to be polite and...you can't lose your temper even if someone is being rude to you or swearing at you, you can't be swearing back. (AgentU3, C1)

So long as you can hear and can be understood and you are prepared to listen to what they are saying without just sort of blanking through it, that's all you need really. (AgentU4, C1)

Just as long as you've got the confidence, actually talking to people... It's monotonous, it's boring, your brain is just dead. You know, you're like being a robot, I was talking to my colleague last week and this is, I'm just trying to measure it, what sort of job you could actually, it is on a par of, and you couldn't even say it's a cleaner, compare it to a cleaning job because that's more interesting than sat on the phones like. You're like a machine basically. (AgentG3, C1)

I was going mad on the phone after only six weeks because in three weeks you have the product, you knew it all...it just wasn't a challenge, it was just tedious, it was like watching paint dry. It was sending me up the wall. (Agent2, C2)

The job itself is mundane and repetitive and no matter how many times you are told it doesn't have to be, it is. (Agent6, C2)

Not really....I think pretty much anyone could be able to do that as long as they, I mean, there is communicating with people, [but] yeah, I am pretty sure that most people could do that. (Agent14, C2)

For these workers there was no mention of the different ways of interacting with customers, the need to manage a conversation, or to empathise. Although aware of the requirement to behave appropriately towards customers, this was not considered to be particularly complex or difficult. At the same time, their rejection of the label 'skilled' is clearly grounded in the view that the job is highly routinised and lacks much in the way of challenge, variety or interest.

It is also noteworthy that when it came to discussing the issues of job quality and job satisfaction, few agents spoke at any length about their interaction with customers, their primary relationships being with managers and co-workers. Indeed, 'bending the rules' to interact in a non-prescribed way could result in a loss of pay or bonuses if it was a call that was being evaluated. Being conversational and going

‘off-script’ were all activities that were encouraged by managers provided the requisite messages were included, such as the correct name of the company or repeating the customer’s name a set number of times. It should also be noted that both call centres employed substantial numbers of men as agents – between 35 and 40 percent – and that we found no systematic difference in response to questions on skill in relation to gender.

To summarise, then, the majority of agents interviewed explicitly rejected the suggestion that they were doing a skilled job. It is clear, however, that there is no overall consensus and that perceptions do vary. Just as two people doing the same job can experience it in different ways (love it/hate it), so skill remains, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder. How then can we explain why managers at C2 insisted that the work was skilled, while those at C1 presented the jobs as fairly low skilled? One possibility is that management at C2 was more focused upon issues of call quality and the customer experience. It was certainly the case that managers at C2 sought to develop in agents a commitment to service quality as part of a wider set of normative controls linked to a particular corporate image and culture. Considerable resources had been put into the physical environment, catering facilities and training and social activities (e.g. ‘family fun days’), with the centre having been cited as one of the best employers to work for in the country. Agents at C2 were expected to enjoy coming to work and were assessed on whether they displayed ‘positive behaviours’ and were fully committed to the company and its values. Portraying the work as skilled can be seen as one element of such a strategy. By contrast, managers at C1 appeared relatively unconcerned about developing a particular corporate culture, as reflected for example in the relatively low wages and widespread complaints among agents about the physical environment, in particular the heating system and canteen.

The overwhelming majority of agents agreed that skilled or not this is a job that can be excruciatingly dull and repetitive. Indeed, this was openly acknowledged by management at C2 who were shifting the focus of their recruitment strategy away from ‘bubbly personalities’ towards:

....people who are suited to call centre work and will stay at it...people who are, you know, a bit more sort of tenacious and stable and resilient is quite a strong word, you know, people who don’t mind doing the same thing time in, time out. (call centre manager, C2)

Both organisations were targeting older women with children. This approach was not because of a perceived better ‘fit’ of women with the interactive parts of the jobs but because of their lower expectations about work and their ‘staying power’.

So if you are a part-time person who returns to work, what we find typically with a part-time person is that their job is their second priority in life. Their primary priority is their family so what they are looking for is flexibility, work-life balance, consistency in terms of their shifts and everything else and not to be hassled. To be included etc. etc. So their priority is pretty different so they can probably do it for years and years, I would imagine. (call centre manager, C2)

Part-time workers not only have fewer job alternatives, but the work may be more bearable if only undertaken for four hours a day rather than eight. These call centres were still recruiting ‘attitude’ (Callaghan and Thompson 2002) but attitude was increasingly being defined in terms of stamina and endurance.

Complexity, Control and Discretion?

The evidence from these two workplaces allows us to question the view that those *within* call centres predominantly regard operative jobs as skilled work. These jobs were deliberately selected as requiring few technical skills so that we could explore the question of emotion and articulation work skills in jobs of the lowest level of ‘apparent’ complexity. Using traditional ‘proxies’ for skill such as qualifications, training and learning times we estimated that the jobs fitted into a semi-skilled definition. Considering the nature of the job, the work was highly routinised, the range of tasks undertaken was very narrow and task variety was extremely limited. Operatives were required to have only limited product knowledge and their working day was tightly controlled through a variety of monitoring mechanisms and targets. The majority of agents rejected the view that their work was skilled insisting that it required only relatively basic or low level abilities.

Those pressing for the recognition of emotion and articulation work skills would presumably argue that these skills are simply not captured by traditional measures. In addition, it might be retorted that some workers may take for granted the complexity and sophistication of their interactive skills or they may simply have internalised a conventional definition of skilled work. Alternatively, however, it might be that these voices are *significant* and that this work is perhaps not as complex or as

skilled as the discourses around emotion work skills and articulation work skills often imply. At the very least, they ought to set a few alarm bells ringing.

Bolton claims that central to defining emotion work as skilled, even for the most routine interactive service job, is the complexity, control and discretion involved in the interaction with the customer. If we take the issue of complexity first, in both call centres, agents repeatedly referred to the routine nature of calls and the lack of variation, while a number admitted that they often worked on ‘autopilot’. These types of responses would suggest that, for the most part, the interaction with the customer was far from complex. Indeed, Bolton (2004: 33) herself concedes that much of a modern consumer capitalism is built around ‘speedy transactions enhanced with routinised “niceness”’ requiring little more than ‘a fabricated performance with faceless actors’. This is not to deny that even in the most routinised service jobs workers can still sometimes choose to relate to customers as *people* or fellow social interactants – indeed, it would be extremely odd if this were not the case. The service interaction is not purely economic and remains socially embedded (Korczynski 2002: 143). At the heart of the ‘emotional labour as skilled labour’ view, however, is the desire to define the ‘normal’ social interactions of everyday life – what Collins (2007:619) refers to as ‘ubiquitous expertise... a huge body of tacit knowledge’ – as complex work skills. This approach inevitably leads to a position where *any* interaction with a customer can be defined as complex and skilled, despite the type of interaction being little more (and often much less) sophisticated than the kind of emotion management the majority of us learn to perform during our everyday lives (see Payne 2006).

To what extent can agents be described as having substantial discretion and control over the interaction? Scripts were provided but there was not a requirement that they were followed ‘word for word’. However, the way that the technical aspects of the jobs had been designed – to deliver a very limited service with anything outside of the job boundary being passed on elsewhere – imposed strict limits on the interaction with the customer. In addition, while the length of the call was not prescribed, the use of call ‘quality’ measures in the two call centres further controlled the nature of the interaction. The measurement of quality and its use as a metric that can be incorporated directly into the performance management and pay system may be an increasingly prevalent trend within UK call centres (see Taylor *et al.* 2002: 145, 147). In the two case studies, calls were measured against set lists that included

marks for correct information provided, use of names, opening statements and so on, alongside scores for voice intonation and at C2 the existence of the ‘wow’ factor. Unlike quantitative targets where call performance is averaged out over a shift or over a month, it could be argued that qualitative measures are a more pervasive form of control. An agent could be randomly targeted for measurement on any call at any time, so that the ‘quality’ of the performance has to be maintained. Of course, workers can resist these management control mechanisms and thereby face pay losses or disciplinary action. However, it is unclear why what are presented as forms of resistance – be it boredom, pretence or offering sympathy to customers – are being defined in terms of worker control and task discretion, let alone skill.

Furthermore, there are real tensions between the conceptualisation of ‘skill’ as resistance/misbehaviour, coping with the job and delivering improved service quality. If, for example, call centre agents learn to deal with the monotony of the job by withdrawing commitment and ‘going robot’, and service quality suffers as a result, are they still performing skilled emotion work? Or does this observation only apply to those circumstances where the worker *goes beyond* managerial emotional work prescriptions by offering customers a *better* service experience than that permitted by strict adherence to existing service norms? Again, the answer is not entirely clear, with the discourse around skilled emotion work appearing to run in two opposite directions at once.

A key claim of the emotion work as skilled work proponents is that these skills are unrecognised partly because they are equated by managers with ‘natural’ female abilities and are therefore undervalued. Certainly, the majority of workers in routine interactive service jobs are women, but it is also the case that some of these jobs are fairly mixed. At least 30 percent of call centre agents and one third of sales assistants and cashiers are men, not really ‘woman’s work’ when we compare them to the highly segregated occupations of nursery nurses (2%), secretaries (4%) and hairdressers (7%). In our research, the only preference shown for female call centre agents related to their disadvantaged position in the labour market brought about by the lack of opportunities for part-time work.

In the end, the problem of winning higher rewards for ‘skilled emotion workers relates not to lack of recognition but lack of scarcity. There are simply too many people able to perform the kind of emotion work required to deliver at least acceptable levels of customer service in many routine service occupations. In so far

as such jobs require people to be basically polite, cheerful and calm when dealing with customers, the potential labour pool is relatively big – too big for management to have to pay a wage premium to those who possess such ‘skills’ (for a fuller discussion, see Payne 2006). Our call centre case studies revealed that employers were quite capable of replacing 20 to 30 percent of the workforce each year, with little indication that they struggled to recruit people with the requisite ‘social skills’ required for the job.

If labelling such job characteristics as skills does not offer a likely route to improvements in pay and status for those in low end service jobs, neither is such an exercise entirely benign. There are real problems, for instance, with seeing skill as embodied in the individual’s ability to ‘endure monotony’, ‘cope with stress’, ‘time manage’ or display ‘empathy’ and then to translate that into defining the work as skilled. After all, why is the ability to endure a badly designed, monotonous and stressful job a skill? In the hands of policy makers, such discourses can be appropriated in ways that raise serious political and ethical issues. Those who suffer from stress, who have a low boredom threshold, or who cannot find it in themselves to be concerned about a customer’s difficulty in remembering a password can be designated as lacking in skills. The policy implication is that these workers need additional training/social conditioning to ‘make them’ into the skilled service worker. As Lafer (2004: 118) argues the original idea of skill was a trade that ‘would enable one to earn a decent living’, while the move to “behavioural skills” reflects the fact that there are not enough job openings in well-paid technical occupations to accommodate the full population that training policy aims to serve.’ The problem of ‘bad jobs’ – stress, work intensification, tight controls, poor job design, low pay – becomes one of lack of skills.

Conclusions

Drawing upon worker perceptions of skill in two UK call centres, this paper has sought to interrogate claims that what ‘appear’ to be highly routinised ‘low skill’ service occupations can be re-categorised as skilled jobs by virtue of their emotion work and articulation work elements. The majority view among those ‘doing the job’ provides little support for an interpretation of these jobs as ‘skilled’, that they involve complex interactions with the customer or that they provide workers with substantial

discretion and control. We have argued that in seeking to overcome ‘conceptual confusions’ (Bolton 2004) associated with a traditional definition of skill, the new discourses around emotion work and articulation work skills are mired in conceptual confusions of their own. Furthermore, there is a worrying trend within these discourses to equate ‘skill’ with the ability to cope with badly designed jobs and stressful working conditions.

However, the problems surrounding emotion work and articulation work skills do not end there. Such discourses also contribute to a *de-relativisation* of skilled work. The mass-market call centre worker, the supermarket checkout operative, and the theme park ride attendant are all emotion workers, emotion work is a relatively complex and sophisticated discretionary skill *ergo* theirs is not a low skilled job. In this way, we are invited to dispense with the category of low skilled work across large swathes of the service economy even if those jobs remain low waged and highly routinised (see Korczynski 2005). In the hands of UK policy makers, such discourses can be used to fuel claims that we are witnessing a general trend towards universal up-skilling in a ‘knowledge-driven economy’, while also allowing a convenient veil to be drawn over the dull, monotonous reality of much service sector work. For all these reasons, it is important that these discourses are opened up to rigorous critical scrutiny. In our view, it is significant then that the majority of call centre workers in our two case studies openly dismissed the suggestion that they were doing a skilled job. These views need to be brought back into the debate in order to restore a sense of balance and avoid the tendency to exaggerate the level of skill required in low end service jobs.

In many ways, those who argue that emotion work is skilled work are pushing on an open door. Social skills, soft skills, customer service skills – whatever one wishes to call them – are now part of the furniture as far as policy makers’ rhetoric around skill is concerned. Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to contest the view that qualities such as ‘enthusiasm’, ‘patience’, ‘politeness’, and ‘tolerance’ are anything but skills. As Grugulis (2007a: 91) notes, ‘the idea of attributes, competencies and personal qualities as skills has already gained so much currency that it seems unlikely that this particular exercise in rebranding will be reversed.’ In trying to hold fast to a tighter and more robust definition of skill/skilled work, one can easily appear like Canute trying to turn back the tide. Yet, loosening skill from its traditional moorings as a specific technical concept (even though subject to social

construction) and allowing it to float freely across a vast sea of human behaviours, dispositions and attributes, is fraught with problems. Unless skill has a clear link to technical knowledge and competence (in its broad sense), there is real danger that as a concept it will become ever more meaningless and ultimately redundant, or as Macbeth said of life ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’

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NOTES

ⁱ Aesthetic labour skills refer to embodied attributes and qualities such as physical appearance, accent, stylishness, deportment etc – what Warhurst and Nickson (2001) refer to as ‘looking good’ and ‘sounding right’ (see also Nickson *et al.* 2004). This paper concentrates on ‘skilled emotional labour’ in interactive service work for two reasons. First, emotional labour has tended to be the dominant paradigm for studying skill in customer-facing service work. Second, while attempts have been made to articulate a case for viewing emotional labour as a form of skilled work (e.g. Bolton 2004), there has, to date, been little attempt – beyond mere assertion – to do the same for aesthetic labour/skills. The argument has tended to be simply that employers want these things and that they are open to development through training in self-presentation.

ⁱⁱ GCSEs maths and English grades A* to C are academic qualifications normally taken at the end of compulsory schooling at age sixteen. Around half of all school-leavers do not achieve this standard in both subjects.