Can perception influence the value of the training and development experience in Call Centre’s?

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Abstract

The lack of skilled workers is one of the key challenges faced by call centre (CC) managers in the local industry, particularly with the shift towards more knowledge intensive work. CC’s are one of the fastest growing service sector occupations, but concerns have arisen about the sustainability of the industry due to the inability to fill higher skilled jobs. This paper explores the role that perception plays in defining the value of training and development experiences in CC’s. Questionnaires and focus groups conducted in ten CC’s show that whilst employees are in fact gaining skills due to their employment, training programs are yet to be widely formalised and frequently have little connection to industry standards and qualifications. Furthermore, while training needs have increased due to ICT, and work has become more knowledge intensive, the invisible elements of work associated with simultaneously managing customer service, work queues and technology fail to be recognised. Hence, the questions raised concern whether employee perception can influence the value of the training and development experience in call centres.

Introduction

Since CC’s started proliferating globally in the 1990’s, they have received considerable criticism for the way the work is organised, and the way people are managed. The lack of training and development opportunities is a recurring theme in the CC literature, and has been identified as a key contributor to the high attrition rates in these workplaces (Harvey and Connell, 2004; CIPD, 2004). But not all CC’s are the same and training requirements and provisions vary considerably between workplaces. What is agreed upon, however, is that training and development is an essential element of work organisation and human resource management where CC’s are concerned (Smith and Smith, 2008).

A report produced by The Union Research Centre for Organisation and Technology URCOT (2000) highlighted the pressing need for training and education in CC’s due to the rapid expansion of the industry, the use of more sophisticated technologies, and the provision of an even wider range of CC services. They warned that without training, there would be a significant risk that the continuing boom would “leave behind a pool of unskilled and semi skilled workers seeking employment in a multi-skilled industry” (URCOT, 2000: 6). Indeed, the importance of training and development for the sustainability of the Australian CC industry has been noted. Researchers have suggested that not only do organisations have a high price to pay with employee exit, a likely cost of the lack of training and development opportunities (see ACA, 2004; Harvey and Connell, 2004); but that the development of the industry as a whole is highly contingent on the existence of a skilled labour pool (Crome, 1998).

In Australia, problems there are already problems emerging in regards to sustaining the industry with a skilled workforce. Managers participating in The Australian Communications Association Call Centre’s Benchmarking Report (2004) highlighted the inability to find skilled employees as a major challenge faced within the industry. In this
paper we explore whether CC workers are becoming more skilled in their jobs, and to what extent they are becoming more skilled. Here the focus is on determining whether CC’s are in fact moving towards more knowledge and skill intensive work as trends suggest elsewhere in the services sector (Shah and Bandi, 2003). Secondly, are training needs increasing in CC’s and if so, to what extent is this due to developments in ICT? Findings from The Global CC Project reported by Sieben, de Grip, Longen and Sorensen (2007) draw attention to the link between advancements in ICT in CC’s, the increasing demand for skills, and higher training needs. While this study examined the impact of ICT in 16 different countries, Australia was not one of them. Hence, the impact of ICT on training and development needs in the Australian CC context are still questionable. Another issue that is explored is if training needs are in fact increasing, to what extent are these being met? This paper attempts to unravel some of these questions from an employees’ perspective by delving into their training and development experiences in the CC environment. The following section reviews the literature surrounding training and development in CC’s.

Training, Development and Skills in CC’s

While training is considered an essential element of work organisation in CC’s (Smith and Smith, 2008) employment in the CC industry has long been associated with limited and inadequate training and development opportunities (Crome, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Bagnara and Marti, 2001; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Paul and Huws, 2002; Harvey and Connell, 2004). One strand of the Human Resources literature suggests global competition, change and the impact of ICT have provided impetus for strategic consideration of skill development and commitment (Bratton and Gold, 2007), particularly given the high turnover rates of up to 50% that are common in CC’s.

Reporting on the results of an industry survey conducted by the Professional Planning Forum (an independent industry body for effective resourcing and planning in the contact centre industry) Woosey (2009) cites a lack of skill development opportunities as the key reason why employees leave UK CC’s – with 42% of surveyed organisations selecting this option. Communication between management and employees and the lack of promotion and progress opportunities both came in as second, with 35% of organisations selecting each of these. He suggests that although many CC’s use multi-skilling as a way to be more efficient, if can also be seen as a development tool. He argues that employees would be trained in new skills after certain periods of time and/or reaching a certain performance level giving employees a sense of achievement and creating variety in a job. Moreover he proposes that it can be possible to achieve this without the need for financial reward, so while development can be considered a means of motivating CC staff, they are also likely to stay with the business longer as they move along the skill path, whilst meeting the business need for efficiency. As CC work is also being considered as a career now with varied roles available, ranging from the traditional path of customer service operator, team leader or support roles in HR Woosey (2009) proposes that it is important that some of these positions are filled with internal candidates hence, providing the knowledge that if they work hard and do well they will have a chance to progress. This viewpoint would not differ radically from traditional career perspectives, what is different is that historically call centre positions have been viewed as ‘dead end’ with a lack of advancement opportunities available (Belt, 2002).

High turnover rates are often related to the image portrayed of CC’s as engaging in low-profit value-added activities, characterised by poor wages and conditions, a disposable workforce, and the implementation of Taylorist principles (Paul & Huws 2002, de Grip et al 2005). Crome (1998: 137) suggests that in these contexts, training is considered ‘nice to have’ rather than a ‘must have’ given the low training budgets dedicated to training
initiatives, and the high churn rates that characterise the industry. In many cases, the highly simplified nature of the tasks performed may render training futile, preventing workers from acquiring additional skills, and causing many workers to leave the industry altogether. In effect, the process operates as a spiral, with turnover and related cost pressures encouraging employers to minimise the complexity of tasks, which diminishes the need for training investment, hence, triggering further movement out of the industry (Crome, 1998; Paul and Huws, 2002).

The question of whether CC’s provide adequate opportunities for training and development is contentious given the diversity that characterises these organisations and the implications that contingencies such as CC structure, size and strategy have for the provision of such initiatives (Weikopf, 2006). The evidence from Australian research suggests training is particularly under-resourced in public sector call centres (URCOT, 2000). Incidentally, the study found that training needs were also much higher in the public sector when compared to CC’s in the private sector. Findings suggest the onus has been shifted to workers to undertake training, with some research participants stating training had practically disappeared from their organisations. In terms of wider industry studies, the 2004 ACA CC Benchmarking report found that CC workers receive an average of 15 days of training each year, below the world best-practice of 20 days (Harvey and Connell, 2004).

In terms of the various debates in the literature, two issues stand out in particular where training and development is concerned. Firstly, the impacts of CC work on employee skills and secondly, the implications of ICT on training needs. While some researchers have argued that employees are able to acquire a range of valuable skills from CC’s (see Hunt, 2004) others have described these workplaces as essentially deskilling due to the low level of complexity associated with tasks. In other words, while some CC’s may assist employees in acquiring skills that are transferable to other CC’s or CC contexts, in other CC’s employees may find their existing skills becoming eroded due to not being utilised due to their inapplicability to the CC environment. Interestingly, it appears the workforce occupying these positions is not always low-skilled when commencing employment. Research conducted in German CC’s by Holtgrewe and Scholten (2005) and in British CC’s by Holman and Wood (2005) found that a substantial number of CC employees had either senior high school or other training qualifications, or held university level degrees. Nevertheless, general educational qualifications are rarely required of CC operatives in Australia. The training tends to be more work-place specific in its focus; although some call centres, particularly larger ones are able to offer more formal career-orientated training due to the existence of career development opportunities. Smith and Smith (2008) note that levels of training, whilst intensive, do not necessarily reflect the education of CC workers. Rather, much of the training is considered low level, routinized, and largely associated with work organisation.

This is concerning given that the key challenge identified by CC’s managers in the ACA ZEENIE survey, was that of ‘recruitment’ due to the lack of a skilled labour pool. Between 2001 and 2004, the number of CC’s experiencing difficulties in recruiting agents increased from 21 percent to 35 percent. The key barrier to recruitment in 91 percent of cases was the shortage of skilled CC workers in the marketplace. The high demand for skilled agents is further highlighted in the fact that the average tenure of CC agents in Australia was 29 months, with 26% of agents moving to competing CC’s, suggesting a high demand for skilled agents. This horizontal rather than vertical career movements within the industry are possibly due to the lack of organisational layers in Australian CC’s and the lack of promotional opportunities. This paper explores whether a lack of training does in fact exist in call centres despite employer recognition that the work requires skills. In particular, this paper explores whether employees are in fact becoming
skilled through CC work and more importantly, the nature of the skills acquired. Furthermore, we examine whether training and development needs have in fact increased in the industry as reported in certain strands of the literature and whether training in call centres has kept up with these developments. Furthermore, the impact of ICT will be examined in terms of the extent to which it has contributed to increased training needs. The following section outlines how the data was collected.

Methodology

This paper reports on findings from a cross-industry study on work and social cohesion in Australia. The CC leg of this project took place between December 2008 and August 2009, and involved ten call centres of varying sizes and characteristics as outlined in Table 1 below. The identities of the CC’s involved are not revealed so as to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of participating organisations and individual respondents.

Table 1: Participating CC’s Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CC</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>CC Age</th>
<th>IB/ OB*</th>
<th>No. of Employees</th>
<th>Turnover</th>
<th>Survey Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Private equity</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answering service</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>IB</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>&lt; 10%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pub</td>
<td>Local council</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Medical Services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>IB</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>&lt;10%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Insurance &amp; Finance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answering service</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>IB</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Priv</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answering service/Telemarketing</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>IB/ OB</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10 – 15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Inbound/ Outbound

Self-administered surveys involving a combination of dichotomous and rating style questions were conducted in each of the CC’s in either hard or soft copy format, resulting in 357 usable surveys. The researchers also undertook focus group interviews in each of the CC’s. The focus groups delved into greater depth about employees’ experiences with the various facets of the work environment; training and development representing one of the key themes of focus. While the surveys highlight general trends in the training and development experiences of the survey respondents, the focus groups place these trends in context by examining the deeper issues surrounding these experiences.

Findings

Findings from the survey reveal a prime aged workforce, with some 51.5 per cent of employees occupying the 25-44 year age profile, and 31 per cent, below 24 years of age. Only 18 per cent of the respondents across the ten CC’s were over the age of 45 years. The notion of CC’s being female dominated workplaces is also confirmed in the survey results.
with only 29 per cent of participants being male and 71 per cent of participants being female. Only 22 per cent of the survey participants indicated they are trade union members. Surprisingly, where career development is concerned, two thirds of respondents stated that they intended to develop a career in this industry and seven in ten also reported that they believed there were promotional opportunities emerging in their current organisation.

**Are CC employees becoming skilled through their work, and what is the relationship between formal and tacit learning on the job?**

Training is an essential element of work organisation and human resource management in CC’s, and this was largely confirmed through the survey. Almost all survey participants (nearly 90 per cent) had received some form of classroom training in the previous 12 months. A further 81 percent had received training on a one-on-one basis, either from their team leaders or other internal or external trainers. The focus groups suggest the use of self-paced, self-directed training in four of the CC’s (CC2, CC5, CC6, CC9). Views on self-paced learning were not entirely positive, with employees stating they often had little time to read over manuals whilst on the job.

Overall, where CC operatives are concerned, much of the learning that takes place is either structured on the job training conducted by managers, or informal tacit and situated learning. Nine out of ten CC’s provided no formal qualification based training to CC employees. Formal training was made available only to Team leaders, who incidentally also had access to a broader range of training options (in-house, out-sourced, self-paced, formal qualifications). As reported in many studies of CC’s, the training conducted in the ten case studies mainly focussed on customer service skills, software skills and client or product knowledge. Employees also spoke of training related to ICT, but this is discussed below. The importance of peer learning was highlighted by 82 per cent of respondents who confirmed they had acquired job skills, learnt short cuts and problem solving, and others ways of improving their work through their co-workers. Focus groups suggest this is largely facilitated through the existence of team based work structures which represent both a formal and informal platform for employees to share ideas and discuss ways of improving their work. The relationship between less and more experienced employees was also highlighted in the focus groups with employees stating they often called on more experienced team members when dealing with difficult calls.

> There are some people who are more or less experienced than others so it’s sometimes comforting to know you can turn to the person next to you and say HELP.. this has just happened, how do I handle it. (CC9).

Such interactions in turn had the effect of developing the mentoring skills of more experienced operators in the same jobs. As one employee pointed out:

> I mean being the age group that I am, I am on the little bit older age group than these guys, but I find my skills as a mother develop and I become a mentor and I have to also have that nurturing side with younger team members and you’re building on that work ethic (CC8).

Overall, improvements in skill levels were reported by 86 per cent of participants who felt the skills they used in their job had increased a little or a lot in the previous five years. Focus group interviews suggest that similar to the wider literature, most of these improvements were in relation to a mixture of generic and organisation specific skills in customer service, computer literacy and product knowledge.
Have training needs increased? If so, can this be attributed to developments in ICT?

According to the survey, close to three quarters of respondents had new information and communication technology (ICT) introduced in the workplace within the previous 12 months. A five point scale (1=a lot more, 3=about the same and 5=a lot less) was used to gauge the responses of participants to the statements outlined in column 1 of Table 2 below. Overall, the impact on employees appears insignificant across the variables, with the mean value for each statement remaining close to the middle value “about the same”. Two noteworthy findings however did emerge. Firstly, 37 per cent of employees believed ICT created more tasks to do in any given day. Similarly 37 per cent also suggested they now require more skills as a result of changes in ICT. The focus groups also suggested that employees across all ten CC’s had experienced an increase in training needs to some extent. Employees in three CC’s in particular (CC3, CC4 & CC8) found their training needs had increased dramatically in the five years they had been in their jobs due to developments in ICT.

Table 2: The impact of ICT in the workplace (n varies from 312 to 318)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you ..</th>
<th>A lot more</th>
<th>Somewhat more</th>
<th>About the same</th>
<th>Somewhat less</th>
<th>A lot less</th>
<th>Mean value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.. need more or less skills due to the impact of ICT?</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.. have more or less responsibility due to the impact of ICT?</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.. have to carry out more or less tasks in a given day due to the impact of ICT?</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In CC7, employees noted that having a company website meant that customer had access to more information, & the complexity of questions received had increased putting more pressure on employees’ to keep up to date with product knowledge.

Whereas before we would answer more basic questions, the fact that we have a website that contains a lot of information means that customers tend to be more clued up. The questions are a reflection of that. As an example, before we may be asked questions about our interest rates, whereas now we are expected to provide comparative numbers, on a range of loan options so our skills are ultimately being stretched & tested. (CC7)

In CC3, CC7 & CC10, developments in ICT were seen to have increased the capacity of the organisations to deal with a wider range of clients & offer a wider range of services.

What’s one advantage we really have over others, the exposure we have to such a range of clients & services. I mean, without the technology it’s not something that would have been possible, so it’s opened up a lot for this place. The amount of work that comes through reflects that. It’s a good forward thinking way to keep things going even when other businesses are going down. (CC3).

This in turn has increased training needs in terms of the amount of knowledge employees need to have about products and clients.

Yeah once you know the basics it’s not hard to navigate it. We deal with a wider range of customers now though so our customer service training helps there, but other than that, the technology is pretty basic (CC7)
Developments in the ICT used in the organisations also placed greater pressure on employees to multi-skill and learn the various developments and updates to the system. Most of this was done ‘on the job’ whilst servicing calls.

We need to understand a broader range of products, and since these are more and more regulated, we need to be able to grasp that too. And also needing to get the new system that we are using. That took a bit of getting used to because before it was more like reception work whereas now it’s more skill focused. (CC7).

Interestingly, the greatest impact ICT had on training needs was through increasing the amount of knowledge employees had about the expanding product and service range. Training needs associated with changes in the day-to-day systems had much less of an impact, with most employees stating they were able to learn these on the job. In other words, the ICT systems used by CC employees remained largely stable, and tended to be released slowly over time. Skills were developed in terms of changes to the system, but most of this was specific on-the-job learning.

I obviously know more now but it’s not really linked to the technology here. It’s not complex. Most of it is straight forward and pretty basic self explanatory stuff. Once you get it, you get it. You learn as you use it (CC7).

Are training needs being met?

As outlined in Table 1, the CC’s involved in this study were diverse and ranged in the nature of service provided and the complexity of the work tasks. While overall, employees did state their skills had improved within the CC, training needs varied between CC’s. Presumably, training needs would be higher in a CC defined by more complex work requiring a higher degree of problem solving and technical knowledge. Three CC’s that fitted this profile were CC3, CC4 and CC8. CC3 is a small CC of 22 employees, and features extensive training both initial and ongoing. In this context, the complexity is in terms of the wide range of clients that are serviced by the CC. At the time of the study, the CC was servicing upwards of 60 clients for a variety of services. All 22 employees were required to have knowledge of the background and servicing requirements of the full cohort of clients:

The clientele is quite different, and new ones are constantly being added here so sometimes it’s hard to know when it’s going to stop. The work is a challenging one because each of us has to know the full range of clients, and the whole range of services that we have to provide and all the terms and things that go with it. Really understand it inside out (CC3).

.....sometimes you only get a call from a certain job say, three times in a month, but each of those times, it means that we need to be prepared and on the ball to know what is going on and to respond according to what is needed (CC3).

In this CC, the training is largely knowledge and system based; requiring employees to understand both client requirements and the different systems that correlate with each client/product. Due to the complexity, employees undergo two hours of in house training every week, and consider it essential for their jobs. Given the frequency and intensity of the training, all employees felt their training needs were in fact being met, and were satisfied with the outcome.

I’m happy with the way they handle the training, because I guess it’s always to make sure we are ready for the calls. And what we learn is always helpful (CC3).
In CC4, training and development was conducted with the introduction of all new major products and changes or developments to existing products. Due to the highly regulated nature of the insurance industry, any changes are accompanied with at least 8-hours of intensive training, and employees were satisfied with the level and extent of training. In CC8 however, employees pointed out that training was usually conducted in a 30 minute team meeting once a week. They found 30 minutes not nearly enough time for training purposes, suggesting this had created stress in their jobs due to their inability to fully understand updates before being placed back on the phones.

_We have very limited training because we usually only have a half an hour like team meeting, where we get trained and if that’s not enough time, if some people don’t understand it in half an hour, too bad kind of thing (CC8)._

On the other hand, employees in the CC’s with less complex work were mostly happy to learn ‘on the job’. In most cases, training needs were largely due to product updates, and on the whole these were relatively minor. Given the lack of complexity in the tasks and the relatively stable context in which these organisations operated, employees were satisfied that they knew enough to do their jobs.

_It’s not complex. Most of it is straight forward and pretty basic self explanatory stuff. Once you get it, you get it. You learn as you use it. (CC7)._

Another interesting observation was that training was most often conducted by team leaders who had little background in training and development. Their capacity to effectively conduct training therefore came under some scrutiny in the CC’s investigated.

_We’re often being taught by our team leaders who don’t know the software that well anyway. They haven’t used it practically. (CC8)_

_Most of its done by the team leaders, and that’s not always the best way to go about doing it, because we do often question how much they really know. (CC9)_

_Some of them aren’t really built for training. They speed through things and we have a hard time trying to make sense of it. (CC10)_

This raises the importance of exploring the training and development capabilities associated with in-house training in call centres. The skills of the ‘trainers’, who in this case are the team leaders, seems to play a role in how effective the training episode is perceived to be. In terms of the fit between skills and the job requirement, the surveys overall showed that 46 per cent believe their duties correspond well with their present skills. Two areas of concern did emerge however. Firstly, 12 per cent of respondents felt they required further training to be able to cope with their current duties, suggesting a level of under-skilling exists in these workplaces. Focus group interviews indicate this was most likely within the larger CC, CC8, where training needs were found to be higher and largely unmet.

_Secondly, 42 per cent of participants believed their current skills were being underutilised in their employment. Focus groups suggest this may be due to employees entering the CC from a wide range of occupational backgrounds (e.g. web designer, chef, accountant, campaign supervisor) which require different skills sets. The survey data, however, highlights another key point about the workforce – the fact that the education and qualification levels of the CC participants were varied, but nonetheless, overall relatively high. Only 14 per cent of participants had not completed Year 12. A further 29 per cent stated the highest level of education attained was Year 12. Some 14 per cent reported having a skilled vocational qualification, and another 21 per cent had obtained either an associate diploma or advanced_
Furthermore, 18 per cent reported holding a degree or diploma, and 5 per cent held a postgraduate qualification. These findings indicate that firstly, there is a lack of application of skills acquired by employees in their previous jobs to their current role and secondly, the level of training offered in the CC’s may not necessarily ‘fit’ the education levels of the workforce. The implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.

**Discussion**

While nearly all employees in the study had received some level of training in the CC less encouraging is the fact that this was almost always in-house training, informal and not linked to any industry level qualifications. ICT had the effect of increasing the levels of multi-skilling required and played a key part in making the work more knowledge intensive (Hampson et al, 2009). Finally, similar to Holtgrewe and Scholten (2005) and Holman and Wood’s (2005) findings, the education levels of the workforce in the ten CC’s was relatively high, but only three of the ten CC’s provided intensive training to their employees. The discrepancy between CC employees’ existing qualifications and skills, and the levels and complexity of the training provided in the CC’s is an issue managers must place more focus on given that issues can potentially arise in regards to employee morale and satisfaction. A key point from the literature and the findings presented here is to endeavour to make the invisible skills referred to by Junor, Hampson and Barnes (2008) visible. They argue that while certain skills such as computer literacy may be apparent in CC work, there are other more ‘invisible’ skills associated with ‘emotional’ and ‘aesthetic labour’ and general workflow maintenance such as awareness, interaction, management and coordination that are equally if not more important (Junor, Hampson, Barnes, 2008). The question was posed in the title of this paper as to whether perception can influence the value of the training and development experience. We believe it can if CC’s if the skills developed by CC operators are valued; that is being able to simultaneously deal with customers, look up information and use technology in increasingly sophisticated ICT environments (Hampson, Junor and Barnes, 2009).

The problem is that it is generally formal training and development that is valued which is accredited in some way. This type of experience is clearly not going to occur in the CC environment where much of the training and development occurs vicariously or through the sub-conscous development of skills as CC operators and team leaders become more experienced. We argue that this process should become more formalised. For example, if CC operators were to develop a ‘learning portfolio’ from the inception of their employment they would be able to assess their progress from the commencement of their employment and chart their journey as they become more experienced. By logging difficult experiences, reflecting on them and developing actions for the future they would be taking the various steps advocated by Kolb in the well known learning cycle. The portfolio could also be the focus of discussion between CSOs and their team leaders becoming a developmental tool in the form of a reflective journal. These techniques may be particularly useful in small CC’s such as those investigated in this study given the resource restrictions and impracticalities that restrict their movement towards more formalised training and skill development initiatives.

Overall, however, without the implementation of formalised and recognised training initiatives, there is to some extent, a lack of portability of the knowledge and skills gained across the Australian CC industry. Based on the trends captured across these CCs, it appears CC managers may continue to face difficulties in finding adequately skilled workers in the years to come, particularly if CC workers are pushed to leave the industry altogether. Hampson et al (2009) suggest the development of generic skills and the uptake of accredited
training with recognition of prior learning represent benefits for both employees and employers in terms of increasing employees’ capacity for multi-skilling and boosting employee confidence, autonomy and overall morale. All of which would be supported by the learning portfolios suggested in this paper. Expanding the inclusion of ‘valued’ CC skills to capture the more invisible and subconsciously developed elements of the work will play a key and integral part towards assisting in the recognition of call centres as somewhere a career can be developed for those who wish to do so.

References

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\footnote{This paper has been peer reviewed by two anonymous referees.}