

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A call centre may be defined as, “a work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permit customer-employee interaction to occur simultaneously with use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information. This includes parts of companies dedicated to this activity, as well as the whole company”. (Holman, 2003, p. 123)

Over the last ten to 15 years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of call centers internationally, with call centers now forming a significant part of the global economy (Holman, 2003). They are considered to play an important role in most industries today. With the call center business growing internationally and now booming in South Africa, research suggests interest in this area will continue for the next few years (ICMI, 2003). The emergence and significant growth of call centers has resulted in greater research in call center environments. This research aims to contribute to this body of knowledge, especially in the South African context, where the telecommunications market is considered to currently be the largest in Africa. South Africa has more installed call center bases than Spain, North and Republic of Ireland combined, as well as the Scottish and Welsh bases combined (ICMI, 2003).

The aim of this research is to explore the images employees in a call centre environment use to describe performance management. This will be achieved by determining: what images employees use to define performance management; how employees’ feelings about performance management relate to the images used; what similarities and differences exist in the images and definitions used by employees on an individual basis and of employees from different levels within the call centre structure; and how the images and definitions relate to constructs used to define performance management in the literature.

1.2. Rationale

Performance management plays a large role in the functioning of most organisations, even more so in call centres where substantial value is placed on performance measures and performance management as a whole. When it comes to defining it, numerous differing definitions exist within literature according to different authors as to what exactly performance management is. What these authors and their definitions have in common however is that they include one or more of the following eight constructs: control; alignment with organisational strategies; the achievement of overall goals and objectives; rewards; training; development; appraisal and motivation (Fisher, Katz, Miller and Thatcher, 2003; Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2003).

In contemporary organisations that find themselves in a fast paced and competitive global market there are increasing pressures to achieve higher and higher levels of performance (Cartwright, 2003). The increasing drive amongst organisations to reduce costs and improve customer service facilities through the use of computer and telephone based technologies is evident in the phenomenal growth in call centres across the globe in almost every economic sector (Cartwright, 2003). Technology has the ability to be empowering but it can also have negative impacts. It may be seen as being intrusive and controlling in situations whereby it provides organisations with the capability to monitor employee performance even more closely than previously done (Cartwright, 2003). Technology seems to play this role in the call centre environment, allowing for significant monitoring which influences performance management.

The importance of performance management in call centres is evident in the weight assigned to call lengths, quality assurance, response time, time adherence and performance monitoring in its entirety, performance management

was thus deemed a critical and integral part of call centres and thus a worthwhile and valuable area for further exploration. Within call centres, performance monitoring, an aspect of performance management, is considered one of the most prominent and pervasive of all existing practices in call centres. This is achieved using various monitoring systems, including monitoring by supervisors (Holman, 2003). Supervisors thus play a crucial role in the performance management system as they ultimately implement and oversee the necessary performance measurement and management tools. Essentially three levels of employees are involved in the performance management system, it is thus necessary to get the views of the call centre agents, supervisors, and managers who control and determine which methods of performance management are to be employed.

The evaluation of images will be used to explore perceptions of performance management due to the fact that it has been argued that images, more specifically metaphors are able to provide a basis for uncovering perceptions, attitudes and feelings which were previously subconscious or not articulated. Metaphors are considered to imply “a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we see the world generally” (Morgan, 1986, p.12). Metaphors are therefore considered as appropriate in expressing people’s perceptions as they will be able to uncover and convey a wealth of meaning and feelings through one image.

“Mental imagery”, is a phrase referring to the experiences people have when they experience picture-like things, sound-like things and when their experiences have the ability to resemble any of their sensory modalities (Klinger, 1980). Morgan (1986) proposed that organisation is shaped by underlying ideas and images, stating that images and metaphors may be considered to be ways of seeing that allow for the explanation of meaning in a different manner, with the added ability metaphors have to provide frameworks for action.

In the English language the role of images has been acknowledged as being important, with various images having received growing attention. Performance management has also formed an important topic of discussion in the organisational literature and performance management undoubtedly plays a key role in every organisation, especially within the call centre environment where great value is placed on performance. After a review of the existing literature, the current research aims to link these two concepts and evaluate the images employees have of performance management within a call centre environment. In order to achieve this objective, a case study of employees from two call centres in the Johannesburg area was conducted to explore employee perceptions.

The following chapters in this research report will detail the following: a review of literature; the methodology employed in the current research; the results from the case study; a discussion of the results; limitations of the current research; suggestions for future research; and an overall conclusion.