Redesigning call centres from the bottom up
How giving employees a voice at work can improve employee health and performance

Executive Summary
The call center industry has exploded worldwide over the past two decades, as advances in information and communication technologies have reduced the costs of providing service and sales from remote locations. Over the same period, call centers have acquired a bad reputation – both as a channel for customer contact and as places to work. Most people have had the experience of calling a call center, only to become frustrated or angry when the call center agent was unable to solve their problem. Poor service quality seems to plague these workplaces, which are often described as the factories of the information economy.
Heavy use of electronic monitoring, tightly controlled schedules and break times, and intense performance pressure have contributed to high levels of employee stress, anxiety, and burnout. Not surprisingly, the work of a call center agent is considered one of the ten most stressful jobs in the global economy. Employee stress also creates serious problems for companies and their customers. Managers struggle to staff workplaces overwhelmed with high turnover and absenteeism rates. Customers lose valuable time and energy being routed between employees who have been narrowly trained to answer specialized questions.

In this report, we review academic research that has analyzed empirically how different approaches to call center management are related to measures of employee well-being and performance. Findings from a wide range of survey- and case-based studies conclude the following:

• **Effects on well-being:** Narrow job design, high use of scripts, intense monitoring, and targets linked to punishment and dismissal are associated with increased levels of physical and psychological strain. This includes repetitive strain injuries, musculoskeletal disorders, stress, anxiety, and burnout.

• **Reasons for these effects:** These management practices have been found to increase strain because they reduce employees’ control over their work, their ability to develop and use skills, and their ability to deal with the emotional work required to interact with customers. These factors lower employees’ capacity to cope with the high demands they face in their jobs.

• **Organizational outcomes:** Research shows that call center management practices associated with high levels of employee strain perform similarly or worse compared to alternative practices that increase employee control over their work and that use monitoring to develop rather than punish employees. Most notably, these high-strain practices can increase quit and absenteeism rates and reduce customer service quality.

We conclude with a series of recommendations for practices associated with a more professional model of call center management, which increase employee control over their work and ability to use and develop skills. These include:

• Cross-training employees to answer a broad range of call types

• Reducing the use of scripts

• Giving employees more choice over schedules and break times

• Limiting monitoring frequency and intensity

• Using monitoring information to develop skills rather than to discipline or sanction employees

• Involving employees in the design and review of performance targets

Examples from a case study in the telecommunications industry illustrate that these practices can be a viable alternative in call centers, creating a strong performance culture through fostering trust and professionalism.