

Call centres in a co-ordinated economy: Flexible skill, skilled flexibility

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1 Introduction

Telephone call centres represent the less skilled and externally flexible segment of ICT-based work. They are frequently cited as an exemplary case for neo-Taylorist standardisation and automation of service work, where tasks are simplified and de-skilled and jobs poorly paid and insecure. This pattern traditionally is gendered, casting ICT-based de-skilled work as women's work and women's skills as personality traits. Yet empirical findings suggest that call centres do not simply re-enact a Taylorist logic of rationalisation. Call centres embody both a logic of standardisation and a logic of service quality and customer orientation, in which rationalisation is both enhanced and limited by the flexibility and indeterminacy of communications, and by companies exploring the possibilities of that flexibility.

This ambiguous logic concerns the issue of skill as well. Especially in a co-ordinated economy such as Germany, call centres draw on occupational training structures in specifically flexible ways. The paper draws on on a previous study by the author of call centres in Germany which was based on case studies and an employee survey (Arzbächer et al. 2002; Holtgrewe 2005), and on a current representative management survey of employment practices and human resource management in call centres.

Establishing call centres, companies often move out of institutionalised training and career patterns, and discover new workforces. Personnel managers in call centres regard employees' previous certi-

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fied skills as not particularly relevant. A statement of a personnel manager in banking is typical of the changing meaning of both training and skill:

„Qualification comes second, first we need the enthusiasm. The knowledge and all the rest we do internally and then we make this person a very, very tiny, slimmed-down banker“ (Manager Personnel, Bank3).

Yet call centre workforces in Germany are not unskilled and bring formal qualifications in service and clerical occupations to the job. On the other hand, call centres themselves invest considerable amounts in the training and coaching of their workforce. The argument thus is that call centres as specifically flexible organisations or parts of organisations play a part in the restructuring of skill in a flexible and marketised economy and society. Skill is becoming individualised and recast in terms of personality traits on the one hand, in terms of ongoing achievements, assessments and evaluations along the lines of employability on the other.

2 Call centres as specifically flexible organisations

From an organisational perspective the establishment of call centres is part of organisational strategies to comprehensively design their relations and communications with customers. Call centres are boundary-spanning units, i. e. units that specialise in communicating with an organisation's environment. Customers or clients are a strategically central environment for any organisation. At the boundary or “on the frontline” (Frenkel et al. 1999), agents process the needs and demands of customers and articulate them with a company's offerings. This is not a neutral translation activity. The very point of selling and marketing strategies is to influence customers' demands and preferences to fit with products and services of the company. Here, connections between information and communication technology are used to both standardise and diversify products and services, to flexibly bundle and segment customer groups (Batt 2000), to gather information and influence customers to co-operate with the organisation. All of these functions tie in with one another, and it is part of call centre agents' work to enact these functions.

This boundary-spanning function is the reason why call centres cannot follow an unambiguously (neo-)Taylorist logic of rationalisation. Such a logic is counter-balanced by the logic of organisational flexibility. In interacting with customers, organisations need the capacity to react to market and customer changes. At the boundaries of organisations this balancing act takes place both in management and in everyday work (Frenkel et al. 1999; Korczynski 2002; Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002).

3 Skill in a co-ordinated economy

Call centres thus embody flexible, market-oriented organisations. They require a specific flexibility from their employees, and these requirements often are met through non-standard employment patterns. With this and with their newness in the employment system they represent a departure from the established German system of vocational training. Still, they utilise the skills employees have acquired in that system.

In Germany, clerical and service occupations are to a large extent included in the densely regulated dual system of occupational training. Here, institutionalised apprenticeships combine school and workplace training. Training for clerical and secretarial skills also takes place in upper secondary schools with an occupational rather than academic focus (Krüger 2003), in which case formal qualifications are regulated by the chambers of commerce. Women participate in the “dual system” (to a lesser extent than men), but tend to be concentrated in clerical and service occupations (Rabe-Kleberg 1993; Dorsch-Schweizer 2004).

The dual system in Germany is generally regarded as an integral part of the co-ordinated economy. Employers, unions and the state are involved in the developments of curricula and standards for dual systems occupations. With its focus on occupations (“Berufe”) it encourages early specialisation and – together with income-based unemployment benefits² – stable occupation-based careers and limited occupation-based mobility patterns (Estevez-Abe 2001; Gangl 2004). However, the dual system in itself is gendered. Welfare state guarantees of human capital investments apply to workers with continuous employment histories only, and on the other hand, childcare provision in Germany tends to force women into discontinuous careers when they have children. Thus it is often occupationally trained women whose skills become devalued on the labour market by the likelihood or the actuality of career interruptions and by limitations on their working times. The interaction of the welfare state and the labour market thus tends to devalue women’s skills especially in clerical occupations, and cultural perceptions confound skills with naturally feminine traits (cf. Belt 2002). Thus, skilled women represent a traditional source of ‘downwardly elastic’ flexibility in a ‘male breadwinner’ gender regime and this flexibility goes beyond purely numerical flexibility (Flecker 2000). Going one step further, we might argue that the skill- and internal-labour-market-based German employment regime is based on an unequal distribution of employment risk among women and men (Smith/Gottfried 1998), and we shall see that call centres draw on these gendered capacities for labour market flexibility.

² Last year's labour market reforms (known as the Hartz IV laws after the chairman of the expert commission that designed the reform) limit income-based unemployment benefits to a year in most cases. It remains to be seen how that limitation of occupation protection affects the labour market and human capital investments in Germany.

4 Skill structure in German call centres

When we started our research into German call centres (Gundtoft/Holtgrewe 2000) we expected call centres to continue the pattern of women's enforced downward mobility that is familiar from Taylorised clerical work (Gottschall et al. 1985; Baethge/Oberbeck 1986; Webster 1996). Call centres appeared to be likely to hire skilled women part-timers for not-very-skilled jobs. Yet call centres represent a re-engineering of skill in comparison to both the occupation-based German labour market and the gendered pattern of de-skilling. For recruitment, they rely on tests of interpersonal and communicative skills rather than training certificates, and subsequently offer extensive training to new CSRs internally (cf. Thompson et al. 2000).

However, the educational level of customer service representatives in our current survey³ supports the view that the call centre labour force in Germany is “not-unskilled” (Gundtoft/Holtgrewe 2000; Bittner et al. 2002; Kerst/Holtgrewe 2003). On average in the surveyed call centres, managers reported that 62.4 % of their “typical” CSRs have a lower secondary education certificate (*Haupt- or Realschulabschluss*), 39.6 % have a higher secondary education certificate (*Abitur*). The majority, an average 75.3% of “typical agents” have completed occupational training in the German dual system, mostly in combination with lower secondary education. 12.6% are reported to have a *Fachschulabschluss*, i. e. a school-based occupational certificate.⁴ 10.4% of CSRs on average have college degrees and another 9.5% are students – which confirms that the German call centre industry provides some entry positions for recent graduates of which we do not know if they are going to be transitory (cf. Kerst/Holtgrewe 2003).⁵ (Figure 1).

Call centres are indeed a women's industry, and in Germany, the use of part-time work is their dominant strategy for creating flexible work arrangements. On average, 71,7% of all agents are women and 42.8% of CSRs in the call centres work part-time. Predictably, women's share of part-time work is even higher at 84%, so that women part-timers make up 36% of the agent workforce. They work an average of 22.1 hours per week – a little more than half the hours of full-time workers in the sec-

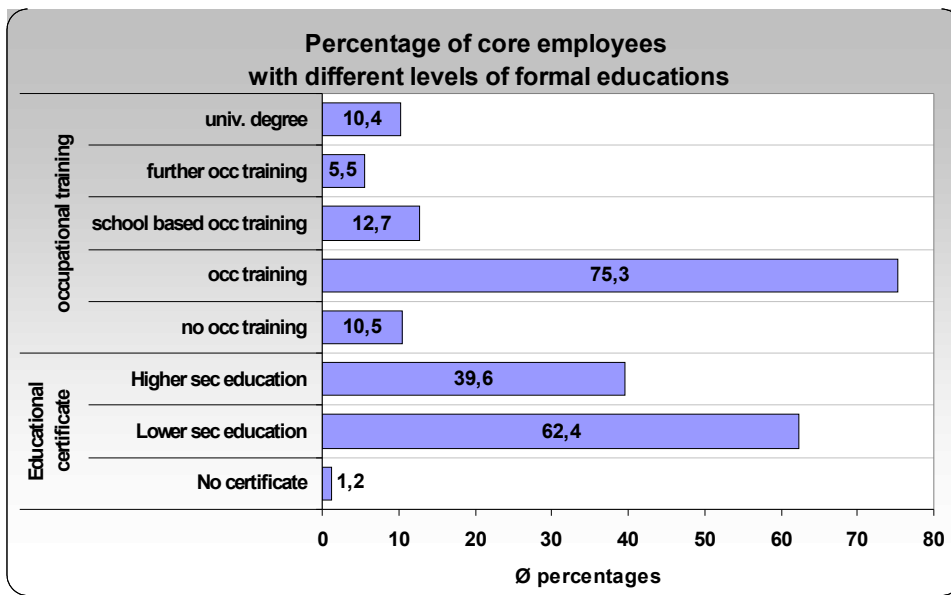
³ These findings are based on a standardised survey administered by phone to managers of 300 telephone call centres which were randomly sampled from a database of 2,700 German call centres. This database was compiled by the German GCC project. The project used databases of regional development agencies in 8 German *Bundesländer*, plus internet-based membership lists of call centre and marketing initiatives, and added the database of the previous, trade union-funded SOCA project which ran a previous call centre survey. These databases were combined, cleaned and brought up to date. The response rate was 51.3 % (n = 154).

⁴ This in Germany is common especially in the sectors of health and social services and with some clerical occupations.

⁵ 5 call centres reported that more than 50% of agents had degrees. These were found in marketing, technical sales, a consultancy and two media call centres. Professional services thus are not strongly represented in the sample.

tor. Women tend to be slightly higher represented in call centres where most agents have lower secondary education.

Figure 1: Percentage of core employees with different levels of formal education



While call centres obviously rely on individuals who have formal educational and occupational qualifications, recruitment is only formalised to a limited extent: 53.9% of call centres do not use any systematic selection tests while 34.2 % hire all their core employees in a systematic way. The percentage of applicants who are actually hired averages 22.3%⁶, although half the call centres hire less than 10% of applicants.

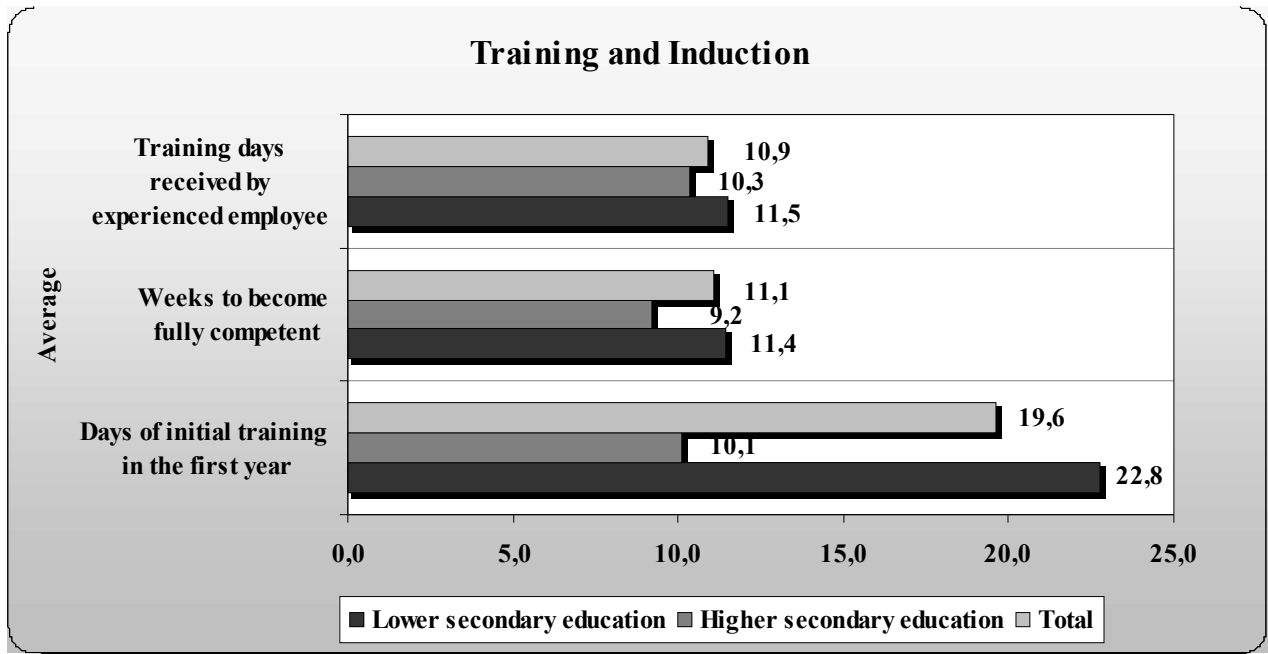
Although call centres hire not-unskilled workforces, they invest considerable time and money into internal training (Figure 2), even if the degree of company-specific training in call centres does not really support the view of a general high-road profile of call centres in Germany. The average initial training period of call centre agents is 19.6 days, with a median of 12 days, and it takes employees an average 11.1 weeks to become fully competent in their jobs. Experienced employees receive another 10.9 days of formal training per year. The focus is chiefly on new product and service information, where 77.3% of call centres have “a lot” or “a great deal” of training. Soft skills play a minor part: Team building skills are emphasised in this way in 22.9% of call centres, and stress management is trained to a larger extent in only 15.6% of call centres.

All of this suggests a specific interpretation of the manager's statement we quoted in the beginning: Call centres focus training on product and service information and leave the required interpersonal skills and coping skills mostly to agents' individual resources – a familiar finding internationally

⁶ Incidentally, the use of selection tests correlates significantly and positively with the percentage of applicants hired.

(Frenkel et al. 1999; Thompson/Callaghan 2002; Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002; Korczynski 2003). All in all, call centres spend an average € 4,505.62 on the screening, recruiting and training of new employees.

Figure 2: Training and Induction



The question thus is how the recruitment of people with previous vocational training or general education affects company-specific training, and working conditions. The proportion of agents with vocational training does not significantly affect company-specific time and cost. However, the level of general education does: Call centres reporting a higher educational level of their employees offer less company-specific training.

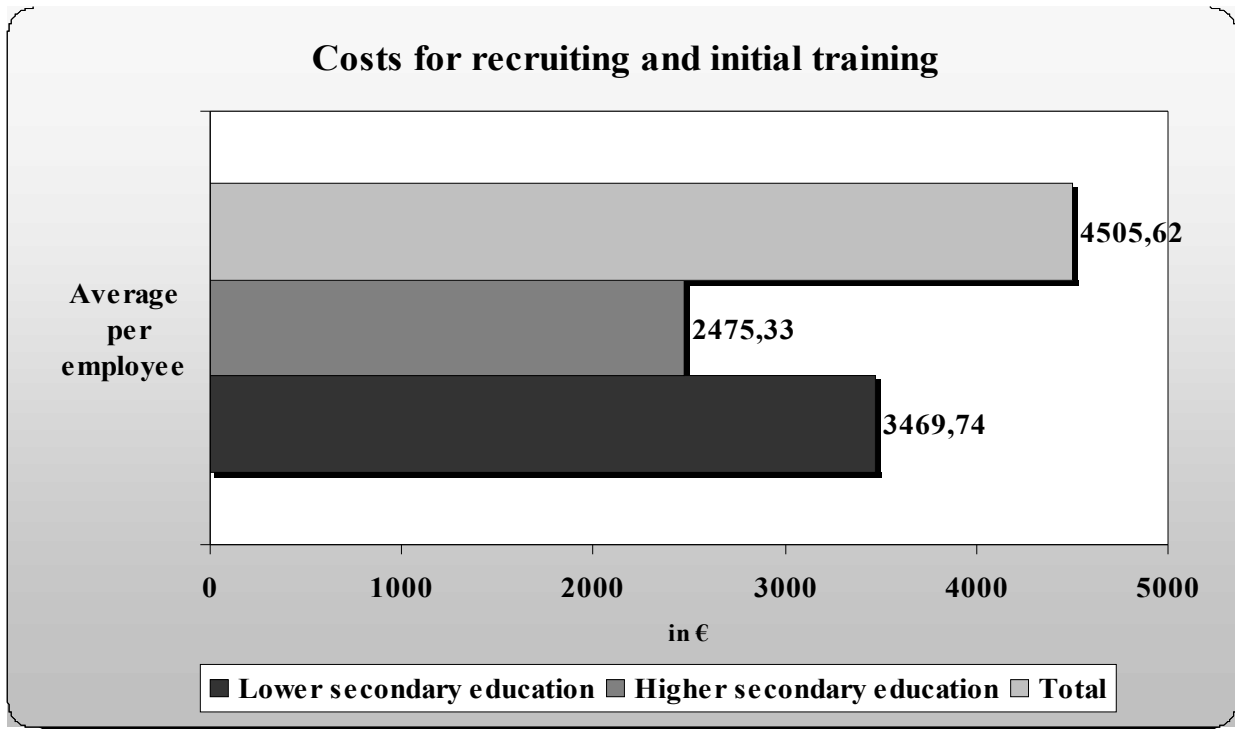
In call centres where the majority of core employees has a higher secondary education, agents get only an average 10 days of training in the first year. If the typical educational level of agents is lower, the average number of training days goes up to 22 days.

Consequently, the cost for recruiting and initial training is lower in call centres with a majority of higher educated agents with 2475,33€ compared with the 3469,74€ in call centres with lower educated agents (Figure 3). There is also less average time needed before agents become fully competent if the educational level of most of the agents is higher (11.4 weeks and 9.2 weeks). Recourse on general rather than vocational education thus lowers the training needs in call centres, while vocational training does not qualify agents for specifically skilled tasks.

Indeed, there is some evidence that agents' lower or higher education levels are connected to different tasks. The average duration of a call, which we take as an indicator for the complexity of work, is the lower, the more both workers with occupational training and women are working in the call

centre. In contrast, in call centres with high proportions of students the average call duration is significantly higher. Discretion at work⁷ increases significantly with the proportion of agents who are graduates.

Figure 3: Cost for recruiting and training



The relationship of formal and company specific qualification with compensation is to some extent vague. Educational and vocational training level below university degrees do not make a difference for average hourly wages. Neither does the proportion of women. Wages are related to the time it takes for a worker to become proficient. The longer it takes, the more she earns. There is also a correlation between the training received and the proportions of workers that are promoted inside the call centre.

In terms of vocational training in the dual system, call centres thus appear as a veritable black hole. Workers cannot convert their skills into claims to remuneration or complex and interesting work. Only some tertiary education makes a difference here. Higher secondary education saves training effort for the companies but does not increase wages. The de-skilling mechanism that is familiar for skilled women returning to work applies to the general, but predominantly female workforce in this field, and general education makes more of a difference than vocational training.

⁷ We asked for managers' estimation of agents' discretion in terms of working procedures, daily work tasks, what to say, speed, breaks, handling unusual requests and workplace design on a 5-point scale. Here we report findings for an index of these items.

5 The institutionalisation of call centre skills

Apart from company-specific training, specific training courses for call centres work have been developed with the expansion of call centres, but CSR skills have only punctually been integrated into vocational training for clerical occupations. There are some co-operations of large call centres with vocational schools that offer apprentices in clerical occupations additional training modules in call centre work or customer orientation (ecmc 2003).

But mostly, call centre training represents a departure from established definitions of qualifications. The development of curricula and certificates was a part of regional development efforts in countries (*Bundesländer*) that were hoping to create new employment through the attraction of call centres. For example Northrhine-Westphalia started a governmental programme called 'Call Center Offensive' in 1997 and other *Bundesländer* soon followed suit (Arzbächer et al. 2002; Arnold/Ptaszek 2003). The training centre of the Chamber of Commerce in Düsseldorf in co-operation with local call centre representatives developed an initial curriculum for a six-week-training course for potential call centre agents in 1997, which was to lead to a chamber of commerce certificate.

On the basis of this curriculum the Call Centre Academy North Rhine-Westphalia (CCA) was founded to disseminate the curriculum to training institutions all over North Rhine-Westphalia and beyond. The curriculum presented a loose, modular framework which lent itself to diverse forms and modes of delivery of courses. It left space for diverse specialisations in terms of industries and participants (such as disabled people or women returning to work), and occasionally, training courses were offered for specific location projects. There are full-time courses, part-time and online courses available. Normally courses take 240 hours with modules such as „data processing“, „modern service work“, „communication competencies“ and a period of training on the job in co-operating call centres. The development of the standard was not restricted to Northrhine-Westphalia. The national Chamber of Commerce (*Deutscher Industrie- und Handelstag, DIHT*) adopted the curriculum and offered it to the training centres of its member chambers. A distinct feature of the North Rhine-Westphalian CCA has been the attempt to evaluate the transformation of the curriculum into course schemes. Probably the balance of standardization and flexibility contributed to the success of the CCA in achieving comparable training standards across the country.

In the beginning, the conception of these certified training courses took place in closely networked relationships between job centres, local training centres and companies establishing call centres. With their limited scope and openness towards specific location projects rather than a general upgrading of skills, they fit into a post-welfarist management of labour-market policy and general employability (cf. Larner 2002 for New Zealand) which does not concern itself with the quality and

sustainability of the jobs that are created. Meanwhile, since the NRW Call centre Academy's activities ended in 2003, the training courses have been taken over by private-sector training companies rather than the IHK's own training institutions. Also, call centres themselves, especially large, independent subcontractors, have expanded their activities to offer training courses. They pursue a strategy of marketing their own, internal training capabilities.⁸ Call centres and training companies are offering courses not only to the unemployed but to a relatively unspecified public which could include staff or managers of other call centres, or people with vocational backgrounds not related to call centres who are interested in further education in that field. One aim of call centres branching out into training may also be to extend their own pool of potential workers and while externalising the cost of training if possible.

While the CCA emphasises the success of the earlier training courses, which in Northrhine-Westphalia guided 70% of participants into call centre jobs (ecmc 2003), managers are not overly enthusiastic. Especially in higher quality call centres such as banking call centres, personnel managers saw an over-emphasis on script use in the training courses at the expense of flexibility, and did not think the courses could replace internal training or make a difference (Arzbächer et al. 2002). Apparently, training courses have more of a function at the lower end of the labour market. In our 2004 survey, managers reported that an average 9.8% of agents had taken part in publicly funded training courses. In independent service call centres, the proportion increased to 15.8%. In East Germany, the proportion is notably higher: here almost a quarter of agents (24.4%) had participated in publicly funded training.

Interestingly, in our sample the proportion of training course participants correlates significantly (at the 95% level) with the proportion of women and the proportion of agents with lower secondary education.⁹ - and it correlates inversely with the hourly wages¹⁰. There is thus evidence that these courses guide women and lower-educated workers (who, as we have seen, often have vocational training) on adversarial labour markets into lower-paid call centre jobs.

⁸ However, this strategy is not pursued throughout the industry, which points to an interesting dilemma of knowledge generation and commodification. Managers in one of the largest independent call centre companies in Germany told us that, different from their competitors, they kept their own internal "academy" deliberately internal. For reasons of competitive advantage, this company was reluctant to publish or market its own knowledge base in the form of training or consulting activities.

⁹ With a Person's r of .212 and .230 respectively.

¹⁰ Pearson's r -.205.

6 Conclusions

Call centres in Germany hire a predominantly skilled workforce, and the companies' re-engineering of skill is still based on workers' previous qualifications and experience. Prior qualifications do not disappear and can still be utilised, but they are both devalued and rendered invisible. Especially vocational training in the dual system loses its significance. Occasionally it is mentioned as a hiring criterion but it does not confer claims to specifically skilled and recognised work. The new semantics of personality resemble the old one of feminine talents in this aspect of invisibility – but it renders selection criteria more individualised. The long-term career and mobility promises of a regulated training system based on industry-specific skills (Estevez-Abe et al. 2001) have traditionally been gendered (Smith/Gottfried 1998), and women have had to accept some downwards mobility. This mechanism now applies to the general workforce in call centres which consists of women part-timers, new entrants to the labour market and people with generally discontinuous careers (Kerst/Holtgrewe 2003).

Qualification in call centres (and probably other fields of the knowledge economy, cf. Thompson et al. 2000) is de-institutionalised and turned into portfolios of firm-specific, short-term skills and ascribed personality traits. The training of call centre specific skills has been established by a post-welfarist network of job centres, chambers of commerce and new intermediaries (cf. Benner 2003), which in contrast to the dual system mostly excludes trade unions. After a 'soft' standard and certification had been established, private sector training companies and call centres themselves took over training according to this standard.

While the gender implications for this skill regime are less predictable than those of the dual system, so far women do not appear to profit from specialised call centre training in the sense of gaining additional access to well-paying and "good" jobs. Although such training in the case of the unemployed or of people in rehabilitation is still funded publicly, so far there is no evidence of it contributing to a 'high road' of call centre development which would combine skilled workforces, skilled work and quality-oriented services.

Hence in call centres we observe the "construction of flexibility" (Arzbächer et al. 2002) on multiple levels. Institutionally, call centres are established outside of traditional collective agreements, regulations and traditional HRM policies, and they keep their training and HRM activities well within the private sector. Workforces and human resource practices are recombined, and temporal and interactive flexibility is managed on an everyday level. This comprehensive flexibility addresses the social construction of skill as well, flexibly articulating "old" and "new" patterns of flexibility in ways which do not appear to be much in the interest of workers.

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