

CHAPTER TWO

PRESENT RESEARCH

1. Rationale

The previous chapter has highlighted various important aspects of call centres. The literature review explored the relationship between organisational climate, which encompassed leadership style, role significance, job characteristics and technological systems within call centres and the impact that these factors have on the social outcomes within the call centre work environment, especially on the call centre agent. Perceptions of organisational climate have been researched in the study and have been found to relate to both wellbeing and life/work satisfaction with respect to call centre agents.

The call centre industry has attracted much negative feedback both in the media and in research. Studies show that contact or call centres perform a range of roles, regarded as tasks with low value, where work is repetitive and intense and call centre operators must work under pressure to keep up with quotas, while having very little influence over their work (Arkin, 1997).

Much work in call centres is technologically governed, making extensive use of technical equipment available, such as computers, telephones, and also using electronic means of performance monitoring. Management and technology control the work environment of the call centre and this establishes in some degree the organisational climate of the call centre.

Working in such an environment can put employees under an enormous amount of stress as monitoring and appraisals are based on how efficiently call centre agents perform their jobs.

Job latitude is deemed to engender a feeling of fulfilment and motivation in employees (Brown, 2005). Furthermore, Korsgaard and Roberson (1995) purported that by having more latitude to make work-related decisions may improve one's feeling of self-worth (Brown, 2005). Call centre agents do not have control over the technology used and in some cases do not have a lot of leeway as to how they perform their job.

Karasek (1979) describes these constraints that employees experience as job control and decision latitude. He proposes that the less power one has to make decisions in one's job, the more negative consequences it will have on the individual. Such negative consequences may manifest itself as a lack of motivation and a decrease in job satisfaction, also these negative consequences may spill-over onto an individual's satisfaction with life, and to a degree on the individual's self-esteem.

The organisation too may be affected in the long-term by encountering absenteeism due to stress related health problems and a high percentage of employee turnover; a common occurrence in call centres. In order to eliminate the negative implications of working in a call centre environment, a more human-centred approach to the design and application of technology and management policies.

This discussion suggests the rationale for the present study. The aims and method of the present study follow.

2. Aims

The main aim of the present study is to measure and describe call centre agent's experience of the organisational climate within a call centre, characterised specifically by their experiences of high demand and low control in the call centre environment. The input variable in the present study is 'organisational climate'. This construct consists of decision latitude, psychological job demands, social support and technology, and is measured using subscales from the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) by Karasek (1985). There are three outcome variables, namely, job satisfaction, which is measured using the General Satisfaction scale developed (Taylor and Bowers, 1972), life satisfaction measured using the standardised Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Pavot and Diener (1993), and self-esteem, which was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1989).

A secondary aim is to ascertain whether or not the organisational climate influences call centre agent's perceptions of their job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem.

3. Approach

The approach of the present study takes the form of a quantitative paradigm. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, and respondents were expected to choose the most appropriate answer from a given set, such as a four-point response

format, for example strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. With the use of appropriate standardised psychological scales, the present study assesses call centre agent's perception and experience of the organisational climate of a call centre and explores the relationship between the call centre's organisational climate and certain psychological dimensions relating to a call centre agent.

4. Research Design and Method

4.1. Research Questions

Question 1: Is the work experienced in call centres characterised by experiences of high demand and low control?

Question 2a: Does organisational climate influence call centre agent's perceptions of their job satisfaction?

Question 2b: Does organisational climate influence call centre agent's perceptions of their life satisfaction?

Question 2c: Does organisational climate influence call centre agent's perceptions of their self-esteem?

4.2. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

A standardised letter (see appendix A) explaining the present research, its aims and the procedure was sent to each prospective organisation. Additionally, the researcher provided assurance that no information identifying the organisations would be published and that no one other than the researcher would have access to results, ensuring confidentiality.

In order to conduct ethical research, permission was required from each of the participating organisations. Once permission was granted the questionnaires were sent to each of the four participating organisations for call centre agents to complete. In total, two-hundred and eighty questionnaires were sent out to the participating organisations. Participation in the research and answering the questionnaire was voluntary. Clear instructions were given with the request to answer accurately and honestly.

Anonymity and confidentiality was assured, as participants were notified that they were not required to state their name or identify themselves in any way. Furthermore, participants were informed that participation in the research study was voluntary; but that completed and returned questionnaires would be taken as an indication of the participants consent to take part in the present research.

Each organisation was provided approximately eight weeks in which to complete the questionnaires. At the end of this period all completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher.

4.2 a) Sampling Method

A non-probability, convenience sampling method was used to obtain call centre agents from four South African organisations who use or have call centres as part of their organisation.

4.2 b) Sample

As the research examined call centre agents, the only selection criterion was that the participants were employed as call centre agents. A sample of two-hundred and nineteen (N=219) call centre agents completed and returned the questionnaires. Therefore, the response rate for the present study was 78%.

4.2 c) Description of the Sample

The sample consisted of call centre agents from four South African call centre organisations. The demographic information is as follows: ages of participants ranged from 18 years old to 54 years of age, with a mean age of employees who participated in the present study being 25 years old.

Of the four call centres used in the research, the sample consisted of 136 (62.10%) from the Banking Industry, 48 (21.92%) from the Insurance Industry and 35 (15.98%) from the Travel Industry.

As participation was voluntary it was not possible to control for an equal gender ratio. There was a gender split of 87 (44.16%) males and 110 (55.84%) females. The sample consisted of 54 (25.23%) black call centre agents, 59 (27.57%) white call centre agents, 91 (42.52%) coloured call centre agents and 10 (4.67%) Indian call centre agents. Additionally, from the total sample 77.84% were single, and 76.71% of the sample had completed high school.

55.25% of the call centre agents who participated in the study had worked for less than one year, with the mean tenure in all organisations being 16 months, or an average of 1 year and 4 months, the longest being employed for 7 years and the shortest only 3 days.

Table one in Appendix B outlines the frequencies with corresponding percentages for each of the demographic variables measured.

4.2 c) Design

Kerlinger (1986) defines non-experimental studies as an empirical investigation wherein the “researcher does not have direct control over independent variables” (p348). The present study is cross-sectional, as the measure occurred at one point in time (as cited in Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991). Thus, the present study is a non-experimental, cross-sectional, ex-post facto design, as the researcher had no control over the participants taking part in the research or the experiences of interest (the treatment).

4.2 d) Data Gathering

The data for the present study was collected by means of a questionnaire that was completed by volunteers at each of the four organisations.

5. Instruments

Respondents were required to complete a six page questionnaire (see Appendix C) comprising a demographic information section and four psychological scales, which was used to collect the data on scalar dimensions for the present study. The four scales were

selected as they were deemed most appropriate to attempt to answer the aims of the study.

5.1 a) Demographic Information

A covering letter accompanied each questionnaire explaining the aims and focus of the research. The demographic information section accompanied the questionnaire as a way of describing the sample. The demographic information was used to obtain biographical information for each of the participants and includes the age, gender, race and marital status of the participant. Additionally, participants were requested to provide information on their educational level, the type of business they work for, their job title and their tenure within the job.

Such information is necessary, because all these characteristics may influence the call centre agent's perception of the organisational climate, their job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem. Furthermore, one may group call centre agents according to similar biographical information, allowing one to make assumptions pertinent to a particular sample.

5.1 b) Level of Employee Performance Monitoring

Call centres typically use some form of employee monitoring, thus obtaining a description of the different monitoring systems used within the four organisations is necessary and provides valuable insight into the organisational climate, from the degree of control over call centre agents to their decision latitude.

Information on the monitoring methods used in the call centres was obtained from the four call centre managers. Six open-ended questions were asked in an attempt to describe the monitoring equipment used. That is, to describe what is recorded and how the information is reported, as well as frequency of the reports generated, what the information is used for and how the information obtained is conveyed back to the agents.

5.1 c) The Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ)

The JCQ is a self-report instrument focussing on the psychological and social structure of the work situation (Karasek, 1985 as cited in Sprigg et al., 2003). The items on decision latitude, psychological demands and social support measure Karasek's (1985) high demand/low control model of job strain (Sprigg et al., 2003). The scale is measured on a 4-point Likert scale, progressing from: 1=strongly disagree, through to 4=strongly agree.

According to results from Gimeno, Benavides, Mira, Martinez and Benach (2004), psychological demands measured by the JCQ reflected the actual psychosocial work environment. Karasek, Brisson, Kawakami, Houtman, Bongers and Amick (1998) purport that the JCQ can be used as a measure of work quality to test various hypotheses and assumptions, such as job satisfaction, job-related illness or psychological distress.

Escriba-Aguir, Mas Pons and Flores Reus (2001) reported Cronbach's alpha for the reduced version of the JCQ was between .74 and .88.

For the purposes of the present study, it is important to define the various constructs used.

The two subscales: skill discretion (six items) and decision authority (three items), make up the nine-item scale: decision latitude. Skill discretion has been defined as ‘task variety’, while decision authority is defined as ‘social authority over making decisions’ or ‘autonomy’ (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). A representative item in the skills discretion subscale is ‘I have an opportunity to develop my own special abilities’, and for the decision authority subscale is ‘my job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own’. Literature refers to the overall decision latitude scale as being a measure of job control (Sale and Kerr, 2001). A high score on this scale represents a high level of decision latitude or job control

The psychological job demands scale in the Job Content Questionnaire is defined as how intensely a person works (Karasek and Theorell, 1990, p63, as cited in Sale and Kerr, 2001). ‘My job requires working very hard’ is an illustration of the kind of items presented in this subscale. The items on the psychological job demands scale are purported to measure a worker’s mental stimulation needed to accomplish their job tasks. Additionally, Karasek and Theorell (1990) suggested that the ‘task requirements’ and the ‘workload’ are the key components of psychological job demands for the majority of workers (Sale and Kerr, 2001). A high score in this scale indicates a high level of psychological job demand.

5.1 d) Job Satisfaction Scale

A General Satisfaction scale developed by Taylor and Bowers (1972) was utilised to ascertain call centre agent’s job satisfaction. The general satisfaction scale is a measure

that assesses the job as a whole, as opposed to particular job characteristics (Mortimer and Lorence, 1995). It is a 7-item scale, based on satisfaction with workgroup, with one's supervisor, with one's job, with the firm as a whole, with one's pay as well as prospects for advancement. One item outlines each of the first five of the dimensions and two items describe the sixth feature.

Respondents were required to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, progressing from 1 to 5, where 1=very dissatisfied and 5=very satisfied. The internal consistency reflects a coefficient alpha of .87. A sample item from this scale is 'all in all, how satisfied are you with your job?' with a high score indicating general satisfaction with one's job.

5.1 e) Life Satisfaction Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is a 5-item instrument designed to measure the global cognitive beliefs of one's life. 'So far I have gotten the important things I want in life' is a representative item from the scale. Respondents answered the scale on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree. A person who scores between 35 - 31 is extremely satisfied, whereas a person with a score of 5 - 9 is extremely dissatisfied with their life (Pavot and Diener, 1993).

The SWLS has favourable psychometric properties, including high temporal reliability. The SWLS is appropriate for use with different age groups (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, 1985). Furthermore, normative data have been presented for the scale, demonstrating good convergent validity with other scales and with other types of

assessments of subjective well-being (Pavot and Diener, 1993).

5.1 f) Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely-used self-esteem measure in social science research (Rosenberg, 1989). The original sample for which the scale was developed in the 1960s consisted of 5,024 high school learners from 10 randomly selected schools in New York in the United States of America. The scale has high reliability: test-retest correlations are typically in the range of .82 to .88, and Cronbach's alpha for various samples are in the range of .77 to .88 (Blascovich and Tomaka, 1993 and Rosenberg, 1986).

Studies have demonstrated both a uni-dimensional and a two-factor (self-confidence and self-deprecation) structure to the scale.

The SES is a 10-item questionnaire and is answered on a 4-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. 'I take a positive attitude toward myself' illustrates the type of questions asked in the SES. The scale ranges from 0-30, with 30 indicating the highest score possible (Rosenberg, 1989).

6. Analytical Procedures

A quantitative method was used to collect the data in order to answer the research questions of the present study. This data was analysed using the SAS statistical package to carry out the various statistical analyses, namely, internal reliabilities of the four

scales, descriptive statistics and correlations, and will be presented next.

The scales were scored and reverse scored according to the guidelines set out by Karasek (1985) for the Job Content Questionnaire, Taylor and Bowers (1972) for the General Satisfaction Scale, Pavot and Diener (1993) for the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and Rosenberg (1989) for the Self-Esteem Scale.

6. 1. Internal Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency is the term used to describe the homogeneity of the items within a measurement (Welman and Kruger, 2001; Sale and Kerr, 2001). In addition, internal consistency examines the intercorrelations between the scale items (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2001).

The present study utilised Cronbach's alphas to measure the internal consistencies of the subscales drawn on to measure the constructs of interest. The results showed acceptable reliabilities, and are represented in table one shown below.

TABLE 1: INTERNAL RELIABILITIES

	<u>CRONBACH COEFFICIENT ALPHAS</u>
<u>JCQ</u>	
DECISION LATITUDE	0.77
PSYCHOLOGICAL JOB DEMANDS	0.87
SOCIAL SUPPORT	0.95
ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE WITH TECHNOLOGY SUBSCALE	0.88
<u>TAYLOR AND BOWERS</u>	
GENERAL LIFE SATISFACTION	0.81
<u>PAVOT AND DIENER</u>	
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE	0.82
<u>ROSENBERG</u>	
SELF-ESTEEM	0.77

6. 2. Descriptive Statistics

Welman and Kruger (2001), define descriptive statistics as relating to the depiction of the data obtained for a grouping of individual units of analysis (p208). Descriptive statistics were run on the dataset as a means of describing the data (Howell, 1999). In this way, the researcher may be able to draw inferences about the population, based on the sample.

6. 3. Correlations

Correlation refers to the association between two variables (Welman and Kruger, 2001). The present study correlated the independent variables that make up the construct organisational climate, namely, decision latitude, psychological job demands, social support and technology, with the dependent variables, namely, job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem, in an attempt to determine if there is any association between the various constructs. A correlation analysis is used to show whether any

association exists between any of the variables, and if so, the degree to which these variables are related. The correlation coefficient ranges between -1 and +1, and the closer to either of these limits, the stronger the relationship between the variables (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2001). The present study used Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) to determine the degree of association between the variables (Howell, 1999). A positive correlation coefficient reflects a direct or positive relationship between two variables. Conversely, a negative correlation coefficient indicates that as one variable increases the other decreases and vice versa (Howell, 1999).