On the Compatibility of Taylorism, Targets, Technology and Teams - Evidence from a US Call Centre

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Taylorism, targets and technology form a potent mix in call centres where groups of individuals are asked to perform as "teams". In this paper we explore how 'task' oriented concepts interact with the 'interpersonal relationship' realm in an environment where group life dominates the notional foundation of a call centre's organisational structure. Tuckman's four stage model of sequential group development serves as the basic theoretical lens through which the role 'teams' play in the working environment of a large call centre.Our analysis of structured interviews conducted in an outbound, financial services call centre in the southern United States reveals the mechanisms by which agents have interpreted their 'team charter' to focus on individual achievement of increased remuneration levels. The interplay between these variables indicate that reward mechanisms associated with simple Taylorist 'piece rate' targets, imposed on the entry level call centre agent and their 'teams', mitigate against meaningful group development. The advancement through promotion based on individual performance to more challenging, less target based work, is in sharp contrast to their initial training period where 'team building' is an essential ingredient of skills acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Frederick Taylor attempted to bring order to the production function following the chaos of the industrial revolution. His principles of scientific management represented a quest in the perennial search of 'the one best way' to perform the sequential components of any given task. (Robbins et al. 2005: 587; Schermerhorn 2002) Targets were a central feature of Taylor's methodology and served both to cement the role of the manager as supervisor and to deconstruct tasks enabling the selection of workers better suited to the requirements of the job. (Samson & Daft 2003) By providing the tools to measure and compare work output against standards, scientific management established enduring techniques which have found a ready application in the technology-rich environment of the contemporary call centre. (Bain 2002; Bain & Taylor 2000; Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999; Wallace & Eagleson 2004; Wallace & Hetherington 2003) Or do they?

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This paper will present findings from interview data gathered in a large financial services call centre in the southern United States to examine the relationship between workers and 'teams' in a Taylorist, target driven environment. It will be shown that, paradoxically, some workers have the ability to use the telecommunications and information technology that dominates their workspace, to exercise creative, 'outside the box' problem solving techniques to maximise their individual remuneration from a target focused compensation system while establishing and maintaining effective interpersonal relationships with their team colleagues.

2. BACKGROUND

The data for this paper was collected by extended, structured interview of members of a call centre located in a southern state on the east coast of the United States of America. It ranks as the second largest in the close proximity of the city which hosts four relatively large (>500 seats), and a number of smaller call centres. The subject call centre supported the financial services industry and was structured into three distinct areas: Inbound (>850 seats); Outbound (>850 seats); and, Training (80 places, four teams of 20 trainees). Training occurred on a continuous basis throughout the year to address the staff turnover needs of the centre. Interview participants were selected from the outbound side of the operation which concentrated on the recovery of overdue accounts. New agents were initially employed in the loss recovery, or 'front end', queue, directly from their initial employment training. Some staff were employed on the floor in the teams they commenced their training with. Others supplemented numbers in pre-existing team.

The outbound business was broadly structured around four queues, each served by multiple teams of 15-20 members. The queues were based upon graduated progression of the overdue accounts commencing with the 'front end' queue attending to debt outside the account terms by >30/<60 days. The next queue concentrated on recovering >61/<90 days overdue accounts, then >91 day overdues and finally, the 'loss recovery' team which engaged in the least structured work of all, attempted to recover customers' debts prior to legal action being initiated. The usual progression for staff in the outbound operation was having gained experience 'on the floor' of the call centre, agents were 'promoted' to join existing teams recovering progressively more overdue debts. The agent's remuneration increased proportionately in direct correlation to the period the debt was outstanding.

3. METHODOLOGY

Data was collected by extended, structured interview of workers drawn from teams engaged in 'front end' debt recovery and from team members of the loss recovery queue servicing accounts >91 days overdue. A total of ten employees were interviewed by two investigators. For security reasons, the call centre required that a public relations officer be present during all interviews. Their presence however, resulted in minimal intrusion into the conduct of the data collection. Each interview was scheduled for forty minutes with the longest interview exceeding sixty minutes.

Questions asked of participants focused on the interviewees understanding of and experience with groups and teams, the four stages of Tuckman's sequential model of

group development and its task and relationship 'realms'. Investigation of the workers experience in joining existing teams concluded the interview.

4. TAYLORISM AND TECHNOLOGY

Technology is the most obvious link between the contemporary call centre and Taylorism. From the management and distribution of calls in queues to the calculation and assignment of roster schedules using Erlang's queuing theories (Wallace & Hetherington 2003) to provision of the mechanism for monitoring of performance and achievement of service level targets (Wallace & Eagleson 2004). Wallace and Eagleson define technology in a call centre context as: 'computer hardware, software and any output or artefact produced by the computer system in the workplaces being studied.' (Wallace & Eagleson 2004: 155) For simplicity of reference, we also include the telecommunications systems upon which call centres depend within the compass of technology. Taylor and Bain identify Automatic Call Distribution (ACD), and Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) as vital components of the call centre technological mix, (Taylor & Bain 1999) although in this respect we accept the acronym IVR to be Interactive Voice Response, a customer interface with their telephone which assists queue allocation to distinguish from Voice Recognition (VR) technology which is rapidly improving in sophistication and accuracy and has the potential to reshape much of the activity conducted by workers in call centres.

All of the elements of technology which characterise a call centre were present at the subject facility however, their application to monitoring of individual agent performance reduced in prominence in the work routine concomitant with the progression of agents to more 'advanced' queues. Agents were given more latitude in their responses to 'customers' independence from structured, scripted delivery to which agents employed in 'front end' queues were exposed. Some agents particularly enjoyed the ability to 'investigate' the circumstances of delinquent account holders in order to trace their where-abouts to commence a resolution of the 'customers' debt. In this respect, agents were able to employ the call centre technology specifically to assist them in their role as 'detective'. Agents also reported satisfaction at being able to exercise creative judgement, within limits, to negotiate options for settlement with account holders which provided a greater range of alternatives than those available to their colleagues at the 'front end'. There appeared to be an inverse correlation between the job satisfaction of agents in more 'advanced' queues and the level of technology induced structure and routine in the nature of their work. Agents also reported a resultant increased opportunity to work in smaller, 'project-based' groups within their queue-based teams leading directly to the establishment of relatively strong interpersonal bonds between those sub-group members.

Agents in these teams seemed to demonstrate the greatest departure from scientific management's 'one best way' approach within the routine of the call centre by their ability to exercise individual discretion, judgement and intuition in performing their work which departed from the predetermined, scripted responses imposed on their less experienced colleagues at the 'front end'. In doing this work, agents were encouraged to explore, (and indeed experienced higher levels success), 'out of the box' methods, almost the antithesis of the mechanistic procedures followed to varying degrees by agents in queues elsewhere within the outbound operation.

5. TARGETS

Call centres have a well deserved reputation for being target-driven production-focused organisations. (Bain 2002; Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Barrell 2000; Callaghan 2002; Dawson 2001; Frenkel et al. 1998; Holland 2001; Kjellerup 2005; Mulholland 2002; Taylor & Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002; Wallace & Eagleson 2004) It is this raison d'être, combined with the technological tools, which cast call centres as perfect incarnations of Taylorism. Paradoxically though call centres also rely on 'teams' as structural elements. In the truest sense of the term, teams distinguish themselves from groups by the interdependence of the membership (Caouette & O'Connor 1998; Chaousis 1995; Dufrene 2002; Fisher, Hunter & Macrosson 1997; Hare 1992; Robbins et al. 2005; Welbourne 2001) in achieving their task outcomes, or targets, as the case may be in call centres. In many call centres, workers attend to calls individually, have limited opportunities to share rostered breaks together, and come together collectively for scheduled meetings only briefly. It would seem that the very nature of their work predicates against meaningful interaction which would give rise to the interdependence of team members. Interviewee 23/1, a member of a 'front end' team identified their work as primarily solitary in focus with. *"… it's more individual, but if I have questions, I can ask them [team members] at any time and they do help me."*

Interestingly in the outbound operation, agents' remuneration consisted of two broad components: the first part was based on their team's achievement of goals and performance targets (bonuses); while the second element recognised their individual efforts. The mix emphasised more individual reward as agents 'progressed' to the teams in queues persuing the longer term debts however, remuneration based on team targets continued to play a significant role in the agents overall compensation package. Whether because of the team-based financial incentives, or because the interdependence and strong personal bonds formed by team members, there was substantial evidence to support the existence of mutual interdependence between members of the more 'advanced' queues in achieving performance targets. Members assist each other with task completion as evidenced by Interviewee 16/1 *"For the conversion list that's on my computer for the next week or so, I do my best to do my queue before the due date then we assist each other. If somebody is going to be out, we split up the work to make sure it gets done before the due date."* Further, Interviewee 16/5 reinforces the mutual decision making evident in planning and allocating tasks, *"… we get together a lot to work on different sections of what we are going to do for that week."*

6. TEAMS

To explore the topic of teams within this call centre, Tuckman's (1965) four stage, sequential model of group development was employed as the lens through which group dynamics were reviewed. The model essentially consists of four stages based on the behaviours associated with group formation (*forming*), conflict (*storming*), rule and standard setting (*norming*), and the achievement of synergy through member inter-dependence in task accomplishment (*performing*). Tuckman's model has an enduring place as the most widely taught, intuitively appealing description of group behaviour. (Dwyer 2005; Furst et al. 2004; Hare 1992; McGrath, Arrow & Berdahl 2000; Robbins et al. 2005) It has been found to be relevant to contemporary call centre organisations, particularly during the initial employment training period. (Hingst 2006a) With the addition of a temporary *conforming* 'phase', Tuckman's model has been extended to describe the condition commonly experienced in call centres,

where new members join existing teams. (Hingst 2006b) Both of these situations were identified as present in the call centre which provided the subject for this study.

Although Tuckman never employed the term 'team', it is during the ultimate stage of his model that it can be argued groups have evolved into teams. Samson and Daft (2003) define teams in the following terms: 'A **team** is a unit of two or more people who interact and coordinate their work to accomplish a specific goal.' (Samson & Daft 2003: 587) This is similar to the definition of a group provided by Wood and his colleagues 'Formally defined in an organisational context, a **group** is a collection of two or more people who work with one another regularly to achieve one or more common goals.' (Wood et al. 2004: 262) The distinction between them lies in the aspect of interdependence between the members. Samson and Daft acknowledge that all teams are groups but not all groups are teams. (Samson & Daft 2003) In order to further explore these differences, reference can be again made to Tuckman's model; on this occasion, to the task and interpersonal 'realms' of groups. Tuckman described these dimensions as the collective efforts required to perform work allocated to a group in order to achieve a goal or task completion; and, behaviours invested in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships which facilitate the interdependence of group members and hence, their improved potential to 'perform'. (Tuckman 1965; Tuckman & Jensen 1977) Temporal and physical proximity to others seems to play a key role in the call centre environment examined here in the ability of members to develop working relationships as illustrated by this comment from Interviewee 16/5. *"… these people are the ones you are going to interact with the most and so sitting with people that keep you awake, make you laugh, is a definite plus. I don't think I could make it without them. They have the same schedule so they are there the whole time I am there."*

Interview participants strongly identified with the four stages of development Tuckman described during their initial employment training. They remarked upon deliberate strategies used by their trainers to guide training groups through the four stages of group development and noted that the strength of the interpersonal bonds formed as a consequence of these processes endured beyond training and their eventual departure upon dissolution of the group when employed on the 'floor' of the call centre. Of particular interest in this study was the tendency of interviewees to associate quite strongly with the members of subsequent teams as they progressed in their careers. These affiliations were most keenly felt when they were 'promoted' to the queue dealing with the longest outstanding debts. Interviewee 16/1 felt these bonds deeply. *"I still keep in contact with my two original partners although I didn't see them as much as my original [training] team. Any time I had a break I would go up and speak to them or go out to lunch. I was on a team with those guys and it was just like family."*

This contrasts with evidence presented elsewhere which revealed the dilution of the strength of social relationships formed subsequent to the training team experience, (Hingst 2006b, 2006a) although this phenomenon seemed confined to teams where the agents were able to exercise individual discretion and judgement, less constrained by scripted requirements. In these conditions, team members were also able to form sub-groups within the larger, team identity. In this respect at least, it seems that freedom from prescribed work behaviours acted as a catalyst for the creation of a more socially rewarding, less Taylorist work environment which was never-the-less, high performing in terms of both individuals and their respective teams. It also indicates that outbound call centres may not necessarily be as 'toxic' as their reputation might otherwise lead us to believe.

7. CONCLUSION

Call centres are the contemporary embodiment of the principles of scientific management. The application of technology to facilitate contact with their 'customers', monitor and electronically scrutinise performance, coupled with the use of targets to focus and evaluate worker activity, have all conspired to contribute to an industry reputation for a stressful work environment. This paper presents evidence to challenge this perception. It has shown that workers in the outbound division of a large financial services call centre in the southern United States, when 'promoted' through progressively more challenging assignments which require routine use of discretion, judgement and intuition, are able to form relatively strong interpersonal work relationships and form teams in a meaningful sense of the term.

Given the existence of contradictory evidence obtained from call centre research in Australia, it would seem necessary to extend study of the area of team and group development into a wider range of call centre and other organisations to determine whether the pursuit of the 'one best way' really is incompatible with teams in the workplace.

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