What’s trust got to do with it? Perceptions of trust in the call centre context

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Abstract

In the organisational context, high-trust relations can be seen as both conducive to and an indicator of a positive and productive workplace climate. Since their emergence, call centres have been criticised in the literature for poor people management. The evidence raised in the extensive body of literature suggests these organisations contain low-trust conditions. This study aimed to gauge trust from the perspective of those on the front-line, and adopted an exploratory approach to examine (a) the extent to which Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) trust their supervisors and managers and (b) the conditions under which ‘trust’ is established and maintained. Surveys and focus groups were conducted with CSRs in ten call centres. Findings suggest ‘trust’ exists despite the existence of low-discretion practices, while higher trust relations can be associated with conditions more likely to exist in a small call centres.

Introduction

While organizational researchers have long shown interest in the notion of trust, the transition from heavy industry to a new technology based economy have led to increased interest in this area. Call centres (CCs) are widely recognised as playing a major role in the new economy and are seen to exemplify the organizations of the ‘information era’ (Green 2005; Batt, Holman & Holtgrew 2009). CCs have made a significant mark on Australia and the rest of the world with an estimated $300 billion spent on them globally every year (Gilson & Deepak 2005). Since their initial emergence in the early 1990’s, the people management practices and principles of work organisation used in CCs have been subject to significant scrutiny (see URCOT 2000; Wallace, Eagleson & Waldersee 2000; Batt & Moynihan 2002; Paul & Huws 2002; Deery & Kinnie 2005; Wall & Wood 2005; Russell 2008).

While it is true that not all CCs are the same (Russell 2008) much of the literature surrounding CCs infer they are low-trust environments. This is evidenced through the high levels of monitoring, surveillance and control that CSR’s are subject to, and the limited discretion that CSR’s experience in the labour process Frenkel, Tam, Korzynski & Shire, 1998; Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Houlihan 2002). The high turnover rates that have marred the image of these workplaces since they initially started proliferating across the globe (see URCOT 2000; Paul & Huws 2002; Callaghan 2005) further suggest what might be assumed as weak employer-employee relations.

In this paper, we examine the extent to which CSR’s have trust in their team leaders and managers, and the conditions under which higher trust relations are exhibited. We also examine how trust impacts on CSR’s attitudes towards their employers and their commitment to the workplace. The following section provides a brief review of the ‘trust’ and ‘CC’ literature. This is followed by an overview of the research methodology and a thematic
presentation of the key findings. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the key themes and closing note.

**Literature review**

Over time numerous scholars have explored the impact of employee trust in management upon productivity and have identified higher levels of trust in management as one of the key and beneficial factors for improved work performance see Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Dirks & Ferrin 2001, 2002; Mayer & Gavin 2005). Myriad definitions for trust have resulted in ambiguity as to what it means and how it is accomplished. Tyler and Degoey (1996) suggest trust is determined by the degree to which individuals feel they are treated with respect; while Shaw (1997) proposes that demonstrating concern for others is paramount to trusting relationships. Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter and Ng (2001) and Kernan and Hanges (2002) on the other hand suggest a positive relationship between interpersonal justice and trust in management. Whitener, Brodt et al. delve deeper by focussing on managerial behaviours, suggesting that by ‘showing consideration and sensitivity for employees’ needs and interests’ (1998, p. 6) employees’ perceptions of trustworthiness may be enhanced. Alternatively, from the CC perspective, Frenkel et al. (1998) propose trust includes trust and the reliability and sincerity of those who run and manage the workplace.

The wider discourse conceptualises ‘trust’ as a multi-faceted phenomenon intimately associated with the norms, values, and belief in the organizational culture (Shockley et al. 1999). To this effect, ‘trust’ represents both a precursor to and indicator of positive management–employee relations, and makes a positive contribution to workers’ satisfaction through stronger affective bonding (Kidwell & Bennett 1993). This essentially establishes a framework of cooperation that is conducive to evoking greater work effort and attention from employees (see Freeman & Medoff 1984).

Changes in the world of work over the last two decades have brought issues surrounding ‘trust’ in the organisational context back into the limelight. For instance, the widespread restructuring of organizations and the reorganization of work to enhance flexibility is a trend that has occurred in much of the developed world in the name of global competitiveness (Ranson 2003). These trends have been aided with the development of new information and communications technologies which have led to the emergence of new types of jobs, and new techniques for the organisation of workers and the management of performance. At the same time, there have arisen new or reformulated hard and soft management ideologies, primarily designed to increase worker productivity (Green 2005). Combined with the increase in casual and flexible employment, shorter term career spans and greater movement by employees between organisations, the terms and strength of employer-employee relationships have been significantly challenged (Kramar 1998).

In no context are these developments more apparent than in CCs. Indeed, technology has played a strong and distinctive role in the labour process of CCs providing organizations with structure, surveillance and control – essentially the antecedents of this relatively new form of work organization (Crome 1998). These technologies allow work to be extensively controlled and monitored in a way that was previously not possible. Described as the modern day panopticon, CCs represent principle environments for the application of managerial control over nearly all facets of employee conduct (Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999; Russell 2008). While from the organisations perspective these systems are considered a necessity in maintaining performance and quality standards, such practices are essentially
predicated on ideologies of distrust. Resonating McGregor’s Theory X view of humans, research suggests these perspectives may lead to counter-productive management practices for organisation in the new economy (McGregor 1960; 2005).

Further concerns are raised due to technology from the ‘information era’ being combined with the principles of work organization derived from the ‘industrial era’. Work organization in CCs is often highly reminiscent of the Taylorist and Fordist production line system, particularly with the focus on ‘mass production’, ‘mass consumption’ and the standardisation of processes, organised in an assembly line method of production (Taylor & Bain 1999). These processes are familiar in terms of the simplification and repetitiveness of tasks, and the intense pressure to process as many potential customers as possible using telephone and computer technology (Holman 2000; Deery & Kinnie 2005).

CCs can also be described as characteristic of the formulation of new and diverse management ideologies and practices, all of which have the same goal of increasing worker productivity in the new economy (Green 2005). On one end of the scale are managerial principles that endorse high commitment philosophies and team based structures (Thompson, Callaghan & van den Broek 2004). Here, commitment necessary for performance to occur is ascertained through developing strong relational bonds and ‘trust’ between CSR’s; and CSR’s and their team leaders/ managers as a means of attaining normative control (Thompson et al. 2004). At the other end of the spectrum are more ‘sacrificial human resources strategies’ which rely on employee replacement as opposed to employee development as a means of maintaining consistently high levels of productivity and quality (Wallace et al. 2000). In these scenarios, there would typically be less emphasis placed on establishing ‘high-trust’ relationships with CSR’s. In fact, the short term nature of employment and the sacrificial stance take on employee motivation and satisfaction would most likely preclude it (Wallace et al. 2000).

Certainly, the images portrayed of CC workplaces vary from one extreme to the next, from the overly negatory where CSR’s are de-skilled in modern day ‘service factories’ and ‘electronic sweatshops’ with excessively simplified tasks, tight scripting and statistical monitoring; to the overly optimistic, where CSR’s represent knowledge workers in a service quality focussed environment where the relational aspects of the call are emphasised above quantitative measures (Frenkel et al. 1998; Bain et al. 2000; Gilmore & Moreland 2000; Houlihan 2002). The reality however is that neither provides an accurate representation, and that CCs may fall into either of these extremes, or anywhere in between, given the heterogeneous nature of the market (Paul & Huws 2002; Burgess & Connell 2004). Nevertheless, Frenkel et al. (1998) over a decade ago argued that while “a complex hybrid form of work organization” may exist which provides for a combination of routinization and customization, at best, the nature of work in CCs means CSR’s are only ever afforded what can be described as limited discretion (Frenkel et al. 1998); a conclusion that is further supported by Houlihan (2002). This is due to CC work still being uniform on many accounts, including the use of largely numerically based performance standards and electronic forms of monitoring (Frenkel et al. 1998).

While there is evidence in the CC literature that suggests CCs are low-trust work environments there is little research that focuses specifically on trust in the CC context. The evidence that leads one to believe that these workplaces are low-trust is that which is derived from literature that adopts a labour process approach, and thus examines the nature of work organisation in these organisations. There is however, limited research that gauges trust from the employee perspective. Nevertheless, what research there is available suggests trust is a critical indicator of well-being and satisfaction.
For instance, Hannif, Burgess and Connell (2008) and Connell and Hannif (2009) determined employer-employee relations to be a key indicator of the quality of work life of CSRs, both through prior evidence and detailed empirical research in two CC settings. Further, Frenkel et al. (1998) found variations in satisfaction amongst CSR’s were determined by the extent to which management could be trusted and relied upon. These researchers emphasised the role of management in building and sustaining a climate of trust and reliability. Sprigg et al. (2003) on the other hand associated unreasonable workloads, and lack of control over how work is conducted with reduced employee morale and trust in team leaders and managers. CSRs in their study also reported negative feelings about performance monitoring, stating it made them feel untrusted.

Indeed, while there is some limited evidence of the importance of trust in CCs, the literature on this area is neither detailed nor conclusive. What is conclusive however, is the impact of ‘trust’ on employee morale and commitment; issues that are of high relevance to CCs, given their traditionally blemished image for poor working conditions. This paper aims to address the paucity of research by examining CSR’s perceptions of trust in their workplace. Specifically, this paper seeks to explore whether CSR’s have trust in their team leaders and/or managers?, and under what conditions are high-trust relations formed and maintained in CCs? The research methodology is outlined in the following section.

**Research 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 nine CCs of varying sizes and characteristics located in New South Wales (8) and Victoria (1) - see 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 CCs Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CC</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Age of CC</th>
<th># of Seats</th>
<th>Turnover</th>
<th>Survey Response Rate</th>
<th>Nature of the work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCB</td>
<td>Private equity</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Tightly scripted, standardised, routinised &amp; closely monitored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCIP</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Tightly, structured monitoring; extensive range of targets; moderately skilled work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWW</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answer service</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>&lt; 10%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Broad range of clients; high skilled work; emphasis on quality; some scripting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCIH</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Tightly, structured monitoring; extensive range of targets; moderately skilled work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Medical Services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>&lt;10%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Emphasis on quality; no scripting or time limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Insurance and Finance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>Performance reviewed on number of measured, but on ad hoc basis. No strict or rigid systems; little pressure on CSOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCN</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Tightly, structured monitoring; extensive range of targets; moderately skilled work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCX</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answer service</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Emphasis on answering times; scripted calls; adherence to script considered important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCL</td>
<td>Outsourcer: Answer service/ Telemarketing</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10 – 15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Tight control mechanisms; tight scripting; broad range of performance measures - quantity + quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study consisted of two stages. Firstly, anonymised self-administered surveys involving a combination of dichotomous and rating style questions were conducted in each of the CCs in either hard or soft copy format. This resulted in 357 usable surveys with response rates ranging from 21 percent to 100 percent (as outlined in Table 1above). The second stage
involved researchers undertaking focus group interviews in each of the CC’s. Focus groups involved between and 7 CSOs and lasted between 50 and 80 minutes. The focus groups delved into CSR’s experiences with the various facets of the work environment; ‘trust in team leaders and supervisors’ representing one of the key themes of focus. CSRs were questioned about whether they trusted their team leaders and managers to look after their needs, and to make the right decisions for the company. An unstructured interview approach gave CSRs significant latitude to respond to these questions. Responses were subsequently collected and organised into themes (see below).

Findings

Background characteristics

The survey results show the majority (51.5 per cent) of CSR’s surveyed were in the 25-44 years category whilst almost 31 per were aged 24 years or less and only 18 per cent of participants were 45 years or older. In terms of gender, 71 per cent of respondents were female. Somewhat surprising was the low level of casual labour and the relatively low use of part-time CSRs in the CCs. Some 67 per cent of CSR’s were full-time permanent staff comprised with 28 per cent part-time permanent. The remaining 5 per cent were casuals. CCs have been shown in other studies to make very high use of the more contingent forms of labour but this did not seem to be the case in these organisations. Further, 80 per cent of participants were less than 5 years in their current job, 59 per cent of which stated they were there for between 2 to 5 years.

Unsurprisingly, 90 per cent of respondents replied that their work was monitored through a computer system. Almost half of all employees stated they are continuously monitored, 13 per cent say they are monitored on an hourly basis, a further 15 per cent on a daily basis, with the remaining monitored on a weekly (13.5 per cent) and monthly (9 per cent) basis. Furthermore, 97 per cent of respondents answered that they are required to meet performance outputs/targets. The number and type of targets varied amongst respondents. Time per call was the most common target covering 70 per cent of those that face performance outputs. This was followed by number of calls received (62 per cent), sales (58 per cent) and calls made (22 per cent). In addition, 29 per cent also selected the ‘other option’.

Respondents were also asked whether they had been consulted about workplace changes in the previous 12 months, and almost 80 per cent reported they had been. Direct channels were clearly favoured in these contexts with 89 per cent of respondents stating their direct supervisor/ team leader had discussed these changes. Team meetings were identified as a popular mechanism (54 per cent) followed by higher level managers discussing changes (47 per cent). Only 6 per cent of unionised employees reported that their union had discussed changes with them.

Employees expressed high levels of commitment to their respective organisations with 90 per cent stating that they are willing to work hard to help the organisation succeed. Nevertheless, only 25 per cent answered that they often or very often work longer hours because of their commitment to the organisation. A further 39 per cent stated they sometimes work longer, 24 per cent do not do it very often and the remaining 12 per cent stated they have never done so. Some 87 per cent believe that their own values are very similar to the organisation and 95 per cent report that they are proud to work for the organisation. Interestingly, 44 per cent stated that they would turn down another job with more pay just to stay with the organisation they are currently working. Correspondingly, 50 per cent indicated that they would take almost any job to keep working in that organisation. These findings suggest that these employees are
happy with their current terms and conditions and overall job satisfaction. Trust levels would therefore also be expected to be high.

**Trust in Team leaders/ Management**

1. **Being heard**

When examining the extent to which CSRs trusted team leaders and managers to understand and look after their needs, within all the CCs investigated ‘trust’ was closely associated with the extent to which employees felt they were ‘heard’ in the organisation.

*If we do want something we have only to put our hand up, and if it is reasonable it will be heard. We (CSRs) are respected and we respect our colleagues and our management (CCN).*

*The other thing as well is, with the management in this company, they listen to the staff. There’s surveys done annually, surveys done quarterly. (CCIP).*

Trust was also determined by the extent to which CSRs felt their feedback was valued by the organisation, particularly in terms of implementation of ideas or responding to concerns raised by CSRs:

*They might do a ‘your voice’ [employee survey] for this centre, and then they go on and say, well, let’s do something about this. They brought in the 10 minute afternoon breaks, that’s a really good thing for the staff (CCIP).*

*If we have a change in like clients or if we have new training put in place, if we have an issue with it we can talk to managers about it; I don’t really think any of us would hesitate about doing it... I mean I’ve had issues with the ventilation, and it’s no problem to approach them (CC).*

In CCN – the largest of the CCs investigated, CSRs felt their feedback was not valued by those in higher levels of management. Levels of trust in higher management were consequently low and this was reflected in the weaker relationships held between CSRs and upper management.

*We are always asked to send feedback, like with call routing issues, send feedback on which call was routed to the wrong area but it just never seemed to – no matter how much feedback we give through on whatever issue, it doesn’t change at all (CCN).*

2. **Making the right decisions**

Trust was also investigated in terms of whether CSR’s felt senior managers could be trusted to make the right decisions for the future of the organisation. Overall, CSR’s appeared confident in the capacity of senior management to lead the organisation in the right direction:

*The way I look at it, it’s in their own best interests to make the right decisions if you know what I mean. They aren’t going to deliberately do the wrong thing. They are employees too at some level (CCL).*

This was more apparent in the only family owned CC: WD, where the senior managers were also the owners:

*They own the business so it’s not like managing it for stakeholders. Every decision they make going to be carefully thought through because at the end of the day it is theirs and any ramifications are felt by them directly aren’t they (CC).*

With the exception of WD where senior managers also played the role of team leaders, CSR’s had higher levels of trust, and consequently, stronger relationships with their direct team
leaders than with managers/ senior managers in the organisation. This was most likely due to higher levels of day-to-day contact with direct team leaders, and the belief that team leaders had greater understanding of the work and CSR’s needs. From the findings it could be argued that the latter is also related to the fact that team leaders are much closer in status to CSR’s, with many having been CSR’s initially.

The managers are great, willing to listen, and very open. The team leaders are the same but because we work with them directly I think the connection is a bit tighter (CCP).

3. Being Seen

Where managers and senior managers were concerned, higher levels of trust seemed to exist where managers/ senior managers were seen by CSRs to frequently interact with CSRs on the shop-floor of the CC. Conversely, levels of trust appeared lower where managers/ senior managers were perceived to be removed from the day-to-day operations of the CC. Further, levels of trust appeared stronger where managers/ senior managers had prior CSR experience.

Managers are often remote. Some of the younger managers (team leaders) have been on the floor, so they know (CCL)

One of our senior managers who runs both our CCs started on the phones, so he’s got a great understanding of the job and what we deal with, but maybe above that, there’s a bit of shuffling. Although the new CEO does have an insurance background. Several have, some haven’t. Our CEO sits on the phone with us and listens to our calls. He’s a nice man (CCP).

Incidentally, the smaller CCs were more likely to allow for more frequent interaction between CSRs and managers/ senior managers on the shop-floor, and greater likelihood of senior managers/ managers having previous experience working as CSRs. Consequently, (with the exception of CCB) levels of trust in managers and senior managers appeared to be higher in the smaller CCs1.

4. Power Distance

Focus groups with CSR’s indicate that perceived status differences played a key role in determining levels of trust. Specifically, CSR’s were more likely to trust their team leaders and managers when they felt there was no strong status difference or power distance apparent between CSRs and team leaders.

Like I said earlier, there’s no gap between our team leaders and managers and us. It’s just not the way this place is run. I think that’s why we are successful and do as well as we do, because there isn’t that division or that feeling or sense of they are above us. I do trust them; I have no reason not to (CCP).

An open culture, where employees were able to directly communicate with managers about work-related concerns was also highlighted as an important indicator or precondition for creating trust.

I’m still quite new compared to the others, but I do feel like I connect with the team members, and the team leaders are quite receptive. The managers are always around; if you want to talk to them you can, so it’s a nice place to work (CCP).

1 (under 100 employees - CCL, CCX, CCP, CCS, CCB, CCW).
Levels of trust appeared highest in CCW and CCP. Here, CSRs described their relationships with their team leaders and managers as being more akin to friendship and “family” than strictly working relationships.

The focus here is very much that of being laid back, inviting, informal, family type unit, and that is what we have become. I mean sure we have our issues here and there, which organisation doesn’t when you have a certain mix of people thrown in together (CCP.)

It’s like working for mum and dad, and I don’t mean it’s strict on discipline or anything like that, but more that they head the family and it is their family and their baby and they look after it with a lot of care (CCW).

The familial atmosphere described could be attributed to the smaller size of these CCs, the smaller size of work teams and more participative forms of management.

5. Transparency

Trust was also associated with the extent to which employees felt team leaders and managers were candid with information. When questioned about the extent to which they had trust in the team leaders and managers, CSRs used the terms ‘open’ and ‘transparent’ to describe high-trust relations with team leaders and managers.

They are very open with us and that’s important (CCX).

They don’t do anything to lose our trust because everything is very open and transparent (CCW.)

Yeah I trust them... and it’s not a secretive culture you know (CCL).

CSRs were also questioned about the extent to which they felt they could be candid with their team leaders. Levels of trust were fairly high in this respect across all CCs, with the exception of the largest CC: CCN. Here CSRs felt they were unable to be completely transparent and open with their team leaders due to the nature of the work (highly regulated financial products) and team leaders regularly reporting information to higher managers. The focus groups suggest trust levels in this CC were lower when compared to the other CCs.

They have the duty to disclose a number of different things [to management]. So you can't put your full trust in them, although you may want to and they may tell you that you can. The position that they’re in is that they also have a manager and they need to report anything that is going to affect the business. I believe it’s [level of trust] a medium (CCN).

6. Justice

Within the CCs investigated, the notion of justice emerged as a key indicator of the level of trust CSRs held in management. Here, connection could be made between feelings of being treated fairly (in respect to flexibility in working hours, pay, benefits, monitoring) and higher levels of trust.

It is about two way respect – it is easy in this workplace to be flexible – it doesn’t encourage deceit about timetabling you don’t have to pretend if you want to go to an audition or something similar you can just say and ask for a shift that suits you. It is about ethics and what you expect from the other person. (CCW)

I think we are very well looked after – great chairs, we’ve just about to move into a new building, we get our uniform, we have our tea room, it’s fully stocked, we are very spoilt compared to other companies which are reducing costs by reducing costs, reducing coffees and things like that. I think we are spoilt [others agree]. (CCIH)
...we also have special days when they offer pizzas, Melbourne Cup and things like that.

Exactly, we are looked after. (CCIH)

7. Empathy

Interestingly, CSRs in the call centres below were found to be quite empathetic towards team leaders and managers, even in circumstances where the course of decision-making meant their particular needs went unmet. As the quotes below suggest, several CSRs still expressed trust in their superiors despite acceptance that decisions were often based on broader and more pressing business imperatives. It was also acknowledged that while things ‘were not always perfect’, team leaders and managers were considerate of their needs wherever possible.

Where they don’t come through with things it’s usually because of the business requirements; they don’t deliberately go out of their way to do the wrong thing (CCX)

I trust they’d do the right thing by us. Some of their decisions can be a bit questionable but sometimes it’s just what they need to do (CCL).

The longer you are here the more you learn that they are just out to do the right thing at the end of the day. If the contact centre isn’t performing they aren’t going to be successful. They put that effort in because the investment pays off if that makes sense (CCP).

Discussion

Since the 1990’s, CCs have held notoriety for their poor working conditions and presumably hard-lined people management strategies (Deery & Kinnie 2005). Evidence gauged from the extensive CC literature suggests that despite the heterogeneous nature of the market and some CCs applying softer high-commitment strategies (see Houlihan 2002), there are various conditions which may be considered inherent to CC work and therefore render these environments fundamentally low-trust in nature (Frenkel et al. 1998; Kinnie et al. 2000). These conditions (including the management of performance through stringent targets and tight monitoring and surveillance) are associated with the nature of work organisation and may therefore be seen as more indicative of the extent to which CSRs are trusted by their superiors. Nevertheless, the level and nature of trust held by team leaders and managers about their employees plays a key role in shaping the overall climate of the organisation (Shockley et al. 1999); specifically, whether the climate is one that is more reflective of ‘high-trust’ or ‘low-trust’ relations between employees and their superiors. Indeed, Frenkel et al. (1998) have argued that management plays a critical role in developing and maintaining a ‘high-trust’ culture; particularly as a means of ensuring levels of morale and commitment are sustained.

Despite initial evidence for the alternative established in the extant literature, this study suggests that ‘trust’ can exist in CCs in spite of the prevalence and extent of performance targets and monitoring. While it is true that the two CCs with ‘high-trust’ relations (CCP and CCW) placed less emphasis on performance targets and monitoring overall, CSRs still showed trust in team leaders and managers where monitoring did take place. These findings suggest the use of high commitment-low discretion strategies (Houlihan 2002) within these contexts. Further, the findings from this study support earlier findings by Deery et al. (2002) that the perception of team leader support may in fact lead CSRs to object less about the level and form of monitoring used.
When examining the conditions that are conducive to high-trust relations, the findings indicate that ‘employee voice’ matters. While consultation occurred across all ten CCs, the findings accentuate the point that consultation should go beyond just communicating with employees. Rather, the extent to which employees are ‘being heard’ through active involvement in decision-making, and having their feedback valued, plays a stronger role in the development of high trust relations. As Sprigg et al. (2003) confirm, CSR involvement not only improves levels of commitment to achieving work goals but also increases levels of organisational commitment. These sentiments were also echoed by Crome (1998) who stressed the role that staff involvement plays in establishing a free-range (as opposed to ‘battery hen’) CC environment by signalling to CSOs that their knowledge is valued.

‘Being seen’ and ‘power distance’ are also important considerations. On the theme of transparency, while having a transparent culture where there is open sharing of information may improve levels of trust, the findings suggest the reverse may also occur. In the case of the large CC CCN, the fact that transparency was across the board gave CSRs less confidence in sharing information with their team leaders. This finding however, may have more to do with the lower level of trust CSRs held in higher management, particularly due to their remoteness from the CC shop floor and the lack of interaction with CSRs. Consequently, if managers increase their face-to-face presence in the CC by ‘being seen’ more, higher-trust relations may potentially ensue.

It can be argued that the themes identified above are more likely to naturally occur in a small CC, where there is less distance between CSRs and higher managers. Certainly, the highest levels of trust appeared in the small CCs CCW and CCP, but lowest in the largest CC, CCN. Does this suggest that the key to establishing a positive, high-trust climate lies in being able to run all CCs like small CCs, where more informal and participative management styles tend to occur?

In an earlier study Connell and Hannif (2008) found the presence of this style in the large private sector CC Salesplus, where despite a workforce of 1400 and relatively low skilled, low paid and routine work, the management model was more akin to the professional service hybrid model (see Batt & Moynihan 2002). A highly decentralised, participative and employee-centric approach was utilised where respect and empowerment were successfully used as antecedents to high performance and commitment. A strong culture of collegiality and trust was maintained, with regular CEO presence on the shop floor, an open door policy and the lack of physical separation between CSRs and managers. Findings from this study suggest that lessons can indeed be learnt from small CCs, particularly in terms of how team leaders and more specifically managers can go about developing stronger relations with CSRs. These findings also indicate that trust can in fact be established in large CC settings despite being environments where control measures tend to be more stringent due to the size of operations.

While it could be argued that CSRs are more likely to trust their team leaders and managers if they feel they have experienced ‘justice’ in the work environment (in relation to the terms and conditions of work) Frenkel et al. (1998, p. 974) showed that overarching the intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction CSRs look to gain from job functions, co-worker relations, and pay and promotion; is the role played by management in the development and sustenance of a climate of trust and reliability. Indeed, organisational culture is all encompassing, and impacts on the overall quality of work life. In the organisational context, ‘trust’ not only shapes culture, but also represents a key determinant for whether it is accepted (Shockley et al. 1999).
Concluding Note

In the organisational context, high-trust relations can be seen as both conducive to and an indicator of a positive and productive workplace climate. While there is little empirical evidence from the call centre context to support this proposition, this paper makes further progress in this direction. The above findings provide some insight into perceptions of trust from the perspective of CSRs, however, this study was essentially exploratory in nature and further research is necessary to explore the notion of trust in greater detail. The findings do however, provide some foundation for subsequent research into the conditions under which ‘high trust’ relations can be achieved and sustained.

References


1 This paper has been peer reviewed by two anonymous referees