

SECTION 3(22)

CALL CENTRES

CONTENTS

	Page No
Relevant Legislation.....	1
Definitions	1
Call Centre.....	1
Call Handler	1
Health and Safety Issues for Call Centre Workers.....	1
Working Environment.....	1
Display Screen Equipment Working Practices	2
Requirements for Workstations	2
Daily Work Routine	3
Breaks	3
Training.....	4
Shifts and Security	4
Verbal Abuse	4
Organisational Working Practices	5
Job Design.....	5
Electronic Performance Monitoring	5
Quantitative Monitoring	5
Qualitative Monitoring	5
Specific Health Issues.....	5
Work Related Stress	5
Noise and Hearing	6
Voice Loss	7
Eyes and Eyesight	7
Musculoskeletal Disorders	7
Risk Assessment	7

(Total numbered pages in this section: 8)

Relevant Legislation

Various pieces of legislation are relevant in the management and inspection of health and safety in call centres. These include legislation relating to the workplace, provision and use of work equipment, display screen equipment and the management of health and safety.

Introduction

The total workforce employed within call centre environments is more than the combined workforce of coal mining, steel and vehicle production, and continued expansion is likely, though probably not at the same rate as in recent years.

Call centres are of particular concern to health and safety because of the unique type of work undertaken by the call handler. The fundamental elements of the job are not so different to those of a typical computer-based office job, and so are covered by existing regulations. The fact that a call handler spends much more time on the telephone and has fewer natural breaks in which to perform other activities, exposes them to particular occupational health risks. In terms of health and safety, call centre should be treated no differently from any other workplace, however there are clear issues pertaining specifically to call centre work.

Attention should be focused on promoting training and development plans for staff, ensuring the awareness of the relevant legislation and improving communication and consultation between management and employees.

If front line contact is to be a success then call centre staff need the right environment and employment practices, a discontented call centre agent means the organisation will end up with discontented customers.

Definitions

Call Centre

A work environment in which the main business is conducted via the telephone whilst simultaneously using display screen equipment (DSE). This includes parts of the Council dedicated to this activity, such as internal helplines.

Call Handler

An employee whose job requires them to spend a significant proportion of their working time responding to calls on the telephone whilst simultaneously using DSE.

Health and Safety Issues for Call Centre Workers

Working Environment

Proper control of the environment in call centres is very important. Optimal environmental conditions are essential for call handlers' comfort, as call handlers can be sitting at their workstation for long periods of time. Problems with environmental conditions may arise if a building is designed for a specific number of occupants. If allowances are not made for expansion in the workforce or in seasonal variations, then the temperature and relative humidity may become unacceptable.

All workplaces should be ventilated with either fresh air or re-circulated air that has been adequately filtered and purified. It is important that air is filtered frequently, a high concentration of people under continuous occupation increases the risk of germs. Dust levels need to be controlled as it can irritate the throat and lungs, which may contribute to voice loss or trigger

asthma. A thorough cleaning programme can remedy this in conjunction with air filtering to control dust levels. A common problem is the erection of screens, which interrupts airflow leading to pockets of stagnant air. A good turn over of air is also important as call centres have high concentrations of computers, the heat generated by them dries the air.

The high concentration of employees and high level of occupation also increases the risk of uncomfortably high temperatures. Temperatures need to be controlled so that it is neither too hot nor too cold, a reasonable temperature for a call centre would be around 19°C. Thermometers should be provided to monitor the temperature, and where necessary, the provision of fans or heaters should be provided to alleviate localised problems.

Low relative humidity can lead to dehydration, which can contribute to sore eyes, voice loss and rashes. Sore and tired eyes can prompt headaches, as can the dehydrating effects of a low relative humidity.

Good Practice

*Tea and coffee are diuretics so can exacerbate dehydration. Call handlers should be encouraged to drink plenty of water or caffeine free soft drinks instead
Cold drinking water should be provided and be readily accessible.*

Most modern call centres have sealed windows and air conditioning, but access to fresh air is an asset if it can be achieved, plants can also assist in keeping the air humid and providing a more pleasing environment.

Lighting requirements may depend upon whether call handlers are only operating DSE or whether they have to consult and complete paperwork. Suitable and sufficient lighting should be provided, and most people prefer some natural light rather than artificial light.

Call centres should have enough free space to allow people to get to and from workstations and to move within the call centre with ease. The total volume of an empty area divided by the number of people normally working in it should be at least 11 cubic metres.

Display Screen Equipment Working Practices

More detailed information can be found in Display Screen Equipment, Section 3(5) of this manual. Call handlers are DSE users, as they use DSE habitually for most of their working day. Compared to typical office workers, such as administration staff, call handlers may be at risk from DSE related problems, as they usually do not have the same opportunities to take breaks from DSE activities, even if these breaks are a change in task, such as, photocopying or filing.

Hot desking is becoming more common in typical offices but is already standard practice in many call centres.

Good Practice

Each time a user logs on, display a short checklist on screen to prompt them to make appropriate adjustments to any of their workstation equipment as required.

Requirements for Workstations

The importance of appropriate workstation equipment cannot be underestimated. The desk, equipment and chair should be suited to the individuals needs. As call handlers use DSE so intensively, it is essential that workstations be set up correctly at the beginning of each shift before the first call is taken.

The main problems tend to relate to space on the desk. Each desk should also have the necessary reference material and stationary. Personal items should be stored appropriately and should not become trip hazards if placed by the workstation.

Good Practice

Provide individuals with sufficient lockable secure personal storage facilities.

Daily Work Routine

Research has shown that it is widely considered that many call handlers express dissatisfaction with their job as it is monotonous. For some call handlers there may be little scope for variety as greetings and questions may be scripted.

In addition to limited variety, automatic call distribution is in use. As soon as a call has been completed, another call is automatically relayed to the call handler.

If call handlers are allowed to do tasks other than answering calls then job design will improve. Even if the alternative was data processing at the workstation, at least the call handlers would not be under the pressure of dealing with customers. As with data processing, basic administrative tasks are not highly skilled, but they do give call handlers a break from using DSE and enable them to stretch and move around.

Research has shown that managers and team leaders tend to be concerned about absence rates. As a call handlers' job is seen to be monotonous sick leave is often taken as an escape.

Breaks

Breaks do not have to necessarily be rest breaks. They can be changes in activity which enable call handlers to take breaks from such intensive use of DSE whilst simultaneously interacting with customers on the phone.

Employees should be allowed to time to take breaks away from the workstation and telephone. The length of these breaks is important as the frequency to allow staff sufficient time to relax. Focusing at one distance for extended periods can cause eye strain and headaches, especially when under pressure. Frequent breaks of sufficient length would mean that the eyes could focus at different distances and be given a chance to rest. The risk of dulled hearing may also be reduced by giving the ears a break from the headset and giving the voice a break from talking to customers may also reduce the risk of voice loss.

Breaks should be taken before the onset of fatigue rather than to recuperate and short frequent breaks are more satisfactory than occasional longer breaks. It has been recommended that call handlers are scheduled a minimum break of 5 minutes in every hour or 15 minutes in every 2 hours. This can be a change in activity or a rest break, and these breaks so not have to be specified, it is acceptable to schedule a period within which call handlers are free to choose when to take their break when it is convenient to them.

Lunch breaks are in addition to these recommendations, and call handlers must be allowed to go to the toilet and fetch drinks when they need to. Call handlers should also be allowed to take a break after handling a stressful call.

Call handlers should have their break allocation explained to them and understand why it is important to take their breaks.

Training

Within new employees induction training the importance of DSE health and safety should be emphasised. The training must ensure that staff are aware of good working practices and explain how poor working practices can have detrimental effects on physical and mental health, such as, eyestrain and headaches.

Staff should be encouraged to stretch and change position whilst at their workstation, a few simple exercises may help to reduce muscular tension.

Shifts and Security

The majority of call centres operates shift systems. This means that consideration should be given to first aid, refreshments and security to ensure adequate cover. A medical assessment must be undertaken to ensure that call handlers are fit to undertake night work

Verbal Abuse

Call handlers may experience more verbal abuse simply because they spend more time on the telephone. The definition of work-related violence, include verbal abuse (see Section 2(12): Violence at Work). There are no clear criteria as to what constitutes an abusive call, as some call handlers may be less threatened than others. Individuals may also vary over time as to how to cope with these kinds of calls and how long it takes them to recover.

Training call handlers so they are fully competent to take calls from the public is the first step in avoiding abusive calls, this includes training in new products, offers or campaigns.

Training and information may include the following advice:

- Try not to panic or put the receiver down immediately.
- Try not to lose your temper or be tempted to react with a similar response.
- Try not to take the remarks personally or become upset.
- Be patient as the abuse may stop shortly.
- If the caller does not calm down, clearly advise them that unless they are able to continue the discussion in a civil manner, the call will be terminated.
- If the caller is not satisfied with the answers to the questions, offer to pass them to a colleague or supervisor, or take their number and return the call when further investigations have been made.
- If, despite a warning, behaviour does not improve, then terminate the call.
- Take a short break or speak to a colleague or supervisor about the call if this would help.
- All calls of this nature should be logged with the supervisor.
- Listening to the recording of the abusive call with a more experienced colleague or supervisor may help in the identification of alternative ways of dealing with similar calls in the future.

Good Practice

Allow call handlers who have just received an abusive call time to recover and discuss it with a colleague or supervisor.

Customers who have been abusive should have this noted and appropriate warnings placed on the system/files.

Provision of awareness training and information.

Organisational Working Practices

Job Design

Employees satisfaction with their job is determined by a number of factors, such as the amount of task variety, the degree of control over workplace and workload, and the degree of role ambiguity. Such factors are collectively referred to as job design. Poorly designed jobs can lead to dissatisfaction and work-related stress.

Electronic Performance Monitoring

The productivity, in terms of quantity and quality, of call handler's can be assessed in a more objective manner by Electronic Performance Monitoring, this is used as a basis for training, improving customer services and determining performance related pay in some areas.

Quantitative Monitoring

This is the automatic minute by minute collection of quantitative data by the computer. It can include, the percentage of a specified period that a call handler is on the phone, average duration of the calls, average time spent in 'wrap up' after the call. The length of time that call handlers are logged off on breaks is also recorded.

Additional information monitored can also include the length of time that a caller has to wait before their call is answered, and the abandonment rate.

The data yielded from this quantitative monitoring is used to provide statistical information for the individual handler, team and call centre as a whole.

Qualitative Monitoring

Qualitative monitoring normally involves supervisors listening to calls in real times and also from recordings. Monitoring of this nature ensures that call handlers are providing the correct information to the customers.

Specific Health Issues

Work Related Stress

Detailed information can be found in Stress, Section 2(11) of this manual. The HSE definition of work-related stress is the 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. Prolonged or particularly intense stress can lead to physical and psychological ill health.

Working in a call centre is by its very nature stressful, working with the public is recognised as a significant stressor.

Stress is not only destructive in terms of the damage it does to the individual, it can also have consequences for organisations including increased sickness absence, reduced staff morale and performance and increased turnover.

Research has shown that limited task variety and low control over the workplace and workload are characteristics of poor job design. Such jobs offer limited satisfaction and are monotonous which can lead to stress. Although self reported stress is low, physical and behavioural manifestations of stress, such as, headaches and migraines and high absence and turnover rates are common.

The employer should always be encouraged to see stress primarily as a result of the nature of the job rather than the result of an individual's personal make up. Management should look at reducing work place stress by improving working conditions and aspects of the job.

Ideally there should be a built-in system whereby the call handler can control the flow of calls to reduce stress. Every member of staff will have an off day or particularly stressful call and this should be taken into account by allowing staff to control call flow and take breaks.

Noise and Hearing

More detailed information can be found in Noise and Vibration at Work, Section 3(13) of this manual. Although call handlers may occasionally experience high noise levels, these are usually for very short duration. Consequently, even taking these events into consideration, call handlers overall daily personal exposure is unlikely to exceed the first action level in the Noise at Work Regulations 2005.

Generally, if a conversation can be held between two people standing two meters apart without either having to raise their voice, then the background level is acceptable. Ideally, any call centre should have minimal extraneous noise levels and modern, well maintained audio equipment with user volume control.

Special material, often in ceilings can minimise reverberations, and carpet and chairs with soft seats and padded screens between callers are also effective noise absorbers if fitted appropriately.

It is important to minimise background noise wherever possible, the major component being the voices of other call handlers. Noise cancelling microphones filter out the background noise so that only the call handler and caller's voice are heard in the headset. Incorrect positioning of the microphone may also compromise its effectiveness.

All headsets should have the facility to adjust the volume, and call handlers should be given the choice of wearing binaural or monaural headsets.

Headsets should be fully adjustable to allow for a comfortable fit. Headsets should be checked frequently and replaced immediately if necessary. As headsets are worn so intensively there is an increased risk of ear irritation and infection. To reduce the risk of cross infection a pool of headsets should be avoided, and individuals provided with their own, appropriate cleaning materials should also be provided.

Acoustic shock results from a sudden increase in high frequency noise transmitted through the headset. Although call handlers may be startled by the noise, exposure to these unexpected acoustic events should not cause hearing damage.

One practical way of limiting exposure is through headset design. This can be avoided by the use of noise limiters, in which headsets should have automatic sound level cut off controls to prevent freak sound bursts.

It may be appropriate to ensure that new employees do not have an undetected hearing impairment that may be exacerbated with intensive telephone use. Hearing tests will provide baseline data at induction and will provide information should an employee complain about their hearing. It is considered good practice for employers to carry out regular hearing checks on all employees whose daily personal noise exposures equal or exceed 90dB(A).

Voice Loss

Call handlers spend a larger proportion of their working day speaking on the telephone than many employees in typical office jobs

Voice Loss or Dysphonia is not just the inability to speak, but it also includes pain, tension, croakiness, irritative cough, poor or no vocal power and breathing difficulties.

Sore throats tend to be more frequently associated with new call handlers for a short period of time until they have become accustomed to the job. When call handlers have a cold or exhibit any of the features of voice loss, they should, wherever possible be allowed to do other tasks instead of speaking on a telephone.

Good Practice

To reduce the risk of straining the throat, if opening scripts are used, then these should be broken into shorter segments, giving the call handler frequent micro-breaks/

Call handlers should be encouraged to drink water or caffeine free soft drinks to maintain hydration rather than tea and coffee, which are diuretics.

Call handlers should be allowed to drink at their workstations to ensure their throats are adequately lubricated.

Stretching the neck and shoulders relieves tension. These exercises can be done at the workstation, as well as during rest breaks.

The risk of voice problems is greater when suffering from a cold. Assigning staff in these circumstances to tasks which do not involve speaking on the telephone reduces this risk.

Eyes and Eyesight

Refer to Section 3(5). Although intensive use of visual display units (VDU's) can cause temporary effects on vision, there is no evidence to support the widely held belief that using VDU's cause long term eye sight damage.

Permanent eyesight deterioration can usually be explained by normal ageing effects. Employers must provide eyesight tests if an employee defined as a DSE user requests ones. The employer is obliged to pay for 'special corrective appliances' if an eyesight test indicates these are required for VDU work only.

It is vital that VDU users maintain normal blink rates while working. It has been established that when working on-screen individuals blink rate tends to drop and this can cause dry or sore eyes.

Musculoskeletal Disorders

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are identified as a principle risk associated with DSE work. Compared to many typical office workers, the use of the DSE is so intensive and there is less opportunity to take a break. Staff should receive training on all aspects of DSE during induction.

Risk Assessment

The aim of a risk assessment is to help you decide what you need to do to ensure the health and safety of your Call Centre staff. You must record the findings of your risk assessment. You need to record in an action plan anything you identify as being necessary to comply with the law, setting out what you have done, what you are going to do and saying who will be responsible for the work.

Review your risk assessment if circumstances in your workplace change and affect noise exposures. Also review it regularly to make sure that you continue to do all that is reasonably practicable to control the noise risks. Even if it appears that nothing has changed, you should not leave it for more than about two years without checking whether a review is needed. An example of a risk assessment for a call centre can be found at:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/casestudies/callcentre.htm>