Towards an understanding of strategies employed by Call Centre Agents for coping with work related stress: focus on GBC, Durban
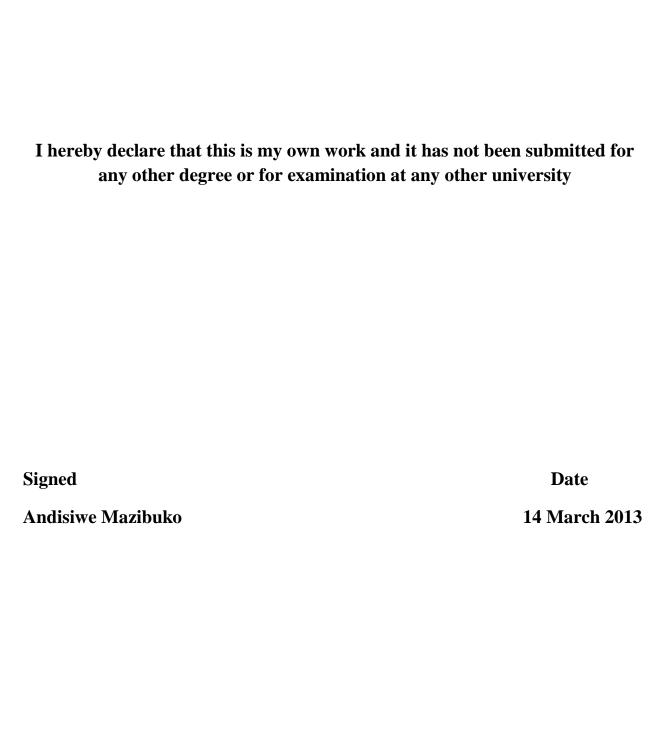

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I hereby declare that this is my own work and it has not been submitted for any other degree or for examination at any other university

Signed   **Date**

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Acknowledgements

Objective Summary

This is a study conducted in a telecommunications call centre called the Greater Brand Company; located in KwaZulu Natal, in a suburb North of Durban. I conducted fieldwork for a complete year whilst working full time in the call centre. Although the call centre had over 400 call centre agents employed at the Durban branch, I had access to 121 agents who worked a similar shift as me. The experiences of these agents are brought to life through this piece of research. The Great Branding Company (pseudonym) is an inbound call centre, which means it handles incoming calls and offers customer service to these callers. It has been argued that "since their appearance on the scene in the early 1990s, call centres have become the most important single source of customer contact in the developed information economies. They have also become huge employment generators, with jobs numbering in the millions" (Rusell, 2008: 01). The call centre industry is growing globally and South Africa is in line with this growth. The nature of the work is also very fast paced and challenging, yet monotonous, for the faceless employees who are working in this environment. The research aims to bring an understanding of these challenges and offer insight into the activities that agents engage in as ways to cope with their jobs.

I carefully chose research methodologies that I believed were going to add value to the research. Writing from the emic perspective offers an opportunity to be able to be part of the study and share my views with very little inhibitions and thus offering a richer ethnography. My research was conducted using purely qualitative research tools because it examines the lives of the call centre agents and there is no better way to showcase this than through qualitative research.

Participant observation being the key tool that I used to gain information in true Anthropology style. Being a participating observer did not mean I was devoid of barriers to entry; it did however put me at an advantage to gain better rapport amongst the research participants who considered me to be one of their own. In supplementing participant observation I also used focused groups, unstructured interviews and semi structured interviews for those questions that required greater probing. The combination of all these research methodologies allowed me an opportunity to gain a greater understanding into the lives of agents and thus write some detailed ethnographic chapters.

The study adds to the field of Industrial Anthropology and hopes to spark a greater interest into this field thereby creating a platform for more researchers to conduct studies on call centre employment in the South African context.

Key words: call centre, telecommunications, South Africa, call centre agents, coping strategies

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<u>Glossary</u>

ACD: Automatic call distributor refers to the routing of calls to the agents

Agent: This is a shortened version of the call centre agent

AHT: Average handling time refers to how long each agent takes on a call.

Chunklines: Toll free number for the GBC call centre which is dialed by the customers

Compliance: This refers to the measure of whether agents sign in on time or not

CTI: Computer telephone integration computer system allows a caller to be identified and the call to be correctly routed

Downtime: Refers to any time spent idle due to system failure or unavailability of a workstation.

Go live: Means taking calls without any assistance

High band customers: Customers who spend more money in the call centre and therefore their calls are answered first to avoid them taking their business elsewhere

Huntline: This refers to the language that an agent is assigned to

IVR: Interactive Voice Response refers to the pre-recorded voice that the customers will hear when they call in

Low band customer: There are a number of astrix next to the customer's number whether they were low or high band customers

Low band customers: Customers who do not spend much money in the call centre and therefore their calls are answered last

Network congestion: This is caused when too many customers all call at the same time. The network which permits customers to make calls gets congested and automatically cuts other customers from making calls

Newbie: A new person in the call centre

On the floor: This refers to agents who are taking calls on the system

PABX: Private automatic branch exchange

Pull the call: Choosing a call that will be evaluated for quality scoring

Quality: adhering to the GBC standards of answering the customer call

Buddying: This is to sit next to a particular or experienced agent and watch everything they do. This may also include the experienced agent allowing the agent in training to take calls on his or her own

Trial calls: These are calls taken on the 4th week of training when the agents are practicing taking calls

USB: Universal Serial Bus refers to the plugging of another device into the computer

USD: (acronym unknown) This refers to the system that allows agents to report a system failure

A common stereotype regarding call centre work is that managing phone based customer interactions all day is neither complicated nor demanding as most interactions are basic, simple and scripted. This Stereotype however is not corroborated by recent research (Wegge et al, 2009:01)

Chapter One: Introduction:

1. Background

Services through call centres are very common in current times, as many businesses make use of them, with the main task of call centres being to "communicate with customers via integrated telephone and computer solutions" (Wegge et al: 2006:61). An accurate image of call centre work is given by Houlihan (2000:228) when he states "if you have dialled directory enquiries, made a purchase or a carried out a banking transaction by phone, it is mostly likely you have come in contact with a call centre". By this example it is evident that call centres have formed part of our daily lives without us even being aware of or taking note of it. In an attempt to provide a more comprehensive definition of what call centres are, Houlihan (2000:228) argues "call centres are centralised, specialised operations for both inbound and outbound communication handling. Call centre operations are especially suited to information delivery, customer services and sales operation". In addition, a call centre can be defined as "a place where as little as three telephones handle organisational issues. It is therefore a business that integrates advanced technology with effectively designed business processes and human resources" (Hauptfleisch: 2006:23).

A central characteristic of a call centre is whether it handles inbound or outbound calls. Inbound call centres handle incoming calls that are initiated by outside callers into a centre. Typically these types of centres provide customer support to their customers who call in, whereas outbound call centres handle outgoing calls, calls that are initiated from within the call centre, by agents. These agents for example, could be selling value added products, offered by their business.

When it comes to outbound call centres, Hauptfleisch (2006:24) argues that "these types of operations have been traditionally associated with the tele-marketing and survey businesses". Another type of call centre is the emergency call centre; this type of call centre is similar to hospital call centres and police emergency helpdesks. While there are thus many different types of call centres, Gans et al (2003:4) note that in order for a call centre to be fully recognized as a fully functionally call centre,it should have the following criterion:

> At its core; a call centre constitutes a set of resources typically personnel, computers and telecommunication equipment which enable the delivery of services via the telephone. It is argued that the working environment of a call centre can be envisioned as an endless room, with numerous open-space cubicles, in which operators with earphones sit in front of computer terminals, providing tele-services to phantom customers

It is further argued by Gans (2003:5) that:

> Call centres are an integral part of many businesses and their economic role is significant and growing. They are also fascinating socio-technical systems which service customers remotely but yet deliver on the emotional aspect that a customer would get if they had to walk into a store.

One of the reasons why call centres have become so successful in the contemporary world is because they offer an efficient way for companies to communicate with their consumers. The call centre industry is vast and rapidly expanding in terms of both workforce and economic scope. It is argued:

> Call centres and their contemporary successors, contact centers, have become a preferred and prevalent means for companies to communicate with their customers. Most organizations with customer contact like private companies as well as government and emergency services have reengineered their infrastructure to include from one to many call centres, either internally managed or outsourced. For many companies such as airlines, hotels, retail banks and credit card companies call centres provide a primary link between customer and service provider,
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> (Gans, 2003:1).

Furthermore, it is argued that an increase in demand for client centred services in a highly competitive business environment which has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of call centres worldwide (Carrim, 2006:66). The call centre industry has grown exponentially throughout Australia,

Europe and the United States over the past decade. In fact, this industry has grown more so than in any other industry (Harnnif: 2005). In the global arena the rise and expansion of the call centre industry has been associated with developments in information and communication technology which can be applied to a wider variety of industries crossing across the public, private, and non -profit sectors (Burgess and Connell:2004). Wegge et al (2006:61) argue:

> Call centres are a growing part of the service industry in many countries and substantial amounts of call centre agents (customer service representative) have been created in this sector in recent years. Three percent of the US working population and 1.3 % of the European working population were employed in call centre in. In emergent markets, the call centre sector is rapidly growing and it is estimated that soon there will be a workforce of 700,000 in India.

Mirroring the growth in the global arena, according to Carrim (2006), the call centre industry has grown tremendously in South Africa. Call centres have become the largest expression of efforts aimed at rationalising the provision of service through the use of communication and information technologies (Russel cited in Heaupetfleisch 2006). The call centre industry has grown dramatically in the country over the last decade as advances in information technology and decline in costs of communications and data transmission have made it easier for firms in many industries to provide customer services and sales that are cost-effective, geographically distant and technology-mediated (Berner, 2007). South Africa's call centre industry is dominated by centres serving a domestic market (91%) and primarily in-bound customer service calls, rather than outbound sales calls (Heauptfleisch, 2006). Call centres operate across many different industries with telecommunication, insurance, banking and financial service industries being the most prominent. In all of its success as a booming industry in South Africa, the call centre industry has major internal problems of unhappy employees due primarily to high stress levels. The growth of call centres focuses on the economic growth and tends to neglect the human aspects of the employees as well as the strategies which agents employ which enable them to cope with their work pressures.

The Greater Brand Company[1] call centre in which the study is conducted falls under the customer service type of call centre. At the GBC call centre when a customer calls in, the call is routed to the customer service call centre by default, and upon listening to the voice prompts the customer can request a specialized helpdesk within GBC which deals with customers particular needs pertaining to their phone or network issues.

Moller et al (2004) argue that in a large best practice call centre many hundreds of agents can cater to many thousands of phone callers per hour, "agent utilization levels can average between 90% to 95%, no customer encounters a busy signal and, in fact, about half of the customers are answered immediately, the waiting time of those delayed is measured in seconds and the fraction of those that abandon while waiting varies from the negligible to a mere 1-2 %"(Moller et al 2004). However, it should be noted that the above represents the idealistic exception, rather than the rule. Most call centres, even well run ones, do not consistently achieve such high levels of service quality and efficiency (see for example Fielding, 2004). In reality call centre agents and call centre managers are under constant pressure to meet the rapidly rising expectations of both customers and company directions (Houlihan, 2000, Deery, 2006, Carrim, 2006, Heaupetfleisch, 2006, Kjellberg, 2010). Thus, although the growth in call centres is positive in terms of job creation, both locally and globally, this growth has not come without damaging effects on both employees and customers (Bagnara et al, 2000). In addition to this, Kjellberg et al (2010:10) state "the machine regulation of the work has also reduced the operator's autonomy and control, which has repeatedly been found to be a risk factor for health and wellbeing, especially when it is combined with high demands and weak social support". Recent research has indicated the ill effects of call centre work. A Swedish survey of psychological conditions in one call centre company found that operators reported a high level of work intensity, poor support from their immediate supervisor, and limited opportunities to influence their work, (Kjellberg et al 2010:10). Similarly, Korczynski (2003:70) found a relatively high incident of stress among call centre staff in Australia. Stress research thus indicates, is a dominant impact of call centre

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[1] Greater Brand Company is a pseudonym

work. Another feature of call centre work is that there is a "risk of conflict between quantitative and qualitative demands on the operators", Korczynski (2003). Kjellberg et al (2010:10) argue that "call centre management is infused with two conflicting logics, a need to be cost efficient and a desire to be customer orientated". The exponential growth of call centres in the global context therefore does not mean that they are devoid of problems; if anything, research indicates that there are numerous problems inherent in call centres.

1.1 Aim of the Research

Having worked in a local telecommunications company in Durban for two years, I became increasingly aware of the discrepancies between the ideal technological innovation of the industry and the impact which this has on employees. The discrepancy between optimal technological output and response time and the effect on employees which I observed first hand, spawned my initial interest in the call centre industry. A key reason why I opted to engage in this study was because of the noticeable gap in terms of how the agents were expected to perform to meet these targets and the reality of how they could perform and deliver on the desired customer service of their company.

The research thus aimed to provide indicators of stress related to monotonous work among call centre agents as well as to demonstrate how work related stress affected the performance and productivity of call centre agents. Following from this, the research then sought to ascertain and describe the innovative strategies that call centres agents employ in an attempt to cope with stress resulting directly from monotonous work. In addition the study aimed to make a contribution in the field of Industrial Anthropology (also known as Business Anthropology), a sub-field of Anthropology, which applies theories, and methods of cultural anthropology in the corporate or industrial realm. Industrial Anthropology is a significant and growing field within Anthropology in many Industrial countries including Australia and America (Kottak, 2008), yet it is a little known field of Anthropology, within South Africa.

This research, which focuses directly on a call centre in South Africa, contributes to the field of Industrial Anthropology in South African as it serves true to the field's theoretical and methodological approach. Correspondingly, a key aim of the research was thus to develop a comprehensive detailed understanding, through qualitative research, of how call centre agents cope with the expectations placed upon them. Accordingly, the key questions asked included: -

- What are the indicators of stress related to monotonous work among call centre agents?

- How does work related stress affect the performance and productivity of call centre agents?

- What (innovative) strategies do call centre agents adopt to cope with stress emanating from monotonous work?

- How do supervisors and managers manage the effects of work related stress on agents' productivity?

1.2 Research Site

The research was conducted for a period of 1 year and 3 months in a telecommunications call centre which employs hundreds of agents nationwide. The Greater Brand Company (GBC) call centre is a national call centre and thus it has call centres in more than one province, including KwaZulu Natal (KZN), Limpopo Province and the Gauteng Province. KZN and Gauteng have the greatest number of call centre agents with the KZN branch brand employing more than having 500 call centre agents. My research was conducted in the KZN research site because this is the branch where I worked; which made this research site readily available. Although I did deal with the call centres in the other provinces for work purposes, they were never part of my research[2].

Nationally the GBC call centre is a 24 hour call centre but only the Limpopo and Gauteng province operate for the full 24 hours. The KZN branch only attends to calls from 6 am till 12 midnight and therefore other provinces attends to the calls received after midnight. GBC is an inbound call centre which, as noted, means customers call in to the call centre to ask for assistance. Customers would call

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[2] The GBC company diagram will be found in Appendix A,B, and C

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in having experienced problems with their phones or the cellular network and the agents, in turn, would assist with those queries and log all the information on their computers. Although during calls agents could refer customers to the service centre where they would get face - to face – assistance if need be; face - to - face assistance was not offered at the GBC call centre itself. Rather, the GBC call centre operated entirely as a virtual helpdesk for customers.

The KZN GBC call centre building is very comfortable for agents as allowance has been made for the fact that their work is stressful. There are three floors just for call centre agents, and on each floor there are hubs of eleven desks for each team. Although there are no reserved hubs for teams, morning and night shifts are paired to one hub so that they are able to store their headsets and any valuables that they may have taken with them to their shifts. Seats at GBC were adjustable to aid comfort and whether agents opt to be close or far from the computer screen is taken into consideration. There are also toilets situated on each wing of every floor and a coffee station, which is called a *'pause area',* is also located on each floor offering agents cappuccino, coffee, hot chocolate, mocha chocca and tea at the press of the button.

In terms of the location of the KZN branch, the GBC call centre site is situated in a suburban area and thus most agents are required to take two taxis to get to work; a taxi from the area in which they lived to the city centre and a taxi from the city centre to GBC. The building is solely for the GBC employees, and thus for many agents it has begun to be a home away from home.

1.3 Research Methods

The GBC call centre is a very time conscious research arena and thus agents were not always available and it was virtually impossible to catch every pivotal moment which is why it was imperative that different kinds of research methods were used to get rich data out of the research project. During the research process I was employed as a supervisor at GBC, and as a call centre supervisor, the biggest part of my job was to observe my agents and ensure the efficient running of my entire floor; this put me at an advantage of being able to work and observe my research

participants simultaneously. The research participants were chosen on the basis of working in the call centre, on the fact that they reported to the specific manager who had been instrumental in granting me permission to conduct my study and on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study.

When I conducted interviews the questions were already formulated from what I had previously observed and participated in. If an agent had received a stressful call from an irate customer, I knew about it, I had handled it as well, just like the agent had and afterwards we talked about it. I carefully chose the research methods I did because I believe that choosing the right method is crucially important to the success of a study. The research took a qualitative route in terms of data collection and analysis. Qualitative research can be summarised as:

> "To answer some of the research questions we cannot skim across the surface. We must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying. In qualitative research, we do indeed dig deep. We collect numerous forms of data and examine them for various angles to construct a rich and meaningful picture of complex, multifaceted situations" (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005: 133).

I chose qualitative research because it has an element of flexibility for the environment I was conducting my research in. The methodology allowed me to conduct informal conversation which was valuable for my research especially when broaching sensitive topics. Maxwell argues (2005):

> In qualitative research design should be a reflective process operating through every stage of a project. The activities of collecting and analysing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating and refocusing the research questions, and identifying and addressing validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the others. This process isn't adequately represented by a linear model, even one that allows multiple cycles, because in qualitative research there isn't an unvarying order in which the different tasks or components must be arranged.

Qualitative research allowed me an opportunity to change or add research questions based on the direction that my research was taking. The flexibility to conduct focus groups but also supplement any additional questions with unstructured interviews is something that can only be achieved effectively with qualitative research. At the call centre, finding time to speak to an agent was not an easy thing to

do. However, the use of different qualitative research methods, made it easier to conduct the research without the agents constantly feeling like it was tiresome work. The fact that I formed part of the study might appear to challenge the reliability of the research but I believe that it did the opposite. Some agents were resistant at first but understood that I started at the company as an agent like them and when I started to work at GBC, I was studying full time. This meant that agents witnessed my development and interests in the call centre and it also meant that they could trust that my research had nothing to do with management. Therefore my long history in the call centre and the good relationships built within the workplace served as testament for the legibility of my studies; those agents who initially had doubts had their doubts alleviated by other agents who spoke on my behalf that I could be trusted and t constantly reinforced this sentiment by forging relationships built on trust with my participants. Agents who participated in the study did not doubt that I was a researcher; I constantly reiterated that interviews and focus group discussions were for academic purposes only. When it came to doing my call centre job as a supervisor, that was my salary and I delivered on that separately. When I conducted research, that was my passion, my academic goal, and I strongly believe that my 'insider' status afforded me greater access to the inner-workings of the call centre as well as greater access to the thoughts and behaviours of the agents themselves..

1.4 Participant Observation

In accordance with the anthropological tradition I used participant observation as the main research method to gather information. Since I was already a full participant within my research context at the outset of the study, the method was conducted in its most authentic form and this made the process of "establishing rapport in a new community, learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up", (Bernard, 1994:137) much easier and more natural. The in-depth nature of participant observation is considered a staple in anthropological studies, especially ethnographic studies and has been used as a data collection method for over a century. Bernard (1994: 137) however adds that participant observation involves more than just observation but includes natural conversations, and interviews of various sorts, checklists, questionnaires and unobtrusive methods.

Participant observation is characterized by such actions as "having an open, non-judgmental attitude, being interested in learning more about others, being aware of the propensity to feel culture shock and make mistakes, the majority of which can be overcome, by being a careful observer and a good listener, and being open to the unexpected in what is learned" (Bernard, 1994: 137). Participant Observation is therefore useful to researchers in a variety of ways: Participant Observation provides researchers with ways to check for nonverbal expression of feelings, to determine who interacts with whom, to grasp how participants communicate with each other, and check how much time is spent on various activities (Schmuck, 1997). Participant observation therefore involves "getting close to people and making them feel comfortable enough with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives" (Bernard, 1994: 138).

The use of participant observation has however, not only been limited to cultural anthropology, it has also made contributions to the corporate world. As part of a contribution in Industrial Anthropology Brigitte Jordan and her team of ethnographers at Xerox Corporation determined the flow of hierarchy of interaction in the operations room of a major airline at a metropolitan airport (Jordan 1992: 2). In addition when the credit card readers were first installed on gasoline pumps in America in the early 1990s, consumers avoided using the technology. John Lowe and a team of participant observers figured out the reasons behind their refusal through participant observation research (Solomon 1993). Participant Observation is thus a useful approach in Industrial Anthropology and in this particular study because it "puts you where the action is and lets you collect data" (Bernard, 2006: 344).

According to Ratner (2002) some qualitative researchers believe that one cannot be both objective and subjective, while others believe that the two can co-exist, and that subjectivity can facilitate understanding the world of others. Ratner (2002), in support of the latter perspective, notes that when one reflects on one's biases, he or she can recognize those biases that may distort understanding and replace them with those that help him or her to be more objective. It is argued that the emic approach

focuses on examining a construct from within a specific culture or sub - culture and understanding that construct as the people from within that culture understand it (Gudykunst 1997 cited in Schaffer and Riordan, 2009:171). Thus it was important for me to understand from the agent's point of view and not cloud the research with own ideas of what I believe they were saying, even if the research was from an emic perspective. It is further asserted that an important issue for researchers to consider when using an emic approach is that "shared frames of references may not exist across cultures" (Ronen & Shenkar, 1988). Weick (1979) argues when studying behavior from within a single culture, importance must be given to understanding insiders' viewpoints and their cognitive thinking patterns within that particular setting. It is for this particular reason that I took cognizance of the fact that while I was automatically an insider by virtue of my employment at GBC, I was also a researcher, and as a researcher, I found great importance in switching between the emic and etic perspective.

The use of both the emic and the etic perspective thus allowed me to understand what the call centre agents were talking about and to empathize with them, while simultaneously standing back from the data and analyzing it through an objective lens. Thus if there was a busy day, such as pay day in the call centre, as an insider I was already aware that the agents were going to have a busy and stressful day and that they would in all likelihood be aggravated and highly defensive on calls. Thus my probing was very much shaped by information that I knew beforehand. However, to ensure that this insider information about the trends of the research did not cloud my research and cause me to miss out on any new revelations within the call centre, I would analyze the information from an etic point of view and observe agents purely on their behavior without attaching insider knowledge of "this behavior is so because it is pay day". In support of the switching between the emic and the etic perspective it is argued "in applying the emics and etics to the interpretation of human behavior and cultural systems, including cognitive and perceptual activities, these two concepts represent the opposite perspectives and take the point of view of either insider or the outsider where, among the interpretations, "the outsider may represent the position of the researcher and the insider (the like) that of the people under investigation" (Xia, 2010:77).

1.5 Self - Reflexivity

Writing from the emic perspective also means that I brought self-reflexivity into my research. This is a qualitative research approach much like the rest of the methodologies I have used to collate data for the study. It has been said that "without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose" (Flood cited in Finlay 2002:209). My study stood no chance of lacking self – reflexivity as I reflect on my own experiences in all chapters of the research, and as I mentioned earlier, this is because I was part of the research. Finlay (2002:209) states that "Reflexivity in qualitative research is where researchers engage in explicit self – aware meta-analysis, reflexivity has a long history spanning at least a century". In an attempt to detail a history of reflexivity as a qualitative research study he argues:

> Early anthropological 'realist tales', where researchers conscientiously recorded observations in an effort to prove their scientific credentials, have gradually given a way to more personal 'confessional tales' where researchers describe decisions and dilemmas of their fieldwork experience. With this movement, most evident from the 1970s, comes a growing 'methodological self-consciousness'. The ethnographic critique of ethnography (led by writers such as Clifford and Marcus, 1986) pushed qualitative researchers into a new paradigm, placing discovery of reflexivity at the centre of methodological thinking' (Seal, 1999:160 cited in Finlay 2002:210).

From the above one can gather that self-reflexivity is an Anthropological method of gaining data and part of that reason is based on the level of engagement that the Anthropological researcher experiences when immensing him or herself into the lives of the participants when conducting ethnographic studies. Much like research from an emic perspective, self-reflexivity research will always be under severe scrutiny for its validity. It is argued:

> We no longer seek to eradicate the researcher's presence; instead subjectivity in research is transformed from a problem to an opportunity. In short, researchers no longer question the need for reflexivity: the question is how to do it? When it comes to practice, the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails. To what extent should researchers give a methodological account of their experiences? How much personal detail can be disclosed and what forms can it take? How are researchers to present a multiplicity of voices while not hiding themselves? Finlay (2002:212).

I will therefore be using the research as a form of introspection and to add value into the field of Industrial Anthropology, but most importantly to provide a view that does not exist within current research on call centre. When Maslow (1996: 45) asserted "there is no substitute for experience, none at all, he pointed researchers towards the value of self-dialogue and recovery. In a similar view Walsh

(1995:335) argues that "those researchers who begin their research with the data of their experience seek to embrace their own humanness as the basis for psychological understanding."

1.6 Focus Groups

The structure of work of a call centre agent's job is mostly done in solitude; it is the agent, the headphones and the computer screen for most of the shift, and thus a focus group was a good way not only to establish information, but also to measure just how many agents felt the same way about what they go through. I thus conducted focus groups as they provide a space where people remind each other of how they feel about certain incidents, and how they deal with them.

The Focus Group method derives from the work by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1941 at Colombia University's Office of Radio Research. In this particular scenario a group of people listened to a recorded radio program that was supposed to raise public morale prior to America's entry into World War II (Bernard 1994) and then, in a group context, were interviewed to discover differences and similarities in experience and viewpoint. Focus groups are argued to produce "ethnographically rich data" (Kreauger, 1988:20) but they "have not always been used for academic study because they are devoid of statistics". However, since the late 1980s and early 1990s focus groups have become widely used in academia, specifically in basic and applied research, to ascertain why people feel as they do about something or in discovering steps that people go through in making decisions (Bernard, 2006). Morgan (1989), for example, ran focus groups with widows to find factors that made it easier for some to cope with bereavement than others. Similarly, Morgan and Spanish (1989) studied what people thought were the risk factors in heart attacks, and Shariff (1991), cited in Bernard (2006:228) reported on the use of focus groups to assess primary health care and family planning facilities in Gujerat State, India and in Pramualratana. However, while focus groups may reveal insights, running focus groups is not always easy because there are sometimes people who tend to dominate the groups affecting the representative nature of the research. I was aware that this could be a problem in my

research context given that some agents are by nature more vocal than others and tend to silence the ones who are shy (see Litsoselliti, 2003). In an attempt to avert this possibility, I explained at the outset of the group discussion that in focus groups there are no wrong or right things to say, but that people are just required to speak from their own experiences. Through reinforcing the notion that an answer cannot be deemed to be wrong or right, agents began to open up and speak more freely.

Focus groups were selected based on their willingness to participate and also on my interaction with them as I was also part of the study; thus every person in the focus groups worked during the night shift as I did. I knew that it would be easier if I selected people that were reporting directly to the same call centre manager as I was because I expected that they would be able to contribute to the development of a better understanding of the employee experiences in a call centre environment. I had four groups of agents whom I repeatedly conducted focus group discussions with. The reason I repeated the focus groups was because it was not always possible to run the group for a full 1- 2 hour period. Thus in total 16 focus groups were conducted in order to validate all of the information given and cover all the topics pertinent to this research.

1.7 Unstructured Interviews

In order to provide as holistic a perspective as possible, my study also made use of unstructured interviews. As Bernard (2006:345) notes, "unstructured interviews are particularly useful when researching some highly sensitive issues. When you want to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings, what it is like to survive hand to hand combat, how you get through each day when you have a child with leukemia, how it feels to make it across the border into Texas from Mexico only to be deported 24 hours later, you just can't beat unstructured interviews". It is further argued that once you learn the art of probing, unstructured interviewing can be used for studying issues, like sexuality, racial or ethnic prejudice, or hot political topics and conflict (Bernard, 2006). I believe that my research area is both sensitive and rich in conflict hence I used unstructured interviews in conducting research at GBC. The reason I preferred the use of unstructured interview

was to avoid having agents feel limited, as one of the dangers of structured interviews is that "it can get in the way of your ability to communicate freely with key informants" (Bernard,1994: 213). However, in using unstructured interviews, I also had to learn the art of probing and the most difficult technique to learn, as already asserted by Bernard (1994) is the silent probe, which consists of just remaining quiet and waiting for the informant to continue. Bernard (1994), argues that the silence may be accompanied by a nod or by a mumbled "uh-uh" as you focus on your note pad. The silent probe Bernard (1994) argues sometimes produces more information than direct questioning. When I first started the research my agents did not know what was expected and they looked at me to guide them. According to Bernard (1994: 217) research participants want to know whether they are "giving you what you want". I learned that different agent's responded differently to various probes and, fortunately for me, I had already experienced the variations at our weekly coaching sessions. I was thus able to respond quickly as to which probe was most suitable for each individual interviewee. In conducting unstructured interviews, I used this opportunity to speak to more than my pool of agents which I was conducting focus groups with. Gaining access to agents for ten to fifteen minute conversations was always possible because I could find them in the Pause Area. The word did get around that I was doing research and sometimes agents would initiate the process and start talking to me, telling me stories without me having to probe. I appreciated the information and thus my questions were structured by the flow of that particular conversation, and this truly spoke to the essence of unstructured interviews, which by their very nature do not have any rigid structure. I cannot give an exact number to these ad hoc informal interviews because of their spontaneous nature, but they were conducted with more than the original call centre agents from night shift, as I sometimes worked in the morning to cover gaps from absent supervisors. Although working morning shift was not the norm for me, there were those occasions when I was expected to work in the morning, and this did happen often enough for me to have a substantial number of interviews with agents across all the shifts. This, I strongly assert, gave my research a more representative perspective of the GBC call centre.

1.8 Semi - Structured Interviews

With regards to semi- structured interviews, it is argued that they "have much of the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviewing, and require all the same skills, but semi structured interviews are based on the use of an interview guide. This is a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order although there is a degree of flexibility to the questions not apparent in more structured interviews" (Bernard, 2006:212). Semi – structured interviews, according to Bernard (2006:212), demonstrate that "you are fully in control of what you want from an interview but leave both the researcher and the respondent free to follow new leads. Semi - structured interview show that you are prepared and competent but that you are not trying to exercise excessive control" (Bernard, 2006:212). Furthermore, Bernard (2006:213) argues "flexibility is a key aspect of semi-structured interviews as it allows the interviewee the opportunity to expand upon themes and engage with further topics relevant to research that the researcher may not have thought to address".

overThe selection criterion which I used for semi-structured interviews was identical to that of unstructured interviews. However, in order to have a more representative sample and avoid any form of bias from the same agents who I was spending most of my time with, I spent extra time interviewing agents that did not attend focus groups. I used semi- structured interviews to conduct interviews with an additional 35 agents. Although I had a set of questions which helped guide the interviews, I did not stick rigidly to these questions as is the norm in semi- structured interviews, and instead allowed the natural flow of the conversation to unfold. However, I did ensure that I covered all areas of concern during the interview process.

1.9 Anticipated problems in conducting research at GBC

The biggest problem that I anticipated at the outset of my research process was getting people to talk freely. I was concerned that the call centre agents may be suspicious of my intentions and I was worried that agents may not share their information with me for the fear that I may divulge the information to management, especially since I was employed as a call centre supervisor. It took a lot of work to break down the ice and get them to fully trust in the intentions of my research.

In addition to concerns surrounding trust, I was worried that time my pose a direct threat to my research. At the GBC call centre, call centre agents sometimes only get two fifteen minute breaks per shift and I was concerned that in this limited time it may be quite difficult for them to have the opportunity to speak about the research. Agents often had to go to the toilet, have a quick smoke break and still grab a bite to eat within this fifteen minute period. Those with children or in relationships also often used the break time to speak to their loved ones, which left them with very little time for themselves. Working in the call centre myself I was fully aware that agents often wanted nothing to do with call centre related talk during the breaks and that the fifteen minute break was just their time to pretend as if they were not really there. Thus the biggest difficulty I anticipated would be finding the right time to talk to them, and to probe what had been observed.

Since I was a supervisor before I conducted my research, I suspected that age may also be a barrier between the agents and myself. Although I was more or less the same age as many of the agents in my team, I was younger than most of the agents in the other teams. I suspected that it may be unsettling for the agents who were older than me to engage in research with somebody younger than them, while structurally on a higher hierarchical level at GBC. I was concerned that this may initially create a blockage in getting them to talk. Moreover when I commenced my research at GBC there were already current issues between young supervisors and agents and thus when the agents knew that they had a right not to participate in my research comments such as "*your fancy degree has nothing to do with me, we are here to make a living and could not be bothered*" were commonplace. I was concerned that such comments would impact negatively upon my research.

In addition, I further anticipated that being female may prove to be problematic in terms of gaining access to female agents, and in this respect my concerns were well founded. Male agents were more than happy to cooperate and assist, although, as I learnt through the research process, their intentions

were not always research orientated. They would, for example sometimes call on my day off pretending they wanted to talk about the research and this made it hard for me to brush them off because I did not want to alienate them. If anything, I needed them to help me gain rapport with the female agents in other teams, and thus it was difficult for me to show my lack of amusement and I often decided "to play" along with the facade that the call was in aid of my research. I feared that maintaining two roles would not be easy; I was a supervisor before I was a researcher, and while this was in many respects a privilege it did not make balancing the two roles any easier. I had a dual role to fulfil, and it was often a challenging switching between the two hats of supervisor and researcher. I needed to always practice being impartial and this was not an easy task because it confused the agents and sometimes they voiced it, *"we prefer the researcher to the supervisor"*. As a supervisor, I demanded that they meet targets, and being a researcher, or somebody who was fascinated with their job, did not exclude me performing my job and achieving my key performance indexes [KPI][3].

This dual role did prove to be a struggle for me but I could not show this to the agents because they could perhaps take advantage of my inward struggle. In the first month, when I was still establishing myself in the role of researcher, I made the mistake of letting them get away with a few misdemeanours because it was my way of rewarding them for helping and I soon realised the dangers behind that. I was structurally in charge of the agents on my team but somebody else, my call centre manager, was structurally in charge of me, and my manager also had his boss. Together, they often asked me at meetings how my research was going, and depending on how the teams were performing they would ask me to share some information. This was always difficult because they were my bosses and the natural reaction towards one's boss is to do what they ask of you without any questions, but this was my research and my studies that they were potentially impending, and it required me to be firm with them; something I was not particularly comfortable with.

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[3] Key performance indexes was quality, AHT and Compliance which were the targets that agents needed to meet for the purpose of their job.

1.10 Overcoming Anticipated Problems

With regards to the issue of me being a spy for management I informed the agents that their names would be kept anonymous, and throughout the research phase I showed my letter from the university asking permission of relevant gate keepers for me to conduct my study. This helped in them trusting me and also in acknowledging that I had just as much to lose if I failed to follow the ethical codes of confidentiality; if the information they gave me was for ill use then I would be in danger of losing my job and could also hinder my academic development, a central purpose of the study.

In terms of the problems I experienced with gaining time for interviews during working hours I went to the smoking areas just before agents went to their breaks so that they found me already there. I believe this strategy helped in easing pressure as they did not feel followed or forced to give answers. Instead it felt very natural and became "as a matter of fact type of conversation" which was better welcomed than what would appear as abrupt questions which required answers. There were also quite a number of call centre agents who do not have their own transport and since it is a shift work environment they often had to wait from an hour to two for others to finish their shift before they could go home with their lift club. This provided an excellent opportunity to talk, or to listen to them talk.

I also used the time after they ended their shift to conduct focus groups. This proved to be helpful as I believe I gained deeper insight into the agents and their work experiences because we often talked about the day whilst it was still fresh in their minds. Such focus groups enabled them to *'let off steam'* which was contrary to what they initially believed which was "*it will exacerbate my hatred for my job.*" Instead most of them found it *"therapeutic"* as they either laughed at their weak moments or shared ways of how they dealt with difficult customers and still met their targets. They termed these focus groups *"support groups"* because they offered support to them whilst sharing their experiences.

With respect to the issue of age, I overcame this area of concern by doing a little bit of 'research within the research'; by asking for genuine advice on why some of the female agents were so hard on me. The agents revealed that they thought that I was a "*spoilt brat*", and that I was '*used to getting my own way'*. Of course this was a preconceived reflection of who I was, and so to ally such sentiments (which were in part fuelled by my position of being a supervisor), I deliberately chose to reveal myself more directly to my research participants by providing anecdotes from my own life. I explained, for example, that I was raised by a single parent, went to a former black school, and then later to a former coloured school when I began high school. I told them about how my entire family got a car only after I turned eighteen, that I was the youngest of my mother's three children, and that her fetching me from work was her way of trying to make up for years of us not having a car. The surprising part in all of this, for me, was that when I was telling the story I had very little concern about the research itself, but my concerns were placed squarely on the fear of being misrepresented. I hated the idea of them thinking I was somebody who I was not, but at the same time it did shed light as to why they would find me "*annoying*" and thus result in them not wanting to assist me with my research. Hearing about the agent's preconceived ideas of me caused me to self-reflect on my own life. From their prospective it made sense that they assumed I was just *"another rich girl"*, somebody who did not know what *"struggling"* meant. I felt their frustration just as much as they felt mine. Thus, like Bernard (1994), I explained to the agents that I wanted to learn from them, and over time they were more than happy to let me do so. Once I opened up and revealed myself to my research participants, I came to be regarded not merely as a supervisor who was separate from them on a structural level, but as a fellow employee, researcher and human who was genuinely interested in their lives and their experiences as call centre employees.

1.11   Moral and Ethical Considerations

The autonomy of the participants in this research was protected through the use of an informed consent form; this was specified in a language that the respondents understand (English). The nature

and the research was outlined to all participants. All participants were informed that their input and identity would be treated in a confidential manner and it was clearly emphasised that they were free to withdraw from the research at any given time should they feel uncomfortable. According to my own ethical agreement form signed with GBC I made it known to all the respondents that the purpose of the study was purely for academic reasons and that their participation, and the research itself, would not jeopardize the company or the participants in any way. Hence I have used pseudonyms for the company and for all of the particiapnts in the study. The letter granting permission to conduct the study was submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal together with the research proposal and ethical clearance form and a copy of the letter is available from the postgraduate research office at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A copy of the letter is not included in the appendix of this dissertation for ethical reasons as the letter contains the real name of the company and its inclusion would therefore be a breach of confidentialy and could potentially result in the identitiy of the research particiapnts being revealed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Frame Work

As mentioned in Chapter One, my interest in the research was sparked by working in the call

centre myself. I started my career in the call centre industry as a call centre agent and my

interest in the research topic grew out of the different stress levels I experienced myself and

witnessed among my fellow colleagues. Since the research for this thesis was conducted in a

business environment, my research forms part of Industrial Anthropology. This field of

Anthropology has been in existence for three decades.

> The term 'business anthropology' come into usage in the 1980s, when anthropologists
> became full-time, non-academic practitioners in niches related to consumer behavior and
> marketing. Prior to that time, the term 'industrial anthropology', 'anthropology of work', or
> 'applied anthropology in industry' were used more frequently to denote areas of research and
> practice focused on business, Baba (2006)

As mentioned in the first chapter, Industrial Anthropology is not common practice in the

South African context. However, many business companies in America employ the services

of Anthropological academics in their work environments in order to better understand the

informal dynamics and industrial conflict in operation in the work environment. It is argued:

> Some of the anthropological studies of such firms produced industrial ethnographies
> (case studies) of the entire company, with a focus on the factors and forces that
> influenced human relations within an integrated social system. For example, Warner
> and Low (1946) conducted their famous case study of a major industrial strike in
> Yankee City (Newbury, Massachusetts), explaining connections between the social
> system within the factory and larger economic, technological, and social forces that
> contributed to the strike. Yet, the anthropologists saw themselves not as "hired guns",
> but as scientists, working to discover laws of human interaction that could establish
> the foundation for a science of human behavior.

The studies of the 1980s gave birth to the sub-discipline of industrial (business)

anthropology, which employs anthropological theory and methodology to best understand

human relations in the sphere of work; whatever the type of work the business/industrial

setting entails. Accordingly, research on call centres which embraces anthropological method and theory in order to best under the call centre environment is therefore located within this sub-discipline.

A number of other researchers Carrim (2006), Hauptefleisch (2006) and Houlihan (2000) have contributed to the study of call centres and this assisted me in comparing and substantiating some of my research results. Globally, as indicated in Chapter One, call centres are one of the most rapidly growing industries. However, it is worth noting that Fielding (2004), cited in Hauptefleisch (2006:23), reports that call centres that began to emerge in the 1980's have started to become "victims of their own success" by fueling an increase in the quantity of customer demand for immediate, better service. This has resulted in working conditions not always being conducive to optimal consulting performance, which in turn has led to call centres being labeled as "sweatshops" of the nineties (Moller et al. 2004), "electronic sweatshops" (Holman, 2003:228) and "modern factories" (Moller et al. 2004)

Literature thus reveals that there is in fact more to call centres than the technological advances which allow businesses to communicate with their customers. My interest lies in the individuals who work in call centres, the call centre agents and in how they structure their everyday work and respond to their working environment. To date, most call centre research on agents has focused on aspects such as causes of burnout, employee stress and wellbeing (Holman, 2003; Fielding, 2004; Heanly and Brambley, 2003 etc.). Other studies include literature reviews on call centre research and trends within the industry from various perspectives (Bagnara, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 1998; Burgess and Connell, 2004).

The majority of studies on call centres are however quantitative in nature, with a focus towards specific aspects in call centre settings which sets them apart from other work settings. Such studies tend to focus specifically on the nature of work and on the positive aspects of the industry and often fail to document the negative. My research documents the call centre from a call centre agent's point of view, it tells a number of individual agent's stories and highlights the various ways in which they cope with call centre work. It transacts less with the business aspects of the call centre and provides a human element to call centre work by focusing on the mind of the agent, the person behind the call centre agent, and the dreams and aspirations which these individuals have which are often at odds with what the call centre offers. Since it is one call centre and since the methodological approach was qualitative, the research findings offer deeper insights into the lives and experiences of the individual agents as more time could be spent interacting with research participants. Given that the research was conducted in South Africa, the research, through the use of a single South African case study, sought to capture the essence of what it means to work in the call centre industry in South Africa.

Hauptfleisch (2006: 23) states that a call centre is a place where customer problems can be solved through the use of communicating on the phone. Call centres are therefore considered to be a business type that integrates advanced technology with effectively designed business process and human resources. Taylor (2004), cited in Paulet (2004:102) suggests a number of aspects that differentiate call centres from other industries. These he asserts

> Include the use of technology to control the nature of work, service activities that can be provided from any location, geographically mobile industry, employees that have access to any information by the "touch of a button" and the substantial amount of control and surveillance over employees, resulting in distinctive work relationships and labour process.

The work of Healy and Bramble (2003:26) when outlining the distinct native of call centre work delineate call centre work according to three criteria. It is argued that:

> Firstly, employees are in direct contact with clients, either through dealing with inbound call calls, initiating outbound calls, or performing some combination of these roles. Secondly, call centres combine telecommunications and information systems technologies in a way that allows employees to interface with customers on the phone while simultaneously entering information into specialized computer programmes. Finally, they facilitate managerial control over labour process, through automatic call distribution (ACD) or predictive dialing systems, which distribute and set the pace of work, while simultaneously monitoring employee performance through real time statistical display. This creates and unprecedented degree of control, which is considered essential to the efficient functioning of the call centre.

Amongst other call centre advantages Houlihan (2000:229) states that "call centres can provide a series of business benefits such as efficiency, high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, reduced dependence on employee skills and substantial cost savings". He further argues that "the fact that makes the environment unique is the information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure which forms the basis of how the call is carried out". Interlinked, Houlihan (2000:229) argues that these technologies make it possible to routinise, monitor and control performance in far reaching ways.

However, not even the technological advancements are able to mask the number of issues that occur in call centre work. "Call centres are highly pressurized work environments characterized by routinisation, scripting, computer based monitoring, and intensive performance targets. This promises a series of business advantages but also risks counter-productive outcomes" (Houlihan, 2000:229). Houlihan (2000) in his study draws on evidence informed by a two year ethnography conducted in an insurance call centre, and six further case studies conducted at a range of UK call centre environments. In his study Houlihan's (2000:228) central concern is "to explore the underlying assumptions of call centre design and management, and to establish to what extent information systems have been constructed

as learning sites or behavioral control sites." His views are that "when behavioral control is a primary goal this introduces a climate of resistance, further inflated by the culture of measurement and enforcement that is likely to ensue" (Houlihan, 2000:228) He argues that "in this environment, agent, manager and organization become defensive and the main outcome is a destructive crisis of trust that creates important and difficult implications for the capacity to learn". His research paper was rooted in what might be termed "the ideal and the real". Houlihan (2000:228) argues that this is to say that "espoused and actual practices and projected and final outcomes quite often differ."

Information that is not well known about call centres, aside from how they make business sense is thus that call centres have an intense amount of stress and pressure which are not immediately evident if one examines the work process only but fails to acknowledge the human element of work. Houlihan's study spells out the fundamentals of call centre work, and testifies to certain themes which are closely identified with the industry and these include stress, disengagement, resistance, emotional labour and reduced space for "escape". Houlihan (2000) argues that the nature of call centres tends to imply that employee agency is minimal or "managed out". Similarities are seen with other studies where it is argued that factors that lead to unhappiness in call centres include the monotony and repetitiveness of the job content (Carrim, 2006). Likewise in many call centres, as argued by Healy and Bramble (2003), the participants reported having a specific script that they have to follow, which also leads to experiences of stress, pressure and depersonalization. Healy and Bramble (2003: 28) argue that "these scripts force them to approach every call in the exact same manner, from opening the call through to the delivery of the resolution, while being constantly monitored by management". Houlihan (2000) thus argues that agents are under constant pressure to "achieve shifting targets and emotional labour of customer care. The agent job is

mythologized as simple and routine, which is a surface fact beyond which there are many complex role and skill demands." In the research done by Hauptfleisch (2006:29) he moreover argues:

> The participants further perceive the scripts as making them feel like "robots", due to the lack of sincerity and not allowing them to express their own personality. "It becomes monotonous, it becomes stressful take a look at Chinese water torture, it's a constant drip, you are constantly doing the same thing, day in and day out, taking fifty to sixty calls per day…it slowly drives you a little crazy.

Literature indicates that this situation is aggravated by lack of opportunities for promotion and by stress which leads to high turnover rates (Worldroom Digest, 2004). The source of the stress comes from different depots, but the biggest stress that call centre agents have to contend with is the customers. The research conducted by Sturdy (1998) elaborates on the complexity of the job in his study, conducted with employees who are in customer services, indicates that there are parallels which can be drawn with the call centre industry. Even though call centre agents are not face to face with their customer, they often have to deal with customers who react in a highly emotional manner (see Houlihan, 2000). In addition, some of the agent's frustrations are based directly upon not having correct information to offer customers. This is evident in the words of an agent who works in an insurance call centre who states, "In effect they are making us practice on the customers. This is what makes me feel bad, because I feel like I am incompetent and stupid which I am not" (Houlihan, 2000:235). After completing certain calls, agents frequently need some time to recover. Carrim (2006) points out that agents are not often given appropriate time to recover from these emotionally charged calls and this, Carrim (2006) stresses, adds to their frustration levels. In addition to the nature of their work which can be frustrating, call centre agents also have to deal with unpredictable work schedules, irregular hours and short lunch breaks which

interfere with family responsibilities, quality time with family and friends as well as other activities outside the work place (Putnam and Loppie 2000).

In addition to the factors outlined above, Sprigg (2004) states that call centre agents also tend to be paid low salaries and they experience poor working conditions. Call centre agents, for example, generally do not seem to receive much praise or acknowledgement from supervisors for having performed their job well, and there are too few incentive schemes. Carrim (2006) thus argues that rather than incentivizing agents, call centres add to the pressure by closely monitoring them to check performance. The above mentioned is what results in feelings of dissatisfaction among call centre agents (Buchanan & Koch Shulte 2000).

It should be further noted that in most call centres the sole duty of agents is to answer telephone calls. Agents are generally not given the opportunity to carry out a variety of tasks. Carrim (2006) argues that, as a result, agents do not gain any insight into the workings of organizations nor do they understand how their functions fit into the rest of the organization. Webster (2003) further argues that the experience gained by call centre agents is very limited because most call centres are constantly busy throughout the day, and managers therefore are unable to train agents to perform other tasks or duties. The literature thus indicates that it is clear that the agents are given very little support and proper tools to do their job accordingly. Van Klaveren et. al (2000) cited in Carrim (2004), further reports that call centre agents reported a strong desire to stop working on phones. This was due to the lack of variety in the work and the stressful nature of telephone-based work. The above provides an indication of the stress endured in call centre jobs. Once agents start working in the call centre they begin

to loathe what they do, and chances of enjoying their work are further streamlined by lack of training which will offer support and better understanding of customer needs.

Research conducted in call centres moreover indicates that constant changes in the environment lead to the experience of uncertainties; as noted by Hauptefleisch (2006) in a qualitative study which looks at the exploration of work experience in a call centre. The research was conducted in an information call centre in South Africa which serviced foreign customers exclusively. The study population was limited to ten employees between the ages of 21- 29 years old. Participants in Hauptefleisch's (2006) research indicated that constant changes in the work environment occur, which leads to a degree of uncertainty. Hauptefleisch's participants noted that this is accompanied by stressful experiences, as they continuously have to adapt to a constantly changing environment, resulting in perceptions of instability. Hauptefleisch (2006) argues that these changes impact the call centre employees in three main areas, which include the shifts they have to work, the performance criteria which they are measured on, and three, service delivery. Other forms of change that agents speak of include existing products being constantly upgraded and improved or new products being developed to enable them to keep up with demands. However, the participants reported that these changes are often not communicated to them resulting in embarrassment and loss of confidence when unable to assist customers due to lack of product knowledge. Management practices that lead to distance being established between management and consultants is a further stress factor mentioned in Hauptefleisch's (2006) research. The participants also expressed concern over management practices, which they perceived as not always being fair and supportive, which ultimately lead to a perception of management as regarding people as replaceable.

Call centre agent's core function is to provide customer service and thus they are the front line service providers. They represent the companies in the eyes of the customer or consumer; they are the point of contact. Thus whatever frustration they may have with the company is likely to be visible and impact on customer relationship. Literature indicates these frustrations range from product knowledge frustration to the repetitiveness nature of their work and any other form of frustration experienced whilst at work or because of work. Literature further spells out that agents develop specific coping strategies for dealing with their frustrations, Winiecki and Wigman, (2007) state, for example, that one of the ways call centre agents cope with the rules of not eating or drinking in their workstations or with the repetitive nature of their work is to press the mute button which means customers cannot not hear what they are doing.

The work of Marek Korczynski attests to different kinds of coping mechanisms installed by front line workers or customer service employees. Korczynski (2003) draws on of Hoschschild's (1983) analysis of the harm of emotional labour for flight attendants, and in so doing focuses upon the damaging psychological processes of individual workers. Although call centre work does not involve having to see your customer face to face, the nature of the work is very similar in that in both cases the intention is to offer customer service regardless of where the customer is, and in both service scenarios work undertaken is highly individualized. However, within this individualized terrain, Hoschchild does raise the issue of what she terms 'collective emotional labour" (1983:114). For Hoschchild (1983), an important part of the emotional tone of the flight attendant's work is set by the "upbeat banter that is swapped between attendants and passengers" (Hoschild, 1983:114). However, Hoschchild (1983), cited in Korczynski (2003:56) argues that "Emotional labour is collective in the sense that attendants rely on each other for mutual emotional support". Hoschchild

(1983) suggest that management seeks to avoid workers sharing 'grudges' with each other and the emphasis is placed heavily on avoiding taking to the gallery what has happened in the cabin. This is so because for many flight attendants the gallery offers a place to 'let off steam'. The flight attendants frustration with their work can be compared to the experiences of call centre agents because in both work situations employees need to separate anger which has developed from interaction with one customer affecting interaction with subsequent customers.

As Houlihan (2000) points out, there is a tendency for call centre agents to treat callers as all the same, especially when they are frustrated. However, there is a large body of management literature that stresses how customers are increasingly seeking service quality in their interactions with service workers, (see Heskett et al 1997). Deconstructing this literature, Korczynski (2003: 57) has argued that increasingly in service firms, in interacting with agents are thrilled by the "enchanting myth of their own sovereignty". This therefore means that customers enjoy being in power over agents for the duration of the call. However, whilst the customer has this sovereign power, the agent alternatively is completely powerless and at the mercy of the customer.

Service interactions are increasingly being structured such that they appear to customers that they are in charge of the interaction (Benson, 1986). Leidner (1983:131) notes, discourtesy expressed by customers to front line workers occurs when the bureaucratic 'inflexible customer' of production organization intrude upon the service interaction. A crucial insight to note with regards to abusive customers is asserted by Korczynski (2003:57) when he states that "the pain occasioned by irate customers is made sharper because customers are also a

key source of meaning and pleasure in service jobs". Thus service workers who are positively disposed to customers and who seek meaning and pleasure from helping customers, but who are confronted with abuse from customer, are therefore, likely to feel pain from this abuse (see Stephen Deery, 2006; Houlihan, 2000 and Kjellberg, 2010).

Given the nature of the job, literature attests that in order to carry out their duties successfully, call centre agents require specific attributes, such as the ability to maintain good customer relations and deal with constant technological change, as indicated for example in a study by Nel and De Villiers (2004). The objective of the study was to ascertain if there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and job performance in a call centre environment. In total 135 call centre agents formed part of the study and their team leaders completed an "emotional competency" test which was used to measure the organistion. According to Nel and De Villier (2004) the strongest correlation with performance in the total call centre environment occurred in the cluster of self-management and the emotional competency of self-confidence. The ability to adapt to fast changing circumstances and to anticipate and deal with complaints were therefore considered to be essential for success in this environment (Nel & De Villers 2004). In addition to this, Houlihan (2000) argues that as intensified work environments, call centres induce environmental and psychological stress. Evidence from his fieldwork suggests that the largest part of the stress is endured and absorbed by the front line and these would be the call centre agents. Houlihan's (2000:230) ethnography was collected in a number of insurance call centres and thus customers were calling into this call centres. In these call centre it is argued that goals and targets were constantly changing, culminating in a stressful working environment for employees. This in turn results in illness, absenteeism and high turnover of staff. Many of these illnesses, in addition, are argued to be caused by "hot and noisy working environments, the force fed

nature of calls and the time when people individually, for one reason or another reach overload", (Houlihan, 2000: 230). Fernie (1998) also draws attention to the stressful nature of the call centre industry and cites an average service length for the industry of 18 months as proof of this stress. From a managerial perspective, the call centre manager is confronted with the problem of finding ways to deal with the high percentage of staff absenteeism and turnover in the call centre environment as a result of the workload and stress experienced by call centre agents Bagnara (2000)

Attention to individual personality traits as a means of predicting an employee's behavior has become one of the most prominent features of recruiting in organizations today (see Coetzee and Visser, 2005). Accordingly, literature indicates that call centres try to minimize these problems by invoking a range of initiative such as "person-job fit", (Houlihan, 2000). In addition to this they look for team- based organizing and socialization initiatives. Houlihan (2000: 231) argues that "core criteria for call centre agent selection are behavioral skills, personality characteristics, and specific abilities such as telephone manner and ability to be part of a team" which Houlihan (2000) states give the prospective employee a realistic preview of the job. Despite such measures literature does indicate that newly employed agents are often unprepared for the routine and pressurized nature of the job.

However, literature does indicate that in the event of all of this pressure and abuse agents do find ways to cope, so as to continue to perform their duties. Stephen Deery's (2006) work is a case in point. In this case study Deery (2006) indicates how co-workers are seen as providing support to their fellow workers in terms of how to deal with their day to day problems and the strain that arise from the employment relationship. Deery (2006) argues that informal ties

and connections between individual workers and collaborative relations among groups of workers are viewed as offering a defense against the abusive practices of management and in some cases the excessive demands of customers. It has been suggested that certain resources, such as the quality of interpersonal relationships and social support from others in the workplace, can assist individuals to deal better with high job demands (Hobfoll, 2002). Employees who receive support from their colleagues or supervisors are thought to cope better and experience less strain because of the help that is provided to bolster their emotional resources to deal with their work related difficulties. House et al (1988) state that these resources can reduce the psychological costs of high demands. In addition to this, there is evidence to indicate that particular sources of interpersonal support such as that derived from co-workers are important moderators of stress. Hauptfleisch (2006:26) states:

> The dominant positive aspect experienced in the work environment by call centre employees is the people [team members] they work with. Team members make work experiences enjoyable, whilst simultaneously acting as a source of knowledge, where the consultants learn from each other about work related aspects as well as about life in general which help broaden their perspective.

In addition to work-based support from fellow agents there is evidence to indicate that workers believe that occasional absences are justified for the onerous and stressful nature of the work they do (Harvey and Nicholson, 1993). Absence, literature indicates, may further provide a barrier between the stressful work environment and its harmful outcomes (Leiter 1990). Absenteeism among employees has been associated with the presence of an absence of culture (Harrison and Price 2003; Martocchio 1994). Taking time off may be seen as a means by which work group members are able to cope better with job demands and restore their energy levels (Mason and Griffin 2003). In addition, Rhodes and Steers (1990:39), cited in Deery (2006) have observed that some supervisors engage in 'negative exchange' with

workers by encouraging them to use up their sick days rather than lose them in order to make up for the stress and workload of the job.

There are many other ways that call centre agents cope with their work. Houlihan's (2000:230) research provides plentiful evidence of agents engaging in prescribed routines with their own strategies, including 'cutting off' difficult customers, withholding service to complicated and uncooperative callers, and a range of call avoidance strategies. Such actions are geared towards achieving targets and minimizing personal frustration and tedium. Hauptefleisch's research (2006) indicates that it is the unfair relationship that creates the lack of interest from call centre agents in their jobs. It does not seem like agents start out that way, instead the call centre culture molds them that way. In his conclusion Hauptefleisch (2006:30) argues "management practices and attitudes toward the call centre consultants, including the perceived distances, lack of support and guidance and empty promises do not recognize this need for coherence and relationships".

The research in the GBC call centre is aimed at adding to the body of literature through a rich ethnographic perspective on the call centre industry. This stated the following chapter will detail the formal aspects of the company. This will provide greater insight into the formal dimensions of the GBC call centre so that the divergence from the formal may become more evident in the chapters that will follow. However, in order for these insights to be fully explained and elaborated upon, a sound theoretical perspective is necessary and therefore in the remainder of this chapter I introduce the relevant theory pertaining to my research.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Although research on call centre work is limited (Carrim, 2006, Houlihan 2000, Deery 2006) there are a number of articles that focus directly on human behavior within the work place. In 1982 an Industrial Anthropologist Gerald Mars, in his detailed ethnography entitled "Cheats At Work" coined the theory of "Grid and Group" when it comes to job types. The theory outlines the different types of jobs in relation to the people working in those jobs. According to Mars (1982) the work place has a culture of its own and the employees are clustered into these cultures. Mars used his theory to illustrate behavioral patterns of workers according to the culture clusters into which the worker falls. In his theory of Grid and Group Mars speaks of jobs that are either strong in group or strong in grid. Mars (1982) argues that 'Jobs which limit autonomy, which define both the tasks and the expectations people have of a job holder, are strong grid jobs' (Mars, 1982:25). On the other hand, weak grid jobs are 'those that grant autonomy and allow their people to carry out tasks in a way they can define themselves' (Mars, 1982: 25). Mars (1982:25) further argues:

> Grid jobs therefore are those jobs that have no group influence and fix people to a defined place and time. The type of work these individuals do does not allow effective relations with others. Examples that are given by Mars are cashiers in supermarkets, elevator operators and the 'skivvy' in a one–servant family. Group jobs on the other hand are those jobs with an overall absence of constraints and where people have autonomous liberty to transact with others. These jobs are marked by collectiveness which can sometimes be detrimental to the individual as the group can impose constraining rules and claims upon the individual.

In his theory Mars argues that as much as jobs with both qualities of group and grid exist, individuals can only be anchored in one. As part of my research proposal I argued that the call centre job is a strong grid job because it has limited autonomy, and although in theory an agent belongs to a team, each agent is judged individually in most respects for individual performance. Yet this individual performance, at the same time impacts upon the overall performance of the team. As a result it is not uncommon to have one team member drag the

entire team down. The team may try and influence that particular agent but ultimately the final decision of how an agent will treat the job lies with the individual agent. However, depending on which team the agent belongs to, agents may be tempted to, or may feel obliged to, participate in group activities, such as, collectively claiming their computers are not working when it is time to start work. Mars (1982:127) argues:

> It is the group worker's acceptance and absorption of group's assumptions that allows him to square his straight self with his sinful self. These two are insulated at one level but coalesce at another and thus ambiguity is resolved. Without group support, however ambiguity remains unsolved.

The vulnerability of various jobs to "fiddling", as Mars (1982) terms it, depends on their specific character conditioned by the constraints imposed on people occupying these jobs, as well as the informal or semi-formal group affiliations. The following chapters will reveal to what extent agents "fiddled".

A theory that is also pertinent to the study of this particular call centre is Goffman's theory of Impression Management. Goffman's theory of Impression Management highlights how people frequently develop strategies for creating an outward image of their persona. Goffman's (1959:59) theory can be utilized in this particular work context to explain how agents develop strategies to avoid work or to avoid getting additional work. Thus impression management is the "art of appearing productive. It is argued that with Impression Management "first workers seek to avoid being noticed at all, and secondly, when under direct observation, they attempt to create the impression of being productively busy" (Molstad, 1998:56). Furthermore to this, Molstad (1998:54) argues, "powerlessness forces industrial workers to be tolerant, but they also reach out in attempts to control some aspects of their work lives". This element of control is e useful when addressing the coping strategies

that call centres agents develop in order to exert some form of control over their working lives.

Another theory, which is relevant to the call centre environment, is the theory of Structural Violence. Winter et. al (1999:01) argues:

> John Galtug originally framed the term Structural Violence to refer to any constraint on human potential due to economic and political structures (1969). Unequal access to resources, to political power, to education, to health care, or to legal standing, is forms of structural violence.

It should be noted that structural violence is not something that is visible to the naked eye, and thus although in upcoming chapters it is revealed that call centre agents are astutely aware that they are "forced" to work in the call centre, they are also aware of the difficulties they are likely to experience in gaining other meaningful employment. It is further argued by Farmer (2006:2) that:

> Structural violence is often embedded in longstanding "ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience because they seem so ordinary in our ways of understanding the world, they appear almost invisible. Disparate access to resources, political power, education, health care, and legal standing are just a few examples. The idea of structural violence is linked very closely to social injustice and social machinery of oppression.

It is argued that "Direct violence is horrific, but its brutality usually gets our attention: we notice it, and often respond to it. Structural violence, however, is almost always invisible" (Winter et. al, 1999:01). Since Structural Violence is not visible to the naked eye, the victim is often unaware that he/she is being victimized. Furthermore "Structured inequities produce suffering and death as often as direct violence does, though the damage is slower, more subtle, more common, and more difficult to repair" (Winter et. al ,1999: 01). The theory of structural violence is applicable to this study because agents are drawn into the call centre,

due to lack of other meaningful employment opportunities, and experience symbolic violence once employed. A prominent reason for this being that although many find themselves frustrated with call centre work, they are unable to explore alternatives due to family demands and lack of employment opportunities. Structural violence essentially then 'forces' the agents to seek call centre employment and, at the same time, causes them to remain within it. The research thus uncovers strands of this particular type of violence at the GBC call centre.

Finally, Rotter's theory of Locus of Control highlights that in spite of everything, each individual is responsible for how they react to their circumstances. Rotter's (1996) theory Locus of Control was developed by Rotter in the context of the call centre environment and refers to the extent to which individuals believe that what happens to them is either within their control or beyond it. Carrim (2006:69) argues:

> People with an internal locus of control believe that the outcomes of their actions are a result of their own personal effort and ability. They believe that hard work and personal abilities will lead to positive outcomes. On the other hand people with an external locus of control believe their own actions do not influence future outcomes and that the outcomes of their actions are dependent of factors outside their personal control. Research findings indicate that an internal locus of control is associated with job satisfaction and an external locus of control with job dissatisfaction.

At GBC call centre there was a definite overlap between internal and external control of agents. This is what determined whether an agent was going to cope with his/her work or not. Carrim (2006: 70) argues, "Internals tend to be happier in their jobs, are absent less frequently, are less alienated from the work setting and tend to be more involved in their jobs compared to externals". In direct opposition to the internals, "people with low locus of control tend to experience more stress and job dissatisfaction in jobs that are highly demanding but low in autonomy", (Carrim, 2006:70). GBC call centre is a low autonomy

company, more specifically for call centre agents, and therefore the stress levels were extremely high for many agents.

In essence, according to this theory, the main thing that makes call centre agents or call centre employees "survive" in their jobs, boils down to personal choice of whether to allow frustrations to affect the way they would normally behave or not.

In the following chapter I turn my attention towards the organization of the formal work structures of GBC and this provides the platform for subsequent discussion and analysis of how formal and informal structures of work are frequently exclusive categories played out in a single work environment.

Chapter Three: The Organization of Work at Greater Brand Company

The aim of this chapter is to provide a formal representation of what the work of this particular call centre entails and detail the specific role of the call centre agents. The term call centre agent or agent is used interchangeably. I will also be using terms which can be viewed as "call centre jargon" in the upcoming chapter. The aim of this chapter is thus to provide information on the formal operations of the GBC Company. The first point of discussion will be the recruitment process.

3.1 Recruitment Process

All agents at GBC were recruited on the basis of having passed grade twelve, on having the ability to speak fluent English and on being computer literate. The GBC call centre uses an external recruitment agency to conduct recruiting of their candidates and this agency also conducts all the initial tests (computer literacy test and memory test) to check for the authenticity of the prospective employee's claims. Internal tests include writing a test which tests memory skills and creating a hypothetical, fictitious customer problem to ascertain how the potential candidate deals with customer enquiries/problems. If the candidate passes the memory test, the next step is the computer literacy test; upon passing this test candidates are then granted a face to face interview with a GBC human resources (HR) representative. Since the desire for the job is generally intensified with every level passed, getting to the face to face interview stage becomes a "big deal" for almost every agent. The interview stage at GBC call centre entails a 20 to 30 minute intensive interview. It requires a great deal of self-awareness and seeks to find individuals who thrive under pressure and possess good customer service skills. The reason the company seeks such individuals is because they know the nature of the job is highly stressful. During the interview process candidates are informed

about the nature of the job. Very specific questions are posed to the candidates with the aim of sifting out the best suitable candidates for the job. One of the questions asked is whether potential candidates can handle abusive customers. All of the agents "on the floor" at GBC, including myself, answered 'yes' to the question. In addition to the abusive customer question, other sifter questions seek to discover whether agents are in control of their emotions and aim to ascertain whether they would allow their emotions to cloud their judgment when dealing with the customer. In order to substantiate their answers agents are asked to provide examples of scenarios where they had previously successfully not allowed their feelings to get in the way of a situation. Again, all agents who were successful in the interview process did provide examples of their emotional achievements. The agents who provided the best and most convincing justifications and exuded the most confidence were allowed they through to the next round. This meant that they were allowed to start training for the job.

3. 2 The Training process

Training is a four week process but by the end of the 3rd week agents are informed if they have passed or not. At the start of the training process agents get a file with all the information on how to navigate the company system; this file is "their Bible". Depending on when agents started at GBC the file may have additional information to what an agent employed at an earlier stage was given, as the system is forever changing. During the training process agents are told about the importance of maintaining their average handling time (AHT) and the importance of the quality of their calls. Following the training, agents are tested on the study material given to them and the overall pass aggregate has to be 85%, otherwise the agent does not get the job. If and when the agent passes the three week training course, the agent is employed as a 'Customer Service Executive' and this is the formal title

that reflects on the agent's profile. The last week of the training entails the agents spending time with experienced agents on the floor; in some cases with a senior agent who is perceived to be really good at his/her job or alternatively with a supervisor. Industry talk from trainers, who have worked in other telecommunications companies, is that GBC has one of the most rigorous training programs in the industry.

Prior to their practical simulation (final week of training before agents start taking calls on their own) agents are required to choose a language that they feel they would best service the customer in, in Durban agents mostly choose from English, isiZulu or isiXhosa but there were instances where agents who spoke Sotho, Tsonga and Afrikaans were recruited. The official term for the languages is called 'hunt lines'. Although agents would pick a language, the reality is that once they started working on the floor they could service customers in any language that they could speak. Although agents officially pass after their third week of training, the fourth week of training is a time for them to learn the "tricks of the trade" from a practical perspective. This is the week before agents 'go live', as it was termed, and this refers to the first call agents take without any assistance after the 4 week training period. The fourth week is therefore considered to be the final week of "hand holding" before agents are left all on their own to start taking the calls by themselves. The fourth week thus consists of "trial calls" whereby agents starts taking calls but the headsets are alternated amongst the people assigned to a particular group. This is not a true reflection of what actually happens on the floor but is part of the training process which closely simulates the nature of the job. Agents generally find this part of the training particularly exciting and are more than eager to take the call at this time, because they are all still very "hungry for the job". At this stage agents also "shadow" other agents on the floor who are actively taking calls; this process is called the 'buddy system'. This means that the new agents in training and the agents who are

already on the floor sit next to each other and look at the same screen whilst listening to one call. The idea is to expose the trainee agents to as many call simulations as possible before they start actively handling calls on their own. Experienced agents often afford the trainee agents an opportunity to take the call so that they have an idea of what it is like to speak to customers whilst the experienced agent navigates the system for them. After a week of 'buddying'[4] the agent is then told which supervisor he/she will be reporting to and the day set to "go live"[5].

When I started at GBC in 2006 they were recruiting a large number of agents because the call centre was expanding. However, by 2007 GBC were forced to fill the gaps and recruit to replace the agents who had resigned or had been fired (which was not uncommon). Thus in 2007 when agents "went live" they joined a team that was already in existence. This made the feeling of being a "newbie" that much harder. I was indeed lucky to have started in 2006 because we were all new at once and this provided a cushioning, in that, as agents, we were not under too much pressure to learn everything at a fast pace because our entire team was still new and thus prone to making mistakes. However, this was much harder on the supervisor because it meant they were constantly "on their toes" attending to many queries, system failures, locking of passwords etc. One needs to bear in mind however that this is an inbound call centre and thus we would be particularly busy on month end as people tended to buy our products more readily when they had money. Thus if the new agents started at month end it would be really difficult for the supervisor concerned as agents were still used to being assisted but needed to operate individually.

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[4] Buddying: when a new agent shadows an experienced agent taking calls, in order to gain experience
[5] Go live: Means taking calls without any assistance

3.3 How an inbound call centre operates

A large number of call centres have been enabled by technological advances in information and communications systems and the GBC call centre is no different. Any customer who wishes to call in and enquire about the network can dial a certain three digit number and calls to this number are free of charge from cellular phone.

When this call is being routed through to the agent, the GBC network recognizes two specific types of information about each call received; the number from which the call is dialed and the number which the customer is dialing. This is why callers are able to be routed to the correct call centre that services their particular needs. However, since all customers dial one toll free number, the location of the call centre does not matter as the network will pick up the toll free number dialed, as opposed to where it is dialed from. An example would be a caller in Durban dials 500 (this is a fictitious toll free number for the GBC call centre) and the call is routed to the Polokwane call centre, while another caller from Johannesburg who has dialed the same 500 toll free number may be routed to a centre in Durban. It is for this reason that it is important for all agents to be fluent in the English, although they would be given different "huntlines" from amongst the different languages. During peak times agents could thus receive a call in Xhosa, even if they were in English huntline, and they were expected to assist especially if they had said they understood both languages in their recruitment files as loaded on their profile. All customers dial 500 and thus during busy times the system routes calls to the first available agent.

The GBC call centre owns many call lines which dial to the same 500 number; if this was not the case the caller would often receive a busy line signal. Customers, as a rule do not like to

be kept waiting and a customer who is wanting to enquire about a simple issue is less likely to be angry when put on hold, or told that the lines are busy, than a customer who feels he/she has been overcharged for services and wants to know why. This customer type is usually very unforgiving of the fact that he/she has been made to wait.

3.4 What is needed by the agents at the beginning of every shift?

In order to take calls, agents need headsets, a universal serial bus (USB) cord and a working workstation. The headsets need to be in tune and the mouthpiece needs to work in such a way that the customers can hear the agent and the agent can also hear the customer. It is recommended that agents come to work 10 minutes before their shift starts in order to check if all their equipment works properly. The common problem however, was not the fact that the headsets did not work, but the fact that agents often did not bring them, a central reason being that they forgot them at home or alternatively that they had been stolen. If everything works perfectly for that day, it means the headsets work properly and the two connecting systems that log the agent in to commence duty comply and the agent is then able to carry on with the shift as planned. Unfortunately, this was not always the case and on any ordinary day the supervisor often has to make arrangements with another team to borrow their headsets because one or two of their agents have misplaced their headsets. In other cases, an agent may have to log what is known as "downtime" for that day because the workstation did not allow for all the systems to connect. In order for the system problem to be solved an agent is required to switch off his/her personal computer and start again; not all systems were new and thus shutting down involved a process that could last as long as 15 minutes. Once the agent had switched on the personal computer he/she could log what was called a USD (acronym unknown) which will serve as a reference of proof that there really was "downtime"; the logged USD would generate a number that is given to the computer (IT)

department.[6] In times where nobody from the technical team would call to help resolve the problem, the supervisor would call in and request for faster resolution since any downtime directly impacted upon the supervisor's performance statistics. The system problem is commonly accepted at GBC as the most daunting part of the shift because it is not something that the supervisors and agents can physically fix themselves; they are fully reliant on the help they receive from their remote technical team. If none of these above issues occur, both the supervisor and the agents can start their shift on a much better note.

3.5 What happens once the call is through to the agent?

When the call is routed through to the call centre by the customer dialing 500, the customer will be directed to IVR (interactive voice response) which is a voice prompt that queries customers on the reason for calling GBC to best judge where to route the call and which language "huntline" to connect to. If it is not peak time, the call gets routed to the direct huntline and that means that if the customer chose English huntline they will be routed to that line as opposed to peak times when the customer would be routed to any available agent at the time regardless of the huntline. As mentioned above, agents have more than one "huntline". The primary huntline would be the language that the agent is most comfortable speaking and the secondary huntline would be the language in which an agent is fluent but does not necessarily prefer to speak. The call centre did not always get this right, and, in such cases, tended to be stubborn about changing it. Drawing on my own personal experience, I will illustrate a common scenario. I am a Zulu speaker, this is my mother tongue but I wanted to be on the English huntline because it is more challenging and also because the queries tend to be more versatile. I was however, given a Zulu huntline automatically. On the flip side of

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[6] The protocol at GBC stated that the technical team should respond in no longer than 10 minutes because everybody in the call centre works by the notion of "time is money" and this was meant in its most literal sense as it affected the average handling time of the agents. Agents should not be left as "signed out" of the system when they are meant to be "signed in"

the coin, there was another agent who was given the English huntline although he was not fluent in English, and despite the fact that he wanted to be moved to a Zulu huntline, he never was. This was one of the common things that irritated customers, when they were routed to an agent who did not speak their language fluently; it did not matter whether it was Zulu or Xhosa, customers hated the thought of being serviced by somebody who did not understand what they were saying, and this made them lose faith in the system. This is especially the case as the IVR specifically asks customers to choose a language they would like to be served in.

An example of how the IVR system works is that callers may be told to "press one", for instance, if they wish to query a certain issue or if they'd like to check their status on what tariffs they are on. In some cases, through continued interaction with the IVR, customers are able to sort out their enquiry without needing to speak with an agent. However, customers may communicate a need or a desire to speak to an agent, and in this case calls are handed from the IVR to an available agent. This process is highly sophisticated and can decipher which agent the IVR must route the call to based on the selection the customer has made. The capabilities of agents may also be used in routing of calls.[7] Thus when agents log in their different profiles appear. Their login identities are then used to retrieve records that describe the types of calls they are qualified to handle. Given the caller's status, as well as the number of agents available to take a call, the incoming call may be routed to the "best" available agent. If no suitable agent is free to take the call, the call may be kept "on hold" and the customer will wait until such an agent is available.

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[7] For example, when agents start working in the call centre they are told whether they will be servicing "high" or "low" band customers. High band customers are those who spend a lot of money on the business and therefore their calls are answered faster. Low band customers are customers who spend less money and therefore wait longer for their calls to be answered

3.6 What are some of the ways in which the agent assists the customer?

Once the call with the customer begins it can follow a number of paths. In the simplest case, the agent will handle the customer or the caller's request and follow the routine "hello". Agents pre–record their greeting and thus the customer will first hear, for example, "Hello you are speaking to Andisiwe, how may I help you?" After the agent has assisted the customer he or she likewise has to say a scripted goodbye, "thank you for calling GBC, goodbye". The simplest call would be a call whereby the caller calls in, gets the required help and hangs up. However, the service need not end; instead the agent may spend more time on wrap-up activities, such as updating the customer's history file or loading the product that the customer requested whilst a new call comes through. Updating a previous caller's information is not allowed in the GBC call centre because the agent is meant to perform such activities while simultaneously talking to the customer. However, in order for agents to improve on their AHT, agents would vocally say goodbye to one customer but continue to update that customer's information on the screen whilst speaking to a new customer. The agents wanted the system to still recognize the shortest amount of time spent on the call rather than prolong the call by updating information which in turn, would impact upon AHT. In other cases agents would be lucky and speak to customers whom they would have to transfer to another huntline because they did not speak that particular language; this would be a very short call that would help improve the average of their AHT. In a situation where the customer is routed to the correct agent then the agent enters caller's number on his/her computer and the customer's telephone number automatically appears on the agent's screen. In addition to the number, the agent will see all of the customer's information including the history of what the customer has needed in the past. Agents often leave notes on the customer's profile such as "customer needs setting, system was down, please load when the system is back up". Such notes help save time and similar notes are also left for prank callers

in which case the agent will leave notes such as "prank caller, has called 3 times, if they call again block their line". In this instance the agent who received the prank call is still required to probe for the accuracy of the notes left, as the policy states that the agent has to verify whether it is a prank caller or not. If the caller proves to be a prankster than the agent can proceed with blocking the line. However, if the owner of the phone is not the prankster and somebody else was using the owner's phone[8], the agent needed to inform the owner that somebody is "pranking" the call centre using their number and therefore that the owner needed to ensure that their phone was kept away from the prankster. It is not uncommon for agents to leave a note on the wrong number, hence precautionary measures through probing need to be undertaken. An example would include asking a customer the reasons for his or her call rather than assuming that a solution has been reached based on the notes left by the previous agent handling the call.

In cases where some customers call GBC in error, the agent on the call is still expected to be extremely polite and follow all the guidelines of the call as if the caller is part of the GBC network. In most cases agent's exhaust different options trying to double check if the number is a GBC number and if the system keeps rejecting it, and the customer insists on being serviced, then the matter is referred to a supervisor who will use his or her system and confirm that the caller does not belong to the company. At this time the agent is usually furious because if it weren't for all the protocol the agent would have told the caller within the first few seconds that the caller's number belongs to another company and that there is no need to check on the system.[9]

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[8] It often happened that children would take their parent's phones and call GBC as a prank
[9] In this particular situation, the agent would be annoyed because such a call would impact upon the agent's AHT

In the GBC call centre agents are assessed from the very first encounter with the customer to the very last word spoken to that customer. Agents are asked to ensure that their recorded greeting plays effectively every day before they start their shift, and they are required to record a new greeting that will match their voice for the day. They are asked to do this because sometimes agents will have flu and their voice will be affected and if the greeting was recorded the day before then it may seem to the customer that he/she is speaking to two different people. A further aspect of assessment is the willingness to help, and that is measured by a statement that the agent has to actually say to the customer when the customer presents the agent with his or her problem. The agent has to respond by saying "Mr X I will assist you with your problem, please may I have your number". At this stage the agent can already see the number on his/her screen but procedure states that the agent must always ask anyway. Once the agent has shown willingness to help, he/she is measured on the effectiveness in assisting the customer. When quality assurers "pull the call" they are able to hear and see everything that the agent was doing during the live streaming of the call, including the mouse movement and if the agent was writing an email. The information appears on the screen that the QA is assessing at the push of a button. The effectiveness of the agent is measured by assessing his/her navigation skills; did the agent go to the right place to find a solution? If agents are seen to be doing their own thing (sending personal emails, playing solitaire or attending to a previous caller's information) they are marked down and if they are still wrapping up the previous call whilst speaking with a different or new customer then they too are marked down and awarded a low score on quality. The reason they are marked down is because the correct information is not showing on the screen. The agent moreover, is measured on the solution, was he or she able to solve the customer's problem? This part allows some level of flexibility because if the agent referred the customer to the

right solution then the agent is given full marks for that section. It must be noted that half a mark cannot be awarded and agents therefore either get a mark or they don't. Finally it is the wrap up of the call that is measured: Did the agent say the wrap up correctly with enough enthusiasm? The correct wrap is "*thank you for calling GBC, goodbye*" and if the agent is in the Zulu Huntline then it is "*siyabonga ukusfonela e GBC, ube nosuku oluhle*". This becomes tricky when an agent is being assessed on an ad hoc call which is of a different language or their secondary language; because they have some form of hesitation prior to saying the wrap up. However, this is not taken into consideration and the QA will mark the agent down which; explains the ongoing tension between QA's and agents. The expected score from a QA for an agent to meet their key performance index (KPIs) is 90%. This benchmark has been increased from the previous benchmark of 85% as scores are constantly being monitored and goals redefined. New agents are given lee-way for a lower score for a period of 3 months after which they are expected to also reach the 90% target. Bonuses of both agents and supervisors are dependent upon the performances of agents. Although the main job of the QA Department is scoring calls, they are also responsible for ensuring that agents follow the right protocol, use the right tone and are well educated on the company products. The QA Department also provides training for all the agents. As an example, the QA Department came up with the notion of "campaign weeks" which serves to remind agents of the basic principles of how to do their job, for example greeting customers. This was helpful for agents who were in one huntline and sometimes got calls from the different huntlines but had forgotten how to greet a customer of that huntline in their language of the choice.

3.7 How all the departments fit together?

At GBC the highest position held belonged to Mr Manzi who is the managing director. In his position of Managing Director, Mr Manzi did not deal with day to day running of the call centre as this was done by the heads of departments, under the Head of Operations. Reporting directly to the Managing Director was the Head of Operations, Miss Pillay and the HR manager. Miss Pillay was frequently referred to as *"Cruella", "Cruella Devil" and "Satan"* by the agents, terms which she willingly embraced. They called her by these names because the agents regarded her as being responsible for all the rules, and this was indeed the case since Miss Pillay held the highest operational level at GBC. She had four call centre managers reporting to her, who in turn had 11 supervisors reporting to them. Call Centre Managers tell their supervisors what the target is for their team and are responsible for quality, AHT and compliance. Compliance basically means that agents are at their desks and signed into their workstation on time. The percentage required for this is 95% and if everyone on a team is on time, it is very easy for all agents to get 100%, because unlike every other measurable benchmark at GBC, everybody has some level of control over arriving at work on time.

In assisting with meeting the quality benchmark are Quality Assurers who report directly to the Quality Assurer Manager and the Quality Assurer Manager reports directly to the Head of Operations. The Quality department is responsible for ensuring that quality standards are met and accordingly they are tasked with overseeing and assessing the attitude and response of agents handling calls. As such, Quality Assurers are responsible for evaluating agent calls and also for allocating points to calls based on the manner in which agents speak to customers. Quality Assurers are part of the department that makes agents feel like *'the call centre is an unfair environment to work in'*. However, at the same time, their quality

assurance form does not allow them much room to fabricate results. If a call is bad the Quality Assurer who evaluates the call has no choice but to mark an agent down because if he/she fails to do so, when calls are checked, the Quality Assurer will in turn be marked down and possibly face disciplinary charges for fabrication of results. It is indeed a difficult place to be in when you are labeled as the enemy for doing your job. Quality Assurance is an important but complex department to work in as the task of this section is related to understanding both agent and customer behavior, but only the behavior of the agent is assessed and given a score.

The Workforce Department which consists of the Workforce Manager and the Workforce analysis also falls under the structural control of the Head of Operations. The Workforce Department is in charge of handling the work schedules of all teams including which shift, which hub and how many hours a person is to work; at GBC there were teams that worked slightly longer hours. The Workforce Department is also responsible for planning and allocating leave. The other function that the Workforce Department serves is for is capturing "downtime"[10] in the call centre. The call centre supervisor or the second in charge (2IC) would compile a spreadsheet for the team for the downtime and it was often the case that the supervisors forgot to send the downtime to the Workforce Department team. If this unfortunate disaster happened then the team's statistics would be affected as the times would not be adjusted to reflect the system error experienced by the agents in that particular team. The team's performance would show as if an agent signed in late because they were late and not because they experience system failure. Workforce also sends statistics for all team performances to all employees at GBC; this information is mostly valuable to supervisors as they can look to see how their teams are tracking against other teams, and check their own

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[10] Downtime referred to any time lost in the call centre because of system failure

performance against their respective Call Centre Manager. Workforce thus plays a crucial part in the running of the call centre.

The position of supervisor entails many jobs wrapped in one. Their job is to lead, teach, coach and complete quality details and support their agents. The call centre supervisor reports directly to the Call Centre Manager, and belongs to a team of 11 other supervisors who report to one Call Centre Manager. At GBC call centre there were four Call Centre Managers, split into morning, midday and two for the evening. The standard number for supervisors was meant to be 11 per Call Centre Manager but the night shift teams had more than 11 call centre supervisors reporting to one Call Centre Manager, this was because night shift was the busiest time for the call centre.

Supervisors are the ones with the biggest role to motivate and drive team performance for the agents with their teams. It is important to get supervisors that are interested in their agent's wellbeing as well as deliverance on targets versus major concern being on delivering performance results which will only affect the supervisor's bonus at the end of the month. The role of a supervisor is not an easy one, as they carry the heavy burden of ensuring that agents meet their targets, whilst securing a balance between playing the supportive role of being there for agents when they are going through issues of any kind. These issues could vary from agents struggling to meet their targets or agents going through personal issues, usually a supervisor is the first to notice this. Supervisors also have their differing patterns and therefore they handle agent issues differently. Some supervisors will embrace the agent's problem and help them find a solution, whilst others may isolate themselves from the problem and give the agent an instruction to fix that issue so that it does not affect the targets.

One of the things that the head of department would say is "leave all your problems at the gate, and grab them on your way out". This effectively that agents and supervisors should not bring any of their issues to work, when it was time to work everyone should not be distracted by any of their own issues.

At GBC call centre agents were loyal to supervisors who were loyal to them. In addition to the agent and supervisor loyalty, the supervisors also needed to demonstrate loyalty to other supervisors and not appear to be too lenient towards their agents; because by doing that, they were creating an expectation that other supervisor could not live up to in their respective teams. Mars's theory of group and grid which I will delve into more in Chapter Five is apparent in call centre supervisors, because supervisors needed to stick together against agents, even though that particular supervisor was working for his or a her bonus it was still important that they all strategize together on ways to overcome the call centre deficiencies such as absenteeism, low quality on calls, AHT and late coming. This was important because as part of supervisors it did not look good for one supervisor's team to be seen doing well whilst other teams were struggling. Thus an element of working together is very important for supervisors. Collectively, supervisors looked good when all targets were met, but would be in trouble individually if one supervisor's team was not doing well.

In addition to the versatile role played by the supervisor, agents also had the help from HR, the HR Manager reports directly to the Head of Department and because this was a small department within GBC agents had direct access to the HR Manager, however, reporting to the HR Manger was the HR officers who mostly handled the hiring of new agents as well as handling the signing of contracts once agents were hired. For day to day running of

disciplinary hearings and listening to any form of grievances the HR Manager had an open door policy with the GBC employees. The trainers structurally reported to HR but in terms discussing agent performances when new products were launched and agents needed to be trained, trainers worked with Call Centre Managers and Head of Department, and as a result there was great confusion in terms of who the trainers reported to around the business as they had direct access to the Heads of Department. This often caused friction between trainers and supervisor because structurally there were in the same level but in terms of day to day ways of working, the trainers worked with upper level management.

Another functional support system offered to agents was from the remote technical support team which I have not added to the diagram because they worked remotely. The technical support team helped agents with locked out accounts and slow systems that refused to action agent's commands. Agents were generally not frustrated with system failures because it meant *'time out'* but an agent who needed to improve on his/her quality or AHT would not like system failure because that would mean that his/her statistics would not have a chance of improvement for that day. That stated, in the following chapter, I turn my attention towards the copying mechanism employed by the call centre agents in order to deal with what many consider to be stressful job.

Chapter Four: Coping Mechanisms at Greater Brand Company

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on the ethnographic information specifically related to the coping mechanisms that agents employ in order to deal with the work stress which they have. I have deliberately chosen to focus directly on a few agents only in order to bring to life their daily work experiences, yet it must be mentioned that their experiences reflect the experiences of the other agents employed at GBC.

4.1 Transition from trainee agent to a full time call centre agent

In the previous chapter the training process was outlined and when this training process is complete all agents generally could not wait to take their first call, regardless of the warnings from senior agents that they should enjoy the training time whilst it lasted. During training period agents want to have their own headsets and to be fully part of the GBC call centre, but they do tend to realize that they are different when they are still in training because they are normally amongst the very few people who are still excited about their job. As noted in Chapter Three, during recruitment agents are warned about the dangers of routine work and the hardships they will experience in coping with that. Most agents in the interview stage claim that they do not get bored and give reasons that are testament to that statement. However, things do change very quickly once an agent has taken his or her first call. Drawing on my own personal experience I remember when I took my first call; it was exciting and scary at the same time. I had an idea of what to expect but my reaction still came as a surprise to me. I panicked, I took longer than I thought I would and my navigation skills were lacking. The first day is hard for most new agents "going live"; in actual fact the first month is still a bit confusing. Once it goes on to the second month, most agents start developing trends in their techniques and start crafting their own styles. These styles are either good or bad and

they are what separate those agents who will enjoy their work from those who will be frustrated beyond measure. My biggest concern from the time I was both an agent and a supervisor was maintaining a calm demeanor with customers, especially when it came to irate customers. Speaking in the right tone and saying the right things is what I always taught the agents in my team when I was a supervisor; most agents however, believed that being frustrated warranted them the right to be rude to the customers. I found it strange that the agents who were my successors started to act inappropriately at an early stage, and it was hard to assess whether it could be attributed to their own personality or to the nature of the job at hand. The agents just appeared to have little respect for customers in general, which, I initially presumed, was because they were not being trained properly. However, the fundamental nature of the call centre, namely its routine structure, results in agents *'acting out'*.

During the research process agents often complained about how they had to do the same thing regardless of what their mood was. In our focus group discussions I therefore asked them a controversial question that I knew would question their current beliefs, but which I believed was necessary to ask. I posed the question of why they were struggling with the routine structure of the call centre when they had been told about it in their interviews, and all of them had expressed their ability to deal with routine work. It was imperative that I asked what had changed. I got numerous responses which I have chosen to list as quotes because that will provide a richer meaning as to how they felt. Some of the answers I received from the agents include:

"It is the same thing day in and day out, they want to know their lug numbers, they have locked their phones, customers call in for stupid queries that they ought to know and we are meant to still say "thank you for calling GBC call centre" like we mean it. It irritates me and that's what makes my whole day much longer than it needs to be". (Zama Phandle, female)

"For me the worst part is that you are expected to act like a robot, as if you are not human. A customer swears at you, and it is fine, they shout at you and use a whole lot of abusive language and it is still fine. I don't like working for a company that does not put me first. There needs to be a line to how far the customer is always right. A swearing customer who starts swearing from the minute you answer the phone is a lunatic and any person can tell you that, it is no brain surgery but our group of QA will still penalize you for daring to be human. At the end of the day it almost feels like what is the point of it all." (Bolekwa Bhukazi, female)

"First of all when you do accept the routine, you are merely trying to get a job, I am being honest here, I know everyone is looking at me like "how can I say that, but you all know it is true". I had no idea it was to this extent. It looked like a fancy job and a part of you assumes that you will be talking to adults and you don't have any idea how childish people turn when they are on the other side of the call. I also did not think that the rules were going to be so strict, especially AHT (average handling time). Till this day I am not sure how to maintain my AHT and still be able to provide good service to my customer. It is hard sometimes I feel like it is worse than asking me how to fly." (Sithobile Shezi, female)

"I did say that I could do it, in fact when I said it I believed it, it was not lip service it was me saying something that I honestly believed. I thought that I could do this job, I often see when you go to a KFC or a McDonalds something about employee of the month, I knew that here at the GBC call centre you do things like agent of the week and star performers. I thought that was going to be me. I just had no idea that you had to sweat so hard for it. At this rate I have not even managed to make 1st place in my own team so I feel like I can pretty much kiss my employee of the month dream goodbye and I am not even bitter about it, I don't want it anymore, I just would like a new job where I never have to speak on the phone ever again." (Luzuko Muvo, male)

From the above direct quotes one can already see the pattern of the explicit barrier that the routine structure of the job creates between the agents and GBC. The feedback from the agents is that the routine nature of the job is more overwhelming and challenging than what the agents had anticipated, and as a result, agents found ways to cope with the routine so that work could be bearable for them. For example, an agent in my group by the name of Zama (pseudonym) would always have an issue before her shift started, her attitude was very negative and she thrived on telling you how tired she was. When a shift started and everyone was sitting at their desk, Zama would be loitering around the call centre trying to find a USB, or if not a USB then she would be looking for her headsets because the ones she currently had were problematic in some way; either she could not hear customers or they could not hear her. This would take anything from 5 minutes to 15 minutes of "downtime". I started

realizing that it could not be a coincidence that Zama was always the one experiencing issues with her equipment irrespective of which hub the team was situated at, and so it became clear that she was avoiding work. She was giving herself time off, by having a later start to her shift, and whilst she was supposedly looking for a working USB she would be on a personal call or chatting to friends whose shifts had not started or had just ended. When I questioned her about her behavior she would however automatically claim that she was *"borrowing a USB"*.

The behavior of Zama portrays a startling similarity with the work of Molstad (1988), on Goffman's theory of Impression Management in understanding the strategies employed by workers in a brewery. Based on his research, Molstad (1988: 4) asserts that "workers in monotonous boring jobs will eventually lose interest and more specifically if the nature of their work is strict and prevents autonomy". Such workers, Molstad (1988) asserts, will then develop strategies to hide the fact that they are not working. Similarly, call centre agents at GBC frequently also give the impression of working by wearing their headsets while simultaneously speaking to their friends. Although these agents are not providing the service that is required of them, they are still giving the impression of working. Creating the impression of working at GBC varied between putting the customer on hold to go and look for a supervisor, signing off "call work" to attend to a customer query and the most favoured being shutting down their personal computers so as to avoid hearing customers. Goffman's theory of Impression Management highlights how people frequently develop strategies for creating an outward image of their persona. Goffman's (1959:59) theory can be utilized in this particular work context to explain how agents develop strategies to avoid work or getting additional work. Thus impression management is the "art of appearing productive" and at GBC is created by borrowing a USB for example, so as to appear productive as in the case of

Zama. It is argued that with Impression Management "first workers seek to avoid being noticed at all, and secondly, when under direct observation, they attempt to create the impression of being productively busy" (Molstad, 1998:56).

When I got the supervisor job in May 2007, I had vowed to myself that I would be a good supervisor, that I would look after the agents on my team and ensure that they knew they could depend on me. This decision was taken in direct response to my experiences with supervisors I had had at GBC. My first supervisor Mangiyise Mbuthwa lifted my image of what a supervisor should be, we all loved him, and we all thought *"he was cool"*. He never gave warnings or took any disciplinary action against us unless we were deserving of that disciplinary action, such as being late for three consecutive days in which case there was no way he could protect us. Then supervisors changed in December 2006, 6 months after I had started at GBC, and we had a different supervisor, Sanelisiwe Vezi, whom I did not consider to be the best of supervisors at this stage. In reality, there was no telling what to expect from her but my view was based purely on the perception which agents attached to most supervisors. As an agent at the time of Sanelisiwe's promotion to supervisor I believed that supervisors were harsh individuals who ruled with iron fists, and that Mangayise was the exception to the rule. In fact, I believed them to be hypocritical autocrats. To put it bluntly, I hated supervisors until I wanted to become one and that is why it was important to me that I approached my role differently, that I broke the norm, fought for my agents and made them believe that supervisors could be good and caring; after all I did have more than some of the agents because I had once had a good supervisor. I believe I achieved my goal of being a good supervisor because my agents were *"considered very lucky to have me as their supervisor"* by fellow colleagues. As a supervisor I made it my mission to ensure that they were valued, I coached them on all the systems and praised publicly and shamed privately.

Zama however appeared to be determined to turn me into a stereotypical supervisor by always pushing the boundaries by doing the wrong thing, which I initially believed was in retaliation from ill treatment, but, Zama taught me that it was bigger than that. It was as if she was determined to find reasons to be angry at all times, even when no reason existed. Once she was speaking to a customer, and it was a man who Zama considered to be overly friendly towards her and Zama was very unpleasant to the customer. The conversation was as follows:

"Zama: Hello, you are speaking to Zama how may I help you?

Customer: Oh wow Zama your voice is helping me already

Zama: Bhuti are you calling for anything important or are you trying to be a charmer? Some of us are here to work so if you are trying to try your luck then I will be forced to end this call. Thank you for calling GBC goodbye!"

The caller did sound suspicious but Zama never gave him a chance; he could have been joking which was not uncommon for customers. In such situations agents are expected to be patient with customers and to remain calm and while some agents did play along with it, and others disciplined them politely, hanging up was considered to be uncalled for at GBC.

 Agents, in addition, were often in fights because of the frustrations they experienced from the job itself and these frustrations created by the job surpassed the positive treatment from a supervisor. I soon realized that arrows of frustration were coming from different directions towards agents; from customers who called in, from QA's who reported bad results and high AHT, and all these things combined to produce a source of immense stress for them. The "nice supervisor" was quite simply not enough to prevent agents from getting affected. As for Zama, she could not effectively balance her deep emotions and hatred for the job with the fact that she still needed it. She managed to create havoc at every chance she got; she found an opportunity to retaliate; that was her biggest way of coping, by feeling that she was able to

produce the same amount of trouble to the *"system"* as it caused to her. As a supervisor I was firm in front of her but deep down I knew that she scared me, she seemed troubled and was somebody who was not always in control of her emotions. However, regardless of how I tried to fully get to understand her she never allowed me inside her head. I just learnt to cope with her outbursts and irrational behavior when it came to customers.

The one thing that was clear in the GBC call centre is that everyone commonly had one enemy, and that is what they called "the system"; this referred to all the tasks they were expected to perform as part of their jobs. Agents understood that targets are not set by the supervisor nor are they set by the quality assurers. As supervisors we in turn understood that it was not our call centre managers who set targets but they came from directors who were faceless to us. Time however, eventually revealed that we were all victims of targets and working structures which were put in place by the executives or board members of the GBC call centre who could never be directly questioned. However, when agents were frustrated with their job, they did not rationalize the fact that everyone, including their supervisors, also had their own deliverables although they were not chained to their workstation and taking calls, and as a result, everyone eventually became the "system". Agents eventually failed to differentiate between what was mutually agreed upon as *"being unfair"*, such as the AHT target and no time allowance to cool off after a call with an irate customers from tasks which they were responsible for and could be held accountable for such as coming to work on time and servicing customers according to the quality guidelines. For whatever reason the system ended up embodying some nonexistent concept which was *"in the air"*. Supervisors were the system, agents were system, customers were the system, quality assurers were the system, the network issues that customers experienced were the system, and agents preferred to blanket them together and came up with one system which was perceived as *"the"* barrier to what they wanted. As a result, agents retaliated against anything that differed from their desires

because in their minds the call centre "system" was faulty and they took on the role of trying to fix it. It was however often the measures they took in *fixing it* that created more trouble than good.

As a supervisor I considered myself to have a good team I as members of the team were hardly ever late for work which transformed into good AHT and good quality average. However, having a *'good team'* did not mean I was safe from issues that other supervisors experienced, it only meant that I experienced them to a lesser degree than the majority. Having a good team meant that when agents were *"being good"* and performing all tasks accordingly, I sometimes forgot that issues existed in the call centre. This generally happened when almost all agents were not choosing to deliberately cause trouble which meant agents did not feel any pressure from supervisors, quality assurers and even call centre managers. This calmness was mostly caused by less pressure being exerted by the board of directors which filtered through the call centre and cascaded down to the agents. During such times agents have a feeling of *"this is what I expected it would be like to work in a call centre"*. It then becomes clear that agents believed they would just be given headsets to speak to customers and that the job would be devoid of the pressure that accompanies call centre work. Nonkululeko Ndlovu said:

"I thought that it was going to be as simple as, headsets are ready and then you just speak to customers, no pressure from supervisors or meeting any demands from QA. This is when I really enjoy working here and I realize how people can be complacent in working here for a very long time, I guess they have more good weeks than me."

This gave me insight in understanding that there are times when everyone within the call centre has a good week, a week of thinking working in a call centre is *"not all that bad"*. The issue arises when they use measures which may not be according to the call centre protocol of getting to their own version of a *"happy working place in a call centre"*.

4.2 Meeting the targets: key performance indexes (KPI)

As a full time 3rd year student I believed that taking a position in a call centre was going to be an easy way to make money. I often told my friends I was going to be paid to take calls and talk on the phone, if anything it seemed like a joke to me. I soon realized when I started working that it was no joke, it was a real job and it required skill, patience and determination like any other job. In order to be a successful agent that did not have the added stress of being reviewed or performance managed, it was important to always meet the three stipulated targets. These targets were AHT[11], quality[12] and compliance.[13] Later as a supervisor, I always told the agents on my team that of all 3, compliance was the easiest KPI to control as there was no reason any agent should not receive the required 95% compliance where it was merely a time measure. However, having previously been an agent I knew that meeting all of the required KPI's was difficult but my job as a supervisor was not to let agents know that I also thought meeting these targets was hard to achieve. I therefore had to find ways to make it easy regardless of my beliefs, and I thus became somewhat of a hypocrite myself. As mentioned above, not all teams were fortunate enough to have members who would average the entire team's score which helped the supervisor because supervisors are rated on team effort and not on the performance of the individual agent. However, if agents were judged only on their individual capacities, the pressure was harder for low performing agents in low performing teams to average the score, especially if there was no "star performer".

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[11] AHT: Average handling time, this refers to how long each agent takes on a call. In the GBC call centre it is calculated on average bases for each day.

[12] Quality: adhering to the GBC standards of answering the customer call

[13] Compliance was referring to ensuring that agents always sign in on time, and when shift starts, agents return promptly from lunch breaks

Supervisor performance was judged on team performance, but agents were judged individually and thus it was imperative that they met individual targets as well as group targets. Individually agents needed to meet their own KPI's so that they could still have a job. If agents did not meet their KPI's for three consecutive weeks a process to performance manage them out of GBC would start, whereby their targets would be lowered for the first two weeks and then brought back to the normal. If the agent in question managed to meet the targets he or she would remain employed but highly monitored. Performance management was a 6 week process provided agents passed - which they often did because supervisors tried to make it easy for them as nobody ever really wanted to see someone out of a job for failing to meet targets. Another main reason why supervisors frequently opted not to perform manage agents out of the system was because the agents that failed to meet their targets were frequently the good ones; the kind of agents that took their time to help customers and were never rude, came to work on time but struggled with AHT. Rude agents who generally met their KPI's often did not perform in the right way according to the pre-defined standards and procedures. However, nobody could prove that these agents were not meeting their targets in the right way. There were times when customers would experience difficulty dialing out from their phone unless it was to a toll free number, and as a result would call the call centre reporting the issue and would be met by an irate agent because the minute the agent answered the call the customers was confrontational. This is how the conversation normally evolved "hello you are speaking to Nkululeko, how I may help you" the customer responded:

"This bloody GBC network does not work; I have no idea why I am still using your network because it is always giving problem. My kids are waiting for me outside school and I am stuck in traffic, I need to call them and tell them not to panic because I am on my way but I can't because your stupid network does not work. Why should I bother having a phone if I cannot use it?" The agent responded *" I understand your frustration and our technicians are currently working on it as we speak"*, to which the customer retorted *"You understand? You understand? Do you have kids stuck at school wondering where their mother is? I am sure you don't so don't come and tell me you understand, there is nothing that you understand. Your technicians are always working on it but you always have issues, I demand to speak to a*

supervisor, somebody higher than you that will give me more than I am sorry.Your I'm sorry can't do much for me".

As a direct result of customer responses Nobuhle from my team panicked when there were network problems. She would make promises that she could not necessarily keep in order to relieve the immediate tension, but in doing so, caused even bigger problems as customer became more irate when her advice did not work. Her famous lines included the following:

"Please switch off your phone for about 10 minutes and then you will be able to make calls, the phone just needs to breathe a bit."

"Please call us after 2 hours because our technicians would have fixed the network and you will be able to make calls".

"I will escalate your number to our technicians and let them know that it is experiencing network issues, please call us after 24hours because that is the turnaround time."

In cases such as these all customers would be irate because they could not make calls, and every agent was being asked for a supervisor, and as there was only one supervisor available he or she could not take calls from multiple irate customers simultaneously. The onus was on the agent to make the customer calm down, make him/her feel like he/she were being effectively assisted even though all an agent could do in reality was tell the customer to wait. This is where agents such as Thabo Qhawe in my team would use the time to fully explain problems to customers because he knew that high AHT was going to be adjusted for in account of network issues. He used the time to bond with customers and explain to them that he also could not call his family and that he understood their frustration. In one of our team meetings he stated:

"In network issues as an agent you just need to remember that customers are only human and if you were in their shoes you would also be just as frustrated and it would be worse if you knew there was a number to dial, surely you would also dial that number with the same amount of frustration".

In a call he received from a very angry husband who said that his wife was accusing him of switching off his phone, Thabo asked for the number of the customer's wife and assured the customer that he would call the wife and let her know about the GBC network issue. In the quality assessment form, what Thabo did counted as being innovative and going the extra mile for the customer. However, not all agents were Thabo, most agents were more than happy to use the infamous line which was to advise customers to switch off their phones and then switch them back on again. Agents were aware that in cases of technical glitches the option to transfer a call to a supervisor was not acceptable. As soon as a problem was experienced, The Technical Department would send out an email informing the floor about network issues and of the fact that they were not sure when the problem could be resolved. The email gave the agents a good enough picture of how the entire shift was going to look. Depending on the agent's experience they would either panic or want to run to the supervisors every single time they received such an email or they would relax and proactively script their own response for the day without having to worry about AHTs. In such situations, supervisors and call centre managers at least knew that high AHTs could be attributed to the network problem. For experienced agents who liked to take chances at every opportunity presented to them such scenarios presented valuable opportunities. When I was the agent, I used the time to send sms's, listen to music or chat on email with friends.[14] However, times have evolved because there are now different things being done by agents to cope with the network issues such as accessing facebook or chatting via email on their phone. Network problems however do result in emotional customers who believe it is their right to speak in any way to agents since they feel badly done by. In his article about brewery workers, Molstad (1998: 360) argues:

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[14] Agents are not allowed to be on personal phones whilst on shift unless helping customers with their queries but there is no a clear cut way to prove that the agent is not helping a customer.

> Brewery workers are relatively powerless in the face of technological control and managerial authority. They do, however attempt to take back some of the control over their labors. The process of influencing supervisors involves a concern for appearance and impression management aimed at avoiding supervisor attention and control. Workers try to avoid being noticed when idle and when under observation attempt to create the impression of being productively busy and unavailable for work. Alternatively they raise barriers to communication which prevent supervisors from intruding on them.

I will argue that the agents started to find ways to cope because it is too much for anybody to be listening to issues and problems for six hours per day while they have little to no control over rectifying the potential problem at hand.

 A common strategy which agents developed was listening to the radio with one ear and to customers with the other. Since the headphones had only one ear piece it was easy for agents to utilize the other ear piece for their own entertainment. If there was an important soccer game playing the male agents would listen for the score on the radio as well. Since they could not outwardly wear their cellphone handsfree headsets, agents would wear hooded jackets and cover their ears so that supervisors did not see they had two separate ear phones on. If caught they would take them off, only to replace them as soon as the supervisor was out of sight. That was the cycle of the call centre; nobody ever really did what they were meant to do, at least not all the time.

 In other cases, agents would leave their headsets unattended and run to the bathroom whilst the customer was speaking. Supervisors were not always around to look after their teams, sometimes they also visited other supervisors or went out to buy dinner, and for supervisors unlike agents, this was an easy thing to do because they were not watched or chained to their

workstations like the agents were. It was thus ultimately the supervisors fault if agents left their workstations because they were not there to supervise.

Another form of *"cheating the system"* was to put customers on hold and claim to go and look for a supervisor knowing very well that the supervisor was going to decline the request to help with an irate customer. The agent would then go and look for another supervisor, by which time the agent would have gotten a very long break. Agents commonly considered customers as being the biggest obstacle in terms of them achieving their KPIs, a as compliance they could control themselves but quality and AHT was subject to the customer. Some agents however, were always polite and thus quality was not an issue for them (although AHT often was) because they did not allow the customer to affect them, or the way they responded to them, regardless of how abusive a customer was. This is what one of the agents, Thabo, a very understanding and patient agent said about how customers made him feel:

"I am a customer, I know how it feels like and I cannot say I don't understand what they are going through now that I am worried about my AHT, I am worried about my AHT yes but I also don't believe I should make that the customer's problem. If the company wants to fire me or start me on a performance management just because I am treating their customers like humans then they are lying when they say they care about their customers because clearly they don't. I would challenge them to listen to my calls and explain to me what they would do differently".

Thabo was however an agent who was something of an anomaly at GBC in that he had great passion for people, and considered each caller to be a person to be in a conversation with, and that is why he managed his quality carefully. However, most of the agents felt differently and they found it confusing that the AHT was set at 135 but they were expected to deliver 90% quality. Since the average AHT was 135 it effectively meant that agents needed to spend on

average 135 seconds speaking to a customer. The idea of having an AHT that is so low is that

it theoretically permits agents the time to answer lots of calls. However, agents argued that it

was impossible to have an average of 135 AHT whilst still having enough time to assist the

customer according to the quality assurers' standards of a good quality call. The agents were

correct in their arguments because the GBC result trend also revealed the same thing; agents

with good quality KPIs spent longer than 135 seconds on average speaking to customers,

while those with a lower than 135 seconds call average had really bad results on quality

because they always rushed to wrap up their calls. This is what an agent Themba Zuma said

about the KPI system:

*"Does it make sense to you Ntsumpa? (ntsumpa is a Zulu slang word for Supervisor).
Seriously how can you be done speaking to an irate customer in 135 seconds? Yes I
understand you mean the average but even so, how can a good agent with good quality be
done in such a short space of time? To me you need to sacrifice one, if you want quality then
you have to be kinder on AHT.*

The sentiment was likewise expressed by Sithobile Shezi:

*"This whole AHT thing is a joke because depending on which shift you work, your AHT is
basically made easier for you just by working a different shift. We work at night, people are
back from work and they have already launched war on to us for all the crap we have been
giving them throughout the day. Maybe they cannot load the products or have network issues
but either way, they put it aside and tell themselves they will deal with it at night and since we
work night shift we suffer those consequences. Think about it, people who work in the
afternoon mostly get prank callers or people with very little time on their hands. Why is it
that this company is failing to see that? Why do we all have simple targets? Why are we
treated the same when we are not? We are comparing apples and oranges and expecting
what really? It does not make any sense, this whole system is a circus and we are just clowns
in it".*

 When I heard the agent say this, I realized it made sense and I discussed it in one of our team

meetings with my CCM (Call Centre Manager) and asked if there was any way we could

have different targets per team and the answer was simply *"no"*. I received a very typical

"management argument" and that was that if other agents could do it, so could they. Added to

that, management argued that agents will not always work night shift since teams are rotated,

and if indeed they wanted a customized AHT target then that meant they were comfortable with a lower AHT if they were moved to day shift. The CCM went on to state that the AHT stipulated by the company has been well researched and that management believed it to be achievable. The fact that a substantial number of agents achieved the target with ease, supported their statement. Taking this information back to agents strengthened their belief that the company did not care, it created permanent resistance from the agents' side and this resistance was played out in the call centre by the ways the agents survived within their jobs.

 Bulekwa was also one of the agents in my team; she had a soft voice and a very creative way of speaking to customers that clouded her sarcasm; she could be mean to customers and the customer would not be able to pick it up and the quality assurers were also at times, fooled by "her charm". She even had a little chuckle that made it seem like she was really pleasant when she was not, at least not all the time. This was her way of coping with the network issues or the product loading issues that would happen during month end. She could say things that would confuse the customers and before the customers knew it she was ending the call and saying the scripted goodbye, *"thank you for calling GBC, goodbye"*. During the network issues[15] day, Bulekwa tried to explain what network congestion was to customers and used the analogy of a small Kombi (mini bus) to explain to customers. Her words below illustrate her explanation:

"Uyabona mama, uma ikhumbi isigcwele wena uhlezi eback seat nomangabe usufuna ukuphuma ngeke uze ukwazi ngoba kumele ulinde wonke umuntu ohlezi ngaphambi kwakho ukuthi aphume, ayikho enye indlela ongenza ngayo kufanele ulinde angithi? Nayo ke inetwork congenstion icishe isebenzise okwe khumbi, njengamenje nonke nifona kanye kanye futhi nifaka amaproducts ethu kanye kanye yikho nje seyigcwele inetwork"

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[15] Network congestion: this was caused when many customers all called at the same time. The network which permits customers to make calls would get congested and automatically cut other customers from making calls. Whenever there were such issues then it would be a "Network issues" day.

Translated into English, Bulekwa was explaining to customers that network congestion is like a kombi that is full and that the customer would be the one sitting in the backseat trying to get out, but in order for her to do that, she would have to wait for the people that are sitting in front to jump out first and only then could the customer get out. Thus when there is network congestion it is when too many customers are calling in and texting at once and thus congesting the network. This was a good analogy for our low band customers who had a great sense of empathy and respected what was being said to them by the agents.[16] Network Congestion provided a great opportunity for agents to "slack off" and play the radio or catch up on their email conversations because they could speak in any manner to these customers and they would be grateful as they felt lucky just to have their phones answered for free. However, this was not the case with the higher income customers. These were the customers that knew their rights and understood what quality service was and thus agents did not get an opportunity to be slack with these customers. Any form of resistance with these customers was depicted as being rude, but the resistance was most commonly a result of an agent stressing once he or she saw what the AHT looked like. The updates that the supervisor sent were highlighted in red, and as a supervisor if the agent's AHT was too high, I generally wrote encouraging comments or comments that would ignite competition amongst agents and cause them to work faster at lowering their AHT.

The ideal way of meeting the targets at GBC is thus to effectively lower the duration of each call whilst not compromising on quality, but this was hardly ever the case. When AHT email updates were sent out to agents by their supervisors, agents saw this as a green light to start dropping calls or transferring the calls elsewhere. When asked about this, as to why they

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[16]Low band customers are customers who did not spend much money on calling or texting and thus generated very little profit for the business. These are the customers that barely knew how to use their phones and thus were always grateful no matter what, (mostly rural-based and semi -educated or uneducated people).

would sometimes advise customers to go elsewhere when they could help them, they would claim that they were reducing AHT and educating customers to be self- sufficient. These are some of the things agents said:

"If you want me to give you low AHT, I will give you low AHT but it should not matter how I got there as long as I am there. My quality is good and my AHT is good so what is the problem?"

The general argument put forward by agents was that one will suffer over the other (either quality or AHT) so it depends on what the supervisor is pressing that week. This is evident in the words of Sibongile Ngema in Muzi Mpungose's team:

"My supervisor does not always care about quality; I guess there is a way he finds good calls. I mean I am not rude to every single customer, in fact I am not rude it is just that customers piss me off at times and I cannot always control my temper, I am human after all but I know that supervisors do QA's once a week surely supervisors can find two good calls of which they always do because I average 92% and that is a good score".

Agents were always haunted by meeting AHTs because that was the biggest drive and the hardest KPI to meet consistently for most agents. Many of these struggling agents would therefore lower their AHT by dropping calls or pretending customers are pranksters, which awarded them the right to drop calls. For fearless agents this was the easiest way to ensure that their AHT was always low without compromising on quality. Meeting targets was the hardest thing for agents to deal with because it directly affected them individually and exposed them to other team members for being the cause of the team's poor results as results were sent to the entire call centre on a daily bases. This was a burden that no agent wanted to carry on their shoulders.

4.3 Embracing Company tools as coping mechanism

In his article about the brewery workers, Molstad (1998) also speaks of how the workers there used company tools as coping mechanisms. He argues:

> If a worker is on a forklift, the added mobility makes this procedure easier. One can drive around, perhaps with a load on the forks, and when under observation, can adopt expression of concentration and attention focused on work, Molstad (1998:357).

As similar type of using company tools or rather a form of fiddling for an employee's own purpose is when they take more than they should from company resources. Workers do this because they feel they deserve more than they are getting but also at times purely out of greed. Mars argues that sometimes it is hard to measure what the worker is taking from the company and therefore it is easier to get away with it. Mars argues:

> Where ambiguity over the quantity of a good, its quality, or its exact category is inherent in its nature, this may not only cloak fiddling but be specially developed to do so. It is not easy for example to compute the quantity of drink consumed at a wedding; or in the building trade, the number of bricks delivered to a site, the thickness of concrete on a path, the exact amount of copper used in a building, or the gauge of zinc in a roof, Mars (1982: 155).

In Chapter Three I spoke about call work, and in GBC, much like what Mars speaks of, there was no way of measuring how an agent took to find the nearest supervisor, and thus call work would vary based on how much that agent was planning on abusing it. In the previous chapter I mentioned call holding which is meant to be used for no longer than 30 seconds to query something or when an agent is transferring the customer to the correct huntline. In such cases call holding is allowed, and the correct script to tell the customer would be *"please hold whilst I look for more information to help you"* or *"please hold whist I verify the details you have given me"*, alternatively if an agent is transferring the call then he or she would say *"please hold whilst I transfer you to somebody that will help you"*. However, a substantial number of agents used call holding as an opportunity to share something with their peers, and in such cases they would put the customer on hold for no apparent reason and engage in

conversations with their peers whilst the customer was holding. If the supervisor was at his or her desk he or she would approach the agents in question. However, this was not always the case and thus agents could often get away with putting customers on hold without anybody picking it up. To put a customer on hold would take anything from 1 minute to 5 minutes and this action thus provided an added break that was not authorized. Agents honestly believed they were entitled to this time off because agents had very few breaks. This is evident in the words of Xolile:

"I don't feel bad when I put customers on hold for no good reason because I also need to think of myself as well. I sometimes just need a bit of a breather, some time off from these calls and just feel normal again". What do they expect when they don't give us proper lunch breaks? When are we meant to get the time to relax? Clearly they say we must fend for ourselves because they are not going to do it the right way."

The lack of remorse for such behaviours indicates that agents have a sense of entitlement in their behaviors. Other tools that agent's abuse is call work.[17] If the agent really was working on a call then call work is considered acceptable. However, if the agent was not working on a call then this was deemed to be problematic. Agents often used this time to go to the toilet or to quickly eat their unfinished food at their desks. In other cases agents needed to return an important call from home and they took call work. They didn't bother to ask their supervisors because they knew they would most likely say no anyway. Since call work was a click of a button in their system, agents just changed their status from "available" to "call work" and they didn't receive any calls. The reasons given for utilizing call work to personal ends included, *"breaks are not long enough"* and agents thus saw it necessary to reward themselves with call work. Zonwabo, an agent on Peter's team, stated:

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[17] The actual use for this tool is when the agent is filling in information with regards to a call that he or she has taken but does not want to get another call because he or she is still working on the system.

"I don't do it all the time but when I do it I try not to feel guilty especially if I did not even have enough time because I was busy attending to an irate customer or loading customer products and the system took longer than it should have to complete the process. It is not like you ever come back to say, I noticed that you took your break 6 minutes later, here is your 6 minutes back. If I am hungry and I need to eat, I take call work. Ultimately it means the same thing to me because if I don't eat I will lose concentration and besides it is not like I take another break, I just take 5 minutes ukuthi ngibambe umoya (just to boost my energy levels). Sometimes you need to take a break from calls and take 5 to 10 minutes to yourself. I don't believe that is so wrong. Although what I am doing is seen to be the bigger crime because I am an agent, the bigger crime is making people work under such conditions where we don't even have enough time to digest our food. I suffer from indigestion ever since I started working here because I don't chew, I don't have enough time to make calls to my family and eat my food at the same time. I eat and talk, eat and talk. One small little call work cannot hurt anyone, that's what I think".

Generally, supervisors overlooked call hold and call work provided agents didn't significantly abuse the system, but some agents tended to be wreckless and put everyone in question by their behavior. If an agent took call work for 15 minutes or longer, it generally got back to the supervisor who would then be questioned as to why the agent was on call work without any assistance from the supervisor. This was a fair question to ask the supervisor because call work would only get out of hand if a supervisor was not doing his or her job of supervising the agents. In some teams, the relationship between a supervisor and the team was so bad that the agents were more than happy to get their supervisor into trouble. A supervisor may, for example, have said no to an agent when the agent wanted a day off or wanted to swap shift times for a particular day and the agent thus rationalised that if he or she took call work then he or she was punishing the supervisor.

The biggest problem at GBC call centre was thus that supervisors and agents appeared to speak different languages. Agents sometimes tried to make amends with supervisors by altering their behaviors but supervisors were quick to write off agents once they had a bad experience with them; supervisor tended not to believe that bad agents could change their

ways. Thus when agents tried to make amends and they were not acknowledged they asked themselves, *"Why bother being good?"* Mnqobi from Nwabisa's team stated:

"I tried, I tried for a very long time to show my supervisor that I had taken on a new leaf but she refused to see it. She has decided that I am bad news and it looks like she wants to get me fired, and if she will work extra hard in getting me fired, I will work extra hard in giving her sleepless nights. Unfortunately I know you guys get bonuses on our targets and if I don't meet my AHT my entire team is pretty much screwed up and so I just won't bother. She does not see my efforts so why bother? She does not allow me to swap even though I have the lowest AHT in the team. All because I have been absent a number of times and been late, I explained my situation to her but she chose not to care, I say let's both not care and see where she will get her bonus from".

Nomusa from Nwabisa's team shared a similar standpoint:

"What I don't understand is why must we all suffer from other people's sins? Our entire team is not allowed to swap and that is because one person decided to mess up the team by being irresponsible so we all get punished? I understand team work but being punished unnecessarily is not it. This is not primary school and so I don't quite get why we are being treated like little children. I was not able to attend a family outing all because our team is not allowed to swap. I hate this stupid job; I get angry just thinking about it".

In the call centre, as noted, time is a factor. Being signed in on one's personal computer on time means that agents are ready to take the first call and this means productivity can be maximized. However, time is not only about arriving at work on time but it is also measured during breaks. When agents return from a break they need to be signed in on time and if they have experienced issues with their system and could not sign in on time, they would record that as "downtime". Once the issue is sorted and Technical Department has announced that downtime problem is solved agents need to sign back on time. The saying "time is money" is literally brought to life at the GBC call centre. For the business, it is a rule of thumb that agents must be signed in and ready to take calls when they are meant to be. Any form of agents being idle is meant to be a result of no calls coming in and not because they are not signed in at their workstations. This is the business rationale of the company, but is not one that the call centre agents seem to have embraced. According to the call centre agents the

time factor was one of the main reasons working in the call centre was so difficult; all time spent doing anything that was not work related needed to be accounted for. Agents could not get up and stretch their legs simply because they were tired of staring at their screen; getting up to go to the lavatory required an agent to sign out of their system on one of five pre - logged options which include (1) call work, (2) system fault, (3) unavailable, (4) break and (5) end duty. 'Break' and 'end duty' could not be substantiated if it was not the correct time for the agent to be signed out on such a basis. It thus left the agent with only three options (system fault, unavailable and call work) one of which required a lot more help to substantiate than the others. 'System fault 'meant that agents needed to log a fault with the technical team stating that they had experienced problems with their personal computer or any other work equipment. In most cases agents chose to sign out on call work when they needed to rush to the lavatory or answer an important personal call. However, agents were reprimanded for taking part in these *"illegal activities"* within the business but they still took their chances as they believed that they had the right to do so. Even agents who did not have a similar sense of entitlement still believed they had no other choice because of the short break times that they had and thus they joined in as well. There were also times when agents would feel like they had *"just had enough"*. This feeling of *"enough"* was further exacerbated by accepting a call from a frustrated customer who would transfer his or her frustration to the agent, thereby causing the agent to be emotionally unsettled. As a human, I understood why the agents would want a break just to calm their nerves, the fact that I was once in that position gave me an even better insider's perspective on something that any human could instantly understand as well. Thus, to me, it did not make sense that the company did not make allowances for such small breaks. Agents who could not deal with the shortage of free time, thus found ways to create time for themselves. Agents could, for example, click the

unavailable button and thus they were still signed in but were not getting calls, as evidenced by Nomusa's words:

"I click unavailable when I have had enough, enough whining, shouting and explaining myself and I click unavailable. Sometimes it is all just way too much and I find myself thinking I cannot handle this anymore".

When asked about some of the other ways in which agents try to get some quiet time, they shared a few things with me that even as an 'insider' I did not know. Musa from a Zunaid's team stated:

"I am bad and I know it, I probably coined every trick that ever was in the book when it comes to absconding company time. I have worked in the call centre for a very long time. I have been through good management and I have been through bad management. There has been a cause to fire me and to be quite honest there is some form of loyalty for me towards the company for failing to fire me. It means they kind of understand why I have to do the things that I do. I am late too often than the average person but I understand the "coaching process" so well that I improve when it happens and I am shocked that they have not come up with a rule to counter–act that rule when an agent is abusing it. This is the main reason why I believe what I am doing is okay, I think the company just threw a bunch of rules together not necessarily because they serve a greater purpose but just because a company needs to have rules and this is the reason why I cannot feel bad for awarding myself a break. I am sure if one person with enough logic were to review the rules, a break, ample breaks that allows agents to be fully charged to take the next call would be provided for at proper intervals not "lo lwabish owenzakalayo laykhaya" (not the rubbish that is happening here).[18]

To fully comprehend Musa's standpoint it is necessary to have an understanding of the team and I will give a bit of a background on Zunaid's team.

Zunaid's team was devided on the basis of length of employment. As mentioned above, the call centre expanded tremendously in size from 2006, but prior to that there was a steady recruitment process, only when agents resigned, got fired or were on maternity leave, would recruitment take place. The ideal for supervisors was to get a new team, a group of fresh new agents who could be molded to their style of leadership. I remember when I was an agent and

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[18] Although the word "khaya" in Zulu means home, in this instance it served to mean *here*, as people can use it interchangeably when referring to a particular place and their household rules

our supervisor changed. I did not like the new one and nothing that she did was right in my eyes even when she was deserving of praise; sentiments which were shared by my entire team. The process of successfully taking over a supervisor's team only worked if the team hated their current supervisor and thus would give a chance to any new person employed as supervisor. This provided agents with a glimmer of hope because in their minds *"no supervisor could be worse than ours"*. This was the case in Zunaid's team as he took over an existing team. Thus a large part of how the teams behaved when it came to time was based on how much they respected their supervisor. A team that did not like their supervisor would tend to "extract" more time from the company in various strategic ways. Nandipha's team was a group of females and most of these females worked with Nandipha as fellow agents before she became a supervisor. This team had a strong sense of friendship and was ruled in an egalitarian manner. This was the case however, until agents started behaving like "other agents", meaning that they also started breaking the rules. For Nandipha it was always hard to maintain a friendship and lead at the same time. I remember, discussing this with Nandipha and telling her that she was going to be in a tough situation because at some point she would have to enforce rules and when that point came the friendship would in all likelihood, be broken[19].

For Nandipha this day came sooner than we had anticipated when an agent on her team took call work for a personal phone call. She was on a call for about 20 minutes which was an extremely lengthy period especially since it was taken all at once. This placed Nandipha in a tough situation as she had to explain to her call centre manager how she had allowed an agent to take call work for that long. This also led to an investigation on Nandipha's team in terms of how they used their time, how much call work the team took, how long they were

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[19] I told her this prior to my research

unavailable for and whether their entire systems fault had been logged with the technical team. Following this incident Nandipha was brought into question for anything that was not done as per company procedure. The truth is, all supervisors had call work issues or time issues but supervisors didn't always feel like fighting with their agents, sometimes they just wanted peace, and sometimes, as supervisors, it did not feel right to enforce rules which they do not necessarily agree with. However, there are rules that all employees at GBC have to live by to ensure that there is no excessive abuse of company time, and such rules included monitoring the team on the live monitors and supervisors spending time at their desks so that agents knew they were being watching.

4.4 Cost impacting fraudulent behaviors

In the GBC call centre there was always a way every misdemeanor could be graded (like time as evident above) from low risk to high risk of possible loss of employment. The majority of the agents valued their jobs in monetary terms and thus engaged in low risk activities so that they reduced the possibility of losing their jobs. It was a well-known fact that consistent late coming could lead to being managed out of the company, but agents actively sought out ways around that. Call work could lead to a verbal warning and agents could then opt to move from call work to signing out on systems fault although this particular choice required more work, since the agent had to log this with the technical department. Again the sentiment held true, it could be done with minimal risk of getting fired. There were also agents who stole products from the system and gave them to their families but this behavior was stringently concealed by agents still in GBC's employ. I did however, through some luck, meet up with an agent who had been fired for stealing products. A friend of mine had borrowed a book from Lunga, the agent in question, and as Lunga wanted it back he came to join us when we were having coffee. He started talking generally and then went on to state:

"Ahhh GBC, you guys still work there? That is a funny company, ya but shame I enjoyed working there. It was fun! I am sure Noxolo still hates me; wherever she is I give her nightmares. (Noxolo was his supervisor). *She was not very nice to me from the start so in a way she is to blame although I feel sorry for her now. I used come late, I would take a lot of call work because my baby mama was stressing me at the time and so she would buzz and buzz and buzz until I eventually felt compelled to call her back and when I did, I suddenly forgot that I was calling her from the work phone. Did you know that you could call from a work phone? When you press call work there is an option to dial. I used to call her there; it was call work right (he said, as he chuckled to himself) so what was wrong with me calling from there? It was an office phone and I put it to good use. Hell, even government employees can use their office phones and government is stingy. The funny part is that I was not fired for making these calls; they fired me for dropping calls. Dropping calls? That was their major concern, their precious customers, but they did not know that I was chowing their money, selling some of their products to family and friends on the outside and sometimes even loading things for free for my friends and family."*

At this point my friend and I were just listening to him talking but I remember feeling very little remorse for the company, but instead, ironically, I felt some sadness for this Lunga who seemed really disturbed. It did not make much sense to say he stole because somebody made him steal, but I could understand him saying he took call work to call his girlfriend because she was buzzing his phone.

However, the persistent need for revenge towards the call centre (for Lunga as for many others) was always the drive for wrong doing. Agents directed most of their anger towards supervisors without realizing that it was a case of a dog biting its tail. During my time as an agent, and of my research, only one agent was fired directly for stealing from the company property. Suriya had stolen something to the value of R60 and when her supervisor discovered this she was escorted out of the building immediately. This gave a scare to the agents in our groups that if you steal, you are out of a job, and I remember everyone arguing the fact that she was fired for something that was valued at R60 and that was an amount you could easily spend on a meal. All the agents that were at the canteen at the time Suriya was escorted from the building were shocked at the stupidity of that agent. Although agents struggled to admit it to themselves, or say it out loud, they did need the job and tried hard to

play along the lines of safety.[20] Agents were all given staff sim cards in 2008; the cards allowed them to make calls for free but only to the GBC network. While rumours abounded that agents were leaving their staff sim cards at home to run a Mr Phone business, my research did not reveal any direct evidence. A traditional Mr Phone business works in such a way that people call using Mr Phones, the owner of the call charges a certain amount per time spent on a call. If this indeed was happening it would mean serious abuse of company property and was also against the contract that agents signed which stipulates that they are not meant to use the phone for personal use. Staff sim cards were one of the main attractions of the job, one might even call them the main perk, and thus having the ability to call for free was enough for most agents and they did not see the need to accrue any additional income from this means at the serious risk of unemployment.

4.5 Absenteeism as means of gaining control

The GBC call centre is as noted in Chapter One, a 7 day a week and 24 hours access call centre. Although the Durban branch closes business at midnight every day the other branches stay open to attend to customer calls. Days off are structured in such a way that teams get two days off per week. Teams however, do not always get two consecutive days off. Days off could be on a Tuesday and Wednesday or Monday and Saturday, for example. My research revealed that agents hated this set up; they hated working on weekends and hated working on public holidays. Salaries also caused major issues at GBC as every month there were a number of agents who were paid less than what they were meant to be paid. Agents in the same team were also not automatically paid the same amount and this was a further cause of grievance. When I was an agent I thus chose not to ask what my team members got paid

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[20] It did not mean that they were innocent at all times but it did mean that the majority of them did not steal tangible products and there was essentially not much to steal except for products that could be loaded and the usage of the staff sim card.

because it was too upsetting for me. To me it did not make sense to have different salaries in one team when agents worked exactly the same number of hours in that month. The few times I did ask about my salary I received very unsatisfactory answers and I therefore made a decision not to ask again as it seemed much safer emotionally that way. However, not all agents shared my sentiments; some were always ready for a fight and used to compile their pay slips in order to count all hours worked and then took them to HR. After doing all of that and getting no help agents would be frustrated. The frustration was evident in the calls that they handled because they would be 'snappy' at customers and rude in their tone. Agents would often have made plans with their salaries, and when the amount expected did not match what was in the bank, agents crumbled and frequently cried when it all became too much for them. Pay day at the GBC call centre was therefore a nightmare. As supervisors, this was the one time when we felt intimidated to even speak to agents about fixing their AHT because it broke the unspoken rule of giving them space, at least in my head it did. By giving them space, it meant that it was one day of immunity from GBC targets because as supervisors we empathized with their salary issues.

It was '*pain day*' as we all eventually termed it, since everyone was in pain. Agents were employees and the role of the employee is to work, and if the employee has worked then the role of the employer is to pay the employee for the correct number of days worked. That was the contractual agreement and when that was broken one could not be expected to perform duties as if things were normal. Agents did not work because they thoroughly loved what they did; they did not wake up in the morning to volunteer their time and thus while payment was beyond my control it was important for me, as a supervisor, that I allowed them time to 'cool off' and 'let off steam'. If an agent was not paid (which was also very common), I would buy him or her supper and try to invoke a sense of calmness about debit orders that would bounce and the children's school fees that needed to be paid. It did however frustrate

me that I did not have the financial means to help. Thus I did what I knew I could do as a token of my support. In my time as a supervisor, I always made sure they had all their timesheets stapled together so that they could provide proof of hours worked and they knew that there was a nod to indicate it was okay for them not to stress about AHT or needing time off from calls for a second or two. I made sure that they knew I was supporting them and that I cared. However, such care and support was not enough for agents who felt short changed by the system. If it was payday and agents inevitably realized that they did not get paid, they would not pitch for work the following day and the reason was that they did not have transport money; something that supervisors could not dispute. When I was a supervisor it would infuriate me when an agent did not come for work but deep down I believed their anger was justified. However, in Zunaid's team the agents tended to be far more aggressive, and on one particular day an agent by the name of Phumlani refused to sign in and take calls. He said he could not sit there and lie to himself. He said he was hungry and tired of the same thing. I remember how I quickly went for my notebook to write what he was saying that day and while it was rich data it felt wrong to have to document a very emotional and hard time in his life. This is what he said:

"it is not fair for us to be treated like slaves, like idiots! We worked for this money and how come every month we have to feel like beggars. This is how we are treated after stressing day in and day out for the AHT and finally I have it right and I feel somewhat proud and then this nonsense happens. I have to go to the bank and be embarrassed in front of my family yet I still came here. I was about to sign in Zunaid but why am I doing that? What for? Nobody knows when I am going to be paid. How am I meant to concentrate knowing that I have not been paid?"

As mentioned in Chapter Three in reference to call work, supervisors did overlook some of the agent's wrong behaviors as long as the agents did not abuse them. In Phumlani's case when he did not want to take the calls it was one of those situations that Zunaid overlooked because he understood where he was coming from. Phumlani was asking valid questions that

we as supervisors could not answer. He eventually took his calls and Zunaid offered to deposit R500 in his account until he got his salary. Ironically the following day the call centre experienced a lot of absenteeism, even from people who did get paid, but it was not unheard of for people to *"ride in the wave"*[21].

While absenteeism tended to be notably high at pay day, agents did not only stay absent at payday, but rather, at times an agent would start claiming to have a headache, saying that he or she could not work and needed to go home. The agent would arrive for work only to sign "end of duty" 2 hours into their shift. This caused huge problems with the performance of the team because the compliance would have hours missing from that agent. Although agents would never verbally say that it was payback for salary issues, as supervisors and fellow employees we knew it was. In instances when agents needed swaps or needed to attend a wedding or a funeral, they would just not pitch for work. This was done in order to get some time off from the frustration of work, as evident in the words of Zama:

"I take days off, I have to. I cannot always wait for leave days and swops to come through. When things need to be done they need to be done. I cannot spend my entire life basing my decisions on my job. I need to draw a line somewhere and when it comes to things that need me, I try for a swop but if that does not come through, I have 30 days of sick leave and I put them to good use"

This sentiment was echoed by Sibongile from Nandipha's team:

"I was scared to be "sick" before. It felt wrong and it required me to always come back looking the part of a sick person and getting a doctor's note to support that I was sick which was always a lot of work as well and sometimes cost money because the doctor that gives out sick notes is now aware that he is in demand so he can up his prize of which I think he did. But the day I discovered that everybody does it and others even fake being admitted to hospital, I thought to myself what the hell. I am also going to be sick".

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[21] Some agents would also pretend to have not been paid during pay, this was done in order to abscond from work.

Although I argue that according to Mars's theory of group and grid, GBC call centre is more 'grid' than 'group' in terms of the nature of call centre work, there are nonetheless elements of 'group' which exist in call centre work, especially on an informal level. For example, when it comes to absenteeism on payday agents collectively tend to stay away, even agents who have been paid stay away, thereby expressing a sentiment of 'group' solidarity among agents. There are many frustrations that call centre agents experience with their job, and some of these work frustrations they deal with and others they decide to face head on by devising strategies of their own to always be prepared for whatever comes their way. Agents compartmentalize how to deal with a customer that is irate and calling about a network issue, they have their own responses which they are ready to tell to the customer. When an agent is late for work the agent is already prepared with the story as to why he or she is late. Similarly if an agent is not meeting the AHT target there is always a story as to why this is. Agents embrace strategies in order to survive in the call centre because failure to have a reason ready exposes wrong doing and could possibly result in dismissal. Molstad (1988:56) argues that "worker control strategies often involve simultaneous use of both technical and social skills to influence the work process". In the case of GBC call centre, workers used their technical skills to know that they can abuse systems such as call work and use this to give the impression of working. Much like the brewery workers in Molstad's (1988:56) study who often found "malfunctioning machinery that required more attention and more trouble to operate. They also found that the slower the production technology, the fewer demands it made on their attention efforts," the GBC agents used the existing systems to buy themselves time or to make a problem seem worse than it was, for example if there was a generic network problem. In order to spend as little time as possible speaking to customers, agents would just provide a generic answer to all customers without probing to find out if that particular customer had a different problem. As further argued byMolstad':

> When workers find themselves unable to exercise control of the major aspects of their work activity, they turn their attention to minor aspects. Their control strategies may appear trivial, but they demonstrate the lengths to which workers will go to assert their personal autonomy Molstad (1988:359)

At GBC call centre agents exercised their personal autonomy through absenteeism on payday. This was not always based on call centre agents not being paid, as indicated above, but it was a way for them to show that they held some form of power. Agents tended to stay absent from work on days that were deemed to be a problematic, such as payday, when many agents had issues with salaries being short paid. Many agents would stay away from work even if they had no issues with their salary. Since it was largely the norm that many agents were short paid, it was not easy for management to tell whether an agent was lying about being underpaid or not because they were also not in tune with payroll in order to tally up the total hours worked along with how much agents needed to be paid.

Mars (1982:227) argues that "Inside and outside the workplace, fiddles often represent untapped potential", in a sense that workers can be fiddling on something that the company can find useful. This offers a new perspective that not all fiddling is actually negative. In some companies, fiddling may lead to an employee discovering a hidden talent such as information technology for example, by doing the wrong thing to try and cheat the system; employees may find a rare skill that can be useful to the company. Therefore Mars (1982) argues that if companies embrace such fiddling and allow workers to openly do it, they may stand to benefit from it. However, in the GBC call centre fiddling tended to be negative and could not in any way benefit the company, aside from the Mr Phone busines which was an opportunity that the GBC company was already a part of. Mars (1982) classifies fiddling people into donkeys and those remain in the isolated subordination, hawks which are open to individual entrepreneurship, wolves which act in the tight work groups and vultures acting in the loose work groups. I will argue that call centre agents are donkey's which are in isolation

subordination because they are in utter mercy of their supervisor, lack autonomy but don't often get an opportunity to consult with other agents because their job task is isolated. However, agents are able to combine and work as a group mostly based on shared frustrations which result in similar outcomes such as absenteeism or abuse of call work, putting customers on hold or providing the wrong information for the purpose of improving KPI's. My argument is therefore is that when employees are characterized as donkeys as stated in Mars's book, there are no clear limitations to how much harm they may cause in the company, it merely depends on how they cope with their frustrations.

n the next chapter I will offer further insight into the individual lives of agents, their journeys within GBC call centre and the different ways in which they cope with their work.

Chapter Five: The person behind the call centre agent

5.1 The case of Zama Phandle

While working as a supervisor at GBC I had an agent in my team by the name of Zama Phandle, whom I considered to be a bright agent who was capable of more than she delivered. In my team, as a supervisor, this is an assessment I consistently gave. However, I also considered Zama to be very bitter about working in a call centre. While the reason for her bitterness was unclear to me, I speculated that it was based on her feeling that she deserved better than to be a call centre agent. She would often say *"Kanti mina ngenzani emhlabeni"* meaning *"what have I done to deserve this?"*. This is an isiZulu phrase often said by a person who believes that their life is cursed and culturally it can only be because they must have done something to deserve it. Thus, for Zama, working in the call centre felt like a punishment for her. As I was not her supervisor when she first started in the GBC it was difficult for me to determine if she was always perceived things this way, or whether she eventually turned bitter after the *"ill treatment"* she argued changed her to be the person that I had grown to know her as.[22]

According to the Locus Control Theory I would argue that Zama had an external locus of control because she constantly allowed the external factors to affect the way she would behave. It was almost as if she had no power to channel whatever situation was brought her way into a positive one. Carrim (2006:75) states that "when stress levels are high within a job situation, individuals who have an external locus of control tend to experience job dissatisfaction". This is much like the fiddlers that Mars (1982) speaks of who feel as if they have no choice but to fiddle in their working environment. Zama struggled to positively do her job and therefore entered into her own form of fiddling, and that was cheating customers

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[22] I eventually got promoted to call centre supervisor and became Zama's supervisor

of the good service that they deserve. During coaching sessions with Zama I would sit with her and try to engage with her and get to know more about her life. I did this both as a researcher and supervisor, in order to effectively fulfill the dual role of managing Zama while simultaneously understanding her. Zama was the eldest of four children; she had a sister who lived with her in her flat on South Beach on the Durban beach Front, as well as two other siblings, aged twelve and sixteen, who lived with her mother in Umtata in the Eastern Cape. From the way Zama spoke about her family it was clear that she was very protective of them, but it was also clear that she was somebody carrying a lot on her shoulders. Zama had a very short temper, not only with customers but also with her colleagues around her. Zama openly admitted that she did not like her job, but needed it, and acknowledged that she had also reached the stage where she could not bring herself to value the fact that she still needed her job. During our coaching sessions I would make her listen to her pre-recorded calls, and on one particular session she went as far as calling the customer stupid without putting on the mute button, which would have prevented the customer from hearing. While on the phone to the customer in question, Zama started talking to her friend Bolekwa who was commonly perceived to be another *"trouble maker"*. The customer was busy talking to herself in the background wondering what was going on. When I listened to this call, I felt my entire body turn cold. I was extremely angry with Zama as a fellow human being and as a supervisor. I was very grateful that all our calls were recorded because I could then listen to them without agents being there. On that particular occasion had Zama been there when I listened to the call, I may have been too reactional in my behavior and in my choice of disciplinary measures. I could not understand why she felt warranted to speak in that manner and it started to seem like she wanted to get fired. I was torn about what to do about that call; I knew I was meant to report it right away, to both the QA and my call centre manager, but I did neither. It haunted me that I was not doing what was procedurally the correct thing to do, by choosing

not to report the call, and I knew this was not the way in which a supervisor was meant to behave. However, I kept thinking if I submitted the call then Zama would get fired, or if she was lucky, she would have gotten a written warning and it would have been just a matter of time before she got fired.

Zama however, was not somebody who could stay away from trouble for long, and it seemed to me as if she woke up every morning thinking of ways in which she could almost get herself fired from work. It seemed as if this provided her with some satisfaction because otherwise, I speculated, she would have rectified her behavior. However, this did not change how I felt about the situation because for some inexplicable reason I felt like I owed it to her to give her a chance to repent. I believed I could "*save her*"; I wanted to try and cure the cause and not the symptom of her bad behavior. One can argue that I played just as much of role in her game because I allowed it to happen by not reporting her.

The following day when our shift started I told her that she must sign in and out on coaching; this meant that she should sign into the system so that Management would be aware that she was on duty, but because she was not going to be taking calls she needed to sign off coaching. I asked her to bring her headsets as per normal to the coaching session but, judging by the way she looked at me, it was clear that she knew she was in trouble.

During a normal coaching session agents bring their headsets so that both the supervisor and the agent can listen to the call and evaluate it together. Both parties then discuss how it could have gone better and what the agent needs to do better in future. Once the coaching session is complete, and the calls have been analyzed, then the agent signs the coaching form and new targets are set for the next coaching session. The airm is always for the agent to perform better. The good thing about this process is that it is a two way process because the agent gets an opportunity to negotiate what he or she believes can be achieved based on the scores and

both parties agree on a common goal. Although there was a universal target to meet, as noted in Chapter Four, if an agent was struggling to meet those scores then the band was lowered slightly for that week and set back at the normal band the following week.

This particular session, however, was not a typical coaching session as Zama had done something severely wrong and she needed to sign a written warning for that. I played the call for her and quietly observed her reaction; it was nothing I imagined it was going to be. There was no remorse; instead she smiled which prompted me to ask how she could be smiling. Did she understand the seriousness of this call? Zama's immediate response was "*but Andisiwe you can tell I was speaking to a stupid person here, how many times was I meant to repeat myself? This person did not understand me*". I internally counted to 10 and tried to speak. I was not sure what was going to come out of my mouth but I knew that I was trying very hard to contain my frustration whilst delivering my point. I heard myself saying to her:

"*Zama, you may think this entire thing is a joke and you may even feel justified in what you did. If this was not a job, if your job was not to speak to customers it would even be fine but unfortunately for you your job is to speak to people, whether they are smart or stupid your job is to speak to them. Within that you have things you are allowed to do and things you are not allowed to do but in your case you gave yourself the right to speak and do exactly as you please. And there are consequences for such behavior. I was hoping you were going to be remorseful but you are not.*"

I printed a warning form and I started typing whilst she sat next to me and watched. I then turned and faced her and I told her that I understood she wanted better for herself and that she wanted to get out of GBC but that if she still needed the job, and if the money was still of use to her, then she needed to behave in accordance with the expectations of the job. I also told her that she was lucky to have me as a supervisor because in any other team she would undoubtedly have gotten a final written warning. I told her I wanted change and that I was not

going to be this understanding in future. The truth of the matter is that I was more understanding than other supervisors, and I continued to be understanding of her, but internally I hated myself for not having enough strength to allow her to get fired. I strongly believed that she deserved to be fired but I knew she needed the money even though she often forgot that she did. Zama was the reason I knew I was not built to be a manager, because a real manager, in my perception, would not have been scared to hand out disciplinary measures if agents or employees were deserving of it. In the coaching session I had said to her that the least she could have done was to take of the headset and take a deep breath before she started calling the customer stupid. After that coaching session Zama tried to be polite and in an attempt to conceal her frustration would take off her headset when she got frustrated. However, in Zama's case, every customer required her to take off her headset which made me realize that she was not going to change her behavior.

In Mars's (1982:71) book "Cheats At Work" he writes about Donkey jobs that are strong in grid, like to the work of call centre agents. He argues:

> The Donkey type of fiddle is an appropriate response to this minimal autonomy. Since the job isolates the worker, the worker fiddles in isolation. Donkey fiddlers do not progress through a well-defined and socially set 'moral career' (that is which involves moral transformation).

Over the months of working with Zama, her behaviour upset me so much that I extended her amnesty periods and I eventually had minimal expectations from her, especially since I knew (as she did too) that I was never going to fully instigate for her to get fired. Zama essentially got paid for pitching up to work and speaking however she pleased to customers, and this was clearly her way of dealing with the lack of autonomy which she experienced from GBC.

Zama did however, during the time of my research, simmer down because agents were getting fired around her, and I believe this made her realize that she needed to respect her job more as she was in actual fact being protected. At times when I would randomly listen to her live calls,[23] I would deliberately compliment her every time she was nice to a customer or exercised some patience with customers. As a form of encouragement from me, I pulled her aside after we finished our shift to let her know that her attempts at fixing her wrong doing were not unnoticed. She responded by saying: *"I do try; I have always tried more so for you then I did for myself. My feelings about these customers have not changed but I know that you stick your neck out for us and the least I can do is try."* Zama's response was a further confirmation that she was never going to really change. If she were to change teams and work for somebody else who she did not feel she "owed" then I believe it is very likely that she would be back to her normal self. It is unfortunate however, that Zama was not the only *"trouble maker"* I had in my team.

5.2 The case of Bolekwa Bhukwazi

Bolekwa Bhuwazi was very good friends with Zama, and it was common to see the two of them giggling about something. They were commonly known to enjoy gossip about people, even if separated from each other, they would stand up to communicate with each other or if they were too far away from each other they would communicate via email.

Bolekwa was the only female amongst male siblings. She loved her brothers very much and was always talking about them and their children. Bolekwa was the eldest in the team, she was seven years older than me, and since the ages in the team varied considerably she was anything from nine years older than the rest of the team members. Like Zama, Bolekwa lived

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[23] This is similar to what one would do in a buddy system as explained in Chapter Three

on South Beach on Durban's beachfront, as did most agents who were not originally from Durban. Bolekwa had a very active social life and always had stories about how she needed to go home for something urgent. It was not uncommon for agents to lie in order to get a day or even few hours off. The GBC call centre allowed for agents to work additional shifts in order to earn money, but at the same rate of pay as agents would get for a normal shift which was R35 an hour. Agents who had been employed in the call centre for a longer period of time would get paid up to R40 an hour. This system of working additional shifts also helped recover possible lost hours that the business would incur if an agent were absent from work. Each day there would be a forecast of how many calls should be answered per shift and the call centre would lose money for every empty seat. A supervisor who had an absent agent would thus call an agent on standby and ask the agent to come to work as quickly as possible. Zoleka was one of those agents who frequently called upon. This was not typically a problem for agents who had enough energy and could last the double shift without burning out during normal shift time[24]. Statistics from earlier shifts however, also affected the following team, and thus if an agent started work earlier than he or she were meant to report, whatever discrepancies had happened in the earlier shift would carry over to the original team. The reason it happened like this is because each agent only has one identity code to log in with and this is linked by default to the agent's team. Although I did not want to affect agent's chances of getting more money, as a supervisor, I also did not want to stand by and watch one or two agents affect my overall team deliverables. It always amazed me how agents hated their job yet the prospect of more money had them waking up early in the morning to work two shifts.

In Bolekwa's case however, she did not wake up early, she would sign in late for her additional shifts and would take longer breaks and when I got to work that night (because our

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[24] This was also less of a problem for agents who were not primary care providers

team worked night shift), her performance would be a disastrous. The first time she logged in late when she was working a morning shift and did not submit downtime, I warned her about it and told her that the privilege of working extra shifts would be removed if it impacted negatively on her performance. While agents could make good money from working additional shifts, they believed that supervisors did not want them to work overtime because they were threatened that the agents would start to earn more than them. This was true for some supervisors, however, while I was not jealous of this overtime payment, I did not believe it to be healthy that agents should work so many hours. Agents working overtime practically spent most of their waking lives in the call centre. After my initial discussion with Bolekwa she stopped coming to work late for her additional shifts but started to stay off work frequently with the reason being that she was either sick from headaches or she had a sore .stomach. Bolekwa like Zama, was extremely negative about her job. However, unlike Zama, despite the fact that Bolekwa did not like her job she was kind to her customers and even when she was rude or sarcastic it was hard for the customer, or even a person evaluating her, to see that she was being rude because she had a soft voice. In addition to having good quality statistics Bolekwa also had good AHT (average handling time) and when she was at work she fully engaged and worked independently without asking questions or needing the supervisor to talk to her customers when they requested a supervisor. Instead, she would merely tell them "*I can offer you the same type of help that you would get from my supervisor*". I appreciated this from Bolekwa; she always improvised where she could. The biggest gripe with Bolekwa was that she was either consistently good for a week or consistently bad. My other frustration with Bolekwa was that as much as she hated her job and always complained that she would like to work for the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), she never spoke about ways in which she was making headway to achieve this goal. It surprised me that there was no sense of urgency on her side to get out of a life that she

claimed to hate. However, most of the problems Bolekwa cited as reasons for her absence could not be addressed because they were all hard to prove, I could not prove that her flat did not flood when she claimed it did, I could not prove that she did not have headaches, nor could I prove that she was being sarcastic to customers because her voice always sounded so gentle and polite. Thus, as a supervisor, I decided to let her be.

Mars (1982) speaks of time cycles and rule bending and this refers to workers using company time to benefit themselves. This happened a lot at GBC and Bolekwa was one of the agents in my team who was guilty of this. Mars (1982: 75) argues:

> We have seen that some people can increase their potential time at the expense of management time by "destructing' their activities (volunteering for a day - release course, for example) so that they are not pinned down to any one activity. Donkey jobs however, embed their workers in a set of highly structured controls - particularly over space. Though the cashier cannot leave her till, the security guard the premises he guards, or the bus conductor his bus, nevertheless some of these workers can fiddle time. In these jobs the fiddling of time is common and is focused *inwards* on the nature of the job itself, rather than *outwards* by playing one job against another. To fiddle, a worker in a highly structured job has to make a virtue of its structure. For example, absence from work is, by implication, just as highly structured as attendance at work. It is then, by recognizing and working within structured absences that the resentful worker fiddles time. In this way, absenteeism is a major fiddle.

In the call centre while certain agents would fiddle time through absenteeism, others would meet the targets and come to work on time but did not appear to be particularly interested in the job. This was often the challenge with agents, the agents with a positive attitude towards work frequently struggled to meet all their targets and perform accordingly, but agents with a negative attitude towards their work were often the ones who increased their supervisor's salaries, because supervisors attain a bonus incentive every month if the team met their KPI's (key performance indexes). It was always a "catch 22" and the agents knew this, hence they often behaved in an unacceptable manner because they felt *"untouchable"*. Nandipha, a supervisor, would often say "*let them do what they need to do as long as my car is paid for at*

the end of the month and none of my debit orders are bouncing why I should stress myself?"

That type of thinking never felt right for me although deep down I also realized I would not be happy if I suddenly did not get the salary I was used to because the star performers on my team got dismissed because they did not have what I considered to be the "right attitude". When looking at it from the money perspective it suddenly did not seem so bad to me to just "let them be". A key reason I thus gave leeway to my agents was because I felt I was benefiting from them because they met their targets as a collective, and I benefited, in monetary terms, through earning money in addition to my salary. It did not seem "worth it" to chase after two agents that were problematic; somehow it felt like if I did I would mess with Karma's good fortune that had been bestowed on me. Since I knew I allowed agents to commit some form of call centre crime, I therefore proved Mars's argument about management colluding with employees to perpetuate and hide all the misdemeanors that occurred at GBC. He argues that "most fiddles, however remain undetected because they are self-controlled, that is they are kept within limits or they are colluded in by management" Mars (1982: 171). This was indeed the case at GBC as well; supervisors had the power to protect their agents even if those agents were guilty of wrong doing. However, no supervisor could protect agents from bad calls as those were recorded, agents could only be protected from absenteeism, late coming and low AHT.

Supervisors who were recently promoted from the floor[25], such as Nandipha and I, still had a strong empathetic stance about how hard it was to achieve all the set targets. Whereas supervisors who left the floor years before could not fully relate, because when they were agents, the targets were easier to achieve and there were also fewer products and promotions. The more products in the system that customers could call to query about, the stricter the

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[25] Supervisors who were recently promoted from agent to supervisor

targets became. This made it more difficult for the agents, and the supervisors who were reliant on the agents, to deliver. As testimony to this, Houlihan's (2000) fieldwork provides plentiful evidence of agents circumscribing prescribed routines with their own strategies, manifestating as both resistance and creative "workarounds". "Cutting out difficult customers, withholding service to complicated and uncooperative callers, editing scripts according to interpretative knowledge and a range of call avoidance strategies", are just a few examples which Houlihan (2000:13) cites. Such actions Houlihan (2000) asserts are geared towards achieving targets and minimizing personal frustration and tedium. Agents at GBC thus coloured their work environment by finding all sorts of ways to cope, and such agents in my team included Zama and Bolekwa.

5.3 Thabo Qhawe: "I would love to grow in the call centre"

In the GBC call centre not all agents misbehaved or placed little value on their job. Thabo from my team was an extremely passionate agent, he was good with his customers, his AHT was satisfactory and overall he was consistently able to achieve his targets. I often used him as an example to motivate my agents. I even used him as a motivation for myself during days when I was feeling down and wondering how I would manage to get to work that day. Thabo was born in 1982 and had a matric but did not further his studies. His values included working hard at his job, he took every single target as a challenge, was not strayed by anything negative and did not need much motivating for him to do his job. Every day he would come to work and follow all the work procedures that he was taught when he first started in the GBC call centre. He was the type of agent who could easily put the supervisors to shame, and as a member of my team, he would remind me what I needed to do at the beginning of the shift as well as at the end of the shift. Thabo lived in the centre of Durban because his home was in Newcastle. He had a baby whom he was determined to provide for

and thus attached great responsibility to the job. He valued his job because it enabled him to provide for his child as well as the ability to be able to send money home. Thabo had aspirations of growing within the call centre job and he saw himself becoming a call centre supervisor. This was one of the main things that separated him from the rest of the agents; he was building a career at GBC whilst most agents saw themselves as being in a job that paid their bills. Thabo was investing in his future and in our coaching sessions I would often ask if he had any aspirations outside the call centre and he would say that he would love to own his own business one day but he could not tell me what type of business he wanted to own. My assumption was that he felt pressured by this question and therefore gave me an answer about wanting his own business even though he probably saw himself as a call centre manager. In a place where most employees undermined the job, it was difficult for one person to say something different from the norm because they would be required to justify why they felt differently. Most agents who hated the call centre could not fathom the thought of an agent wanting to work the rest of his life in the call centre environment. Thus Thabo gave an answer that he believed would not create too many questions of why he felt differently about the call centre. Most agents did not share Thabo's sentiments. Houlihan (2000:233) argues:

> Motivation is rooted in perceptions of fair play. Agents commenting on their relationship with their work demonstrate a mental story line as to what they expect from their employers and most adjust their expectations to minimize frustration. It is when expectations are frustrated, when they perceive they are being mistreated or they perceive management as distancing itself from responsibility for system breakdowns that morale and, as a result, work effort deteriorates.

I did admire how Thabo felt about his job as well as his ability to remain highly motivated in a work environment where motivation levels were generally low. Since Thabo was the most passionate agent in my team, I made him second in charge of the team. This role meant that he was responsible for all my duties when I was not there, which included having access to

sending the rest of the team their AHT scores, ensuring that he disciplined people to stay in line and not take call work and long toilet breaks when they were meant to be in shift. Thabo performed this duty, as he did the rest of his duties, with great passion and dedication and I frequently felt that the agents feared him more than they did me. This was not fear as in an unapproachable fear but fear in the positive sense of "*oh my gosh I need to do this or else Thabo will not be happy with me*", as in the words of Zandile, an agent in my team. My agents understood that I was very forgiving in nature and they often took advantages of this, which was something that Thabo also often warned me about *"Ntsumpa nawe you let them get away with a lot, kufanele ube stricter"*. In translation he would often say that I allowed the agents to get away with a lot and that I should be stricter with them. Aside from his job, Thabo did not share much about his life. He was a very private person and I only realized much later that this is one of the reasons we worked so well together. I did not know enough to immerse myself in his life to a point where I would carry his burdens if he was in trouble. The lines were still drawn between what was work and what was private. This allowed me to help him with improving his work, especially his AHT because that was the only target that often needed attention; his quality was 100% and his compliance (ensuring that all tasks were always done on time) was also 100%. It was not uncommon for agents to have bad weeks in terms of AHT, but this was always important for Thabo because one of the minimum requirements for becoming a call centre supervisor included meeting 90% of all combined key performance indexes. As Thabo knew, when it came to the supervisor selection process if there were better performing agents who had no problem meeting all three of their targets they were most likely to get the position instead of someone who sometimes did not meet their required targets Thabo thus consistently worked on trying to better his AHT. Thabo applied for the position of supervisor twice, but was unsuccessful on both occasions. In fact, both times he never made it through the first round. The unfortunate part is that the

supervisor interviews at GBC are tough, the interview always has a panel and as an applicant it is important to have strong communication skills. During the interview agents could not show any signs of being intimidated because the panel was trying to ensure that they were hiring somebody who would be able to enforce rules. Unfortunately, in an interview situation, Thabo did not present himself as a suitable candidate for supervisor. In my mind I did believe however that he would make a good supervisor as he is passionate about his work and very loyal to the job, but it was not possible for me to say this to management. The only thing I could do was to recommend names of agents that I believed were good candidates for supervisor positions. In my team, Thabo was consistently the only agent I felt I could nominate for the job. However, when Lesley (an agent in my team) and Bolekwa wanted to apply for the job I agreed to their application. As a supervisor I had a choice of not signing their application and argued that in both cases I did not believe they were ready. However, I decided to let them apply and not be successful as a tactic to get them to perform better. In addition to that my thinking was that if they believed that they could do it, then they needed an opportunity to try, and I awarded them that opportunity. The agents who impulsively wanted to apply for the position of supervisor would sometimes be called for the first round of interviews because their results showed that they were performing well or because they had a good resume. When Thabo's second application was unsuccessful he became disgruntled and this was apparent in his handling of calls. When I confronted him about this, he did not deny it. Instead, he said he hated the fact that he now shared the views of the majority. He did not understand why undeserving people could get supervisor posts when he had always worked hard yet still did not get an opportunity to be afforded an interview. This angered Thabo and I felt very helpless because I did not have answers for him and I was unable get the required answers. When we were talking about the matter he said to me:

"More than anything I don't want to be on the complaining bus. I am not sure what I am more upset about, the fact that I am not given an opportunity or the fact that not getting the interview upsets me so much that I see myself being one of the bitter people who only complain. So I should probably take it to mean that I am not ready hey? That's what it is Ntsumpa? They don't feel I am ready yet?"

The following day Thabo was back to his normal character and said that he would just need to prepare better for the next interview and that he needs to ensure that his scores are always high. Thabo is not somebody who gives up easily and if he became like the rest of the agents then he realized that would have meant the same thing as giving up to him. I was very lucky that Thabo was in my team, he served as an inspiration to all of us. Thabo, in accordance with Rotter's Locus of Control theory, had an internal locus of control which meant that he believed that he was responsible for his outcomes. It is further argued that "Individuals who have an internal locus of control tend to exert greater effort in coping with work stress and manage to remain content with their jobs even in work settings where they have no control" (Cooper cited in Carrim, 2006: 70).

5.4 Nkululeko Ndlovu: the agent who followed her dream
As stated, there were agents in other teams who participated in my research such as the agents in Nandipha's team, and although I learnt far more about the agents in my team because of the amount of time we spent around each other, the others did make important contributions to my research. In Nandipha's team there was an agent called Nkululeko Ndlovu whom I considered to be young, smart and intelligent. She was new within the call centre but was friends with people who had been there for some time and she therefore became known in the business much faster. Nkululeko was known for being intelligent. She was currently studying towards her Honors degree in Philosophy, Political Science and Economics. She was only working in the call centre to earn money whilst she was studying;

she admitted to me that this was a *"pit stop"* job for her. Nkululeko lived in the university residence and did not have any dependents to support with the money she earned. Nkululeko told me that *"she has fun in her job"* and *"she enjoys being around other young people"*. Nkululeko stated that *"a call centre was like a smaller campus"* for her where she knew most of the people around her. The call centre in fact became more than a job to her, it became another home. She did not have many friends at university as she was originally from Pietermaritzburg and she took the job because her closest friends were already working in the call centre and therefore she had nobody to socialize with at university. When Nkululeko started working in the call centre she suddenly had many friends, leading to her say *"I love it here, so many young people who are nice and we have lots of fun whilst taking calls and even when we are waiting for the transport. It feels like a smaller version of varsity only less stuck up"*.

However, Nkululeko did have issues with her supervisor whom she considered to be *"incompetent and uneducated"*. Nkululeko told me she found it *"hard to respect somebody who cannot even construct a proper sentence when she is sending an email"*. To illustrate Nkululeko stated *"The other day she wrote, guys please watched your AHT, watched. Seriously!"* In her mind this reflected badly on management because Nandipa was a management figure. Although Nkululeko said the call centre was a *"pit stop"* for her, she did apply for call centre supervisor positions. I asked why she did this and her response was:

"You grow in interest in what you do, yes this was originally a pit stop for me but I did genuinely want the supervisor position. It was not a let's test if they would be interested in me or not but more of a feeling that I am currently working here and if there is an opportunity to grow then why not? I have my whole life ahead of me and there is no reason why I should not diverge from my plan. In my head I believe that I can still go for the job of my dreams but I would love the challenge of being a call centre supervisor, an opportunity to do a better job than my current supervisor."

Nkululeko did not get the position; she was called for a panel interview but when she got there she was told that she had the wrong interview day. This was not true; she had gone to the interview on the day that she was given. This was another one of those situations which nobody could explain; it was one of those mysteries similar to salaries that differed even though people were part of the same team and worked the same hours. However, Nkululueko was furious and took this attack very personally. Her conclusion was that GBC did not want educated people because they did not trust that they would stay long in the company, and also, Nkululeko believed that GBC found them to be problematic because they were always speaking about their rights. She stated:

"This place wants sheep; followers, people who would not question the status quo. If today management were to say that they wanted agents to produce AHT of 100 seconds, the supervisors go and take that to their agents, no offense to you but I think this place is being ruled by a bunch of idiots who want to hire other idiots .You would think that they would find it beneficial getting an opportunity to have young educated people. Instead they are threatened and would rather hire people who don't have the slightest clue. How is this business going to have any chance of going forward if no plans are being taken to hire the right type of people? After they told me that I got the wrong date, I lost all interest and it is very clear for me that I do not belong here."

After speaking to Nkululeko, I thought long and hard about what she said. I believe there was a lot of truth in it. Out of the pool of supervisors I was the only one that was still studying, and the connotations attached to people who are studying is that they will not stay long in the call centre. In contrast, supervisors who were not studying, even though they sometimes expressed feelings of wanting to leave the call centre industry, consistently expressed that they still wanted to go and work in another call centre. This meant if their concerns were met, then they would not have reason to leave. However what Nkululeko said kept me thinking for days especially since I had applied for a call centre manager's position. At this level I would have an opportunity to implement change as opposed to executing instructions. As a supervisor I had minimal power to enforce any change, I could not challenge neither

processes, nor could I take decisions which affect operations. In essence, I realized that the only thing I was in control of was my style of management and whether I brought the frustration to my agents or not. These, I realized, were personal choices but not ground breaking business decisions that were going to implement change.

With regards to Nkululeko, she left four months after our conversation and found a job in Pietermaritzburg as an intern in the Department of Economic Development. We continued to keep in touch because she was also still a student at the same university, and when I asked her how she felt after leaving she said *"it feels good to work for a place that wants to know more about how smart you can be; a place where they want you to dazzle them more with your brain, your thoughts. I was starting to believe such a place did not exist"*.

When agents resigned it started becoming a trend that they would send goodbye emails which were actually more like good riddance emails. Such emails always surprised me especially with the job markets being so volatile. Nkululeko, in contrast, wrote a very encouraging email stating how much growth she had experienced in the call centre, how grateful she was for all the friendships that she had made as well starting her appreciation for the salary she had received. She also stated in her goodbye email that she was going to miss the GBC customers as they had grown to be a big part of her life. This was a refreshing email for everyone because it allowed us to see the positive in our jobs. Nkululeko left her legacy and started a good trend. Not all agents followed in Nkululeko's footsteps but she was remembered at GBC for her kind words. c

In reference to Rotter's (1996) theory of locus control, within the GBC call centre this theory is evident with agents like Zama and Bolekwa who constantly play the "victim card" and take no responsibility in their actions as opposed to agents like Thabo and Nkululeko are more

prone to take some responsibility and therefore positively affect their lives in turn. Attitude is the biggest driver of people's success and while that is what I always told the agents in my team, I could not control their intrinsic beliefs, I could only try and affect them. That noted, in the next chapter I will be discussing the divergence between expectations of call centre agents about their future and how these expectations change when they start working in the call centre. The Chapter will draw upon Structural Violence as a theoretical point of reference.

Chapter Six: *"Working in the Call Centre is nothing like I expected it to be"*

Work has always been part of man's (humans) history and a crucial factor in social organization. The earliest prehistoric people sustained themselves by hunting and fishing. Cultures developed and a division of labor replaced an essentially nomadic life. Working activities such as hunting, fishing, herding, and trading occupied primarily the men. When social structures further developed they led to the evolution of distinct occupations such as farming and craftwork. This trend toward focusing on a specific group of tasks gave birth to the concept of career. (Dr Rènette du Toit , 2003)

6.1 Why do people work?

In the previous chapters I have covered in detail what a call centre is and what it means to work in a call centre. In addition, I have outlined the coping mechanisms employed by the call centre agents within the GBC. However, I have not covered in detail the numerous reasons agents stay in the call centre, given, in many circumstances their outward resentment towards their work. In a country that is characterized with high unemployment such as South Africa, a person with a job is seen as very lucky. Klasen et al (2008:01) state:

> South Africa has been experiencing one of the highest reported unemployment rates in the world. Using a 'narrow' definition of unemployment (including only those who are willing to work and actively searching), South Africa had an unemployment rate of 28% in 2004; using a 'broad' definition (which includes those who are willing to work but are not searching), the unemployment rate stood at about 41%.

In addition to existing unemployment rates being high in South Africa, there are a substantial number of young South Africans that struggle to find jobs, it is argued:

> There can be no doubt that youth unemployment in South Africa is a serious cause for concern. The damaging consequences are too ghastly to contemplate. Currently, a generation of young people in South Africa is caught in an inhumane dilemma that affects all spheres of their lives. Most of them have no prospect of a decent work-life that could enable them to earn an income, choose working activities that they would like to do, and be integrated into a socio - economic system .Du Toit (2003:20)

Given the high unemployment rate in South Africa, coupled with the difficulty in attaining employment, I believe is one of the central reasons why a number of call centre agents stay in

their jobs even though they hate working in a call centre. Simply stated, they hate their jobs but they feel fortunate to be employed. It is quite ironic to feel lucky about something you hate but the love - hate relationship is something that I witnessed with the GBC call centre agents when it came to their job.

In addition to unemployment being high, and agents working specifically to earn a salary, a number of agents working in the GBC call centre are under enormous pressure to prove that they are worthy of the very same job they do not like. Agents are required to produce results and meet all their stipulated key performance indexes (KPI) in order to avoid questioning of whether they are capable of doing their jobs or not. Although I have argued that one of the reasons call centre agents stay in the job is because they want to avoid unemployment, for the agents in the GBC call centre, avoiding unemployment is about avoiding not having an income. If the agents had to have another solution to earning money, I do not believe they would continue to work in a call centre. There are however, other reasons people go to work aside for seeking money. Du Toit (2003:2) states that:

> First, work has an economic function: people work to earn some sort of wage, or are involved in activities to be rewarded in such a way that they can sustain themselves and dependents in order to fulfill certain primary needs. Second, there is a social dimension to work; the occupation or work that individuals are involved in determines to a large extent where and how they live, the community and organizations in which they participate, and many other social aspects of their lives. Social status has long been associated with individuals' jobs. Third, work has a personal or psychological dimension: it is an essential source of identity, and provides people with the feeling of self-worth and self-esteem as they experience a feeling of mastery and self-fulfillment when they successfully engage in work activities.

I will argue that all the above reasons, as cited by Du Toit (2003), ring true for the GBC call centre agents because, aside from the money, agents at GBC also form strong bonds with each other. In addition to this, GBC also provides a sense of belonging in knowing that they

form part of the working community which enables them to participate in society. However, this does not mean that their work is without its challenges. My research revealed that agents at GBC are frustrated and this is evident in the level of absenteeism experienced in different teams and in the number of "bad calls".[26] In addition, there were grievances from the agent's side that management could not address. Management wanted agents to do what they were told to do, which was to meet the targets irrespective of how complicated it was, and agent's felt like they had no voice in the matter. The work of call centre agents therefore had the symptoms of structural violence embedded within it.

6.2 Traces of Structural Violence at GBC

It is argued, "Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress" (Farmer; 2004). In a similar vein, call centre agents at the GBC call centre are the victims of high unemployment rates facing the country and as a result are forced to accept and retain jobs that would not be their preferred choice (due to their need to earn an income). In support of this statement Zandile in my team stated:

"It is not by choice that I am here, I am constantly thinking of business ideas. I am not sure if I will be able to land my dream job, I am not even sure if I want to bother anymore. Somehow the idea of working for someone ever again is just not appealing. I want to be my own boss now, I just need an idea. So I attend a lot of those business workshops. My friend suggested Umsombovu funding which helps people with ideas, but this cannot be the end of me."

Farmer (2004) argues:

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[26] Agents would lose their temper with customers.

Today, the world's poor are the chief victims of structural violence, a violence that has thus far defied the analysis of many who seek to understand the nature and distribution of extreme suffering. Why might this be so? One answer is that the poor are not only more likely to suffer; they are also less likely to have their suffering noticed, as Chilean theologian Pablo Richard, noting the fall of the Berlin Wall, has warned: "We are aware that another gigantic wall is being constructed in the Third World, to hide the reality of the poor majorities. A wall between the rich and poor is being built, so that poverty does not annoy the powerful and the poor are obliged to die in the silence of history."

Agents at the GBC call centre did not regard themselves as poor or desperate, those are not the words that they used to describe themselves. However, it was apparent that they needed the money and on this basis they could not resign from their job; regardless of how much they hated it. Although agents complained about high unemployment, at no point during our focus group discussions did they complain about structural violence or a greater need for the government to react. When blame was cast, it was towards managers or supervisors in the call centre. Therefore in the agent's mind their suffering was within the walls of GBC, the nature of the country's economic situation was not seen as a major contributing factor based on the information agents shared with me. Despite this, agents were nonetheless acutely aware that widespread unemployment would make it difficult for them to find employment elsewhere and therefore the threat of unemployment and a corresponding lack of earnings played a part in keeping them at GBC.

Agents at GBC needed the money and as a result would generally comply with the company rules even though they felt like protesting. Even those who chose to exert agency and openly rebelled against the call centre structure, narrowly guided their protests by ensuring that they didn't cross the line and give GBC sound grounds for dismissal, as in the case of Thandeka and Bulekwa. This gave agents as sense of power (agency) as they could voice their disdain or "act out" against the structures, but at the same time, they were still confined by the very

same structures, as this was their source of gainful employment in an economically volatile environment.

Agents at GBC call centre were paid R27 an hour; they mostly worked 6-hour shifts and therefore at the end of the month the minimum that agents should have gotten would be R4000. However, this was not the case; agents often got between R3000 and R3500 which means they were being given R500 to a R1000 short in their pay. Agents did protest against this, they lined up at the HR office to state their cases and through persistence some did get their additional money. An agent from Peter's team by the name of Khubo used to resiliently fight for her money. In a conversation with me she stated:

"It is tiring to fight for your money when you are being short paid, and as much as a part of me can somewhat understand why most agents decide to just give up on their money, I cannot do that. It is way too much money to just forget about, even though I am not a permanent employee of GBC call centre, I cannot just sit by and relax why I don't get the money I deserve. So I fight, I cannot be fired for fighting for my money. I come to the HR department until I get my money paid back to me. It is still not ideal because I don't always get it when I need it but there is satisfaction in knowing that I do get it."

The majority of the agents were contracted in what is called a short to long term contract; this meant in its simplicity that the agent's services were needed up until they were not needed. When I asked my call centre manager, Praven, about why they could not hire call centre agents on a permanent basis he stated:

"It is a very fickle business and for that reason we cannot have many permanent agents because it will cost the company too much money should things change. Today, it makes sense to have a lot of agents on the floor; there is lots of technology advancement, self-servicing options for companies through interactive voice responses (IVR). The truth is we cannot fully predict if there is a need to expand yet, it is just safer to have these agents on contract basis."

This system did not provide the feeling of safety in one's job, and if an agent was failing to meet his or her target this caused an even greater reason for the agents not to feel secure about the job. Managers at GBC are supremely aware that unemployment is high and that there are many people looking for jobs and that the higher the demand for jobs the lower the salaries can be. Agents were therefore caught in the middle of this difficult situation, staying in a job that does not meet their expectations or choosing to leave the call centre not knowing when they will find another job. A big part of the reasons I started working in a call centre whilst I was finishing my third year at University was because I did not want to be unemployed after I graduated. I enjoyed having to earn a salary and being independent; I also enjoyed knowing that I was part of the working group. Not all of my peers at University had found jobs by the time they graduated and this assured me that I made a good decision when I started working whilst I was studying because it gave me a fighting chance at finding future employment.

6.3 Motivation behind working in the call centre

When it comes to working in a call centre, none of the agents ever started out hating it. All agents had great hopes about their job within the call centre industry as well as for their careers within the industry. The belief was that they would grow and become supervisors and thereafter possibly call centre managers. Each agent said that they believed their story would be different. Zinhle Zungu *said: "I was told by my cousin who has been working here since 2003 that I should not even dare come work here if I know what is good for me. I thought that she was just saying that because she did not want to share, or just did not want me in her space. Then I came here, I wish I listened to her."*

Zandile from my team also said:

"I knew that it was not a bed of roses but I did not think that it was something I could not handle or something that I would find myself also complaining about doing. My friend Ntokozo works in morning shift, to be quite honest I think that is better because she loves it. I guess people are sleeping in the morning or rushing to work that's why they don't have time to play on the phone. Phela some of these customers are playing, they don't really need the help. I just don't have as much patience for talking as I thought I did."

On a personal level I did not have high hopes about working in the call centre, but, as mentioned, I believed it made sense to get a head start in the working world. From where I stood, everyone has a family member, a friend or a friend of a friend who has been looking for a job with no luck. Thus, it was very important for me to respect my job because the value for me is in having a job as opposed to not having a job. Therefore it made sense for me to secure a form of income,; this was even more important for me because I did not enjoy having to depend on my mother for everything. It was only when I started working in the call centre that I developed dreams of wanting to be a supervisor, and I realized how it could add value to my academic work as well as my monetary growth. In essence I never regarded the call centre work as *"real work";* in my head it was something to pass time whilst I waited for my dream job. I was not the only one who felt that way, there were other university students who shared my views and Nkululeko Ndlovu[27] was one of those agents. It was easier for people who felt the same way as I did because they were not disappointed when the job did not live up to the expectations which they had created in their heads. The belief was that working in a call centre was quick and easy and it also paid well. The greatest motivator was speaking on the phone and being paid loads of money for doing a very easy job. None of the call centre agents, myself included had bargained for the kind of work we had to do once we started working.

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[27] Nkululeko Ndlovu is the agent who left the call centre work to become an intern in the Department of Economic Development

6.4 Divergence from what the agents expected prior to working in the GBC call centre

Agents who worked at GBC call centre began to see it as a job and not as a career. When I asked the agents to define this for me the common sentiment as expressed in the words of Zanda Zulu

"A job is a place you go just because you need your bills to be paid, whereas a career refers to what you love, something you will risk being paid less for because the joy of doing what you love is payment enough."

The agents did not feel the latter about call centre work, they started off working in a call centre to earn extra money and they believed it to be something that was going to be very easy. Although all the targets were explained to them in black and white and formed a big part of their three week theory training, somehow none of the agents seemed prepared for what awaited them when calls started coming through. When starting out, agents frequently failed to meet the AHT (average handling time), they struggled to explain the products to customers and often forgot to say their scripted greetings and farewells. The job was demanding and it was stressful and many were simply not coping. When they started working they realized they were failing to deliver according to company expectations; they realized that they were not happy to be at the bottom in terms of job deliverance. It bothered the agents to realize that they were failing at something they did not consider to be that complicated, as evident in the words of Nana Zungu *"I hate it when my name is highlighted in red every time the AHT updates are being sent out, I don't get why I care so much but I do"*. Many agents started giving themselves a timeline of when they would leave the call centre. However, in most instances it did not happen as planned and some left sooner than expected because they were not coping at all. Thula Goba for example, was in my team when we were training to be agents and she left after three months because she was not coping with any of the targets, nor was she coping with the hours that we needed to work. Thuladzu was in the English huntline which meant that she really had to be know what she was talking about with respect to services offered by GBC because the customers that called in required

that of her since they knew about the services. Thula explained *"When one is in training, things seem different, your trainer is your friend and when you buddy, your buddy is your friend as well, and they help you and assist you through all the problems. However, when you start taking calls and get on the floor, the hand holding stops."* While some supervisors allow for at least a month of mistakes and are very helpful, other supervisors take a "sink or swim" route and how agents handle the "sink or swim" approach determines which agents can handle the pressure and which cannot.

Many agents however also found that they could not leave according to the timelines they had initially set because they created commitments for themselves. They committed themselves to accounts, they bought contract phones, and some even bought cars. They upgraded their lifestyles and started getting used to a different way of living from that which they had been previously accustomed. The money became an integral part of who they were; the fabric of their life. It then became hard for them to quit once the job started stressing them. There were many factors that contributed to agents not leaving the call centre even though they repeatedly stated how *"fed up"* they were with the call centre. For those who were breadwinners for their family, they saw themselves as not having a choice. Similarly, for those with children, even if they got support elsewhere, it was still important for them to be able to provide for their children. Whereas for others who had developed a taste of the consumer culture and were enjoying the benefits associated with it such as wearing nice clothes, going to *"in"* places and having all the accessories associated with their new found income, realized that in order maintain their lifestyles they needed to work. Mbali Buthelezi from Nande's team said:

"I love going to Primi Piatti in Gateway and buying those jam jars. I love buying my clothes at Vertigo and Aca Joe. I had always wanted all these things for myself but my parents could

not afford to get them for me and now I can get them for myself. It feels like a dream but yet a nightmare at the same time but I am not ready to leave because I am not ready to wake up and not have all these things that make me so happy. Jobs are meant to be stressful, that is what my mother says."

Whatever the reason might be for the agents to remain with the call centre, essentially they still stayed because of the money, it all boiled down to money. In an article about farms and labour camps in America, Benson (2008:593) argues:

> Structural Violence is often perpetuated on the basis of visibility. Certain factors are seen as "causes" or suffering while others are overlooked, as when government policies and programs focus on individual behaviors, ignoring underlying systematic conditions.

Much like the call centre agents at GBC call centre who were aware of the structural deficiencies that existed in their call centre but chose to stay in any case because it was still better than not having a job. This is a well - known flawed cycle of behavior where people treasure having a job than not having one at all. The visibility and normality of the practice is what makes it acceptable for the call centre agents to be satisfied with having a job that they do not like for the need of money.

Sbusisiwe Zungu is a prime example of an agent who absolutely hated working in the GBC call centre, she and I trained together and although she was eight years older than me, we were good friends. When we graduated from training and became agents, she and I were on the same team. She even sat right next to me in whatever hub we worked on. She also always sat next to Mandlayise who was our first supervisor, this was important for her because she believed that if she had questions the supervisor was right next to her. She had no problems finding a seat next to our supervisor because none of the agents in our team wanted to sit next to him because this meant that *"best behavior"* was required throughout the shift. In the GBC call centre it was important that your supervisor was helpful, supportive and had great product knowledge so that when a customer was angry, as noted the supervisor was

knowledgeable enough to talk the agent through that call. However, as a part of call centre restructuring, supervisors were changed whenever the managers believed it made business sense to do so. If there were teams that were struggling to meet their targets and were considered to be troublesome for too long, stronger and more experienced supervisors were moved to those teams. As states our initial team was affected when that change was made and as a result we lost to another team. This was a very hard time for our team because we were very attached to him, and many agents considered resigning at that very moment before they even met the new supervisor. The feeling of apprehension was caused by the fact that we knew we were lucky to have a supervisor like Mandlayise and we never bargained for the fact that we might lose him to another team. We did not know what it meant for the future of our team as well as our general well - being within the call centre. When our new supervisor joined our team it was worse than we bargained for because she was an agent who had joined GBC and trained after us, and this meant that we had more experience in taking calls than she did. Our team felt very insulted by this move. On a personal level this was a scary thought for me because at the time I did not feel like I knew much and if somebody who had started working three months after me was already my supervisor that meant that this person was extremely intelligent and grasped everything very quickly, or alternatively, it meant that I was extremely slow. On this day I vowed that the next post of supervisor that was advertised. I would apply for, and that is what I did. Thus when the next post was made available, I did apply and I got the job.

However, back when I was an agent with Sbusisiwe and we were reporting to our new supervisor after the restructuring processes, she got very frustrated and started missing work. Sbusisiwe would become frustrated by how much Sindy, our new supervisor, threatened us with warnings. Every single time she was unhappy with what we were doing, she would

threaten us with warnings. This caused us to lack trust in her and created a wall between us, as agents, and her as the supervisor. Sbusisiwe was a mother of one and she was traditionally married (in customary law) to her husband Sizwe, although they had not entered a legal marriage. Sbusisiwe constantly stressed that she wanted *"big things"* for herself and she hated the position she was in, knowing that she needed the money but hated the work. Sbusisiwe had been unemployed for a long time prior to working at GBC and I remember how blessed she felt when we all passed training and how badly we all wanted the job. However, when working on Sindy's team she no longer felt the same type of gratitude for the job, if anything she felt in despair because of her job. She often told me that she was always very stressed and that she would literally have to pull herself back from handing in her resignation. In all of our discussions, Sbusisiwe never hid the fact that she was working for the money because she *"needed it"*. Although it was not obvious to an outsider that she needed the money because Sbusisiwe often drove to work in a car, it was, in fact, her husband's car. It was easy for Sbusisiwe to talk to me because she considered me a friend and she told me about how badly she wanted this job:

"I prayed for a job for years, you know when you get out of university you don't think you will need to pray for a job. I never wanted to be that wife that relied on my husband. Sizwe has been great but I did not enjoy the fact that I had to rely on him even to buy just a lollipop for my son. It embarrassed me and it affected our marriage because I was grumpy and stressed all the time. So when the opportunity to work here came, I prayed for it and I was over the moon when I got it. However, it is a circus here and I am tired. I want to leave, it was better when we still had Mandlayise as our supervisor. He made it worthwhile to come to work but Sindy will drive me to drink. It is almost like some management decisions are made just because they can. Why would they give our team a supervisor that is less experienced than us? In which world does that make any sense? So every second I have to remind myself that I need this money, otherwise when I am day dreaming, know that I am thinking about packing my bags, handing over the headsets and never returning here ever again".

The issue of shift work always came up when agents were tired of working even though this was the first thing they were warned about in the initial interviews, that the job required

somebody who was flexible to work shifts. Amongst the many things that made Sbusisiwe hate her job, in addition to her supervisor, was working shift hours and dealing with customers. In addition, her perception (or realization) that the company did not care once you were working was something which she considered to be in stark contrast to her experience during our training days. Whilst we were training we were given special treatment but when we became agents things changed, *"it became every dog for himself"*. Most agents struggled to survive in the call centre because what they expected it to be and what the reality of working in the call centre was, were two completely different things. Sbusisiwe stayed in the call centre for another year after the appointment of the new supervisor and within that year she fell pregnant with her second child. She was often absent from work or would leave work early, which caused additional friction between her and her supervisor, Sindy. As a rule of thumb in the call centre, supervisors preferred it if agents missed work all together than for them to come to work for an hour and leave before the shift ended. These hours were almost irrecoverable and would interfere with the supervisor's team compliance, which was always meant to be a 100%. However, Sbusisiwe did eventually resign and was indeed *"over the moon"* like she said she would be when she left. Sbusisiwe went to work in the same company where her husband worked. She did admit that it was not ideal but that it allowed her to work normal hours and have her weekends free.

6.5 Zandile Zuma the agent who cried when she did not pass the test

Zandile Zuma and I trained together, she was in my group and the thing that was most striking about her is the fact that she once cried because she thought she was not going to pass training. She cried so much that I went to comfort her. She was one of those agents who always made you wonder *"what possible reason could they have wanting to work in a call centre?"* She dressed well and had her own car, a luxury shared by few of the agents when

they first started the job. Many agents did progress to buying a car after working for a couple of months or even a year but a handful would start training already having a car of their own, and Zandile was one of those agents. Since she was so different from everybody on the bases that she appeared to have more, people, including myself, always seemed puzzled by why she wanted to work in a call centre. However, when speaking to her she also said the same thing that everybody said, she needed the money, she had bills to pay and she had to pay for her car. Agents such a Sthobile used to wonder out loud about why Zandile was working at the call centre when she had a car, agents at GBC call centre somehow believed that a person who can afford a car can afford to be in a better place than a call centre. Sthobile once stated:

"Maybe she has a sugar daddy or comes from a rich family, how come she can afford a car? But then again our salaries differ so much that maybe she gets paid enough to afford a car. I would not put it passed this place to make a mistake that big!"

Zandile and I had a good relationship and she told me that:

"I sometimes think that part of the reason I have such a bad relationship with supervisors is because I have a car. I think people think maybe I am arrogant because of it. They may even think I don't need the money. I am not saying I am not guilty of ukweyisa (being troublesome) but I also think I get less leeway as oppose to someone who they deem needs the money more than me, and that is not fair."

Back when we were all trainees, before I was promoted to being a supervisor, we were writing one of our last tests and Zandile was failing for the third consecutive time. This was not good and in any other case she should not have been allowed an opportunity to write the final exam. However, our trainer was kind to her and allowed her an opportunity to either pass the final exam or go home. By some mercy she did pass and was able to proceed to the next stage. The reason I am sharing this information is because Zandile hated being an agent from the very first week she started taking calls, she was ready to leave and was telling the

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rest of our team about another call centre company that was hiring. This was a confusing concept for me because I thought she would consider the fact that she had struggled to pass the test to get into her current job and that if it was not for the mercy of our trainer she would not have had a job to hate. I do believe this was not a concern for her because she carried on looking for another job; however she never did get that elusive job. Zandile changed teams from time to time because she had a problem with every supervisor she worked with. She also changed shifts from the night shift to the morning shift but none of this helped her like her job. Instead her resentment for the job grew stronger, Zandile was sent for disciplinary hearings for insubordination; if it was not the case of the quality assurers complaining about the way she spoke to customers, it was the supervisor complaining about her being late for work on a daily basis. Zandile had become one those agents who were considered by others to be a *"trouble maker"*. This was frustrating for me to watch because no matter how hard I tried to forget, I always started thinking of the day she wanted to get into the call centre so badly, the day the job was so important to her that the thought of not getting it brought her to tears. It troubled me for a while until I realized that Zandile was in the call centre to make money and issues of inconsistent salaries bothered her and affected her respect for the job.

"It is simple really, I work you pay. Here I am volunteering; I might as well wear one of those badges that say I am volunteering. I have a set number of things that I budget to do with my money and I am here day in and day out when I am meant to be here yet I still get paid peanuts. It is not even peanuts, our salaries are peanuts but what I get is less than our salaries so it cannot be called peanuts, I am insulting the peanuts. Am I right? Hey am I right?"

She was right about her salary issues, she was one of those unfortunate people who, more often than not, had salary problems and this, as mentioned, was a big problem in the GBC call centre. There were always salary issues, but these were inexplicable issues which did not affect all agents. One of the agents during the smoke breaks once said "*the purpose of a job is to earn you money; this is a job not a career. More than anything else this is where this company fails the most. It almost makes us feel like slaves and we must just always smile and*

dance for our master even when he shows us at all times that we are worthless by failing to pay us. They miss the definition of what a job is in this place." In many agents' minds, especially those that were working purely for the money, it was harder for them to justify staying in a job that could not keep its basic obligation, which was to pay for labour. It took me a while to figure out why Zandile was always lashing out as there was never a full way of knowing which agents were acting out of injustice and which agents were being rude to customers just because they could since agents did not publicly disclose how much they earned. Whatever the results might have been agents who worked in the call centre only for the money were the ones that hated it more than those who were hoping to build a career within the call centre or within a call centre related field. It is argued, "Although structural violence is pervasive, primarily the poor and the marginalized groups experience its most egregious outcomes "Johnson et. al (2003:130). Zandile who worked at GBC purely for the money, eventually left the call centre but she had not found another job yet. She merely decided that she could not handle it anymore and said she had to leave the job for the sake of her sanity. Zandile's leaving did however confirm that she was different from everyone else because out of all the people I interviewed for my research, she was the only agent who voluntarily left the call centre even though she had not yet found a job. This did meant that she had other means of gaining income or some form of assistance from home, and therefore could choose not to be a victim of structural violence of staying in a job that she did not like. Although the call centre did not live up to the expectations of many, this was not the case for me as well as for a few other agents.

6.6 The Power of the agent within GBC call centre

I started working in the call centre, as noted, in order to avoid having a gap of doing nothing after I finished my degree. I did not bargain on the fact that I was going to like the work to the point where I got a promotion. When I first started at GBC I had no idea that I was going to be conducting a research study for my masters' degree. People differ in many ways; and for me, the call centre grew to become a bank of knowledge when it came to human behavior. I realized the power of the customer when they needed to have their queries resolved. I learnt about my individual patience threshold and ways to calm down when I was starting to stress, but most importantly, I learnt a different working culture. The call centre is stressful, in contrast to what you believe when you first apply. Learning how to control your emotions during times when customers shout at you while knowing that you need to find the energy to smile for the next customer were character traits I learnt through working at GBC. Although the customer was never going to see whether you were smiling or whether you were crying, it was important to maintain a happy tonality. A balancing act between all these emotions is what allows one to succeed in the call centre without having to commit any unethical actions which are against the call centre protocols. Therefore, it is important to note that even though the call centre did not meet the expectations of many agents, I do believe that it must have taught them a lesson about listening to the job requirements of a job before committing to it. I can find fault in many things about the GBC call centre but I can argue that they do give agents a thorough explanation of what working in the call centre entailed and for this reason agents needed to also take accountability for their actions in choosing the job. The job by nature is stressful and customers were never going to be forced to be polite and this was something agents needed to learn to deal with and accept as part of the job. I had to learn this and I had to learn to be even firmer about this when I became a supervisor. I passed this notion on to the agents in my team and we often read articles about other call centres. This

served two fundamental purposes: the first one was to make them realize the nature of the call centre and the second was to show them that they were in actual fact better off than the agents in the article. Working in the call centre made me learn more about the power of being a caring manager and agents related better to managers or supervisors who they believed had a vested interest in them. Agents, I came to realize, were supervisor's customers and they were also the key to also making a supervisor's job a dream or a nightmare. Thuli from Nandipha's team said:

"Do you see how fat agents get when they get promoted to supervisor role? That R2500 is treating you when we are left getting peanuts and yet we are the ones that work hard. I don't care when I don't meet my targets because I know that it is not even my bonus anyway! The supervisor will suffer, not me shame"

Most supervisors believed that they were in charge, because formally they are but, in actual fact at an informal level this was not the case. I realized this during my time as an agent, when our supervisor changed my team changed and became troublesome and the only time they started *"behaving"* was when the new supervisor Sindy changed the way she treated us and started paying more attention and being more understanding as opposed to taking the *"I don't care how you do it but you have to do it route"*. The change in her attitude made all the difference in her team statistics, agents started coming to work and started achieving their targets. As a supervisor I realized that when it came to taking calls, customers were in charge because the rule is *"the customer is always right"*. However, when it came to meeting team targets, agents were in charge because they had the power to either meet the targets or not to meet them. Agents could easily play the targets game because all they needed to do was to ensure that their statistics were not unmet for three consecutive weeks because that would result in a performance management. However, even if they improved their statistics it still was not going to be enough to help the supervisor in question meet his or her targets for the

month and therefore qualify him or her to get his or her bonus. This would cause a ripple effect because it would mean that the call centre manager was also not going to get his or her bonus because his or her team of supervisors was not meeting their targets. Agents had the power and they knew when to use it. Agents lack formal power but actively asset agency to claim power in the workplace. This lack of power is an attribute of Structural Violence; it is argued that "in the context of Structural Violence, power relations are omnipresent and are exercised from innumerable points" James et. al (2003:130). Agents do gain some power which is not seen by many at GBC, and with this informal power they can formally destroy a supervisor's reputation by disregard of the regulations such as coming to work on time, meeting targets but they can still do in such a way that they don't get into trouble. Bulhan cited in James et. al further argues:

> There are parameters for understanding Structural Violence that 1(1) is a high order phenomenon that involves more than just a violation of clearly defined and legally encoded regulations of fairness and justice (2) is a set of relations, processes, and social conditions that embody and produce other types of violence and encompass the conscious and nonconscience view, attitudes, and actions create everyday social realities; (3) enjoys sanctions of ruling authorities and is reflected in the law, media, education, religion, work relations, the environment, cultural and material arrangements (2003:130).

Pius who was in my team before I got promoted to supervisor did not get along with our new supervisor, Sindy, and the resentment they had for each other was much stronger than what the rest of the team felt towards her. Pius stated:

"If Sindy thinks she's in charge, I will show her. Well I have shown her, you have seen from our team statistics. I can just come to work fifteen minutes later and that will ruin her compliance, already in that day she will need to explain her compliance to the call centre manager. On days where I feel like it, I can just stay more than twenty minute on a call and that will drive her AHT up the roof. Again, I am not the one that will be accountable for that. It is not hard to come up with a justification as to why I am not meeting my targets"

Similar sentiments were expressed by Philani from Manzi's team:

"If my supervisor irritates me, I simply get "sick" the following day, if not sick I have hectic transport issues. She may fail to prove it because I will have my story rock solid but inside she will know that I am "sick" or "late" because of her. Nothing beats respecting each other because we are all here to do a job, so if they mess me up with my job, I do the same to them. She's the supervisor she needs to be in charge and not me",

Zanda from Nandipha's team also expressed ideas similar to those of Pius and Philani:

"I think it is funny how we can screw them ten times as hard. I find it sad sometimes, if I were a supervisor I would worship the ground my agents walk on. Heck I would bribe them if I could, as long as targets are met. That's what Nandipha does, she does not bother us much, but if I were to change supervisors, I shall not mention any names but I know some supervisors I would mess up their stats so bad that they will be thinking of me when they can't sleep at night, I would be the bane of their existence. It is such an evil though but supervisors do walk around like they rule the world, it would be nice to teach a few a lesson" (chuckles as she said this) Zanda from Nandipha's team

This is something that can only be realized with close examination of the agents and their working ethic and is something that eventually transcends to their working culture. I will argue that Structural Violence is part of the reason agents react the way they do. It is often argued that "structural violence is dangerous because it frequently leads to direct violence. Those who are chronically oppressed are often, for logical reasons those who resort to direct violence", (Dunann, 1999: 01). Although in GBC call centre there was no direct violence, there was a replication of violence which was caused by the structure, agents at GBC retaliated to whatever form of mistreatment they experienced from their supervisors. The supervisors also had no choice but to enforce rules to meet targets as that is part of their deliverables, but the agents also expect some form of leniency form the supervisor because there is the expectation that supervisor should play the understanding role. However, pleasing everyone was nearly impossible. At some point the role of being supervisor requires enforcing rules which is something that agents struggle with, and if a supervisor chooses to slack for that particular week and allow agents not to meet their AHT, they get called into the

call centre manager's office to explain their poor performance. Therefore, a successful team at GBC was a team that helped each other in order to make the bosses happy by meeting targets and not letting their frustrations transcend to affecting targets. In my team we continuously worked at having a "happy" working culture where personal vendettas were kept at a minimum but I could not fully avoid them with Zama and Bolekwa as mentioned in chapter four and five. This did not often happen at GBC as egos got in the way and many supervisors demanded respect through threats of denying leave or disconnecting staff sim cards. As a result agents often had to surrender to supervisor because they were the ones with the power to get the agent fired. Thus agents would eventually start adhering to the rules when they felt their job was really in jeopardy. Although there is some form of agency (choice) this agency is limited or 'capped' by the very structures of the organization. Philani states:

"When I am angry I will stay absent for a day and not the whole week. Some agents overdo it and stay absent the whole week. I like trouble as well as the next person but I believe that is taking it too far. So, the idea is to cause a dent on the supervisors targets but don't make them stop trusting you all together"

Nkosi from Peter's team said:

"I don't want to have a supervisor as an enemy, I like to have swops and I often need leave. If I am on the supervisor's "bad agent" list, I would guess that they keep a list. Well, I actually don't know if they do but if they did I would not want to be in it."

From the above mentioned it is clear that call centre agents have a number of ways to cope with their jobs. Although agents are able to actively assert agency in order to cope with the daily constraints and stress of the job, this agency is limited as in order to protect their jobs in a country faced by mass unemployment. They are forced to contain their agency. In this chapter, I have highlighted this in greater detail. In the final chapter I will provide a conclusion and my recommendation for further study in this field

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction:

My expectation when I applied for a call centre job was not that I was going to develop such an interest in it and as a result end up staying an extra year working in the call centre just to complete my fieldwork. I did eventually leave the call centre to pursue a career of my choice but the lessons I learnt working there will live on through my research. In conclusion I will make arguments that will offer insights based on my research and will make recommendation for future research. I will start by unpacking my observations.

Firstly, while the call centre work is a growing industry and a number of articles have been written about call centre growth (Hauptefleisch, 2006, Houlihan, 2000, Carrim, 2006, Deery 2006) there has been very little literature that looks at call centres from an Industrial Anthropology perspective. I have had an opportunity to add to the field, by exploring both the formal and the informal dynamics of a telecommunications call centre, thus creating the platform for other researchers who may in future share similar interests in this field of research.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

Call centre agents at GBC entered into a line of work which they believed would be an *"easy job"*, *"a quick way to earn money"* but much to their surprise, once in the industry, they discovered that this was not the case. The job proved to have more challenges than they had initially anticipated and it is through these challenges that I found the richness of my research. Agents expressed major challenges in dealing with customers; they were failing to assist them without losing their temper. This was most alarming because agents were hired to

assist customers, but the dawning reality that they would be speaking to these customers for as long as they were employed as call centre agents at GBC began to frustrate them; this was the first indicator of their stress related to their monotonous work. In GBC's defense this is one thing that they are told about in training, that they have to enjoy talking to people and solving their problems.

The next sign of frustration was meeting their KPI's because the balancing act was not as easy as they perceived it to be. Talking to customers seemed like an easy enough job to do but when combined with time limit, guideline on how to speak as well as ensuring that this is done on time becomes a different story. Agents could not maintain the balancing act of meeting all of their targets as stress-free as they thought it would be. Meeting their targets or failure of began to eat away at them and the pressure formed into a constant stress in their job. Lack of time was also a major stress in agent's lives because they believed that they had less time to eat lunch, and somehow before they knew it they needed to be back at work. Therefore working hours was something that agents were not happy with.

Personalizing the frustrations was the biggest stress for most agents. Agents did not always understand that the pressures they experienced were common amongst many other call centres. To them it was their misfortune that they landed up in a call centre with customers that could be abusing as well as targets that often seemed impossible to achieve. The focus groups were crucial in providing this rationale for agents because they shared stories and realized that they were not alone in their thoughts. The research methods employed offered a conducive platform for me to get all the required insight as I had unstructured interviews for additional research questions which I needed elaboration on, as well as semi structured interviews for covering specific questions.

In focus groups agents expressed how the stress from their job affected productivity. Agents believed that the targets were not reasonable and as a result they spent more time stressing about meeting AHT that they did not always assist the customers efficiently because they did not want to have high AHT and eventually have issues with their supervisor. For the agents who really experienced system issues, this was also deterrence to their productivity. The biggest flaw at GBC call centre was the salary issue because this is a direct violation of the contractual agreement between employer and employee, notably paying for services rendered. Agents always had gripes issues with their salaries and failure to give proper answers on this issue created a lot of resentment from call centre agents towards "the system". This does not appear to be an issue that only exists at GBC call centre because other articles (Houlihan 2000, Deery, 2006 and Carrim, 2006) seem to argue the same when it comes to salary issues. This played a major role in low productivity as agents would stay away from work when it was pay day, almost as if to get back their money's worth by missing a day or two of work.

Agents at GBC found ways to cope with working conditions which they found undesirable, they learnt how to cope because they felt they had limited control over their working conditions and through their different coping mechanism they allowed themselves to gain some form of control over their working situation. Whilst at work agents would make use of their cellphones as distraction from their routine, with their cellphones they listened to music and went on social network sites. They also used systems which existed for them to assist customers to their own benefit, they would put customers on hold or take call work in order to catch up with each other, and this was not something they could do whilst signed in on

duty. Many agents would purposefully go to faulty computers so that they have to sign in later whilst their supervisor looked for a working computer which they could use. When it came to salary issues, agents would simply stay away from work whether they had salary issues or not. At times agents would come to work and fake a headache so that they would be allowed to go home. Agents did not run out of ways to counter act the system.

7.3 Discussions

Looking at Mars's group and grid theory (1982) call centre show signs of both group and grid when it comes to salary issues agents react in group format, where they collective stay away from work and the call centre experiences low productivity on such days. However, agents are still judged as individuals based on their own unique performance. According to the research done by Houlihan (2006) agents become dissatisfied with their job mostly based on the repetitive nature of the call centre work and this proved to be true at the GBC call centre as well. Many agents underestimated the monotony of the work and the emotional dangers it held. Literature review also speaks of the targets and salary issues, which also proved true for the call centre, and one can argue that is the trend for call centres worldwide and South Africa is no different.

Carrim (2006) in Rotter's theory of locus control argues that agents can control their realities simply by their mindset. More agents at the GBC call centre have the external control because they believed that external factors were the cause of their misery in their work. They did not take responsibility on the basis that they did want the job as well and that they stayed because they also believed that having a job was better than not having one. This forms part of Structural Violence that is due to high unemployment as the reason why South Africans

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may take jobs that are less than desirable to them because having a job is better than not having one. Agents who believe in being cursed then become victims of Structural Violence even in their thoughts and they are not emancipated by believing in the possibility of a brighter future. The agents who believed this could not fathom the thought of changing their mindset to be channeled in believing they could also affect their fate in the call centre by changing their point of view. Agents like Nkululeko and Thabo were different from the rest because they had a positive mindset and therefore they had internal locus of control. The learning in this is that call centre HR representatives can do psychographic tests for the agents and not treat this profession like any other blue call or mass jobs. There is a great need for investment in training and solid support structure to assist agents in dealing with customers, as well as their own emotions.

7.4 Recommendations

 (It is my belief that qualitative research is the best research method to use for gaining and in depth of call centre agent. However, I do believe that no call centre is the same as the next although they are similar. Quantitative research will give the benefit of researching a larger sample size and therefore a faster way to track what the general populous of call centre feel and think like. However, qualitative research can have benefit of researching the person behind the job and allow that greater personalized interaction which can only be obtained from participant observation. Since call centre work is a very personalized job, as one needs to invest their emotions in making their job a success, speaking to people and having to act the role of a friendly helpful individual irrespective of how one is feeling, I believe that there is merit in using life histories as a research method. This will assist in knowing whether one's history can affect their success in call centre work or not.

I believe there is a lot of information in the service industry that needs to be uncovered by academic research. One cannot study working culture and working industry without linking it to unemployment for example. As a result of unemployment, people are forced to take jobs, rather than chase after their passion, which is a reflection of Structural Violence.

I believe that as Anthropologists we need to explore the working culture more as people spend the bulk of their lives at work. What are the dangers of routine work this and how does it impact on the lives of agents and their families. In Anthropological research conducted on the mine workers in South Africa we are told that men engage in drinking and multiple sexual contacts having girlfriends in hostels because they miss home, but at the same time forced to work in the mines. Through research and having an in depth understanding of call centre agents one can uncover insights on impacts caused by the absence of a partner due to working long hours which call centre industry demands.

There is a lot of rich data that has been uncovered through this research, and it has helped that this research on one particular call centre will spark further research into the social dimension of call centres in South Africa. However, there are gaps because it does not include an in depth understanding of the pressures that management in call centres have. It also does not cover a larger number of agents as well as more call centres in South Africa. A study that starts to research the agents journey from the time they apply for a job in a call centre job, to when they start working and after they have worked for 6 months and a year. There would be a need to see if agents who start working at the same time suffer from any influence and adapt what is being done or agents can form their own opinions about how they feel about their work. If companies are investing in call centres, it is imperative to understand this

industry because more customers will be serviced by call centre agents and more South African's will be finding employment in these jobs, call centres will form part of our socio-economic structure. Future studies should also draw parallels between agents that are happy working in the call centre and the ones that are not, this can the agents that are unhappy.

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Focus group Discussion Guide

Getting to know the agent: [All]

  Icebreaker:

- Tell me anything you find interesting about yourselves
- How do people describe you?
- What are your interests?
- What are your hobbies?

Understanding how agents ended up in the call centre:

- Is this something they have always wanted to do with their lives
- How did they end up working here
- Was it easy to find this current job?
- Did they know anybody who worked in the call centre prior to working here?

Views of the call centre prior to working in the call centre:

- Is there anything that they heard about working in the call centre prior to working here?
    - If so, what are those things?
- Have any of those things proven to be true or false in their opinion?
- Would they recommend this job to anybody else?
    - If not, why?

Call centre views post working there

- What is their impression or view of the call centre now that they work here?
- Is this something that they can be doing for the rest of your life?
- Would they like to advance their career at the GBC call centre?
    - If not, why?
- What would be their ideal job if it's not call centre work?

What agents like about the call centre

- What is the one thing that they like about the call centre job?
- What would they miss if you had to find new employment?
- What is the one thing that pushes them to come to work every day?
- What do they believe is the one good thing that they find in this call centre that they would not find anywhere else?

What agents dislike about working in the call centre?

- What is the one thing that they will not miss should they stop working here?
- If they could change anything about their job, what would it be?
- What is their least favourite task about your job?

Emotional connection to one's work

- Do they find what they do stressful?
- When they think about their job, what stresses them the most?
- Do they get enough support in order to deal with their stress?
- Are there enough systems or programs in place to help them deal with work life stresses?
- Do they feel they have a work life balance?
  - If not, what would it take to give them a work life balance?

Targets/ Key Performance Indexes [KPI]

- Are you able to meet all of their KPI's?
- Do they find all of their targets easy or hard to achieve? [Explain]
- Do they think that every call centre agent should have the same target as the next? [Explain]

Coping mechanism:

- If they find their work difficult, what are some of the ways in which they cope?
- Are there any specific things that they do in order to make work life bearable?
- What are those activities or initiatives which they employ to cope with your work?

Line manager/ supervisor views

- Do they have a good relationship with your supervisor?

- o If, not, what would they change about their relationship with their supervisor?
- Is their manager doing a good job in their view?
- Do you think that their supervisor has bigger work frustrations or fewer frustrations than them?
- If given an opportunity to be a supervisor for a month, would they implement any changes?
  - o If so, what would be those changes?

Wrap up: Ideal call centre

In their view, what would an ideal call centre be like? [Explain]

Do they think with better direction GBC call centre can be better than what it is? [Explain]

Thank and closing

Semi-structured interview questionnaire

1. How do you feel about working in the call centre industry?
2. Are you feelings towards your job the same today as they were when you applied for the job? Explain
3. Do you feel that the interview process adequately prepared you for the job? Reasons.
4. Did the training you received prepare you for the realities of dealing with customers as well as meeting your targets? Explain.
5. Are there any additional things that you would mention to someone applying for your job if given an opportunity to interview someone today?
6. How do you feel about dealing with people's calls on an everyday basis?
7. Do you find it easy or difficult to deal with customers? Explain.
8. How do you handle an angry customer? Please provide an example.
9. How do you feel about the quality of your calls? Elaborate.
10. Have you ever received a very low score on the quality of your calls? [Tell me about the call]
11. Do you feel you are able to achieve your average handling time and still assist customers adequately? Elaborate.
12. How do you feel about solving people's technological queries over the phone?
13. What do you value most about your job?
14. What do you value least about your job?
15. Do you intend to build a career in the call centre industry? If so, Why or why not?
16. Do you think that your feelings towards your job are commonly shared at GBC?