The London School of Economics and Political Science

Workplace selves, interactive service work and outsourcing:

Labour in Kenya's call centres

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

The consequences for workers of the expansion of interactive service work in Nairobi, Kenya, are explored in this thesis. I investigate workplace power relations as forms of control that are implicated in managerial strategies by examining workers' experiences in the call centre sector.

The Foucauldian-inspired conceptual framework for this study privileges *workplace selves*, enabling a focus on how call centre agent conduct is problematized by management. The empirical part of the study uses a multi-method approach that includes interviews, workplace observations and a questionnaire.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that while management tends to approach in-house or captive agents as low-status subordinate selves, business process outsourcing (BPO) agents are best regarded as flexible selves, owing to their selectively autonomous working roles and the relative insecurity of their work. As a 'development' project, the BPO sector is shown to have a mixed record with respect to agent livelihoods. It has given rise to new opportunities for workers but without providing stable employment.

Examining the rationalities underpinning workplace control, my analysis indicates that captive agents can be understood as being subject to a rationality of *directed conduct*, while their BPO counterparts are more likely to be managed according to a rationality of *strategic egalitarianism*. Consequently, BPO agents are shown to be implicated in a relatively more complex configuration of workplace power relations than captive agents, with the result that they tend to speak more favourably about work that they also depict as onerous.

The empirical analysis provides a basis for advancing theoretical understanding achieved by introducing novel concepts, the most important of which concern modes of workplace 'subjectification': *comprehensive observation*, *self-problematization* and *recognizing individualism*. These help to position the analysis of managerial strategies in a way that neither regards agents as fully

empowered nor assumes worker exploitation as the main outcome. The study demonstrates how management endeavours to oversee the intensive monitoring of conduct while also securing agents' commitment to their roles by providing fulfilling workplace experiences.

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Glossary of terms

BPO   business process outsourcing

BPOs   companies providing BPO services

captive   an in-house call centre

CCK   Communications Commission of Kenya

client   the company from which a BPO acquires a contract

EASSy   Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System – undersea fibre-optic cable installed in 2010

ICT   information and communications technologies

ICT Board   Information and Communications Technology Board

IDRC   International Development Research Centre

ITES   information technology-enabled services

KITOS   Kenya Information Technology and Outsourcing Services

LION2   Lower Indian Ocean Network – undersea fibre-optic cable installed in 2012

SEACOM   undersea fibre-optic cable installed in 2009

TEAMS   The East African Marine System – undersea fibre-optic cable installed in 2009

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1 Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

This thesis is concerned with call centres and outsourcing in Kenya and the country's experience of providing services on the international market. Kenya expanded into the international services market with high hopes for the creation of a business process outsourcing (BPO) sector. Until the installation of the first of a set of undersea fibre-optic cables in 2009, East Africa was one of the last regions in the world without access to broadband internet. By the end of 2012, however, following the advent of a series of public–private partnerships and hundreds of millions of dollars of investment, the situation had changed markedly. In Mombasa, Kenya's second-largest city and major port, the privately financed and partly African-owned SEACOM and TEAMS cables were connected in 2009, followed by the EASSy cable in 2010 and LION2 in 2012.

In practical terms, the installation of the cables was designed to end the dependence of countries in the region on unreliable and costly satellite-based connectivity by dramatically improving speeds and decreasing bandwidth costs. For stakeholders in Kenya – traditionally the strongest economy in the region – the enhanced internet infrastructure suggested the possibility of seeking new business opportunities and of building on the country's growing reputation for technological innovation (Dihel et al., 2011, 237, Msimang, 2011, 33).[1]

Although not the original impetus for the creation of the BPO sector, the arrival of the cables was seen as likely to catalyse Kenya's success in the international outsourcing market, enabling local providers of call centre and "back-office" services to benefit from significantly cheaper costs and demonstrating to international clients that the country's infrastructure could rival

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1 For example, this innovation is exemplified by the creation of the M-Pesa mobile money facility, developed by Safaricom, and the open-source crowdsourcing platform Ushahidi, created in the wake of the 2007–08 post-electoral violence as a tool for

that of other countries around the world. Hoping to promote an important source of future growth and revenue, the champions of the BPO sector argued that Kenya's infrastructure, human resources, business culture and English-language standards made it well positioned to replicate the successes of other countries in the global South – such as India and the Philippines – in providing services for Northern clients (Saraswati, 2014, 128). While there were examples of BPO companies in Nairobi as early as 2004 (Isenberg, 2009), the idea of positioning the BPO sector as a key source of future growth in the Kenyan economy gained considerable traction, leading the government and other stakeholders to promote BPO as a flagship component of the country's "Vision 2030" initiative (Ndemo, 2007, 8, Were, 2011b, 196).[2]

Moreover, the possibilities of creating jobs and of spurring entrepreneurial activity encouraged international development organizations to finance research and promotional activities to support the expansion of BPO in Kenya. Using funds provided by the World Bank (Msimang, 2011, 30), the Kenyan government's ICT (information and communications technologies) Board – set up in 2008 as the government's marketing and promotional organ – commissioned McKinsey, a global consulting firm, to undertake a study and offer a set of recommendations for the development of the sector.[3] Canada's

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2 Vision 2030 is a broad-ranging government initiative designed to enable Kenya "to achieve middle-income status as envisaged under the long term development framework" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, iii). In facilitating the expansion of the BPO sector, the installation of the undersea cables was understood to contribute to "a positive developmental impact through its facilitation of widespread internet connectivity to ensure universal access to ICT [information and communications technologies] throughout the country. All these will enhance Kenya's economic competitiveness and development of a knowledge-based society. It will also create new income-earning opportunities for Kenya's youth, thus answering to the acute need for jobs in that sector of the population" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, viii).

3 McKinsey's report was entitled "Seizing the prize: driving BPO sector growth in Kenya" (2009). Frost & Sullivan also released a report entitled "Analysis of the Kenyan call centre market" (2008).

IDRC (International Development Research Centre) also funded research into the experiences of other countries providing services (Were, 2011b, 195), leading to the identification of a cluster of "critical success factors" (Waema et al., 2009) based on a number of legal, regulatory, data protection and human resources concerns, in addition to the infrastructural considerations. With new companies setting up operations, a number of BPOs sought to group together as a representative body – first known as the Kenya BPO and Contact Centre Society and later as KITOS (Kenya Information Technology and Outsourcing Services) – in a bid to lobby the government to provide further support for the sector, such as by marketing Kenya internationally and through the provision of contracts.

To introduce my study of the expansion of interactive service work in Kenya, I first discuss the initial promise of BPO (section 1.2) in the broader context of the Kenyan government's interest in investing in internet infrastructure and in establishing an internationally oriented BPO (business process outsourcing) call centre sector. I continue in section 1.3 by considering the arguments marshalled in support of the idea that Kenya would be well positioned to generate new sources of revenue and to attain global recognition as a services provider. This is followed by a discussion of my motivation to generate insight into the types of workers in Kenya required for call centre roles and the extent to which BPO may be understood to be supportive of "development". With this background for the study in place, in section 1.4 I highlight the focus of each of the subsequent chapters in the thesis, before summarizing the overall contributions of the study in section 1.5.

1.2 The promise of BPO

Arguably, on a conceptual level, from the perspective of the Kenyan government and key stakeholders, the motivation to establish an internationally oriented outsourcing sector can be regarded as reflecting three strands of thinking about the importance of investing in internet infrastructure. In this

regard, the installation of the fibre-optic cables can be understood to encompass: 1) "modernization"; 2) the generation of new sources of revenue to improve livelihoods; and 3) a challenge to Kenya's historical and geographic marginalization in the global political economy.

In broad terms, the government's interest in dramatically improving Kenya's internet infrastructure can be understood to undergird the ambition to establish a "knowledge economy" (Government of Kenya, 2008b). With broadband connectivity in place, there were hopes that the digitization of services and of government data would underpin new efficiencies in governance and enable greater civic engagement (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 11), as part of a larger effort to "bridge the digital divide and lower the cost of communications" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, 25). With ICTs identified as "crucial catalysts in the development process" (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 10), the expectation was that the investment in digital infrastructure, hardware and software would support efforts to transform Kenya "into a modern, globally competitive, middle income country, offering a high quality of life for all citizens by the year 2030" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, ii).

Providing outsourced services to the international market seemed to represent a key opportunity to make the drive to achieve a "high quality of life for all" practicable. With companies in Kenya now better able to access clients in the global North by drawing on cheaper, more reliable connectivity,[4] for many in Kenya, the creation of the BPO sector heralded the promise of tapping into an underserved and growing international market, as reflected in the optimistic predictions of business figures and commentators in Nairobi (Graham and Mann, 2013). Enabling a shift away from the traditional focus on exporting primary products such as tea and coffee in the Kenya economy, fulfilling potentially lucrative call centre and back-office contracts for Northern clients seemed to suggest an opportunity to capitalize on Kenyan skills and creativity in

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4 Wausi et al. (2013, 34–35) note that: "the cost per MB of data transmitted dropped significantly from about Sh6000 in 2007 to around Sh500 in 2010 attributed to connection to the fibre optic cable in 2009."

the international service sector. Consequently, in the long term, BPO came to be understood by the government as likely to make a significant contribution to tackling unemployment.[5]

In addition to the potential for financial returns, the interest in providing BPO services also suggests an opportunity to reposition Kenya in the international imagination. To be recognized as a provider of globally competitive, high-quality and reputable services perhaps would offer the scope to counter the frequently negative depictions of the country – and of the African continent in general – as the site of the relatively basic, unskilled production of agricultural products and light manufacturing. As a result, improving Kenya's connectivity not only affords greater access to international markets, but also the chance to present a more encouraging image than the geographically peripheral view that often predominates in Western depictions of the country. By extension, providing internationally outsourced services could be understood to overcome Kenya's historical marginalization in the international political economy as a result of the country's subordinate relationships to richer countries in the global North. In this regard, establishing new types of economic relationship perhaps implies being able to move out from what the anthropologist James Ferguson (2006) terms the "global shadows",[6] based on taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the international service sector and the chance to generate more promising financial returns than those of the country's traditional export products.

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5 In the "first medium term plan (2008-2012)" (Government of Kenya, 2008a), the expansion of BPO was expected to spur the creation of 7,500 new jobs by the end of 2012, with the sector recording an overall contribution to Kenya's GDP (gross domestic product) of KSh (Kenyan shillings) 10 billion (approximately US$100 million).

6 As Ferguson (2006, 32) writes: "[I]n Africa, modernity has always been a matter not simply of past and present, but also of up and down. The aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one's way of life, one's standing, one's place-in-the-world. Modernity has thus been a way of talking about global inequality and about material needs and how they might be met."

1.3 Establishing Kenya's BPO sector

There were many arguments in favour of Kenya's potential as a BPO provider. Having identified the likely advantages to establishing a BPO sector, those championing Kenya's potential drew on a number of interrelated understandings to underscore the country's suitability for providing services in the international market. Further to the infrastructural improvements, increased bandwidth capacity and significantly lower costs, it was suggested that Kenya's competitiveness as a BPO destination would stem in part from the availability of cheap labour (Msimang, 2011, 31), especially when compared to the rising costs in India's more mature sector.

Complementing the suggestions that Kenya's appeal might lie in the affordability of its labour, the country was also understood to possess a large pool of high-quality unemployed and under-employed university and secondary school graduates, who would be inclined to quickly adapt to the managerial demands of companies providing call centre and back-office services. With an estimated 30,000 university graduates and 250,000 school leavers joining the labour market each year, the abundance of labour market entrants was regarded as auspicious (Were, 2011b, 198). As an initial strategy, advocates of Kenya's potential in the BPO market argued that the so-called "neutral accent" of Kenyan workers made them especially well suited to sales and customer service call centre job roles (Waema et al., 2009, 39), since their on-call manner and speech would be likely to be more agreeable to the ears of Northern customers than that of Indian agents.

Paralleling arguments in favour of Kenya's human resources and personnel, the country's "Westernized" institutions and business culture were also said to be a better fit with the expectations of clients in the global North than those of the more prominent BPO providers in the international market. This extended to the appeal of Kenya's time zone – which is three hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) – for clients based in European countries, in contrast to the business hours of competing countries. Moreover, Nairobi – as the most established commercial city in the East African region and as a "strategic

location" and "regional hub for communications and finance" (Were, 2011b, 198) – was identified as a promising asset with respect to appealing to prospective clients. Overall, while stakeholders in Kenya did not expect to immediately supplant the position of the traditionally dominant countries in the international BPO market, this constellation of factors strongly suggested the potential for dramatic growth in Kenya's BPO sector and the opportunity to achieve substantial returns over the long term.

In the light of these arguments, it is important to examine the implications of the suggestion that call centres would become an increasingly important feature of Kenya's labour market. Exploring these implications gives rise to the focus of my study, centring on two areas of research interest. Firstly, the expectation that Kenya would be successful in the international BPO market warrants a close analysis, especially given the government's association of BPO with "development" (Government of Kenya, 2008b), and the interest of other African governments in harnessing outsourcing and digital technologies in order to expand into services (such as South Africa (Willcocks et al., 2012), Rwanda, Uganda (Van der Linden and Hengeveld, 2009), Ghana (Ocra and Ntim, 2013), Morocco and Egypt (Abbott, 2013)). Given the notion that BPO was positioned as the "sector of choice" (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 14) of graduates, I was motivated to examine whether the growth in call centre work would prove to be supportive of the creation of appealing, attractive jobs for young workers.

Secondly, the expansion of interactive services in the Kenyan labour market – as exemplified by the emphasis on BPO call centres – calls attention to the significance of the growth in service sector job roles underpinning a customer-oriented labour process. If the types of employee attributes, capacities and characteristics entailed in service roles can be understood to be different to those of agricultural and manufacturing workers, then this raises the issue of how forms of workplace control are implicated in the management of call centre workers. In order to understand how managerial strategies might be illustrative of particular configurations of workplace power relations, this called for analytical attention to who is positioned to undertake call centre jobs and to the

approaches to the control of conduct that are deemed preferable by management.

1.4 Overview of thesis

Following a review of the literature on outsourcing and call centre labour in chapter 2, I develop a conceptual framework of "workplace selves" as a means of investigating the consequences of the expansion of the interactive service sector in Kenya. Inspired by a Foucauldian-based conceptualization of power relations, this framework positions call centre agents in Kenya as workplace "subjects", whose "selves" – in embodying particular characteristics, attributes and capacities – can be understood to represent the centrepiece of managerial control. This enables me to examine the forms of "self" and the notions of agent conduct that are idealized by management, and the understandings and motivations of agents themselves. By drawing attention to how management seeks to "problematize" agent conduct, the conceptual framework of "workplace selves" encouraged me to focus on how forms of control operate in practice in BPO and "captive"[7] call centre working environments. This focus is encapsulated by the overarching research question for the study:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

By exploring the management of call centre agents as a "problem", I focus on the role of forms of workplace control in order to develop an understanding of the significance of the expansion of interactive service work in the Kenyan labour market. Consequently, I do not begin with the premise – which is characteristic of the more optimistic accounts in the call centre literature – that agents can be considered to undertake relatively appealing "knowledge work".

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7 The term "captive" refers to a call centre that is run within a company, rather than outsourced to another provider. This can indicate an operation that is established within a company in a domestic economy, or an operation that is "offshored" and set up elsewhere in the world, without being outsourced.

By the same token, however, in order to fully understand the nature of workplace power relations, I consider the core notion of worker exploitation offered by other strands of the literature to underpin what I argue is a less promising approach to the study of workplace control than that which I develop in this thesis.

As part of a discussion of the methodology employed in the study, the research tools with which I operationalize the conceptualization framing the investigation are presented in chapter 3. In order to refine the overarching research question, three sub-research questions are posed:

- How has the creation of the BPO call centre sector contributed to "development" in Kenya?

- What type of agent do companies seek to manage?

- What is the "rationality" underpinning managerial approaches to agents' job roles?

In the light of the interest of other African governments in expanding into services, chapter 3 includes a discussion of the potential significance of the experience of Kenya within the wider East African region. For the purposes of examining the suggested association between outsourcing and "development" proposed by the Kenyan government, I draw on the literature on "wellbeing" (McGregor et al., 2009) to enable a specific focus on the extent to which BPO call centre work has proven supportive of workers' prospects. The choice of a multi-method research approach is discussed comprising interviews with a range of actors in the call centre sector, participant observation of company workplaces and a questionnaire completed by call centre agents – leading to the acquisition of extensive data germane to the analysis of forms of workplace control. The interview and field note data are analysed by undertaking an iterative thematic analysis, in combination with the analysis of the supplementary quantitative data. In seeking to examine management's requirements of agents, this approach leads me to identify two distinct types of workplace self as part of a broader understanding of what I refer to as the role

of particular "rationalities of control" that can be shown to be characteristic of BPO and captive working environments.

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter. I examine the evolution of Kenya's BPO call centre sector and the implications of the emphasis of the government and other stakeholders in the sector on internationally oriented voice work. The discussion begins with a review of the challenges associated with establishing the BPO sector and the notion of positioning international voice services as a core component of the government's Vision 2030 initiative. In the wake of the financial difficulties experienced by companies in the sector, I continue with a discussion of the BPO companies' relatively greater interest in establishing relationships with clients in the domestic market. Contrary to the government's understanding that the BPO sector would lead to the creation of appealing jobs for Kenyan youth, my analysis suggests that the companies' domestic focus has engendered a form of "casualization" by undermining the security of in-house positions. In order to examine the developmental impact of the BPO sector more closely, I consider what the perspectives of current and former BPO call centre agents illustrate about the "wellbeing" of the sector's workforce. My analysis indicates that the BPO sector can be regarded as having a mixed record with respect to the creation of appealing jobs: while many agents are enthusiastic about aspects of their work, companies have yet to provide stable, monetarily appealing positions.

The analysis in the next two empirical chapters in chapters 5 and 6 focuses of the nature and operation of forms of workplace control in BPO and captive call centres in the Kenyan labour market. In chapter 5, I examine the attributes and capacities that are regarded as desirable by management, and the use of multifarious tools of surveillance and supervision that are deployed to enable the observation of worker conduct. I propose that BPO and captive agents can be regarded as "flexible" and "subordinate selves" respectively, based on my analysis of managerial expectations and agents' perspectives on the skills and capabilities that they consider integral to their job roles. In the light of these findings, the analysis in chapter 6 considers *why* there is evidence suggesting two substantively different types of workplace self. By examining the role of

company working environments and workplace hierarchies, BPO and captive agents are shown to be subject to two distinct managerial strategies. In the light of the different motivations of BPOs and captives, my analysis suggests that BPOs manage agents according to a "rationality of strategic egalitarianism", while a "rationality of directed conduct" is more likely to inform the captives' approach.

In chapter 7 I provide an analysis that addresses the overarching and sub-research questions in this thesis. I focus especially on the role of particular forms of workplace control. I draw upon the conceptual framework (see chapter 2, section 2.5) to interpret the insights set out the preceding empirical chapters. I suggest that what is significant about the managerial approaches to call centre agents in Kenya is the role of three, overlapping modes of "subjectification" – "comprehensive observation", "self-problematization" and "recognizing individualism".

Finally, in chapter 8 I summarize the theoretical and empirical insights highlighting my contribution to the study of interactive service work, specifically in the Kenyan context. I consider the limitations of my study and suggest modifications to the initial conceptual framework based on the insight emerging from my study. I also consider whether alternative interpretations of the data might be suggested if my empirical results were to be considered by proponents of other theorizations of call centre labour and I suggest that my interpretation is robust. I conclude by suggesting some of the broader implications stemming from the evidence presented in my study, including directions for future research.

1.5 Conclusion

This study makes two principal contributions to the literature on interactive service labour. Firstly, by examining the nature and operation of assorted forms of control in call centre working environments in Kenya, my conceptualization of workplace power relations affords the opportunity to understand how the management of agents is predicated on more than mere instructions and the

close regulation of conduct. As part of a consideration of how managerial strategies can be understood to be informed by particular "rationalities", this approach helps to reveal how company desires for consistent sales and customer service outputs are partly realized by aligning with the motivations of their agents. Unlike in working environments in the global North in which call centre work is typically regarded by some analysts as undesirable for workers *tout court*, exploring Kenya as a case study illustrates how the efficacy of company managerial strategies rests on the ability to awaken their agents' sense of the skills and capabilities that "professional" workers *ought* to be able to develop and to display.

Secondly, rather than regarding the expansion of interactive service work in general – and the creation of a BPO sector in particular – as self-evidently beneficial, the study considers the implications for Kenyan workers of the government's emphasis on services. The conceptual framework of "workplace selves" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) adopted in this study enables a critical examination of what management expects its agents to be and to do, and how this suggests an emphasis on particular types of customer-oriented skills in the labour market. In turn, this enables a focus on the implications for worker prospects in relation to the availability of secure, appealing and relatively rewarding jobs. Undertaking an analysis of *both* forms of workplace control and agent perspectives on their circumstances is shown in this study to yield nuanced understandings that elude the relatively more optimistic and pessimistic accounts in the literature. Furthermore, by examining worker "wellbeing", my analysis also indicates that the link between outsourcing and "development" is not as clear as what was assumed by the Kenyan government. While the creation of the BPO sector is shown to lead to opportunities for workplace experiences that are valued by many agents, BPO call centre work has not proven a straightforwardly encouraging form of employment.

2 Theorizing call centre labour: conceptualizing agents as workplace selves

2.1 Introduction

My study is motivated by an empirical focus on the expansion of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market. In order to analyse the consequences of this expansion, I develop a framework of "workplace selves" as a fruitful means of conceptualizing call centre power relations. With a view to understanding the nature of control in the call centre labour process, this framework facilitates an analysis of company managerial strategies through a comparison of BPO (business process outsourcing) and "captive" working environments.[8] The conceptual framework is proposed as an analytically illuminating lens through which to examine how agents' attitudes towards call centre work can be understood to relate to the manner in which they are problematized as subjects of workplace control. It provides the basis for the overall research question that motivates the study:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

With this overall conceptual framework in place, the study aims to assess the significance of the expansion of call centre work by analysing the workplace power relations that condition worker experiences.

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8 The term "captive" refers to a call centre that is run within a company, rather than outsourced to another provider. This can indicate an operation that is established within a company in a domestic economy, or an operation that is "offshored" and set up elsewhere in the world, without being outsourced.

2.2 Work in the information age: post-industrialism, post-Fordism and the rise of service work

This section introduces ideas about the contexts of work in the contemporary information age and the critical theoretical traditions in relation to contemporary work models in an increasingly globalized world.

Theory relevant to outsourcing and call centre labour can be traced to wider conceptualizations of the significance of information age work, with many of the salient contours of debates around changes and continuities in global production, consumption and society informing the theoretical positions in the literature. The section maps the evolution of this wider literature and highlights feature areas of debate around the relative merits of "flexibility", the rise of "precarious" work and the establishing of a globalized service sector labour force. In view of the expansion of an information-based global infrastructure, the section continues by discussing the emergence of international business relationships in the context of outsourcing practices, with a particular focus on the consequences for workers raised by critically oriented strands of the literature.

2.2.1 The shift to services: an historical rupture?

Catalysed by the exponential rise of advanced ICTs (information and communications technologies) in industrialized countries, the beginning of the 1970s initiated a period of intense globalization, the increasing interconnectedness of the global economy and a new conquering of temporal–spatial constraints. Underlined by the greater ubiquity and prominence of information, these changes led many to perceive a radical rupture with past production methods and means of social organization. Chief amongst such ideas was Daniel Bell's influential theory of the "post-industrial society". This saw technological advances as heralding a paradigm shift away from the predominance of assembly line, blue-collar industrial work towards new, "post-industrial" service work in the light of the rise of the tertiary sector in many countries (Bell, 1973, 14).

Bell (1973, 125) suggested that the capacity to automate production would elicit a trend towards a reduced need for employment in the manufacturing sector, creating labour surpluses on the strength of substantial productivity gains. This would liberate industrial workers for employment in the post-industrial service sector. Bell argued for the importance of regarding technological innovation as a key catalyst of progressive social and economic change. A core tenet was that investing in and integrating technology into production processes – with the attendant possibilities for automation – would facilitate a shift towards the prevalence of service employment. In an optimistic account, Bell perceived the future of work to be predominantly white-collar, immaterial and autonomous and to entail more rewarding job roles dealing with people rather than with things (Bell, 1973).

Theories of post-Fordism also consider the move away from the mass production and consumption that underpinned the 1940s–1970s period (Jessop, 1995, Leborgne and Lipietz, 1992). Along with the greater role for information production and processing within labour and employment structures, awareness of the tertiary sector's rise in the 1970s led to ideas around value being produced in people's interactions (Gershuny and Miles, 1983). Perhaps less inclined than the post-industrial perspective to perceive a radical break with the past, debates within post-Fordism engage with the notion that "the period since the mid-1970s represents a transition from one distinct phase of capitalist development to a new phase" (Amin, 1995, 1). Within the domestic economies of industrialized countries, this transition can be seen as part of a breakdown in the stability of mass markets for which standardized products were supplied (Tomaney, 1995). Within the global political economy, post-Fordist theories evaluate the implications of the declining profitability that firms in industrialized countries experienced at the end of the 1970s and the resulting move to "subcontract" (Harrison and Kelley, 1993) production to non-Fordist countries, leading to "an internationalization of productive processes" (Lipietz, 1997, 3). In view of advances in ICTs, the drive to reduce costs can be seen to underpin the externalization of aspects of production that were formerly fulfilled internally, thus fragmenting the locations and organization of work.

There are debates in the literature about the consequences of these developments for employment and labour, and the extent to which post-Fordism represents an analytically fruitful basis on which to theorize the changing basis of production (e.g., Thompson, 2003, 361, Jessop, 1997, 292–93). These discussions notwithstanding, the concept invites attention to the emergent managerial imperative to engage workers in flexible working practices in a bid to stimulate an increase in skills, specialization and the value of outputs (Rose, 2004, 259). When compared with the standardization characteristic of the Fordist model, flexibility encompasses an increase in workers' "mental effort and commitment" (Vidal, 2013, 453) within production processes, implying a need to disrupt the rigidity of assembly line roles and to create conditions for greater adaptability. From workers' perspectives, the move towards flexibility also suggests a reduction in employers' commitment to the long-term job security that had been a feature of the former Fordist period (Tompa et al., 2007, 210).

In the light of notions of flexibility and customization, for scholars of the sociology of work these broad trends are seen as exerting new demands on those employed within the expanded tertiary services sector. For certain scholars of work, the rise of service sector work was regarded as neither a dramatic break with the previous basis of production nor as cause for celebratory predictions. In a landmark text that would become the foundation of much of the critical literature on call centre work, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) emphasized that many jobs (in both manufacturing and services) were becoming progressively less autonomous and more routine, simplified and alienating for workers. Informed by a distinctly Marxian position, Braverman's Labour Process Theory (LPT) stressed the fundamental deskilling of workers' labour (their craft and creativity) involved in assembly line production under capitalist logics of enhanced efficiency, control and the sub-division of tasks. He argued that this is based on the separation of "hand and brain" in the Taylorist scientific management of production processes (Braverman, 1974, 126). With respect to the composition of clerical and service work, Braverman sought to examine how new means of exploitation and control were being

conceived for those undertaking "mental labour" (Braverman, 1974, 315, Brophy, 2010, 474).

Although also writing from a Marxian position, scholars such as Burawoy (1979, 199) argued that Braverman misunderstood the managerial obligation to seek consent and collaboration from workers, rather than to simply intensify workplace control. Despite its limitations, Braverman's account set the tone for a critically inclined line of questioning, challenging the optimism behind automation by emphasizing the extension of Taylorist management into service work. Indeed, scholars such as Webster (1995, 46) point out that one of the key criticisms of the early theories informing the concepts of the "information society" and "knowledge work" was the tendency to overstate the notion of a departure from the intensity and repetitiveness that characterized factory work.

At the same time, however, the emphasis on contrasting polarities has been at the forefront of conceptions of new modes of production in the information age and contemporary demands on the workforce in the service sector. Where assembly lines called for standardized, routinized and rationalized production, the ability to share, acquire and utilize different types of information through ICTs has facilitated the customization and individualization of outputs according to company, customer and client needs. Similarly, the provision of information can be seen to underpin a new productive flexibility, signalling a form of break from the rigidity of the Fordist era. As part of a new international division of labour, a range of advances in ICTs enabled the digital distribution of fragmented components of services production and advanced forms of monitoring and evaluation of production processes.

2.2.2 The internationalization of service work

While advances in ICTs stimulated the emergence of information-based services, companies' efforts to tackle declining profits created the motivation to move operations outside traditional organizational structures, leading to "the fragmentation of production into discrete activities … allocated across countries" (Feenstra and Gordon, 1996, 240). With a view to eliciting greater organizational flexibility, the desire to reduce costs and to draw on specialist

input created the impetus to restructure the closed, self-contained operations that had been the mainstay of the Fordist period (Harrison and Kelley, 1993, 214). Whereas companies in industrialized countries in the post-Second World War period were understood to favour operating hierarchical, bureaucratically structured organizations, the move towards externalization was understood to reflect a logic of vertical disintegration (Grossman and Helpman, 2005, 135). Within the international sphere, this trend was bolstered by the advent of a series of free trade agreements and the increasing interconnectedness of the global economy. While restructuring was perhaps initially most visible in relation to the manufacturing sector (Messenger and Ghosheh, 2010, 9), the increasing role of the circulation of information also contributed to the dramatic rise in the international service sector.

As part of the trend towards "contracting out" (Harrison and Kelley, 1993, 213), the principle of flexibility was made practicable by new business practices based on subcontracting. Key amongst these was "outsourcing", a practice geared towards responsiveness to rapidly changing international market conditions. Outsourcing encompasses a business relationship in which a company enlists one or more suppliers to undertake operations previously fulfilled internally (Sharma et al., 2006, 328). In their examination of managerial motivations behind the practice, Harrison and Kelley describe outsourcing as a form of subcontracting. As distinct from simply "buying in" a particular component or service, outsourcing takes places when a client company possesses the in-house capability to undertake a task yet opts to contract a third-party provider (Harrison and Kelley, 1993, 215).

Within the instrumentally inclined academic literature – which addresses themes such as how to improve outsourcing relationships and how to measure potential revenues within the international services market – scholars identify a range of reasons why a company may outsource. As part of a strategy of focusing on "core capabilities" (Lacity et al., 2011, 227), this includes relatively straightforward cost-cutting by contracting a supplier to undertake an activity more cheaply (Narayanan et al., 2011, 3). Suppliers may be based in the client company's country of origin and be domestically sourced, or operate abroad –

whether on a "nearshored" (i.e., within a neighbouring country) or "offshored" basis (at considerable geographic distance – Chakrabarty, 2006, 25). Suppliers may also be able to perform a task to a better standard or more quickly than their clients (Sharma et al., 2006, 328). Furthermore, an outsourcing relationship may enable a client to integrate specialisms and innovations possessed by the supplier (Narayanan et al., 2011, 3), or assist the client with scaling up their operations (Lacity et al., 2011, 231). Separate from outsourcing relationships, it is important to note that companies also opt to offshore to "captive centres" set up in other countries (Oshri et al., 2009, 196). These are subsidiary divisions, which perform work for the company in a country that may have lower wage rates or in which operations can be fulfilled to a higher standard, without outsourcing to a third party (Javalgi et al., 2013, 476).

With companies facing intense pressure on costs initiated by global competition, the value of outsourcing within the international service sector has led to dramatic growth in revenue for some countries able to successfully meet the demand for information-based services. International outsourcing is estimated to be worth US$126.2 billion in revenue by the end of 2015 (Chakravarty et al., 2014). India has been among the countries in the global South best able to take advantage of the opportunities in the sector. Oshri et al. (2009, 192) note that in 2008 the country provided services for some 65 per cent of the international ITO (information technology outsourcing) market and

43 per cent of the BPO (business process outsourcing) market.[9] The offshore outsourcing of information technology alone was estimated to employ 2 million workers in India in 2011 (Javalgi et al., 2013, 477).

As part of the overall BPO market, India is perhaps best known for its success as the foremost international provider of English-language "voice services" and the size of its call centre sector. Despite this success, Abara and Heo (2013, 167) note that the Philippines has now overtaken India in the BPO call centre market, recording annual revenues for voice projects of US$5.70 billion, compared to India's US$4.58 billion. In reference to this growth, Ruppel et al. (2013, 246) point to the significance of the Filipino sector's size in relation to employment: "Employing 530,000 Filipino people in 2010, the call centre industry represents 6 percent of the country's gross domestic product". Abara and Heo (2013, 166) also note that India is shifting to provide "higher-skilled activities in the global service chain". This suggests the desire of many Indian providers to offer more sophisticated outsourced services to international companies, for which profit margins are likely to be greater. These services are collectively known as KPO (knowledge process outsourcing) and refer to a range of "higher-end" activities such as investment research, data analytics, industrial and architectural design, engineering and management consulting (Javalgi et al., 2013, 481). At the same time, in the light of the rising international demand for outsourced services and India's partial move away

9 ITO can be defined as "the sourcing of information technology services through external third parties", while BPO can be understood as "the sourcing of business processes through external third parties" (Lacity et al., 2011, 221). ITO is commonly acknowledged as a more established form of international outsourcing than BPO, and is based on activities requiring a high degree of skill. Example ITO services include software development, data storage or infrastructure services. Lacity et al. (2011, 222) note that the development of the BPO market is a more recent phenomenon, but that BPO is growing at a faster rate than ITO. Example BPO services encompass processes such as payroll, insurance claims and call centre operations (Abara and Heo, 2013, 181), which are regarded as more basic and as contributing lower-value returns than ITO services.

from its previous focus on basic BPO, the Philippines' success indicates the opportunities available for countries able to compete with India's cost structures and establish their own operations. As Southern countries are able to substantially increase the size of their international service sectors and draw upon growing revenue, the success of India and the Philippines arguably offers an influential example for other countries in the South of how to dramatically reorient their relationship to the global political economy.

2.2.3 Flexibility and workers

While the instrumental academic literature mainly focuses on desired outcomes, exploring the implications of the dynamic restructuring of the international economy has also given rise to a number of lines of critically inclined empirical enquiry. Though examples in the critical literature are diverse in both their conceptual and empirical orientations, they can be regarded as broadly concerned with the consequences for workers of increasingly "flexible" and "adaptable" modes of production in the wake of changing employment relations. For example, as part of larger discussions about the emergence of multiple forms of short-term, temporary and "precarious work" (Kalleberg, 2009), employers' drive towards enhanced competitiveness and lower costs is associated with insecure employment. This insecurity is understood to be further intensified by the decline in collectively negotiated contracts and union-based representation, the rescinding of extra-monetary benefits, reduced working hours and compensation for redundancy, and lower salaries (Cappelli et al., 1997).

Questions raised in relation to outsourcing and labour focus on the implications of the shift away from long-term, stable employment and the resulting rise of short-term work. Focusing on the theme of "vulnerability", Tompa et al. (2007), for example, draw attention to the health risks to workers provoked by job insecurity. Within the critical human resource management literature, Burgess et al. (2013, 4086) underline the distinction between "flexibility of employees and flexibility for employees", implying the importance of examining whether working conditions are straightforwardly stacked in

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employers' interests, or if there are favourable, "employee-friendly" circumstances for workers. Writing from a social psychology perspective, Silla et al. (2008, 740) suggest that contemporary employment relations are characterized by a greater emphasis on "employment security" than "job stability". This encompasses the notion that workers are to be encouraged to concern themselves with their general employability (i.e., their ability to access jobs, their skills and capacities, and what they offer to the labour market), rather than expecting security from a long-term role or position (i.e., what a specific company offers them). Under the rubric of "happiness studies", Silla et al. seek to consider how job insecurity can be understood to undermine workers' sense of "life satisfaction" and therefore induce psychological distress.

The concern with "employability" as increasingly a matter of worker responsibility is also echoed within the sociology of work literature. Kalleberg (2009, 8) argues that the growth in "precarious" work can be understood as a transfer of risk from the employer to the employee, which is reflected, for example, in the obligation for workers to shoulder health insurance and pension costs. With the rise of a global, information-based economy, Kalleberg (2009, 3) also suggests that a "neoliberal" orientation towards flexibility, competition and the predominance of market relations at a macro-level is reflected in the increased role of "market forces" in the workplace. As a break with the Fordist principles of standardization, stability and collectivity, this can be considered indicative of the primacy of entrepreneurial values, inter-worker competition, a logic of cost–benefit, and modes of individualization, as part of increased employer attention to the role of "human capital" (Read, 2009b, 28). Though Kalleberg does not draw on an expressly Foucauldian framing, the notion of a general transfer of risk is arguably suggestive of Foucault's (2008, 226) analysis

of the neoliberal worker as "*homo œconomicus*".[10] Infused by entrepreneurially based understandings of workplace activities and motivations, from employers' perspectives, workers can be regarded as increasingly responsible for their own employability, based on the idea that competition ought to be the basis of social relations (Lemke, 2000).

Though much of the literature is oriented towards restructuring in the context of industrialized economies, other critical scholarly perspectives bring the implications of "flexibility" for workers in the global South more strongly into view. In the light of the globalization of the labour market initiated by international competition, scholars focusing on the international political economy consider the ways in which Southern countries' efforts to appear attractive to international capital can undermine labour standards and worker protection within domestic economies (Mosley, 2011). Other areas of debate centre on whether outsourcing serves to raise demand for and the wages of unskilled labour in Southern countries – or, as a consequence of the transfer of technology, if it stimulates demand for skilled labour while undermining the position of unskilled workers (Flanagan, 2006, 61). Focusing on the manufacturing sector, scholars such as Wells (2009) highlight the role of global offshoring in eliciting a potential "race to the bottom", as well as pointing to the efforts of Southern workers to contest undesirable conditions within subcontracted working environments in response.

With Northern companies highly sensitive to pressure on prices and to rapidly changing demand and production requirements within consumer markets, Southern suppliers are correspondingly frequently obliged to oversee intensive, highly repetitive forms of production in a bid to retain contracts (Fabros, 2009). The suggestion is that this global relationship can force workers

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10 By referring to "an entrepreneur of himself", Foucault's (2008, 226) term "*homo œconomicus*" suggests the notion that activities and motivations within "neoliberal" workplace relations are to be understood according to a logic of competition, rather than exchange. The relevance of a Foucauldian lens for the analysis of workplace power relations within this project is discussed further in section 2.4.

to bear the brunt of the effects of global competition, leading to poorly and inconsistently paid wages, abusive forms of supervision, increased job insecurity and compulsory overtime – ultimately giving rise to "sweatshop" conditions (Wells, 2009). In this regard, "flexibility" can be understood to refer to the nature of companies' operations, rather than to an appealing aspect of workers' job roles.

With respect to the international services sector, other researchers suggest that it is "high volume, low value, routinized" work – namely, standardized, rather than customized, operations – that is most likely to be outsourced (Taylor and Bain, 2005, 269–70). The implication is that service sector workers working within BPO environments are likely to endure more repetitive, intensive and less autonomous working conditions than their "captive" counterparts, and that, for suppliers, maintaining a low-cost labour force is the key factor in retaining a client company's contract and ensuring that their own operation is profitable. There are also observations that the offshoring of service work leads to the employment of highly educated workers in "low-skilled" jobs, without obvious avenues for career progression (Beerepoot and Hendriks, 2013). Moreover, in order to synchronize with the working hours of customers' countries, outsourced workers may be obliged to undertake "extensive night-time working" (Taylor et al., 2009, 24). Equally, suppliers' ability to deliver consistent service levels is anchored in the use of pervasive, information-based systems of monitoring and evaluation, resulting in an intensive, highly pressured labour process (Bain et al., 2002).

Elsewhere in the literature, scholars underline the socio-cultural and emotional requirements placed on Southern workers as a consequence of global competition. Russell and Thite (2008, 617), for example, suggest that Indian BPO call centre agents might be regarded as drawing upon a degree of

"emotional labour"[11] that surpasses that of captive, Western call centre workers. Though this might be understood to result in superior skills, it also reflects a requirement that Indian workers be able to negotiate "linguistic and cultural dualities" (Russell and Thite, 2008, 617) by concealing their locations and "neutralizing" their accents for the ostensible benefit of Western customers' ears.

Poster (2007) extends this line of analysis. As part of a managerial strategy based on "national identity management", he writes that Indian agents are obliged to participate in a comprehensive transformation of their on-call identity, spanning "voice and accent" (diction, voice modulation, rhythm and grammar use), "alias" (adopting an "American" name), consumption of US television and sports entertainment, and location masking (Poster, 2007, 272). Similarly, Nath (2011, 710) draws attention to the "race-related customer aggression" endured by Indian call centre employees as a consequence of Western customers' dissatisfaction. Writing from an explicitly post-colonial position, Mirchandani (2004) delineates the "practices of globalization" that frame Indian call centre workers' experiences as they participate in job roles requiring "neutral accent" training, predefined scripting and the aping of the US culture of their customers. In view of companies' efforts to mould workers' on-call performance towards normatively preferable modes of speech, she underlines that "the 'neutral' in this sense contains a significant regional bias, reinforcing the 'racist hierarchization' implicit in identifying American English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate" (Mirchandani, 2004, 360). In common with other perspectives within the critical BPO literature, Mirchandani identifies examples of deskilling, tedium and excessive repetition in agents' roles, while, at the same time, observing

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11 The term "emotional labor" was pioneered by Hochschild (1983) as a means of conceptualizing the demand for manufactured, suppressed and consistent emotional displays within service sector job roles. In its attention to the psychological distress induced by isolating front-line service roles, Hochschild's approach has offered an influential lens for a number of scholars of call centre labour, such as Deery et al. (2002), Jenkins et al. (2010), Korczynski (2003) and Mulholland (2002).

how outsourced call centre work is experienced as a form of cultural invalidation.

Without necessarily seeking to reject these arguments, other scholars suggest that Southern workers' experiences of outsourced, service sector labour should not be regarded as simply stultifying or based purely on relations of subjugation (whether understood in a cultural or material sense). For example, Hechanova's (2009) study of Filipino customer service representatives presents pertinent examples of workers developing new forms of self-esteem and national pride as a result of interacting with US customers. Furthermore, in an article influenced by Bourdieu's work on the social meaning of consumption, Murphy (2011) argues that many Indian workers imagine themselves as belonging to a transnationalized middle class owing to their globalized working role and their relatively high incomes and consumption habits.

With outsourced job roles understood to be tedious, deskilled or even exploitative, the numerous strands of the literature on labour and international outsourcing suggest a number of salient questions in relation to workers' experiences. In the light of the rise of call centre work as a feature component of international BPO, key amongst such questions is how to understand the role of control in the labour process and the basis on which companies seek to manage their staff. These themes frame the discussion presented in the following section.

2.3 The call centre labour process: theorizing control

In order to extend the analysis of the establishing of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market, it is necessary to examine the constitution of workplace power relations. This discussion is designed to facilitate an extensive consideration of companies' strategies of control, as part of a broader analysis of the implications of the expansion of information-based, interactive service work.

As a means of articulating the divergent understandings of call centre labour in the literature, this section outlines the predominant conceptual

approaches utilized by critically inclined scholars, based on an exploration of how the question of workplace control is theorized in relation to key themes such as standardization, routinization, autonomy, surveillance and (self-)evaluation. This provides a foregrounding for a subsequent discussion of key Foucauldian concepts and the analytical relevance of the framework of "workplace selves", which is undertaken in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

2.3.1 Call centres as contemporary service work

With client companies in pursuit of lower costs and greater efficiency, the rise of outsourced call centre work has been part of the progressive globalization of business activities under the aegis of an expanding international ICT infrastructure. Within many countries there is also a parallel growth in "captive" call centres, reflecting companies' preference for retaining services "in-house" in view of data protection, service quality and skills-related concerns.

Call centres can be understood as remote, ICT-mediated offices where employees supply and seek information, deliver services or support, and pursue sales (Holman, 2005, 111–12). They are in many respects emblematic of contemporary service work in their provision of an intangible, perishable product that is "highly variable and engages the customer in its production" (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 1). Specifically, call centres require their employees to be skilled at interacting with remote customers while working with computer systems designed to engender productive workers and the monitoring of work quality. Call centre services tend to be defined as either in-bound (involving, for example, processing sales, customer service and technical support) or out-bound (entailing making sales, telemarketing, survey research and fundraising).

There are extensive contributions made from a number of academic fields – such as communications, sociology of work, management studies, organization studies, human resources and industrial relations – within the call centre literature. As noted in section 2.2, the theoretical strands pursued mirror wider conceptualizations of the significance of information age work. While scholars (e.g., Glucksmann, 2004, Holman, 2002, 36) point to the scope for variation in the structuring and organization of call centre work (as reflective of, for

example, the sector in which an employer operates, the use of targets and monitoring metrics, and the size of the company), a series of distinct positions has emerged in the literature. For example, with reference to Batt and Moynihan's (2002) prior classifications, Pritchard and Symon (2011, 434) identify three feature models that are termed "classic mass production", "professional service" and "mass customisation". These models correspond to understandings of call centre work as potentially repetitive and tedious, as specialist and empowering, or as a combination of these features.

In a comprehensive overview of research approaches to call centre work, Russell (2008, 204) also highlights a number of "ideal typifications", observing that Kinnie et al. (2000b, 142) offer a similar characterization to Batt and Moynihan, describing working models as "transactional", "relational" and "pseudo-relational". While these classifications do not necessarily capture the nuances of every theoretical orientation within the literature, they nonetheless offer a useful differentiation between broadly optimistic, pessimistic and ambivalent positions with respect to workers' interests.

2.3.2 Flexibility and customization or standardization and "assembly lines in the head": the foundations of call centre literature

With the rise of highly monitored, technologically mediated service labour, much of the call centre literature has drawn on Braverman's Labour Process Theory (LPT) to theorize call centre work as an iteration of the Taylorist separation of "hand and brain". Braverman argued that factory workers' "execution" (their "doing" of the work tasks in the labour process) had been increasingly reduced to a range of simple, uniform applications under automated, fragmented forms of production. This served to remove "conception" from the process, undermining the role of workers' own brain power, creativity and decision-making and ensuring management's control of the speed of production. While the information age is based on new logics of customization, flexibility and individualization at a macro-level, Labour Process Theory-inspired scholars in the call centre literature have conceptualized workers' day-to-day role as

subject to the same separation of conception and execution first outlined by Braverman.

In the call centre, these new demands on workers are seen as combining with the use of ICTs to monitor individuals' performance through statistical records under management's constant surveillance of operational processes. Initially, this gave rise to bleak notions of "electronic sweatshops" and the "tyranny of the assembly line" (Fernie and Metcalf, 2000, 2), in marked contrast to celebratory ideas around "knowledge workers". In its focus on ICTs as surveillance, Fernie and Metcalf's article provides an initial critical framework. It advances a Foucauldian notion of call centre technologies and organizational forms as the realization of the Panopticon: "This occupation merits study because the possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output are amazing to behold" (Fernie and Metcalf, 2000, 2).

This framework is rudimentary insofar as it emphasizes a perspective that tends to privilege technological determinism and a portrayal of workers' bleak submission to techno-managerial control. Notwithstanding these limitations, the significance of the quantitative monitoring of workers' performance – such as call-handling time, call-waiting time and call wrap-up time – has been an analytically important theme in the literature. In their emphasis on the Taylorization of white-collar work, Taylor and Bain (1999) instead underline that call centre work represents an "assembly line in the head". They provide a Braverman-influenced, pioneering framework for the study of the call centre as a unique labour process for the mass-produced delivery of information services, based on high-volume and low complexity for many workers. Following scripted, pre-planned lines of interaction, workers are considered to function as mere cogs as part of a factory-like division of labour. In the call centre, this Taylorization is understood to be underpinned by "a coalescence of digital technologies" (Russell, 2008, 197), such as fibre optics, switches, personal computers and automated call distribution systems. The framework contrasts markedly with optimistic perspectives on call centre labour as potentially skilled knowledge work that is not simply reducible to standardization, such as the "high commitment service" model (Holman, 2005, 117).

While arguing that call centre labour is subject to routinization and a choice of technologies geared towards maximizing efficiencies and minimizing workers' autonomy, Taylor and Bain's framework opened a space for a consideration of employee resistance and moments of clandestine disobedience. This led them to reject the totalizing power of the Panopticon metaphor in Foucault's adaptation of Jeremy Bentham's late-18th century prison design (Bain and Taylor, 2000, 3, Knights and McCabe, 1998, 164). Though sharing the Foucauldian orientation advanced by Fernie and Metcalf, Knights and McCabe (2003, 1591) stress that "Foucault never suggested that power was as totalizing as these authors suggest even in prisons, let alone in the factory or office."

Though "neo-Marxian" in its focus on the nature of exploitation and conflictual relations between employees and management, Taylor and Bain's analysis has provided a prominent framework within critical management and business school perspectives on the call centre labour process and working conditions. While the Taylorist application of scientific management, the resulting standardization of job processes and the intensification of work are understood broadly in the mould of Braverman's "deskilling", the term is nevertheless a subtext rather than a construct explicitly investigated within this perspective (Russell, 2008, 199).

With respect to demands on employees, there is also another prominent perspective within the literature, which calls attention to the role of emotional labour implicated in call centre work. Based on an understanding of service work as entailing the "manufactur[ing] of relationships" (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996, 8), this perspective focuses on the display of emotions that comply with organizational norms around customer service, such as maintaining a pleasant demeanour and phone voice. Having to project emotions they may not feel and suppress those that they do, employees are implicated in the labour process in an effort to ensure a positive experience for customers. This has led certain scholars to regard skills as primarily social rather than technical (Thompson et al., 2001, Callaghan and Thompson, 2002), and to emphasize a demand for stereotypically feminine capacities around "soft skills" and "communication skills" (Belt et al., 2000, 369). Within international call centres, one aspect of

such labour in the popular and academic imagination alike is concern with Indian workers' "contradictory identities" – namely, their obligation to manage their identity or conceal their location through accent alteration and familiarization with customers' culture (Taylor et al., 2013, 1).

In its stress on call centre workers as a "white-collar proletariat" and the call centre as "industrialising interactive service work through standardisation" (Taylor et al., 2013, 440), the understanding of call centre work as an "assembly line in the head" emphasizes a continuity with Fordist work and a predominant logic of a search for efficiencies and low cost, rather than the radical rupture implied by Bell's post-industrialism. Workers are seen as alienated through routinized work divided into discrete, standardized and highly monitored elements (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001, 20–1), albeit with space for acts of resistance (Bain and Taylor, 2000, Knights and McCabe, 1998, 163). If information age work is characterized by flexibility and customization, then for this perspective, the level of autonomy this implies is essentially restricted to the macro-level of the service sector's overall composition, rather than shaping workers' own day-to-day roles.

2.3.3 Mass-customized bureaucracies

Where labour process theorists have underlined continuities, other scholars have been keen to see change in the call centre as a site of new information age work, leading them to downplay the role of Taylorist scientific management. A key point of difference concerns workers' level of autonomy, with scholars such as Frenkel et al. (1999) focusing on the significance of the diversity of service work given customers' involvement in the production of the service. In contrast to the assembly line, this diversity is seen as necessitating greater scope for employee decision-making and a move away from seeing work as simply standardized.

This perspective understands call centre work as a "mass-customised bureaucracy" (Frenkel et al., 1999, 270). This describes the unknown quality required for interacting with a customer, which means that the otherwise "rigid adherence" to managerial control (Russell, 2008, 200) is displaced by the need

for workers to be free to respond to customers' specific needs in order to provide the service effectively. In this understanding, an overly intense application of Taylorist measures would be inclined to undermine the managerial goal of high service levels (Russell, 2009, 94). Rather than a form of subjugation, control in the workplace can be seen as "info-normative" (Frenkel et al., 1999, 139) and composed of a mix of bureaucratic rules and performance monitoring in combination with aspects of autonomy and worker empowerment, as features of knowledge work. This combination is said to result from the overall peculiarity of the work as "mass-customised", where a logic of efficiency and low cost coexists with the need to be simultaneously highly customer-oriented (Korczynski et al., 2000, 670, Frenkel et al., 1998, 957).

While its space for analysis of the customer and its emphasis on bureaucratic norms are instructive, criticism of the notion of mass-customized bureaucracies has centred on its crux – info-normative systems of control as "facilitative supervision" – as an ultimately underdeveloped framework for understanding dynamic power relations (Knights and McCabe, 2003, 1589–90). Furthermore, Taylor and Bain (2001, 50) responded to the perspective's tendency to present call centres as representing elements of knowledge work as far too generous an interpretation of the reality of much of the work, arguing that it is ill-equipped to examine differences "between and within call centres". Equally, workplace power within this framework is arguably essentially static and embodied within objects and rules, offering little means of conceptualizing the dynamics of manager–worker power relations and the fluidity of resistance and control.

2.3.4 Immaterial labour, autonomy and subjectivities

With the knowledge economy transforming work under the restructuring of international companies, the rise of services and the expansion of outsourcing, other expressly Marxist concepts of "immaterial labour" have come to inform critical perspectives on call centres and the implications of contemporary "communicative capitalism" (Dean, 2009, Brophy, 2010, 471). Where Labour Process Theory-based understandings underline historical continuity, the neo-

Marxist immaterial labour tradition has developed a critical lens in response to its understanding of sweeping post-industrial change, sharing with the "mass-customized" paradigm a fundamental concern for the novelty of the knowledge economy.[12]

In response to celebratory ideas around post-Fordism and the knowledge economy, Mauricio Lazzarato's "immaterial labour" (Lazzarato, 1996) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's autonomist Marxism framework highlight the importance of "affective labour" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 292). This relates to the capturing of workers' personalities and tastes for the purposes of satisfying contemporary capitalist demands for flexibility and personalization. "Affective labour" concerns the production of affects – demonstrating in one's work a feeling of ease, satisfaction, excitement or passion (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 108, Coté and Pybus, 2007, 90) – in forms of labour that historically have been unpaid and "feminine" (i.e., job roles that produce services and care).

The autonomist tradition is so named for its commitment to the revolutionary role of forces outside formal working-class structures. However, "autonomy" is also understood as a departure from the role of Taylorist scientific management in undermining workers' decision-making and control in the labour process. The tradition understands contemporary working processes as belonging to a new age in which labourers' cognition is harnessed and in which workers possess a degree of autonomy according to capitalists' needs within work contexts. For Lazzarato, immaterial labour under post-industrial work constitutes a move away from workers' production of tangible products into a realm of information-handling and data-processing (the "informational content"), along with the input of elements not previously considered labour, such as personal tastes,

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12 In a stimulating overview of the emergence of perspectives on immaterial labour, Gill and Pratt (2008, 3) identify the concept of "precarity" as a lens through which to approach "the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living". This term refers to both the contingency entailed by contemporary "flexible" work and the potential for new forms of inter-worker solidarity that extend outside conventional political party and trade union structures.

opinions, and cultural and artistic norms (the "cultural content" – Lazzarato, 1996). The use of ICTs from the 1970s onwards is seen to represent a "great transformation" in the way in which work entails new subjectivities that are rich in specific knowledge. For this perspective, just as traditional differentiations between material/immaterial and mental/manual labour dissolve and conception and execution blend, work engenders a new role for communication as the basis of flexible, team-based work. Where management techniques aim for "the worker's soul to become part of the factory" and for the worker's personality to be open to organization and control, "participative management" – the manager as facilitator rather than foreperson – becomes a new technology of power, with jobs defined by their flexibility (Lazzarato, 1996, 134). In this reading, communication's role in work is approached as the means for "productive cooperation" (Lazzarato, 1996, 134). Instead of management dictating how to fulfil existing tasks more efficiently, productivity is understood to be enhanced by identifying new tasks as a team, as part of the practice of collective learning.

As part of an emergent, broad-ranging body of critical theory of post-industrialism, this tradition is being applied in a recent strand of call centre research, developed by scholars such as Enda Brophy (2010, 2011). Rather than simply reducing elements of workers' mental labour to capitalist logics of efficiency and production, in this tradition, workers' "subjectivities" – their cognition, creativity and aspects of their personalities, decision-making and aesthetics – are regarded as becoming far more extensively implicated in the production of call centre services. Significantly, the influence of Foucault's concept of bio-power[13] (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 13) on the immaterial labour tradition's understanding of worker subjectivities recasts an element of Foucauldian theory within understandings of call centre labour.

Arguably, this tradition takes an industrial–post-industrial binary chronology (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2004, 142) and the tendency to simplify a homogenized

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13 Bio-power refers to Foucault's concept of technologies and techniques of capturing, comparing, regulating and subjugating as a technology of power over citizens' minds and bodies. It is discussed at greater length in section 2.4.

"services" sector somewhat at face value. Nonetheless, its perspectives on the socio-economic significance of advanced technological change in general and the rise of service sector work, in particular, are more expansive than are the Labour Process Theory-based understandings. And if these traditions are arguably theoretically reductive in their emphasis on the capital–labour dichotomy as the holistic explanatory factor for social change, their emphasis on the role of worker subjectivities within contemporary working environments is instructive. This emphasis arguably dovetails with other concepts of service sector skills with respect to demands on workers, such as aesthetic (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007, Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996).

2.3.5 The limits of immaterial labour

Theories focusing on subjectivities present an interesting frame to identify how language, communication, culture, identity and skills are put to work. Nonetheless, this tradition's proclivity towards uncovering new forms of collective labour resistance and transnational solidarity may be misplaced with respect to service sector contexts in the global South and limited as a lens on fluid, day-to-day working practices. While critical of labour process theorists' tendency to present "the dispiriting image of a subjugated workforce" (Brophy, 2010, 474), the immaterial labour tradition's desire to move away from a focus on how management controls workers to assess emergent worker autonomy and collectivization perhaps allows for only a partial understanding of forms of workplace control and worker responses. Researching the potential for formal union organization among Indian call centre workers, Taylor et al. (2009) seek to interrogate the "discourse that employees are universally antipathetic to trade unionism", yet nonetheless write of the inchoate nature of unionization within the country (Taylor et al., 2009, 38). These findings tally with Noronha and D'Cruz's research on the Indian sector, with many workers exhibiting a tendency to self-identify as "professional" individuals who are disinclined towards wider forms of collectivization (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 163).

In the light of these observations from the Indian context, it perhaps seems empirically and theoretically premature to focus on workers' aspirations towards collective organization in relation to the Kenyan sector. Nonetheless, certain influences on the immaterial labour tradition are pertinent to the study of workers' experiences of call centre jobs. The influence of the concept of bio-power – nation-states' power over bodies – within the immaterial labour tradition resituates key elements of Foucauldian theory within the call centre literature and illustrates the roots of the tradition's concern for the role of "subjectivities" (Coté and Pybus, 2007, 92).

Notions of "affective labour" perhaps reflect a similar line of interest in management's expectations of service sector workers to the emotional labour perspective. However, affective labour is arguably a more expansive concept of subjectivities, suggesting questions about the wider day-to-day aesthetic requirements and constructed ideals of workers' appearances, skills, identity management and behaviour in contemporary working environments such as call centres. Furthermore, in their efforts to develop more sophisticated and nuanced understandings of workplace experiences, behaviours and power, the call centre scholars arguably draw – implicitly and explicitly – on salient Foucauldian concepts, beyond Foucault's overt influence on the immaterial labour tradition.

2.4 Theorizing the control of labour: Foucault, power and selves

In order to develop a conceptualization of how workers' experiences are conditioned by company strategies of control, this section elaborates the framework of "workplace selves" through a Foucauldian-inspired lens so as to analyse power relations. In view of the preoccupation with workers as the centrepiece of control within the service sector literature, an analysis of how call centre agents are "problematized" according to specific managerial concerns and representations of workplace performance is proposed.

2.4.1 Understanding workplace control

The establishing of a BPO call centre sector in Kenya gives rise to important questions in relation to the constitution of workplace power relations. In the light of the parallel creation of "captive" call centres, there is the potential to compare differences between call centre working environments in Nairobi and to examine how these might reflect different formulations of power. This suggests a focus on the significance of call centre labour within the Kenyan labour market, and the means with which companies seek to manage workers according to particular forms of control. A key aspect of this, for example, could be what call centre companies want their agents to be and to do, and, by extension, how companies seek to regulate their agents as a result. Moreover, the type of agent that companies seek to mould might be understood to relate to larger strategies of workplace control, while, at the same time, inviting attention to how agents themselves respond to such strategies.

Discussions about the relevance of a Foucauldian-inspired framework in relation to call centre labour can be seen as part of an established, wider debate within labour process scholarship. Arguing against the predominance of a Labour Process Theory-based understanding of control, accounts from scholars such as Knights (1990) presented early arguments in favour of overcoming the problem of the "missing subject" within Braverman-influenced approaches. As Grey (1994, 479) underlines, the Foucault-inspired early research into the labour process primarily explored the workplace as a site in

which "Panoptic techniques" underpinned "disciplinary" formulations of power. Within the call centre literature, the *analytical purchase* offered by Foucauldian concepts has tended to be overlooked. Dismissing the Panopticon as a simplistic symbol of pervasive technological control, Taylor and Bain (2001, 41) were perhaps most vocal in rejecting Foucault's relevance to the study of workplace power relations.

A reading that is open to Foucauldian conceptualizations arguably offers greater scope for understandings of power relations, identity and workplace control within call centres. Despite being somewhat marginal within the literature, there are a number of interesting examples of critically informed research on Northern and Southern call centres that are striking in their use of Foucauldian theory (e.g., Alferoff and Knights, 2008, Knights and McCabe, 2003, Kasabov and da Cunha, 2014, Carrillo Rowe et al., 2013, Desai, 2010). When applied to the analysis of call centre working environments, Foucault's concepts can be approached as instances of disciplinary-based and governmentality-based formulations of power.

2.4.2 Control as discipline: subjects, subjectivities and surveillance

As a representation of disciplinary power, call centres can be understood to rely in part on the management of "docile" bodies (Foucault, 1978, 305) for the purpose of generating consistent, measurable outputs in relation to on-call performance and interactions with customers. With companies seeking to engender consistent service quality, workplace knowledge about performance can be seen as underpinning "games of truth" (Foucault, 1997, 281), providing criteria against which agents are recruited, trained, assessed and coached. With reference to the metaphor of the Panopticon, scholars have considered how Foucault's (1978, 184) understanding of logics of "normalization" offers a conceptual mapping of the surveillance capabilities provided by quantitative and qualitative monitoring technologies in the workplace (Alferoff and Knights, 2008, 36). "Disciplinary normalization", Foucault (2007, 85) explained, is anchored in a model of producing conformity in relation to norms of movements and actions – with that which is seen by management and workers to conform designated

as "normal" and that which is incapable of doing so as "abnormal". In enabling the production, regulation and circulation of knowledge about call centre agents, workplace monitoring technologies might therefore be regarded as constituting a "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1984, 74) as a record of "normal" and "abnormal" conduct.

Without suggesting that an electronic Panopticon enables power to function as "perfect" or totalizing, Ellway (2013, 39) underlines that "surveillance is discontinuous in its actions but permanent in its effects on individuals" – namely, agents must assume that they are being watched continuously. This can be considered distinct from understandings of "sovereign" managerial power, where the subject's role is predicated on straightforward submission and compliance with the instructions of actors of higher status (Foucault, 1991, 95). By enabling the production of knowledge about performance on the basis of techniques for the recording, ordering and reforming of workers' actions, workplace technologies can be understood to facilitate forms of permanent "visibility" (Foucault, 1978, 187). If this knowledge underpins the ongoing assessments of agents by management, then it also provides a form of discursive reference point for agents themselves, encouraging practices of self-assessment and self-adjustment in relation to their awareness of normative notions of "correct" conduct. Moreover, the dissemination of knowledge – such as through statistics displayed publicly on computer screens – about agents' ability to meet workplace targets can also give rise to the monitoring of peers or "horizontal visibility" (Ellway, 2013, 40).

By making conduct visible, the ongoing dissemination of knowledge about performance can be regarded as creating conditions for the production of desirable workplace subjectivities. This invites attention to the types of characteristics, attributes, dispositions and capacities that are perceived to be preferable – perhaps even mandatory – by management, as well as agents' subjective experiences and views of these capacities. As part of techniques of domination, key to the moulding of these subjectivities is the role of experts or authority figures charged with providing a "gaze" of observation (Foucault, 1979, 45). Equally, Foucault's work addressed how subjects participate in their own

"subjectification" (Rabinow, 1984, 11), or, as he described it, "the way a human being turns himself into a subject" (Foucault, 1982, 778). The historical practice of the "confession", for example, became one of the "most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (Foucault, 1979, 59), encouraging subjects to judge themselves in relation to understandings of deviance, abnormality and inadequacy, on the strength of which they were to recognize aspects of the self to be modified. Within contemporary employment contexts, scholars have considered how workplace practices such as self-evaluation and self-appraisal represent modern examples of the confession (Barratt, 2002).

In addition to subjectivities, the term "subject" therefore ought to be regarded as having a dual meaning, since it invites a core empirical interest in how workers are made and make themselves subject to organizational and management goals. As Foucault (1982, 781) wrote: "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge." Resulting from the dynamics of governance and self-governance and surveillance and self-surveillance, power can be understood as fluid, dispersed and processual. For example, Winiecki's (2007, 370) study of US call centres run by an express delivery company and a computer equipment manufacturer stresses the dynamic of "shadow boxing with data" – namely, the fact that workers' individual and team performance is under surveillance, recorded and fed back to them through "objective" statistical records. On the strength of these statistics, he argues that workers modify their behaviour and regulate both themselves and one another in pursuit of achieving company targets. Winiecki alludes to the Panopticon as a central monitoring device and pervasive feature of the organizational landscape – not as a totalizing force, but as a shaper of conduct. With the recording of discrete, fragmented components of work, call centre workers are encouraged to "see yourself in the data" (Winiecki, 2007, 365), on the strength of which an individualized, "objective" depiction of one's performance can be created as a statistical representation – an identity – according to which behaviour may be modified in line with awareness of ideal metrics.

Noronha and D'Cruz's (2009) study of international call centre workers in Bangalore and Mumbai shares the view of ICTs as one element in managerial designs on control, even if the authors do not describe their work in Foucauldian terms. Rather than regarding monitoring technologies as determinants of workers' behaviour, the authors argue that workplace control is pursued according to two types of mechanism: techno-bureaucratic and socio-ideological (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 161). In the first, managers and quantitative monitoring-based statistical information combine as a technology of control (rather than surveillance). In the second, workers are trained, socialized and assessed according to the "notion of professionalism" (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 157). This is administered throughout recruitment, induction, training and performance reviews as a form of identity and profile transformation – that is, altering and harnessing one's personality and mood in accordance with customer service objectives (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 16). This is designed to ensure an internalized commitment to customer service and to prepare workers for management's prerogative of monitoring. At the same time, this approach is complemented by the provision of perks and privileges, which Noronha and D'Cruz argue serves to encourage workers to absorb job-related strains and to inhibit collectivization. Their thesis is that employee identities and sense of self are invoked to ensure commitment to and the realization of competitive advantage, with employees implicated in a mode of behaviour that the authors term "professionalism" – that is, workers become self-regulating subjects according to their self-interest and the ideals to which they should aspire.

Within a disciplinary conceptualization of power, management is broadly concerned with ensuring that workers conform to modes of permissible conduct, which it seeks to engender through the use of monitoring techniques, through constraining and normalizing, and by deploying experts to oversee ongoing processes of reform. Alongside the notion of control as discipline, there is also, however, another perspective that reframes power as dependent on more subtle relations of domination. With reference to Foucault's concept of "governmentality", this is suggestive of how agents can be made responsible for

monitoring and defining their own conduct, and therefore be encouraged to become experts of themselves.

2.4.3 Governmentality and control "at a distance"

Governmentality refers to the manner of governing and its rationale – or simply, "how to govern" (Gordon, 1991, 7). Signifying a combination of "governance" and "rationality" (Lemke, 2001, 191), Foucault drew on the concept to consider formulations of power that differ from disciplinary and sovereign examples. Governmentality is understood to form part of a "triangle" of power relations, in conjunction with sovereign and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991, 102).

Rather than suggesting that practices of "government" have supplanted other forms of power (Dean, 1999, 30), Foucault considered how power relations and the control of subjects can be understood to recede and to operate "at a distance" (Rose and Miller, 1992). In an initial conceptualization, Foucault (2003, 242) understood government to refer to how populations as a whole become principal objects of concern for various authorities, as distinct from the techniques and tactics for the regulation and direction of individuals and of the body that are characteristic of disciplinary power. Proposing the term "bio-power", he suggested a movement, starting at around the beginning of the eighteenth century, towards understanding human beings as a biological species (Foucault, 2007, 16). Biologically based understandings of human populations came to be anchored in two, interrelated strands of focus: an "anatamo-politics" of the human body and a "biopolitics of the population" (Rabinow and Rose, 2006, 196). This recast the problem of government as a concern with managing the vitality of a population, such as through monitoring birth rates, fertility and mortality (Foucault, 2003, 243). With respect to bio-power, to govern is to care for a population, to improve its condition, and to optimize its "wealth, longevity, health, and so on" (Foucault, 2001a, 217).

As his work progressed, Foucault (2001a, 219) developed the term "governmentality" as a means of approaching power relations as the "conduct of

conduct".[14] This term indicates the notion of conducting, leading or guiding others' conduct, actions or behaviour, as well as the idea of governing one's own "self". "Government", therefore, refers to the techniques and procedures that guide and shape conduct (O'Farrell, 2005, 106). Under this formulation, instead of seeking to arrange bodies temporally and spatially within institutional settings, power ventures into broader social, political and psychological dimensions within the social body, becoming a matter of appealing to subjects' desires, choices and motivations. This is partly because government is a matter of maximizing "its effects whilst reducing its costs as much as possible" (Foucault, 2008, 318), as it is not feasible to oblige every member of a population to regulate themselves "in minute detail" (Murray Li, 2007, 5).

Foucault discussed the operation of power at a distance as it relates to the emergence of a liberal "rationality of governance" (Joseph, 2012, 25). For Foucault, to consider a "rationality" of governance – or an "art of government" – is to analyse why certain governmental practices are established, framed by questions such as "who can govern", "what governing is" and "what or who is governed" (Gordon, 1991, 3). As suggested by the semantic coupling of governing ("gouverner") and thinking ("mentalité"), this is based on the recognition that the study of technologies of power cannot be isolated from an analysis of the rationality that frames them (Lemke, 2001, 191). As Dean (1999, 24) underlines, to understand a rationality of government is to ask why the problem of managing a group is calculated, understood and responded to in a particular way, rather than suggesting, for example, "the hegemony of a particular Reason as prescribing how we must think or reason". Similarly,

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14 As Joseph (2012, 24) highlights, the term "conduct of conduct" did not actually appear in English translations of Foucault, despite being taken up extensively within the English-language literature. In French, however, Foucault (1994, 237) did use the term "conduire des conduites". In English, a close approximation of this phrase is found in "The subject and power", in which Foucault (1982, 789) wrote: "The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome."

Foucault (1982, 779–80) commented: "What we have to do is analyse specific rationalities rather than always invoking the progress of rationalisation in general".

In this regard, Foucault (2008, 318) approached "liberalism" not as a straightforwardly theoretical or ideological matter, but as a "way of doing things" that animates programmes of action. Within a liberal conception of government, he wrote, it is important to respect the "natural phenomena of economic processes" (Foucault, 2007, 353) – suggesting that, within this conception, to discipline or restrain such processes would be to negate their innate force or vitality. This observation extends his perspective on the invention of "a synaptic regime of power", based on the exercise of power within a population rather than above it (Foucault, 1980, 39). Instead of being reliant on the generation of forces and an imposition from above, to govern is to approach "management" as a matter of respecting and guiding economic processes that are immanent to the population and that exist within the social body (Foucault, 2007, 353).

In view of this, Foucault (2007, 353) argued that the "insertion of freedom within governmentality" represents the key point of difference with other types of power. Governing well, it follows, derives from respecting the freedom of those governed and their self-interest, as opposed to pursuing direct regulation or outright dominance. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Foucault's explications on governmentality were oriented towards analyses of the rationalities underpinning classic liberal governance and the twentieth century "neo-liberal" ideas of the German Ordo-liberal school and the American Chicago School. Under forms of neoliberalism, he argued, the task of government becomes not simply to respect the natural processes of exchange, but instead to act to stimulate competition. With respect to what economic subjects do and how they can be understood, Foucault suggested a qualitative shift. "*Homo œconomicus*" is no longer approached as simply a subject of exchange, but as a creature of competition (Read, 2009b, 28). In a neoliberal framing, individuals are to be considered rational entrepreneurs, whose actions ought to be interpreted, moulded and fostered according to a market-based understanding. This encompasses, for example, the view of investing in one's own capacities in

anticipation of a return or according to a form of cost–benefit analysis, based on a reading of one's essential self-interest and need to engage in competition – not only within the economic sphere, but within social, political and civic life. McNay (2009, 61) underlines that neoliberal governance "operates not through the delimitation of individual freedoms but through their multiplication in the context of a notion of responsible self-management". Lemke (2001, 201) highlights the linkages that neoliberalism attempts to create between "a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor". This also presupposes the role of "human capital" as a question of considering how autonomous, self-interested individuals might view themselves as the site of resources, capacities and aptitudes – or, "innate elements and other, acquired elements" (Foucault, 2008, 227) – to be moulded, harnessed or enhanced (Binkley, 2009, 62, Dean, 1999, 185). Foucault (2008, 226) encapsulated this sentiment with reference to the phrase "*homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself". As part of a rejection of Keynesian state-run social security apparatuses, a core objective behind neoliberal rationalities is to encourage individuals to see themselves as self-governing, "self-actualized" (Dean, 1999, 182) subjects responsible for their own circumstances and management.

While Foucault's investigations focused on analyses of particular liberal and neoliberal rationalities, his ideas about the forms of subject and subjectivity presupposed by distinct mentalities of government – and their relationship to attendant programmes of governmental action – have been highly influential, if perhaps less well known than his explication of disciplinary power. Writing from a "neo-Foucauldian" perspective, a number of scholars have further elaborated Foucault's understanding of governmental rationalities as a conceptual basis on which to approach diverse forms of contemporary social and political organization. This takes the form of an "analytics of governmentality" (Rose, 1999b, 19) or an "analytics of government" (Dean, 1999, 27), which relies upon an examination of how forms of thought are embedded within programmes for the guidance and reform of conduct (as opposed to, for instance, considering the abstract and theoretical dimensions of thought or starting from a set of

specific theoretical principles). In one line of thinking, this literature extends the theme of the "free subject" or autonomous individual (Dean, 1999, 182) to consider how subjects are encouraged to self-discipline and self-mould in order to become particular types of person. This invites, at the same time, attention to how people are problematized and understood by authorities as objects to be acted upon, and how these understandings are taken up by individuals as a basis on which to act upon themselves (Miller and Rose, 2008). Instead of focusing on who people are or ought to be, this *analytical approach* depicts the task of analysis as who people think they are (Miller and Rose, 2008).

Rather than assume a model of seamless transmission of power's demands for the reshaping of subjects, Foucault (1988, 18–19) proposed "governmentality" as the "contact" or "continuum" (Lemke, 2001, 201) between the macro- and micro-levels undergirding power relations. The analysis of power becomes a question of the interrelations between macro-level "practices of government" and micro-level "practices of the self" (Dean, 1999, 20). At the micro-level, Foucault's (1987, 26) later studies of "ethics" bring the role of personal practices of self-modification more sharply into view. Under the term "technologies of the self", his concern within his later works is how, with reference to ancient historical contexts predating medieval Christianity and the rise of the modern state, individuals might engage in practices of self-reflection and self-assessment as a means of aspiring towards the achievement of goals of self-realization. Foucault (1988, 18) proposed that the term "technologies of the self" be understood to indicate how individuals seek to convert a desire for self-transformation into "a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality". This is suggestive of how governing enters into the domain of a relationship with one's "self", thus requiring forms of self-knowledge in the act of seeking to fashion particular identities.

This articulation offers a further lens for the neo-Foucauldian literature in its examination of neoliberal rationalities. Within contemporary domains, it asks how formerly established disciplinary techniques – in relation to, for example,

health, hygiene and civility – serve to awaken a sense of responsibility and control within subjects by aligning with and fostering their own "projects for themselves" (Rose, 1999b, 88). With individuals inclined towards modifying themselves according to their understandings of what they ought to be or to do, the role of discipline – and its adjudicators in positions of authority – becomes more a matter of guiding choices than constraining actions. In order to make use of one's freedom in a desirable manner, individuals must exercise that freedom responsibly – or, according to "ideals of how free individuals should act" (McKinlay and Taylor, 2014, 16). Governmentality, therefore, leads to the "creation of free and active subjects" (Joseph, 2012, 25), who are at once empowered and who assume the risk of that empowerment.

2.4.4 Empowerment as subjectification

For scholars concerned with the transformation of work under "neoliberal globalization" (Fraser, 2003), this Foucauldian framing suggests an instructive means of examining the mentalities and programmes of action shaping contemporary workplaces and workers' subjectivities. The decline of stable work and the fragmentation of production across the international sphere prompt a series of critical questions around what "flexibility", "efficiency" and "responsibility" mean for workplace subjects.

With companies increasingly required to be "lean" and "adaptable", there is a corresponding expectation that employees should embody the attributes and ethos that characterize their organizations. This presents a contrast with previously predominant ideas of management, where workers' autonomy, participation and individuality were perceived as antagonistic towards, rather than supportive of, the drive for profit. With reference to the notion of an "enterprise culture" under Thatcherism in the UK, du Gay and Salaman (1992, 627) consider the discursive shift that enabled a "rapprochement" between employees and companies. Instead of positing an inherent tension between employee autonomy and profit maximization, the "discourse of enterprise", they suggest, presented employees' motivation for self-fulfilment through work as aligned with the company's quest for competitive advantage. This discourse

sought to inculcate certain "habits of action", glorifying the values of self-reliance and risk-taking as honourable (du Gay and Salaman, 1992, 628).

In a discussion of the changing international structure of work, Fraser (2003, 163) suggests that "Fordism" led discipline to "become generalized and emblematic of society at large". This involved not only the scientific management-based drive towards efficient factory production, but also greater control over family, social and community life, on the premise that "work habits began in the home" (Fraser, 2003, 163). But where proponents of Fordism urged the spread of disciplinary control within a national frame, Fraser (2003, 167) argues that the spectre of global competition and "neoliberal globalization" – as "postfordist and therefore post-disciplinary" – initiate new globalized forms of regulation. At the level of the individual worker, the role of the "actively responsible agent" becomes key. Fraser (2003, 169) refers to the term "flexibilization" to suggest the dual nature of contemporary working conditions – the proliferation of casual, short-term employment, and the obligation for workers to be adaptable, both inside and outside the workplace, through developing new skills, retraining and changing jobs.

Emerging as a key feature of instrumental strategies of control, the contemporary workplace domain and its culture can be considered to be constructed differently to those of the past. No longer the subject of direct control, the worker becomes recast as a resource to be empowered (McKinlay and Taylor, 2014, 13). The vitality of the company is enriched not by compelling, commanding or restraining, but by soliciting and facilitating. Rather than being simply hierarchically defined, workers' responsibilities – to make suggestions, to support and supervise their colleagues, and to identify with company goals – are understood by management to extend beyond the traditional confines demarcated by their job roles. By extension, workers are encouraged to approach responsibility as the basis for their own self-management, and to perceive work not as a source of tedium or extraction, but as a site promising self-fulfilment through self-transformation. From the company's perspective, inculcating the ethics of self-improvement and responsibility-taking offers the promise of stimulating the creativity, energy and inventiveness of a wider

portion of the workforce. This suggests a potential antidote to the perceived inefficiency and rigidity of organizations structured along overtly bureaucratic and hierarchical lines.

Scholars working within the governmentality tradition challenge the seeming wholesomeness of these ideas. This entails, for instance, underscoring the elimination of the once unifying, collective identity behind the "worker" implied by this discursive shift towards an ethics of self-improvement and the installation of a distinct "strategy of subjectification" (Read, 2009a, 7). Consistent with the trend towards temporary and part-time work, this collective identity is usurped by the recasting of individual workers as empowered "companies of one" and as subjects of human capital, who are to "incorporate the rationalities of political rule into their own methods for conducting themselves" (Binkley, 2009, 62) as a means of developing personal resources, not collective objectives. In this light, flexibility not only represents a cost-cutting imperative, but also a way to suggest that workers' responsibility is to make themselves employable by identifying, working upon and managing their personal capacities.

2.4.5 Governing call centre labour and managing selves

The concept of governmentality has inspired interesting new avenues of research into the call centre labour process, partly shifting the analytical focus away from the predominance of the views of deskilling and repetition that

characterize Labour Process Theory-based analyses.[15] It has also extended the disciplinary understandings of previous Foucault-inspired research.

For example, Winiecki and Wigman (2007, 119) propose that technologies of the self be understood in reference to individuals' goals and aspirations, such as through personal strategies for managing stress, attaining a promotion and acquiring useful qualifications. Moreover, Knights and McCabe discuss the role of "teamworking" as a workplace technology anchored in managerial practices of governing at a distance, as opposed to direct control. In order to understand how management seeks to encourage workers' identification with organizational goals, the authors conceptualize power as "transform[ing] individuals into subjects that secure their own meaning, identity and reality through identifying with or resisting the discursive practices that power evokes" (Knights and McCabe, 2003, 1593).

Other authors have suggested the increasing role of agents' "voice" – that is, their input, views and ideas – as an emerging feature of some call centre work. Scholars such as McDonnell et al. (2014) are interested in what is at stake in managerial efforts to achieve greater agent involvement in workplace decisions. With respect to the constitution of workplace authority, there is considerable debate about whether agents' participation amounts to substantive influence, or whether it "in effect, is participation without authority" (McDonnell et al., 2014, 216). Within the critical management literature, the notion of "voice" is approached as a managerial device with which to blur conventionally structured hierarchies and valorize the input of those traditionally subordinated.

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15 Interestingly, Taylor – who previously seemed a critic of Foucault's relevance to the study of work and call centre labour – now appears to favour a Foucauldian perspective. In conjunction with McKinlay (a Foucauldian human resources scholar), Taylor provides an illuminating clarification of the origin of the term "governmentality". The authors point out that it was coined by Roland Barthes in 1957 to refer to how formerly politically understood questions of government came to be reconsidered as "neutral" matters of efficient administration. This proved a "profound political act", effacing the operation of power and depicting government as a purely technical operation (McKinlay and Taylor, 2014, 2–3).

Karlsen and Villadsen (2008) consider the notion of "dialogue" as a governmental technology geared towards the "liberation" of employees' energy, creativity and ideas. The authors suggest that expertise – in the shape of management, counsellors and consultants – is itself being increasingly problematized as inclined to stifle, rather than correct, the capacities of those subjected to its gaze. They summarize this view as: "Management should not be exercised in an instructive, controlling or disciplinary fashion but rather 'facilitate' the creative energies of autonomous teams and 'passionate', self-supervising employees" (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008, 346).

In a similar vein, Fleming and Sturdy (2010) point to the idea of "just being yourself" as an instrumental means of enhancing call centre agents' performance. Rather than indicating a reduction in the intensity of control, this refers to managerial practices that are based on distracting agents through a celebration of individualism. The "hard" measures that are core to the labour process – such as targets, time logged-in and time per call – are intended to be overshadowed by exhortations to have fun, play games, fool about and express oneself while working (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010, 180). Elsewhere, Fleming extends this line of interest with reference to changes in organizational and managerial discourses in general, drawing upon the concept of bio-power to examine transformations in the contemporary workplace. Contrary to the strict demarcation of the areas of work and non-work central to the "Fordist mentality", he highlights that forms of contemporary management try to counter the sense of "inauthenticity" that workers feel when one's "true me" is negated by workplace conformity (Fleming, 2013, 879). In order to engender greater identification with an organization, he suggests that "Liberation Management" instead encourages workers to talk to their colleagues about "who they are" outside work (Fleming, 2013, 879), thus enabling the workers' "authentic" self to enter the workplace.

These lines of empirical enquiry are suggestive of how larger questions of organizational adaptability might intersect with demands on individuals to harness their inner resources as a means of self-management and alignment with company goals. The theoretical framing offered by governmentality and

disciplinary conceptualizations of power suggests a means with which to analyse the interconnections and tensions between "technologies of domination" and "technologies of the self" – or what Lemke (2000, 50) identifies as the "link" between the two. This presents a fruitful means of considering how, rather than being simply dehumanizing or dispiriting, agents' centrality within the call centre labour process might encompass forms of acting on the self. As a lens on managerial discourses, it also offers an explanatory basis on which to approach how companies seek to restrict and mitigate expressions of negativity or frustration in the workplace, and thus mould their agents as subjects.

2.5 Studying agent experiences and managerial strategies of control: a conceptual framework

In order to underline the relevance of a series of key concepts for the study of call centre labour in Kenya, the following section outlines the conceptual framework for this study. The framework of "workplace selves" is presented as a fruitful lens through which to examine the nature and operation of workplace control within Kenyan call centre working environments. This discussion is then followed by the presentation of the primary research question for the study.

In examining demands on workers' characteristics, attributes and capacities, the study is informed by an empirical interest in the ways in which agents are problematized by the managerial strategies that envelop them. At one level, **problematization** refers to what management wants call centre agents to be and to do, and how forms of control reflect a managerial endeavour to produce particular types of workers. By seeking to analyse the means of control, the study draws upon a conceptualization of agents as **subjects** who are assessed by their companies according to a logic of **normalization**, encompassing normative notions and standards of "correct" conduct. Agents' experiences are understood to relate to companies' "biopolitical" (Rabinow and Rose, 2006, Foucault, 2001b, 216–17) strategies of overseeing workforces – both as a collectivity and as individuals. This suggests a focus on companies' efforts to approach areas of agents' on-call and off-call

behaviour as key sites of managerial monitoring and regulation. Moreover, it invites analysis of the specific ways in which companies seek to understand agents' performance through the use of techniques of observation and the dissemination of expectations embedded within norms pertaining to what is required by the work. These techniques can be regarded as comprising a means of "panoptic" **visibility and surveillance** (Foucault, 1979, 207), enabling the production of qualitative and quantitative forms of knowledge about workplace performance.

In view of the analytical framing of agents as subjects, the study conceptualizes managerial strategies as oriented towards producing and integrating a type of "**self**" (Foucault, 1988) into the labour process, which comprises the locus of control. It treats the notion of the self as a composite of agents' **subjectivities**. This leads to an empirical concern with the role of agents' personalities, emotions and decision-making in the provision of consistent in-bound (answering calls) and out-bound (making calls) services. Subjectivities consist of aspects of the "self" – that is, the capacities, attributes, dispositions and motivations that agents are required to demonstrate and which companies seek to record and make visible.

The term "self" thus offers a conceptual basis on which to analyse and articulate the overall type of agent sought by companies. Based on the "forms of person, self and identity presupposed by different practices of government" (Dean, 1999, 43), the "self" refers to how a call centre agent is constituted as an idealized workplace subject. This is not to suggest, however, that the manner in which agents are problematized ought to be regarded as straightforwardly linear, static or based on the seamless transmission of managerial commands. The study draws upon the notion of "**technologies of the self**" (Foucault, 1988) as a means of examining how agents interpret company ideals and respond to efforts to shape their conduct. It conceptualizes agents as active participants in their "**subjectification**" – rather than being subjects of totalizing control, agents are regulated and regulate themselves around norms, standards and ideals of behaviour. Agents are understood to engage in practices of self-constitution and self-regulation in accordance with their own understandings and motivations

towards what they ought to be. Because of this, the study approaches **workplace selves** as plural, in view of the potential for alternative, perhaps contested, articulations of demands of call centre agents. Consequently, the analytical task is to focus on how ideals relate to workplace practices, such as in relation to the degree of autonomy afforded to agents, agents' participation in assessments of their work, and the working conditions underpinning call centre labour.

By encouraging agents' identification with sanctioned behavioural norms, control can be understood to reflect forms of disciplinary power that are based on modes of recording, ordering and categorizing. At the same time, understanding the management of agents as a "problem" also invites attention to other dimensions of power. Without necessarily displacing the disciplinary basis of control, the use of a Foucauldian approach enables an analysis of the role of alternative formulations of workplace power relations that may sit alongside the logic of normalization – whether as a complement or in tension. For example, conceptualizing instances of "sovereign" power as being comprised of subjugation, instruction and status creates scope to examine how agents may be subject to straightforwardly direct forms of control. Conversely, the notion of **government** "at a distance" (Rose, 1999b, 49) grants analytical space to an examination of the role of relatively more light-touch, subtle forms of control.

In the light of the scope for alternative formulations of workplace power relations, the second principal component of the study relates to *why* call centre agents are managed according to particular logics of control. Within a Foucauldian framing, the concept of problematization is enriched by a focus on the "**rationality**" (Gordon, 1991) of governance – namely, how forms of thinking about what agents ought to be are embedded within company programmes for the guidance and reform of conduct (Dean, 1999, 27). This approach enables an examination of why companies seek to assess their agents in specific ways, as part of instrumental strategies of enhancing performance. It also opens up analytical space to consider how areas of agents' conduct may be anchored in practices of self-enhancement and "**responsibilization**" (Rose, 1999b, 74),

based on encouraging agents to identify activities and capacities on which to improve and the partial retreat of conventionally understood expertise as a result. This invites attention to how companies' objectives align with or awaken individual agents' motivations around self-constitution. It also offers scope to advance an enriched understanding of why call centre work might not be depicted in overwhelmingly negative terms by its participants, despite the repetitive, highly monitored nature of the labour process.

The concepts discussed so far suggest a perspective that is sensitive to the key aspects of workers' experiences explored by the literature on interactive service work, international outsourcing and call centre labour. In the light of this, a multidimensional understanding of agents' selves and the nature of workplace control is needed. An initial series of overlapping constructs has been derived from this discussion. These are:

1) **the secure self**, which encompasses the security of agents' job roles. This construct is integrated in the light of scholarly concerns (such as Kalleberg, 2009) with the implications of short-term and temporary forms of work.

2) **the equal self**, which refers to how agents' status is conceived within workplace hierarchies. This pertains to whether management seeks to minimize or reinforce the notion that agents' status is straightforwardly low, as reflected in managerial concerns with who is charged with speaking in the workplace (following the suggestions of scholars such as Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008).

3) **the empowered self**, which encompasses how agents' autonomy and input can be understood to enhance service quality. This construct stems from observations of the emergence of forms of management based on soliciting employees' input and seeking to de-emphasize the direct influence of superiors (such as McKinlay and Taylor, 2014).

4) **the aspirational self**, which relates to agents' sense of their own self-development – in the form of attributes and capacities acquired – as a result of undertaking call centre work. In the light of suggestions that workers are to regard themselves as "companies of one" (such as Binkley, 2009, 62), this

construct invites attention to agents' motivations for undertaking call centre work.

5) **the responsible self**, which considers the extent to which agents are encouraged to take ownership of aspects of their work, rather than simply follow managerial instructions. The construct derives from scholarly debates centring on understandings of workers as "actively responsible" (such as Fraser, 2003, 168).

Taking the preceding dimensions as the conceptual basis, the overall theoretically informed research question that underpins this study is:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

On one level, this question is designed to encourage an analysis of how companies strive to control particular types of agents. At the same time, however, the question also encourages a focus on how call centre agents respond to the managerial control to which they are subjected. In this regard, the novel feature of my study stems from the attention granted both to how the control of agents is conceptualized by companies and how agents respond to such managerial strategies.

With this conceptual framework in place, the study offers the opportunity to examine the expansion of call centre work in the case of Kenya. The research design and methodology for the study are elaborated in chapter 3, "Researching experiences of work and workplace control". However, before completing chapter 2, it is important to discuss alternative theoretical approaches. This enables a clarification of the choice of the conceptual framework of "workplace selves" for the study and is presented in section 2.6.

2.6 Pathways not followed

Prior to formulating the ultimate conceptual apparatus for this study, I considered a number of other theoretical approaches to the study of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market. Although certain approaches offered promising avenues of analysis and empirical insight, as discussed earlier in this chapter, I developed the framework "workplace selves" as a means of maintaining conceptual unity and analytical consistency in relation to the range of issues that comprise the focus of the project.

As previously discussed, the neo-Marxist immaterial labour tradition (e.g., Lazzarato, 1996) offered a stimulating basis with which to examine the potential novelty of the subjectivities required by call centre work. Nonetheless, the tradition's conceptual orientation appeared limited as a lens on the fluidity of workplace power relations and the interconnections between management's endeavour to attain control and agents' own motivations while at work. Arguably, one area of conceptual weakness relates to the tradition's tendency to posit inexorably conflictual relations between capital and labour, at the expense of a nuanced analysis. Perhaps especially in an outsourcing context, the inclination might be to perceive "flexible" work as exploitative in absolute terms and as anathema to "autonomy" and "empowerment" in the workplace, rather than opening up questions of how practices of "autonomy" might be connected to managerial strategies. In a similar vein, the Labour Process Theory-based perspective (as exemplified by Taylor and Bain, 1999) could be understood to approach power as possessed by management and projected downwards onto the workforce. As a consequence, managerial strategies of control might be perceived to entail the straightforward direction of agents as subjugated, machine-like cogs. Certainly, it is important to consider the implications of agents' "alienation", "deskilling" and the "co-option of workers' craft" implicit within the analyses advanced by this tradition. However, it seems analytically more fruitful to draw upon a conceptualization that is sensitive to the potential for enthusiasm towards call centre work on the part of agents, and to ask how this enthusiasm might reflect agents' own ambitions and sense of self.

Approaching the creation of the BPO sector as a question of "codified" and "tacit" knowledge (Balconi, 2002, 360, Cohendet and Meyer-Krahmer, 2001, 1564) suggested a further analytical possibility for the study. Spanning diverse disciplines such as organization studies, innovation management and economic geography, this field's focus on "knowledge management" is broad-ranging and expansive. For instance, where certain scholars consider the "spatial clustering of economic activity" and the geographic mobility of knowledge (Bathelt et al., 2004), others seek to understand how codified and tacit knowledge compare in relation to increasing organizational efficiency (Edmondson et al., 2003).

Given the financial difficulties faced by Kenya's BPO companies (see chapter 4, section 4.2), focusing on codified/tacit knowledge could have offered the potential to consider how the capacity to access and fulfil contracts for international clients might relate to more than the mere transferral of particular processes from one workforce to another. This perspective offered the possibility of conceptualizing the skills and knowledge required by outsourced call centre work as reliant on workers' "tacit" understandings. This would encompass the notion that there are subtleties and nuances – such as cultural similarities or shared understandings between customers and agents – inherent in undertaking call centre work that are misunderstood or that do not feature within mainstream conceptualizations of managerial approaches to outsourced working environments. However, although this orientation suggested an instructive basis on which to problematize understandings of the fulfilment of international service work contracts, it seemed insufficiently concerned with worker self-management to support an expansive analysis of the implications of this aspect of the establishing of call centre work in Kenya. Moreover, owing to my concern with workplace power relations, focusing on "codified" and "tacit" knowledge would have suggested a preoccupation with agent capacities in the workplace, limiting the scope to consider how these might be interrelated with companies' overall strategies of control and the rationalities that underpin them.

In suggesting important questions about the nature of Kenya's expansion into the international voice services market, the use of a post-colonial lens also offered the possibility of generating illuminating insights. Mirchandani's study

(2004), for example, provides a stimulating discussion of how Indian call centre agents negotiate the practices of "scripting, synchronicity and location masking" implicated in transnational work. Firstly, this lens offered the potential for a deep questioning of the discourses implicit within the BPO initiative on what "development" and "success" might constitute. Equally, a consideration of the role of the "neutral accent" required for English-language voice work might have opened up a number of lines of analysis in relation to the creation and production of workplace attributes deemed to be desirable for Northern customers. Moreover, as a counterweight to the arguably "modernizing" intent behind the expansion into interactive service work, a post-colonial lens (as articulated, for instance, by Shome (2006), Basi (2009) and Carrillo Rowe et al. (2013)) could support a robust critique of the potential for new relations of dependency with the global North, based on providing low-cost services and the importation of workplace technologies, expertise and managerial knowledge. While this has a conceptual affinity with a Foucauldian lens, drawing upon a post-colonial theorization nonetheless seemed to treat the project of creating a call centre sector in Kenya as a somewhat singular or homogenous event. In view of the financial and commercial difficulties experienced by BPO companies in Kenya, it was important in my study to focus on the BPO sector as an incomplete project, rather than to treat the creation of the sector as eliciting a dramatic, all-encompassing shift in the requirements of Kenyan workers servicing the international economy. Since I wanted to undertake a comparative analysis of BPO and captive working environments, a post-colonial theorization would have guided the analysis of the corpus of data in ways that were not the core focus in this study.

2.7 Conclusion

For the purpose of exploring existing approaches to the study of call centre work, this chapter began by mapping the positions in the literature in relation to the contexts of work in the contemporary information age. It situated the practice of outsourcing within a history of subcontracting relationships, as part of the internationalization of service sector work.

Having noted the multiple questions raised by critical strands of the literature on outsourced labour, such as the rise of "precarious" work, the distinct perspectives on the call centre labour process proffered by critically inclined scholars were presented, underlining the predominance of the Labour Process Theory-based understanding of call centre work. It was suggested, however, that the study of BPO and captive call centres in Kenya can be fruitfully analysed using a Foucauldian lens on workplace power relations. The main features of a theorization of forms of disciplinary power were highlighted, along with the relevance of Foucault's later work on governmentality, leading to a discussion of how understandings of the operation of power at a distance might facilitate the analysis of alternative managerial techniques.

The conceptual apparatus informing the study was then elaborated. In order to examine the key themes in the literature, such as "flexibility", "empowerment" and "autonomy", it was suggested that conceptualizing the management of call centre agents in Kenya as an issue of problematization offered the potential to generate rich insights into the nature of workplace control. In response to this focus, the concepts of normalization, visibility, surveillance and subjectivities were presented as key tools with which to analyse what companies want their agents to be and to do in the endeavour to regulate conduct in the workplace.

In the light of the scope for alternative power relations beyond a disciplinary formulation, the concept of governmentality was proposed in order to focus on less direct forms of regulating conduct. As an extension of the notion of problematization, this second principal component of the study facilitates an analysis of why call centre agents are managed in particular ways by examining the rationalities that underpin the reform of conduct. The concept of

subjectification was presented as a lens through which to consider how company efforts to mould idealized workplace subjects may posit agents as active participants in practices of reform. As a means of understanding how agents' own sense of what they ought to be might intersect with company ideals, the term "technologies of the self" was proposed to consider agents' personal goals and the practices of self-assessment and self-management in which they engage as part of call centre work.

In response to critical themes in the literature, the discussion continued by setting out the conceptual framework of "workplace selves". Rooted in a Foucauldian-influenced understanding of workplace control, the framework incorporates a series of overlapping constructs geared towards developing rich understandings of agents' experiences of call centre work and companies' managerial strategies. In the light of the understanding of call centre agents as subjects, each of the constructs was identified to facilitate an analytical orientation towards how particular types of agents are considered desirable by management and by agents themselves (see section 2.5). This framework is used to foreground the exploration of the overall research question for this study, which pertains to how the endeavour to control agents influences the workplace practices implicated in call centre labour in Kenya.

With the conceptual framework and the overarching research question in place, the research design and the overall methodology for this study are outlined in chapter 3.

3 Researching experiences of work and workplace control

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the overall methodological approach and the research design for this research. As explained in chapter 2, the overall research question for the study is:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

The research problem and the elements to be investigated are further explored in this chapter, leading to a discussion of how I have sought to address the study's research question with reference to the research design and choice of methods. The relationship between these methods, the selection of research sites, my access to these sites and the strategy with which data was acquired are discussed. This includes a consideration of the ethical dimensions of the project, as well as the potential implications for the acquisition of data of my status as a British researcher in Nairobi. I also provide a description of my overall corpus of data and how I analysed the data. This includes a discussion of the relationship between the concepts employed in the conceptual framework, the methods and the empirical material acquired, and the basis on which empirical insights have been generated.

3.2 Research problem: voice services, call centres and control

In this section, a further elaboration of the central research question for the study is undertaken. This includes discussion of the importance of Kenya's experience of BPO (business process outsourcing) call centre work as a salient case study within the African continent, as well as the epistemological considerations resulting from the focus on this question. The section continues by outlining the two periods of fieldwork during which I undertook my research. It then concludes by discussing the analytical insights offered by drawing on

several dimensions that have been employed in empirical studies of "wellbeing", which provide a lens through which to analyse the BPO sector's associations with "development" – that is, the broader environment within which BPO was introduced.

3.2.1 Elaborating the study's overarching research question

Arising from a broad interest in the significance of call centre work in Kenya, in my study I opted to focus on worker experiences and managerial strategies of workplace control. These concerns led me to consider how call centre agents – those making and receiving calls – are problematized as key participants in a customer-oriented labour process. This invites a focus on how elements of agents' selves, performance and day-to-day practices are targeted by companies' monitoring, evaluation and surveillance tools. This encompasses attention to the processes by which agents are made and make themselves into subjects of organizational control, and the tensions that may exist between the managerial obligation to engender limited forms of creativity on the part of agents and the regulation of consistent conduct and outputs.

As indicated, the overarching question that is addressed in this study is:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

Drawing upon the conceptual framework in chapter 2, working practices will be understood as being associated empirically with key aspects of call centre work. The attention to these aspects of call centre work provides a means of operationalizing the key concepts underpinning the study. Empirically, focusing on working practices encompasses how management conceptualizes call centre work and what role workers' personal attributes and skills play in the provision of call centre services. It also encompasses how forms of workplace monitoring, such as individualized statistics, operate as a record of work. In turn, focusing on working practices calls for attention to how workers respond to the recording of their activities, and how such responses might condition workers' attitudes towards call centre work.

Stemming from this understanding of working practices, several sub-questions are addressed in the study that are designed to enable a focus on the multiple components of the overarching research question. In the light of hopes that BPO would improve livelihoods in Kenya, the first sub-question is:

- How has the creation of the BPO call centre sector contributed to "development" in Kenya?

This pertains to the association of the BPO sector with "development" (see sections 3.2.5 and 3.5.1) and comprises the focus of the analysis undertaken in chapter 4.

The second sub-question is:

- What type of agent do companies seek to manage?

The third sub-question is:

- What is the "rationality" underpinning managerial approaches to agents' job roles?

These two questions pertain to the forms of workplace control implicated in call centre work in Kenya (see sections 3.5.2 and 3.5.3) and comprise the focus of the analysis presented in chapters 5 and 6.

3.2.2 Repositioning Africa's relationship to the world?: Kenya as a case study

The empirical interest in this study lies in the expansion of call centre work in Kenya and the implications for those employed in voice service roles within an emergent interactive service sector. As discussed in chapter 1, the choice of Kenya is partly in response to the notion that creating an international BPO (business process outsourcing) sector would contribute towards "development". Though theoretically the study is informed by the Foucauldian-influenced framework of "workplace selves", the association of BPO with "development" suggests other important considerations to which the study must be sensitive (which are discussed in greater detail in section 3.2.5). In this respect, I considered Kenya to offer the opportunity to provide illuminating insights into

the implications of the expansion of interactive service sector work within African countries and the consequences for workers employed in such job roles.

Centring almost exclusively on Kenya's capital, Nairobi, the establishing of call centre work raises important questions about communication worker experiences in environments in which their voice and personality are put to work, in which elements of personal conduct and performance are subject to continuous forms of regulation, and in which power relations are rooted in sustaining service quality through the management of adaptable workforces. This encourages a focus on how to conceptualize and interrogate power relations and managerial strategies within digitally mediated workplaces in Nairobi, as well as offering a means of considering how such relations might be different to configurations of power found within the relatively more established agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

In my study, I regarded Kenya as an important case study for a number of reasons. The Kenyan government, as part of its Vision 2030 initiative, put an emphasis on the expansion of an internationally oriented BPO sector as one of "six priority sectors" (Government of Kenya, 2007, 30) designed to stimulate economic growth and to create jobs. While not overtly packaged as a "poverty alleviation" initiative, the intention behind BPO was to tackle the lack of formal sector job opportunities for young Kenyans. As discussed in chapter 1, following the success of one or two BPO companies in Nairobi, a particular type of profiling of Kenyan workers, and the recommendations of international consultancies, call centres were identified as the flagship form of work for the sector. Establishing a BPO sector was said to be greatly enhanced with the installation of four undersea fibre-optic cables – known as TEAMS, EASSy, SEACOM and LION2 (Gwaro et al., 2013) – which were intended to dramatically increase Kenya's bandwidth capacity and to decrease costs (Bryce et al., 2011, 18).

Kenya's employment creation initiative may have implications for other African countries seeking to expand into the international services market, and an analysis of its record offers an opportunity to further the theorization of

interactive service sector work within African contexts. In view of the potential significance of Kenya's efforts in relation to international BPO work, there is an opportunity to ask what lessons might be learned from the country's plans to create new jobs, to recruit and retain workers, and to encourage international companies to supply work. The analysis may suggest ways in which Kenya's BPO initiative points to a potential reconfiguration of its position – and reputation – within the global political economy as an exporter of commercial services. Moreover, given the parallel rise in "captive"[16] call centres within Nairobi's labour market, there is also scope to examine how workplace control and the nature of the labour process differ between outsourced and non-outsourced workplaces.

3.2.3 Epistemological considerations

Owing to my interest in the consequences of the expansion of Kenya's call centre sector, the study is guided by the theoretical orientation of my specific conceptual framework, which I refer to as a conceptualization of "workplace selves".

The use of this framework presents epistemological challenges in relation to the use of research data and the study's methodological choices. Rather than a form of enlightening, detached lens, Foucault argued that social science research is itself an element of existing power relations and their reproduction. This has implications for the collection and interpretation of data in this study. Foucault underlined that though we may study social phenomena with a notion of improving research participants' lives in some way, in identifying supposed deficiencies or types of problems we create new "regimes of truth". These are based on assertions of our own knowledge as experts and subjecting individuals and groups to new understandings of deprivation and deficiency

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16 The term "captive" refers to a call centre that is run within a company, rather than outsourced to another provider. This can indicate an operation that is established within a company in a domestic economy, or an operation that is "offshored" and set up elsewhere in the world, without being outsourced.

(i.e., what they are or are not, or what they do or do not have). The knowledge that results can undergird new forms of regulation of subjects' conduct. Foucault therefore argued that the focus should be on an interrogation of the social, historical and power processes by which subjects are constituted. Rather than an interpretive search for essences or underlying hidden meanings, this entails treating data as the starting point for investigating emerging patterns of ideas.

Drawing on a Foucauldian-inspired framing is intended to enable the examination of the expansion of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market. Rather than presupposing "any immediate polemical implication" (Gordon, 1991, 7), my approach provides scope for a potentially rich understanding of workplace power relations. In approaching research participants as "subjects" of power relations, the framework of "workplace selves" offers the potential to extend the analytical gaze beyond evaluations of what research participants are or are not, or what they do or do not value – or, expressed differently, to ask why they feel the way that they do about call centre work. This provides scope to generate insights into how the interconnections between technologies of the self, as "individuals' own ideals", and technologies of subjectivities underpin forms of "subjectification" (Yates and Hiles, 2010, 62) in the workplace – or, as Hook (2007, 246) writes, how forms of subjectification "involve the operation of a type of power that connects the norms of authorities to the motivating ideals we have of ourselves". The aim of the study is to provide analytical insights that are sensitive to larger conditions (such as companies' own struggles to establish themselves in the face of unpromising circumstances) without being blind to, or an apologist for, instances of potentially unsavoury relations. The goal is to understand how workplace control works not only "on" agents (by directing them), but also "through" them (in stimulating, creating and aligning with their own aspirations).

A further consideration, which is important for my study but not specific to it, concerns the applicability of theories principally devised within Western academic settings. My conceptual framework cannot be applied to the Kenyan context as a seamless explanatory grid. This is because the framework of "workplace selves" is rooted in examining the specificity of power relations

within a particular setting. While it invites attention to particular areas of empirical concern, the framework is not intended to presuppose a simple transferral of a conceptual apparatus from one research context to another. With respect to the analysis of control, the challenge in this study is to examine how service sector workplace understandings and practices originating elsewhere in the world might be adapted and transformed in Kenya – by companies and by their workers – rather than being simply imported or transmitted.

3.2.4 Fieldwork and familiarization

In order to generate data with which to address the research question, I was primarily concerned with capturing the experiences of a sample of call centre agents with varying degrees of experience of BPO and "captive" work. I was also interested in integrating the perspectives of a number of research participants working within other roles, particularly those with experience as team leaders (TLs) and quality analysts (QAs), as well as senior members of staff and other stakeholders within the call centre sector and the Kenyan government.

My research took place in Nairobi over two separate stages. The first phase of fieldwork represented an initial period of qualitative enquiry with which to establish research contacts and recruit participants. It also enabled me to explore the feasibility of the proposed research design (as suggested by Denscombe (1998, 111)), and to refine the focus of the study's overarching research question by enabling greater reflection on the requirements of the call centre labour process (as part of an "emergent design", as outlined by Mabry (2008, 216)). This phase spanned September and October of 2012, during which time I focused on call centres within the BPO sector, establishing contact with individuals and companies interested in participating in my study and undertaking a number of interviews with currently and previously employed members of the BPO workforce. On the strength of a preliminary analysis of the data acquired and having gained a greater understanding of the challenges of establishing the BPO sector, I subsequently elected to broaden my study to

include captive call centres in order to undertake a comparative analysis of key differences between working conditions and workers' experiences within the two components of the overall call centre sector.

As part of this initial phase of interviewing, I was able to arrange for a number of additional participants to be interviewed during the second period of fieldwork, following introductions from co-workers and associates. The second phase took place over the course of January to June 2013. Furthermore, in liaising with company officials, I negotiated visits to observe operations at a number of call centre working environments, which enabled me to record a series of ethnographic field notes germane to my study's research questions. During this second phase of fieldwork, I was also able to distribute copies of a questionnaire for agents within a number of companies.

3.2.5 Contextualizing the research in a developmental context

While the research design facilitates the operationalization of the conceptualization of "workplace selves", the choice of Kenya as the research site presents an important opportunity for an additional analytical focus. As a historically poor country within the global political economy, Kenya's creation of an internationally oriented outsourcing sector raised the issue of how BPO might contribute towards "development" – namely, how the country's, and its workers', prospects might improve in some way as a result of seeking to provide outsourced services. As mentioned in section 3.2.1, this issue is examined through reference to the sub-research question:

- How has the creation of the BPO call centre sector contributed to "development" in Kenya?

Arguably, this issue is especially pertinent in the light of the Kenyan government's notion that BPO – as a feature component of the "Vision 2030" initiative – offered considerable promise as an emergent provider of appealing employment opportunities for the country's young people. Given the potential for unattractive work suggested by the critically inclined literature on outsourcing (as discussed in section 2.2), the association of outsourced labour – predicated

on a high-volume, low-cost model – with "development" might seem misplaced.[17] Moreover, within the Kenyan labour market, observed patterns of casualization and informalization (e.g., Were (2011a) and Mitullah (2010)) could suggest the potential for negative consequences stemming from the creation of a sector based on intense downward pressure on workers' remuneration. Alternatively, the sector may present potential scope for transformation for workers initiated by new opportunities within the labour market and prompted by the creation of an internationally influenced sector – in terms of markets, company practices and cultures.

In the endeavour to be analytically sensitive to other illuminating aspects of Kenyan workers' experiences, the empirical study critically assesses the suggested association between BPO and "development". In order to undertake this assessment, three principal dimensions are articulated as a lens through which to examine participants' experiences. These are the "material", "relational" and "subjective" dimensions. These dimensions are taken from the literature on "wellbeing", which encourages research based on more than mere material understandings of human development (McGregor and Sumner, 2010, 105). This work is rooted in a reflexive and iterative focus on the ways in which research participants articulate and give meaning to their experiences. It aims to open up a space in which the policy and research interventions leveraged in ostensible support of improving livelihoods can demonstrate greater sensitivity to people's own voices, perspectives, ideas and articulations – in short, the meanings attached to their lives and actions. It is interested in objectively

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17 Owing to the predominance of the idea of offshoring in public discussions and criticisms of sending jobs away from a country of origin, it should also be noted that outsourcing may be politically contentious and seen as disloyal or unpatriotic within client countries, leading to pressure to move services back "on-shore". Such a sentiment is exemplified by US President Barack Obama's criticism of companies in the United States that send work abroad during his 2012 State of the Union address. For countries providing outsourced services, this illustrates a further challenge to the notion that establishing an internationally oriented outsourcing could support "development".

verifiable concepts of livelihoods (measuring what people do and do not have), in personal subjective understandings (individuals' personal experiences and ideas), in how understandings of wellbeing are socially constructed and in how meanings, values and ideas can be shared inter-subjectively. A focus on these dimensions suggests attention to: 1) what a person has (material); 2) what the person can do with what they have (relational); and 3) how the person thinks about what they have and can do (subjective) (McGregor, 2010, 317).[18]

In encouraging a focus on what participants value and do not value about their experiences, these dimensions enable me to consider the relationship between call centre work and "development" from the perspectives of Kenya's BPO call centre agents, instead of presupposing what the term might mean to them or relying substantially on the viewpoints of "experts", such as senior company or government officials. These dimensions are further elaborated in section 3.5.2, as part of the discussion of the analytical strategy for the study.

3.3 A mixed methodological approach to studying work

This section begins by outlining the research design for the project and the use of a multi-method approach. The initial sub-sections explain the choice of individual methods, before continuing with a discussion of how these methods were used in combination in the study.

3.3.1 Overview of research design and choice of methods

For the purposes of acquiring an extensive corpus of data, a multi-method research design integrating qualitative and quantitative methods was developed. In the light of the focus on workplace experiences, the primary

18 It should be noted that in this work, the "subjective" aspect of experience differs from the conceptualization of "subjectivities" in a Foucauldian approach. While the former implies an orientation towards validating participants' perspectives on how they feel about their circumstances, the latter considers "subjectivities" to be key to the analysis of how producing particular types of subjects represents a salient feature of organizational control.

research method was semi-structured interviewing, which I used as a means of capturing research participants' perceptions of what is required by call centre work, of the type of agent sought by companies, and of what might represent "success" in the workplace.

Alongside my focus on how participants speak about call centre work, I also undertook visits to BPO and captive call centre operations floors. This enabled me to observe workplace operations first-hand and to produce ethnographic field notes as a complementary source of data and a secondary means of qualitative enquiry. The intention was to use this method to yield substantive insights into day-to-day practices of call centre work and to explore how company differences in relation to size, sector and atmosphere might condition workplace experiences. In order to incorporate the views of an extensive sample of agents and to build upon ideas resulting from observation, the research design also included a questionnaire. The questionnaire was answered by agents working at call centres of varying sizes, and was distributed as a means of attaining quantitative data with which to generate complementary and alternative insights to those resulting from the analysis of the project's qualitative data. In the following sub-sections, the role of each of these methods is described in greater depth.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

The use of semi-structured interviewing as the main research method in this project reflected a primary concern with participant experiences and perceptions of call centre work. As an established approach to qualitative inquiry, the method represented a fruitful means of eliciting copious written data for analysis (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, 486), while enabling a focus on participants' own understandings of their actions and motivations by generating "precise and substantial descriptions" (Kvale, 2007, 5). As a key approach within qualitative research, interviewing stems from an interpretivist epistemological position, with the emphasis on producing understandings and analyses of the social world that derive from the interpretations offered by research participants (Bryman, 2012, 266). Given my intention to focus on the perspectives of call centre

agents, the method served as an in-depth means of engagement with which to capture descriptions of participants' emotions, perceptions and feelings (Denscombe, 1998, 111). Complemented by the additional methods, I regarded semi-structured interviewing as essential for acquiring data that would privilege participants' own understandings of their "lived daily world" (Kvale, 2007, 10) and that would serve as a basis on which to analyse specific processes of workplace "subjectification" (as discussed in chapter 2, sections 2.4 and 2.5).

In research contexts in which one seeks a degree of openness with which to respond to participants' unexpected revelations and surprising reflections, semi-structured interviewing offers practical adaptability towards new avenues of inquiry (Guest et al., 2012, 13), as well as the means to generate "great richness of material" where a researcher demonstrates sensitivity towards fruitful cues (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, 487). This was both a methodological and an ethical issue in my study since the ability to interview rests in large measure on creating "a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk" (Kvale, 2007, 8) and where the exchange is a "comfortable, conversational one" (Ruane, 2005, 147). Given the need to establish a quick sense of rapport with respondents and to minimize the scope for distrust, this adaptability enabled me to offer "considerable latitude" (Ruane, 2005, 149) to participants who would be likely to value the opportunity to elaborate on their views when speaking, rather than adhering to an overly rigid structure of questioning (Denscombe, 1998, 113). It also granted me the option of speaking more expansively in instances where it seemed necessary to provide further clarification and to allay fears stemming from participants' misunderstandings about the nature of the questions asked. Furthermore, I found the capacity to be adaptable important when interviewing senior members of staff and key stakeholders, as it was often appropriate to speak in a manner that demonstrated my existing understanding of the Kenyan call centre sector, thus serving to establish my credentials as a relatively knowledgeable figure.

While my interviews were "semi-structured", I drew upon interviewing as a purpose-led conversation anchored in a specific research agenda. The interviews were framed by reference to core areas of interest, yet unfixed with

respect to the order in which questions were posed and in allowing for follow-up questions specific to an individual interview. I identified two broad types of interviewee – "workers" and "non-workers" – and developed interview guides in accordance with these classifications (topic guides for which are included in appendices 1 and 2).

My core interest was in interviewing "workers", a classification that encompassed call centre agents, QAs (quality analysts) and TLs (team leaders). Agents constituted staff employed in sales and customer service roles entailing making and receiving calls. QAs were marginally more senior members of staff employed for the purposes of monitoring and evaluating agents' on-call work and offering qualitative feedback on recorded and on-call interactions with customers. TLs occupied a basic managerial role within an operations floor, organizing teams of between 10 to 50 agents to ensure that service levels were maintained. Depending on the workplace hierarchy, TLs were regarded by their companies as equivalent to QAs, or as marginally superior.

"Non-workers" pertained to a wider range of senior individuals, and interacting with such participants necessitated an additional degree of adaptability in relation to the type of questions posed. Non-workers comprised senior members of managerial staff, COOs (chief operating officers), investors, BPO sector body representatives, government officials and company owners. Given the different professional positions and statuses of these participants, it was necessary for me to tailor questions in a manner appropriate to individual areas of experience and expertise, rather than drawing upon the comparatively more standardized set of questions comprising interviews with "workers". I regarded interviews with "non-workers" as an essential means of capturing wider perspectives on the expansion of call centre work, providing the views of senior figures on what is required of those undertaking workplace roles and a broader context for Kenya's efforts to establish the BPO sector within the global and domestic economies.

The interview guides were first developed in anticipation of the initial visit to the field in September 2012. Their contents were subsequently refined in preparation for the main period of fieldwork, commencing January 2013. For workers, interview categories focused on: time worked in the call centre sector; educational background; level of training received at work; attitude to training; nature of motivation; the skills required by one's job; attitudes to surveillance; and the qualities required by workers. For non-workers, categories focused on: the qualities and skills required by workers; recruitment; level and purpose of training; monitoring of work quality; professional mobility; challenges associated with the creation of the BPO sector; and the evolution of the call centre sector in Nairobi. I interviewed a total of 60 participants, comprising 37 "workers" (22 agents, 10 TLs or shift leaders, 3 HR officials and 2 QAs) and 23 "non-workers" (6 senior staff or owners, 4 call centre managers, 4 account, service delivery or sales managers, 2 government representatives, 2 academics, 1 head of quality, 1 investor, 1 IT officer, 1 BPO sector consultant and 1 BPO sector body representative).[19]

When undertaking interviews, I primarily met with research participants in public places within Nairobi's central business district in order to encourage them to feel comfortable speaking with me. Given that in most cases I was meeting with participants for the first time, it seemed appropriate to interact in a relatively casual, demonstrably friendly manner to ensure that participants remained at ease and were not inclined to feel a gaze of examination. Alternatively, in certain instances it was necessary to undertake interviews at workplaces. While this might have given rise to reticence for workers towards relaying their experiences, it was common for management – aware that their employees would be speaking with me – to voluntarily point out that participants ought to be free to speak openly and to say, for example, "different things to what I tell you" (as stated by a BPO company owner, 21/01/2013).

Interviews were approximately one hour in length and were conducted in English. Interviews undertaken at participants' workplaces were an exception to

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19 The list of interviewees is included in appendix 7.

this, generally lasting between 25 to 30 minutes. While I was able to record a number of interviews and to produce transcripts, many participants expressed a preference for the exchanges not to be recorded. Equally, it was sometimes impractical to record an interview owing to the environment in which they took place, such as a workplace or government office. In instances when I could not record an interview, I took abbreviated notes during the exchange and expanded them immediately afterwards, before subsequently writing them up in full.

3.3.3 Participant observation at company workplaces

The use of participant observation was designed to allow access to working environments to view call centre workers in their everyday professional settings. It thus facilitated an ethnographic engagement and an understanding of the area of research enquiry, enabling me to avoid preconceptions and to aim to "preserve indigenous meanings" (Emerson et al., 2011, 12). Further to the use of participants' self-reported interview data, it was intended as a complementary method to enable greater empirical appreciation of day-to-day working conditions, activities, behaviours and experiences in the workplace. As Becker (1998, 46) argues: "Focusing on activities rather than people nudges you into an interest in change rather than stability, in ideas of process rather than structure".

Undertaking participant observation entailed gaining access to companies' operations floors. Other researchers of call centres suggest that those in managerial positions often regard external research with suspicion and are unwilling to host researchers. Despite this, I was able to negotiate access to several workplaces and found some, if far from all, managerial personnel to be receptive to the study – both as research participants and as gatekeepers of operations floors.

When observing operations, I asked to be introduced to members of staff by presenting myself in front of the group and describing my research project. I stated that I was a PhD student from the UK interested in experiences of call centre work in Kenya, and I endeavoured to make it clear that I would not be

observing anybody in particular or reporting back to management. Owing to the continuous level of activity in large call centres, it was not always possible to announce my presence to each member of staff. Nonetheless, the advantage of such activity was that my presence appeared to go unnoticed by workers busily engaged in speaking with customers and other workplace activities, thus preserving the "naturalness" of the observed environment. That being said, in the light of Emerson's (2011, 4) suggestion, it was not my intention to seek to prevent my presence from "contaminat[ing]" research sites. Instead, I was concerned that those observed should not feel distressed or unclear about my role, which I would have regarded as both unfair to them and likely to jeopardize the quality of data acquired.

The data took the form of field notes (samples of which are included as appendices 3, 4 and 5), which I took discreetly during observations to avoid making workers feel that their actions were being overseen in a prejudicial way. I then wrote up my field notes in full immediately after each company visit in order to produce "fresher, more detailed recollections" (Emerson et al., 2011, 49). Field notes were an important reference point as part of the iterative process of participant observation and for the study as a whole, and offered a key source to be read and re-read as I developed my "tacit understanding of meanings, events and contexts" (DeWalt et al., 1998, 271) over the course of the research.

In general, the person accompanying me to the operations floor assigned me a workspace among agents and granted me as much time as I wished to observe. Periods of observation ranged from one and a half hours to three hours. In order to attain a strong appreciation of workplace activities, where possible I visited companies on several occasions, which also enabled me to improve my skill as an observer as a result of gaining more practice (DeWalt et al., 1998, 266). Furthermore, I altered the times at which I visited companies, which allowed me to acquire enriched understandings of, for example, the implications of different shift times and of the atmosphere that characterizes undertaking call centre work late at night. In addition to observing agents, in

certain instances I was also able to attend company training sessions and to witness the work of quality analysts monitoring live calls.

3.3.4 Questionnaire

The use of a questionnaire represented an important method for capturing the profile, opinions and experiences of a wider tranche of the call centre workforce than that permitted by interviews alone. By targeting agents' responses, the questionnaire (which is included as appendix 6) was designed to enable interesting comparisons across a number of categories, offering scope to generate further insights into agents' experiences of call centre work and the perceptions of the characteristics, skills and qualities required by the sector among its numerically most significant workers.

The questionnaire design was based on the conceptual framework (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.5), involving the operationalization of specific concepts (which are detailed in table 1). In addition to demographic information, agents were asked basic questions about whether their work was in-bound or out-bound, the type of work that they undertook, and which sector their company worked within.

Concept	Link to conceptual framework (section 2.5)	Empirical interest
Workplace monitoring techniques	- This concept stems from the study's interest in forms of workplace "visibility", "surveillance" and attitudes to knowledge about performance among agents	- Is recording regarded as an "objective" representation of work performance? - Is monitoring considered helpful or unhelpful?
Autonomy	- This concept relates to agents' perceptions of whether "normalization" is predicated on simply conforming with company rules, or whether success at work is partly based on instances of "responsibilization" in which agents' offer their own comments on aspects of their performance	- Degree of freedom in job role
Job satisfaction	- This concept draws upon the	- Do agents enjoy

	notion of "technologies of the self" to examine what agents consider beneficial about call centre work	their work?
Agent attributes	- As examples of "subjectivities", this concept relates to agents' perceptions of the attributes considered preferable for call centre work	- What are the principal personal attributes required by call centre work?
Agent skills	- As examples of "subjectivities", this concept relates to agents' perceptions of the workplace capacities considered preferable for call centre work	- What are the principal skills required by call centre work?
Attaining attributes	- Stemming from the study's interest in how companies endeavour to monitor "normal" agents, this concept relates to how agents' personal attributes are worked upon and transformed	- How are agents' attributes developed, moulded and regulated?
Attaining skills	- Stemming from the study's interest in how companies endeavour to monitor "normal" agents, this concept relates to how agents' workplace capacities are worked upon and transformed	- How are agents' skills developed, moulded and regulated?
Purpose of training	- This concept invites attention to agents' understanding of the role of training in reforming workplace conduct and promoting ideals around agents' behaviour	- How is training understood?
Purpose of superiors' role	- As part of the study's focus on "visibility", this concept relates to agents' perception of the roles of QAs (quality analysts) and TLs (team leaders) in the workplace	- Understanding of the role of QAs and TLs in monitoring and regulating agents' conduct

Table 1: Empirical focus and links to conceptual framework

Respondents were asked to list the predominant skills, qualities and characteristics required by their work, the level of training received, the purpose of training, how their performance was assessed at work, and their attitude to this assessment. Owing to the concern with attitudes rather than precise numerical data, many of the variables used were ordinal, with respondents asked about the extent to which they agreed with particular descriptive statements, with a limited number of answer options available (Fowler, 2009, 101).

The questionnaire design was subject to numerous revisions based on prior testing and advice from individuals involved in the call centre sector during the initial period of fieldwork, which also included suggestions for the phrasing of questions for Kenyan English speakers. The intention was to ensure that questions would be intelligible for respondents, enabling the questionnaire to collect information relevant to answering the research questions in this study (i.e., ensuring that there would be "construct validity" (De Leeuw, 2008, 315)). In view of potential managerial suspicion, the questionnaire was designed to be "neutral" in tone and focused on the skills and qualities required by workers, rather than introducing terms suggestive of, for example, excessive surveillance or exploitation.

The questionnaire was designed to take approximately 15 minutes to complete so as to balance encouraging individuals to respond with the need to achieve sufficiently deep engagement. In order to acquire completed questionnaires, I requested that research contacts at individual companies arrange for the distribution of paper copies at their places of work, which I provided in advance. Those able to arrange distribution were often employed in relatively senior roles, and therefore had sufficient influence to arrange for agents to complete questionnaires within their companies. Nevertheless, I stressed to my contacts that respondents' participation was voluntary, which I also underscored on the questionnaire's front page. In small BPO call centres employing a low number of workers, the questionnaire was provided to each agent at the company. In larger call centre working environments, respondents were selected on the basis of my contacts' internal connections (such as their

responsibility for particular teams), which meant that the questionnaires were distributed among agents working on a specific shift. Once the copies were returned to me, I input respondents' answers into an online version of the questionnaire produced using Qualtrics software, prior to exporting the collated data for analysis using SPSS.

3.3.5 Combining research methods

In the light of the multi-method research design for the project, it is essential to consider the relationship between the study's three research methods – semi-structured interviewing, participant observation and the use of a questionnaire. Perhaps most strikingly, it could be argued that qualitative and quantitative methods stem from entirely separate epistemological orientations, and that combining them is therefore problematic. Broadly speaking, while the former seeks multiple viewpoints and situated, fluid and local meanings, the use of the latter might be said to be motivated by a search for universal and fixed research findings.

Although some scholars may regard qualitative and quantitative approaches as epistemologically opposed, others provide useful clarifications about the manner in which a multi-method research design can be configured. When a study primarily makes use of qualitative methods, Flick (2008, 103) notes that drawing upon quantitative data can aid in the generalization of qualitative results by offering "an additional check of their plausibility". Miles and Huberman argue that the suggestion of a irreconcilable division between qualitative and quantitative methods is misplaced. Instead, they (1994, 41) stress, one needs to consider whether a study aims to isolate "a few controlled variables", or whether it is based on a "systemic" approach in which the objective is to generate understandings of complex environments. The authors propose a research design in which a period of initial "exploratory fieldwork" is undertaken, followed by the use of "quantitative instrumentation, such as a questionnaire", before the completion of a substantive period of qualitative enquiry as a study's final stage (Miles and Huberman, 1994, 41–42).

In a discussion of Foucault's relational understanding of power, Silverman (1985, 88) underlines that analysing the implications of the discursive formation of subjects relies on favouring "what we can observe about the nature of certain practices and about their real effects", rather than seeking to isolate a singular motivation pursued by individuals considered to "possess" power. Arguably, this sentiment echoes Foucault's (1974, 523-24) own suggestions about approaching his materials and theorizations more as a "kind of tool-box" – geared towards the analysis of forms of governance specific to particular research contexts – than as a set of grand theories leading to orthodox, prescriptive readings of social phenomena.

The fact that my study is rooted in an analysis of how agents are problematized by their companies might be regarded as at odds with the potential rigidity implied by the use of questionnaire data. However, I regarded the use of quantitative data as important precisely because it offered scope to validate and refine the insights emerging from my qualitative data. Instead of predetermining questions, I designed my questionnaire following the first period of fieldwork so as to incorporate the reflections resulting from the initial round of interviewing, with the intention of using the questionnaire data to supplement the qualitative analysis. In other words, I did not treat the questionnaire results as self-evidently supportive of particular findings or as simply freestanding. Instead, I sought to ask how such results might extend, complement or complicate the value of findings generated elsewhere in the study.

In this regard, the purpose of using questionnaire data was to enhance the scale of the study by incorporating the views of a larger tranche of respondents. This did not, however, presuppose uncovering an uncomplicated "truth" about agents' experiences or identifying a straightforward set of cause-and-effect relationships or patterns. Rather, the goal was to enrich the insights into the role of workplace subjectivities and the constitution of call centre agents as subjects. This, I considered, would enable my analysis to disrupt and problematize potentially more simplistic understandings of the significance of call centre work in Kenya, whether based on the celebration of a putatively wholesome

"developmental" legacy or, alternatively, on impressions of the subjugation of exploited workers.

3.4 Acquiring data sources and practicalities of research

This section gives an overview of the strategy with which I recruited participants for the study, including an outline of the sampling and the overall amount of data acquired. This is followed by a consideration of my experience of the power relations involved in the practice of interviewing, the implications for my handling of the data acquired and the ethical dimensions of the study.

3.4.1 Recruiting participants

In order to recruit research participants and negotiate access to company workplaces, I made use of a number of approaches. In some instances, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to explain my research project to people with whom I met at social events or seminars at the University of Nairobi's Institute for Development Studies (IDS), who then introduced me to relevant contacts. This was often the case with respect to the aspects of the project related to BPO, especially in relation to gaining introductions to government officials and senior personnel. This allowed me to access important stakeholders in the BPO sector as interviewees.

I also reached potential interviewees through email and social networking. A small number of research contacts approached me via Twitter, while I was able to find and access other participants using the professional networking site LinkedIn and by emailing company staff. Following the completion of an interview, participants frequently volunteered to introduce me to other people likely to be valuable contributors to my study. I found this to be particularly useful as a means of both accessing additional participants and of establishing trust in being introduced by the person connecting me.

Where possible, I asked interviewees to introduce me to senior personnel so as to negotiate company visits. While this did not always prove successful, it led me to visit numerous operations floors and to arrange for the distribution of

the questionnaire. Equally, in many instances I was also able to ask interviewees to put me in touch with individuals who had experience of particular job roles (such as QAs, TLs or HR officials) or who had worked for a number of call centres (i.e., for multiple BPOs or within both BPO and captive roles). This enabled the collation of data from individuals and companies of a variety of characteristics and backgrounds, as discussed in the following sub-section.

3.4.2 Sampling strategy and data accumulation

I interviewed a total of 60 participants, comprising 37 "workers" (22 agents, 10 TLs or shift leaders, 3 HR officials and 2 QAs)[20] and 23 "non-workers" (6 senior staff or owners, 4 call centre managers, 4 account, service delivery or sales managers, 2 government representatives, 2 academics, 1 head of quality, 1 investor, 1 IT officer, 1 BPO sector consultant and 1 BPO sector body representative). Staff interviewed as part of the study originated from 18 different call centre operations in total (appendix 7 provides a record of the participants interviewed for the study).

The criteria for selection were based on a purposive sampling strategy with which I endeavoured to ensure that workers from numerous call centre companies were represented and to interview both those currently employed and those who had left their positions. With respect to call centre staff, I interviewed both female and male agents, and as far as possible tried to achieve variation in the level of experience participants had. I was also concerned with interviewing participants from small and large BPOs, as well as with interviewing those with experience at different types of captive call centre, such as companies operating within the banking, telecommunications and energy sectors.

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20 Certain participants had experience at more than one company and in more than one job role. When presenting the analysis in chapters 4, 5 and 6, some participants are referred to in more than one professional capacity, depending on the relevance of their job role.

In a bid to observe variations in working environments and workplace practices, I endeavoured to collate ethnographic data from different types of call centre.[21] I undertook observations at a total of eight call centre operations floors, five of which were located at BPOs and three at captives (one energy provider, one telecommunications company and one bank). The number of visits varied from one to three depending on whether I was able to negotiate subsequent visits. As mentioned, in instances when I was able to return to a company, I requested the opportunity to observe operations at a different time of day. In general, I found BPOs – especially small companies employing low numbers of agents – to be among the most receptive towards my visits, and captives to be less so (which was perhaps a reflection of the relative lack of official bureaucratic channels at BPOs and the comparative ease with which I was sometimes able to access influential senior staff). Nonetheless, a number of other BPOs were also unwilling to grant access to their operations floors.

The questionnaire was completed by 181 agents, working for eight companies. The intention was to strive for a balanced representation of BPO and captive company respondents to the questionnaire so as to identify potential differences between agents' experiences of working for the two types of operations. In view of this, the questionnaire was answered by agents working at three BPOs and at five captives (3 banks, 1 energy provider and 1 telecommunications company). Overall, the questionnaire achieved a response rate of 70.59 per cent, based on the return of 192 copies out of 272 distributed in total.

3.4.3 Reflexivity and ethical considerations

Given my motivation to generate insights into the views of participants experienced in Kenya's call centre sector, it is necessary to consider how the circumstances under which the data was acquired might have consequences for the ultimate conclusions. Perhaps most obviously, when undertaking the research it was essential to be cognizant of the potential implications of

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21 A record of the companies where I observed operations is provided in appendix 8.

interviewees' perceptions of my background, status and purpose. Inasmuch as I endeavoured to establish rapport with interviewees and to put them at ease, it is important to acknowledge the latently unequal power relations in place between interviewer and interviewee.

It might be argued that this is especially salient when undertaking research within countries in the global South. While Nairobi can be characterized as an open, outward-looking environment in which diverse groups of people have mixed historically, it was also a centrepiece of British colonial activities within East Africa. Many Kenyans maintain a deep awareness of their country's historical position as an imperial possession (and perhaps even a sense of being downtrodden or looked down upon). Though they may not be outwardly suspicious or antagonistic towards British people nowadays, as a British researcher – as well as a "*mzungu*" (white foreigner) – it was important to be aware of the scope for negative reactions or associations. When speaking about myself and my research, one way in which I tried to mitigate such associations was by saying that I was from the UK, rather than Great Britain or England. Conversely, it is also possible that my status as a foreign researcher from a Western university offered a degree of access to senior research participants and to company workplaces that would have been denied to Kenyan or East African researchers.

Given that participants might have been unaccustomed to social science researchers and inclined to be wary about speaking with me, there were also more general considerations related to the practice of interviewing. In view of this, I began each interview by explaining that participation was voluntary and that, if an interviewee subsequently decided against participating, the data acquired from the interview would not be used. I also underlined the confidential nature of the exchanges, and that contributions would be fully anonymized

during the writing-up stage of the research.[22] Equally, I emphasized that the questions being posed did not have "correct" answers, but that responses should instead stem from participants' own feedback.

Following Denscombe's (2007, 183) suggestions, I regarded such considerations as important ethical and methodological features of my research, which would be conducive to establishing researcher–participant trust. When interviewing, I found maintaining a demonstrably friendly manner to be a significant factor in eliciting responses from participants. With respect to the acquisition of quantitative data, I asked respondents to read an introductory page discussing the purpose of the research and the use of its results (Lavrakas, 2008, 133). This page also outlined the anonymous basis of respondents' participation.

On an analytical level, it is also important to consider how the manner of my interview data collection might have a bearing on the interpretation of the results and findings generated by the study. In a majority of cases it seemed that participants were very comfortable speaking with me, perhaps especially as interviews progressed and as participants' responses tended to become more expansive. In the light of this, it appeared that participants were inclined to offer sincere reflections on their experiences and views, rather than, for example, seeking to mislead me or offering a version of events that they perceived me to want to hear.

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22 In order to respect participants' privacy, throughout the study I have used pseudonyms. In view of the potential sensitivity around ethnicity and ethnic identity in Kenya, I have also avoided using names that suggest that a respondent belongs to a particular ethnic group. Instead, I use generic, non-Kenya specific names, which are in use in Kenya yet are not particular to the country, such as Doreen or Paul. Companies included in the study are also referred to under pseudonyms.

3.5 Analytical strategy

As part of the overall strategy for analysing the data, this section discusses the analytical phases and techniques employed for the purpose of addressing the research questions.

3.5.1 Examining the BPO sector

In order to examine the creation of BPO in Kenya, I undertook a thematic analysis of the experiences of individuals involved the BPO sector. This enabled me to answer the sub-research question:

- How has the creation of the BPO call centre sector contributed to "development" in Kenya?

The three dimensions discussed in section 3.2.5 provided the starting point for the analysis. Using the NVivo 10 software program, I began by undertaking a first review of the perspectives of "workers" and "non-workers" with respect to what is valued or considered unfavourable about BPO call centre work. This review led to the identification of an initial set of codes with which to organize the data, according to an understanding of the "material", "relational" and "subjective" aspects of agents' wellbeing. Some codes immediately offered fruitful encapsulations of ideas, such as "BPO as springboard", which referred to how exposure to the BPO sector could lead to future opportunities for workers. Other codes that emerged early on the coding process proved less useful and required refining. For example, I found the code "job dissatisfaction" to be overly broad and of limited use as a catchall label. However, I was able to reconsider this code as a set of sub-codes rooted in more specific labels, such as "job dissatisfaction - customer rudeness", "job dissatisfaction - low wages" and "job dissatisfaction - unrealistic targets".

As I became more familiar with the data over the course of a second review, I was able to more concretely identify associations between the ideas contained within the data, and to further refine the choice of codes used for the analysis by settling on specific definitions. In order to validate the emergent findings, I was also able to verify that the ideas emerging from the data featured within the

understandings of multiple research participants. I considered how categorizing the codes with reference to the conceptualization of the wellbeing approach towards "development" could enable the generation of top-level themes. By approaching the codes as clusters, I identified three core themes as approximations of each of the dimensions taken from the wellbeing approach, which I termed "experience", "profile" and "compensation". The identification of these themes was geared towards an exploration of the interplay of the three dimensions – material, relational and subjective – set out by the wellbeing tradition.

By foregrounding the perspectives of those who have undertaken the work, the analysis utilizes these themes as structuring devices with which to examine the BPO sector's association with "development" as job creation.[23] The theme of "experience" relates to workers' sense of what they have acquired from undertaking the work and whether they regard it as broadly supportive of their future prospects. It focuses on the problems or opportunities that arise from a person's circumstances and the subjective interpretations that they offer in assessing the resulting harm or gains pertaining to their prospects (McGregor, 2008, 4). "Profile" refers to the type of person generally employed in the BPO sector and the extent to which call centre work can be said to be a simple form of work to undertake. It encourages a focus on the broader context of the relational gains available to workers and the extent to which workers' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds may condition their ability to access the work. Finally, "compensation" refers to the monetary earnings that workers receive, the provision of bonuses and further benefits, and the insecurity conditioning their labour. In the light of the concern for individuals' material resources (combining "objective" assessment with participants' "subjective" perception of their circumstances – McGregor, 2010, 317), this focuses on the

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23 As part of a discussion of the expansion of Kenya's call centre sector, the analysis of the relationship between BPO call centre work and "development" is presented in chapter 4. This discussion precedes the presentation of the analysis of workplace control, which is presented in chapters 5 and 6.

degree to which BPO call centre work has become a monetarily appealing new form of work for young people.

3.5.2 Analysing discourses of subjects and subjectivities

In examining the consequences of the expansion of the overall call centre sector in Kenya, the analysis of the interview and field note data was based on an iterative thematic analysis of the experiences of individuals involved the sector. As a means of interrogating the constitution of workplace power relations, the purpose of the analysis was to identify the discursive formations of workplace subjects. This focus enabled me to answer the sub-research questions:

- What type of agent do companies seek to manage?

- What is the "rationality" underpinning managerial approaches to agents' job roles?

I approached the analysis of workplace control in Kenya's call centres by undertaking a thematic analysis of the study's complete qualitative dataset, while also incorporating the use of statistical techniques to provide further insights and substantiation of the analytical findings (as discussed in section 3.5.3). By reading through my interview notes, transcripts and field notes line by line, I began with an initial review of the perspectives of "workers" and "non-workers" in relation to what is entailed by call centre work and the ways in which companies seek to monitor and manage their agents.

While the theorization integral to the framework of "workplace selves" provided guiding concepts through which to interpret the data, I produced codes inductively so as to facilitate an openness towards various avenues of analytical possibility. I began the coding process by treating codes as labels with which to isolate specific ideas within my data, focusing on participants' understandings of the role and expectations of agents in the call centre labour process. Subsequently, I was able to better understand the significance of these ideas by considering how the codes underpinning the analysis could be organized hierarchically and clustered together according to their interconnections.

As part of the endeavour to understand how ideas about what is required of agents animate particular workplace programmes or "strategies" of control, the overall analytical task was to reconstruct different discourses on what constitutes a "good" call centre agent. This began with a focus on the subjectivities idealized by management, and the understandings and articulations offered by agents themselves. This led to the generation of a nascent set of codes centring on the qualities, attributes and capacities required by agents, as well as codes related to the means by which such qualities are identified, known and worked upon by management. For example, I drew upon the code "agents' desire for correction" as a means of identifying how agents express an inclination towards particular forms of feedback on their performance. By using the codes "staff motivation - company induced" and "staff motivation - employee created", I also found that there were productive distinctions to be made between how companies seek to motivate their agents and how agents might envisage their consistent displays of effort to derive primarily from their own motivations.

While I was concerned with understanding differences across BPO companies, my appreciation of the parallel expansion in "captive" call centres within Nairobi necessitated a comparative analysis of workplace power relations within outsourced and in-house working environments. In the ultimate reading of the data, I endeavoured to undertake a close analysis of how agents and other research participants experienced in BPO and captive call centres spoke about the qualities required by the work. At the same time, I was able to enhance my emergent understanding through the analysis of the field notes related to my workplace observations, which suggested further insights in relation to approaches to managing agents. Owing to my greater familiarity with the data at this point in the coding process, I was able to refine the codes in use so as to attain precise encapsulations of participants' ideas. This enabled me to identify patterns in the data and to consider why different understandings of agents' roles might exist between different working environments, as well as how participants' ideas – as ways of talking about themselves – might be illustrative of particular strategies of control.

With reference to the framework of "workplace selves", I ultimately identified three distinct types of workplace subject. According to an analysis of BPO call centre managerial approaches, captive managerial approaches and agent self-understandings, these types are presented as "flexible selves", "subordinate selves" and "the responsibilized self" in chapters 5 and 6. On the strength of this analysis, I was also able to consider how discursive formations of agents relate to the rationalities underpinning companies' strategies of control – in other words, why agents are thought of and managed according to different logics.

3.5.3 Analysis of quantitative data using SPSS

The analysis of the questionnaire data was undertaken using SPSS (version 21), which offered a supplementary source of evidence with which to extend the insights into forms of workplace control generated from the analysis of the qualitative dataset. This entailed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and correlations to identify variables pertinent to the analysis of workplace power relations, such as in relation to differences between BPO and captive working environments.

This type of analysis served to clarify aspects of participants' attitudes towards their experiences of call centre operations floors. As a result, the analysis of the quantitative data led to additional reflections on the circumstances under which agents offer particular views of call centre work. For example, as presented in chapter 5, the analysis identified a positive correlation between agents expressing satisfaction with their job and attitudes towards the accuracy of workplace statistics. In order to disaggregate relationships between variables that might not have been readily identifiable within a qualitative thematic analysis, this type of finding exemplified the analytical benefit of integrating quantitative data into the overall analysis of companies' endeavour to control agents as workplace subjects.

3.6 Conclusion

With reference to each aspect of the research design, the overall methodological approach for the study was discussed in this chapter. In responding to the conceptualization of "workplace selves", I began by providing a further elaboration of the overall research question first introduced in chapter 2. The theorization of call centre agents in Kenya as "subjects" enabled me to refine the overarching research question as a set of additional sub-questions to focus on different aspects of workplace experiences and workplace control. The importance of these questions was underlined by discussing the significance of the expansion of call centre work as an emergent source of employment for young Kenyans. In view of the suggested association of the BPO call centre sector with "development", a set of dimensions to assess this aspect was discussed as a means of enabling analytical sensitivity to the endeavour to harness the sector to create new opportunities for Kenya.

The use of a multi-method approach and national case and single sector research design was discussed as a means of acquiring a corpus of data with which to address the overall research question. Semi-structured interviewing represented a promising method with which to capture research participants' perceptions of what is required by call centre work. This method therefore comprised the primary tool for gathering data. The ultimate analytical insights produced as part of the study were substantially enhanced through the integration of two additional methods – participant observation at company workplaces and a questionnaire for agents. Based on the recording of field notes, participant observation provided scope to view call centre workers in their everyday professional settings, and thus enriched my appreciation of what their job roles entail. As a further supplement to the data, a questionnaire was used as a means of capturing the views of a wider tranche of Kenya's call centre workforce than semi-structured interviewing allowed, enabling a basis to examine both demographic characteristics and agents' perceptions of the attributes and capacities necessary for call centre work.

Having underlined the relevance of these research methods, the practicalities of acquiring data in Kenya were outlined. This discussion included how research participants were recruited and the sampling strategy for the study in relation to the interviews, participation observation and questionnaire data. With respect to both ethical and analytical implications, it was important to be reflexive about the circumstances under which data was acquired and to consider how to encourage participants to feel comfortable about contributing their views.

The analytical strategy used to organize and interpret the data was also discussed. This highlighted the use of an iterative thematic analysis to generate insights into the nature and operation of workplace control, and how these insights could be further refined with reference to the analysis of the questionnaire data. In the light of the suggestion that BPO ought to be considered "developmental", the dimensions used to examine the BPO sector's record as an emergent provider of employment opportunities for Kenya's young people were also discussed.

The insights produced by the analysis of the data are presented in the three subsequent chapters, "Connections, casualization and wellbeing: the evolution of Kenya's call centre sector" (chapter 4), "Consistency and control: flexible and subordinate selves" (chapter 5) and "Rationalizing control: directed conduct and strategic egalitarianism" (chapter 6).

4 Connections, casualization and wellbeing: the evolution of Kenya's call centre sector

4.1 Introduction

As part of a review of the challenges associated with establishing the BPO (business process outsourcing) sector, the implications for the sector's workforce and the idea of harnessing international voice services as a core component of the Kenyan government's Vision 2030 initiative are explored in this chapter. This begins with a discussion of the evolution of the sector, which is presented in section 4.2. With reference to the difficulties experienced by BPO call centres, this encompasses an examination of the "hope" and "hype" that characterized the understandings of the sector's stakeholders. In view of such difficulties in the international outsourcing market, the chapter continues with a discussion of how BPOs subsequently sought to source contracts from within the domestic economy.

The implications of the turn towards the domestic economy are considered in section 4.3, with a focus on how BPO can be understood to have contributed towards the "casualization" of call centre work within the Kenya labour market. This includes a discussion of how outsourcing has been predominantly established as a viable cost-cutting strategy for companies in Nairobi, rather than being based on creating appealing jobs for the sector's workforce. As a consequence, my analysis considers how BPO in Kenya has proven to be more notable for importing negative employment practices than for exporting internationally recognized voice services.

In order to examine the implications of this outcome for "development", section 4.4 presents a focused analysis of the perspectives of those experienced in the BPO sector. With reference to the themes of "experience", "profile" and "compensation", my analysis considers how employment in the BPO sector might be understood to contribute towards workers' "wellbeing" (McGregor, 2010). As outlined in section 3.5.2, the theme of "experience"

relates to workers' sense of what they have acquired from undertaking BPO work. Secondly, the theme of "profile" refers to the type of person generally employed in the BPO sector and the extent to which call centre work can be said to be a simple form of work to undertake. Lastly, the theme of "compensation" refers to the monetary earnings that workers receive, the provision of bonuses and further benefits, and the insecurity of their labour.

The chapter's key findings in relation to Kenya's experience of international BPO work are summarized in section 4.6, leading to the suggestion that the initial insights – with respect to the type of worker required by the labour process – merit further exploration in chapters 5 and 6.[24]

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24 For the purposes of presenting the empirical material for the study, it was appropriate to first address the association between BPO and "development" in chapter 4, prior to presenting the analysis of workplace control in chapters 5 and 6. I ordered the empirical material in this way as a means of explaining how the BPO call centre sector in Kenya evolved, and what the implications were for the composition of the overall call centre sector, given the emergence of in-house, "captive" operators.

4.2 BPO work: from international to domestic

In this section, stakeholder understandings of the creation of the BPO sector in Kenya and the experiences of companies operating within the sector are examined. These are presented around the key themes that emerged in my analysis – "hope and hype", "problems with sector" and "the domestic turn".[25]

4.2.1 Hope and hype

While the BPO sector in Kenya is approximately 10 years old, it has ultimately failed to establish itself as a niche provider of international call centre voice services. From 2004 onwards, the enthusiasm behind the sector stemmed from a cluster of overlapping, mutually reinforcing ideas in relation to Kenya's potential as a services exporter within the international economy – such as its Westernized institutional culture, the "neutral" English-language accent of its workforce, its abundance of educated graduates and its time zone. Equally, as part of a larger strategy of attaining enhanced internet connectivity and substantially reduced bandwidth costs, there were strong expectations that investment in a series of undersea fibre-optic cables would catalyse sustained opportunities (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 36).[26]

Indeed, the predominant hindrance for the sector had been identified as the lack of a robust internet infrastructure (as highlighted by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013). This was understood both to undermine the country's international reputation and to oblige Kenyan companies to shoulder the costs of relying on satellite-based communications. In a bid to overcome traditionally high bandwidth costs, the government – through the provision of private sector projects and public–private partnerships – oversaw the installation of the

25 Where the discussion refers specifically to interviewee data, this is indicated with the date of the interview. This convention is used throughout the chapters. In some cases, the evidence is drawn from field observations or from the results of the questionnaire, as outlined in chapter 3.

26 These ideas are discussed in chapter 1.

TEAMS, EASSy, SEACOM and LION2 undersea fibre-optic cables to support broadband communications. This was seen as a dramatic improvement with respect to reputation and cost reductions, and likely to propel Kenya into a progressively more lucrative relationship with the global economy. As James, a sector representative and former BPO senior manager, reflected (26/01/2013):

> "The original idea was that there was a strong belief and credible, I would think, evidence; there was reason to think that Kenya could be well positioned to compete in the voice market… Some of the constraints that we had 10 years ago was that we were not aware, and we did not probably appreciate, just how important it was to have good connectivity. Then it cost about US$3,500 a megabyte to have a satellite connection that had so much latency, and could not ensure quality of calls. And, in fact, some of the companies or clients, or potential clients, had such advanced systems that they would detect that your connection wasn't good enough for the quality of service. And so it became a tough call and sell to compete with the Indias who had terrestrial means, almost throughout the entire country, and the Philippines too."

Though this manager's reflection suggests a retrospective recognition of inexperience, the locus of his understanding rests on the centrality of technology in establishing the sector, both as a means of connection and as a basis for international comparison. This reflects an understanding of Kenya's challenges as attributable to comparatively low levels of connectivity and inferior technology, rather than, for example, to an absence of expertise in relation to acquiring contracts or in workforce management.

While a lack of digital connectivity demanded attention, the initial success and prominence of the sector's flagship company, KenCall,[27] perhaps served to make Kenya's capabilities seem self-evident. As a means of capitalizing on the lucrative international outsourcing market, KenCall was started on the strength

27 Isenberg (2009) provides a descriptive history of KenCall.

of a belief in Kenya's potential to replicate the experiences of other countries in the global South (as explained by an investor, 21/09/2012). The company's ideas and activities were a considerable influence on the development of the BPO sector, and would, in many respects, prove to be the feature example of the economic and developmental possibilities stemming from supporting companies and expanding the sector as a new source of growth and jobs.

With KenCall providing a tangible example of the possibilities and numerous other companies springing up to offer voice and data services, the Kenya ICT (information and communications technologies) Board was set up in 2008 as the government's marketing and promotional arm. The potential of the sector captured the imagination of the domestic and international media,[28] and many new companies – both call centres and data and transcription services alike – surfaced in the rush to get a foothold in the market.[29] BPO call centre

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28 See for example *The Economist*. 2010. Outsourcing to Africa: the world economy calls. 25 March. Available: http://www.economist.com/node/15777592?story_id=15777592; Fildes, J. 2010. Kenya's ambitions for an outsourced future. *BBC News*, 16 December. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-12004815; Wambugu, S. 2010. Biting a piece of the outsourcing pie. *The Daily Nation*, 8 May. Available: http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/Biting-a-piece-of-the-outsoursing-pie-/-/440808/914684/-/56kn0uz/-/index.html; Imara Securities Team. 2011. Why outsourcing could be Africa's next big opportunity. *How We Made It In Africa*, 11 May. Available: http://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/why-outsourcing-could-be-africas-next-big-opportunity/9793/. See also the video resources "2007 Outsourcing" (available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eKyB2J2MdY&feature=related) and "Doing business in Africa - Kenya - outsourcing Kenya" (2010 – available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMH9l73fKJE&feature=g-vrec).

29 Once prominent companies such as Skyweb-Evans, Call Centre Africa EPZ, Cascade Global and Preciss International are no longer in business (or, in some cases, have sought to adapt to become training service providers). Nonetheless, other companies such as KenCall, Horizon, TechnoBrain, Direct Channel, Spanco Raps and Gorilla BPO remain in operation.

companies came to undertake a variety of both in-bound (receiving calls) and out-bound (making calls) activities, such as customer service for telecommunications companies, telesales for insurance coverage, and the transcription of mobile users' voicemail messages. As part of its "Vision 2030" initiative (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 15), the BPO sector was identified by the government as a key pillar of future growth and revenue (and perhaps something of an emblem of Kenya's efforts to dramatically reconfigure its historical marginalization within the global political economy).

Having received funding from the World Bank, the ICT Board commissioned a global consulting firm, McKinsey, to conduct a study and provide a set of recommendations for the development of the sector.[30] The firm emphasized the country's suitability for call centre work based on its existing profile and future potential.[31] The initial emphasis on providing call centre work was understood as a relatively straightforward area in which to establish the country's name by accessing the "low-hanging fruit" (as commented by an ICT Board official, 12/09/2012) of voice service contracts. There were suggestions that the sector would provide some 7,500 jobs by the end of 2012 (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 40), a figure that McKinsey in fact regarded as insufficiently ambitious. Both the ICT Board and the sector's BPO and Contact Centre Society[32] produced several reports and events designed to establish how the sector

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30 McKinsey's report was entitled "Seizing the prize: driving BPO sector growth in Kenya" (2009). Frost & Sullivan also released a report entitled "Analysis of the Kenyan call centre market" (2008).

31 As a challenge to McKinsey's recommendations, some commentators lamented the emphasis on call centre work as undervaluing the country's real potential, such as Hersman (2010) and Gathara (2010).

32 The term "contact centre" is sometimes used in place of "call centre" because it refers to a range of capabilities that go beyond voice services, such as email and social media services.

should proceed and how the country could improve its reputation and attract regular work.[33]

With respect to the type of workers required, those promoting BPO in Kenya also emphasized a specific set of traits in the country's workforce and wider culture, such as a welcoming disposition (being accustomed to tourism, for example). As Anne, a government official, outlined (08/04/2013), this included speaking English with a "neutral accent" likely to be far more intelligible to Northern customers than, for example, Indian English accents:

> "I think that was the main rationale, that we can target the call centre work from Europe and North America. That was the main thing. It's the language in particular. I would say that's the main thing, because when we would go out to the expos [expositions], the clients would tell us oh, yes they are outsourcing to India, but they have issues with the accent. And they felt that the Kenyan accent is a bit more neutral. So we thought that is really why we should target the sector."

This reflection suggests an essential belief in the readiness of Kenya's workforce and the ease with which a portion of the international market might be acquired. Investors recognized that Kenya would command nothing more than a modest proportion of the international voice market (aiming, for example, for a 2 per cent share – as suggested by both an investor, 21/09/2012, and the chief operating officer of a BPO company, 21/01/2013). Nonetheless, the sense of ease around offering a more satisfactory service for international clients than their existing providers perhaps gave rise to naivety, overshadowing the actual challenges of attracting work and offering reputable services. In discussing the fate of the BPO call centre sector within the international market, a former TL

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33 For example, the "Seize the opportunity" event (11–12 November 2009, Nairobi), the "Connected nation" presentation, and materials such as "Do IT in Kenya: Kenya's business process outsourcing".

(team leader) summed up the overall rationale as "how hard can it be to answer calls?" (28/02/2013).

4.2.2 Problems with establishing sector

Despite a sustained wave of enthusiasm around establishing BPO services (with call centre work as the sector's centrepiece), the sector's companies have faced a number of unexpected difficulties, and its stakeholders' optimistic predictions have not come to fruition. Though companies such as KenCall and its rival Horizon Contact Center enjoyed initial periods of success, many companies went out of business and were unable to attract sustainable internationally oriented work (as explained by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013). While a number of BPOs have taken out licences with the Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK), many are unregistered and have operated "informally", unbeknownst to the CCK or ICT Board (as highlighted by an ICT Board official, 12/09/2012). Many companies have engaged in low-skilled data clean-up, processing and transcription tasks, commonly procured online (and, increasingly, by providing services to domestic companies within Kenya). Without established reputations or sufficient contacts within their target markets, BPOs have proven unable to acquire sustainable contracts or regular work, and have lacked the requisite capital with which to promote themselves (as a government official underlined, 04/10/2012). As Anne, a member of the BPO/ITES (information technology-enabled services) Working Group, pointed out (08/04/2013):

> "Having the right partners, and having the financial capacity, is critical. Yes, because even without financial capacity you cannot hire the right salespeople. If you are targeting the international markets, you need to hire people who are expert salespeople and who are based there and who command a real high salary, so most of these BPOs just didn't have that capacity. There was an assumption that as long as I am a BPO and I am operating in Kenya, the work will flow."

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Furthermore, with Western client companies folding during the international financial crisis of 2007–08, there was a dramatic reduction in the number of contracts available and a general aversion – especially within the US – towards sending work abroad during an economic downturn (as highlighted by an investor, 21/09/2012, and a sector consultant, 03/04/2013), contributing to the loss of jobs for many workers within Kenya's sector (as underlined by a former BPO HR official, 25/09/2012). Though certain stakeholders suggest that insufficient government funding for BPO has undermined the provision of adequate research and training within the sector (e.g, an ICT Board official, 12/09/2012), others argue that available funds were spent unwisely on attending expositions and making expensive trips abroad. This extends to arguments that those in the government have shown favouritism towards the best-connected BPOs, and that well-funded companies have dramatically overspent on large facilities without the guarantee of regular work (as argued by a chief operating officer – BPO company, 21/01/2013). Furthermore, some contend that funds have been concentrated unnecessarily – at the expense of paying agents in full – on external consultants brought in from abroad (something described by a former BPO sales manager as being "soft on colour" owing to the preference for white, non-Kenyan experts, 02/05/2013).

Criticisms of the use of funding notwithstanding, it seems that establishing a BPO sector proved something of a fleeting interest on the part of the government, despite its supposedly pivotal role as a key economic "pillar". With the sector's take-off failing to live up to the original enthusiasm, the interest on the part of government and other stakeholders shifted to an emphasis on "internet-enabled services" (ITES), which is perhaps best illustrated by the ongoing development of "Konza Technology City" and its potential to attract

multinational technology firms to set up in Kenya.[34] With BPO rebranded as "BPO/ITES", ambitions have changed to promote Kenya as Africa's "Silicon Savannah" and to attract multinational companies, rather than to position the country as an emergent provider of reputable, formalized voice and data services.

In the meantime, those in the BPO sector have experienced sustained financial difficulties, including its better-funded and more prominent companies. With labour costs rising in India and Kenyan companies unable to effectively consolidate their own reputations, in many instances established Indian providers have served as intermediaries in seeking to minimize their own costs. As a result, some of Kenya's BPOs rely on insecure and unstable opportunities that do not result from a direct relationship with Northern companies (as explained by a former BPO account manager, 11/10/2012). With respect to out-bound selling for instance, Indian BPOs pass on sales and telemarketing leads that may be several weeks old, all the while retaining more promising

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34 Dubbed the "Silicon Savannah", Konza is an ambitious, public–private project designed to firmly establish Kenya as Africa's leading information technology player. Set in a 2,000-hectare plot 60km south-east of Nairobi, Konza is planned to become an entirely new city constructed over some 20 years. The project aims to capitalize on Kenya's growing technology reputation by attracting international companies and expanding its information technology-enabled service activities. With construction at an estimated US$7 billion, the government aims to make Konza central to its Vision 2030 development strategy, providing 200,000 jobs and helping to transform Kenya into a "middle-income country providing a high quality life to all its citizens". Though Konza may well provide a key, long-term revenue source, questions surround the project, such as its delays, the use of substantial public funds, and the distribution of benefits within the wider society. With much of the existing technology community reliant on Nairobi-based business models, there is also the matter of the feasibility of encouraging companies to relocate, and the emphasis on international businesses rather than those developing within Kenya.

information for themselves.[35] Given the prominence of conversions-based workplace targets, this poor quality of work has implications for out-bound call centre agents, who are obliged to draw on unpromising data, as well as for the companies' workers as a whole, owing to the threat to profitability resulting from undertaking low-margin work.

In instances where Kenyan BPO companies do deal directly with those providing the work in the US and the UK, they have also faced difficulty in procuring promising contracts. For example, a senior management figure with substantial international experience commented that he had never heard of most of the clients with whom rival BPO companies were entering into contracts, suggesting that their clients' reputation and the activities involved would be likely to be undesirable (chief operating officer – BPO company, 21/01/2013). Contracts are commonly project-based, meaning that a client offers work for a limited period of time only, with agents themselves often employed on a project-by-project basis as companies struggle to balance their capital, recruitment and staff needs. While such a basis need not be problematic *per se*, companies have suffered from a lack of experience in preparing contracts, leading to difficulties when clients refuse to pay based on small errors and supposed breaches of contract (as underlined by a former BPO sales manager, 02/05/2013). A further problem has been the tendency for Kenyan companies to compete with one another on the basis of a high-volume, low-cost and low-margin model – for example, being paid per call on customer service accounts rather than per resolution of customers' queries. Equally, others experienced in the market suggest that companies are unable to invest in the type of internationally competitive high-tech workplaces expected by

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35 For example, I observed operations at a small BPO call centre (20/03/2013; 25/03/2013) that relied exclusively on two onerous contracts procured via an intermediary – one administrating loans to UK customers and another selling male enhancement pills to customers in the US and Canada. As an interviewee subsequently revealed, the second contract had also been taken up at a more prominent BPO call centre.

international clients (as highlighted by a BPO manager, 15/10/2012). Despite an initial understanding of their attractiveness, many have underlined that Kenya's costs, such as labour (a key element in outsourcing relationships), are ultimately only moderately competitive and are therefore not an incentive for clients (as suggested by an investor, 25/01/2013, and a member of the BPO/ITES Working Group, 08/04/2013).

While numerous smaller BPO companies have subsisted by undertaking data-based work, the sector's flagship voice service providers have been primarily foreign-owned (or headed by individuals with extensive connections within target markets – as explained by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013). Though they rely on recruiting Kenyan workers, the prominence of such companies suggests that those established within the BPO call centre sector have essentially imported existing experience and investment from abroad (rather than the sector giving rise to the emergence of local providers, or being reliant on locally developed business strategies). This demonstrates that the emphasis on BPO call centres has not enabled Kenyan entrepreneurs to straightforwardly tap into an underserved international outsourcing market by exporting voice and data services, and that much of the business activity has been based on BPO call centres in Kenya (rather than necessarily Kenyan BPO call centres).

Nonetheless, given the sustained financial problems faced by the leading BPO call centres, this is not to suggest that the sector's primarily foreign-owned, flagship companies have themselves attained a strong position within the international market. Though senior staff and numerous call centre agents testify to initial company successes in fulfilling lucrative contracts (prior to the international financial crisis, when the sector experienced a measure of international exposure, and when companies' agents were often able to earn bonuses that would dwarf their basic salaries – as explained, for example, by a former BPO agent, 28/02/2013), the companies' inability to set up more robust operations has severely undermined their position. While it is not the case that every BPO call centre has failed to consistently pay their agents and other staff, certain companies have effectively subsidized operations through under- or

non-payment of their workers. Consequently, such a scenario offers an immediate challenge to notions that the creation of BPO call centres has served in the interests of "development" by creating appealing, adequately remunerated jobs – or even numerous positions – as the "sector of choice" for graduates and others. As a reflection of staff dissatisfaction, the sector has seen a high degree of attrition, with workers seeking better paid, if similarly unstable, work from rival companies (and, with respect to more senior staff, often being "poached"). Consistent with a somewhat fleeting interest in BPO in its original incarnation, the government itself has seemed essentially uninterested in ensuring adequate protection for the intended beneficiaries of the Vision 2030 initiative – the labour market entrants working within the BPO sector.

4.2.3 Establishing domestic contracts

As a consequence of their difficulties within the international outsourcing market, BPO call centres remaining in operation now have a substantially different portfolio of work, with contracts primarily originating from within the domestic economy. Though the original strategy behind the sector was not exclusively oriented towards international voice work (as explained by an ICT Board official, 18/04/2013), the notion of challenging established international providers was predominant (as highlighted by a government official, 08/04/2013). Owing to their difficulties in competing internationally, however, BPOs have subsequently been obliged to develop far more business relationships with companies within Kenya in order to sustain their operations.[36]

Though the leading BPO call centres undertake different types of contract, each company has achieved a measure of success in acquiring work from Nairobi-based clients – many of whom were formerly highly suspicious of the

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36 In a discussion of the South African call centre industry, Benner et al. (2007, 7) point out that India is in fact an "outlier" in its provision of large-scale operations oriented towards the global market. For the majority of call centres, serving the domestic market is the norm.

idea that another company might be trusted to handle internal, sensitive data when running a business process on their behalf. Indeed, while Kenya's BPO call centres can be said to have failed internationally, businesses' awareness of their operations – especially the potential for lower costs and particular specialisms, such as digitally mediated customer services – has enabled the practice of outsourcing work to gain considerable traction within the domestic economy. For example, a number of the leading BPO call centres now focus on customer service contracts for Kenya's telecommunications and media product markets.[37]

Additionally, BPO companies now also compete with one another to offer staff training (as explained by a BPO TL, 18/02/2013) and to install facilities for Kenyan companies seeking to set up their own in-house or "captive" call centres (as highlighted by an investor, 21/09/2012). Indeed, rather than outsource to BPO providers, a number of companies in Kenya now operate their own captive call centres, which are commonly incorporated into larger company structures. Though there were one or two examples of captive operators prior to the emergence of the international BPO sector (such as Safaricom and Telkom Kenya, the previously state-run monopoly "telco"), the creation of the BPO call centre sector – along with the resulting importation of new forms of customer–worker interaction, cost-cutting approaches, and digitally mediated managerial approaches – appears to have been a key influence within the wider business landscape. Just as the practice of outsourcing has gained credibility, so too has the idea that companies competing within specific markets ought to dramatically reconfigure the basis on which they interact with customers, and move away from being somewhat elitist, closed institutions (such as, for example, banks' traditional apathy towards non-rich *wananchi* ("the people")). Consequently, companies in the BPO sector have been key in exemplifying a core means by which customers can be reached, leading advocates within other companies to stress the role of

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37 This is not to suggest that concerns around sensitive data have been completely superseded, but simply that there is now greater acceptance of BPO relationships.

call centre operations. As Samuel, the head of customer service at a leading bank, argued (23/04/2013):

> "We were [previously] characterized as a cost centre *per se*. It was purely the centres where customers can call for information… we are trying to get to the streams now, and you will see the business is now really looking at this not just as an information centre *per se*, but as a place where they can do business."

This reflection encompasses a recognition that call centre-based customer service and sales operations should not be regarded as a mere cost to be borne (or, indeed, avoided). Rather, from companies' perspectives, such operations ought to be seen as a feature component of a larger strategy of capturing and integrating insights, satisfying customers' needs for information, and creating scope for new revenue streams. This also relates to companies' concern that their products are differentiated effectively from those of competitors (as explained by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013), as well as the need to actively seek to satisfy and create new types of customer demand.

While Kenya's BPOs have demonstrated the domestic potential for call centre services, the rise of captive call centres represents a less immediately striking, yet perhaps more substantive, growth in operations within the country's overall call centre sector, with the total number of captive agents likely to surpass that of BPO agents in the next few years. Though captives are primarily set up by large banks and telecommunications companies, there are numerous instances of government departments, smaller banks, utilities providers, recruitment companies and international organizations establishing their own, generally small-scale services (figure 1 presents the locations of BPO and captive operators within Nairobi).
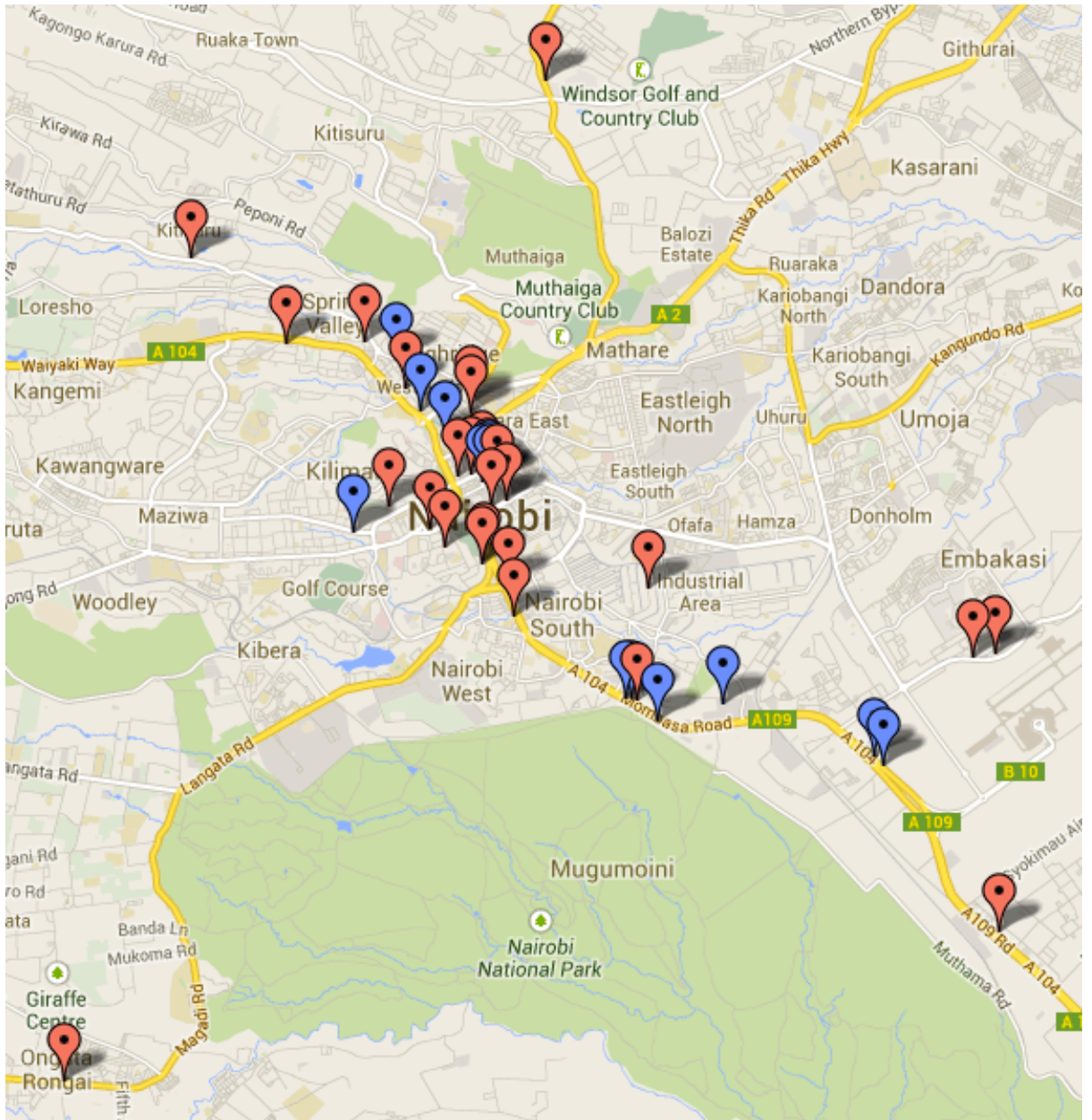
Figure 1: Nairobi's BPO (blue tagged) and captive (red tagged) call centres

With the exception of larger companies, captives therefore employ low numbers of staff, with agents' jobs typically more secure than within BPO companies as a result of being part of larger company structures.

The relatively better job security of captive environments has, however, been increasingly tested in the fallout of the BPO sector's financial difficulties and the interest of Kenyan companies in outsourcing customer service and on-

call sales processes. From the perspective of BPO call centres, the scope to service Kenyan companies has necessitated a change of focus, ensuring that contracts continue to be acquired and enabling companies in the sector to reinvent themselves and to renew confidence in their services. From the perspective of Kenya's workforce, however, such a change has been detrimental, and seemingly perverse, in the light of the original stress on call centres as a key means of tackling unemployment. In addition to the problems with remuneration resulting from unstable international contracts, the change of focus appears to have directly undermined the position of those with putatively more secure roles. Arguably, this has created conditions for the greater "casualization" of the workforce, as discussed in section 4.3.

4.3 Casualization of the workforce: a perverse outcome

In order to consider the wider impact of the BPO sector on the Kenyan labour market, this section discusses how BPO can be regarded as contributing to the deterioration of workers' terms of employment, focusing on "the BPO employment model and remuneration problems", the "deterioration of work" and "exporting services or importing practices".

4.3.1 The BPO employment model and remuneration problems

Owing to their need to establish themselves internationally in the competitive voice services market, BPO call centres' operations were, from the outset, predicated on low costs of labour, leading to the predominance of low salaries, temporary contracts and minimal benefits for workers. Though not subject to the same degree of informality that characterizes employment in the *jua kali* ("hot sun") sector, workers' terms in the BPO sector have been consistent with those of outsourced workers within other economies. Just as those employed speak of the ease with which one can lose one's job, the relative abundance of potential workers available to replace "low-skilled" staff has exerted downward pressure on remuneration within the sector.

While certain BPO senior managers speak earnestly about wanting to offer opportunities to their staff (as exemplified by the comments of a company

owner, 20/03/2013), Nairobi's professional landscape is replete with companies well aware of workers' acute need for employment and their obligation to tolerate undesirable working conditions (as highlighted by an agent, 21/04/2013) – and the approaches of many BPO call centres perhaps seem consistent with this awareness. Agents speak of an assortment of advantages to gaining experience with BPO call centre work (as discussed in section 4.4), but many stress the consistent problems with paying staff faced by a number of companies and the failure to honour employment contracts in the wake of entrenched financial problems (as commented by a former TL, 12/10/2012). Though in certain instances this has led to strike action within particular companies (as described by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013), those with direct experience of call centre work highlight that companies inhibit collective action by preemptively firing potential ringleaders (as explained by an agent, 30/01/2013). Moreover, the scope for cross-company unionization is inhibited by the high degree of staff turnover across the sector.

With government figures seemingly content to regard industrial action as a teething problem for the sector (as suggested by an ICT Board official, 18/04/2013), there has been no endeavour to seek workers' insights or to push for adequate protection in the case of under-payment. As Anne, a member of the BPO/ITES Working Group (08/04/2013) underlined:

> "There was talk of engaging with the Ministry of Labour about this issue, but it seems… What seems to be happening is I think it is something which will just resolve itself. Because you cannot really dictate, as the government, what an entrepreneur is going to pay his staff."

Furthermore, though BPO companies pursue arguably progressive managerial approaches (which are further examined in chapters 5 and 6), staff concerns

about remuneration appear to go unaddressed.[38] Consequently, some agents describe BPO call centre jobs as feeling more like an unpaid pastime than actual paid work (as depicted by a former BPO sales manager, 02/05/2013, and a former TL, 12/10/2012), leaving agents highly dissatisfied. While some are hopeful that payment will be forthcoming once their companies' finances improve (and, in the meantime, they remain encouraged in part by their companies' light-hearted working environments and atmosphere), other agents have been quick to leave their underpaying employers to seek work with other companies in the sector and elsewhere.

4.3.2 Deterioration of work

With the practices of both outsourcing and call centre operations gaining credibility within the domestic economy, the business relationships resulting from BPO call centres' new focus seem to have, in turn, further undermined the developmental aspirations for the sector. While some BPOs fulfil entirely new contracts for Kenyan companies established on the basis of their customer service expertise,[39] in other instances, the rise of outsourcing practices has undermined preexisting modes of employment, leading to a dramatic deterioration in workers' conditions. Where once call centre agents were employed in-house (and commonly eligible for the same terms of work as counterparts elsewhere within a company's structure), the emergent trust in

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38 As a result of the absence of such attention, disgruntled agents have sought outlets online (as highlighted by a former BPO agent, 18/09/2012). An example of this is the list of numerous comments posted on a Kenyan Entrepreneur blogpost about KenCall, entitled "Blood, Sweat, Tears & Bureacrats [sic]" (available: http://www.kenyanentrepreneur.com/kencall, 21/07/2009), in which employees debate with one another – sometimes less than politely – about, for instance, not being paid and conditions at the company.

39 For example, I learnt that the BPO company "ICT Solutions" (a pseudonym) fulfils a newly created customer service contract for a leading Kenyan cable television provider and media company, when visiting the company (04/02/2013).

outsourced services has led to a scenario that seems inimical to the creation of salutary new forms of service sector employment.

Especially within Kenya's competitive domestic telecommunications market, larger companies have attempted to cut salaries to a fraction of their previous level by outsourcing voice contracts to BPO call centres. Perhaps the most salient instance of this resulted in the strike and walkout action taken by employees of Spanco Raps, an Indian-owned BPO, who had been transferred from their previous employer, Airtel. In an incident that was well-covered by the Kenyan press, the employees protested their removal from Airtel and the reduction of their salaries to a mere KSh15,000 (Kenyan shillings – approximately US$175).[40] This scenario parallels events seen elsewhere in the sector, such as Aegis's outsourcing of call centre operations to Horizon, which reportedly obliged employees to take a cut in their salaries of over 50 per cent – from KSh36,000 to KSh17,000.[41]

In other instances, there are examples of a hybrid model establishing itself, in which BPOs fulfil high-volume, low-cost call centre operations for clients, while the clients retain the handling of non-standardized – and higher-value – sales tasks and customer queries in-house (as described by an agent, 27/02/2013). In addition to ensuring renewed stress on low labour costs, this approach can also undermine BPOs' ability to retain more senior staff skilled in areas such as business development, since by working directly with another

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40 E.g., Okuttah, M. 2012. Strike paralyses Airtel customer care operations. *Business Daily*, 4 September. Available:

http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate+News/Strike+paralyses+Airtel+customer +care+operations/-/539550/1496208/-/wjyrl9/-/index.html; *The Standard*. 2012. Airtel continues suffering as standoff at Spanco persists. *The Standard*, 6 September. Available: http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2000065537/airtel-continues-suffering-as-standoff-at-spanco-persists

41 As detailed in Nyabiage, J. 2011. Labour pains of call centre outsourcing. *Daily Nation*, 7 March. Available: http://www.nation.co.ke/Features/smartcompany/Labour-pains-of-call-centre-outsourcing/-/1226/1120544/-/rr155e/-/index.html

company, staff can be liable to be "poached" (with the poaching company able to offer better salaries and benefits, as highlighted by a former TL, 12/10/2012). While BPO managers promote their companies as specialist service providers, it is less financially buoyant players within competitive markets – such as telecommunications – that are most inclined to outsource. With companies keen not to shoulder responsibility for, or to offer benefits to, permanent employees, outsourcing has therefore become a straightforward cost-cutting strategy, rather than an opportunity to draw on BPOs' expertise, thus stifling opportunities for upward professional mobility for staff pushed outside client-company structures (as highlighted by an agent, 21/04/2013).

As a consequence, despite the reduced company scepticism towards outsourcing customer services, client companies that do outsource tend to be doing badly within their markets relative to their competitors, meaning that they use outsourcing as a cost-saving strategy based on lower labour costs (as underlined by a sector consultant, 03/04/2013). Recognizing the importance of retaining customer interactions in-house, companies that are performing better within their markets do not tend to outsource voice operations, considering that to keep operations in-house is to retain control over the front line of company–customer exchanges. Nevertheless, such companies also increasingly make use of non-permanent contracts, particularly in instances where staff do not possess a tertiary-level qualification.[42]

4.3.3 Exporting services or importing practices?

Despite the notion that creating a BPO sector would put Kenyan skills to use to export services and create worthwhile employment opportunities, one damaging result of the sector's evolution has been the deterioration of local working conditions, established on the basis of the casualization of call centre work. With Nairobi-based clients becoming convinced of the cost-saving benefits of outsourcing, hiring and remuneration practices have been reconfigured and

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42 This was pointed out to me during an interview with an agent working at a captive call centre (28/06/2013).

stacked against the interests of stable, adequately paid work, and have intersected with patterns of worsening conditions within more established parts of the Kenyan labour market (Were, 2011a, Mitullah, 2010).

Overall, this outcome has created a rather perverse scenario. An initiative that was designed to improve livelihoods on the basis of exporting services and the expansion of interactive service work within Kenya's labour market has in fact contributed to the growing popularity of a practice that undermines workers' interests. Though much of the Kenyan labour market has traditionally been subject to assorted forms of casualized labour, the greater credibility around outsourcing arrangements between "formal sector" companies appears, in effect, to have led BPO to become principally about the importation of negative employment practices well established elsewhere in the world. As reflected in the government's and companies' emphasis on expensive visits and foreign consultants, momentum has ultimately been directed towards importing knowledge into Kenya, rather than exporting profitable capacities. While the emphasis was on the idea of providing internationally recognized services and opening up the productive capabilities of Kenya's labour force, the evolution of the sector seems acutely antagonistic towards a notion of "development" privileging opportunities for workers. Though those behind the creation of Kenya's BPO call centre sector were motivated by a desire to reposition the country internationally, the sense of a creating a reputable sector offering digitally mediated services did not appear to extend to establishing adequate employee protection and guaranteeing remuneration.

Nonetheless, while such a scenario illustrates profound difficulties and invites further critical examination, it should not give rise to a notion that activities within the sector were necessarily predicated on a deliberate strategy of exploitation. In order to explore the developmental claims undergirding BPO, a closer analytical engagement with workers' experiences is presented in section 4.4.

4.4 "Development", wellbeing and BPO

In order to examine the association between BPO and "development" more closely, this section analyses the perspectives of BPO workers in terms of what BPO call centre work offers, which members of the labour force tend to undertake the work, and whether the work is regarded as financially appealing. This discussion starts by exploring the theme of worker "experience", followed by "profile" and "compensation".

4.4.1 Experience

> "Personally I think that it all depends on your talents, because they hardly look at your educational background. As long as you're confident and can call, and as long as you can speak, they actually pick you and train you. They find your strong areas and then they work on your strong things." (Jane, agent, 28/01/2013)

Despite the reputation of the work as basic, "low-skilled" and as requiring a modest degree of formal education, Kenya's BPO call centres have drawn on competitive recruitment procedures designed to select the best candidates. This is partly based on an acknowledgement that the work is tough, requiring resilience and a capacity to perform a relatively limited set of tasks consistently over the course of a nine-hour shift, for over 40 hours each week. As noted, much of the sector has experienced a high degree of staff turnover.

The sector's high turnover demonstrates that it is yet to establish itself as an attractive form of employment and would suggest that outcomes integral to workers' "wellbeing" – material or otherwise – have been unrealized. However, while this illustrates that many workers have been disinclined to remain in an ultimately undesirable working role, the picture is complicated by workers' generally positive reflections on what one gains from the work. For many university graduates and school leavers alike, work experience in constructive formal working environments is tough to acquire, and they claim that interactive service work has enhanced their "relational" capabilities in facilitating the acquisition of recognized skills, experience and self-confidence.

Though in some cases the result of an aversion to the work, the level of staff attrition is also explained by workers' desire to use call centre work as an entry point into the labour market (as suggested by an ICT Board official, 12/09/2012). When looking back on their period of employment, those who have left BPO call centres commonly highlight that a number of their colleagues in their current workplaces got their start in BPO (as commented by an agent, 18/01/2013). Significantly, the challenging reputation of many of the call centres – with respect to recruitment and the varied work experience gained – favours workers who have undertaken as little as a few months' work with a BPO company. Though aspects of the work are based on monotony and repetition, the emphasis within call centre work on routine and forms of personalized feedback on one's performance also appears to serve to engender processes of self-reflection within a larger context of nurturing staff (this is explored in greater depth in chapter 5).

While it would seem inaccurate to describe such "nurturing" as anything other than a company strategy to ensure that agents are consistently attentive to customers (and that they satisfy the expectations of companies' clients), the personalized attention appears to be seen as being of benefit to workers. When subsequently moving on to another work opportunity, workers commonly exhibit an affirmative subjective disposition towards the confidence and personal development that they attain, underlining the high degree of recognition that their new employers show towards candidates who have been selected and who have undertaken BPO call centre work. Other workers point out that the invariably tough, fast-paced nature of the work provides for excellent general work experience (as highlighted by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the first BPO agent interviewed on this date). Meeting targets, multi-tasking and facing frequently cantankerous – sometimes even abusive – customers all contribute towards the onerous nature of the work. As Linda, an agent, commented (15/01/2013):

> "Being patient I learnt when I was on the job. You know, working
> under pressure – you know to work under pressure you really

have to work. Those are skills that I learnt when I was there, and I appreciate them."

Though former agents may in the extreme say "never again" to the work, they regularly point out that the level of difficulty and the complement of basic skills that one acquires provide an excellent springboard for the future (as explained by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the second BPO agent interviewed on this date). While aware of the downsides of the work, some former workers also argue that each and every employee would speak of the resilience and self-confidence gained from BPO work, the skills developed and the opportunity to "grow as a person" (as highlighted by a TL, 11/10/2012). Indeed, despite the reputation of call centre work, some workers even speak of colleagues leaving companies to take up posts elsewhere, only to subsequently be welcomed back by their BPO call centre employer and to profess that they "missed it" (namely, the working environment and company culture).

Workers also speak warmly of their companies' sincerity in wishing to identify agents' personal strengths in order to enhance them (as underlined by a TL, 01/10/2012). Though such points of view seem likely to be expressed more strongly by those who have achieved internal or cross-company promotions, their sentiments about this type of benefit of the work – despite its monotony and challenges – are echoed by others who ultimately leave the sector. In keeping with the degree of recognition shown towards the value of the work experience, others stress that BPO work exposes one to different sorts of challenges than those found in other sectors, which serve as excellent preparation and are likely to instil a broader mindset in a worker than a person who, for example, simply went directly into the banking sector (as suggested by a sector representative, 25/09/2012).

Even taking into account the potential for exaggeration from those keen to promote the sector or who have achieved a measure of professional success within it, such a collection of broadly positive responses serves to problematize the notion that call centre workers are simply mere information age factory cogs, whose subjective interpretations of the work would be profoundly

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negative. If "harm to the social person" (McGregor, 2010, 338) derives from a failure to meet needs – whether relational (as personal resources activated) or subjective (as demonstrating a measure of positivity towards the work) – then BPO call centre work has certainly offered a space of opportunity for workers. However, this is not to downplay workers' views on some of the less auspicious aspects of the call centre labour process. While some workers regard targets, the high degree of monitoring and the repetition associated with interactions as necessary to maintain quality, many bemoan the continual pressure to sustain service levels and to attend to in the vicinity of 300 calls in a nine-hour shift (with a one-hour unpaid lunch break and two further 15-minute breaks). As a TL reflected, perhaps in understated fashion, "talking for eight hours is not easy" (01/10/2012).

The pressured work environment can feel like a "high school" in its regulation (as commented by an agent, 16/10/2012). Likewise, the obligation in many working roles to maintain an average handling time of, for example, 1 minute 40 seconds is a continual challenge, often accentuated by circumstances outside one's control, such as an irate customer who insists on speaking for an extended period of time. Negative interactions have to be instantly dismissed from one's mind, but the fact that all calls are monitored and assessed at random means that work deemed sub-standard may be seized upon. Even senior management disclose that "it's almost like being a robot" (as commented by a chief operating officer, 21/01/2013), which when added to the general stress faced over an extended period of time in part illustrates why the sector faces a high level of attrition (as highlighted by a TL, 18/02/2013).

One additional challenge peculiar to internationally oriented BPO call centre work is the practice of concealing worker locations and pretending to be operating in the client's country. While this implies an additional pressure for workers, some suggest – particularly when new in the job – that there are elements of enjoyment to adopting an alternative persona (as explained by a manager, 02/03/2013). In general, however, BPO companies pursue a pragmatic approach to agents' on-call voice, and regard the need to sustain a clear, "neutral" manner of speaking as more important than attempting to mimic

a client country's accent. Though not obligatory and dependent on a client company's preference, concealing agents' location can on occasion prove the basis for customer hostility towards workers, leading to swearing and even racist abuse in some instances (as explained by an agent, 18/09/2012). While certain companies employ counsellors to support agents' experience of stress, the expectation is that the training provides adequate priming to anticipate unaccommodating customers and to enable agents to put difficult interactions behind them. If an aversion to dealing with such customers is an understandable reason to leave one's job, then the sense of resilience achieved for those who do stay proves another aspect of enhanced personal resources.

More generally, BPO call centre workers speak of training in overwhelmingly glowing terms, pointing out its sophistication and rigour. Indeed, where workers have experience with a single company, it is common to hear each speak in loyal terms about the training – consisting of a combination of soft skills improvement, basic technical and product knowledge and even speech therapy – available within their particular company, which in their view is superior to that offered elsewhere in the BPO sector (as argued by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the second BPO agent interviewed on this date). Similarly, this view prevails in relation to comparisons between BPO and captive operators, with those working within BPO emphasizing the better quality skill set that one develops as a consequence of exposure to diverse, dynamic professional activities (despite the labour process itself being essentially routinized). The validity of this view notwithstanding, this esteem for a company's (and by extension, one's own) level of skill and superiority also reflects a desire to draw upon inter-subjectively understood notions of the merits of working in the sector and the opportunities that it affords (or, as McGregor (2010, 239) argues, processes of social construction aimed at the generation of shared meaning beyond objective evaluation or subjective interpretation).

On the part of companies themselves and in keeping with the logic of nurturing in relation to personalized performance feedback and training, BPO working environments are, in many instances, consciously designed to encourage openness in worker–manager interactions, as a contrast to more

overtly hierarchical, status-based professional settings elsewhere in Nairobi. Though this does not eliminate displays of petty authority between employees of different statuses within BPO call centres, it does suggest the role of an internationally influenced corporate cultural practice of reduced manager– worker distance geared towards ensuring greater participation and investment in one's "self" (which is examined in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6). Given agents' position on the front line of service, such company openness can be argued to reflect a straightforward imperative of keeping agents happy and ensuring that a client's customers are provided for. Nonetheless, it also offers agents exposure to working environments in which both the training and the companies' culture are oriented towards maximizing the key elements of their selves as implicated in service provision. Though this scenario results from strategic managerial need, it nevertheless offers workers joining the labour market with minimal work experience the opportunity to enhance their relational resources, in support of their own prospects. Moreover, while the sector has been characterized by a high degree of attrition, both current and former agents display a positive subjective disposition towards certain benefits of BPO call centre work.

The creation of BPO call centre jobs within the Kenya labour market invites further examination of who has tended to undertake the work. This includes the issue of whether the provision of low-skilled work has been accessible to a broad base of workers in Nairobi, or rather restricted to a particular type of person. This examination is undertaken in the following section, as part of a discussion of the "profile" of the sector's workers.

4.4.2 Profile

> "Most people don't really speak English. You have to have gone to
> a really good school to have a good command of the English
> language, and an understanding." (William, agent, 28/02/2013)

Unlike Nairobi's captive call centres, BPO call centres have nominally been open to applicants without a tertiary qualification in the form of a diploma or a

degree. Nonetheless, the companies' general premise was that better educated workers would be preferable. When the BPO sector first began, companies placed an emphasis on "academics" and were oriented towards those with, or studying towards, a university-level qualification (as explained, for example, by an HR official, 25/09/2012). Having recently been at university, such individuals are primarily from a young demographic, specifically the 18–24 age bracket. Some state that the age of 35 represents the upper limit for recruited agents (as commented by an HR official, 17/10/2012), and that there tend to be marginally more women than men working as agents. The companies' understanding was that younger workers with a degree would be quick-thinking, digitally literate and possess the strongest aptitude for soft skills – in short, that they would be "all-rounders" (as highlighted by an agent, 18/09/2012). As a means of delving into a largely untapped graduate labour market, this understanding also complemented the economic argument that young, inexperienced Kenyan workers would represent a promising human resource for clients looking to access "cheap labour" (as commented by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the first BPO agent interviewed on this date).

Over time, however, company management came to observe an often lower level of professional commitment and an inclination to quit on the part of some of the better educated agents. Conversely, those with secondary school education might generally exhibit more loyalty to a company and a greater capacity to focus and enhance their skills, owing to a greater willingness to undertake the work. Moreover, agents with less formal education tended to be less "exposed" to opportunities elsewhere in the labour market (as highlighted by a TL, 11/10/ 2012). Such an impression on the part of management eroded the original emphasis on tertiary education.

While recruitment policies with respect to educational qualifications evolved over time, the level of education within the sector seemingly varies between companies. Some underline that "80 per cent of the workforce is university educated" (as commented by company owners, 11/09/2012), while others insist that "the majority of the guys [male and female workers] were fourth form leavers" (as underlined by an agent, 16/10/2012). Perhaps more salient is the

general perception on the part of agents that one's level of education is unimportant for applicants and experienced workers alike, and that the managerial focus instead relates to what "contribution" a person makes at the company (as explained by a manager and company owner, 02/03/2013), with this term connoting both an amenable personality and an agent's receptivity to management's control. This perception might be termed one of "banal egalitarianism" since it suggests that anybody can fulfil an agent's role, as it is low-skilled and, therefore, open to all. Some even claim that BPO call centre work requires "no skills" (as argued by a TL, 18/02/2013). More progressively, one manager spoke passionately about the notion that jobs within the BPO sector were being offered on merit, thus presenting a contrast with the previous tendency across much of the labour market to restrict employment opportunities within ethnically based patronage networks (02/03/2013). The change in recruitment also reflects a willingness of those in greater immediate financial need – who often are not degree holders – to endure tough routines and intensive monitoring, and to project the emotional resilience required in a manner that their more socio-economically stable counterparts may not do. Aligned with this sense of greater openness in recruitment, this trend has meant that the sector's difficulties in retaining staff have created opportunities for those with less formal education to find work within BPO. Certain opportunities to use BPO to improve livelihoods have emerged, though perhaps not in the way originally conceived by the sector's stakeholders.

In illustrating the role of merit within BPO (rather than education or any other indicator), what is important might be characterized as one's attitude. Highly educated workers whose pride leads them to feel the work to be beneath them are less likely to perform well in the job. Those who do not display and cultivate patience, listening skills and an ability to be "on point" (as highlighted by an agent, 16/10/2012) will struggle, as will those who are not adaptable to a fast-paced working environment (as underlined by a TL, 06/02/2013).

In a strategic sense, for companies it is important that this attitude leads to receptivity towards workplace control mechanisms designed to sustain quality, address large call volumes and maintain pleasant customer interactions (as

examined in chapter 5). Though agents themselves commonly argue that the work is open to all, it should be noted that those who meet these requirements have fit a particular profile, which constrains the greater access to the work for non-degree educated applicants suggested by the reduced emphasis on university education. Perhaps most obviously, agents need to be comfortable using English professionally, and – in the case of international contracts – with customers whose accents may be dramatically different to their own. Generally, while the emphasis on being university educated has eroded, the language requirement implies at least completing an education in a well-performing secondary school in which English use predominates (rather than Swahili or "vernacular" language). Though companies have become more domestically and regionally oriented over time (taking on Swahili-language accounts on occasion), agents continue to need proficiency in English.

This requirement is but one aspect of a generally competitive recruitment procedure: agents commonly face intensive interviews, role plays and examinations designed to identify those most comfortable and deemed the best. Once they undertake call centre work itself, agents need to project consistent confidence, and not be quiet or slow (as explained by a TL, 11/10/2012). Consistent with the original country profile for Kenya itself, the so-called "neutral accent" in English is an essential requirement for potential workers. In practice, agents consistently describe this as being disadvantageous for those with a "tribal" accent, since a person cannot easily be trained out of their "mother tongue" manner of speech (as highlighted by an agent, 18/09/2012), which reflects growing up outside an urban setting without much exposure to English. While this does not exclude people from non-voice BPO work (as pointed out by an agent, 18/09/2012), those from a rural environment commonly do not have the same level of digital literacy as their urban counterparts. Indeed, in instances where agents have referred people "from their village" to be recruited by their employer, those referred have seen a lack of such skills seriously impede their ability to work, making them unsuitable (as explained by an agent, 13/10/2012).

These requirements illustrate that though international voice services BPO – and its basis as a job-creation policy – can be said to have created new opportunities, those opportunities appear primarily restricted to urban workers who are digitally literate, confident in using English professionally, and willing to tolerate a repetitive, monitored labour process. With international voice work, the English language operates as a broad cultural requirement. Though workers may enhance their relational wellbeing and "experience" through BPO, they do so on the basis of existing personal resources stemming from their background, making them better positioned to benefit materially from the opportunity of work. Those who can understand an array of Australian, North American, British and Irish accents may be from the richer western part of Nairobi, or will at least have had exposure to other forms of English (as underlined by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the second BPO agent interviewed on this date), and will thus be far better positioned to fulfil their company's expectation of agent–customer rapport when on-call.

An agent's socio-economic background can therefore strongly condition the ability to interact with international customers, as it is not really possible to acquire this type of skill (as suggested by an agent, 10/10/2012 – listed in appendix 7 as the first BPO agent interviewed on this date), meaning those from less advantaged backgrounds – be they urban or rural – are unlikely to be regarded as suitable for international voice work or to be taken on. This extends to the type of confidence one has to put to use when interacting with international customers. Though certain workers have successfully entered the sector and used their jobs as their main source of income, many have been young students and graduates, who live with their parents and whose income is "for buying clothes and getting drunk" (as highlighted by an agent, 13/10/2012). While recruitment practices have evolved to acknowledge the potential of those without a degree, culturally the nature of international work especially – the original focus of the sector – is more closely aligned with those from a "middle-income family" (as pointed out by a sector representative, 25/09/2012). The type of confidence that has to be drawn upon when interacting with customers also derives from an internationally exposed cultural background. While being

willing to work in a BPO call centre is contingent on tolerance for routine and responsiveness towards personalized performance assessment (and a subjective sense of the value that one derives from such experience – whether during or after working in the sector), the capacity to access the work seems to depend on fitting a particular socio-economic profile, albeit one that is broadly defined.

This illustrates a basic, if sweeping, problem with a job-creation strategy based on international outsourced call centre work: those best positioned to undertake the work can become rapidly uninterested (given the levels of attrition seen and the aversion towards the work as a longer-term job prospect), while those without an internationally exposed background are considered less appropriate by companies. This intersects with problems associated with promoting an outsourcing model based on high call volumes and low costs and the reliance on competing on the basis of "cheap", casual and temporary labour. The characterization of the typical BPO call centre worker would therefore be a young university student or graduate, possibly from a middle-income background, seeking a temporary position to acquire extra cash, rather than a person – from whatever background – seeking a long-term position and motivated to acquire an appealing post. Challenging perceptions of the BPO sector as low-skilled and therefore open to all, particular workers have been positioned to access the work on the basis of a requisite combination of confidence, cultural suitability and personality.

Arguably, with the portfolio of international work having diminished, the international cultural demands on workers have receded, putting greater emphasis on agents' cultural familiarity with Kenya and the East African region as a whole, and thus potentially enhancing the ability of those less educated to gain employment on accounts that are not based on international voice services. Nonetheless, many workers and other stakeholders hope that international work will pick up again in time and that internationally oriented BPO will become established as the mainstay of the Kenyan sector. The analysis of BPO agents' reflections on the promise demonstrated by less educated workers suggests that companies in the sector benefit, and could

benefit still further, from employing a broader base of candidate. In the light of agents' positive reflections on particular relational elements of BPO call centre work, this, in turn, suggests the potential to increase the developmental implications of the work by offering opportunities to others in the labour market to acquire new skills. Though company selection procedures remain anchored in logics of efficiency and selecting arrangements that aim to optimize resources, BPO's intended association with "development" as employment creation suggests a need for a greater focus on distributing opportunities. This would ensure that the relational gains from general work experience – such as the enhanced self-esteem acquired in response to the challenges of BPO work – continue to be extended to those not from a middle-income background.

However, in the light of the financial difficulties experienced by BPO companies, the suggestion that BPO work offers promising relational benefits to agents should not overshadow the remuneration problems faced by the sector's workforce. As part of an analysis of BPO workers' "compensation", this discussion is presented in the following section.

4.4.3 Compensation

> "I think they don't really solve it [attrition] – they don't really look at the problem. They just recruit. Because we have quite a number of youths looking for jobs – so when you leave, someone else will be prepared to take the job, so they really don't take much consideration into checking why did you leave, or try to work that out. And also retention – I would say in my company it's quite poor, it's quite poor. If you declare that you want to leave, you just have your notice and nobody will bother with why are you leaving. You just have your notice and that's it."
> (Maxwell, agent, 30/01/2013)

The theme of "compensation" more expressly encapsulates the material aspects of workers' experiences of BPO call centre labour. Though there is variation in the sector, agents typically earn a starting salary of between KSh

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(Kenyan shillings) 15,000 – 25,000 per month (US$175 – US$295), with a salary closer to KSh15,000 more common than KSh25,000.[43] Though this may be regarded as a living wage, it is not considered especially appealing (as pointed out by an ICT Board official, 12/09/2012) and leaves little scope for anything beyond living month to month. While Kenyan law stipulates that casual employment is permitted for up to six months, or a maximum of 12 months in an 18-month period (Wausi et al., 2013, 45), variation between BPO companies and the sector's problematic financial record make work far from secure.[44] As Rachel (18/01/2013), an agent, commented, permanent work is difficult to acquire:

> "In a call centre you are normally… you don't have a temporary or a permanent… It's hard to get a permanent. So they employ you as a consultant and most of the consultant contracts are normally renewable after one year."

For agents, the primary attraction to the work is seen as the ability to earn bonuses from sales conversions, surpassing customer service levels and simply through one's "adherence" to stipulated periods of availability on the workplace system. Bonuses can enable agents to earn four times their basic salary, which made BPO work very appealing at an earlier point in its short

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43 Captive call centre agents commonly earn starting salaries equivalent to three or four times that of their BPO counterparts. Across other sectors, the typical monthly salary for BPO agents is similar to that of other positions considered "semi-skilled", such as approximately KSh13,000 per month (US$152) for a general clerk. "Unskilled" workers such as urban-based general labourers can earn approximately KSh10,000 per month (US$117).

44 Employees and companies share equally a monthly US$3.20 contribution to the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF), as well as a US$4.00 social security contribution to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). Wausi et al. (2013) detail contractual relations between BPO employees and employers, including a maximum pension fund contribution of 5 per cent of a worker's basic salary, while noting that there is variation in pension provision between companies.

history (as highlighted by an agent, 28/02/2013). Nonetheless, university graduates aware of friends earning more in other sectors are frequently influenced to leave their companies in search of opportunities elsewhere (as explained by an HR official, 25/09/2012), which means BPO is treated as a stopgap sector. Specifically within the BPO sector itself, companies have also struggled to retain staff, who hear about better paid work at rival companies and leave their positions.

As discussed, the issue of pay stems directly from the companies' need to compete – both with one another and internationally – on low costs, leading to downward pressure on labour costs and an increasing worker tendency to regard the sector as a stopgap. Though some agents speak enthusiastically about earning bonuses, these difficulties have strongly impacted on the workforce: the most striking material aspect of agents' experience has been being dramatically underpaid or even not paid at all. In the wake of declining contracts and profits, certain companies have not paid their agents regularly (with some going out of business entirely), providing salaries at only 30 per cent of agreed rates or only paying every few months (as highlighted by an agent, 18/09/2012). Examination of the agents' material circumstances indicates that the sector has not made good on policy aims, with the non-payment of salaries proving damaging and scarcely supportive of agents' quality of life. Without recourse to a government arbiter or the union representation characteristic of parts of the manufacturing and public sectors in Kenya, agents have been left uncompensated (yet describing charismatic management and companies' perceived honesty about their financial situation as the impetus for many to remain in their jobs regardless – as underlined by an agent, 28/02/2013).

It is not the case that each and every BPO call centre has failed to pay staff, but the sector's reputation has been damaged. While the original economic rationale behind the sector's potential within the international market would not necessarily have gone hand-in-hand with casualized labour practices, the initial emphasis on high-volume, low-cost services made the cost of labour a key variable in its value proposition from the government's perspective and led to intense pressure on workers' remuneration. Many agents said that they feel that

job security is poor and that they can be readily dismissed as easily replaced cheap labour, especially considering that client companies may themselves terminate an agent's position (as underlined by an agent, 16/10/2012). This means that those working in BPO are subject not only to their own company's authority, but also to that of clients. Furthermore, in the context of company financial problems, agents privy to accounts-related details berate middle-ranking, more senior members of staff – earning salaries that dwarf those of agents and apparently without the awareness of company owners and the most senior staff – for continually ensuring that their own salaries are prioritized, while agents may fail to pay personal bills, have to borrow funds from colleagues, and even face evictions (as pointed out by a TL, 12/10/2012).

This outcome illustrates that the material dimension of agents' work – job security and the level of compensation – is experienced with considerable ambivalence. When companies are able to sustain profitable operations, salaries are available at a modest, perhaps good, level of income. In times of difficulty, agents bear the brunt of diminishing internal funds and may find those senior to them inclined to provide for themselves. While those experienced in international voice work appear to display a positive subjective disposition towards elements of personal development and the confidence gained as a result of BPO work, this should not distract from the fact that a sector that was once earmarked to improve livelihoods now appears to be undermining working conditions.

4.5 Conclusion

In view of the developmental aspirations of those promoting Kenya's BPO call centre sector, the foregoing analysis examined some of the outcomes of the BPO sector's expansion and the implications for its intended beneficiaries, young workers. An initial analysis of the context of the BPO sector's creation was provided, leading to a discussion of the shift in emphasis away from the international market towards the domestic economy. Despite the wave of media attention, stakeholder enthusiasm and entrepreneurial activity within Nairobi,

BPO call centres faced considerable problems in establishing themselves on the international market, with the interest on the part of Kenya's government being ultimately fleeting (despite the emphasis on BPO within the Vision 2030 initiative).

In the light of the greater credibility around BPO practices within Kenya's economy, my analysis suggests that the sense of secrecy and suspicion that traditionally characterized inter-company relations has diminished, creating a new appetite for the outsourcing of formerly in-house processes. Rather than representing a means of asserting Kenya's position internationally, BPO is instead contributing to a legitimation of outsourcing as a cost-cutting strategy within the domestic economy. In addition to the outsourcing of internal business processes, the discussion also demonstrates that BPO operators have developed ways to interact effectively with customers on-call and to meet new forms of demand and capture input from customers. This is giving rise to renewed interest in call centre operations on the part of other companies in Nairobi.

The BPO sector's evolution appears to have undermined workers' interests. While the set of conditions underpinning employment in the BPO sector were arguably less than supportive of workers' prospects at the outset, my analysis suggests that the sector's evolution has led to a more acute casualization of its labour by directly undermining workers' jobs, particularly within the telecommunications sector. Perhaps illustrated most clearly by workers' walkout and strike action at Spanco Raps, the overall outcome appeared perverse in the light of the government's early understanding that establishing BPO work would stimulate the creation of attractive jobs (Government of Kenya, 2008a, 78). Despite aspirations to reposition Kenya internationally on the basis of exporting voice services, it can therefore be suggested that the evolution of the BPO sector has been conducive to the importation of negative labour practices (and the reliance on often expensive, external expertise).

In the light of these critical observations, a deeper exploration of worker experiences of BPO call centres was undertaken (see section 4.4), which

enabled an investigation of the premise that an outsourced call centre sector could be conducive to "development" and enhancing workers' livelihoods. With reference to the theme of "compensation" (see section 4.4.3), my analysis highlights that the under- and non-payment of salaries is an unfortunate feature of many agents' experiences. It is also an outcome that those promoting the BPO sector appeared to show no substantive interest in. In spite of the capacity for agents to earn substantial bonuses when the sector was launched, this points to a highly problematic set of circumstances with respect to workers' "material" interests.

Without wishing to downplay the significance of undesirable working conditions and non-payment of salaries, evidence of agents' enthusiasm for BPO call centre work was also considered in view of the "subjective" and "relational" aspects of the work (see sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2). Those in a position to endure the call centre labour process appear to establish enhanced confidence by undertaking tough work and company training. This confidence on the part of agents experienced in BPO has been recognized elsewhere within the labour market and has enabled workers to use BPO as an entry point or "stopgap". This suggests that managers in a number of BPO working environments consciously strive to create jovial atmospheres and to eschew conventionally rigid company hierarchies (the significance of which is explored further in chapters 5 and 6).

Based on an examination of the "profile" of workers within the BPO call centre sector (section 4.4.2), my analysis underlines that BPO work is largely unattractive to its target group, university-educated graduates, and that, while this has contributed to attrition within the sector, it has also led to an eroded emphasis on "academics" and to greater opportunities for less-educated workers. This reduced emphasis on agents' levels of education notwithstanding, internationally oriented BPO call centre work appears particularly suited to agents from a "middle-income" background, despite the unattractiveness of the work to many graduates. In addition to the pressure on salaries resulting from the companies' high-volume, low-cost model, the apathy of many agents from a middle-income background – despite their cultural suitability for the work –

highlights a further difficulty with respect to the premise that BPO call centre work is likely to be appealing to graduates.

While the analysis of workers' experiences of BPO highlights a number of challenges to the sector's association with "development", the expansion of call centre work within Kenya's labour market also raises the question of how companies endeavour to replicate consistent standards of service. As the centrepiece of the call centre labour process, this invites particular attention to how companies seek to produce, manage and control particular types of agents. Given the potential scope for differences between BPO and captive call centres, the analysis presented in chapter 5 offers a focused interrogation of the nature and operation of forms of control within call centre working environments in Kenya.

5 Consistency and control: flexible and subordinate selves

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 5, the significance of interactive service work in the Kenyan labour market is investigated by analysing the managerial demands on call centre agents' capacities. The analysis draws upon the conceptual framework of "workplace selves" presented in chapter 2 (section 2.5), in which it was suggested that call centre power relations can approached as a matter of controlling particular types of workplace "self".

Building on the discussion of the "development" (Government of Kenya, 2008b, 8) implications of the BPO sector presented in chapter 4, in this chapter my analysis focuses on what Kenyan companies want their agents to be and to do. In order to present a discussion of how workplace power relations are established, this is based on an examination of the means with which BPO and captive call centres seek to create, mould and manage particular types of agents. The analysis is based on interviews with agents and other stakeholders experienced in BPO and captive call centre work. The chapter also integrates the analysis of quantitative data acquired from questionnaires completed by a sample of BPO and captive agents, in addition to the analysis of ethnographic field notes (as discussed in chapter 3).

In view of the emergence of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market, I draw upon the notion of "subjectivities" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) to consider the type of recruit sought by different call centres. In section 5.2, this includes discussion of the emphasis on young labour market entrants without work experience within BPOs, and on older, experienced and well-educated recruits within captives. My analysis explores why company managerial strategies are based on the recruitment of agents with particular characteristics. In section 5.3, this leads to a focus on the ways in which call centre companies seek to manage their agents through processes of disciplining, ordering and

direct control. Based on the conceptualization of "workplace selves" presented in chapter 2 (sections 2.4 and 2.5), the analysis considers the role of various forms of workplace monitoring oriented towards enabling "panoptic" visibility (Foucault, 1978, 207). In view of the companies' need for consistent, predictable outputs, the analysis continues by addressing how companies endeavour to foster agents' capacities to interact with customers and to demonstrate emotional resilience.

Building on these findings, in section 5.4 the terms "flexible" and "subordinate" selves are proposed as a basis on which to conceptualize BPO and captive agents respectively. This is based on a discussion of agents' contrasting statuses within their companies and the role of agents' perspectives and input within BPO working practices. The intention is to examine how BPOs adopt managerial strategies that go beyond a conventional approach of direct control and instruction, creating limited sites of autonomy as a strategy of enhancing their agents' performance.

5.2 Ideal recruits

In order to explore what constitutes an "ideal" recruit to call centre work in Kenya, a discussion of the characteristics that are sought by BPO and captive operators is presented in this section. It is organized by the themes that emerged in the analysis of the data, starting with "education, attitude and humility", and followed by "patience, age and skill sets" and "adaptability, experience and 'openness'".

5.2.1 Education, attitude and humility

Kenya's internationally oriented BPO call centres were not strictly the first instance of telephone-based customer service and sales roles (given the earlier interest in such services of the telecommunications company Safaricom and of Telkom Kenya, the formerly state-run monopoly "telco"). The creation of an outsourced call centre sector, however, has catalysed demand for workers with new skills. In this broad sense, the labour involved – and the attention to

workers' suitability – is different to what is required by other sectors, in which there is less of an emphasis on customer–employee exchange.

In keeping with the enthusiasm towards BPO at the sector's outset, the expectation was that urban-dwelling, university-educated and "neutral" English-speaking graduates would represent high-quality, committed labour market entrants (as highlighted by a member of the BPO/ITES Working Group, 08/04/2013). Nonetheless, BPO recruitment practices now acknowledge the high level of commitment from diploma-holders (and at times secondary-school leavers), leading companies to reduce their emphasis on university degrees (as noted in chapter 4).[45] This reflects an awareness of some graduates' lack of commitment to call centre work (as pointed out by a BPO manager and a company owner, 02/03/2013), which they may regard as inconsistent with their level of education and professional prospects (as a former BPO TL (team leader), 30/04/13, underlined). As Mary's reflections outline (BPO agent, 04/04/13), those employed as agents need to be "humble" to prevent their professional aspirations from "spoil[ing]" them:

> "Someone went for the interview, then she was recruited and she was a CSR [customer service representative]. She was always saying that I will work but I am still waiting to graduate and then I can get a better job. You get that notion that didn't even make her last. Because first of all you are not humble, you do not want to adapt to this situation … you will always be thinking of the front and you do not know about it. So this is what you have got right now then adapt to it. If that comes, well, very good. If it doesn't, be yourself on this and then move high … basically that notion has spoiled so many people."

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45 For example, a former BPO TL (team leader – 12/10/2012) – who was otherwise far from straightforwardly upbeat about her company – enthusiastically told the story of a cleaner who spoke excellent Swahili being employed on a Tanzanian account, who went on to perform well despite having no experience or extensive education.

This is not to argue that every university student or graduate is antagonistic towards working as an agent. It does, however, suggest that a key characteristic of suitable workers is to be amenable towards what is required by the work (which one BPO agent, 04/01/13, described as being "teachable" and not having an "attitude").

The high level of staff attrition reported by many BPOs is indicative of the unpopularity of the work among certain recruits (whether as a result of inconsistent remuneration or the monotony of the work). BPO agents included in the questionnaire sample were employed for a shorter period of time than captive agents. The questionnaire results indicate that 86.8 per cent of BPO agents were working for their companies for one year or less, while 60 per cent of captive agents were working for two years or more.[46]

The level of attrition also suggests that utilizing this form of "21st-century skill set" (as described by a BPO sector representative, 25/09/2012) does not appeal to all. With much of the work based on repetitive processes, BPO call centres seek to recruit individuals who demonstrate upbeat, chatty and "happy-go-lucky" (BPO agent, 30/01/2013) personalities on a consistent basis, as well as those able to be calm and unflustered when on-call (as highlighted by a former BPO agent, 15/01/2013). This seems to be what "communication" skills mean in practice, as Julia (a former BPO agent, 15/01/2013) highlighted in reference to what companies look for in recruits:

> "You have to be really good in communication, you have to be
> really good in listening – you're dealing with clients who are really
> irate. You have to listen and you have to be calm. And then, at the
> same time, you really had to be patient with them [the customers],
> and you have to be a fast thinker and to know how do I work it out
> to make the target, and you really have to be fast. And then, at the
> same time, you really have to be social, and, you know, be ready

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46 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Figure 2: Time with current company" and "Table 2: Length of time working for current company".

to work under pressure because there was really lots and lots of
pressure. You're more of a, you know … you're not boring to the
client, you want this client to keep listening to you."

As suggested, recruitment to BPO roles involves identifying candidates who are prepared to develop a level-headed workplace demeanour. Beyond being a mere calming influence, agents are even, as Julia alludes to, required to entertain customers when on-call.

5.2.2 Patience, age and skill sets

In the absence of performance records at the recruitment stage, the degree to which applicants will maintain their calm and energy when ultimately in the job is difficult to establish. The BPO sector's flagship call centres (along with some telecommunications captives) make use of particular selection activities by way of compromise. In order to identify potentially even-tempered applicants, these include role plays and team exercises, involving tense, difficult customer–agent scenes that recreate the most challenging activities on the operations floor (as highlighted by a BPO HR official, 25/09/2012). Along with aptitude tests, these activities are complemented by telephone interviews to assess applicants' manner of speech. Furthermore, companies test applicants' use of a computer and their ability to read passages out loud (as reported by a BPO agent, 10/10/2012) in order to exclude those with excessive "mother tongue" speech (as commented by a former BPO account manager, 11/10/2012). Identifying ideal recruits focuses on agents' "patience", which some involved in assessment view as an inherent, rather than a teachable, disposition (as a BPO QA (quality analyst), 18/02/2013, argued for example).

With agents required to be chatty, calm and patient on a daily basis, some argue that growing tired and under-performing is inevitable after approximately two years. For instance, a BPO agent (10/10/2012) pointed out that managers have a preference for workers who are "fresh", and even encourage more established agents to move on after an extended period in the job. This suggests that companies need to replace agents over time who may be liable to

burn out. In any case, BPO agents' tendency to seek other work – within other call centres and elsewhere entirely – ensures that there is a need to find new recruits on a regular basis (as underlined by a former BPO sales manager, 02/05/2013).

Staff attrition is generally less of a feature of captive call centres, partly because agents are integrated within larger organizational structures and are regarded as permanent employees (as emphasized by a BPO sector representative, 25/09/2012). Working for a larger captive company generally requires a degree – perhaps in, for example, banking specifically – and multiple years of work experience. This is a requirement that John, a contact centre[47] manager for a bank, outlined (13/02/2013):

> "When the call centre started they used to take degree and
> diploma, but now … it doesn't really matter which field or
> department you are going into, you have to have an
> undergraduate either in banking or the business field. That way
> you are more able to tackle whatever is ahead of you."

As this comment highlights, bank captives regard a banking or business degree as a prerequisite because an agent needs to rapidly assimilate comprehensive knowledge of a range of financial products and services. Captive positions are based on higher levels of pay, greater scope for promotion, and greater job stability overall (for instance, the head of a bank's contact centre,13/02/2013, outlined the favourable terms afforded to workers). These conditions are particularly characteristic of the numerous banking call centres initiated over the past few years. Though there may be a similar requirement for a measure of humility on the part of captive agents, the superior "top percentile" rates of pay (as commented by a head of customer service – bank, 08/10/2012) offered within the captive portion of the call centre sector are considered likely to inhibit

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47 Companies' call centres may also be referred to as "contact centres". This is in recognition of the role of agent–customer interactions that take place via social media and email, as a supplement to voice services.

feelings of being professionally unfulfilled. In common with their BPO counterparts, large telecommunications captives handle substantial call volumes. However, their agents are much better paid than BPO agents and are employed on a more secure basis, in common with the banks' agents.

Owing to the abundance of labour market entrants, BPOs have been able to draw upon a large pool of applicants with which to replace those who leave (as well as, in some cases, rehiring former employees). A key point of difference to captive recruits relates to age. BPO agents are commonly under the age of 25, and may even be considered unsuitable if older (as suggested by a BPO TL, 18/02/2013). The questionnaire results indicate that captive agents included in the sample were on average 6.01 years older than BPO agents.[48] The orientation towards younger, inexperienced workers within BPOs is concomitant with the lower pay levels offered than in captives. It also reflects a perception on the part of BPOs that older, more established workers are unlikely to endure or tolerate the work (as a BPO agent indicated, 10/10/2012). While some BPO workers have commended the opportunity to increase earnings through bonuses (such as a former BPO TL, 28/02/2013), salaries within BPOs are approximately a third or a quarter of captive salaries. For BPO agents, call centre work is based on renewable contracts and non-fixed weekly hours, which undermine job security and – in combination with the sector's immaturity and the lack of long-term career prospects – makes agents inclined to regard the sector as a "stopgap" (as commented by an investor, 25/01/2012) or springboard to other opportunities.

With the exception of telecommunications captives (which handle high call volumes), captive call centres impose fewer workplace targets on their agents than BPOs (as underlined by a bank's contact centre manager, 30/04/2013, who also had experience of running a team of agents at a BPO). Samuel, a customer care agent at an energy company (02/03/2013), pointed out that the

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48 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Figure 3: Age of agents" and "Table 3: Mean age of agents".

emphasis at his company was on addressing a customer's query, rather than answering a particular number of calls:

> "You wouldn't say that you have an individual target as such, or a shift target. Basically, it's to try, as much as possible, to sort all these customers – not really hurriedly, because you want to pick everything – but satisfactorily, sort them out, as well as make sure that you don't miss any calls. So I would not really say we have a target – you have to pick 50 calls, or 80 calls. No, you have no control over the calls that are coming in. The lines are open; as long as your system is on ready for you to receive calls, a call will come."

This reflection suggests that some captives, particularly those without the high call volumes characteristic of telecommunications customer service, focus on a comprehensive response to customers' queries. This is different to BPO and captive operations based on telecommunications, where dealing with a large number of calls leads companies to stipulate individual and team targets to stimulate a quick turnaround.

As a result of different priorities, non-telecommunications captives, such as banks and energy companies, are not reliant on recruiting the large numbers of energetic talkers that preoccupy BPOs and telecommunications captives. Indeed, as a manager of a bank's call centre highlighted (02/02/2013), agents are sourced from within company structures rather than being recruited specifically for call centre roles, which illustrates a limited focus on identifying chatty, upbeat personalities among new recruits. Alternatively, but with the same consequence for captives' interest in recruitment expertise, banks may also recruit seasoned agents with experience of working in, for instance, a telecommunications call centre (as stressed by a bank's call centre manager, 30/04/2013), rather than seeking to train new recruits without existing experience. This suggests that BPOs seek to develop forms of expertise in relation to recruitment practices that are far less of a feature for captives. The locus of skill on the part of captive agents relates to product knowledge and

workplace systems (as employees fully integrated within a company's structure). BPO agents, however, act on behalf of a client company without being fully integrated into the client's organizational structure. This suggests that BPOs require agents with skills that are predominantly interactive, interpersonal and customer-oriented in nature, rather than being anchored in the in-depth, product-related knowledge that characterizes the basis of captive agents' skills.

5.2.3 Adaptability, experience and "openness"

Although the BPO sector is characterized by attrition and a consistent need to replace its agents, it would be inaccurate to depict companies as content to simply hire-and-fire their workers, not least because recruitment and training represent significant costs (as two BPO owners outlined, 02/03/2013). While BPO is unappealing as a long-term employment option for agents, not requiring a specific educational background enables a broad base of candidate to access the work (even if, as discussed in chapter 4, internationally oriented BPO call centre work seems culturally most suited to graduates of a relatively affluent background). As a result, the BPO sector has become somewhat "open" to applicants, with the ideal recruit likely to be young, inexperienced, willing to tolerate low pay, and to possess a capacity and commitment to self-transformation into a consistent performer.[49] This is not, however, to discount the competitive basis of recruitment within many BPO companies (as underlined by a TL, 01/10/2012), but merely to suggest that accessing the work at the point of application is more open than captive operators. Along with a basic familiarity

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49 For analytical purposes, the term "open" refers to two interrelated aspects of call centre work. Firstly, it relates to the extent to which recruitment presents overt barriers to accessing jobs, such as requiring agents to be university graduates or to have extensive existing work experience. Secondly, the term refers to the nature of agents' participation in the labour process, such as the basis on which their views and input are sought by management. The term builds on the theoretical discussion presented in sections 2.4.4 and 2.4.5 in chapter 2, in which employee "empowerment" and workplace "voice" are presented as key concerns of contemporary managerial approaches.

with digital technology, the principal criteria for BPO recruitment relate to attitude, patience and receptivity to managerial direction and the repetition of tasks.

Furthermore, BPOs need workers of an "adaptable" disposition, beyond those who are merely "patient". Despite the repetitive nature of each shift, agents may be required to be able, for instance, to alter scripts *in vivo*, to develop personal sales approaches and to offer their own suggestions about how to respond to high call volumes. They may also be required to rapidly adapt to shifting workplace demands and intensities, such as by quickly learning new products or switching from in-bound to out-bound accounts (as highlighted by a BPO agent, 18/09/2012). Those experienced within BPO suggest that younger workers – in addition to being more tolerant of lower pay than their older counterparts – may reveal themselves as better suited on the basis of adaptability to change. As James, a BPO agent, reflected (04/04/2013):

> "I have worked with a few older people in the previous call centre and, not to judge them, but they were quite, a bit, rigid. And their performance was a bit below par because they tend to be very rigid and always on point about the script, and about what is required, and they don't try to elaborate further… You know, in a call centre it is dynamic – it changes. You know, sometimes you have to come up with your own ideas for addressing a question, or problem, or challenge."

Within telecommunications captives, an agent's age is also important at the recruitment stage. As a telecommunications shift manager (18/10/2012) highlighted in an explanation of her company's approach to recruitment, agents are generally between the ages of 25 and 35. Her company settled over time on a balance between employing young, digitally adept workers and often more "loyal" and hardworking older individuals. The perception that older workers are likely to be more hardworking than younger ones contrasts with BPOs' notion that non-degree educated, young workers can be more committed than older or better educated recruits. Despite the claims of some who have done the work

(such as a BPO agent, 04/02/2013), it seems inaccurate to describe agents' labour as purely low-skilled given the emphasis on avoiding rigidity. Indeed, some agents depict their work as necessitating "creative" solutions (as described by a BPO agent, 16/10/2012). This suggests a desire to validate one's work by presenting it as more than simply routine.

Given the strenuous nature of the work, it seems misplaced to posit "openness" within BPO as a straightforwardly beneficial aspect of the BPO sector's creation. Nevertheless, the notion of openness seems relevant to an additional analysis (which is undertaken in chapter 6) of why elements of BPO call centre work are regarded with a degree of enthusiasm by current and former workers. On the one hand, there have not been opportunities to attain senior managerial roles for Kenyans of less privileged or connected backgrounds (which, as argued by a BPO HR official, 25/09/2012, tend to be fulfilled by comparatively expensive Indian, US and British expatriates, along with more affluent Kenyans). And yet, with the emphasis on merit and whether one can do the job well, some point out (such as a BPO manager, 02/03/2013) that there is a measure of transparency – and, therefore, credibility among workers – behind how BPO recruitment operates. This suggests a potential contrast to many people's experiences of acquiring opportunities elsewhere within the labour market. For example, while learning about a BPO job opportunity may well derive from information passed on by a friend, accessing a BPO position does not rely on having an existing connection, knowing a company associate, paying one's way to a job opening through bribes, or belonging to a particular ethnic group or clan.

For their part, captives commonly recruit agents from among existing workers. If this reflects less focus than BPOs on recruiting call centre-specific talents, then the implication is to restrict access to positions to more established and more formally educated workers. Given captives' relative inexperience in relation to serving customers and moulding specialist agents, over time recruitment practices may change to recognize the potential of a broader base of candidate. Equally, this is not to elide all captives as offering identical working conditions, especially given the similarities between certain telecommunications

providers and BPOs fulfilling outsourced telecommunications contracts. Further to a discussion of the differences between workers recruited into BPO and captive working environments, there is also a need to analyse what companies seek to encourage recruited workers to become in order to meet the requirements of the labour process. This invites analysis of the means by which recruited characteristics develop into more specific workplace subjectivities, as addressed in section 5.3.

5.3 Surveillance and supervision: monitoring and systems of control

In an analysis of the role of managerial strategies for establishing consistent quality and outputs, the deployment of monitoring and evaluation techniques within call centre operations floors is discussed in this section.[50] Following the discussion of what types of agents are sought by companies at the recruitment stage, my analysis focuses on the ways in which ideal traits seem to develop into particular workplace subjectivities and presentations of self (building on the discussion of these constructs in chapter 2, sections 2.4 and 2.5). This includes a discussion of a key managerial dynamic in relation to sustaining quality: ensuring that agents' performance is standardized and predicated on a logic of focused control, without undermining agents' energy, motivation and commitment. Following the same approach as in the preceding sections, the analysis is structured around key themes: "continuous forms of assessment", "assessment and anticipation" and "emotional stability".

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50 As discussed in chapter 2, company monitoring and evaluation techniques represent a key means of producing knowledge about agent performance and disseminating ideas about what constitutes desirable or "normal" conduct. The analysis of such techniques is therefore important to generating an understanding of how companies seek to establish forms of control over their agents, and how agents themselves respond.

5.3.1 Continuous forms of assessment

Company approaches to monitoring and evaluation are based on continuous forms of assessment that are aimed at making agents' performance visible and their conduct malleable. The attention to discrete elements of employee performance – and the deployment of a pervasive, largely standardized set of metrics – seems novel within the Kenyan labour market, both in the use of digitized recording mechanisms and the individualized basis of such records.

Within a call centre working environment, monitoring is especially oriented towards regularizing agents' availability and their interactions with customers. This relies on a combination of quantitative (automated, numbers-based) and qualitative (words-based) measures. At perhaps the most straightforward level, monitoring concerns an agent's "adherence" to weekly schedules – that is, the amount of time spent being available to take calls on a company's system (as described by a BPO agent, 16/10/2012). Within BPO, adherence provides a means to ensure that agents fulfil scheduled shifts, with punitive consequences in the form of salary deductions for non-compliance. It can also lead to rewards, such as KSh1,500 (Kenyan shillings, US$17.5) for fulfilling a month's scheduled shifts (as explained by a BPO agent, 10/10/2012). While their availability is also tracked, captive agents are not rewarded or penalized financially. Because captive agents are better paid than BPO agents, the absence of these salary measures suggests that turning up to work is regarded as a given, rather than something that needs to be actively encouraged.

Beyond adherence, workplace monitoring relates to the recording of discrete, temporal elements of individuals' performance. Though specific metrics may vary between companies, customer service accounts utilize measures such as "call handling time" (time on a specific call), "average handling time" (mean time across all calls during a shift), "average hold time", "call waiting time" (time taken to respond) and "total calls answered". These measures can also form the basis of specific targets to be met by individual agents – such as an average handling time of 100 seconds (as reported by a BPO agent, 16/10/2012) – or by teams of, for instance, 15 to 20 agents required

to answer a specific number of calls during a shift. Within sales roles, agents and teams are tasked with attaining a specific number of "conversions", transforming data about a potential customer supplied by a client into actual sales.

Company metrics seem to be part of a managerial strategy aimed at stabilizing quality and outputs via agents' compliance with continuous demands on their time and energy. Companies also aim to identify differences in performance between agents (whether by comparing one agent to another, or an individual agent's past and current record). While differing in the use of targets, BPOs and captives make similar use of metrics to manage their agents. As Paul, an agent experienced at both a BPO and a bank captive, explained (28/02/2013):

> "There is no major difference in performance tracking and performance management in both organizations … You log in, you work your shift, and you log out at the end of the shift. Or, as necessary, you take your breaks, you log out, you log back in. All that is tracked – how long you take on each call. Average handling time is tracked, how long you take before you pick the next call is tracked, and all this goes into creating a football table, so to speak, of agent performance … it is very fundamental in monitoring and advising staff on how to better themselves, or how to be more efficient and effective."

Though metrics such as average handling time are regarded as important performance indicators, agents face circumstances that are outside their immediate control, such as when interacting with customers who are unable or unwilling to accommodate the pace of a call. A BPO agent, for instance, underlined the length of time that it can take to speak to "old people from the village" (04/01/2013). These challenges generate intense pressure over the duration of an eight- or nine-hour shift. Arguably, the reliance on such metrics within BPOs and telecommunications captives undermines the overall quality of

service achieved, given the focus on clearing calls and keeping one's numbers down at the expense of unrestricted time to interact with a customer.

As a result, there is an apparent dissonance within BPO environments between requiring agents to be consistently fast-paced and time-oriented, yet at the same time customer-focused. The evidence suggests that companies seek to reconcile this through the qualitative means of agent monitoring provided by team leaders (TLs) and quality analysts (QAs). TLs' and QAs' roles exist to ensure that the management of agents goes beyond straightforward intensive monitoring. TLs supervise teams of 15 to 20 agents (or up to 50 to 60 agents within some operations), and take charge of duties such as timetabling and agents' weekly performance reviews (as explained by a former BPO TL, 12/10/2012). QAs are responsible for listening to and assessing agents' interactions with customers, usually by referring to recorded interactions (as reported by a BPO QA, 18/02/2013). This entails attention to phone manner, demeanour and demonstrations of confidence when on-call. These can be understood as key subjectivities that each agent is required to develop and to display. Moreover, as George, a BPO agent (19/03/2013), explained, BPOs expect agents to "control the call", rather than merely be complaisant towards a customer, and to be consistent over the course of a shift:

> "From my training, I was told that I need to sound the same – right
> from the time that you pick the first call to the time you pick the
> last call. Now, most of the guys in the call centre, when they start
> taking the calls in the morning they are very energetic, very good
> at that. Now, come the time they want to leave, this person is just
> thinking that I want to go home, looking at the door, the finger is
> already on the log-out button. So you see, the type of attention
> they are going to give the customer is not going to be a good one.
> So that's what I'm saying, they need to have a professional
> cheerful kind of voice to use on all the calls they have, because
> your calls need not to be different. They are not being handled by
> two people – you are the same person … so you need to maintain

a particular type of voice which is going to be to make it so that you control the calls and you give the customers what they want to hear."

QAs are also instructed to check that agents use the same terms or language as the customer, that they achieve a "resolution" to the customer's query, and that they match the customer's pace of talking (in spite of company targets to maintain a low average handling time). Though there may be scope to deviate from a script, QAs seek to establish whether an agent states their name as part of an "opening salutation", "closes" the call correctly by repeating the customer's name, and then subsequently records their interaction with the customer on the company's system. The need to empathize with a customer is perhaps best encapsulated by a phrase often heard from agents: the goal is "to put yourself in the shoes of the customer" (as commented by a BPO agent, 19/03/2013, which was a phrase I heard from numerous participants). More formally, a number of BPOs separate what they are looking for from agents into specific areas, such as "interpersonal", "troubleshooting" and "resolution" skills (as outlined by a BPO QA, 18/02/2013). As calls are scored on a randomized basis, QAs' monitoring is designed to ensure that agents feel obliged to sustain their standard of service over the course of a shift, with QAs' interventions encouraging agents to rapidly learn what is required of customer-focused workers.

In this respect, while quantitative monitoring appears to be oriented towards attaining specific outputs, qualitative measures seem to reflect an endeavour to mould and refashion agents' dispositions when interacting. In order to combine both areas, each agent is assessed according to an individualized matrix of "KPIs" (key performance indicators, which is an internationally established human resources term). KPIs provide a comprehensive means of assessment in relation to agents' productivity and time-keeping, as well as their energy, politeness, and capacity to listen and interact with a customer. TLs and QAs supervise agents following standardized targets, while at the same time coaching and seeking to mould agents into displays of expected conduct (thus

building on the patience, energy and resilience sought at recruitment and developing these qualities into specific, consistently displayed workplace capacities).

While systems for monitoring agents are increasingly similar in BPOs and captives, BPO call centres in Kenya have pioneered the use of pervasive metrics in managing a workforce. They have therefore been influential, especially as senior BPO members of staff have moved to nascent captives in search of more lucrative, stable work. Though also key within larger telecommunications captives, monitoring that is focused on sustaining a confident yet amenable on-call agent is a striking feature of BPOs,[51] which are reliant on the close control of agents' labour. This is not to suggest that captives are unconcerned with moulding customer-focused employees. Rather, it is to underline that a focus on sustaining standardized on-call interactions is especially pertinent to BPO work, and to maintaining BPOs' claims of a specialism in interactive, telephone-based sales and customer services. In fulfilling outsourced contracts, BPOs are only provided with limited access to client companies' data (as emphasized by a BPO consultant, 03/04/2013), which means that agents fulfil a limited set of tasks on behalf of a client company. However, captive call centres – whether banks, telecommunications providers, energy or media companies – are concerned with ensuring that agents possess a comparatively more comprehensive knowledge of their products and services.

5.3.2 Assessment and anticipation

Companies aim to establish a consistent standard of interactive service across a workforce, while, at the same time, making each agent responsive to individual areas of conduct on which to improve. In being intensively monitored, agents are exposed to an ongoing record of their work. When this encompasses

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51 When observing operations at a BPO and sitting with a QA (18/02/2013), I learnt that the company's QAs even monitor agents' rate of breathing, as an indicator of their level of agitation.

statistical recording, agents are encouraged by those monitoring to regard metrics as a straightforwardly accurate record of various parts of their performance. As a BPO TL commented (28/02/2013), "statistics scores were regarded as more factual [than other forms of monitoring]". Being calculated by a computer, statistical scoring provides a continuous set of scores that appear to be untainted by human interpretation or bias, unlike TLs' and QAs' roles. As Brian, a BPO agent, commented (04/04/2013), company statistical outputs have an air of incontestable authenticity:

> "Now with statistics actually what comes in mind is that this is a computer; it doesn't do wrong. You are told … your average handling time is 480 seconds. Your speed of answer is 4.6. Your attendance is this much. But then again you are being given something that is actually printed out from the system. You actually go back and feel, I need to work on this. But you do not have that much argument about it because I think we have that mentality or that feeling in our heads that the system is always correct. So whatever has been generated from the system has to be the real thing."

Agent agreement with the notion of "the real thing" is not, however, independent of other factors. Both BPO and captive agents who describe themselves as "satisfied in my job" are more likely to regard workplace statistics as an accurate record. Within the questionnaire sample, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between reported levels of job satisfaction and the perceived accuracy of statistical monitoring (.396, $p < 0.01$, n=175).[52] There were also interesting correlations between job satisfaction and other forms of workplace monitoring. Agents' agreement with the accuracy of TLs' reports (.284, $p < 0.01$, n=171) and QAs' reports (.477, $p < 0.01$, n=174) both have

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52 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Table 4: Correlation between job satisfaction and statistical accuracy".

statistically significant positive correlations.[53] This suggests that, from the agents' perspectives, the legitimacy of workplace monitoring is linked to levels of satisfaction and the extent to which agents subscribe to the knowledge that is produced about them.

Because individual performance records differ, agents are provided with a personal overview of their strengths and weaknesses. While the call centre labour process is repetitive and intensive, it seems monitored in a manner that makes it straightforward to identify personal areas on which to improve. This relates both to agents' on-call efficiency and to demonstrations of kindness, politeness and attention to customers' needs. The pervasiveness of the monitoring means that agents quickly learn what is required of them, which was summed up by a BPO agent as "you know that I had to do this to get this" (26/03/2013).

Clarity in relation to assessment measures is also sought by telecommunications captives. As a shift manager commented (18/10/2012), her agents are likely to be able to recite their KPIs by heart. In other words, the clearness of monitoring enables agents to anticipate what is regarded as "correct" performance. As a BPO agent (04/01/2013) pointed out, agents know what they are likely to earn at the end of a month by assessing themselves in relation to adherence, their average handling time and QAs' scoring of recorded calls. For BPO companies, restricting bonuses when agents are not performing seems among the strongest ways of directing performance, which was described by one BPO TL (18/02/2013) as "when they feel the pinch, that makes the difference".

QAs are key in regulating agents to display correct conduct. They undertake one-to-one meetings with agents in which key aspects of performance are discussed, especially those related to the ability to listen to a customer and identify a resolution to a problem or complete on a sale. A QA's role is to elicit

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53 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Table 5: Correlation between job satisfaction and accuracy of TLs' reports" and as "Table 6: Correlation between job satisfaction and accuracy of QAs' reports".

changes in the interactive dimension of an agent's on-call self. Within BPOs and telecommunications captives, QAs discuss the scores that they award directly with agents and show them the predetermined set of criteria on which they are assessed (as explained by a BPO agent, 16/10/2012). When meeting, a QA and an agent listen to the agent's recorded call, while the QA points out what is laudable and what needs to be addressed. This does not prevent agents from disagreeing with assessments, which – despite the standardized criteria – can be regarded as "subjective" in being interpreted by a colleague (as described by a BPO service delivery manager, 15/10/2012). It does, however, inhibit an agent's ability to feel misrepresented or penalized unjustly as the evidence is presented rather than concealed. Periodically, companies require in-depth reviews in which agents undertake a form of self-assessment of their performance, rather than simply being instructed or having areas of weakness dictated to them. "You rate yourself", as a telecommunications captive agent reported when describing quarterly reviews (27/02/2013).

The seeming clarity underpinning the monitoring – whether quantitative or qualitative – appears to allow performance measures to be easily understood and internalized by agents. As Lucy, a former BPO agent (12/04/2013), pointed out, the basis of assessment is free from obscurity:

"It is known; there is no secret. Because we are given that sheet [detailing assessment criteria], or we have it on our screens, so we will look – this is what is needed here, here and here. So that is the same sheet they will use for assessment. So even if they are bringing a new person to assess you, it's the same same [sic] procedure. Your opening script, how long you took on the call, holding, were you able to solve the problem within the required time – we knew, we knew what they wanted."

The implication is that workplace monitoring is presented as "transparent" (as described by a BPO HR official, 24/03/2013) and consistent, rather than being mysterious or discordant. Agents thus appear to be known to their companies – and come to know themselves – through reference to "forms of truth" anchored

in being continuously measured, evaluated and coached. Even though agents may object to the intensity of the labour process, the transparency of monitoring seems significant because it appears to make the terms of success in one's role manifest. Areas of personal performance on which agents ought to work are clear, leading to the development of skills recognized by their company. Agents' reflections on their work suggest that they realize that they must rely on themselves to achieve, albeit with reference to the coaching and expertise of others.

5.3.3 Emotional stability

As a complement to the specific focus on agents' interactions with customers, TLs play a key role in developing emotionally stable, happy selves within their team. TLs undertake continuous observations of individual agents, providing both *ad hoc* and formal feedback in order to coach their staff. In addition to administrative duties, TLs focus on motivating agents and providing supervision on the operations floor (as explained by a BPO agent, 04/01/2013), such as by ensuring that agents do not make false claims about a product. A TL's role involves forms of psychological preparation prior to each shift and the generation of energy and confidence within a team which can be achieved through practices such as telling jokes or singing in groups. It also requires encouraging agents to be in a good mood, without which there is a risk that "you'll have a riot on your hands" with respect to attaining agents' cooperation as a team (as a former BPO TL underlined, 11/10/2012).

Ensuring that agents are in a good mood at work leads TLs to also take an interest in each of their agent's lives outside the company. Though this form of attention is not an official assessment measure, it can be an important means of keeping check on the emotional states of one's agents (as a former BPO TL, 11/10/12, explained in reference to the troubled home life of a member of her team). As a BPO HR official highlighted (17/10/2012), a TL is "like a parent to [their] agents". In this respect, monitoring workers goes beyond the immediacy of the operations floor (as a BPO service delivery manager explained, 15/10/2012). The TLs' focus reflects a need to ensure that agents are not only

attentive to a customer when interacting, but are also resilient to the emotional demands of an intensive labour process. Under the TLs' tutelage, agents are encouraged to develop "patience" (BPO agent, 04/04/2013) through a process of self-evaluation (even if, as discussed earlier, some involved in supervising agents may regard "patience" as unable to be coached – for example, a BPO QA, 18/02/2013).

With agents obliged to answer a series of brief calls and liable to encounter rude customers during each shift, emotional resilience seems to be a key subjectivity in relation to one's success while working. While agents quickly come to know how they are assessed, they nonetheless actively look to their TL as a source of expertise in relation to exactly what to say to customers (as explained by a former BPO TL, 12/10/2012). In addition to motivating and sustaining energy on the operations floor, TLs are required both to monitor their agents' frame of mind and to foster the agents' capacity to endure the work. This reflects a managerial effort to prevent ill-tempered agents from undermining service quality by speaking rudely to customers. It is also important in curbing negative feelings within a team or company workplace which can lead to antagonistic "group thinking" (as described by the manager of a bank's call centre, 02/03/2013).

Because they act on behalf of a client, monitoring agents' moods is particularly important to BPOs. While captive companies undertake a number of operations within various organizational divisions, BPOs' sole focus is providing a satisfactory service or selling for another company. This leads BPOs to rely on intensive monitoring, without which the basis of their revenue would appear to be compromised. If BPOs' agents are not able to be consistently polite to customers when working on customer service accounts, then there is a risk that clients will withdraw their contracts. When running a sales account, if agents are unmotivated and unwilling to perform well, then this jeopardizes the conversion of supplied data into sales. As a BPO owner put it (20/03/2013), unhappy agents can "burn your leads". In order to mitigate negative responses to the intensity of quantitative monitoring, a TL's role seems therefore to be to sustain agents' energy and even-temperedness.

Managing resilient, happy agents thus appears to be based on a logic of emotional containment in relation to on-call conduct. It also seems based on a logic of dispersing stress with respect to off-call conduct. Within BPOs, TLs encourage agents to release stress when off-call, such as by making fun of customers or making jokes with colleagues. Companies aim to keep up morale and individual motivation by providing instant prizes for a sale or exemplary service, by overseeing leaderboards detailing top performers or by passing treats around such as chocolates. A BPO human resources official (25/09/2012) even said his company was providing counselling services to agents to alleviate stress (which seems a dubious cost to bear given that the company did not have a record of consistent payment to agents).

Because BPOs endeavour to contain emotion and facilitate its release, they combine acute attention to on-call conduct with a relatively light-touch approach to agents' off-call behaviour. When I observed operations at a smaller BPO, the TL even exclaimed to his team that "I wouldn't care if you're watching porn here, if you make 10 sales" (25/03/2013). This illustrates that the emphasis when working in a BPO is on one's performance in the context of the specific task of being on-call, as indicated in this example by the number of sales made. While intensive monitoring is increasingly a feature of both BPOs and captives, BPOs seem particularly concerned with regulating agents' emotions and less focused on how agents act in the workplace when not interacting with a customer. When compared to captives, the key subjectivities relate to being emotionally stable and highly focused on-call. BPOs seek to generate revenue through short-term contracts based on high-volume, low-margin work, and their agents are often only employed for a relatively short time.

Captive agents work under different conditions to BPOs, and their companies concern themselves with more than simply generating revenue by serving clients. Though they continuously track agents, captives do not make the same use of TLs as BPO call centres. TLs in captives are generally in charge of a larger number of agents, thus leading to reduced attention on each

individual.[54] This is because many captives do not handle the same call volumes as BPOs. This suggests that they do not feel the need to maintain the same attention to agents' emotions as BPOs, which consider such monitoring imperative. Especially within bank call centres, the result seems to be a less demanding day-to-day experience of the labour process compared to BPOs. As Paul, a former BPO TL who went on to work for a bank's call centre, suggests (28/02/2013), taking a break is essential for agents at BPOs:

> "The main difference between a bank and a third-party BPO is that at a bank sometimes you don't even need a break. You don't have to step out. You can have your meal at your desk. With the third party it was overwhelming; I would encourage that you leave your desk."

Furthermore, captives are part of large organizational structures separated into a series of divisions in which call centre agents are not the core workforce. While BPO agents are required to turn their hand to a wide range of activities (such as in-bound, out-bound and data-entry tasks), captive agents – in being

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54 For example, a media company agent (26/03/2012), who had previously worked at a BPO, commented disparagingly that her company didn't even have a TL, despite employing over 100 agents.

fully integrated members of their companies – undertake tasks on the basis of in-depth knowledge of their company's products and services.[55]

BPO agents appear required to mould a particular type of on-call personality that is patient, energetic, emotionally stable and focused on elements of interaction. Conversely, captive agents seem trained to be product-focused and to fulfil tasks in greater depth, with less attention to their emotional states. The type of self that is sought by a captive company therefore seems product- rather than customer-oriented. As part of established company hierarchies, captive agents also seek internal promotions and, in adhering to company protocols and procedures, appear obliged to follow established

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[55] In order to enable a comparison with BPO agents, the notion of "in-depth" encompasses important aspects of captive agents' job roles. Firstly, the term refers to captive call centres' emphasis on resolving customers' queries, as opposed to the relatively stronger focus on tackling high call volumes that tends to characterize BPO call centre operations. This extends to the relatively greater emphasis on product-related skills in captives, as opposed to customer-oriented skills in BPOs. Secondly, because captive call centres operate in-house, their agents are privy to internal company data and information that are regarded as sensitive. Since they undertake activities on behalf of clients, BPOs, however, do not have access to the same amount of information as captives (as highlighted by a BPO sector consultant, 03/04/2013). When entering into a contract with a BPO provider, a client company is only likely to release the data required for the activities provided by the BPO, meaning that the data that is provided to BPO agents is limited. The implication for captive agents' job roles is that they are able to offer a relatively fuller service to their customers than their BPO counterparts, based on their extensive knowledge of their company's products and their access to the company data that they require in order to provide an adequate service. A further implication is that BPO agents' job roles tend to entail undertaking a broader range of activities than captive agents. This is because, in the endeavour to generate revenue, BPOs take on a variety of contracts for clients. Rather than agents being trained for well-defined, circumscribed job roles – as captive agents are by their companies – BPO agents can be expected to fulfil a relatively wider range of tasks, such as on-call customer service, on-call sales, email-based customer service, data clean-up or transcription.

bureaucratic channels based on approval from authority. As Paul described (28/02/2013), the "open door policy" of his BPO employer contrasts with agents' lack of access to senior staff within banking:

> "When I first left the BPO organization, I was at the level of supervisor. The ranking system here [at the bank] is different because supervisor is a managerial role, and they have – how shall I put it? – not barriers let's say, but, like labels, sort of, that you have to respect. In the BPO third-party organization where I was, it was an open-door policy – CEO, agent, we all fully interact and speak at any time regarding the business or personal issues. But here, there is a process you have to follow before you see a manager in the banking sector. Which is understandable because of the sensitivity, and the nature of the job. It's understandable but we are making strides in adjusting that – really, little bits and pieces from the previous organization to this organization."

With reference to "making strides", Paul suggests that the BPO "open-door" policy and working culture are perhaps something that his current employer would like to emulate. Captives, as Paul's comment suggests, utilize a corporate structure in their workplaces based more overtly on status and hierarchy than BPOs. According to their low workplace status, captive agents are allocated a predefined role based on fulfilling in-depth tasks. As discussed in section 5.4, this presents an important difference to BPO agents, who, despite being monitored intensively, are encouraged to think of themselves as free to be problem-solvers and to work on the basis of personal initiative, rather than status.

5.4 Flexible and subordinate selves

Following the discussion of forms of workplace monitoring, the analysis presented in this section focuses on the ways in which company management of agents can be understood as seeking to control different forms of self (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.5). This includes a discussion of alternative means of understanding agents' role and place within a company, which, as will become evident, suggests that there are contrasting forms of power relations between BPO and captive call centres. In this section, the analysis proceeds by first considering how agents are conceptualized, followed by a discussion of the forms of autonomy in BPO agent job roles and how BPO agent voices are selectively solicited, rather than ignored, by management.

5.4.1 Conceptualizing agents

In utilizing pervasive monitoring, call centre management in Kenya can be understood as reflecting the intensive regulation of individual agents. This is characterized by norms around individual speeds of response and capacities in relation to effectively interacting with customers. The overall purpose is to direct the energy and motivation of a workforce as a whole in order to replicate consistent service quality. In this regard, call centre labour undertaken within BPOs and captives can be understood as being governed according to a logic of regulation, ordering and the disciplining of instances of undesirable conduct. Within BPOs, where the labour process tends to be more intensive than in captives, agents do not end up being recruited for the long term. In this sense, an agent's self can be understood as being "flexible" in that they are employed on a short-term basis, without the promise of more secure work.

The ubiquity of monitoring is the crux of a labour process largely pioneered by BPOs. Nevertheless, there are examples of managerial practices that operate more at a distance than through procedures aimed at achieving constraint and direct control (which is analysed in sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3). Insight into these practices is helpful in setting out how alternative forms of power relations operate, and in delineating the types of self that are required by

different working environments. The analysis of the evidence in this study indicates that at the core of a BPO operation, BPO agents are spoken of as "adaptable" (BPO HR official, 24/04/2013) and as "all-rounders" (BPO agent, 18/09/2012), with the idea being that each agent ought to have the creativity, energy and ideas to respond to a dynamic work environment that requires more than simply undertaking a limited range of tasks. This is another incarnation of the notion of being a flexible self within the BPO context since BPO work encompasses the idea that one must be not only patient and resilient, but adaptable and creative. As a complement to the dissemination of reportedly non-mysterious, individualized feedback on an agent's strengths and weaknesses, each agent is encouraged to engage in an ongoing, personal process of self-improvement. While many opt not to stay in the job for long, the difficulty of the work can mean that an agent can be confident of "surviving" in any other workplace (as argued by a former BPO agent, 10/10/2012). BPOs' managerial approach appears oriented towards the notion that agents are responsible for developing a series of workplace capabilities. Agents are not simply told what to be or what to do; companies solicit their input when evaluating their performance and seek in part to govern at a distance. This includes a strategy aimed at reducing the perception of authority and distance between agents and senior management, thus promoting the notion of a relatively flat organizational hierarchy in which agents appear not to be simply subordinate to senior staff (which is further analysed in chapter 6).

By contrast, captive agents appear more straightforwardly disciplined. Owing to the increasing influence and adoption of techniques first applied by their BPO counterparts, captive call centres also subject their agents to continuous tracking. They thus seek to achieve order and control on the basis of disseminating individualized knowledge to agents. However, captives do not accord the same degree of attention to cultivating upbeat, emotionally stable on-call selves. As explained by an agent with experience of a BPO and a bank (28/02/2013), banks, for example, do not need to measure that "[you] maintain your smile through bad times". The same agent also suggested that BPO agents, as a result of their workplace experiences, are more confident in their

skills and in making decisions than captive agents (as he described it, "They [captive agents] haven't been nurtured or developed"). While BPO agents might not automatically develop in the manner suggested, the comment implies an approach to managing agents which appears to validate confidence and self-initiative.

By extension, captive agents are perhaps not required to be able to "multi-task" (as a BPO agent termed it, 04/04/2013) in the same way as BPO agents. Rather, captive agents undertake a specific set of in-depth activities that are circumscribed and based on comprehensive knowledge of a company's products and processes. Captive agents are simply expected to assist a customer according to their training. They become what the manager of a bank's call centre referred to as "universal agents" (08/10/2012) – that is, agents expected to handle a range of products based on an extended period of training (two months in the case of this manager's company).

Nevertheless, the notion that captive agents do not "multi-task" in the manner of BPO agents is complicated by the demands of telecommunications captives handling a similar amount of calls to BPOs. As I witnessed when observing operations at a large telecommunications captive (28/06/2013), agents are obliged to, for example, input customer data pertaining to a previous call while, at the same time, serving the next customer. The intensity – and the need to undertake several tasks at once – parallels how BPO agents are required to work, which I observed on other occasions (such as 18/02/2013 and 04/04/2013). The difference, however, when considering what type of self companies seek to inculcate is that telecommunications agents are considerably better paid than BPO agents and are employed on a permanent basis. Moreover, telecommunications captive agents are obliged to fulfil the same predefined, circumscribed range of tasks as bank, energy and media company agents. Telecommunications captive agents also have a low status within their companies by virtue of working within a large organization with various divisions and an obvious hierarchy, in common with other captive agents.

Arguably, captive agents are considered by their managers as being straightforwardly subordinate to superiors, which leads to an emphasis on being told what to do rather than being encouraged to self-reflect. In this regard, they are disciplined in the context of their labour, yet are also subject to what might be recognized as a form of sovereign power based on the superior status of other figures within the organization. Captive agents appear to be partly objectified as fixed "subjects", whereas BPO agents seem to be "subjectified" under a more fluid model of power relations. Captive agents are conceptualized as subordinate selves based on a frozen status encompassing the fulfilment of an imposed set of tasks. BPO companies, however, approach some aspects of their agents' activities at work in a more open way than captives, soliciting their input, participation and decisions. This is discussed further in sub-section 5.4.2, "Creating forms of autonomy".

5.4.2 Creating forms of autonomy

Since the creation of the BPO sector, BPOs have accumulated managerial expertise that goes beyond simply disciplining workers according to pre-established norms. As a BPO company owner underlined, one "can't afford to be a dictator in a call centre" (02/03/2013). For all that they apply pressure to agents to sustain a resilient emotional state, BPOs also nurture agents into practices that surpass being straightforwardly represented as being subdued.

In order to sustain agents' motivation, BPOs construct areas of input in which agents are encouraged to provide their own ideas about working practices. This takes place in a limited fashion and does not seem in any way to displace the importance of disciplining agents. However, it advances the logic of nurturing happy selves beyond mere emotional release based on coaching, self-evaluation and cultivating patience. For instance, when preparing for a new, Kenya-based contract involving the distribution of secondary-school scholarships on behalf of a client, the co-owners of a small BPO that I visited (04/04/2013) asked their agents to devise the conversational script themselves, rather than stipulating a mandatory procedure. Agents were tasked with working on a script in small groups, before presenting their suggestions to the team of

approximately 20 agents for discussion, debate and feedback. When I spoke with a co-owner later in the day, he underlined the effectiveness of asking his agents to develop their own tools, thus establishing a degree of ownership over their job roles. This approach also entails inverting the notion that senior figures ought to simply mandate instructions and seek direct control over their employees' actions.

As a TL at another BPO emphasized (01/10/2012), agents are recognized as the lifeblood of the company, who are "empowered" to suggest the best way of undertaking operations. Agents are made to feel that their opinions are important to the running of the business, such as in generating ideas for how to source new contracts. At other companies outside the BPO sector, the TL underlined, the managerial practice is likely to be based on "shut up and follow orders". Rather than seek to completely constrain the company's workforce, a former BPO sales manager highlighted that her company had a culture of "speaking out" (02/05/2013). Furthermore, TLs were trained to be able to supervise "10 different characters in each team" and to value diversity, rather than seek to mould homogenized workers (which is something that seems in tension with companies' efforts to standardize consistent outputs based on predictable conduct). These comments were made by individuals who were able to achieve within their companies and who occupy more senior positions, and who, therefore, may be inclined to offer an overly positive reflection. However, even if it might be simplistic to regard agents as straightforwardly "empowered", this suggests a managerial approach that contrasts with that of captives, which do not appear to have the same consideration for employees' input or encourage "speaking out".

This is not to suggest that openness to employee input straightforwardly illustrates a wholesome, quasi-democratized form of management. Rather, these practices seem indicative of a particular instrumental approach to optimizing how agents perform. As Doreen, a BPO head of quality, stressed (31/01/2013), it is important to achieve consensus from BPO agents, rather than simply impose commands:

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"Whenever you are making any change, involve them – otherwise you will get to have problems with them!"

This comment suggests that, despite the pervasiveness of company monitoring and emotional support, getting the best out of agents relies on encouraging them to provide opinions and to have a degree of input into decisions related to workplace measures. It also suggests that companies rely on permitting agents to have a form of autonomy in their roles. A space is created in which agents are not only able to release the stress induced by the repetitive intensity of the labour process, but are also asked for their perspectives on running the operations floor, in spite of being outside positions of strategic or senior management. While they are regulated to say certain things or perform sanctioned actions, BPO agents are also managed according to a rationale of free speaking in relation to internal company interactions.

BPOs' approach to creating a space of autonomy is suggestive of a sharp contrast with captives. A telecommunications captive agent suggested (27/02/2013) that she and her colleagues regarded senior members of staff with a degree of trepidation, and were certainly not free to express their opinions. Similarly, a media company agent (13/10/2012) highlighted that senior management at his company had a very low tolerance of subordinates' opinions. Rather than being an opportunity to draw upon a broader range of opinions, agents' suggestions were regarded as provocative questioning of the *status quo*, which might even lead to being fired. These comments suggest that unlike BPOs, captives' management of agents can be rooted in practices of dominance and prescription. In BPOs, there is a practice of downplaying officialdom and manifest authority in relation to off-call, inward-facing conduct.

In the light of this, managing BPO agents is perhaps something of a paradox. Since the sector's inception, BPOs have subjected agents to a high degree of monitoring, utilizing metrics and observations to promote normative notions of correct conduct. As the sector has progressed, however, they have sought to engage agents in practices of self-improvement based on facilitation and participation, rather than direct instruction. Significantly, albeit in only

limited ways, BPO management also entails maintaining a space in which agents' views and opinions are solicited. While this appears to be partly about enabling agents to release stress, it is also about accessing the input of a broader tranche of a workforce than senior members of staff, as discussed further in section 5.4.3.

5.4.3 Soliciting agents' voices

When promoting self-reflection on one's performance, an agent's voice is an important feature of encouraging identification with normative goals of correct conduct. However, BPOs also make use of the collective voice of teams of agents. While this is partly to seek consensus, it also seems to reflect an endeavour to enliven teams' responsibility towards devising solutions to workplace challenges. As a result, agents' participation is sought in relation to improving the design of workplace processes. As Evans and Benjamin, co-owners of a BPO (01/02/2013), explained:

> "When you have too many review meetings with the team, and
> things are changing, sometimes you just let them, you put them in
> one room, just the agents plus the team leaders, and they talk
> amongst themselves. They come up with the best possible
> solutions of how to improve the target. And sometimes that works
> – instead of every day, let's say, a manager coming in and
> pointing fingers and all that. So you give them the opportunity as
> well to work it out amongst themselves."

In the larger context of pervasive workplace monitoring, this form of practice occurs only to a limited extent. However, it is significant insofar as it seems to illustrate a logic of paying attention to employees' voices and diminishing those of more senior figures in certain situations. Equally, directors may meet with agents without account managers present, under circumstances in which "no one is quoted" (BPO HR official, 24/04/2013). This provides a means of creating an open space in which agents are asked to identify areas of difficulty or aspects of work that can be improved upon or changed. It suggests that being a

flexible self is partly about being permitted to comment on and propose ideas, beyond simply being required to recognize how one might better adhere to sanctioned modes of conduct.

At the level of a single team, BPO management entails seeking to instil values of cooperation in agents, which complements the focus on their perspectives on handling day-to-day challenges. Teams meet to discuss their overall performance, with each team member invited to contribute to an analysis of a previous shift and to suggest how improvements might be made. As Doreen, a BPO head of quality, explained (31/01/2013), the weekly performance review of a team supplements reviews of individuals' performance:

> "When they are having their weekly performance review, they will
> have it as an individual, then the team. Maybe during a post-shift
> or a pre-shift, the team leader will ask the agents every week –
> tomorrow we are having our pre-shift; come in by 1 o'clock. So all
> agents are in at 1 o'clock. So they review the team. They know
> they are 20. Everybody's name is there, and you talk about it as a
> team. So they will say, last week we had our average talk time at
> 2.2 – this week we had it at 2.9. Guys, what is up? Then they start
> venting – 'oh, we had this, this, this, and this!' And they will say,
> no, you should have done this. So it's an open discussion –
> multiple feedback."

The notion of "multiple feedback" suggests an effort to incorporate the views and insights of individual team members and to animate the team into commenting on itself. The implication is that expertise around performing well is not projected in a purely unidirectional manner. Members of a team are to provide input, rather than be simply instructed. This does not, however, annul the role of the TL as the person with overall authority within the team. The TL, as Doreen's explanation suggests, retains a diagnostic responsibility for identifying the nature of difficulties faced:

"Then from there, the team leader will come up with a focused plan. Okay, so it is probing [getting a customer to purchase a product] that is bringing this team down and its quality – what do we do? It's not the agents who will identify the problem; it is the team leader. So then it is for the group. So how do we sort this out? So guys will come up with suggestions; they will use them. They will use one at a time; they will use all. Maybe everybody is doing well except for one person, so you sit with her – yeah. And everybody takes it very positive by the way… You know, you find two people stuck together, and you are like what is up with these two? So you find, yeah, that is the mentor – mentoring each other, when they sit. So it is more, they know they are a team. And they know when the team is performing well, [it is] for their own good – all of them. So they cooperate with the team leader, and with each other."

However, translating the team's views into a programme of action remains a team task, albeit one facilitated by the TL. With respect to their own performance, agents observe one another and engage in a process of identifying how to improve as a salesperson or a customer service agent. As Doreen's reflection indicates, this can also lead to an agent mentoring another following a group discussion in which difficulties are aired. In this regard, moulding agents' conduct reaches beyond monitoring processes that are directly overseen by a company. Practices of self-analysis can spread to the analysis of colleagues. Corrective aspects of managing agents can be partially decentralized, instead of being anchored in the interventions of company-appointed experts. Notions of correct conduct underpinned by the "truth" about how to perform well can be appropriated and used by agents within a workplace, rather than simply directed towards them.

This ought not to suggest that this approach leads seamlessly to a virtuous circle of control and quality. The notion that "everybody takes it very positive" seems likely to be an exaggeration in the light of the level of staff attrition within

the BPO sector. For example, the practice of naming-and-shaming implied by undertaking group discussions seems unlikely to be received enthusiastically by those tired or profoundly dissatisfied with the labour process. Nevertheless, it does hint at a strategic endeavour to channel agents' voices towards forms of reflection that would not be pursued following a more conventional understanding of who is allowed to speak based on status. Being a flexible self thus appears to rest on a degree of privileging agents' voices and opinions. This points to what might be termed divergent "rationalities of control" within call centre workplaces, which are analysed in chapter 6.

5.5 Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has examined the nature of BPO and captive call centre agents' working roles and how agents are managed. The evidence indicates that there was a significant difference in the age of BPO and captive agents, with BPO agents tending to be several years younger than their captive counterparts. For BPOs, younger recruits tend to be preferable owing to their familiarity with digital technology, their "adaptability" and the lower cost of employing inexperienced workers. Captives, by contrast, tend to employ agents who are university graduates and who have several years' work experience. Moreover, many captives appear to appoint agents from within their existing workforce, rather than seeking to develop expertise in recruitment.

The role of workplace monitoring and the use of continuous forms of assessment have been depicted as a means of overseeing agents' performance, based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. The ongoing recording of discrete, individualized elements of performance within BPO jobs was shown to provide the basis on which agents could be known, and could know themselves, while at work. In the light of the intensity of such recording, and of the potential repetitiveness of agents' roles, the importance of team leaders (TLs) and quality analysts (QAs) was examined. Partly in order to offset the effects of the strenuous nature of call centre work, the evidence suggests that TLs are charged with ensuring that agents are

motivated and emotionally stable. QAs, for their part, are responsible for coaching agents to recognize elements of their on-call performance on which to improve. It was also noted that BPOs make use of a greater number of TLs and QAs than captives, suggesting that the locus of BPO monitoring activities – and the type of subjectivities required of agents – primarily relates to ensuring favourable interactions between agents and customers. For BPOs, the focus on favourable interactions extends to the need for "fresh" workers, both with respect to fostering emotionally resilient on-call agents on a day-to-day basis and, over the long term, to hiring new recruits to replace those likely to burn out. In using fewer workplace targets and relatively less intensive monitoring, captive operators appeared to be more focused on developing agents able to resolve customers' queries, leading to a greater focus on product knowledge and following established company procedures, based on the agents' status.

In view of the composition of workplace monitoring and the focus on particular subjectivities, it was suggested that BPO and captive agents are approached as "flexible" and "subordinate" selves by the management of BPO and captive operators. In the case of BPO, this was shown to stem partly from the short-term, insecure basis of agents' positions. Moreover, within BPO working environments, the evidence suggests that agents are invited to contribute suggestions in relation to working practices, ensuring that the managerial approach is not simply based on direct control. Captives agents appear to differ from their BPO counterparts owing to management's relatively more overt emphasis on the agents' status and their simple adherence to instructions.

The identification of such differences in workplace selves calls for further discussion of *why* distinctions exist in the ways in which companies seek to maintain managerial control over "flexible" and "subordinate" agents. This necessitates analysis of company cultures, hierarchies and workplace artefacts, and the implications for how BPO agents can be conceptualized as "actively responsible" (Fraser, 2003, 168). In view of the difficulties BPOs have experienced in establishing sustainable operations, the discussion presented in chapter 6 offers a deeper analysis of how power relations can be understood to

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reflect specific "rationalities of control" in relation to the management of call centre agents. In exploring agents' reflections on the personal benefits derived from call centre work, the analysis in chapter 6 also examines why BPO agents speak enthusiastically about elements of their workplace experiences despite, at the same time, underlining the intensity of the work, its insecurity and its unattractive rates of pay.

6 Rationalizing control: directed conduct and strategic egalitarianism

6.1 Introduction

In order to consider the implications of the expansion of call centre work within Nairobi's labour market, the analysis in chapter 6 focuses on how BPOs (business process outsourcing companies) and captives[56] might be understood to "problematize" (Foucault, 1987, 10) the management of their agents. As discussed in chapter 2, this, it is suggested, can be understood to illustrate the role of particular managerial rationalities of control. In the light of this conceptualization, the terms "directed conduct" and "strategic egalitarianism" are proposed as a means of referring to the rationalities that govern captive and BPO agents, respectively. In order to examine how agents respond to such rationalities, the analysis also explores how agents' engagement in practices of self-reflection and self-development can be conceptualized as a "responsibilization" of the "self".

As an extension of the investigation into how workplace power relations are constituted in chapter 5, further analysis is provided in this chapter of why it is that BPOs and captives manage their agents differently. In section 6.2, an exploration of the significance of companies' workplace environments is undertaken. This includes a consideration of how workplace cultures might be understood to be consistent with companies' endeavour to control "flexible" and "subordinate" selves within BPO and captive call centres, as discussed in chapter 5, as well as a discussion of the role of workplace hierarchies as an additional aspect of strategies of managerial control.

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[56] As discussed in chapter 4, BPO call centres fulfil voice services contracts for client companies. By contrast, the term "captive" refers to a call centre that is run within a company, rather being outsourced to another provider. Call centre services are increasingly regarded as important to banks, telecommunications, energy and media companies, leading to a rise in the number of captive operators in Nairobi.

The analysis presented in section 6.3 examines how the motivations for running a call centre have implications for how managers seek to organize, control and manage their agents. With reference to the concept of "rationalities of control" (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.5), the analysis continues with an examination of why there are indications that companies seek to manage their agents according to particular logics. While the analysis does not necessarily indicate sharp contrasts between working environments, it is proposed that BPO and captive managerial strategies can nevertheless be regarded as conceptually distinct.

In the light of the inability of BPO companies to offer well-paying work to agents, the interrelation between BPO managerial approaches and agents' sense of their workplace roles is examined in section 6.4. In exploring agents' responses to an intensive labour process, the analysis focuses on agents' "relation to the rule" (Foucault, 1987, 25). Given the qualified enthusiasm with which many agents speak about BPO work, this discussion includes a focus on what agents value about their workplace experiences. This includes attention to why agents speak with a degree of enthusiasm about work that they also regard as repetitive and insecure.

6.2 Environments, hierarchies and working cultures

In order to consider the significance of company workplaces as key features of managerial control, an analysis of BPO and captives working environments and approaches to workplace hierarchies is presented in this section. This is organized as a discussion of "working environments: materials and facilities", "workplace hierarchies" and "the limits of low-cost BPO".

6.2.1 Working environments: materials and facilities

Within a number of Kenyan call centres, the way in which companies set up their working environments appears to be consistent with a strategy of optimizing agents' performance. While there are differences in how companies conceptualize status, agents' input and the use of workplace monitoring, many BPOs and captives endeavour to create similar types of workplace. With agents

obliged to undertake repetitive tasks, the overall goal seems to be to sustain collective "happiness" and energy.

Being based on a low-cost business model, BPOs might be expected to make use of cheap materials and facilities. However, while not every company uses good-quality materials, the general trend appears to be to invest in sophisticated workplace tools. As a chief operating officer at a BPO highlighted (21/01/2013), agents have new headsets, computers and orthopaedic chairs in order to enable them to feel comfortable when on-call. I visited several BPOs (such as 15/10/2012, 04/02/2013 and 20/03/2013) and observed that these companies make use of similar materials. This investment extends to the provision of spaces designed to support off-call release and relaxation, such as designated "chill-out" zones, TV rooms and staff canteens. With respect to support for agents' activities outside the workplace, there are even examples of BPOs encouraging agents without a degree or a diploma to pursue evening courses by providing educational loans. The practice of encouraging agents to pursue further qualifications seems to relate to the involvement of international charitable organizations in the BPO sector. For example, there are instances of not-for-profit organizations providing BPOs with data entry and data clean-up accounts. This was on the condition that the contracted BPOs employ recruits from disadvantaged backgrounds, with one form of assistance being to offer educational loans.

Smaller BPOs employing fewer agents do not possess the same funds to invest in workplace spaces as their larger counterparts, but they too seem to invest in good-quality materials. While companies strive to maintain low-cost operations, being frugal is perhaps secondary to running a workplace in which agents are provided with good-quality tools. Given that BPOs are often obliged to grant access to their working environments to clients, creating a sophisticated workplace also seems to reflect wanting to appear professional to visitors.

As discussed in chapter 4, companies operating in other sectors in Nairobi were previously averse to setting up captive call centre operations. Many regarded call centres as an unnecessary cost to bear, albeit before coming to

the view that providing on-call customer service might offer a competitive advantage (an attitude described by the manager of a bank's call centre with a background in BPO as "reactive not proactive", 30/04/2013). As a result, captives might also be expected to be reticent towards investing in sophisticated workplace facilities. Nevertheless, many share the BPOs' approach to agents' working environments. This might reflect captive agents' position as workers integrated within a company's larger organizational structure, who are regarded in the same manner as other employees. However, there were instances in which captives seemed particularly focused on making their call centres among the most favourable working environments within their companies. A bank's IT officer (18/10/2012), for example, expressed his surprise that his company's call centre was one of the most attractive premises within the entire company, pointing out that agents worked next to an aquarium. Despite agents' low status within the company, he suggested that there seemed to be a particular effort to establish a calm environment. This reflection is similar to my own observations of other bank call centres (such as 12/03/2013 and 02/05/2013) in which each agent worked within a relatively spacious open office and was provided with a large desk and relatively high-quality computer. This suggests that agents' work is increasingly valued by banks. In addition to offering a way of differentiating a company from its competitors through customer service, call centres provide banks with a means of generating new revenue by training agents to "cross sell" when on-call with existing customers (as a bank's head of customer service underlined, 23/04/2013). Having elected to run call centre operations, bank captives therefore seem to share the BPOs' concern with maintaining a salubrious working environment oriented towards happy, consistent performers.

Telecommunications captives seem to surpass both BPOs and banks in the effort to create workplaces conducive to consistent service levels. Telecommunications captives that retain customer service in-house (rather than outsource) handle equivalent call volumes to BPOs fulfilling outsourced contracts. They rely on targets, intensive monitoring and a repetitive labour process, which is likely to be associated with agents' level of stress. As

Margaret (19/01/2013), a telecommunications captive TL (team leader), explained:

> "It has a high stress level of work because you are timed when you go to the toilet, you are timed when you're doing work – you see everything is literally on timings. So it's a high stress level, so we really need to know how to manage these people."

As Margaret's comment suggests, the intensity of handling large call volumes is likely to induce stress in agents. This implies a managerial commitment to invest in facilities oriented towards nurturing agents and replenishing energy levels, in order to sustain service quality. For example, a telecommunications captive that I visited (28/06/2013) provided its agents with an extensive range of benefits. These included a library, a gym, a games room, kitchen facilities and a cafeteria offering subsidized food, which were all on-site. There was also a childcare facility, a medical clinic and minibus transportation to and from work. Because the call centre operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the company provides a range of services for its agents in order to increase their day-to-day availability for work (as explained by a shift manager, 28/06/2013). Beyond providing agents with good-quality materials and creating attractive working environments, this approach reflects a form of nurturing of agents by making additional aspects of their off-call lives straightforward and as stress-free as possible. In practice this does not prevent attrition (as highlighted by a captive agent based at a market research company, who commented that a number of her friends had left their telecommunications captive, despite being well-paid, 24/04/2013). Nevertheless, it illustrates a strategy of investing in forms of support for agents that go beyond workplace materials and creating a comfortable operations floor.

Captives and BPOs therefore seek to create similar types of working environment based on providing agents with attractive workplaces and good-quality tools. There is a difference, however, with respect to the type of working culture that the companies seek to establish within these environments. Although they increasingly invest in high-quality facilities, captives do not seem

to engender the "fun" working culture that is characteristic of BPOs. BPOs seek to establish workplaces in which the seriousness of attending to customers contrasts with the nonchalance of internal interactions on the operations floor. With out-bound accounts, this can take the form of TLs encouraging clapped applause for an agent who makes a sale (a practice described by a former BPO TL, 11/10/2012). BPOs often play loud music in areas next to the operations floor to create a buzz within their workplaces, and they encourage their agents to participate in games (as highlighted by a former BPO agent, 12/10/2012). Some senior managers make a habit of buying pizza for agents on Fridays (as described by a BPO TL, 03/02/2013), while TLs may be instructed to hand out instant prizes as a form of recognition, such as extra cash, a shopping voucher or dinner at a restaurant (as described by a former BPO agent, 21/04/2013). Rachel, a former BPO agent (18/01/2013), pointed out that her former employer instigated dress-down Fridays:

> "They used to have this thing called the 'Entertainment Club' in the company whereby it is for them to decide like to organize team buildings, to organize fun events – like this Friday all of you are going to come dressed in African attire… Such are the things that made it fun … because you know you are looking forward to every Friday. There's something different, something crazy."

The notion of "looking forward" suggests that Rachel's company was keen to alleviate the potential tedium induced by the work's repetitive nature.

In the light of these practices, BPOs seem inclined to approach their workplace cultures as youth-oriented and as "fun" (which was a term used by numerous BPO agents, such as 12/10/2012). After moving on to work elsewhere, certain agents lament the comparatively dour and conventional working culture of their new employers, and reminisce enthusiastically about their former BPO employer (such as a BPO agent, 12/04/2013). BPOs seek to create a buzz, to sustain agents' energy and to create a light-hearted atmosphere. This approach to the working culture of the operations floor seems consistent with the BPOs' light-touch approach to agents' off-call behaviour (as

analysed in chapter 5), which contrasts with their relatively more intensive focus on continuous on-call monitoring and individualized forms of feedback. In view of the scope for stress induced by the intensity of the labour process, BPOs' efforts to instil a particular working culture seem to be another aspect of an instrumental strategy of keeping agents happy, and, thus, better able to attend to customers on-call.

This is not to claim that captives' working cultures are overwhelmingly different to BPOs'; those experienced within captives suggest that their managers also try to create a light-hearted atmosphere (as highlighted, for example, by a bank's call centre manager, 13/02/2013). The distinction, however, is that many BPOs pay particular attention to agents' working culture in a manner that did not appear to be such an immediate concern for captives. In part this was because captive agents are not their companies' core workforces, unlike agents in BPOs. Moreover, it reflects the manner in which many BPOs approach their workplace hierarchies, as analysed in section 6.2.2.

6.2.2 Workplace hierarchies

As underlined by a former BPO sales manager (02/05/2013), many of Nairobi's companies in general can be regarded as "stuffy" and based on what might be perceived to be excessive respect for seniority. While captives create salubrious working environments for agents, their hierarchies appear to reflect a similar formulation to other companies in Nairobi. Captive agents are regarded as low status workers within their companies and are expected to fulfil a range of in-depth tasks according to their company's training (as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.3.3). Though companies increasingly recognize the value of providing on-call interactive services, call centres are one of several company divisions. Captive agents are not their companies' core workforces and do not appear to be treated as essential to a company's overall performance. Senior managers are generally inaccessible to agents and, unlike within many BPOs, there does not seem to be a strategic endeavour to solicit and integrate captive agents'

perspectives on the company's call centre operations.[57] Captive agents appear to be expected to follow official communications channels, to adhere to company protocol and to speak only in accordance with their status.

Many BPOs approach their companies' hierarchies differently. This seemed to be an extension of their use of strategic forms of autonomy. Companies seek to downplay the importance of seniority and to create the notion that there is proximity, rather than distance, between agents and senior personnel. Within smaller BPOs employing as few as 15 agents, proximity between agents and owners may simply reflect the low number of staff overall and the absence of multiple layers of hierarchy. Nonetheless, there are examples of management's efforts to efface differences and to present the idea of a flat hierarchy. The owner of a small BPO (02/03/2013) underlined that he strives to convey a notion of no differentiation between members of staff. Based on his dress and actions, he insisted, a visitor to his company would think that he was a regular agent. This approach parallels my own observations (04/04/2013) of another small BPO where the company's owners pursued a similar approach of seeking to blend in with their agents. The owners also underlined that they believed their agents' salaries to be the highest in the BPO sector (11/09/2012). In order to demonstrate their importance, the owners made sure that agents were the first in the company to be paid.

Creating the perception of a relatively flat hierarchy is also characteristic of large BPOs. Rather than blending in through a similar style of dress, this takes the form of ensuring a sense of access to senior personnel. Agents are encouraged to speak with senior staff, rather than feel intimidated or obliged to remain quiet. For example, a BPO TL spoke (04/01/2013) enthusiastically about

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[57] Perhaps owing to the influence of BPO working practices, some captive managers with previous experience in BPOs do seem to solicit agents' views in certain contexts. A bank captive's manager (02/03/2013), for instance, spoke of her preference for "leaders" not "followers" and insisted that agents ought to speak up if they have a "better formula". Nonetheless, this did not seem to be an official company policy; it was a practice that managers themselves implemented based on earlier experiences.

the "approachable boss personality" of the company's most senior manager. This was something I observed in action when undertaking observations at the company's workplace (04/01/2013), where the manager was very visible on the operations floor and was keen to chat and joke with agents when they were off-call.

Agents' access to the most senior staff appeared to be a feature of other large BPOs. A former BPO agent highlighted (26/03/2013) that the company's chief executive officer (CEO) used to regularly sit with agents in the staff canteen. She expressed surprise that he would join staff and eat the same food, encouraging those present to chat about personal matters instead of discussing work. The company's head of quality also spoke of this practice (31/01/2013), underlining that it could be regarded as part of an endeavour to project "unity" in the workplace and that the company had "a different culture [to other companies in Nairobi]". She pointed out that agents ought not to fear or avoid the CEO, or think "Oh, the CEO is here! Let's run!" This is similar to another BPO's approach. The company encouraged all members of staff to speak with one another and sought to make light of the gulf between senior management and agents. As Frances, a former BPO agent (12/04/2013), observed, the company recognized that "no interaction" between different levels of personnel could undermine morale:

> "I refer to the management… They knew what kind of job we were
> doing. So they were positive about it, and they knew this kind of
> work, if there is no morale, if there is no interaction between us
> and the big people, there will be some kind of tension. And you
> know working with a lot of pressure which is not work-related, it's
> not really a very good atmosphere … we used to have
> interactions. Our CEO, his name was called Steven – Steven
> would come to the floor, walk around, say hi to people, listen to
> their calls, then get back to the office… that gap was not there.
> The gap was very little, very little. And if at all it was there, you
> couldn't notice. He would come back and you would be told, that's

the CEO. That's the guy in charge. The manager in fact was very young, was around 26 years old. He just looked like one of us… They had to employ young people – at least make the place exciting. Can you imagine employing an old person at a call centre?! No, no, no – it would look like a government office."

As Frances's and others' reflections suggest, many BPOs' managerial strategies appeared to be based on a logic of inclusivity in relation to workplace interactions, as opposed to exclusion based on status. While this does not entirely erode workplace hierarchies, it does suggest that BPOs endeavour to support the notion that their workplaces are "open" environments in which every worker's input is respected.

This suggests that the logic of creating strategic forms of autonomy within teams analysed in chapter 5 also extends to the larger workplace culture that companies seek to create. Rather than seeking to establish direct forms of authority, downplaying seniority appeared to be a key aspect of optimizing BPO agents' performance. This is because it encourages agents to feel comfortable when off-call, while, at the same time, reinforcing the notion that agents' perspectives and input are valued by their companies. In practice, this does not necessarily lead to a harmonious workplace in which every worker is listened to. Despite the notion of a relatively flat hierarchy, some interviewees suggested that there remained a gulf within their companies between agents and senior staff (as underlined, for example, by a former BPO agent, 18/09/2012). Within large BPOs, middle-ranking staff may be wary of being upstaged by ambitious agents and may therefore endeavour to deflect attention away from junior colleagues' ideas (as lamented by a former BPO sales manager, 02/05/2013).

Nevertheless, this analysis does suggest an ethos of effacing, rather than reinforcing, status-based workplace authority, even if this does not elicit values of cooperation from every member of staff. Owing to the intensity of the labour process and the risk that agents might quit, projecting the notion of a relatively flat organizational hierarchy seems consistent with the endeavour to facilitate agents' emotional release. Because agents are central to BPOs' overall

performance, it appears that their companies regard encouraging open interactions as a more advantageous instrumental approach than upholding straightforwardly rigid hierarchies.

6.2.3 The limits of low-cost BPO

As explained in chapter 5, BPOs endeavour to combine quantitative monitoring with individualized forms of feedback and soliciting agents' identification with their performance. Seeking to establish "fun" working cultures and to downplay workplace hierarchies seems consistent with this strategy. Despite the low-cost basis of the BPO model, this appeared to reflect a willingness to invest in working environments that are conducive to enhancing agents' performance.

However, there was also an example of a company pursuing an ultra-low cost approach, implying that it eschews the focus on supportive working environments that is predominant within other BPOs. In chapter 4, the analysis noted that Spanco Raps, an Indian company and more recent entrant into the Kenyan BPO market, had experienced a publicly reported walkout and a strike in the wake of salary disputes. By paying particularly low salaries, Spanco's approach was based on undercutting their BPO competitors via especially low margins. As an investor in another BPO remarked (21/09/2012), the strike action resulting from Spanco's approach demonstrates the limits of pursuing an ultra-low cost, high-volume model, and is suggestive of the potential for worker collective action within other companies in the sector.

While I was unable to undertake observations at Spanco, I learnt that the company serviced telecommunications accounts and paid lower salaries than others in the BPO sector. This was highlighted, for example, by a manager at a rival BPO (21/01/2013), who stressed that Spanco admitted to an attrition level that far surpassed that of its competitors. While other BPOs have experienced difficulties in retaining agents, he suggested that Spanco's attrition indicated that the company was content to bring in new agents, work them intensively and replace them as necessary. This implies a far weaker commitment to cultivating the skilled, customer-focused agents that was characteristic of many other BPOs, and a corresponding intolerance of agents' stress.

As detailed in a number of press articles (such as *The Standard*, 06/09/2012,[58] and *The Star*, 20/05/2013[59]), those striking were previously employed as captive Airtel agents. Airtel had elected to outsource its call centre operations in order to cut costs. By being outsourced to a BPO company, the agents' working terms deteriorated dramatically; their salaries were cut and they were transferred to short-term contracts. This led to a legal challenge organized with the support of the agents' union, the CWU (Communication Workers Union). Spanco ultimately agreed to employ the agents under terms "comparable" to their previous Airtel contracts (as reported by *The Star*, 20/05/2013), but not without "paralys[ing]"[60] the Airtel customer service account that Spanco was contracted to provide as a consequence of the strike.

Airtel's contracting of Spanco was not the only example of formerly in-house telecommunications operations being transferred to external providers. With BPO companies experiencing difficulties in acquiring international work, many have sought to acquire local contracts, and have been especially successful in establishing working relationships with the telecommunications sector (for example, a number of BPO agents spoke about working as customer service representatives on telecommunications accounts, such as 18/01/2013, 16/10/2012 and 13/10/2012). In common with Spanco, this has led to examples of BPOs reemploying previously captive agents on dramatically lower salaries. However, in general, the response of those transferred seems to have been to

[58] *The Standard*. 2012. Airtel continues suffering as standoff at Spanco persists. *The Standard*, 6 September. Available:
http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2000065537/airtel-continues-suffering-as-standoff-at-spanco-persists

[59] Kiragu, P. 2013. Airtel losses [sic] case against former employees. *The Star*, 20 May. Available: http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/article-121048/airtel-losses-case-against-former-employees

[60] Okuttah, M. 2012. Strike paralyses Airtel customer care operations. *Business Daily*, 4 September. Available:
http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate+News/Strike+paralyses+Airtel+customer+care+operations/-/539550/1496208/-/wjyrl9/-/index.html

simply leave their positions (as highlighted by a former BPO agent, 10/10/2012, who emphasized the speed with which disgruntled agents left the BPO to which they were transferred). Moreover, the predominant approach seems to be to outsource the captive's operations to a contracted BPO without transferring its workers, thus inhibiting the potential for union-led collective action. While many agents underscore the frustration of not being paid regularly and the stress induced by call centre work, other BPOs do not appear to have faced a mass walkout. By seeking to reemploy a number of unionized, former Airtel agents and to pay ultra-low salaries, Spanco seems to have faced the most extensive collective action in the sector. For other BPOs, this also suggests a further advantage to employing young, inexperienced agents as they tend not to be members of a union (as pointed out by a BPO agent, 30/01/2013, who suggested that collective representation would be likely to be very popular with his fellow agents, but that they were not members of a union).

As a newer entrant to the BPO sector, it is possible that Spanco's management was aware that the BPO sector's flagship companies had invested considerable funds in good-quality working environments and had drawn upon a facilitative approach to managing agents, only to struggle to establish profitable operations and acquire sustainable contracts. As a result, Spanco may have elected to adopt an especially low-cost model in a bid to enhance profitability, based on a less than subtle practice of hiring-and-firing and general intolerance towards agents. Spanco's approach seems different to its BPO competitors, who combine a low-cost model with the creation of strategic forms of autonomy, "fun" workplaces and the notion of a "flat hierarchy". While experiencing staff attrition, other BPOs appear to have avoided walkouts. In part this seems to reflect a tendency to recruit new agents rather than employ workers transferred from captive call centres, thus avoiding the tension created by flagrantly undermining working conditions and remuneration. It also suggests the instrumental benefit of combining a facilitative managerial approach with intensive monitoring, in lieu of treating agents as expendable and utilizing direct forms of control. Further to the analysis of how BPOs and captives seek to manage their agents presented in chapter 5, there is therefore also a need to

analyse why workplace power relations are not simply based on a conventional formulation of authority. This analysis is undertaken in section 6.3, "rationalities of control".

6.3 Rationalities of control

With a view to examining the role of alternative formulations of workplace power relations, an analysis of why companies undertake call centre operations – and the resulting implications for how they endeavour to manage their agents – is provided in this section, which focuses on "captives and directed conduct", "BPOs and strategic egalitarianism" and "supplementing low and no pay".

6.3.1 Captives and directed conduct

Company managerial strategies appear to stem from their motivation for undertaking call centre operations. While increasingly interested in using on-call interactive services as a means of differentiation, captives appeared primarily to regard running call centres as a costly expense (as underlined by a bank captive's manager, 30/04/2013). Although they may recognize opportunities to cross sell when on call (as highlighted by a bank's head of customer service, 23/04/2013), captive call centres have traditionally been regarded by their companies as a cost to be avoided. For a captive, call centres are but one division within an organizational hierarchy, and they are thus run as an adjunct, rather than as a core operation.

By extension, captive agents do not occupy a central position within their companies' core staff. They are organized according to a task-centric managerial strategy; agents are trained to offer comprehensive service to a customer based on an in-depth knowledge of products and services. The purpose of their role is to assist customers with resolving queries, and thus to ensure that customers do not need to call back. The company's success is not contingent on how well it operates its call centre, but on achieving adequate sales. If the company performs well within its market, then customers will continue to call.

Because captives recognize the importance of providing consistent customer service, many invest in intensive monitoring of agents' performance and in attractive working environments that are supportive of agents' moods (as suggested, for example, by a bank's IT officer, 18/10/2012). However, captives were not found to focus on agents' on-call conduct to the same degree as BPOs. Nor do they seek to deploy the same range of workplace expertise to cultivate agents' interactive subjectivities. While increasingly interested in interactive customer service and sales, captives are not concerned with developing a specialism in these areas (as highlighted by a bank captive manager, 30/04/2013, with experience at a BPO). Agents' on-call performance is not linked to a captive's financial performance in the immediate manner of a BPO. Captives generally do not use calls-based targets because they are more interested in whether queries are resolved than the number of calls attended to.

Telecommunications captives are an exception in this respect. They handle a large number of customer service calls, and thus also rely on the use of targets and continuous monitoring of agents, in common with BPOs. Telecommunications captives operate differently to BPOs, however, in that their use of targets and monitoring relates to a desire to handle calls efficiently, rather than to demonstrate service levels that are satisfactory to clients. As noted in chapter 4, telecommunications captives that opt not to outsource their calls do so because they recognize the value of interacting with customers, rather than relying on an intermediary. While other operations may be outsourced, on-call interactions provide the company with direct access to quantitative and qualitative customer data that can indicate opinions on products or changes in demand (as highlighted by a BPO sector consultant, 03/04/2013). In this regard, it would be inaccurate to say that telecommunications captives simply wish to prevent customers from calling. However, unlike BPOs, captives utilize targets and monitoring for the purpose of efficiently dealing with high call volumes in order to minimize costs, rather than to ensure the retention of a contract from a client.

Captive agents did not appear to be strategically empowered or encouraged to identify with individualized measures of their workplace performance to the

same extent as those working for BPOs. Instead, the management of captive agents can be conceptualized as reflecting a rationality of directed conduct. Captive agents are assessed according to their ability to carry out extensive on-call tasks. Owing to data sensitivity, BPOs are only provided with limited data from their clients. BPO agents often only work with limited sales leads or as the first-line of customer service, meaning that they work on a relatively more cursory basis than their captive counterparts with respect to the tasks that they undertake (as highlighted by a former BPO TL, 12/10/2012). By being retained in-house as staff employed on conventional, permanent contracts, captive agents have access to relatively more company data, and, therefore, are better able – and expected – to carry out tasks in-depth. Captive agents are assessed according to whether they meet their responsibilities in relation to circumscribed tasks, rather than their on-call demeanour and consistent energy.

Captive agents are generally employed in well-paid, stable positions, and are integrated within a larger organizational structure. With the exception of telecommunications captives, they handle lower call volumes than BPO agents, under relatively less stressful working conditions. Companies often move agents to other roles outside the call centre in order to prevent them from becoming complacent about fulfilling the role of an agent (as explained by the head of a bank's captive, 13/02/2013). This is different to BPOs, where agents are expected to turn their hand to a variety of tasks on the call centre operations floor, rather than being moved away.

Nevertheless, captive agents are regarded as low-status workers within their companies and are managed as subordinate to their superiors. Whether off-call or on-call, captives' management generally expects agents' conduct to be "professional". Captives do not encourage agents to identify the basis on which they ought to improve aspects of their performance to the same extent as BPO agents. While captives draw upon intensive monitoring, the knowledge that this produces appeared to be a straightforward means of ordering workplace performance and telling agents what to do. Captive agents tended not to be encouraged to interact with senior staff, to speak out or to contribute ideas for the running of the operations floor to the same degree as BPO agents.

Thus, captives appeared to require agents to be straightforwardly "subordinate" and frozen in status.

6.3.2 BPOs and strategic egalitarianism

BPOs have a different interest to captives in running a call centre, which appeared to lead to more complex workplace power relations. BPOs operate on the strength of a specialism in on-call sales and customer service, from which they generate revenue and compete with one another. A call centre is thus central to a BPO's business model, and its agents represent the crux of the operation.

The basis on which BPO agents are managed reflects their companies' motivation to acquire and retain clients' contracts. A BPO's financial record is directly linked to its agents' on-call performance. With respect to sales accounts, companies earn a commission as a result of their agents' ability to convert leads into sales. When fulfilling customer service accounts, BPOs rely on agents who are able to offer consistent, high-quality interactions. BPOs commonly make money on a per-call basis (as explained by a BPO TL, 01/10/2012) and seek to attend to a number of accounts acquired from clients. This can result in a broader range of tasks for BPO agents than captives, but without the same access to company data or expectation of detailed product knowledge. BPOs require agents who are "flexible" and able to turn their hand to a variety of activities. This results in the use of a demanding, fast-paced workplace labour process that appears to create the potential for tedium, tiredness and stress. BPOs deploy pervasive and continuous forms of monitoring to ensure that service quality is maintained and can be demonstrated to their clients. When compared with captives, BPOs paid particular attention to agents' interactive on-call capacities, relying on the use of quantitative, time-based metrics in combination with the qualitative insights and the emotional monitoring of TLs (team leaders) and QAs (quality analysts).

Despite the use of intensive monitoring, BPOs were more likely to draw upon a managerial strategy that is anchored in cultivating agents' subjectivities, instead of simply instructing them in tasks. BPOs thus manage agents

according to a customer-centric approach. This strategy can be understood to reflect a rationality of strategic egalitarianism. With reference to a clear, publicized set of measurements, agents are encouraged to recognize aspects of their workplace performance and their on-call conduct on which they ought to improve. Agents receive an individualized record of their strengths and weaknesses, and are subject to ongoing performance reviews in which their reflections are sought by colleagues working within expert roles. Although agents may object to the repetitive nature of their work, many perceive workplace monitoring to produce forms of "truth" that are universal, non-mysterious and fair. The requirements for success in one's work appear to be made clear by the monitoring.

BPOs pay relatively less attention to agents' off-call conduct. This is because ensuring that agents perform well on-call is imperative, while promoting the notion of a rigid, status-based hierarchy is not. BPOs are less concerned with agents' off-call conduct as they recognize the need for agents to let off steam, to vent and to replenish their energy (as a BPO agent highlighted, 15/01/2013, companies are keen that agents put tension behind them). In order to prevent stressed or irate agents from speaking impolitely to customers, it is important for a BPO to sustain collective energy and goodwill within teams. This extends to preventing agents' dissatisfaction from spreading across the operations floor and thus jeopardizing the service. BPOs endeavour to establish "fun" workplaces in which the seriousness of on-call interactions contrasts with a sense of good-natured camaraderie off-call (as explained by a former BPO TL, 28/02/2013).

BPOs recognize that tired agents need to be replaced over time (and that many are lost through attrition), meaning they need an "open" recruitment policy with which to bring in new staff. Nonetheless, in general BPOs do not appear to regard agents as straightforwardly expendable, and instead were more likely to focus on sustaining agents' happiness in the workplace. As Evans, a BPO owner, underlined (01/02/2013):

"You know, in our sector, sometimes it's not that rosy. A contract may go, or a client may downsize, so you need loyal staff to stay with you and to make sure really that the project is a success. So you need to retain the staff."

This includes promoting the notion of a relatively flat organizational hierarchy based on a perception of staff equality. Just as agents are encouraged to identify aspects of their performance to work on, BPOs also create forms of workplace autonomy by soliciting agents' views and input into the design of working practices. This creates spaces in which agents' voices are privileged over their superiors', while also encouraging agents to take ownership over their work and advancing a form of management at a distance. In lieu of merely taking instruction, agents become actively responsible for their performance and the workplace tasks in which they engage (this is further analysed in section 6.4).

Owing to the role of their call centres in generating revenue, BPOs appear to draw upon a rationality of strategic egalitarianism as a means of optimizing their agents' performance. However, BPOs also rely on paying low salaries. As a BPO owner highlighted (20/03/2013), agents and management both recognize that agents are not well paid. In some cases, companies do not even pay their agents at all (which was described by a BPO agent, 04/04/2013, as a "morale killer"). In the case of large BPOs employing relatively well-paid senior staff, this scarcely seems commensurate with a genuine notion of workplace equality. In some instances, there was evidence of flagrant disregard for ensuring that agents are paid, which seems likely to dramatically undermine an ethos of workplace unity.[61] This invites further analysis of the extent to which BPO managerial strategies engender the flexible, committed agents that are sought, as discussed in sub-section 6.3.3.

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61 This was underlined, for example, by a former BPO TL (12/10/12). In reference to a difficult financial period for her company, she berated more senior, much better-paid colleagues working within the company's finance department for their inclination to pay themselves at the expense of providing agents' salaries.

6.3.3 Supplementing low and no pay

As illustrated by Spanco Raps's ultra-low cost model, BPOs that pay very low salaries and eschew a tolerant, facilitative managerial approach run the risk of staff walkouts. BPOs' profitability in general is reliant on low salaries, and, in some instances, companies have failed to pay agents consistently. A company's inability to pay its staff seemed to dramatically undermine agents' ongoing motivation at work. As Robert, a former BPO agent (04/04/2013), highlighted when explaining his experience of working for a former employer:

> "What used to happen is that, people are mad at the company for extending the payments [not paying salaries] – so, people will not work. If the system is hanging, they will all keep quiet. They were all just sit there and say 'don't tell the IT – let us sit for an hour or two without working or anything.'"

While many BPOs have faced staff attrition, they appear, however, to have avoided the complete breakdown of their operations as a consequence of strikes or walkouts. Despite paying low salaries, this suggests that the BPOs' managerial approach serves to inhibit collective action and overwhelming dissatisfaction. The basis on which BPOs seek to manage their agents therefore seems instrumentally efficacious. BPOs seek to promote, for instance, a notion that if an agent loses a customer through mishandling or rudeness, everybody in the company suffers from the resulting loss of revenue (as highlighted by a BPO QA, 18/02/2013). Some agents reported that their company's management sought to be honest about financial difficulties (such as a former BPO agent, 18/09/2012). This suggests an endeavour to be transparent with staff about a lack of funds, although this is not a view that every agent necessarily shared (other agents, such as 26/03/2013, argued that in practice this employer was not, despite appearances, upfront about the company's finances).

Though they may disagree about the extent to which their employers are open with their staff, BPO agents appeared to endorse their workplaces in

general. As Paul, an agent experienced at both a BPO and a bank captive, explained (28/02/2013):

> "It's this culture shock when you move from that place to another organization. It's just culture shock. Because most of Nairobi works with robot employee business culture, except for a majority of BPOs because they have picked up on this, and found out that is actually beneficial for them."

Rather than apathy or dislike, Paul's reflection exemplifies the measure of enthusiasm that many agents display towards BPO workplaces. For all that BPOs offer low – and even no – pay to agents, agents' reflections on BPO work are not straightforwardly antagonistic. Its insecurity and poor remuneration notwithstanding, this suggests that BPO work is able to offer experiences to agents that they value. In this regard, for those who remain within BPO positions, the non-monetary aspects appear to compensate – albeit perhaps temporarily and incompletely – for monetary shortcomings. For agents, the relatively flat hierarchy, individualized focus and "openness" of BPO working environments that are integral to a rationality of strategic egalitarianism seem partly to atone for the challenges of unstable work.

The basis on which agents are managed indicates another aspect of the legacy of the BPO sector's creation. In a bid to establish Kenya's capacity to export voice services, the flagship BPOs invested extensively in good-quality facilities and workplace tools. Nevertheless, following the BPOs' difficulties with acquiring sustainable international contracts, companies have struggled to provide consistent salaries to agents. One outcome in the sector seems to be the importation and domestication of casualized working practices (as analysed in chapter 4). However, as a result of the experience of the BPOs' founders outside Kenya, a further consequence is the importation of novel managerial techniques. Although not every BPO owner has international connections, the influence of the BPO companies founded early on – and the introduction of intensive, individualized monitoring – has spread throughout the sector, while

also demonstrating the usefulness of call centre operations to other companies in general.

In combining an ethos of inclusion and openness with inconsistently paid salaries, BPO agents might be inclined to perceive their companies' working cultures as empty or hollow (especially within large BPOs in which the remuneration of senior personnel vastly overshadows that of agents). Added to the monotony and stress of the work that many report, the original aim to BPO a form of attractive work might seem unfulfilled from the agents' perspectives. Despite these shortcomings, agents' reflections on BPO work imply that running companies according to a rationality of strategic egalitarianism can provide what are perceived as worthwhile experiences. They also imply that the adaptation of internationally influenced managerial practices has led to a formulation of workplace power relations that is somewhat favourable to agents, providing non-monetary opportunities that supplement low pay, and thereby ensuring that company operations are not extensively jeopardized. Because this observation problematizes the notion that agents are straightforwardly exploited, it requires further exploration of why agents may not be readily negative towards BPO work. This discussion comprises the focus of section 6.4, "Self-development".

6.4 Self-development

In order to undertake a deeper analysis of the perceived benefits of BPO call centre work, an examination of why many BPO agents appear favourable towards their workplace experiences is presented in this section where the discussion focuses first on "work experience" and then on "personal transformation" and "the responsibilized self".

6.4.1 Work experience

In my discussion of the "development" implications of the creation of the BPO sector (see chapter 4), three principal dimensions – "material", "relational" and "subjective" – were introduced as lenses through which to analyse agents' perspectives on the extent to which BPO work might be understood as supportive of their prospects. In the light of the attrition faced by companies,

that analysis identified an apparent contradiction: agents spoke of their work as monotonous and unattractive, but without describing BPOs in overwhelmingly negative terms. In spite of the insecurity behind BPO work, the evidence suggested that agents speak approvingly about some of their workplace experiences. In view of the focus on workplace power relations in chapters 5 and 6, further analysis is warranted of how agents' experiences relate to company managerial strategies.

As noted in chapter 5 (section 5.2), BPOs have tended to employ young agents without extensive work experience. BPO agents suggest that acquiring work experience is the clearest advantage of call centre work: 78.8 per cent of BPO agents (n=52) in the questionnaire sample identified "gaining general work experience" as the most beneficial aspect of their job, compared with 51.9 per cent of captive agents (n=55). This appears consistent with agents' views of the financial benefits associated with the work: only 4.5 per cent of BPO agents (n=3) regarded "earning a salary" as the primary benefit, compared to 18.9 per cent of captive agents (n=20).[62] Both sets of agents appeared to perceive their job to offer worthwhile work experience. However, while a majority of 58.8 per cent of BPO agents "strongly agree" with the statement "doing my job has given me excellent experience" (n=40), only 27.9 per cent of captive agents strongly agreed (n=31).[63]

While this suggests that BPO agents are more inclined to identify work experience as a general benefit, these reported attitudes were tempered by an agent's level of education. There was a statistically significant negative correlation (-.223, $p < 0.01$, n=179) between agents' agreement with the statement "doing my job has given me excellent experience" and their possession of an undergraduate degree.[64] There was also a statistically

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62 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Figure 4: Benefits of current job".

63 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Table 7: Job as excellent experience".

64 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Table 8: Correlation between attitude to job as experience and possession of undergraduate degree".

significant negative correlation between agents' agreement with the statement "I am satisfied in my job" and their possession of a degree (-.160, $p < 0.05$, n=180).[65]

In the light of Nairobi's high unemployment rate, these results suggest that less well-educated agents are more likely to be content to have a job and to gain experience at a company. Indeed, a number of respondents underlined the difficulty many face in general with respect to finding work. For instance, John, a manager at a bank's call centre (13/02/2013), commented:

> "Because in Kenya first of all getting a job is really hard … so the fact that you have a job in itself is something that satisfies you to some extent. You have something to look forward to at the end of the month, and that caters for all your expenses – your rent, everything, your daily expenses, food, transport. So that does have some considerable influence on some people."

The notion that acquiring work is "really hard" suggests that many agents might simply be appreciative of having a job. Although the BPO sector has experienced substantial attrition, many BPO agents (such as a former agent, 26/03/2013) pointed to "hope" as an explanation for why a number of agents remain in their jobs without the guarantee of consistent remuneration. This former agent also underlined that, in Nairobi, people's "greatest fear is to be jobless", and she suggested that her colleagues wish to remain optimistic that the BPO sector will make good on its early promise.

For all that the establishing of call centres was treated with considerable fanfare at the beginning of the BPO sector, those working in BPOs and captives underlined that the work is not regarded as particularly desirable by their families and friends. A shift supervisor at an energy company (02/03/2013), for example, commented that her family was keen for her to move on to another job, despite her enthusiasm for the position and her relative seniority at her

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65 These results are presented in appendix 9 as "Table 9: Correlation between job satisfaction and possession of undergraduate degree".

company. This suggests that call centre work is not considered particularly appealing to those outside the companies. Within the BPO sector, specifically, agents' willingness to work as a call centre agent – particularly under insecure circumstances – might seem simply to reflect the absence of other job opportunities.

However, the fact that BPO agents underline "work experience" as a primary benefit of the work invites further analysis of what it is that agents value. Current and former agents appear primarily to speak in enthusiastic terms about what BPO offers with respect to workplace capacities. For instance, a BPO agent (30/01/2013) stressed that the work had "made me better". In other words, rather than simply providing agents with a job with which to access a salary, BPO workplaces appear to create opportunities for personal growth that are recognized by agents.

6.4.2 Personal transformation

BPO companies in general might be perceived to capitalize on agents' desperation to remain employed. Nevertheless, agents seemed to regard BPO work as supportive of the type of experience that they ought to acquire, suggesting that the means by which companies manage their agents partly aligns with agents' own motivations. In addition to speaking favourably about BPO workplaces, agents especially focus on their sense of personal transformation as a result of undertaking BPO call centre work. For primarily young, aspirational labour market entrants, BPOs seem to offer the opportunity quickly to acquire recognizable skills as a result of undertaking call centre work.

Workers experienced in BPO speak favourably about the manner in which the work facilitates a form of personal development. Agents who have been promoted to more senior positions are perhaps most inclined to speak in glowing terms about what the work offers: a TL (11/10/2012), for instance, stressed that nobody reflecting on their experiences could claim that they did not "grow as a person". Even those inclined to be more ambivalent about their work underscored the personal benefits associated with BPO. Though measured in discussing her company's overall merits, a former TL (12/10/2012)

pointed to an apparently common quip among ex-workers to the effect that her company "is a training ground for Kenya". Since many BPO training and recruitment procedures are regarded as especially thorough by other companies in Nairobi, many former agents suggested that working for a BPO – especially for a well-known company within the sector – contributes to future opportunities. As Catherine, a former BPO agent, observed (18/01/2013):

> "If I had a problem the trainers were really free. You could go to someone and say 'hey, I need you to help me with this – I have a difficult client. This is what is happening, so can you assist me?' It was easy usually to approach the management of that organization … Because you know, without that, I wouldn't have got to where I am currently."

The efficacy of training can create difficulties for BPOs because agents are liable to be poached by captives (as explained by a TL, 11/10/2012, when referring to her company's recent loss of several agents to a bank captive). Rather than being antagonistic towards the rigour or pressure of their work, many BPO agents express pride in their companies' training, insisting that it is superior to their competitors' (among a number of examples, two former BPO agents, 26/03/2013 and 12/04/2013, both argued that the quality of training provided by their respective companies was the highest in the BPO sector).

In this regard, BPO work appears to offer experience that is valued by other companies in the labour market. But perhaps of greater significance is the way in which agents' experience of BPO workplaces awakens a perception of self-development, leading to enhanced confidence and a sense of new capacities. Agents are exposed to a tough, repetitive labour process, but one which is also rooted in continuous forms of monitoring geared towards encouraging agents to recognize weaknesses in aspects of their work on which to improve. With companies keen to maintain service levels, agents receive consistent, individualized feedback within a monitoring system that is predicated on non-mysterious, "fair" forms of knowledge about performance. Though workplace hierarchies remain in practice, there was evidence of a meritocratic ethos as far

as performance as an agent is concerned. As a TL explained (01/10/2012), her company was not interested in "where you're from on the surface", but whether an agent can fulfil the role.

As a consequence of BPO work, agents appeared to develop considerably enhanced self-confidence. In other words, the types of subjectivities that companies seek to cultivate appear to be prized by agents, perhaps especially among the less-educated agents. This relates, in part, to agents' acknowledgement of specific skills that are acquired, even if an agent only remains within a BPO role for a limited period of time. As a result of providing customer service, agents become aware of their ability to identify customers' needs in a manner that is validated by their companies. While the work itself may be tedious, because agents are encouraged to participate in practices of self-evaluation, they recognize the capacities that they have developed through reference to their companies' criteria. Companies actively focus on developing agents' "strong points" (as observed by a BPO agent, 18/01/2013). Moreover, agents regard selling over the phone as a genuine challenge, implying that an agent can be pleased with him- or herself in the event of making a sale (for instance, a BPO agent, 15/01/2013, spoke of the difficulty of making a potential customer "need your service"). A former BPO TL (30/04/2013) emphasized that the difficulty of selling over the phone led successful agents to gain considerable confidence in their abilities, both as salespersons and in general. With respect to "multi-tasking", agents are obliged to learn to use a computer and a phone under pressured conditions, using tools that may previously have been unfamiliar to them (as explained by a former BPO agent, 10/10/2012). Although BPOs do not undertake particularly detailed tasks, agents may find that they are obliged to work on various accounts and to engage in a relatively broad range of workplace activities. As a former BPO agent explained (13/10/2013), this enables agents to learn a great deal, even if the nature of the work seems excessively intense.

There were also examples of confidence-building that appear to relate more to agents' broader sense of what is required of them in the labour market than the specific subjectivities that their employers seek to cultivate. Certain agents,

for example, pointed to the inner resolve that is engendered by the intensity of BPO work, leading them to feel that they can withstand any kind of workplace pressure (as suggested by a BPO agent, 16/10/2012). Others suggested that the demands of BPO inculcate practices of self-discipline, especially in relation to time-keeping and punctuality (as indicated by a former BPO TL and current agent at a bank captive, 28/02/2013, who began work as a BPO agent). Having subsequently moved on to a bank captive, this agent suggested that captive agents are unable to exhibit the same repertoire of skills in relation to serving customers and making sales as agents at his former company.

Agents also highlight the degree to which their experience of call centre work leads them to appreciate the importance of patience when interacting with others (as commented by a BPO agent, 15/01/2013). Those experienced in BPO point to the mix of different personalities found in the workplace, which requires them to become accustomed to dealing not only with different types of customer, but also with different colleagues (as explained, for example, by a former BPO TL, 12/10/2012). In a similar vein, a former BPO agent (18/09/2012) commented that her working environment showed her that "not all crazy people are bad". This suggests that the act of developing interactive capacities to provide services to customers can also enhance the ability to relate to colleagues.

Furthermore, some agents emphasized that their experience of BPO work affects their non-work, day-to-day interactions. For example, agents' displays of the demeanour that companies seek to cultivate may be commented upon by their friends and families. A BPO agent (19/03/2013) remarked that people ask him about his "respectful" manner, illustrated by the habit of saying "*ndiyo* [yes]" in response to questions, instead of his previous preference for "eh". His reflection was echoed by Gideon, another BPO agent (30/01/2013), who underlined how BPO work affects his interactions with others:

> "In my experience, I have been able to, you know, harness my
> skills and interacting with people – how I respond to people and
> also handling people, as well as socializing with people."

These reflections suggest that the notion of "put[ing] yourself in the shoes of the customer" (as commented by a BPO agent, 19/03/2013) offers a schema for considering how to recognize others' positions or points of view outside the workplace.

The agents' enthusiasm for gaining work experience appeared to be anchored, therefore, in acquiring recognizable customer service and sales skills, along with developing robust confidence in their abilities. This seems to confirm that the BPOs' managerial approaches provide agents with experiences that they value, in spite of the low salaries. Nonetheless, there is a further need to address how the companies' endeavours to control the agents as "flexible selves" are understood by agents. This necessitates asking what it is about the process of undertaking BPO work that leads agents to value their experiences. The analysis presented in the following section suggests that the agents' apparent qualified affinity for BPO work can be understood as a facet of the process of becoming a "responsibilized self".

6.4.3 The responsibilized self

As indicated above, BPO agents are not well-paid and rarely seem to stay with their companies on a long-term basis. Nevertheless, many indicated that they value the personal transformation that BPO work elicits. As discussed, BPO companies seek to manage "flexible" agents according to a rationality of what I have identified as strategic egalitarianism. In spite of many complaints about the intensity of the work, agents seemed broadly supportive of their companies' managerial approaches. The reason the work was valued seemed to be a reflection of the agents' roles within the labour process. This suggests that BPO agents' interpretations of their companies' desires for "flexible selves" can be conceptualized as a result of a process of becoming a "responsibilized self". Agents are partly managed on the basis of the recognition of their performance, rather than their superiors' direct instructions. This leads to a workplace dynamic in which agents are encouraged to take ownership, not only of the tasks that they undertake, but also of the process of developing the capacities required to fulfil those tasks. The agents appeared to value working in an

environment in which they are regarded as responsible for their own actions, and in which those actions are recognized through reference to well-known assessment criteria.

Outside the context of the workplace, Nairobi's young workers inhabit a social milieu in which they feel exposed to pressure to establish themselves as being professionally successful. As a reflection of their ambitions, it is very common for workers generally to undertake part-time and evening courses in business management, accounting, finance and workforce management (as a former BPO agent reflected, 13/10/2012, this leads to long hours each day as workers try to balance working and studying).[66] A BPO agent (26/03/2013), for example, emphasized the imperative of "improv[ing] yourself" during non-work time. With a view to enhancing their prospects, this suggests that at least a visible proportion of workers in the labour market are keen to acquire skills related to overseeing business operations, management and running organizations. When commenting on new recruits, William, the manager of a bank captive (23/04/2013), spoke of the challenge of managing what he regarded as overly ambitious new agents:

> "We start to see there is quite a lot of other expectations from this new generation, and I will tell you this … my experience in Kenya today, there is this age group that wants to run from an agent to the CEO in six months."

Captive company managers such as William said that they seek to concentrate on ensuring that their agents fulfil a task-based role. The BPOs' strategy, however, is to selectively solicit agents' views and to encourage agents to focus

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66 This is alluded to by Odera (2011, 146). She comments: "There is a sudden urge for everyone to go back to school in Kenya. As much as 70 per cent of newspaper ads are about going back to school and on universities, and all of the universities have opened up private enterprises offering opportunities for those who did not manage to get into the public universities."

on how to develop their on-call demeanour and take control of their interactions and emotions.

Inasmuch as many agents opt to leave BPOs in search of more stable work, they appear to do so having gained enhanced confidence in their abilities as a consequence of their employer's managerial approach. Within a relatively short period of time, experience with BPO call centre work provides agents with identifiable skills (as highlighted by a former BPO agent, 18/09/2012, in reference to the breadth of experience gained after only a few months). While this may not perfectly mirror agents' sense of what is required in a competitive labour market, agents appear to regard the capacities that they develop as being supportive of their prospects (as suggested by a former BPO agent, 10/10/2012). Though companies make use of pervasive monitoring, agents are partly managed at a distance. In an environment characterized by what appeared to be perceived to be "fair" assessments, agents are required to rely on themselves to develop into the type of employee that they are required to be. The structuring of the labour process seems to condition an ethic of self-reliance in relation to motivating the self. As Paul, an agent experienced at both a BPO and a bank captive (28/02/2013), explained when reflecting on his work at a BPO company:

> "You need first of all as an individual to recognize, when I am upset, I am the only one who knows myself. I know what to do to get to 'level B'. I would not expect the company to know that, unless I told them beforehand. So as an employee it is my responsibility first of all to motivate myself. When I am leaving home I chant whatever I chant between home and work to make sure when I get to the office, it is all smiles."

This quotation suggests that those who speak favourably about their experiences of BPO work perceive value in learning to motivate themselves, as part of a broader practice of "know[ing] myself".

While BPO agents may not especially care for the vocation of call centre work overall, company managerial approaches appeared appealing to many (as implied by a former BPO agent, 21/04/2013, who described her former company as an "amazing" organization). Agents can be said to value being problematized as subjects of their own self-development, rather than development through direct control. The work provides not only personalized attention to one's strengths and weaknesses, but also an ethic of self-responsibility to improve. The manner in which companies manage agents may be regarded as an instrumental strategy to maintain service levels, but one that also connects with the agents' ambitions in relation to what they understand themselves to need for "success" in their professional lives. When compared to captives, BPOs seemed less inclined to seek to freeze agents in roles according to their status, and more concerned with strategically freeing up agents' energy, perspectives and capacities to self-develop. By encouraging agents to be actively responsible, BPO call centre work can be understood as awakening agents' sense of control, enabling a perception of adding value to the self as a result of training, feedback and learning to manage customers and colleagues.

In the light of the reflections of those who have left BPOs, my analysis suggests that BPO agents regard their "self-responsibilization" approvingly. While this term might appear to imply that the work is "empowering" for agents, it is also suggestive of a shift in the way workplace assessments generate alternative forms of "truth" about performance. The captives' managerial rationality of directed conduct leads to a relatively conventional means of assessment that is based on subordination – that is, following instructions and fulfilling a set role. The BPOs' managerial rationality of strategic egalitarianism, by contrast, suggests that agents ought to be capable of translating personal responsibility for their performance into adequate improvement, with the onus being on agents to achieve change.

Given the influence of BPOs' call centre operations on other companies in Nairobi as a means of customer interaction, the BPO company managerial approaches raise further issues with respect to changing employee–employer

relations and the strategic disruption of conventional workplace hierarchies. While captives orient themselves towards achieving relatively straightforward obedience, BPOs' managerial approaches might be said to create the perception of deficiencies that are based on whether agents are capable of the self-reliance that underpins the development of workplace capacities. Although the future of BPO call centres seems to be in doubt as a result of their financial difficulties, the introduction and influence of a "flexibilized" employment model may be serving to further erode the commitments to workers of companies in other sectors. While the "egalitarian" ethos of the BPOs might provide a progressive influence for other companies, the potential recasting of "success" at work as reflecting a worker's responsibility to self-manage, rather than to demonstrate obedience, may be indicative of a more subtle form of control. Moreover, if employment practices are increasingly based on the supposed benefits of "flexible" short-term contracts and rapid skills acquisition, then companies may be able to offer seemingly worthwhile workplace experiences in lieu of providing well-remunerated work. Owing to the focus on "self-development" and workers' responsibility for their skills, this may distract the companies' attention away from creating worthwhile, stable jobs, and thus serve to further undermine the creation of substantively attractive work.

6.5 Conclusion

With reference to distinct motivations for running call centre operations, the analysis in this chapter has examined the BPO and captive company management of agents in order to tease out the different "rationalities of control". While both BPOs and captives regard working environments as a key component of optimizing agents' performance, BPOs appear to pay particular attention to their workplace cultures. The evidence suggests that BPOs promote the idea of relatively flat workplace hierarchies as a means of downplaying seniority and encouraging agents to feel comfortable when off-call. In the light of the apparent implications of Spanco Raps's ultra-low cost employment model, the evidence also suggests that creating "fun" workplaces serves to mitigate the potential disruption of strike action and staff walkouts.

In considering the position of call centres within overall company operations, two conceptually distinct understandings of the basis on which agents are controlled emerged. In view of their non-core, task-centric roles, the idea of "directed conduct" was presented as a means of conceptualizing captive agents' positions within their companies and captives' relative lack of interest in developing capabilities in on-call customer service and sales. Given the extent to which BPOs rely on offering a specialism in these areas as the basis of their revenue, the notion of "strategic egalitarianism" was proposed as the principal approach to control within BPOs. With BPOs required to maintain service levels for clients on the basis of low salaries for agents, this rationality refers to an endeavour to combine an intensive, stressful labour process with a notion of "openness".

The relationship between BPO managerial approaches and agent motivations in relation to acquiring workplace skills and capacities was also highlighted (in section 6.4). In spite of the BPO sector's attrition, my analysis suggests that many agents look upon BPO work approvingly as a consequence of its seemingly meritocratic ethos, individualized feedback and the use of "fair" assessment measures. While agents pointed to the tedium and insecurity entailed by BPO work, they also appeared to value a sense of personal transformation elicited by their participation in the labour process. The evidence suggests that many agents value BPO work as a result of an ethos of self-reliance and control over their actions in the workplace. In responding favourably to a perception of self-development, it seems that agents experience a form of "self-responsibilization" consistent with their sense of what is required of them by the labour market.

Along with the analysis in chapters 4 and 5, the insights presented in this chapter are considered in the next chapter in relation to the conceptual framework for this study (developed in chapter 2).

7 Alternative formulations of workplace power relations: findings and theoretical implications of the study

7.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises a discussion of the implications of the expansion of the call centre sector in Kenya. Stemming from my interest in the significance of interactive service labour in Kenya, the consequences of the expansion of call centre work have been investigated. Informed by a Foucauldian-inspired conceptual framework (as discussed in chapter 2), this study has focused on the nature of control in the workplace and the way that call centre agents – as the centrepiece of a customer-oriented labour process – are "problematized" by management.

This analytical focus gave rise to the overarching research question for the study:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

As discussed in chapter 3 (section 3.2.1), this question was examined in finer detail by asking several sub-questions and these are used to structure the discussion in section 7.2. The analysis of "workplace selves" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) considered whether call centre agents can be approached as subjects, whose subjectivities and performance become managerial targets that are implicated in the reform of their conduct. This enabled me to consider how agents can be understood as a "problem" for management, thereby inviting attention to the rationalities of control underpinning company strategies for managing their agents.

In section 7.3, I reconsider the findings discussed in section 7.2 for their theoretical implications, and conclude with a summary of the first- and second-level analysis in section 7.4.

7.2 Synthesis of research findings

A first-level analysis of the empirical material in the study gives rise to the following insights and observations, with reference to "unfulfilled expectations", "measuring performance as the monitoring of conduct" and "how companies' motivations influence the control of agents".

7.2.1 Unfulfilled expectations: the challenges of international BPO in Kenya

In view of the Kenyan government's hopes for the creation of attractive new service sector jobs, I examined the extent to which Kenya's BPO (business process outsourcing) companies proved able to establish sustainable operations (see chapter 4). This was in response to the sub-research question:

- How has the creation of the BPO call centre sector contributed to "development" in Kenya?

In order to address how the BPO sector might improve Kenya's prospects, my analysis drew on three principal dimensions to examine participants' experiences of BPO call centre work. These were the "material", "relational" and "subjective" dimensions, which were examined as "experience", "profile" and "compensation" (see chapter 3, section 3.5.2).

I began by examining the broad motivations for the creation of the BPO sector from the perspectives of its stakeholders. The analysis suggested that the principal preoccupations of the Kenyan government and the companies in the BPO sector related to the country's poor internet infrastructure and high connectivity costs. These were regarded as key impediments to attracting clients and to meeting the growing international demand for outsourced services (see chapter 4, section 4.2.1). In my estimation, this appeared to lead to practical questions of business strategy being overshadowed by the call for technological improvements. This was perhaps best illustrated by the reflection of a BPO sector representative (26/01/2013):

> "The original idea was that there was a strong belief and credible, I would think, evidence; there was reason to think that Kenya could be well positioned to compete in the voice market… Some of the constraints that we had 10 years ago was that we were not aware, and we did not probably appreciate, just how important it was to have good connectivity."

Based on my analysis of interviews with BPO stakeholders and my awareness of the coverage of the sector in the media, my overall impression is that those involved in BPO had regarded Kenya's future success within the international sphere as self-evident. This view is consistent with the perception on the part of the sector's stakeholders that the country's Westernized institutional culture, the "neutral" English of its workforce, its time zone and its abundance of educated graduates would prove straightforwardly appealing to potential clients. This was reflected in the stakeholders' original interest in what an ICT Board official termed the "low-hanging fruit" (12/09/2012) of providing international call centre services, and the fact that KenCall – Kenya's flagship BPO company – enjoyed an initial period of success (see chapter 4, section 4.2.1).

Despite a period of sustained enthusiasm and the establishing of numerous BPOs, the companies in the sector experienced significant difficulties in their efforts to source regular, lucrative contracts from clients. The companies' and stakeholders' anticipation of success in the international market was aptly characterized by a member of the BPO/ITES (information technology-enabled services) Working Group, who commented (08/04/2013):

> "There was an assumption that as long as I am a BPO and I am operating in Kenya, the work will flow."

From the government's perspective, the early interest in supporting Kenyan BPO companies was somewhat fleeting. Kenya's activities within the international BPO market were reconsidered by government officials with the aim of attracting multinational technology firms to run operations in the country. In response to the difficulties faced in the international market, Kenyan BPOs

turned their attention to the domestic economy, leading to an interest in providing services for local clients (see chapter 4, section 4.2.3). As a means of cutting costs and integrating customer service capabilities, Kenya-based companies that were previously reticent towards outsourcing practices became more amenable towards the subcontracting of in-house activities to external providers.

In view of the government's intention that BPO would "become the sector of choice for employment among the youth and young professionals" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, 78), the result of this turn to the domestic market was problematic. Rather than establishing itself as a recognized exporter of reputable international BPO services, Kenya instead appeared to have imported outsourcing practices that served to jeopardize the position of the sector's agents. My analysis suggests that this recast the BPO sector as antagonistic towards the creation of attractive new jobs, rather than as supportive of the government's salutary aims. Furthermore, with Kenya-based companies keen to reduce costs, the growing credibility in relation to BPO practices within the Kenyan economy also seemed to undermine the security associated with in-house job roles. Especially in the case of telecommunications providers running their own call centre operations, this resulted from the employers' ability to transfer on-call customer service and sales activities to local BPO providers (see chapter 4, section 4.2.3). In my estimation, this led to a dramatic deterioration in the working conditions of the in-house employees who were affected, given that they were no longer eligible for their previous salaries and benefits. While the insecure nature of many jobs in Kenya's labour market was hardly peculiar to BPO, the casualization that came to characterize employment in the sector appeared, in my analysis, to be inimical to the goal of improving the livelihoods of Kenyan youth and to undermine the association of BPO with "development".

In the light of this, a further examination of the perspectives on BPO call centres of those experienced in the work was undertaken. My analysis highlighted a number of unappealing features of BPO call centres, while, at the same time, noting the numerous aspects of the work deemed favourable by the

sector's agents. With respect to skills and professional capacities, many agents were found to be enthusiastic about the opportunity to acquire formal work experience, especially at companies recognized elsewhere in the labour market for their challenging job roles and sophisticated training. While the BPO sector faced considerable attrition owing to its relatively poorly paid – and sometimes unpaid – salaries, many current and former BPO agents said that they valued the scope to acquire customer service and sales capabilities, and considered their experiences supportive of their future prospects. Nonetheless, these reflections did not appear to stem from straightforward enthusiasm for working as an agent. Rather, agents reported that the difficulty entailed in call centre work – in terms of both company and customer demands – ultimately created conditions for enhanced confidence in their abilities. In view of the difficulty of acquiring useful work experience within Nairobi's labour market, many participants described BPO call centre work as conducive to their personal development, and they reported that the demanding nature of companies' working environments – and the high degree of monitoring – encouraged them to cultivate substantial emotional resilience (see chapter 4, section 4.4.1).

Engaging with the views of BPO agents therefore appeared to complicate the government's notion that the BPO sector would straightforwardly contribute to the creation of a "knowledge-based society" in which attractive new jobs for young Kenyans would be established (Government of Kenya, 2008a, viii). My findings suggest the theme of "experience" as an interesting means of considering how BPO agents felt about the circumstances of their jobs. As an operationalization of the "subjective" dimension of the wellbeing approach (McGregor and Sumner, 2010, 105), this theme invited analytical attention to two, interrelated aspects of workplace experiences: what agents thought about their work and whether they felt able to derive value from undertaking it. With regard to the first aspect, agents were perhaps more inclined to value the idea of being employed than their actual positions as call centre workers, especially given the potential for tedium and burning out. Many agents suggested, for example, that undertaking their work *per se* was not enjoyable. However, many BPO agents did speak approvingly about the personal resources – as new

capacities and professional confidence – that they acquired as a result of their experiences, and they suggested that, from their perspectives, the work afforded valuable opportunities, in spite of being unappealing. Consequently, this finding appears to validate the emphasis that the wellbeing approach places on integrating the views of those studied, rather than simply approaching the analysis of development as a matter of identifying "deficits" (McGregor, 2004, 346). As a matter of supporting "development", a consideration of agents' "experience" therefore indicates that BPO call centre work served to create worthwhile opportunities for labour market entrants in the form of new capacities. While this view may be particularly striking within the sample included in my study, it seems reasonable to posit that it might predominate among BPO agents in general – or, at least, among those employed at BPOs for more than a few months.

In the light of the focus on the "interplay" between the dimensions of wellbeing emphasized in the literature (McGregor, 2010, 317), my analysis was also sensitive to the "relational" aspect of BPO agent experiences. This led me to identify the theme of "profile" as a basis for examining how the resources that agents reported might pertain to a particular socio-economic or cultural background. From the point of view of Kenya's BPOs, the original expectation of company managers was that the sector would attract university graduates interested in undertaking voice-based, interactive service sector work. As a result, the BPOs' approach to recruitment initially focused on applicants' level of education. Nonetheless, based on my analysis of interview data, over time the management of many companies appeared to alter such expectations in the light of concerns about staff attrition and their impression that less educated agents were often among the most committed members of staff. Without disregarding important concerns over inconsistent remuneration for agents or insecure job roles, the companies' reduced emphasis on educational qualifications was suggestive, in my estimation, of an encouraging outcome in enabling a broader base of applicant to access BPO work. Moreover, many workers in the BPO sector appeared to regard the process of applying for a position as a call centre agent as a matter of merit, being based on applicants'

performance during interviews and selection tasks rather than whom applicants knew. For example, as an agent commented (28/01/2013), her company focused on applicants' "talents":

> "Personally I think that it all depends on your talents, because they hardly look at your educational background. As long as you're confident and can call, and as long as you can speak, they actually pick you and train you. They find your strong areas and then they work on your strong things."

However, while a number of workers emphasized the general accessibility of BPO work for those seeking employment, my analysis pointed to the prominence of a particular cultural profile with respect to agents' suitability for international call centre work (see chapter 4, section 4.4.2). Perhaps most obviously, agents were required to be very comfortable using English for professional purposes, even as companies began to service regional accounts for which Swahili might be used. Just as this was shown to favour those of a middle-income background, it also meant that those raised within an urban setting – in which there is likely to be greater exposure to English – were better placed to fulfil the position of a BPO call centre agent. This was neatly encapsulated by an agent (28/02/2013), who underlined:

> "Most people don't really speak English. You have to have gone to a really good school to have a good command of the English language, and an understanding."

As a result, socio-economic background was shown to strongly condition a worker's suitability for BPO call centre work, especially with respect to interacting with international customers. Further to the casualization of work (as discussed in chapter 4, section 4.3), this illustrated the fundamental challenge of a job-creation strategy based on international outsourced call centre work. For all that recruitment approaches became receptive to a broader base of applicant, the call centre work was shown to favour those of a middle-income

background with the requisite confidence to interact with customers from elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

These findings suggest that "profile" – as a key dimension of the analysis of BPO's association with "development" – can be understood as dually articulated. In being framed by the issue of what those studied "are able to do with what they have" (McGregor, 2004, 346), it invites attention to the question of for whom BPO work is suited and to what agent perceptions are of who can access the job opportunities in the sector. With respect to the first consideration, not only does the nature of BPO call centre work appear to favour workers of a particular socio-economic background, such workers also seem less inclined than those of a lower-income background to tolerate the work (see chapter 4, section 4.4.2). Just as BPO companies endured significant financial difficulties in establishing profitable operations, they also experienced problems with retaining staff as a result. This outcome appeared to undermine the two principal components of the government's overall expectation for the BPO sector – that is, that the sector would enjoy straightforward financial success in response to unmet international demand and that it would create attractive jobs for young people.

However, the second facet of the "profile" encouraged sensitivity to an illuminating aspect of agents' perspectives, which is suggestive of a relatively more encouraging outcome. The finding that BPO work is suited to middle-income workers notwithstanding, the perception among many agents appeared to be that companies became largely uninterested in applicants' backgrounds or their personal connections, and that BPO management instead focused on cultivating "talents". From the perspective of BPO companies, this was illustrated by the relative decline in the importance of "academics" – the agents' level of education – as a prerequisite for accessing BPO call centre jobs. In turn, some agents were positively disposed to BPO work partly owing to their perception that it was open to a broad base of applicant, rather than being based on having a particular educational background or an existing connection to a person of influence within a company. Further to the analysis of "experience", in this respect, BPO agents' favourable understandings of the

nature of working in the sector might be characterized as not "who you know or who you are, but what you can do". In keeping with many agents' sense of acquiring worthwhile new skills, in this regard, BPO call centre work can appear based on merit and to be suggestive of opportunities for social mobility – whether or not such opportunities are actually realized.

While the managerial effort to establish a "meritocratic" ethos can be understood as a strategic component of control (as analysed in chapters 5 and 6), from the agents' perspectives, it can perhaps also be interpreted as a point of difference to their perceptions and experiences of other workplaces in Kenya. For agents, the "profile" of a BPO worker – in terms of who companies recruit – may suggest a favourable contrast to what prevails elsewhere in the labour market. Certainly, it is essential not to overlook, as Deneulin and McGregor (2010, 506) underline, instances in which people may report being "subjectively satisfied" in spite of very troubling conditions, leading them to seek to "cope" with difficulties in their lives by being upbeat about their circumstances. In the case of Kenya's BPO agents, however, rather than being expressive of a form of "false consciousness" (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010, 506), it seems that the enthusiasm that many agents reported for aspects of BPO work is suggestive of how their "relational needs" are being met (Devereux and McGregor, 2014, 300). For example, though BPO call centre work may be tedious and unappealing as a long-term position, BPOs' working cultures, based on my analysis of workers' depiction of them, do not appear to be predicated on the same forms of exclusion that has been understood to characterize companies outside the BPO sector.

In this respect, the staff attrition that BPOs experienced does not seem to be straightforwardly indicative of an all-encompassing dissatisfaction or disaffection on agents' part. Certainly, in instances of inconsistent remuneration, agents were inclined to seek alternative employment. Furthermore, they also said that they regarded their jobs as a "stopgap" (see chapter 4, section 4.4.3). However, in the light of the analysis of the "experience" theme, it appears that many agents regarded BPO call centre work as a constructive job opportunity during which new skills could be developed, rather than merely as a means of

occupying their time while searching for a more preferable position in another sector. Given the aversion to BPO call centre work of many university graduates, the notion that the work was constructive does not appear to reflect every agent's perspective. Nonetheless, in my analysis, it does suggest that BPO call centre work, in the estimation of many of those undertaking it, is not simply considered a "dead-end" or devoid of any worthwhile opportunities. Rather, many agents appeared to perceive BPO work to be broadly supportive of their future prospects, albeit without regarding the work as an appealing long-term employment option.

While the themes of "experience" and "profile" call attention to the nuances of agents' perspectives on BPO work, analysis of the theme of "compensation" suggested a more clear-cut assessment. In material terms (following the understanding presented in chapter 3, section 3.5.2), the creation of the BPO sector seemed to be scarcely supportive of the agents' quality of life. In the wake of the financial difficulties faced by BPO companies, BPO agents were employed in insecure, temporary positions, meaning that the sector proved unable to offer attractive, long-term job roles. Although BPO work offered agents a worthwhile "stopgap", there remained a high level of attrition in the sector. This was highlighted, for example, by a company's HR official (25/09/2012), who pointed out that agents were often inclined to seek more lucrative job opportunities in other sectors. Moreover, being faced with the non-payment of salaries, some BPO agents characterized their jobs as feeling more like an unpaid pastime than actual paid work (see chapter 4, section 4.3.1). As a result, in the light of some companies' poor payment record, I suggest that the BPO sector should not be regarded as fulfilling the government's expectations in relation to creating financially appealing job roles for graduates and school leavers. The problems related to remuneration appeared to damage company reputations among workers, and encouraged agents to seek better paid work at rival companies and in other sectors.

Given the emphasis on offering high-volume, low-cost services, these problems illustrate the difficulty of positioning low cost of labour as the key variable in a BPO company's value proposition for clients. Consequently, in the

eyes of the Kenyan government, positing the creation of the BPO sector as a key development policy appeared to be related more to an aspiration to expand into globally recognized, digitally mediated services than to being attentive to the impact of the policy on its intended beneficiaries – "the youth and young professionals" (Government of Kenya, 2008a, 78). In this regard, McGregor and Sumner's (2010, 107–08) articulation of a prevailing view of "development" within official policies – and the unfavourable conditions that may result for particular groups of people – is illuminating:

> "[N]ot all notions of what development should be and how that can be promoted are focused on improving the societal conditions for human wellbeing of all members of society. Rather they are focused on development as some other objective or vision of what it is to be 'developed' (to have a high *per capita* income, to be modern), in the belief or on the assumption that human wellbeing will somehow magically follow."

As this reflection indicates, the aspirations of governmental authorities and policy-makers do not necessarily encompass a focus on whether policies are supportive of human wellbeing, despite the intended associations of such policies with "development".

In this respect, the theme of "compensation" provides an instructive means of considering the material implications of the creation of the BPO sector. Just as it is illuminating to integrate the perspectives of BPO agents, it is equally important to approach agents' circumstances as a matter of "what do people have" (McGregor, 2004, 346) – namely, in this context, their remuneration and job security. As my analysis showed, BPO agents appeared to be poorly compensated in both respects. Rather than leading to consistently and adequately paid work, being employed as an agent in the BPO sector entailed relatively low pay within insecure job roles. While such problems might be considered a consequence of companies' unanticipated financial difficulties, rather than an outright endeavour to exploit employees, the fact that government interviewees appeared unconcerned with agents' difficulties

suggests a view that the benefits of BPO work for agents would "magically follow". In addition to facilitating an analysis of agents' material circumstances, the theme of "compensation" therefore also serves to illustrate how practical questions in relation to workers' circumstances and the establishing of constructive employment relations can be overlooked. As a result, "development", in this regard, appears to be conceptualized as more of an exercise in building modern infrastructure and projecting a particular image of the country than being attentive to the practical consequences of development policies.

Taking the foregoing findings into account, my analysis of the BPO sector's suggested association with "development" indicates a mixed record with respect to the impact of the sector on its agents. In the light of the discussion of the implications of these findings, the themes of "experience", "profile" and "compensation" support a multi-dimensional analytical approach to "development". In the light of the findings of my study, an understanding of "experience" begins by focusing on workers' subjective interpretations. This leads to a consideration of two, overlapping aspects of workplace experiences – workers' attitudes toward undertaking their work and whether they consider their work to lead to worthwhile opportunities. In turn, the analysis of "development" as being related to "profile" was based on combining an analysis of workers' subjective perceptions of who can access job opportunities with an assessment of whether accessing the work favours those of a particular background. Lastly, integrating an analysis of the "compensation" theme ensured that the consideration of workers' circumstances in material terms is also undertaken. While an analysis of the subjective and relational dimensions of people's circumstances can give rise to understandings of "development", the theme of "compensation" encourages a more overtly objective assessment of what workers have or do not have – namely, whether they are well remunerated or not. Used in combination, these themes offered the opportunity to generate insight beyond the narrower focus stemming from official understandings of "development", as exemplified, in this case, by the Kenyan government's

seeming lack of interest in the consequences for agents of its policy towards its outsourcing sector.

Following this exploration of the developmental implications of the BPO call centre sector, in the next section I examine how BPO and captive call centre agents can be understood as subjects of particular managerial strategies.

7.2.2 Measuring performance as the monitoring of conduct

In order to generate insights into how agents were conceptualized by management, the analysis in chapter 5 examined differences between the types of agents sought by BPO and captive call centres in Kenya. This was framed by the sub-research question:

- What type of agent do companies seek to manage?

I began my analysis by considering the role of call centre recruitment. In view of the high level of staff attrition experienced by companies in the BPO sector, the importance of recruiting new agents for BPOs was highlighted. BPOs were shown to be especially focused on moulding "communication skills", which at the recruitment stage entailed identifying workers who were likely to be upbeat, consistently happy, patient and receptive towards companies' training and feedback.

Since agents are inclined to burn out in response to the intensity of a labour process based on continuous monitoring and high call volumes, BPOs are obliged to continually replenish their workforces. With many agents likely to regard BPO work as a stopgap and a springboard for subsequent professional opportunities (see chapter 4, section 4.4.1), call centre managers and agents reported that those preferred at the recruitment stage were "teachable", willing to tolerate low pay and likely to demonstrate humility towards undertaking the work. This was characterized by a BPO agent (04/04/2013) as: "[T]his is what you have got right now [so] then adapt to it." When compared with captive agents, the BPO agents in this study were generally of an appreciably lower age and possessed limited formal work experience in the labour market. On average, their captive counterparts were considerably older, had existing work

experience and had been employed as agents at their companies for more than one year, rather than only a few months (see chapter 5, section 5.2).

Aside from telecommunications call centres, many captives were found to have a preference for recruiting degree-educated agents from within their existing workforces. Partly owing to their high staff turnover, BPOs paid relatively more attention to recruiting new agents than captives, with a particular focus on employing agents able to develop interactive, interpersonal and customer-oriented skills. For captives, however, management's emphasis was on product knowledge and familiarity with workplace systems, with agents integrated into their company's larger organizational structure, rather than being hired by a separate, outsourced entity (as explored in chapter 5, section 5.4.1). While outsourced call centre work appeared to be more strenuous than captive operations, the relative "openness" of BPO recruitment procedures – which were based on attention to whether one could do the work, rather than on one's educational credentials or personal connections – led selection criteria to be regarded as transparent by agents, and thus credible (as explored in chapter 4, section 4.4.2). Moreover, the perception among many BPO agents was that the work required adaptability to shifting workplace demands, such as having to quickly learn new products or to switch from in-bound to out-bound accounts during shifts. This, in my estimation, seemed significant as it suggested that working as a BPO agent was relatively more dynamic than as a captive agent.

Kenya's call centres sought to establish the provision of consistent service quality, and this was reflected in different managerial approaches. The digital recording of workplace performance was a characteristic feature of call centre work within the Kenyan labour market. In addition to agents' "adherence" to predefined working schedules, the recording of performance was shown to provide a means of monitoring discrete elements of agents' work on the basis of pervasive metrics, such as "call handling time", "average handling time" and "total calls answered" (see chapter 5, section 5.3.1). The results of these metrics were depicted within companies' key performance indicators (KPIs), which served as an individualized record of workplace performance that was intended, from management's perspective, to become familiar to agents. My

analysis shows that management was successful in making metrics familiar to its staff, which was illustrated, for example, by the comments of a former BPO agent (12/04/2013):

> "It is known; there is no secret… Your opening script, how long you took on the call, holding, were you able to solve the problem within the required time – we knew, we knew what they wanted."

Among such indicators, some workers suggested, such as a BPO TL (team leader, 28/02/2013) and a BPO agent (04/04/2012), that the statistical recording of elements of workplace performance was regarded by many agents as "factual". However, as my analysis indicated, such attitudes were positively correlated with the level of job satisfaction reported by agents (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2).[67]

The relationship between a favourable attitude towards the accuracy of workplace monitoring and agent job satisfaction was also observed with respect to the reports on agent performance prepared by TLs and QAs (quality analysts).[68] TLs' and QAs' roles appeared to enable performance monitoring to encourage agents to focus on interacting with customers, rather than merely clearing calls (see chapter 5, section 5.3.1). TLs were in charge of overseeing the performance of a team and its individual members, both by supervising according to standardized targets and by monitoring the energy and emotions of their agents, so as to ensure that customers were attended to in a friendly fashion. QAs were tasked with assessing recorded calls, which entailed attention to agents' phone manner, demeanour and demonstrations of confidence when on-call. Owing to the randomized basis on which recorded

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67 Within the questionnaire sample, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between reported levels of job satisfaction and the perceived accuracy of statistical monitoring (.396, $p < 0.01$, n=175).

68 Agents' agreement with the accuracy of TLs' reports (.284, $p < 0.01$, n=171) and QAs' reports (.477, $p < 0.01$, n=174) both had statistically significant positive correlations.

calls were selected, the managerial intention appeared to be to encourage agents to recognize the need to perform consistently on every call, with reference to established assessment criteria that was clear and readily identifiable.

Positive customer–agent interactions seemed to be important for both BPO and captive call centres. Additionally, paying attention to agents' emotions and stimulating practices of self-improvement appeared to be a particular feature of managing BPO agents. This was illustrated, for instance, by the relatively greater use of TLs and QAs on BPO operations floors, which suggested that the management of BPOs was keen to ensure that intensive monitoring would yield consistently high levels of customer service.

BPO agents, in my analysis, appeared more encouraged than their captive counterparts to identify areas of improvement within their performance, and to cultivate the personal resources required to achieve enhanced emotional resilience and greater empathy towards customers' needs. This suggests that agents' even-temperedness was a particular concern for BPO management, given that BPOs focus on providing a service on behalf of a client. As a result, BPO agents were provided with continuous, ongoing and individualized assessments of their conduct, leading to the identification of clear areas of improvement. Nonetheless, the distinction between the attention granted to BPO agents' on-call and off-call conduct suggests that the rigorous, pervasive forms of monitoring that enveloped agents' on-call performance was different to the relatively light-touch approach to their off-call behaviour. This seems to be consistent with a larger working culture in which agents are encouraged to interact with senior staff relatively freely, as part of a managerial practice of partially downplaying authority. Moreover, BPO companies encouraged their agents to release emotions when not on-call. Captive call centre work, however, did not necessitate regular breaks or the practice of emotional release that were characteristic of BPO call centres. This implication of this is that the monitoring of agents' emotions and moods represented a relatively stronger focus for BPO management.

This is not to discount areas of similarity between the managerial approaches of BPO and captive call centres, perhaps most markedly with respect to the high call volumes handled by companies fulfilling telecommunications accounts. To compare BPO and captive call centre work, in chapter 5 the terms "flexible" and "subordinate selves" were used to distinguish the different approaches to managing agents. I have suggested that BPO agents can be understood as "flexible selves" who are subject to two principal dimensions of control. Firstly, in the light of the insecure, temporary nature of their employment, BPO agents may be relatively more disposable than their captive counterparts in not being employed long-term. Secondly, the demands of the BPO labour process may create conditions for BPO agents' greater adaptability than captive agents, in the face of intensive work based on "multi-tasking" in relation to a variety of in-bound and out-bound activities.

BPO agents were encouraged to offer input and to suggest solutions to workplace challenges in a manner that surpassed the conventional confines of their job roles (as examined in chapter 5, sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3). This was demonstrated by the practice of soliciting agents' input with respect to sales strategies and approaches to managing call volumes, as well as running meetings within a team in which agents judged their collective performance and proposed changes and solutions to difficulties. While these practices did not appear to supplant the primacy of rigorous monitoring as the basis of BPO workforce management, they suggest an endeavour to create sites of limited autonomy in which agents' decision-making and opinions are sought.

Conversely, captive agents were shown to be subject to a more straightforward approach by management, which was based on managing agents by reinforcing, rather than downplaying, their low status within the company (see chapter 5, section 5.4.1). The notion of "subordinate selves" suggests the comparatively greater importance of an overt workplace hierarchy and the relatively lesser attention to monitoring and coaching agents within captive call centres, as reflected in the lower level of nurturing of on-call skills and attention to agents' emotions (see chapter 5, section 5.3.3). As a result, captives appeared to focus more on agents' awareness of products and on

running operations along overtly bureaucratic lines than on cultivating emotional stability and agents' capacity to put themselves "in the shoes of the customer" (as commented by a BPO agent, 19/03/2013). At the same time, captive agents – the trend towards "casualization" identified in chapter 4 notwithstanding – were generally employed on far more favourable terms than their BPO counterparts, being paid around three or four times more, within positions characterized by security and the potential for promotion (as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.2.2).

Having identified the differences between how agents were conceptualized by BPO and captive call centres, my analysis continued with an extended examination of the role of workplace hierarchies and companies' working environments. In the light of this, it was suggested that observed differences can be explained through an analysis of distinct "rationalities of control" (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.5). These findings are presented in section 7.2.3, "How companies' motivations influence the control of agents".

7.2.3 How companies' motivations influence the control of agents

Having considered how BPO and captive agents are conceptualized differently by their companies, a further examination of why differences exist between BPO and captive call centres was warranted. In order to develop an enriched understanding of the nature of workplace power relations, in chapter 6 my analysis focused on the "rationality" of forms of managerial control. This focus was guided by the sub-research question:

- What is the "rationality" underpinning managerial approaches to agents' job roles?

I began my analysis by examining the role of company working environments. Despite BPOs' emphasis on offering low-cost call centre services, companies in the BPO sector were found to be investing in sophisticated workplace tools and materials. Rather than aiming to maintain low costs with respect to each aspect of their operations, this suggested that BPOs recognized the importance of providing their agents with good-quality facilities.

Captives appeared to pursue a similar approach, in spite of their previous notion that call centre operations represented an unwelcome cost to bear, rather than a useful means of reaching their customers (see chapter 4, section 4.2.3). In the light of the repetitiveness and potential for stress resulting from the labour process, it seemed that BPOs and captives alike regarded their working environments as important in sustaining agents' emotional stability and energy.

However, BPOs and captives were found to differ with respect to the role of workplace hierarchies. Captive call centres were run as one of several company divisions, and their agents were regarded as low-status workers who were not essential to their companies' overall performance (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.4.1). The management of captive call centre workforces did not appear to be motivated by the same strategic endeavour to integrate agents' perspectives that characterized the BPOs' approach. Furthermore, captive agents generally did not interact with senior management figures, and the gulf in status between workers of different levels of seniority appeared to be underlined, rather than effaced. This approach to workplace hierarchies was different to that of BPOs (see chapter 6, section 6.2.2). In small BPOs, senior management figures often sought to blend in with agents and to minimize the differentiation of company personnel. With respect to large BPOs, my analysis suggested that tension can result if interaction between members of staff is impeded. For instance, BPOs appeared keen to establish notably different working cultures to those of other companies in Nairobi in general. This was illustrated, for example, by the comments of a former BPO agent (12/04/2013):

> "I refer to the management… They knew what kind of job we were doing. So they were positive about it, and they knew this kind of work, if there is no morale, if there is no interaction between us and the big people, there will be some kind of tension."

As a means of demonstrating that agents were valued by their employers, this approach appeared to be part of a larger endeavour to maintain a stable emotional climate, and thus to optimize agents' performance.

As a contrast to the focus on supportive working environments, the example of Spanco Raps was explored in order to consider the apparent effectiveness of the predominant managerial approach within other BPOs (see chapter 6, section 6.2.3). In the wake of the publicly reported strike action at the company,[69] Spanco had experienced significant difficulty with the management of its agents as a result of offering particularly low salaries. While this stemmed from the transferral of formerly in-house AirTel agents to the company, rather than the recruitment of new agents for the outsourced jobs, it also seemed that Spanco's approach to the management of its agents differed to that of its competitors in the BPO sector. The attrition experienced in the sector notwithstanding, Spanco seemed more inclined to be intolerant of agents and to eschew the examples of a facilitative approach to management adopted by other BPOs. Since other BPOs appeared to avoid the disruption of strikes and walkouts, Spanco's competitors seemed better able to appease their agents, thus suggesting the greater efficacy of their managerial approach.

In view of the differences identified between BPOs and captives, the issue of why differences in the managerial approaches of BPOs and captives exist was examined. Captives were characterized as approaching the management of their agents according to a rationality of "directed conduct". Given that call centre operations were an additional, rather than core, component of captive company organizations as a whole, this, in my estimation, was consistent with the observation that captive agents were of low status in their companies. Captives did not appear to demonstrate the same focus as BPOs on nurturing their agents' interactive or "communication" skills when on-call with customers. Instead, agents were trained to be focused on their companies' products and services. Moreover, captive agents were not expected to turn their hand to the same variety of workplace activities as BPO agents, and their job roles

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69 For example, see *The Standard* (2012), Airtel continues suffering as standoff at Spanco persists, 6 September. Available:

http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2000065537/airtel-continues-suffering-as-standoff-at-spanco-persists

appeared more well-defined. By extension, captives did not appear to solicit agents' suggestions in relation to workplace practices, or to downplay the role of hierarchy in the workplace by encouraging interactions between members of staff of different levels of seniority (as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.4.2).

My analysis of BPOs' managerial approach yielded insight into key points of difference to captives, suggesting that a rationality of "strategic egalitarianism" was at work (see chapter 6, section 6.3.2). Given that BPOs operated on the basis of providing a specialism in on-call sales and customer service to their clients, their agents represented the centrepiece of their activities. As a result, the management of BPO agents relied on paying particular attention to workplace performance. BPOs' revenue resulted from providing services to clients, often leading BPO agents to be required to fulfil a relatively more diverse set of workplace tasks than captive agents. Owing to the necessity of clearing high call volumes, the BPOs were shown to draw upon pervasive and continuous forms of quantitative monitoring. Moreover, in order to observe agents' emotions and assess agent–customer interactions in finer detail, BPOs also made relatively greater use of TLs and QAs than captives (as discussed in chapter 5, section 5.3.3). This seemed to be designed to ensure the identification of specific elements of agents' performance on which to improve.

While evidence of the close attention paid to agent performance by BPOs was found, there were also signs of workplace conduct characterized by relatively greater autonomy. Firstly, this related to the practice of soliciting agents' input with respect to tackling challenges on the operations floor, such as handling call backlogs or proposing sales strategies for particular products. Secondly, BPO agents were subject to comparatively less regulation of their off-call conduct than captive agents. This could be regarded as being consistent with management's endeavour to create "fun" working environments in which agents were encouraged to unwind. While governed by a logic of emotional containment when on-call and interacting with customers, BPO agents were found to be encouraged to release emotions when off-call. Furthermore, companies attempted to present the notion of a relatively flat workplace hierarchy by reducing the significance of status and promoting agents' access

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to more senior members of staff. Overall, it appears that a strategy of safeguarding the service quality was required for on-call interactions undertaken on behalf of clients, which comprised the basis of BPOs' revenue. At the same time, this strategy also appeared to reflect an endeavour to prevent agents – who were not well paid and, in some instances, not paid at all – from allowing their potential dissatisfaction with the work to jeopardize the service provided.

While there was a significant level of staff attrition within the BPO sector, a majority of BPO agents in this study were enthusiastic about aspects of call centre work. Though the sector's salaries and the poor remuneration record of certain companies proved a source of disappointment, agents' positive reflections on their experiences suggested that they did not regard themselves as straightforwardly exploited. Rather, BPO call centre work seemed to offer the opportunity for forms of self-development that were valued by agents. Broadly, agents reported that BPO call centre work provided them with worthwhile work experience, and that undertaking difficult work – and the training that they received – led them to develop considerably greater self-confidence in their professional capacities.

While BPO agents were subject to pervasive monitoring, and this could become the source of tedium and stress, the record of their performance that companies produced appeared to be commonly regarded as "fair", being based on well-known, non-mysterious assessment criteria (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.3.2). This seemed to give rise to the perception of a meritocratic ethos within the sample of BPO companies, while also providing agents with individualized feedback on areas of their performance on which to improve. In turn, this led many agents to report that they had acquired recognizable skills as a result of undertaking the work, which, they suggested, facilitated a form of personal development that they appreciated (see chapter 6, section 6.4.2). For example, as a BPO agent observed (18/01/2013), companies appeared to actively focus on developing agents' "strong points". Without completely displacing their concerns in relation to remuneration, the benefits that agents reported suggested that the BPO managerial approach served to mitigate the agents' dissatisfaction with their work. From agents' perspective, the value of

the work can be understood as a reflection of becoming a "responsibilized self" (see chapter 6, section 6.4.3). Despite their complaints about the intensity of BPO call centre work, agents seemed to value the opportunity to undertake a working role in which, I suggest, they perceived success to be based on self-reliance and taking responsibility for their self-development. Owing to their perception of what they ought to be as workers in the labour market as a whole, BPO call centre work seemed to awaken agents' sense of control of their selves as a consequence of companies' training, feedback and learning to manage customers and interact with colleagues.

This analysis invites further discussion of the theoretical implications of the study.

7.3 Overlapping modes of workplace subjectification

A second-level analysis of the research findings in this section focuses on the modes of "subjectification" (see chapter 2, section 2.4) that emerged as being constitutive of workplace power relations in call centres in Kenya.

7.3.1 Modes of subjectification

In order to generate a thorough understanding of workplace power relations, the empirical analysis focused on the control of agents in the call centre labour process in Kenya. As discussed in chapter 2, conceptualizing call centre agents as subjects at work can serve as a fruitful lens through which to analyse how companies strive to control particular types of agents and how agents respond to company managerial strategies. The discussion in this section confirms that this was indeed a fruitful approach. As service sector workers employed specifically to interact with customers, call centre agents' subjectivities – as attributes and capacities – can be understood to represent key aspects of control with respect to management's endeavour to train and monitor its workforce. By seeking to make conduct visible through reference to ongoing forms of assessment, management can be understood to approach agents as "workplace selves" who demonstrate characteristics and behaviour conducive to the maintenance of consistent outputs.

The processes that underpin how companies strive to manage particular types of agent are regarded in this study as modes of "subjectification" (see chapter 2, section 2.4, and Rabinow, 1984, 11) that enable the production of desirable workplace attributes and capacities – that is, how agents are turned into, and turn themselves into, subjects (Foucault, 1982, 778).

The processes underpinning the control of call centre agents are discussed in reference to three, interconnected modes of subjectification. Being sensitized to the potential significance of different instantiations of workplace "self" (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.5), the analysis in this study – as summarized above and in the preceding chapters – suggests these modes as a means of elaborating on the insights arising from the first-level analysis in the preceding section. Firstly, the notion of "comprehensive observation" seems appropriate to characterize a mode of subjectification anchored in the intensive monitoring of the temporal, spatial and interactive aspects of agent performance. Secondly, the notion of "self-problematization" suggests how agents are encouraged to translate management's expectations of their conduct into forms of acting on their own "selves". Lastly, the notion of "recognizing individualism" is suggestive of how overt managerial expectations can recede in order to accommodate differences in the workplace and encourage forms of autonomous conduct and expression.

7.3.2 Comprehensively observing agents

As discussed in chapter 5, BPO agents can be approached as "flexible selves", while their captive counterparts can be regarded as "subordinate selves". As Alvesson et al. (2008, 16) point out, "identity control" – or, the regulation of employees' identities – can be understood as key to the managerial effort to make the self the "target" of organizational control. From the perspective of those managing call centres, achieving success in the provision of on-call voice services appears to necessitate a primary focus on agent conduct in the workplace, with a view to moulding and overseeing a particular type of agent. Thus, for management, targeting agents' identities appears to be anchored in

the discursive representation of aspects of performance considered to be important.

As noted in the conceptual framework for the study (see chapter 2, section 2.5), the concept of "surveillance" is suggestive of how depicting performance as an individual "identity" stems from the managerial endeavour to use workplace monitoring to make agents observable. Developing a Foucault-inspired approach to call centre labour, scholars such as Winiecki (2007) propose that the recording of individualized statistics enables agent performance to be presented as "objective". This perspective is helpful in suggesting that the production of knowledge about performance positions agents as the objects of a managerial "gaze" (Foucault, 1978, 190) – that is, agents enter into a relation of control that is based on observation.

In this regard, for the management of Kenya's call centres, workplace monitoring appears to be intended to provide a pervasive overview of agent activities while, at the same time, enabling the knowledge produced about performance to be perceived as accurate and "true" among its workforce. In the light of Kenyan companies' use of "continuous forms of assessment" (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.3.1), the surveillance of call centre operations floors may best be understood to encompass two, interrelated managerial goals. Firstly, management strives to attain a "panoptic" (Foucault, 1979, 207) overview of its agents – namely, it seeks to be satisfied that the activities of those making and taking calls are rendered fully visible through the recording of discrete, quantitative and qualitative elements of performance. Secondly, having attained this visibility, management wants to know – by considering each agent's performance as an individual identity – that its criteria are being fulfilled and that agents are performing as required.

Approaching management as an endeavour to make workers visible encourages sensitivity to the pervasiveness and intensity of workplace monitoring. Following from my analysis of the rationality of "strategic egalitarianism" (see chapter 6, section 6.3.2), this close attention appears especially pertinent to the management of BPO agents, since it is conducive to

the maintenance of a specialism in on-call sales and customer service. The managerial principle of maintaining this focus on aspects of agent performance seems to be made practicable through the deployment of multifarious forms of workplace monitoring. This appears designed to enable a continuous process of overseeing agents' ability to adhere to managerial expectations.

By extension, the concept of "problematization" was also introduced in the conceptual framework (see chapter 2, section 2.5). This was understood to relate to how management's endeavour to know its employees can lead to a focus on observing different, interlinked aspects of conduct. On one level, this encompasses how individuals are understood by authorities as objects to be acted upon (Miller and Rose, 2008). In my study, this concept proved to be analytically useful insofar as it suggested that managerial control is predicated on two primary considerations: articulating what is required of call centre agents – based on targets and expected demonstrations of desirable subjectivities – and drawing upon a system of measurement to verify that these expectations are met.

The analysis of the role of "assessment and anticipation" (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2) suggested that the management of Kenya's call centres can be understood to problematize agents as a resource that necessitates pervasive, ongoing assessment. From management's perspective, the "problem" of managing agents initially seemed to stem from the concern with what needs to be known about their conduct – namely, which actions should be made intelligible. From a practical point of view, however, making conduct intelligible appeared to be reliant on the measurement of salient aspects of performance.

Taken together, I suggest that these two considerations give rise to a specific programme of action in which three overarching areas of agent conduct are implicated. Firstly, through the use of a comprehensive set of quantitative metrics, this comprises the digital recording of key temporal elements of workplace performance, encompassing the speed at which agents work and their capacity to be consistent over the course of their shifts. Secondly, it encompasses a form of spatial control, with agents required to remain available

at their workspaces to answer and make calls in order to adhere to predefined schedules. Lastly, in view of the limits of digital recording as a means of generating desirable outputs (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.3.1), companies deployed TLs (team leaders) and QAs (quality analysts) to oversee agents' performance in relation to emotional stability, energy and the handling of customers. In this regard, I suggest that TLs and QAs can be understood as experts who are employed to assess the interactive dimension of agent performance, thereby enabling the production of knowledge about performance that complements the recording of discrete temporal and spatial elements.

In this view, the managerial endeavour to discipline agents according to notions of desirable conduct represents the crux of workplace power relations. With the goal of fostering predictable and consistent outputs, the primary component of workplace control therefore appears to be predicated on producing a form of "truth" (Foucault, 1997, 281) about what agents do. As a consequence, agents can be considered to be understood as being objectified by management on the basis of the ongoing production of knowledge, which makes them visible by facilitating the depiction of their performance as an identity and thus implicates them in an example of workplace "games of truth" (Foucault, 1997, 281). In this mode of subjectification, agents are comprehensively observed and treated as passive.

Viewed in this light, the use of workplace assessments (as discussed in the preceding section) may be seen as undergirding a primary mode of subjectification. As a result of the managerial endeavour to render their conduct intelligible, agents are "subjectified" via a mode of what I suggest is best termed "comprehensive observation". As a form of disciplinary technique, this entails the recording of agents in accordance with metrics designed to oversee normatively preferable actions. As a result, the management of agents can be understood to reflect a particular logic of "normalization" (Foucault, 1978), based on establishing the authenticity of workplace assessments and the knowledge that results. This, in turn, permits the representation of areas of deficiency and success in relation to agent performance, based on ideals of

appropriate conduct that are understood by each member of the workforce and the subjectivities required by call centre work.

While the management of Kenya's call centres can be regarded as an endeavour to oversee the performance of individual agents, it is also illuminating to consider how manager control aspires to understand the workforce as a collectivity. Following Foucault's (2010, 239) concept of "bio-power", in addition to understandings of norms that pertain to individual conduct, authorities also demonstrate a concern with the vitality of populations as social bodies (as explored in chapter 2, section 2.4.3). With BPO agents, in particular, liable to experience tedium and to burn out, it has been fruitful to consider their employers' preoccupation with sustaining the collective happiness and energy of their workforces (as examined in chapter 6, section 6.2) as a matter of vitality. For BPOs, attending to this concern was shown to entail maintaining salubrious working environments and creating "fun" workplace cultures that were conducive to agent happiness.

In this regard, the notion of vitality in Kenya's call centres seemed to centre on the collective mood and emotions of agents. Though my analysis did not suggest that enhancing the collective mood was targeted to the same extent as agents' individual conduct, the monitoring of emotion on the operations floor nevertheless appeared to be a key feature of the TL job role (see chapter 5, section 5.3.3). Within Kenya's BPO call centre working environments, it seemed that the problem of managing agents was partly approached as a form of bio-power anchored in emotional supervision. In view of management's apparent preoccupation with collective emotion, this insight helps to refine my understanding of BPO agents as "flexible selves". Though the employment of BPO agents on a short-term basis indicates their relative expendability as compared to captive agents (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.4.1), the overseeing of operations floors was characterized by a light-heartedness aimed at fostering upbeat teams of agents, suggesting a perceived managerial advantage to maintaining a relatively high turnover of staff. For instance, some agents reported that managers favoured employing those who were "fresh",

rather than those who would stay in the job for an extended period (see chapter 5, section 5.2.2).

In the light of the managerial concern with agents' collective mood, treating agents' positions as relatively short-term might thus be regarded by managers as supportive of sustaining the larger happiness of the workforce as a population, by preventing the potential dissatisfaction and boredom of more established agents from undermining the attitudes of other, less experienced colleagues. Consequently, the managerial endeavour to monitor and make visible consistently performing, "normal" agents might also be understood to lead to a proclivity towards the recruitment of replacement agents, rather than necessarily seeking to retain staff. Viewed in this light, an additional aspect of "flexibility" may therefore stem from a managerial understanding that employing agents on a relatively short-term basis is likely to lead to the creation of a more energetic, more even-tempered overall workforce than recruiting for the longer term, thus preserving the collective capacity of agents to provide customers with services on-call. Further to the ability to meet managerial criteria, being a "normal" BPO agent consequently can also be understood to comprise only being employed for a relatively short period of time.

However, based on the evidence in this study, the logic of normalization – despite the endeavour to understand agents as objects – does not appear to presuppose simple obedience or docility on the part of agents. Rather, control – especially in the case of BPO management – also appears to operate through normalizing the notion of the agent's responsibility to change and to improve. As discussed in the following section, this is consistent with how agents are nurtured to act on their "selves" as part of a mode of subjectification that I characterize as "self-problematization".

7.3.3 Self-problematization

While the management of call centre agents has been shown to be predicated on generating knowledge about performance and making actions intelligible, it is also about eliciting change in conduct. Despite being treated as objects, the knowledge that is produced about call centre agents is not concealed or

restricted to management. Instead, it was publicized within the workforce. By being shared with agents, the results of the workplace monitoring appeared to provide a discursive point of reference with which to assess performance – whether that of an agent's own performance or that of a colleague. As a component of control, the fact that such knowledge is not concealed and is readily understandable appeared to legitimate its validity among those observed (see, for example, chapter 5, section 5.3.2), and thus to naturalize the authority and authenticity of the workplace monitoring.

In the analysis presented in chapter 5 (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2), the role of TLs and QAs as facilitators of discussions with agents was examined. Rather than simply dictating areas of weakness and instructing agents to improve, BPO companies appeared especially keen to encourage their agents to identify areas of inadequacy – through reference to the knowledge produced about their performance – and the agents' own sense of the difficulties presented by their work. In the conceptual framework for the study (see chapter 2, section 2.5), the notion of "the equal self" was proposed as a means of sensitizing my analysis to the potential implications of a managerial effort to integrate a selective focus on agents' "voice" (McDonnell et al., 2014) – that is, to validate the views of conventionally lower status workers. While this notion helps to understand the endeavour to create strategic "forms of autonomy" (as analysed in chapter 5, section 5.4.2), it is also helpful in considering how management seeks to establish a relationship between its affirmation of agents' views on the challenges of their work and agents' practices of self-assessment in response. Encouraging agents to self-assess seemed to be a particular feature of BPO management, which employed a relatively greater number of TLs and QAs than captives (see chapter 5, section 5.3.3). The concept of an "equal self" is therefore helpful in inviting attention to how BPO management perceives an advantage in encouraging agents to identify and recognize personal deficiencies.

My analysis offers a basis for extending these observations. With respect to interactions between TLs, QAs and agents, the notion of "equality" seemed to encompass not only the idea that agents should recognize areas of deficiency

in relation to their performance, but that they should also regard the responsibility to develop workplace capacities as being supportive of their self-improvement. As discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.4), it is useful to revisit Foucault's (1988, 18–19) notion that "governmentality" involves the "contact" between the macro- and micro-relations of power. In this view, while Kenyan call centre agents' performance can be depicted as an "identity" and as a feature of management's effort to comprehensively observe and tightly control agent conduct under a disciplinary formulation of power relations, a focus on the "self" calls attention to the contact between management's goal of reforming agent conduct and the agents' desires to improve.

In this regard, inasmuch as workplace monitoring enabled the tight regulation of agent conduct, management sought to govern agents by encouraging them to choose to improve, rather than simply by constraining their actions. From the agents' perspectives, improving at work appeared to presuppose a relationship to the self based on self-knowledge (see, for example, chapter 6, section 6.4.3) – that is, being able to recognize areas of success and areas of difficulty, and to devise strategies to acquire capacities and skills. Once improvements in performance were recognized by management, agents came to perceive themselves as workers who embodied useful attributes and capacities, which appeared to be a source of satisfaction (see chapter 6, section 6.4.2). This observation is redolent of Foucault's (1988, 18) concept of "technologies of the self", referring to the idea that subjects can be understood to undertake a "certain number of operations" on their bodies and "souls", so as to "transform themselves" in support of particular goals. For Kenya's call centre agents, to know one's "self" seemed to imply engaging in an ongoing process of self-assessment and self-reflection, based on maintaining a personal awareness of how one's workplace capacities might fall short of those of an idealized agent. At the same time, developing a relation to one's self in support of personal transformation seemed to imply that agents were assuming the responsibility for changing their conduct, rather than simply being instructed or directed by hierarchically superior figures. Thus, to be a "normal" agent is not

only to adhere to managerial expectations, but to take responsibility for changing one's conduct.

This understanding of the relationship between management's expectations and agents' self-transformation suggests the role of a second mode of subjectification in the workplace. In order to condition an ethic of improvement, agents appeared to be encouraged to approach their "selves" as a problem, leading them to recognize the importance of self-management (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2). With workplace monitoring providing an individualized record, agents undertook forms of self-assessment in a bid to initiate appreciable improvements in their work. In general, agents appeared to regard assessments of their performance as credible (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2), suggesting that to be recognized as a well-performing employee was based on relatively transparent criteria. In combination with the practice of discussing one's performance, rather than being simply dictated to, the emphasis on self seemed, for agents, to indicate the importance of self-regulation and self-reliance.

An emphasis on self-reliance suggests that management recognized the benefits of encouraging agents to assume the responsibility for reforming their conduct in the workplace, rather than simply treating agents as objects. In the conceptual framework for the study (see chapter 2, section 2.5), the notion of "the responsible self" – suggestive of treating workers as "actively responsible" (Fraser, 2003, 168) – was proposed as a means of sensitizing my analysis to how and why management might encourage workers to take ownership of aspects of their work. Given the agents' generally favourable attitude towards the BPOs' managerial approach (see chapter 6, sections 6.4.2 and 6.4.3), the companies sought to enhance their agents' identification with their work. In my analysis, the crux of this identification seemed to relate to the agents' sense of acquiring worthwhile work experience, skills and dramatically increased confidence. For agents, despite their aversion to the repetitive nature of the labour process and the often unattractive rates of pay, the sense of being treated as "active" appeared to be regarded approvingly and to align with a notion of the "responsibilized self" (see chapter 6, section 6.4.3).

This observation echoes the understandings of the role of "active" employees explored in the critical management literature. As a means of encouraging employees to "transgress the 'iron cage' of established 'Fordist' or 'bureaucratic' control mechanisms", Alvesson and Willmott (2002, 623) argue that, from a company's perspective, employees' commitment to their work and their loyalty – especially in the light of decreasing job security – cannot simply be assumed and must be "engendered or manufactured". As the authors suggest, from a managerial perspective, conventional approaches to control may be limited and fail to enliven employees' motivations. For example, in the endeavour to standardize working processes and attend to large production volumes, a Fordist approach might focus mainly on engaging employees in repetitive, potentially dispiriting tasks, while a classically bureaucratic approach might over-emphasize the importance of working according to status and the rigidity of job roles, thus inhibiting competition between employees and preventing management from securing the commitment of lower-status workers.

Rather than approach employees' autonomy with suspicion or as overwhelmingly antagonistic to control, a potential antidote to these limitations is to approach employees as "active" participants, whose identification with managerial objectives in relation to efficiency and service quality can be nurtured. Scholars have noted a shift in managerial techniques of workplace control, where forms of management that rely on disciplining workers are treated with relatively greater suspicion than in the past. One example of this shift relates to the managerial treatment of views and voices in the workplace. In their discussion of the role of "dialogue" as an emergent "governmental technology", for example, Karlsen and Villadsen (2008, 346) suggest that validating the perspectives of employees, rather than imposing the authority of the views of "expert" figures, is an increasingly prevalent feature of contemporary managerial approaches:

> "The objective of management should not be dictated uniformly by experts and superior authorities, but must now arise from a dialogue on equal terms – that is, a genuine colloquial relation,

originating 'from below' or 'from within' the subject to be governed… Management should not be exercised in an instructive, controlling or disciplinary fashion but rather 'facilitate' the creative energies of autonomous teams and 'passionate', self-supervising employees."

The notion that management ought to stem from facilitation, rather than explicit control, is instructive for considering how call centres in Kenya seek to engender improvements in agent performance. While the analysis presented in chapter 5 highlighted company endeavours to manage agents with particular subjectivities, the practice of engaging agents in dialogue about their performance suggests that cultivating such subjectivities was not only a matter of direct commands, but was also reliant on a form of "self-supervision". In spite of the use of pervasive monitoring as a means of rendering agent conduct visible, management appeared to approach the reform of conduct as at least partly a matter of self-assessment. Initially, agents were encouraged to identify and recognize areas of weakness in their performance with reference to their awareness of company metrics and standards and in consultation with QAs and TLs (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.3.2). Thereafter, they were expected to assume the responsibility for working out how to address the identified weaknesses.

Call centre agents in this study cannot be characterized as pawns subject to managerial domination. As Lemke (2000, 50) suggests, examining the "link" between "technologies of domination" and "technologies of the self" enables management to be understood as engaged in establishing a relationship between its own problematization of agent conduct and the agents' desire to improve in a manner that is captured in the workplace monitoring. The concept of "technologies of the self" highlights the agents' endeavours to seek satisfaction through work. This, however, from management's perspective, was found to take place in a manner that was coincident with its expectations of idealized conduct. While companies want to produce a specific type of agent, "self-problematization" suggests how management seeks to encourage each

agent to develop a relation to their "self" as a means of activating a sense of a responsibility to improve. Inasmuch as companies seek to standardize their services and engender consistent outputs through comprehensive monitoring, this suggests that agents are encouraged, as part of an ethic of self-reliance, to identify and develop the personal resources necessary to improve their workplace performance.

A third mode of subjectification within BPOs that did not entail reforming conduct in accordance with the metrics underpinning workplace monitoring was also apparent (see chapter 5, sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3). There were instances in which management sought agents' opinions and ideas about working practices and their suggestions for strategies in response to challenges on the operations floor. I characterize this as a mode of subjectification that I denote as "recognizing individualism".

7.3.4 Recognizing individualism

As illustrated by the discussion of BPO managerial strategies above, the management of call centre agents can be regarded predominantly as rendering conduct visible and encouraging agents to address areas of inadequacy. In this respect, managerial control typically was based on assessing agents according to predefined criteria and encouraging agents to be responsible for addressing problems in their performance in response. However, while this dynamic may be the basis for maintaining control, it does not suggest that agents work in a straightforwardly or homogeneously robotic fashion. Although the production of knowledge about performance was designed to provide an authoritative depiction of agent conduct, BPO companies also appeared to approach agents' performance as autonomous and adaptable in relation to the immediate governance framework of pervasive assessment criteria (see chapter 5, sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3).

The practices of "creating forms of autonomy" and "soliciting agents' voices" (see chapter 5, sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3) suggested that BPOs were inclined to perceive a managerial advantage in encouraging agents to speak freely about how to improve company operations and to take ownership of their job roles.

Captive agents were shown to be better characterized as "subordinate selves", whose roles, despite the introduction of digitally based monitoring techniques, were predominantly based on following managerial instructions and undertaking relatively less self-reflection than their BPO counterparts (see chapter 6, section 6.4.2). In BPOs, agents were more accurately characterized as "flexible selves", who, in addition to being employed on less secure terms than captive agents, were expected to undertake a relatively wider range of workplace activities. BPO management was based on the practice of downplaying status and hierarchy in the workplace while, at the same time, encouraging agents to be free to make suggestions about working practices and strategies, as part of what was a selectively democratic, participatory workplace culture (as examined in chapter 6, section 6.2.2). Moreover, BPOs appeared to pay less attention to their agents' off-call conduct than captives, suggesting that there were fewer expectations of BPO agents than captive agents when they were not engaged in the specific task of speaking with customers. As a contrast to the predictability required of agents when on-call, this implies that management tolerated, and even valued, a form of less intensive control when agents were off-call.

This suggests that the practice of improving performance in the workplace also entails demonstrating ideas and capacities that are not encompassed by BPO management's formal assessment criteria. As a mode of subjectification, "recognizing individualism", from a managerial perspective, seems to involve problematizing the self in a way that is not solely about instilling a sense of "responsibility" to improve in agents. In my analysis, the notion of "the empowered self" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) is helpful in drawing attention to the implications of managerial practices of seeking employee opinions. The notion of "empowering" agents was helpful in exploring BPO managerial practices of soliciting agent contributions and encouraging the idea of a participatory working environment (see chapter 5, sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3, and chapter 6, section 6.2). Running counter to the predominant mode of "comprehensive observation", there was evidence of a parallel managerial endeavour to respect and encourage individuals' ideas and talents, in contrast

to a culture in which conformity and deference to superiors are emphasized. Strategically, this aspect of empowering agents seemed to suggest that a culture in which agents were understood as being different from one another – and encouraged to speak freely and to exchange ideas – was perceived as supportive of managerial objectives. While the close control of agents' selves was central to providing call centre services, management appeared to perceive an advantage in regarding agents' off-call conduct as an area of relatively greater autonomy.

McNay's (2009) discussion of the "self as enterprise" and the notion that, for management, seeking to control individuals' actions too closely can risk stifling energy and creativity is relevant here. In the light of Foucault's discussion of the reworking of identities under forms of neoliberalism, McNay (2009, 63) highlights that an entrepreneurial version of the self does not presuppose conformity or an "homogenizing logic". Rather than passivity or standardization, the self as enterprise is regarded as contingent on "active differentiation, regulated self-responsibility and depoliticized autonomy" (McNay, 2009, 62). Similarly, for call centre management, agent autonomy is not necessarily perceived as antithetical to managerial control. Instead, management seeks to encourage agents to consider themselves free to contribute ideas in the workplace, rather than adhere to commands. McNay's notion of "depoliticized autonomy" also draws attention to the bounded nature of this form of "freedom" in the workplace. "Autonomy", in this respect, does not mean complete freedom to challenge the legitimacy of workplace monitoring. In this study, it did lead to a questioning of existing approaches to handling call volumes, to sales strategies and to establishing rapport with customers (as examined in chapter 5, section 5.4.3). Call centre managers' aims seemed to be to access the ideas of agents, without disrupting their prerogative to assess the workforce.

Approaching the subjectification of agents as involving "recognizing individualism" draws attention to a logic of liberating the energy, contributions and creativity of a wider tranche of the workforce than is typical in a conventional organizational structure. Rather than providing a source of stability, an overt hierarchy might be regarded with suspicion by management if

it leads to a detrimental emphasis on status in the workplace, and confines contributions and suggestions about working practices to workers of mainly higher status. Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) discuss the "re-imagination" of the organization, with reference to the US and the UK in the early 1990s. Prompted by an increasing managerial concern with customers and the "sovereign consumer", the authors argue that "bureaucratic principles" were receding in the wake of the primacy of a commercial logic geared towards the refashioning of the workplace according to "market relations" (du Gay and Salaman, 1992, 615), and an emphasis on encouraging competition within organizations and on adding value. Traditional, bureaucratic methods of controlling employees came to be perceived by mainstream managerial approaches as:

> "too overtly oppressive, too alienating and too inflexible to encourage employees to behave in the subtle ways which customers define as indicating quality service, many of which – subtleties of facial expression, nuances of verbal tone, or type of eye-contact – are difficult to enforce through rules, particularly when the employee is out of sight of any supervisor" (du Gay and Salaman, 1992, 621).

Rather than seeking explicit control, du Gay and Salaman (1992, 626) suggest that, "under the regime of enterprise", greater employee commitment and identification with company goals started to be understood as contingent on conditioning a spirit of self-fulfilment through employment, based on enabling employees to respond to customers in a manner that they deemed appropriate. As Rose (1999a, 103–04) writes, the idea that work ought to provide fulfilment recasts the worker as "an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximized 'quality of life', and hence of work", rather than as a resource deployed to undertake a set of tasks. The manager comes to be regarded as a facilitator whose role is to create meaning for the worker, thereby establishing an affinity between the worker's self-fulfilment and the company's endeavour to put its resources to optimal use.

Approaching call centre employees as "entrepreneurial" – namely, as workers with individual ideas, motivations, strengths and the potential for innovations – highlights a further aspect of the empowered self. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), Foucault depicts "*homo œconomicus*" as "an entrepreneur of himself". In exploring the implications of the managerial approach to BPO agents in Kenya, it was fruitful to consider how this approach led to an understanding of agents as individual entrepreneurs through appeals to their self-interest and personal investment, and of seeing a return on that investment in the form of greater aptitudes. As outsourcing providers, Kenya's BPO call centres were endeavouring to assert their superiority – when compared to demand fulfilled in-house – as providers of high-quality and low-cost customer and sales services. Developing this specialism appeared to be dependent not only on obedience from agents, but also on their investment – in terms of loyalty, commitment and inner resources – in the work. By approaching agents as "entrepreneurial" – whose activities constituted a form of "adding value" to their workplace selves – agents were encouraged to identify their aspirations for professional self-development with their employers' aim to maintain lean, adaptable and competitive operations. Consequently, I suggest that to be an empowered self is not solely a matter of soliciting agents' ideas. Rather, it can be understood as a managerial endeavour to expand the agents' sense of self-knowledge beyond the immediate goal of "self-problematizing" and of reforming conduct in accordance with pre-existing expectations of what constitutes a normatively preferable agent. Further to this, BPO agents were also encouraged – by offering their own ideas and suggestions – to establish a personal, fulfilling connection to their work, thus extending their commitment beyond shouldering responsibility for their selves as a "problem".

The idea that the subjectivities developed in the workplace can be understood in entrepreneurial terms helps to explain the esteem with which many agents appeared to hold their experiences of BPO call centre work, despite the difficulties associated with remuneration in the BPO sector (see chapter 4). The notion of "the aspirational self" (chapter 2, section 2.5) was used to draw attention to how agents' desire for a sense of self-development

informs their motivations for undertaking call centre work. The discussion of "self-development" (see chapter 6, section 6.4) showed that from agents' perspectives, the experience of continuous assessment, cultivating the personal resources with which to improve, and being treated as though their opinions were of operational merit to their companies, seemed to support a form of investment in the self. The tedium and repetitiveness of employer monitoring notwithstanding, for agents, many of whom appeared professionally ambitious, BPO call centre work has been shown to offer a significant degree of satisfaction, at least in the call centres examined here. This stimulated a form of personal transformation through the acquisition of skills and confidence that the agents regarded as relevant to the wider labour market.

By being regarded as "individuals", BPO agents were selectively positioned as relatively autonomous, equal employees, whose opinions and contributions were sought by management. While this mode of subjectification was not the prevailing feature of workplace control, attempting to position agents as "free" suggests a managerial endeavour to cultivate adaptable agents enthused by the opportunity to develop their skills, and thus to liberate agents' commitment and energy in support of undertaking the relatively broad set of business processes fulfilled on behalf of BPOs' clients. In this respect, although workplace power relations in this study seemed primarily to reflect a disciplinary formulation (Foucault, 1978), BPOs also appeared to perceive a benefit to counterbalancing the overt nature of control based on rigorous, pervasive assessment. As a result, BPO agent jobs seemed to be partly governed at a distance, with management endeavouring to promote the notion of autonomy in relation to aspects of agent performance in order to secure enhanced commitment to work. Though this does not displace the predominant disciplinary nature of BPO call centre work, these observations are suggestive of an alternative form of power relations where overt regulation is regarded by management as unfavourable to optimizing the performance of its workforce. While control is rooted in producing knowledge about conduct and encouraging agents' to identify weaknesses, it also consists of enabling agents to feel that

their work provides meaning and fulfilment by validating the agents' sense of their individual capacities.

Having been encouraged to develop the inner resources conducive to call centre work, provided with assessment criteria to validate their performance in the workplace, and approached as "empowered" and "equal", many agents appeared to develop considerably enhanced confidence in their abilities in general (as examined in chapter 6, section 6.4). As a result of BPO efforts to establish agent visibility, agents came to know their own "selves" as embodying productive professional capabilities. Nonetheless, while agents were enthusiastic about what BPO call centre work provided in terms of the capacities and skills that they gained, they commonly regarded the work itself as a source of tedium and stress. Consequently, while BPOs appeared to engender relatively greater "commitment" from their agents on the operations floor than captive management, ultimately, this seemed to occur at the cost of enabling agents to seek more appealing opportunities elsewhere in the labour market.

7.4 Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter, I summarized the results of the first-level analysis of the empirical discussion in chapters 4, 5 and 6, and addressed the research questions in this study. Three core themes – "experience", "profile" and "compensation" – were used to depict the relationship between the creation of a BPO call centre sector and "development" in Kenya (section 7.2). Drawing on the conceptual framework for the study (presented in chapter 2, section 2.5), the main features of the operation of workplace control in Kenya's call centres were examined, with a focus on the type of agent sought by call centre companies and the managerial rationality underpinning agents' job roles within the BPO and captive parts of the overall call centre sector.

A second-level analysis then considered the theoretical implications of the findings (section 7.3). I have suggested that workplace control can be understood to stem from three principal, interrelated modes of "subjectification",

as understood through the lens of the "workplace selves" conceptual framework. Based on my first-level analysis, I proposed that subjectification can be regarded as involving "comprehensive observation", "self-problematization" and "recognizing individualism". These terms capture three principal dynamics of workplace control: the managerial endeavour to render agent conduct intelligible; the idea that agents – especially within BPO working environments – are encouraged to regard their "selves" as a resource to be acted upon to meet managerial expectations; and the notion that treating aspects of BPO agent conduct as relatively more autonomous serves to engender enhanced commitment from agents and the elicitation of operationally advantageous ideas.

8 Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

The overall contributions of the thesis are presented in this chapter. In section 8.2, the motivation and context for the study are revisited, along with a summary of the key insights. The key theoretical and methodological contributions are discussed in section 8.3. I propose modifications to the conceptual framework for the study in section 8.4, with reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the study presented in section 8.5. The wider significance of the findings and the scope for further research are also addressed, followed by a discussion of the broader implications of the study in the conclusion to the chapter in section 8.6.

8.2 Motivation for the study and summary of insights

In the wake of the government's intention to establish a globally recognized outsourcing sector, investigating the expansion of call centre work in Kenya represented an opportunity to generate new understandings of interactive service labour. The overall research question for this study was:

- How does the control of "workplace selves" influence working practices in the Kenyan call centre labour process?

In order to consider the constitution of workplace power relations, I sought to examine how company managerial strategies can inform and condition different forms of workplace control. By extension, this necessitated a corresponding focus on the responses to the strategies of those fulfilling call centre job roles. As discussed in the preceding chapters, I have analysed how workplace control is understood by company actors and how it operates in practice.

My desire to examine workplace control in Kenya's call centres stemmed from a broader motivation to understand the implications of the growing interest of many stakeholders in African countries in investing in digital technologies to stimulate employment growth. For many, such investment is bound up with a

number of interrelated aspirations, offering the opportunity to catalyse lucrative economic activity and to generate new forms of revenue with which to enhance countries' overall prospects. In another reading, the interest in digital technologies – and the attendant promise of offering reputable services on the global stage – is also understood to encompass the possibility of demonstrating a form of "modernization", and thus to illustrate a desire to challenge a sense of geographic and historical marginalization.

Rather than an instrumental focus on the commercial and financial potential of such investment, in this study I was interested in exploring the consequences of creating a digitally mediated service sector by examining the experiences of those undertaking the work and by considering what type of worker would be desirable to employers. In the light of its ambitions to be "the top offshoring destination in Africa" (Government of Kenya, 2007, 81), the Kenyan government's investment in a series of undersea fibre-optic cables (Gwaro et al., 2013) offered a salient case of an East African – and, more broadly, Southern – country seeking to reorient its relationship to the global political economy via investing to achieve dramatic improvements in its bandwidth capacity (Graham and Mann, 2013). Given the emphasis on the creation of the BPO (business process outsourcing) call centre sector, and the increasing numbers of "captive" providers, the example of Kenya presented an important opportunity to gain insight into the significance of the growth of outsourcing and call centres within the international and domestic contexts. Owing to other African countries' interest in establishing BPO sectors – perhaps most notably South Africa (Willcocks et al., 2012), Rwanda, Uganda (Van der Linden and Hengeveld, 2009), Ghana (Ocra and Ntim, 2013), Morocco and Egypt (Abbott, 2013) – investigating the constitution of workplace power relations in Kenya's call centres offered the potential to generate understandings of the wider implications of the growth in interactive service sector jobs within African labour markets.

With a view to identifying and examining the type of agent sought by call centre companies in Kenya, the conceptual framework of "workplace selves" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) was developed as a lens through which to analyse

forms of workplace control. Inspired by Foucauldian theory, this framework incorporated key sensitizing concepts germane to different articulations of power relations, leading me to conceptualize the managerial endeavour with regard to controlling agents as a process of "problematization". Another aspect of the study examined the association of the BPO sector with "development" in Kenya. Drawing on the wellbeing literature (see chapter 3, section 3.2.5), I examined three principal aspects of BPO agent circumstances – "experience", "profile" and "compensation" (see chapter 4). In enabling agents to acquire new skills and confidence while working on an insecure basis, the analysis suggested that the BPO sector's record is mixed. It seems that using internationally oriented BPO to create appealing new jobs is not as straightforward as the Kenyan government and other stakeholders have often assumed and this is highlighted throughout the thesis through my analysis of the constitution of workplace power relations.

The application of the "workplace selves" conceptual framework was helpful in identifying key differences between various kinds of call centre working environments, especially with respect to managerial approaches to the control of agents. The terms "flexible" and "subordinate selves" were proposed as a means of capturing the differences between BPOs and captives (see chapter 5). Based on both the insecure nature of the work and the relatively greater autonomy and task variety characterizing their job roles, my analysis suggests that BPO agents can be understood as "flexible selves". Owing to their relatively greater job security and their employers' emphasis on hierarchy and working according to status, I suggest that captive agents can be regarded as "subordinate selves".

In chapter 2, I drew attention to the potential for divergent "rationalities" of control to be present (section 2.5). This argument framed my exploration of why differences in company managerial approaches were apparent in the empirical data. My analysis of company hierarchies and working environments suggested that BPOs approach the management of their agents according to a "rationality of strategic egalitarianism" (see chapter 6). While close monitoring of agent conduct emerged as the predominant mode of "subjectification" (chapter 7,

section 7.3), I found that a facilitative form of management was deployed at BPOs, exemplified by the creation of sites of autonomy (see chapter 5, section 5.4.2) and the selective downplaying of authority (see chapter 5, section 5.4.3). Conversely, captive agents appeared to be managed according to a substantively different rationality of control – "directed conduct". The evidence of the relatively greater importance of workplace status within captives, and the absence of a core – rather than additional – organizational interest in the provision of call centre services, indicated that captive agents were subject to less complex and less nuanced forms of workplace control than were BPOs.

Additional insight emerged from my analysis in chapter 7, which revealed three distinct, yet interrelated, modes of workplace subjectification. In the light of the relatively greater complexity of workplace power relations that I identified in BPOs in Kenya, in addition to the prevailing mode of workplace subjectification – "comprehensive observation" – the managerial endeavour to render agent conduct continuously "visible" suggested that BPO agents were encouraged to develop a heightened awareness of their "selves" as composites of the skills, capacities and aptitudes required by their work, rather than being simply commanded to adhere to instructions in relation to how to interact with customers. Given the responsibility to self-improve that this implies, I characterized this as a process of "self-problematization", referring to the connection that management endeavours to establish between achieving service quality and the agents' desire to be recognized as capable workers. Lastly, in view of the managerial receptivity towards agents' ideas, I also suggested a further mode – "recognizing individualism" – to encapsulate the managerial desire to capture agent contributions beyond the conventional confines of low-status job roles, while, at the same time, creating a sense of commitment among agents by indicating that the work could be more fulfilling than simply following instructions.

Overall, the analysis in this thesis indicates that the forms of control implicated in the call centre labour process derive from management's goal of producing and overseeing two distinct types of agent. Owing to the importance of agents as the centrepiece of a customer-oriented labour process,

management was concerned with agent conduct in both BPO and captive working environments. However, BPO and captive managers were found to oversee agents with substantively different attributes and capacities. In the light of the role of hierarchy and of working to status at play within captives, the findings of my study suggest that working practices within in-house call centres are organized around approaching agents as "subordinate selves". In this regard, the control of captive agents can be understood to be partly based on a "sovereign" formulation of workplace power relations exemplified by the relatively strong emphasis on fixed job roles and the views of hierarchically superior figures and a tendency to manage based on commands, rather than exhortations. At the same time, in captives, the evidence suggests that this formulation sits alongside what can be regarded as a disciplinary model of power relations based on the increasing use of pervasive monitoring and the digital recording of agent performance.

Control with BPO working environments in my analysis can be regarded as illustrative of a managerial strategy that is different to that of captives. Being reliant on the use of intensive monitoring – and the relatively greater use of workplace "experts" such as TLs (team leaders) and QAs (quality analysts) – the management of BPO agents can also be understood to exhibit the close control and regulation that are characteristic of a disciplinary formulation of power relations, in a manner that surpasses what is in operation in captives. As discussed, in BPOs the intensive monitoring of agent performance was shown to be supportive of service quality and of sustaining a specialism in voice-based sales and customer service. Though agents are disciplined as a result of the close control of the temporal and spatial elements of their labour, as "flexible selves" they are also governed according to the relatively more light-touch examples of regulation. As my analysis indicated, this combination appears conducive to the maintenance of service quality and to mitigate the impact on agent morale resulting from poor and inconsistent remuneration. In the light of these findings, the advantage of this managerial strategy results from overseeing agents according to non-mysterious, "fair" assessment criteria that are accepted by agents as broadly authoritative as a record of personal

performance in relation to on-call conduct, in conjunction with creating conditions for agents to perceive that their work fosters their professional self-development.

8.3 Theoretical and empirical contributions

While there are several academic traditions within which to situate my study (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.6), my approach was inspired by Foucauldian studies of interactive service work and call centres, focusing especially on the relational nature of power – and how the production of knowledge can undergird forms of subjectivity. The conceptual framework – "workplace selves" – enabled me to identify and critically examine the implications of the expansion of Kenya's call centre sector, leading to insights into workplace power relations that are presented in this section. The extent to which these insights could be generalized to processes of workplace control within East African service sector working environments is discussed in section 8.5.4.

I examined different approaches to the management of BPO and captive agents, regarding these as a divergent rationalities of control (see chapter 6). Drawing on my interpretation of Foucault's approach to workplace power relations as potentially involving disciplinary, governmentality and sovereignty formulations (see chapter 2, section 2.4), I explored not only what management required agents to be and to do, but why particular forms of control were deployed. As an extension of the interest of neo-Foucauldian scholars in how subjects are problematized and understood by authorities, and how these understandings can influence individual subject conduct (Miller and Rose, 2008), I considered how managerial rationalities of control – in relation to the types of subjects idealized by management – animate particular programmes of action for the reform of agent conduct. Rather than beginning from a premise of conflictual relations between management and agents, I focused on how different managerial motivations are reflected in divergent forms of workplace control.

This orientation yielded a number of insights. Across the numerous approaches adopted within the literature, a key concern is whether call centre work – and "knowledge work" in general – is oppressive of workers or, rather, enriching. For scholars writing from the perspective of "immaterial labour", workers are not regarded as having a "choice" within post-industrial, service sector working environments since their job roles are normally understood to operate solely in service of the needs of capital. In this sense, workers are obligated to demonstrate the capacities and skills deemed necessary by management. Consequently, the practices of making decisions and suggestions at work, of considering how to improve one's conduct and of presenting oneself in a favourable manner to customers that feature within service roles are often understood to be predicated on a corrupting extraction of workers' creativity and personalities. This position presents a contrast with mainstream perspectives on "choice" in the workplace, which suggest that management is increasingly concerned to encourage "empowered" workers to commit to developing their workplace skills and to volunteer their ideas and suggestions in relation to working processes. As a result, this understanding pursues an instrumental focus on outcomes that are desirable to management, at the expense of a close examination of the nature of workplace power relations and the extent to which workers may be said to possess the agency to "choose" how to conduct themselves.

My findings, however, suggest that the role of agents' "choice" in relation to actions in the workplace, and what is required of agents in the shape of particular workplace subjectivities, benefit from contextualization within a wider understanding of management motivations. Privileging "freedom" (Foucault, 2007, 353) and "autonomy" (McNay, 2009, 62) in relation to subject conduct, consistent with my conceptual framework, yielded insight into how partially "autonomous" and "empowering" job roles are connected to larger managerial strategies of optimizing agent performance. Rather than suggesting that appealing forms of "facilitative supervision" (Frenkel et al., 1998) are increasingly a feature of contemporary workplaces, my analysis of Kenyan call centres provides insight into examples of management in which workers are

selectively conceptualized as resources to be empowered (McKinlay and Taylor, 2014, 13), as part of a managerial endeavour to regard workplace subjects as "free", yet responsibly autonomous (Dean, 1999, 182).

As part of a blended model of workplace power relations (combining examples of disciplinary- and governmentality-based formulations), BPO agents in particular can be understood as the subjects of both close regulation with regard to on-call conduct and relatively greater managerial distance in relation to off-call conduct. In this respect, the BPO managerial strategy encompasses a "mentality" of government within which an overly domineering approach to control appears excessive and inclined to undermine agents' identification with their work. In order to counter this, it is important that agents "choose" how to improve and reform their conduct, but without being in a position to reject or call into question the authority of management's recording of performance. As the evidence in this study demonstrates, BPOs were relatively successful in producing enthusiastic, committed agents, who appeared to develop stronger skill sets than their captive counterparts. However, in practice, the blended forms of control did not appear entirely complementary. Aside from agents' dissatisfaction with their remuneration, producing confident agents with a heightened sense of their skills (see chapter 7, section 7.3.4) appeared to contribute to the attrition that BPOs reported.

In the light of this, a key observation arising from this study is the notion that workplace control within call centres in Kenya is best understood by **exploring both the relationship between forms of control and the rationality that informs them.** In this context, control is seen as fluid, relational and to entail both overt and subtle techniques for the reform and direction of workplace conduct. Given the potential increase in call centre jobs within other African labour markets, this is especially important because it offers scope for a nuanced analysis of workplace power relations. It counters a tendency by some scholars to approach interactive service work as essentially either encouraging or unattractive. Given other African countries' interest in creating internationally oriented outsourcing sectors and likely increases in the number of workplaces featuring digitally mediated monitoring, my perspective on workplace control

offers scope to examine the nature and implications of novel forms of regulation within interactive service job roles.

At the same time, by encouraging an analysis of how the managerial endeavour to attain workplace control relates to and can awaken worker motivations, the insights in this study were further developed by considering **the "self" in a way that links the macro- and micro-relations of power.** That is, by privileging the self, this study offers insight into how management seeks to maintain consistent outputs and agent motivation through the use of rigorous monitoring in combination with "employee discretion" (Kinnie et al., 2000a). This aspect of my analysis builds on studies of the role of forms of regulation and agent self-awareness when faced with the continuous recording of actions (Winiecki, 2004), and studies of how the banality of work resulting from the standardization entailed in call centre labour may be mitigated through appeals to agents' "voice" (McDonnell et al., 2014). My analysis of BPOs' desire to secure agents' commitment through offering fulfilling, meaningful work suggested the notion of "recognizing individualism" (see chapter 7, section 7.3.4), a concept that is redolent of what is referred to elsewhere in the literature as the "just be yourself" managerial approach (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010, 178). Thus, the framework of "workplace selves" (see chapter 2, section 2.5) offered scope to consider how agents are expected – and seem to expect themselves – to demonstrate different types of subjectivity. A focus on the construct of the self offered a fruitful conceptual basis on which to examine the interconnectedness between company objectives in relation to service quality and agents' desire to develop attributes and capacities that they perceived as professionally beneficial.

My analysis highlighted that BPO agents' attitudes towards call centre work can be inconsistent (see chapter 4, section 4.4). For example, while offering generally favourable reflections on the personal transformation that they experienced, many said that they found the work to be repetitive and routinized. Nonetheless, the agents' enthusiasm also could be understood to reflect their employers' ability to offer experiences and feedback that agents deemed professionally valuable. Given management's concern that agents demonstrate

emotional resilience, an upbeat personality and a consistently favourable disposition towards customers, the notion of the "self" offered an instructive means of examining agents – whom I understood to embody an assortment of particular attributes and capacities – as the key company resource and centrepiece of control. By extension, this enabled me to explore agents' selective enthusiasm for call centre work as a matter of developing an awareness and a relationship to the self (see chapter 7, section 7.3) that is germane to a perception of self-development – even if BPO agents did not regard the work as attractive in the long term.

Given the apparent efficacy of the BPO managerial strategy, the finding that agents are selectively enthusiastic is significant when considered in the light of the wider context of the labour market in Nairobi. While call centre work in many Western settings is often regarded as undesirable, and perhaps even a "dead-end", in Kenya BPO call centre work attracted relatively well-educated, ambitious young labour market entrants. Beyond the important material consideration of simply having a job, agents' generally favourable views of what I termed "the responsibilized self" (chapter 6, section 6.4.3) suggested that BPO workplace cultures and the emphasis on personalized forms of feedback on performance were regarded as broadly conducive to developing capacities and skills.

The sense that undertaking BPO call centre work enabled a form of self-development suggests that Kenyan agents' responses to their companies' strategies of workplace control were relatively more approving than might be expected among agents working within Western workplaces, where the notion of a "fun" working environment and the idea of developing worthwhile service sector capabilities seem likely to be met with more straightforward scepticism. While this selective approval may not be ultimately peculiar to workers in Nairobi, and might well be observable among other workers elsewhere in the East African region if similar BPO call centres were to be established in cities such as Kigali or Kampala, it suggests that the relative efficacy of the BPO managerial approach is a reflection of the context of the wider labour market. What may be significant about Nairobi in particular is that the expansion of

higher education (Odhiambo, 2011) and the demand for vocationally oriented courses such as business and accounting could be understood to indicate the influence of people's sense of the capacities that a "successful" professional ought to embody. In this regard, BPO call centre work seems to be regarded enthusiastically by workers owing to the perception that it creates the opportunity, albeit perhaps only to a limited extent as a short-term employment option, to develop some of these capacities.

BPO agents' tendency to regard their positions as relatively short-term employment options in fact appeared to be shared by their employers, owing to the stronger overall performance of "fresh" teams of agents in the workplace (see chapter 7, section 7.3.2). The analysis of BPO agents as "flexible selves" (see chapters 5 and 6) yielded insight into **the role of flexibility within interactive service working environments** which was shown to have two principal dimensions – **flexibility of work**, with regard to agent terms of employment, and **flexibility at work**, in relation to agent job roles. Firstly, despite being based in the "formal" – rather than the "informal" – part of the Kenyan economy, BPO agent jobs were short-term and modestly remunerated (see chapter 4, section 4.4.3). With BPO agents treated as more expendable than their captive counterparts, the expansion of outsourced call centre work appeared to be leading to an increase in relatively insecure work, thus undermining the association between BPO and "development" as proposed by the Kenyan government (as analysed in chapter 4, section 4.4).

Secondly, my analysis drew attention to the managerial utility of introducing elements of flexibility into BPO agent job roles, based on an understanding that agents needed to be "adaptable" (see chapter 5, section 5.2.3). This second dimension of flexibility seems to support agents' commitment to their work, and to be advantageous to management in serving to ensure that agents' potential dissatisfaction with the terms of their employment does not jeopardize the overall service quality. BPO managerial strategies were illuminated by the relative rigidity of the captive approach to managing agents as "subordinate selves". Unlike in captives, the BPO managerial approach was characterized by examples of autonomy, by making agents feel empowered and by presenting

the notion of a relatively flat workplace hierarchy. My analysis suggests that BPO agents' commitment to their work can be understood to stem from three different modes of "subjectification" (as examined in chapter 7, section 7.3). While the first of these seems to reflect the managerial objective of ensuring agent "visibility" (Foucault, 1978, 187), the second and third modes can be understood respectively to create a sense of responsibility in agents to improve, and to elicit contributions and ideas from agents outside the immediate framework of workplace monitoring.

These results emphasize the importance of the dually articulated nature of flexibility in the call centre service sector working environment. This study furthers understanding of the "flexibilization" (Fraser, 2003) of contemporary working conditions based on temporary employment and expectations of adaptability on the part of workers. My evidence suggests, however, that workers' enthusiasm for personal development instigated by their work can alleviate concerns about the lack of commitment by their employer to hiring for the longer term, rather than resulting in antipathy towards unappealing terms of employment. Consequently, this is suggestive of why "precarious" work – characterized by the transfer of risk from the employer to the employee (Kalleberg, 2009) – is not necessarily regarded as straightforwardly negative by workers. In other words, when viewed as a key component of larger managerial strategies of control, the two dimensions of *flexibility of work* and *at work* are shown to be interlinked, with the sense of personal fulfilment fostered by the workplace experiences implicated in the second dimension serving to inhibit the potential for dissatisfaction stemming from the first.

With the potential increase in interactive service work within African labour markets, and the use of outsourcing as a cost-cutting strategy, understanding the implications of call centre worker flexibility is a pressing concern. My analysis of BPO agents as "flexible selves" indicates that "empowerment" and "autonomy" are important facets of managerial strategies, rather than beneficent features of workplace control. By encouraging attention to both the terms of employment and worker capacity to demonstrate the customer-oriented capabilities required by management, my analysis of flexibility as being

dually articulated provides enhanced insight into company expectations of service workers.

8.4 Revisiting the conceptual framework

In the light of these insights, the usefulness of the core constructs in conceptual framework – "workplace selves" – in chapter 2 (section 2.5) and chapter 7 (section 7.3) can be assessed.

Firstly, the construct of "the secure self" – which pertained to the security of agent job roles – proved to be limited in providing insight into the implications of managerial strategies for call centre workers. While my initial concern was with job security, this issue became subsumed within a broader consideration of the "flexible" and "subordinate" basis of BPO and captive agent jobs. In this regard, my examination of job security took the form of an empirical consideration of the differences between BPO and captive agents' working conditions, rather than playing a significant role as a conceptual device. Consequently, with respect to the understanding of forms of workplace control, I propose that the notion of job security can be better approached as a facet of being a "flexible self".

In order to be sensitive to the structuring of workplace hierarchies, I also drew upon the construct of "the equal self". The notion of forms of equality in the workplace – and BPO management's strategic effacing of status – is particularly helpful for understanding the validation of the views of conventionally low-status workers (chapter 7, section 7.3.3). When viewed as a facet of a mode of "subjectification", or what I refer to as "self-problematization", considering how workers may be selectively treated as "equals" invites attention to management's endeavour to awaken agent perceptions of personal deficiencies in their conduct.

By extension, the managerial goal of ensuring that agents can recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their performance was shown to be supportive of the notion that agents are responsible for changing their conduct. I have suggested that the notion of "the responsible self" can invite attention to how workers may be encouraged to be "active" and to "take ownership" of aspects of

their work, rather than be instructed principally via direct commands. While the findings of the study suggested that a disciplinary formulation – based on management's goal of attaining panoptic visibility of agent actions (see chapter 7, section 7.3) – represented the predominant configuration of workplace power relations, being attentive to agent "responsibility" helped to sensitize the analysis to areas of agent conduct that are subject to managerial control "at a distance".

I also suggested the usefulness of the construct of "the empowered self" to encourage a focus on how forms of workplace autonomy might be understood by management to enhance service quality. Insofar as the notion that "empowering" agents relies on the partial receding of managerial authority, there was, in hindsight, a degree of overlap between this construct and that of "the responsible self". Nonetheless, the exploration of the theoretical implications of my study in chapter 7 (section 7.3) clarified the promise of each of these constructs. Where agents' "responsibility" can be regarded as stemming from the managerial expectation that agents should recognize how to problematize their conduct and work towards self-improvement, being an "empowered self", I suggest, encompasses the notion that management is receptive to agents' individuality in regard to certain areas of performance. As part of a mode of workplace subjectification which I call "recognizing individualism", BPO management especially was shown to be open-minded towards agent ideas for improving company operations. In this respect, the understanding of the empowered self can be further refined (chapter 7, section 7.3.4). In addition to paying attention to the managerial inclination to solicit agent ideas, this construct also encompasses how agents are encouraged to establish a connection to their work based on offering ideas and suggestions that are not enveloped by the immediacy of the disciplinary apparatus of workplace monitoring.

Taken together, the notions of "equal", "responsible" and "empowered" selves encourage attention to the forms of workplace control undergirding a governmentality-based configuration of workplace power relations, in parallel to the prevailing disciplinary formulation. By bringing the aspects of agent conduct

that are governed at a distance into view, the value of the framework of "workplace selves" derives from they way it calls attention to how management strives to employ intensive monitoring in conjunction with the selectively autonomous, light-touch regulation of worker conduct.

The idea of establishing a connection to one's work through "empowerment" is also important for the investigation of agent motivations in response to managerial strategies of control. The notion of "the aspirational self" was suggested as a means of integrating a focus on agent self-development – that is, agents' sense of what they gain from undertaking call centre work. This was helpful in bringing agent responses to managerial control into view, and in suggesting how the management of BPO agents relies on providing workplace experiences that agents deem to be supportive of their professional prospects. This construct was helpful in providing clues as to why BPO agents spoke favourably about a form of work that they also depicted as onerous and unappealing. It also suggested that in combining individualized workplace monitoring and feedback on performance with a regard for agent ideas and opinions, BPO management engendered agent commitment and affinity to call centre work by making aspects of the work appear professionally fulfilling.

Exploring different examples of agent selves has been helpful for generating understandings of the operation of forms of workplace control. Given the attrition and evidence of agents' qualified enthusiasm for their work, this does not suggest that management is able to achieve a form of totalizing control over how agents act and think. Nevertheless, it does underscore the merits of asking about how different instantiations of "workplace selves" are interrelated with larger strategies of managerial control in interactive service sector working environments.

8.5 Reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the study

The analysis and reflections in this study offer a nuanced understanding of workplace control. Nevertheless, it is important to consider other possible interpretations of the evidence when other approaches in the call centre

literature are brought to bear on the evidence in this study. In this section I consider three alternative approaches: "the Taylorization of white-collar work", "emotional labour" and "mass customization". I also consider the limitations of the study and propose avenues for further research.

8.5.1 The Taylorization of white-collar work

The perhaps most predominant approach to the study of call centre labour is informed by the concept of the "Taylorization of white-collar work", especially as it relates to high volume, simple operations (Taylor and Bain, 2001). Pioneered by Taylor and Bain (1999), this approach (as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.3) is highly influential among critically inclined scholars, spawning a plethora of studies of numerous aspects of call centre labour, particularly in the UK (e.g., Taylor et al., 2002) and India (e.g., Taylor et al., 2009). In regarding call centre labour as "Taylorized", Taylor and Bain's perspective is broadly influenced by Harry Braverman's (1974) deskilling thesis and the notion that the scientific management of workplace processes underpins repetitive, routinized and alienating job roles. Consequently, the authors are highly sceptical of the relatively celebratory accounts of those inclined to regard call centres as increasingly based on "knowledge work" (Taylor et al., 2002, 133).

Taylor and Bain's approach is well illustrated in their challenge to Fernie and Metcalf's (2000) account, who – in appropriating Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1978) – depict call centres as the realization of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. While sharing a critical stance, in their response Taylor and Bain underlined the diversity of call centre operations and the scope for agents to resist the excesses of workplace control, whether individually or collectively (Bain and Taylor, 2000). Accordingly, rather than positing uniformity, this approach emphasizes the differences between call centre working environments, and the resulting implications for agent experiences of work. Empirically, this is investigated with a focus on the significance of key variables for those involved in the call centre labour process, such as simple versus complex interactions, routinization versus customization, and high versus low call volumes (Taylor et al., 2002).

This approach might have suggested giving considerable attention to how agent experiences in Kenya are conditioned by the constraints and routine of their job roles. Especially in the light of the downward pressure on remuneration in outsourced working environments, an analysis deriving from a "Taylorization" perspective might have highlighted the unattractiveness of call centre work in Kenya, based on BPO endeavours to maintain low labour costs through the close control of essentially homogenized agents. This might have yielded a robust critique of the Kenyan government's emphasis on the BPO sector as an important source of appealing employment, based on an analysis of poor, even exploitative, terms of agent employment and the expansion of excessively monitored voice service work in the Kenyan labour market. This might also have suggested greater emphasis on resistance to workplace power and distinctions between how management conceptualizes control and how what occurs in practice may be supportive of agents' capacity to defend their interests.

With a primary focus on agent "resistance", I might have paid more attention to the potentially exploitative nature of some call centre work in Kenya. However, in view of the relatively less intensive use of monitoring in captive call centres, this emphasis might have led to a conclusion that captive agents undertake straightforwardly more appealing jobs than their BPO counterparts, and I might have missed the evidence suggesting BPO agents' relatively greater enthusiasm for their job roles than captive agents. Insofar as it is argued that agents have "agency" (e.g., Callaghan and Thompson, 2001, 15), scholars working in the "Taylorization" tradition risk over-emphasizing the role of workplace resistance. Rather than examining how the managerial approach to control awakens and intersects with agent motivations, the inclination would have been to assume that "agency" is based on resistance to the alienation of repetitive workplace procedures.

I suggest that this could have produced a less nuanced understanding of workplace power relations than that arising from my approach. Firstly, within workplaces in the global South, it seems misplaced to suggest that agents are primarily concerned with contesting the managerial prerogative of control or with emancipating themselves from their job roles. Secondly, if normatively

appealing concepts such as "autonomy" and "empowerment" are treated as conditions of liberation, rather than as aspects of managerial strategy, then this favours the assumption that management approaches agents as objects, thereby overlooking the subtlety of workplace control. This is not to suggest that power is predicated on a managerial capacity to completely envelop agent identities and their sense of self, but to underline the relational nature of control, and that a key form of agency is agent endeavours to become, in their estimation, skilled, capable workers.

8.5.2 Call centres and emotional labour

Another perspective focuses on the implications of the managerial endeavour to co-opt and control workers' "emotional labour". Informed by a concern with the "commercialization of human feeling" entailed in service sector work, this approach draws on Hochschild's landmark study of the experiences of airline cabin crew, published in 1983 as *The Managed Heart*. In the context of the growing prominence of service sector work within the US economy, Hochschild examined the increasing importance for companies of ensuring agreeable customer experiences and the regulation of their employees' emotional displays. In common with the "Taylorization" tradition, the "emotional labour" approach derives from a broadly Marxian understanding of employment relations, as illustrated by Hochschild's (1983, 7) definition of the term:

> "I use the term *emotional labor* [author's italics] to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; *emotional labor* is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*. I use the synonymous terms *emotion work* or *emotion management* to refer to these same acts done in a private context where they have *use value*."

Hochschild's work has influenced studies of call centre labour, providing the intellectual scaffolding for a number of examinations of worker experiences and the composition of managerial control. As Van Jaarsveld and Poster underline (2013, 153), with agent–customer interactions taking place over the phone, call

centre agents can be understood to draw upon "vocal" rather than "visual cues", involving "communicating appropriate emotions" and the maintenance of a pleasant phone voice. Empirically, much of the emotional labour scholarship focuses on the potential for emotional harm engendered by the intensity of a labour process underpinned by the continuous manufacturing of inauthentic feelings and the suppression of emotions. For example, in a study of five call centres in Australia, Deery et al. (2002) isolate key factors associated with "emotional exhaustion" and its relationship to absenteeism from work. In their case study of recruitment and selection at "Telebank", Callaghan and Thompson (2002, 249) argue that agents can be considered as "competent emotion managers", rather than as employees demonstrating the "deep acting" proposed by Hochschild (1983, 35), which refers to displays of sincere, and not merely "surface", feelings. Elsewhere, Nath (2011) draws upon the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour to examine the role of "stigma" as it pertains to "national identity management" in outsourced call centre working environments in India.

The emotional labour approach might have favoured a concern with the managerial endeavour to manufacture and sustain agreeable feelings in agents. My analysis might have yielded a more extensive discussion of the role of agent emotions and personalities. The roles of TLs (team leaders) and QAs (quality analysts) on the operations floor might have received more attention and the managerial aim of nurturing agents' inner resources of emotional control might have been explored in greater depth, thus facilitating an examination of the extent to which agents undergo a "deep" or simply "surface" change. Beginning from the premise that the work is likely to elicit emotional exhaustion would have shifted my focus principally to agent interests.

Nonetheless, the emotional labour perspective is arguably limited in the case of call centre work in Kenya. Korczynski (2003) suggests that Hochschild's approach yields a relatively narrow focus on emotional harm, especially as it relates to individual workers. This comes at the expense, he suggests, of a more detailed examination of customer–service worker relations, given that interactions can be the source of pleasure and validation for the worker, as well

as "pain" (Korczynski, 2003, 57). Approaching call centre work as emotional labour might also have risked concluding that agents are the passive victims of managerial dominance, thus making it difficult to trace the nuances of control through multiple modes of subjectification.

8.5.3 Call centres as "mass customization"

The third perspective that has a bearing on my study is "mass customization". The refers to managerial endeavours to "reconcile" the dual logics of "standardization" and "customization" implicated in the provision of call centre services (e.g., Frenkel et al., 1998). Call centre work is understood to be distinct from the standardization that underpins manufacturing, and to exhibit elements of "knowledge work". While it typically offers a relatively more optimistic account than the other traditions considered in this section, it is sometimes yields a critical outlook when scholars examine the potentially "constraining" features of call centre work (Frenkel et al., 1998).

The mass customization perspective often offers a broadly Weberian conceptualization of rationalization through bureaucracy, rules and formalized procedures. This is implied, for example, by Frenkel et al.'s (1999, 134) reference to "caging employees electronically". More specifically, control is theorized as "info-normative" (Frenkel et al., 1999, 134) – that is, the use of information technology-based employee performance data is understood to be combined with a working culture informed by customer-sensitive behavioural norms. Control is said to be structured in this manner owing to the managerial need to sustain service quality – by attending to customers adequately – and to maintain competitive advantage by marrying efficient, routinized processes with employee discretion and a measure of "empowerment".

Interpreting my data through the lens of the mass customization approach might have yielded a sharper focus on the role of customers – both as a managerial preoccupation and as a key influence on agents' experience of their working roles. This approach gives relatively greater attention to the implications of the customer-oriented nature of call centre work. Unlike the "emotional labour" perspective, which emphasizes the potential for emotional

harm within service sector jobs, the mass customization approach offers scope for a consideration of how interacting with customers "may be an important arena for meaning" (Korczynski et al., 2000, 671) for agents. Future research might benefit from greater attention to Kenyan agent experiences of interactions with customers and an exploration of the nature of the relationship between customer–agent interactions and agent levels of job satisfaction. This could yield additional insight into differences between agents' experiences of providing services for international and for local customers.

The risk of pursuing this line of inquiry is that "knowledge work" might be depicted in a celebratory way in relation to call centre labour. As Russell (2008, 201) underlines, this perspective sometimes offers relatively simple conceptualizations of workplace control. Consequently, rather than focusing on these features of agent job roles as part of larger strategies of managerial control, they may be seen as being supportive of agent liberation, thereby neglecting a more refined understanding of workplace power relations.

8.5.4 Strengths and weaknesses of the study

My research drew upon a mixed methodological approach comprising the use of semi-structured interviewing, participant observation at company workplaces and a questionnaire completed by BPO and captive agents within the context of a single sector and country (see chapter 3). A multi-method approach provided a means through which to identify the type of agent required by the management of different call centres, and how such requirements are understood by agents.

As in any study, there are several limitations arising from this approach. Firstly, by focusing on a single country, the conclusions in this study cannot be assumed to be directly relevant to other countries, despite the similar interests in BPO of other governments in Africa. Moreover, within Kenya, by only focusing on the call centre sector, the analysis of "flexibility" that I present is applicable to BPO and captive workplaces, and merely suggestive of managerial control strategies and worker experiences in the wider Kenyan labour market. While there was evidence of markedly different managerial

strategies in operation in BPO and captive working environments, a larger sample size – both in terms of interviewees and observed companies – might have led to more nuanced insights into forms of workplace control.

These limitations notwithstanding, while the generalizability of the results is limited, the additional research would help to further substantiate my conclusions and provide the opportunity to refine the overall analysis.

8.5.5 Avenues for further research

On the basis of this study I suggest that insights into the nature of workplace control can best be generated by differentiating between captives and BPOs in relation to their strategies toward the call centre workplace. My suggestion that the rationality of captive management is best characterized as "directed conduct" might imply that captives oversee essentially homogenous operations. Further research is needed to examine the particularities of individual call centres, or those belonging to other sectors. Similarly, further research is needed to confirm differences between BPO and captive service provision.

My analysis drew a distinction between small and relatively large BPOs, and the implications of the differences between them merit further examination. For instance, it is possible that "strategic egalitarianism", though it was shown to be a prevailing rationality of most BPOs, actually stems from different motivations in small BPOs that are owned by local entrepreneurs, as compared to large BPOs that are funded by foreign companies or by Kenyans with substantial international connections. In this regard, it would be interesting to explore the influences resulting in the establishing of particular workplaces and relatively flat workplace hierarchies. This avenue for additional research could provide further insight into changes in managerial approaches to the control of interactive service sector workers in Kenya.

8.6 Broader implications

The findings regarding the experience and consequences of the expansion of the call centre sector in Kenya are suggestive of implications for similar

developments in interactive service work elsewhere in Kenya and in Africa as a whole. In the light of the BPOs' endeavour to oversee customer-focused workers, there may be an interrelated perception within Kenyan companies of the importance of "the customer" as an object of increasing interest within domestic markets. Within the Kenyan economy, this is most applicable to the telecommunications and banking sectors, which are characterized by increasingly greater competition, leading companies to pursue strategies aimed at strengthening their competitive advantage.

While in the past companies within such sectors were primarily concerned with the most affluent consumers, there now seem to be signs of a relatively greater interest in the economic returns from providing services to the less affluent, yet most numerous, consumers. This was suggested, for example, by the head of customer service at a leading bank in Kenya (23/04/2013 – see chapter 4, section 4.2.3). In reference to the changing attitude towards call centre operations among senior figures at the company, he commented:

> "We were [previously] characterized as a cost centre *per se*. It was purely the centres where customers can call for information… we are trying to get to the streams now, and you will see the business is now really looking at this not just as an information centre *per se*, but as a place where they can do business."

As this reflection illustrates, from the companies' perspectives, call centres – despite their running costs – appear to offer an appealing tool for capturing customer data and for generating improved analysis of market demand. In conjunction with the growing appetite of many companies for using outsourcing to cut costs (as explored in chapter 4, section 4.3), this interest suggests that the managerial demand for workers with strong customer service skills will remain strong – and may even grow.

By extension, the drive to cut costs through outsourcing and to oversee customer-oriented workers may also influence how companies in Kenya think about their internal structures. As explored in chapter 7 (section 7.3.3), in view

of the perceived advantages of moving away from the traditional emphasis on overt hierarchies and conventional bureaucracies, management may be becoming progressively concerned to inject a spirit of competition into the workplace. In the endeavour to prioritize what the customer wants, other companies in Kenya may be inclined to adopt managerial strategies characterized by selective forms of autonomy as part of an endeavour to make job roles fulfilling for workers. Rather than a straightforward emphasis on the authority of senior figures, this rationale has been shown to lead companies to encourage workers to think of themselves as "empowered" (see chapter 6).

This might suggest a relatively favourable configuration of workplace power relations. However, in the light of the findings of this study, it is arguably more fruitful to consider such approaches as features of workplace control aimed at leading to the optimization of performance, rather than as examples of worker emancipation. This study provides future scholars with a set of sensitizing tools with which to evaluate the relationship between the expectations of workers and management strategies within interactive service sector work in African contexts beyond the call centre companies examined here. Rather than indicating uncomplicated progress with respect to employee–employer relations, the expansion of interactive service work calls for critical attention to the nature of managerial approaches. The managerial expectation that workers are to be "responsible" and "flexible" has been shown to undergird subtle forms of control – at least in the sample of companies examined in this study. With respect to customer-oriented service sector working environments, this suggests the need for research into the implications of the recasting of "success" at work as reflecting a worker's responsibility to self-manage, as the traditional emphasis on straightforward obedience recedes. When viewed *prima facie,* such changes suggest to some analysts the emergence of putatively wholesome employment relations informed by an individualist, egalitarian ethos. However, based on the evidence in this study, for workers, the attractive nature of *flexibility at work* may be dramatically undermined by the *flexibility of work* prompted by insecure, temporary employment. If the growth in service sector employment within African economies is to yield substantively more attractive work, then it will be

necessary to maintain a critical scholarly focus on the nature of workplace control and the consequences for those implicated in workplace power relations.

Appendix 1: Topic guide for interviewing "workers"

- For the purposes of my study, I understand "workers" to be staff involved in undertaking, training and assessing voice-based work. This primarily encompasses call centre agents, quality analysts (QAs) and team leaders (TLs), as well as trainers and human resources officials. This topic guide provides examples of themes addressed in interviews with workers.

Experiences of call centre work

Suitability
Characteristics
Recruitment
Training

Doing the job well
Monitoring and evaluation of performance
Management

Workplace community
Enjoyment of work
Personal development

Worker details
Background
Education
Previous experience

Skills in the workplace
Developing and maintaining one's skills
Customer interactions

Inter-personal workplace relations

Appendix 2: Topic guide for interviewing "non-workers"

- I understand "non-workers" to be research participants in senior working roles within call centre working environments, along with other stakeholders in the sector (such as government officials, company owners and representatives of the BPO sector body KITOS). Owing to their diversity, it was not feasible to design an interview guide for "non-workers" in which every question would be relevant for and answerable by each research participant. For example, an accounts manager might be able to share a great deal of insight into management practices and evaluative approaches, but know less about growth and commercial trends in the sector. Conversely, a company owner would likely know a great deal about the history and commercial aims of their company and its strategies for growth, but have less awareness of day-to-day operations, working practices and workforce management.

Perspectives on call centre sector

- History and strategy behind BPO sector
  Difficulties faced

- Types of services provided by company
  Ownership structure

- Government's role in stimulating growth in BPO
  BPO sector's relationship to Vision 2030 initiative

- Growth in "captive" call centres

- BPO shift in emphasis from international to domestic contracts

- Workers' suitability
  Characteristics
  Recruitment
  Training

- Type of person employed in sector
  Educational level in sector
  Workers' previous experience

- Workplace community
  Workplace culture

Appendix 3: Field notes - Compubyte* (20/03/2013)

* This is a BPO company. The company name and persons referred to have been changed.

- I start off by speaking with Samuel, who sits away from the computers and cubicles where the agents work. He shows me the system they use, though not too extensively. The company is currently running two accounts. The first is a UK-based loan account. My understanding is that UK customers will have at some stage applied for loans for smallish sums of money online. Their details are retained as leads, passed on to Compubyte, and it is then the job of the agents to phone these individuals and attempt to get them to go through with the loan.

- Samuel mentioned that their contact in India gave them the system they use to monitor calls. I think it's a fairly standard, commonly used call dialler, distribution and recording computer system. They don't have any in-house expertise to maintain it. I ask Samuel if the client is able to see everything that's going on (i.e., whether the client can surveil the agents' activities). He says that the daytime client can't, but the client for the night shift can. He says that it is two different systems (but actually later on James, the company's owner, tells me that it isn't in fact – it's actually the same system, but one account is hosted locally, and the other is done so in the cloud).

- Samuel says that once a week he and James will sit around together and look at the stats, looking at the computer together. There are individual stats on each agent.

- Their US account is something to do with male health and medication. It takes place in the night-time of course, to accommodate the time difference between Kenya and the US.

- The call centre is located in a fairly basic, old building. The sales account that I'm listening to involves the 11 agents working calling up UK customers and telling them that they've been accepted for a loan.

- When I first sit down, Samuel introduces me to the agents, and the two of us then speak at the back of the room. I then return to where the agents are working and begin to observe.

- The working environment starts off very quiet, with no calls at all, but all of a sudden it becomes extremely noisy, with seemingly every agent on call and busy calling people. You can no longer make out individual voices at all. Each agent asks to speak to the lead they have. If they can't get the person to even pick up the phone, the system moves on to dial somebody else.

- Samuel sits on the other side of the room. He is fairly visible in walking down the narrow walkway between the two rows of computers and cubicles from time to time, but he more or less stays out. Samuel tells me that there are 11 agents working during the day shift, and 13 at night.

- The company also has an "ICT" part, outside its BPO operations. There is one guy sat in a much plusher office space there. Samuel says that this side of the business does web hosting, websites, domain name registration and so on. There is also a receptionist.

- The loan seems to always be offered to the clients, most of whom are not interested and do not take up the offer. The job is clearly very tough! You have to phone up confidently and clearly, and then ask a bunch of personal questions. You can imagine that, as a UK customer, it would be strange to hear one of these people, with their different accents and manner of speech. Some agents sound more aggressive to me than others, and of course all need to be direct with the customer. It's also a totally out of the blue thing. They basically phone up and then try to get through. Upon doing so, they immediately launch into a bunch of questions. This would certainly really throw a customer, and I'm wondering if it might be better to initially speak a bit slower, calmer and let people catch their thoughts.

- The work seems to be basically unscripted with respect to what you have to say, but you have to flow through particular questions and procedures when interacting. For example, the agents ask people about their approximate disposable income each month. Many of the customers seem to have no idea

why they're being called, which inhibits their responsiveness of course. I think it's the case that they potentially registered some time ago online.

- It seems to me, although it's a friendly atmosphere, like a really tough place to work. It's noisy, you can hear very many other agents on call, you can barely hear yourself think. It's tough for me even to think about what I want to write down, so trying to hold an important conversation must be tougher.

- The agents are approximately 50 per cent female and 50 per cent male. They are all dressed in smart casual attire.

- In more detail, the kind of questions they ask customers about concern: who they bank with, their living set-up (whether they are a private or a council tenant); their date of birth; whether they own a laptop or personal computer; whether they have a pension policy.

- The call centre then goes more or less quiet again – the activity very much comes in waves.

- The computers the agents have are desktop PCs. They seem of a fairly good standard. I notice that the agent behind me, when not on call, is just browsing on the internet and chatting with a friend. This means that internet access is not restricted.

- Fairly obviously, as an outsourced operation, the agents call on behalf of the client company, which I think is called "Loans-4-U UK".

- The work and its processes seem extremely repetitive and intense. You can see how tiring the work must be.

- Some agents' accents are conspicuously much more "neutral" than others. A contrast with how many in the city speak on the phone occurs to me. Many people simply hang up when talking on the phone, as this is common in East African custom and interactions. But of course for this job you can't simply hang up abruptly. You have to, perhaps, be trained to say thank you at the end etc.

- A number of clients clearly hang up immediately. The agents can get through and then find that clients put the phone down immediately, or perhaps after a few questions (which strikes me as a bit bizarre – you would think that they

would be interested by that point). Some agents launch very quickly into a set of questions or a description – you would hardly have time to think as a customer.

- Agents seem to a certain extent free to come and go, but Samuel told me that they have scheduled breaks.

- Despite the general difficulties that agents face in getting through to customers, some customers do nonetheless hook. Agents occasionally make it all the way through to process the transfer of funds into an account. Nonetheless, some still drop off after a couple of minutes, which must be very disheartening after all that initial effort.

- I wonder what the agents think of the customers they speak to? There's an awful lot of repeating themselves, and some of them are manifestly a little "shouty" about relaying their information and getting details from customers, in having to ask the same thing several times.

- There is the occasional wrong number. You can hear text messages going off and being received from time to time, so it's clear that phones are permitted.

- It seems like a very dull job to me. It's an endless effort to hook a customer, sometimes you don't get through; sometimes you do and the customer answers a couple of questions but then hangs up. Occasionally you make it all the way through the process, but then of course you start again.

Appendix 4: Field notes - Enerforce* (02/03/2013)

This company is an energy provider. The company name and persons referred to have been changed.

- The Enerforce workplace has a number of televisions mounted on the wall. One shows news from K24 – though there was no sound. A couple of other screens show the real-time reporting from the Cisco system that the company uses: a screen displaying statistics and data relevant to the whole team and the whole operation, such as number of people on call, number of calls waiting and the longest call of the day.

- In some respects, I'm not sure how much attention agents actually pay to these screens: they are not really big enough to be viewable from anywhere in the room. However, they do serve as a reminder of the exigencies of working to reduce call traffic, and illustrate the fact that many elements of their work are being recorded – both collectively and as individuals.

- The operations floor is fairly noisy, but perhaps less so than others I have visited. It has nice chairs for the agents to sit on, which of course is important if they're seated there all day. The agents are organized into rows. They have their own desks, but because they work on shifts, these do not exclusively belong to them. They are divided into cubicles, each with their own computer and headset.

- There is a trophy perched on top of a filing cabinet. Linda mentions to me that she picked this up at a shop and that it "doesn't belong to anybody", but can be won by different people over time.

- Linda shows me the head of customer service's space. There are three chairs here, and they are conspicuously plusher than the agents, as they are padded leather. She also shows me the separate space where quality control works, which is a set of a few desks. As it is a Saturday, she points out that there were fewer people at work and it is calmer than usual. Linda also shows me the separate room where technical support operates. There are a couple of people working in the room.

- The agents of course are mostly sat at their desks. They do not get up and leave very often, and are meant to be available all the time. It is not clear to me whether they can take their breaks when they want. It is not obvious to me that Linda, as the supervisor, was telling people to go – they seemed free to do so. Rather, the monitoring system that she spoke about logs people as they go for [TEABREAK] or [LUNCHBREAK]. There is a record of it, agents know this, and so they are obliged to work according to stipulated timings, not from the supervisor directly telling them what to do.

- The operations floor itself presents a contrast to other parts of the premises I see. It is well ordered, symmetrical and organized into rows of people, artefacts, computers etc. The other bits – a separate space full of randomly assorted chairs, desks and tables, as well as the supervisor's raised desk – are more erratic and less organized.

Appendix 5: Field notes - ICT Solutions* (04/02/2013)

* This is a BPO company. The company name and persons referred to have been changed.

- I am struck by the constant buzz and chatter of the operations floor. You can continuously hear people talking away, both to their colleagues, and to customers on the phone. I am sat next to a group of people working on a customer service account. I get a keen sense of their obligation to work through as many calls as possible and the repetitiveness of their work from the fact that I can repeatedly hear "Thank you for calling – how can I assist you?" as the opening script. I am also aware of the closing script.

- It strikes me that many people may well be used to having to talk – both on and off the phone – under fairly noisy conditions, as this is what Nairobi itself in general is like. However, for me personally I would find it difficult to both listen and think quickly in an environment in which there is the continuous distracting noise of other people speaking. Perhaps it is fair to say that an unstated element of the communications and listening skills which people mention as a requisite of the job is the ability to perform in a noisy environment.

- This background chatter also adds to the sense of pace and urgency about the operations. On the one hand I can imagine that this creates a definite sense of buzz for the agents, but on the other I can see that it would feel pressurized, perhaps especially after an extended period of several hours, days or months.

- The room itself where the operations take place is of a reasonable size, but it is not really big. It also is not completely full, suggesting that they probably have more capacity and could take on more business, but it still nevertheless felt busy and like there was a lot of activity. It is partitioned into cubicles, yet is open plan. Each desk is contiguous with the others and has a computer and a headset.

- I am also struck by hearing multiple languages in the workplace. Particularly when it comes to Swahili and English, people have to switch back and forth continually, both within individual calls with customers and between calls. This,

obviously, mirrors their experience of Nairobi life, though perhaps there is more emphasis on the use of English than many might be accustomed to. That said, I do know from speaking with people here that not everybody would be able to do this – it is not a given that you speak English comfortably (perhaps fairly obviously to me), and it is also not a given that you speak Swahili well (perhaps less obviously to me). Many people have mentioned to me that the Swahili spoken in Tanzania and within Kenya's coastal province is very different (indeed, "better") also, so this obligation changes in instances where accounts entail speaking with customers in only Swahili. I am also struck by the fact that the company's COO, who is not from East Africa, could not do the job his agents do owing to his admission to me that he speaks "not a word" of Swahili.

- I believe that the company operates services in other languages, but it is not so easy to discern these for example.

- Calls are scripted to always begin in English, and after this agents will change languages where necessary.

- The agents working in the room are all young, with a couple of exceptions. Most agents seem to be 25 and under, possibly up to the age of 30. They are dressed in what one might call smart casual, or even fairly casual. They seem in good spirits – people are fairly happy. The balance between male and female agents is approximately 50–50.

- I am sat next to those working on the company's account for Cabletain, which is a customer service account for a well-known media & entertainment company. Sarah told me when I interviewed her that ICT solutions takes care of 100 per cent of Cabletain's customer service. In other words, it is completely outsourced. ICT solutions agents answer the phone as employees of Cabletain, fairly obviously.

- The chairs are very comfortable, as Steven – the COO – had told me. They seem to be orthopaedic. As anybody knows from sitting in an uncomfortable chair all day, it is a useful thing to have a comfortable chair in the light of the fact that you can get very uncomfortable, even to the point of having problems with your posture, if you are involved in an activity which involves sitting all day.

- I am also struck by the fact that people need a certain degree of digital literacy in order to do the job. It is not a given that everybody would have this. John told me when I interviewed him that he felt around 30 per cent of people had to get up to speed with respect to using a computer when they first started at the company.

- Steven is very present in the room in the time that I am there. He mixes with his agents, rather than patrolling around. His being there doesn't appear to make any difference to people's attitude and behaviour. I have heard from other people about call centres where the senior management are almost never really visible on the floor (the implication being that they do not know what's going on), and where the team leaders – the "bad" ones – have a tendency to simply sit at their desks and stare at their computers. Steven's "hands-on" approach could perhaps be attributed to his 10 years of experience with call centres in the UK.

- Agents are arranged into teams and are working by account type. This is obviously about pooling people together and about positioning people to be able to interact with each other, coach each other and give an example to follow about how to do things "well" or "correctly". The first time I had seen the operations room Steven had been telling me that he encourages his clients to send over branding – like paraphernalia with the logos and even the material covers that partition each of the cubicles – to create the notion of working for the client company itself. Nonetheless, most stuff is ICT Solutions branded.

- I quickly get the impression that it would be very tiring to be on the phone all day. You need patience and an ability to perform a very similar task again and again. An agent's ability to do this feels to me like another "organic" or extra-company institutional form of filtering or differentiation between who can and who can't do the work: if you get tired or fed up, you will absent yourself (as opposed to being told that you're not suitable, or demonstrated not to be by tests). The responsibility and obligation is to consistently replicate the same experience over and again. You can see that this repetition would get tiring. I can hear the man next to me getting more and more aggravated with a person he's talking to, for example. The customer seems to be having difficulty with

whatever the solution is to the problem with his hardware, and the agent has to repeat himself again and again. The aggravation is evident. He's presumably been working all day, and is getting tired. Equally, I wonder to myself whether he would be adjudged to need to escalate the problem to a superior to resolve, or if he would be expected to resolve it himself. If a QA were to catch this call, what would they make of it? Would they instead cut the guy the slack of understanding that the customer was being "difficult"?

- While it's a supervision- and surveillance-heavy working environment, it feels as though it's part of the institutional design and architecture, rather than an overt, in-your-face example of "breathing down your neck" (which was a phrase that John mentioned in reference to what the workplace does not feel like).

- The small cafeteria – replete with a bar space, tea and coffee and a massive TV with cable – is next to the operations room. The toilet facilities are also genuinely nice, which is different from other work premises I have visited.

- The 2-minute AHT does not seem realistic. People seem to be on-call for much longer.

- There's a power cut at one point and the power to the lights goes out, but the agents continue unfazed, and their computers seem to stay on (presumably because of a back-up generator), so it hardly disrupts their work.

Appendix 6: Questionnaire

Participation in questionnaire

Thank you kindly for participating in this questionnaire about your experiences of call centre work. Participation is anonymous and answers are confidential.

The questionnaire will take about 15 minutes to complete. The questions are about workers' skills, backgrounds, ideas about personal characteristics needed for the job, and motivation in the workplace.

There are no "correct" answers, so please feel free to answer openly based on your perspective. The questionnaire's results will contribute anonymous data to be used for a PhD thesis on people's experiences of call centre work.

Any questions about research

Thank you kindly for taking the time to answer the questions. If you would like any further information regarding this questionnaire, please contact alexjordanfree@gmail.com.

The following questions relate to performance in the workplace.

For *you personally*, what is the most important indication that you have done your job well?

Please tick one box

☐ Customers saying thank you

☐ Good personal statistics scores

☐ Quality Analyst reporting I have done well

☐ Team Leader reporting I have done well

☐ Colleagues saying that I have done well

☐ Meeting targets

☐ My adherence to scheduled shifts, attendance and breaks

☐ Positive observations by Senior Managers

☐ Other - please state:

For *your company*, what is the most important indication that you have done your job well?

Please tick one box

☐ Customers saying thank you

☐ Good personal statistics scores

☐ Quality Analyst reporting I have done well

☐ Team Leader reporting I have done well

☐ Colleagues saying that I have done well

☐ Meeting targets

☐ My adherence to scheduled shifts, attendance and breaks

☐ Positive observations by Senior Managers

☐ Other - please state:

The following questions are about the characteristics and skills agents need in order to do their job well.

With respect to what is needed for your job, how do you view the following personal characteristics?

Please give each characteristic a mark out of 4 by ticking the relevant box.
4 means "very important" and 0 means "not at all important".

	0	1	2	3	4		0	1	2	3	4
Being outgoing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Independent worker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being a good listener	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Team worker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assertive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Persuasive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Easy-going	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Attentive to others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tenacious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Creative thinker	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Level-headed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Attentive to rules and procedures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How much do you agree with this statement?

"Before I started at my company, I already had the personal characteristics I needed for my job."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

With respect to what is needed for your job, how do you view the following skill sets?

Please give each characteristic a mark out of 4 by ticking the relevant box.
4 means "very important" and 0 means "not at all important".

	0	1	2	3	4		0	1	2	3	4
Technical skills (tech savvy, ability to use computers)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Inter-personal skills (ability to relate to customer)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social skills (ability to get on well with customers and colleagues)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Communication skills (listening and talking)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Company-specific skills (behaving "professionally" and as the company expects)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Cognitive skills (ability to think quickly and to multi-task)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How much do you agree with this statement?

"Before I started at my company, I already had the skills I needed for my job."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

---

The following questions relate to job satisfaction.

What gives you most satisfaction in your job?

Please tick one box

☐ Customers saying thank you

☐ Quality Analyst telling me that I have done a good job

☐ Team Leader telling me that I have done a good job

☐ Achieving good personal statistics scores

☐ Achieving good team statistics scores

☐ Being paid

☐ Colleagues telling me that I have done a good job

☐ Meeting targets

☐ Other - please state:

How much do you agree with this statement?

"I find my job very challenging."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"I am satisfied in my job."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"Doing my job has given me excellent experience."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

What would you say is most beneficial about your job?

Please tick one box

☐ Gaining general work experience

☐ Specific training

☐ Earning a salary

☐ Helping people

☐ Making friends and meeting people

☐ There is nothing beneficial

☐ Other - please state:

The following questions are about workers' backgrounds and the type of work they do.

How old are you?

_____

Were you born in Kenya?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, in which county in Kenya were you born?   If no, in which country were you born?

_____   _____

Are you female or male?

☐ Female   ☐ Male

What is your current job title? (Please state)

_____

Do you have a diploma?

☐ Yes. What did you study for your diploma? _____

☐ No

Do you have an undergraduate degree?

☐ Yes. What did you study for your undergraduate degree? _____

☐ No

Do you have a master's degree?

☐ Yes. What did you study for your master's degree? _____

☐ No

How long have you been working as an agent for your current company?

☐ Under 3 months   ☐ 1 to 2 years

☐ 3 to 6 months   ☐ 2 to 3 years

☐ 7 months to 1 year   ☐ More than 3 years

Including your current company, how many call centres have you worked for?

☐ 1   ☐ 4

☐ 2   ☐ More than 4

☐ 3

In your job, do you do in-bound work (receiving customers' calls and messages), out-bound work (calling customers) or something else (other)?

☐ Only in-bound

☐ Mostly in-bound

☐ Only out-bound

☐ Mostly out-bound

☐ Approximately 50% in-bound and 50% out-bound

In your job, which of these activities do you do?

Please tick all that apply

☐ Using the phone, customer service and/or troubleshooting

☐ Sales to customers

☐ Sales to companies

☐ Booking appointments and meeting times for customers

☐ Data entry

☐ Transcription of recorded messages

☐ Marketing through social media (Twitter and Facebook)

☐ Customer service through social media (Twitter and Facebook)

☐ Customer service through email

☐ Customer service through SMS

Are you a full-time or part-time worker?

☐ Full-time   ☐ Part-time

Are you employed on a temporary contract or a permanent contract?

☐ Temporary contract   ☐ Permanent contract

When speaking with customers, which languages do you use?

Please tick all that apply

☐ Swahili (or Sheng)

☐ English

☐ Other - please state:

In which sector does your company work?

☐ BPO (business process outsourcing)

☐ Banking and financial services

☐ Insurance

☐ Telecommunications

☐ Energy

☐ Airline

☐ Media and entertainment

☐ Freight

☐ Logistics

☐ NGO (non-governmental organisation)

☐ Government / parastatal

☐ Other - please state:

The following questions relate to training and evaluation in the workplace.

How much training did you receive when you started working for your company?

☐ 1 week

☐ 2 - 3 weeks

☐ 1 month

☐ 2 months

☐ More than 2 months

In your opinion, what was the main purpose of the training you received when you started your job?

Please tick one box

☐ To learn about products and services

☐ To learn how to interact with the customer

☐ To learn technical skills in the workplace (such as the use of computer systems)

☐ To learn the company's values and ethos

What is the main reason you know how to perform well in your job?

☐ Training when I started working for the company

☐ Training I receive from time to time at the company

☐ Coaching from Team Leader

☐ Coaching from Quality Analyst

☐ I just know "inside"

☐ Discussions with my colleagues

☐ Other - please state:

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"I know all of the ways in which my performance at work is assessed."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

The following statement relates to the role of Team Leaders.

"The role of the Team Leader is to…"

Please give each role a mark out of 4 by ticking the relevant box.
4 means "very important" and 1 means "not at all important".

	0	1	2	3	4		0	1	2	3	4
Identify weaknesses of agents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Share my professional difficulties with	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identify weaknesses in the team	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Share my personal difficulties with	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Provide agents with expert advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐						

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"The Team Leader's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

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The following statement relates to the role of Quality Analysts.

"The role of the Quality Analyst is to…"

Please give each role a mark out of 4 by ticking the relevant box.
4 means "very important" and 0 means "not at all important".

	0	1	2	3	4		0	1	2	3	4
Identify weaknesses of agents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Share my professional difficulties with	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identify weaknesses in the team	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Share my personal difficulties with	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Provide agents with expert advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐						

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"The Quality Analyst's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

How much do you agree with the following statement?

"Workplace statistics are an accurate record of my performance at work."

☐ Strongly agree | ☐ Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly disagree

Once the research is written up, would you like to have a summary of the results sent to you by email?

☐ Yes. Email: _____   ☐ No

Questionnaire ends

Thank you very much for your participation in this research – your time is much appreciated.

Appendix 7: List of interviewees

| Date(s)	Company type/organization	Gender	Position	Current/ former employee
11/09/2012; 01/02/2013	BPO	male	BPO company owner	current
11/09/2012; 01/02/2013	BPO	male	BPO company owner	current
12/09/2012; 18/04/2013	government	male	ICT Board official	current
18/09/2012	BPO	female	agent	current
19/09/2012	telecommunications - captive	female	agent	current
20/09/2012	telecommunications - captive	male	team leader	current
21/09/2012; 25/01/2013	BPO investor	male	investor	current
25/09/2012; 26/01/2013	BPO sector body	male	BPO sector body representative	current
25/09/2012	BPO	male	HR official	current
01/10/2012; 31/01/2013	BPO	female	head of quality	current
03/10/2012	academic	female	BPO researcher	current
04/10/2012; 08/04/2013	government	female	government representative	current
08/10/2012; 23/04/2013	bank - captive	male	head of customer service	current
09/10/2012	telecommunications - captive	male	agent	current
10/10/2012	BPO	male	agent	former
10/10/2012; 12/04/2013	BPO	female	agent	current
11/10/2012	BPO	female	account manager	former
11/10/2012; 13/02/2013	bank - captive	male	call centre manager	current
12/10/2012	BPO	female	team leader	former
12/10/2012	BPO	male	BPO company owner	current

13/10/2012	BPO	male	agent	former
13/10/2012	telecommunications - captive	male	team leader	current
15/10/2012	BPO	female	team leader	current
15/10/2012	BPO	male	service delivery manager	current
16/10/2012; 15/01/2013	BPO	female	agent	current
17/10/2012; 24/04/2013	BPO	female	HR official	current
18/10/2012	bank - captive	male	IT officer	current
18/10/2012	telecommunications - captive	female	shift leader	current
19/10/2012; 19/01/2013	telecommunications - captive	female	team leader	current
26/10/2012	academic	male	BPO researcher	current
16/01/2013	bank - captive	female	agent	current
18/01/2013	BPO	female	agent	current
21/01/2013; 22/04/2013	BPO	male	chief operating officer	current
30/01/2013	BPO	male	agent	current
03/02/2013	BPO	female	team leader	current
04/02/2013	BPO	male	agent	current
18/02/2013	BPO	male	team leader	current
18/02/2013	BPO	male	quality analyst	current
21/02/2013	mobile phone/ICT services - captive	female	agent	current
26/02/2013	BPO	female	HR official	current
27/02/2013	telecommunications - captive	female	agent	current
28/02/2013	bank - captive	male	team leader; agent	current
02/03/2013	energy - captive	male	agent	current
02/03/2013	BPO	male	call centre manager	current
02/03/2013	energy - captive	female	agent	current
02/03/2013	energy - captive	female	service delivery manager	current
02/03/2013; 20/03/2013	BPO	male	owner	current
02/03/2013	bank - captive	female	call centre manager	current
19/03/2013	BPO	male	agent	former

26/03/2013; 21/04/2013	captive - media company	female	agent	former
03/04/2013	sector consultancy	male	sector consultant	former
04/04/2013	BPO	male	agent	current
04/04/2013	BPO	male	agent	current
04/04/2013	BPO	female	agent	current
24/04/2013	captive - market research	female	agent	current
30/04/2013	bank - captive	male	call centre manager	current
02/05/2013	BPO	female	sales manager	current
02/06/2013	telecommunications - captive	male	quality analyst	current
02/06/2013	telecommunications - captive	female	agent	current
02/06/2013	telecommunications - captive	female	team leader	current

Appendix 8: List of observed company operations

Date(s) visited	Company type
04/02/2013; 18/02/2013; 15/04/2013	BPO
02/03/2013	energy
28/06/2013	telecommunications
12/03/2013	bank
15/10/2012	BPO
17/10/2012	BPO
11/04/2012; 04/04/2013	BPO
20/03/2013; 25/03/2013	BPO

Appendix 9: Questionnaire results

* Table 1 (pp. 92–93) and figure 1 (p. 124) are included in the main body of the text.

Bar Chart
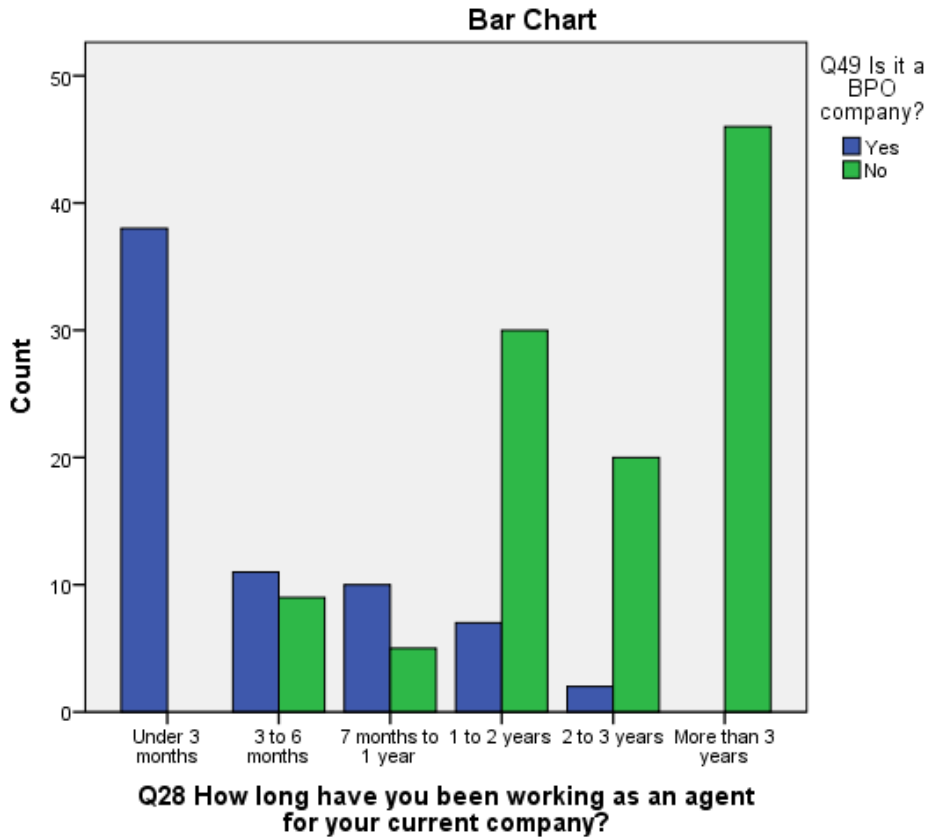
Figure 2: Time with current company (n=178)

Q28 How long have you been working as an agent for your current company? * Q49 Is it a BPO company? Crosstabulation

			Q49 Is it a BPO company?		
			Yes	No	Total
Q28 How long have you been working as an agent for your current company?	Under 3 months	Count	38	0	38
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	55.9%	0.0%	21.3%
	3 to 6 months	Count	11	9	20
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	16.2%	8.2%	11.2%
	7 months to 1 year	Count	10	5	15
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	14.7%	4.5%	8.4%
	1 to 2 years	Count	7	30	37
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	10.3%	27.3%	20.8%
	2 to 3 years	Count	2	20	22
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	2.9%	18.2%	12.4%
	More than 3 years	Count	0	46	46
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	41.8%	25.8%
Total		Count	68	110	178
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2: Length of time working for current company (n=178)

Bar Chart
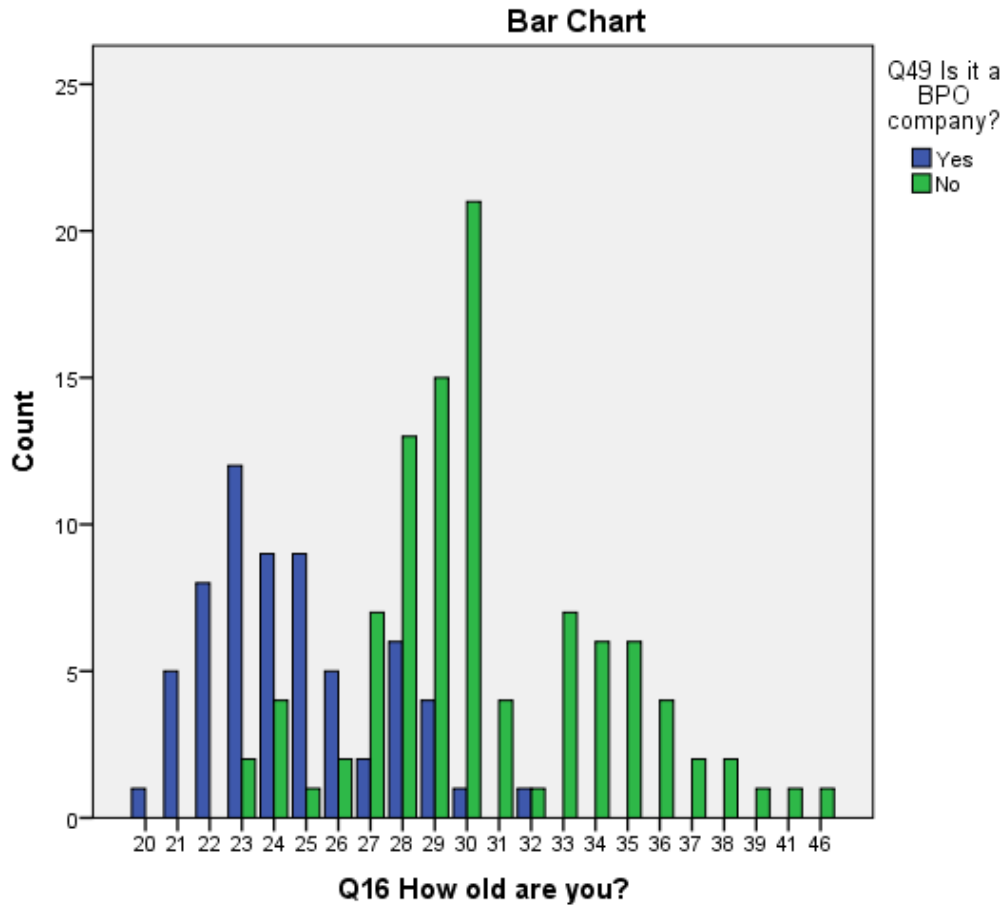
Figure 3: Age of agents (n=163)

Report

Q16 How old are you?

Q49 Is it a BPO company?	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Yes	24.57	63	2.626
No	30.58	100	3.945
Total	28.26	163	4.556

Table 3: Mean age of agents (n=163)

Correlations

		Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Q46 "Workplace statistics are an accurate record of my performance at work."
Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Pearson Correlation	1	.396**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	180	175
Q46 "Workplace statistics are an accurate record of my performance at work."	Pearson Correlation	.396**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	175	176

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Correlation between job satisfaction and statistical accuracy (n=175)

Q14 What would you say is most beneficial about your job? * Q49 Is it a BPO company? Crosstabulation

			Q49 Is it a BPO company? Yes	Q49 Is it a BPO company? No	Total
Q14 What would you say is most beneficial about your job?	Gaining general work experience	Count	52	55	107
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	78.8%	51.9%	62.2%
	Specific training	Count	1	4	5
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	1.5%	3.8%	2.9%
	Earning a salary	Count	3	20	23
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	4.5%	18.9%	13.4%
	Helping people	Count	10	22	32
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	15.2%	20.8%	18.6%
	Making friends and meeting people	Count	0	2	2
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	1.9%	1.2%
	There is nothing beneficial	Count	0	2	2
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	1.9%	1.2%
	Other	Count	0	1	1
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	0.9%	0.6%
Total		Count	66	106	172
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 4: Benefits of current job (n=172)

315

Correlations

		Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Q43 "The Team Leader's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."
Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Pearson Correlation	1	.284**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	180	171
Q43 "The Team Leader's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."	Pearson Correlation	.284**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	171	172

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Correlation between job satisfaction and accuracy of TLs' reports (n=171)

Correlations

		Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Q45 "The Quality Analyst's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."
Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Pearson Correlation	1	.477**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	180	174
Q45 "The Quality Analyst's reports are an accurate record of my performance at work."	Pearson Correlation	.477**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	174	175

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6: Correlation between job satisfaction and accuracy of QAs' reports (n=174)

Q13 "Doing my job has given me excellent experience." * Q49 Is it a BPO company? Crosstabulation

			Q49 Is it a BPO company?		
			Yes	No	Total
Q13 "Doing my job has given me excellent experience."	Strongly agree	Count	40	31	71
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	58.8%	27.9%	39.7%
	Agree	Count	25	51	76
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	36.8%	45.9%	42.5%
	Neither agree nor disagree	Count	3	18	21
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	4.4%	16.2%	11.7%
	Disagree	Count	0	6	6
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	5.4%	3.4%
	Strongly disagree	Count	0	5	5
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	0.0%	4.5%	2.8%
Total		Count	68	111	179
		% within Q49 Is it a BPO company?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 7: Job as excellent experience (n=179)

Correlations

		Q13 "Doing my job has given me excellent experience."	Q24 Do you have an undergraduate degree?
Q13 "Doing my job has given me excellent experience."	Pearson Correlation	1	-.223[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	179	179
Q24 Do you have an undergraduate degree?	Pearson Correlation	-.223[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	179	181

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 8: Correlation between attitude to job as experience and possession of undergraduate degree (n=179)

Correlations

		Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Q24 Do you have an undergraduate degree?
Q12 "I am satisfied in my job."	Pearson Correlation	1	-.160[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.032
	N	180	180
Q24 Do you have an undergraduate degree?	Pearson Correlation	-.160[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	
	N	180	181

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 9: Correlation between job satisfaction and possession of undergraduate degree (n=180)

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