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CALL CENTERS (“TELEMARKETING”) WORKING CONDITIONS AND OPERATORS’ HEALTH: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present the working characteristics of the telemarketing sector, with a particular emphasis on the health aspects of the workers who are involved. We undertook a bibliographic review of workers' health in the telematics sector, using electronic databases and the libraries of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in addition to studying Brazilian legislation relating to working conditions in the telephone sector, including case law and union documents. We saw that there is little literature on this subject; in some countries public authorities are only just beginning to introduce regulations regarding working conditions in the sector. We concluded, therefore, that it is necessary for further studies to be carried out and that public policies for telemarketing need to be developed that can reduce the, as yet barely apparent, health problems being faced by the large, young population of telemarketing workers in Brazil.

Key words: telemarketing; call-center; telemarketing operators, occupational health; overview.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years telemarketing activities have been developed in what are commonly called call centers, or telemarketing centers. This economic sector employs millions of workers all over the world and has organized structures for dealing with the public, based on a telephone-IT interface (telematics). It has become the main form of business contact for the vast majority of both public and private companies with their customers and/or users. Countless branches of the economy are involved: telephony, public utilities, banks, major industries, large commercial organizations and others.

The major call centers first started appearing worldwide in the 90s, on the back of the veritable dogma that surrounded the search for "total quality" and market demands for an instant and continual service for the buyers and users of goods and services, in general. Direct sales to the consumer, via both "passive" and "active" telemarketing, became the driving force of a large number of companies throughout the world.

Despite being controversial and scarce, Brazilian data do not differ from those of other countries; they show a strong expansion of this particular business sector and its economic importance. According to the Brazilian Association of Telemarketing the sector has been expanding very fast and is becoming "one of the largest employers in the country", with "more than 555,000 direct jobs" (ABT, 2005).

The world call center market had revenues of nearly €23 billion in 1998, with an estimate of €60 billion for 2003, employed nearly 1.5 million Europeans and 5 million people in the USA. The number of operators in the latter country may vary from 2 to 7 million, working in some 70,000 establishments. In the United Kingdom the number of employees is between 160,000 and 200,000, in Germany, 65,000 and in Australia there are some 60,000 telemarketing and teleservice operators (Toomingas, 2002). Call centers are one of the fastest developing businesses in Sweden; in 1987 this sector employed 438 workers and currently employs 1.5% of the total Swedish population (Norman, 2005).

According to the Health and Safety Executive, call centers are work environments where the main activity is carried out by telephone, with the simultaneous use of computer terminals. The operator, or teleassistant, is a professional who answers the calls, which take up a significant proportion of his or her time at work, while simultaneously using a computer terminal (HSE, 2001).

According to the Brazilian Code of Occupations, in Brazil the telemarketing operator is a person who deals with users, offers services and products, provides

specialist technical services, carries out research and makes calls for collecting money or registering customers, always via teleservicing (Brasil, 2002).

With regard to the general working conditions of this profession, the Brazilian Code of Occupations explains that "working under pressure is common when the number of those waiting to be put through increases", because the characteristics of telemarketing are the necessary and constant use of the telephone, a variety of types of work, the need to relate to the users and work organization based on "planned and controlled routines and scripts, aimed at capturing, retaining or recovering customers" (id.). It also emphasizes that different "personal competences" are required, such as "vocal quality (...) self-control (...) the capability of working under pressure (...) agility ... and others" (id.). While the complex components and demanding nature of telemarketing work are considered intrinsic to the activity, as we shall see later there are countless studies that point to its potentially harmful nature and, despite the fact that it is recognized in the description of the activity, the demands made on people by this work have been underestimated by companies in the sector, as we shall also see.

The scenario within which call centers operate is that of so-called "globalization", understood to be the transcending of national frontiers by capital. At the same time that the spatial integration of world markets is being promoted, the time it takes for information to circulate is constantly speeding up: "Material flows increasingly depend on the immaterial nature of information" (Cocco, 1999), thereby justifying the expansion of call centers all over the world.

Expansion is made possible by what Castels (1999) calls the maturing of the information technology revolution in the 90s, which modified the market and introduced new forms of the technical and social division of work.

In addition to technological changes, changes in the nature of work include the co-existence of the "old" organization of work alongside management technologies that supposedly modernize it (Abrahão, 2000).

As competition continually increase, company strategy for surviving and staying in the market is to focus its activities on tasks said to be "core", leaving those activities considered to be "accessory" up to third parties. This has important repercussions in the administrative and operational sphere.

The provision of outsourced services by telemarketing centers in our country is beginning to become a management strategy for handling market and profitability demands on the one hand, and on the other, in the case of telephone

companies, one of the ways they have found of coming into line with Brazilian state regulations.

The recent large growth in telemarketing services, which try to provide the company-customer relationship with agile mechanisms, is based on an extensive and intensive use of IT, in association with advanced telephony - telematics. It is of the utmost interest economically that:

(...) the informatics revolution speeds up other revolutions. IT and communications reduce distances; they have brought people together in real time and made them familiar with their products. (Assunção and Souza, 2000)

The workers that guarantee the production and transmission of the information are required to undertake new and frequently multiple and complex functions that go way beyond the previous demands on "just" their muscle power.

According to Castels (1999) workers stop having control over their work time and the complaints about the loss of significance of their work and feelings of persecution, impotence, uselessness and emptiness, all demanding a mental effort that is not measurable using current mathematical standards, are increasing.

In Brazil, as in the rest of the world, telemarketing companies are using increasingly rigid time and task controls. They use electronic registers and strict time controls for handling the calls and any breaks, or interruption in the work (Assunção and Vilela, 2003).

Thus organized, the sector exposes its workers to risk factors, which explains the prevalence of complaints registered both in literature and by the unions (Marinho-Silva, 2004).

Various union organizations at the international level have denounced the unacceptable working conditions, low salaries and various types of discrimination of call centers, which have even been called the "sweatshops of the electronic age".

For this study we reviewed literature, using as the key words, either in isolation or cross-referencing them, "telemarketing", "teleservicing", "telematics", "call centers", "call centres", "centres d'appels", "telemarketing operators". We consulted theses, dissertations, scientific works and publications on electronic databases and in the library systems of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, as

well as various books and publications (whether periodicals, or not) relating to the topic "work" and its repercussions on workers' health. We likewise consulted the laws on and regulations relating to working conditions in Brazil, the state rules for local public, fixed and mobile telephone services, in addition to relevant international electronic literature that was the result of researching through the electronic documentation available on the Internet.

TELEMARKETING IN BRAZIL

Various areas of activity are increasingly using telemarketing services. Telemarketing in public telephony, in particular, has become big business after recent changes in Brazil's telecommunications' policy, notably the privatization process that occurred in the 90s. Large state companies, without any formal profitability objectives, used to be responsible for all telecommunications operation, including customer service. The transformation that occurred when the companies were privatized created the need for stricter management mechanisms to cut costs, increase competitiveness and provide a return on investments.

The new organizations chose to hire outsourced services as provided by large telemarketing companies, thereby seeking to meet market and customer service demands, while at the same time coming into line with Brazilian state telephone regulations that demand guaranteed minimum answering times and a "quality" response for users.

We note, however, that there is an evident paradox between the marketing discourse of serving customers and top quality service and the working conditions offered to operators and the manifestations of dissatisfaction from the customers about the services they are receive¹ (Mascia and Sznelwar, 2000).

The economic and structural context of Brazil over the last few years, with its high levels of unemployment, young, qualified and available labor and the possibility of paying salaries little higher than the legal minimum, has favored the exponential growth of telemarketing in all economic segments. We shall see that a study of the repercussions of this process, in which the precarious working conditions offered are very evident, shows a situation where employees are excluded because of sickness and where there is high

¹ According to the research report "*1998 International Call Centre Benchmarking Report*" available at <<http://www.weoverc.com/index.html>>, there is great dissatisfaction ("63%") on the part of English consumers with the way call centers are used. In Brazil, as widely published in the press ("*Porto Alegre will have an anti-telemarketing law*". *Folha de S. Paulo*, Oct 2, 2003), Porto Alegre, RS, introduced legislation allowing dissatisfied consumers to put their names on lists, thus preventing telemarketing companies from calling them.

turnover.

In The International Context The Movement On The Part Of Large Companies For Reducing Costs Has Encouraged The Rise Of Call Centers In Countries Such As India, Mexico And The Philippines, Where The Populations Receive Low Salaries And Are Fluent In Either English Or Spanish. Without The Advantage Of Language Brazilian Companies Try To Compete With Even Lower Costs: A Brazilian Teleworker Earns Less Than One Third Of The Salary Of An American (Salomone, 2004).

Generally speaking, the economic picture is what defines the social aspects of telemarketing professionals in Brazil; as Assunção and Vilela found out in their study in 2003, they are young (78% under 30 years old), predominately female (70%) and highly qualified. Furthermore, these data are easily extrapolated for the whole of Brazil. (ABT, 2006). They are, however, badly paid professionals. The salaries of this category of worker in the State of Rio de Janeiro in 2003 were around R\$ 245.00 per month (approximately 1.1 x minimum salary), the minimum wage for the category was R\$ 1.34 (one real and thirty four cents) per hour.² This situation is no different in other states in Brazil. Similarly the Collective Bargaining Agreement of Sintetel (2006) with telemarketing companies in São Paulo for the 2005-2006 period defined the following minimum salary for thousands of teleservice workers:

CLAUSE 2 – MINIMUM WAGE FOR CATEGORY

It is hereby agreed that the minimum wage prevailing on March 31, 2005 shall be readjusted on April 1, 2005 by the single percentage of 8% (eight percent), totaling R\$ 540.00 (five hundred and forty reais), which amount shall be in force for a period of 12 (twelve) months.

It is not difficult to assess how salaries at this level have an obviously negative effect on the quality of life of the workers in the sector we are here studying.

THE ROLE OF ANATEL REGULATIONS

In 1997 the National Telecommunications Agency (Anatel), a state regulatory body for the telecommunications industry, was set up as part of the privatization process of the sector in Brazil with the aim of organizing the business of running the telephone services. The regulatory picture devised by the Agency makes no reference to the health of the

² < <http://www.sinttelrio.org.br/contax.doc> >

workers involved - neither those employed in the concession holders, nor in the service providers (Brasil, 1998). The rules focus on economic aspects of the sector, with the concept of service quality being basically linked to the waiting times of the consumer. Paradoxically therefore, demands for "quality", translated to mean a reduction in telephone call times, end up interfering directly in the organization of the work of the telemarketing operator and from the business point of view justifying the definition of strict average answering times (TMA).

Anatel Regulations for the Commuted Fixed Telephone Service (STFC) establish that the telephone service provider must make available to the customer, continuous, rapid and free access to the information and service center, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Article 16 of the regulations of the so-called General Quality Targets Plan define:

Calls to automatic answering services or those that need the intervention of the telephonist must be answered (...) in up to 10 seconds, (...) in 95% of cases (...) (our italics).

§1º - In no case should it take longer than 35 seconds to answer the phone (our italics) (Brasil, 1998).

If the contractual provisions are broken, thereby implying a loss of quality in the service provided, there are sanctions, such as fines of up to R\$ 40,000,000.00 (forty million reais) (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning that from the point of view of the Agency, whose aim is to protect the service provided to the population, it is both desirable and necessary that in urban communities the demands function in this way. Furthermore, most of the expenses of call centers are related to staff costs, and so from the business point of view it is interesting to keep the number of workers in activity to a minimum, while increasing the number of tasks they have to do. At the same time the perception of the workers on the harm caused to them and the effects on their health, as described in the scientific literature, is ignored (Torres, 2001; Abrahão et al., 2003; Taylor and Bain, 1999).

THE INTENSIFICATION OF WORK IN THE TELEMARKETING AREA: TIME DEMANDS

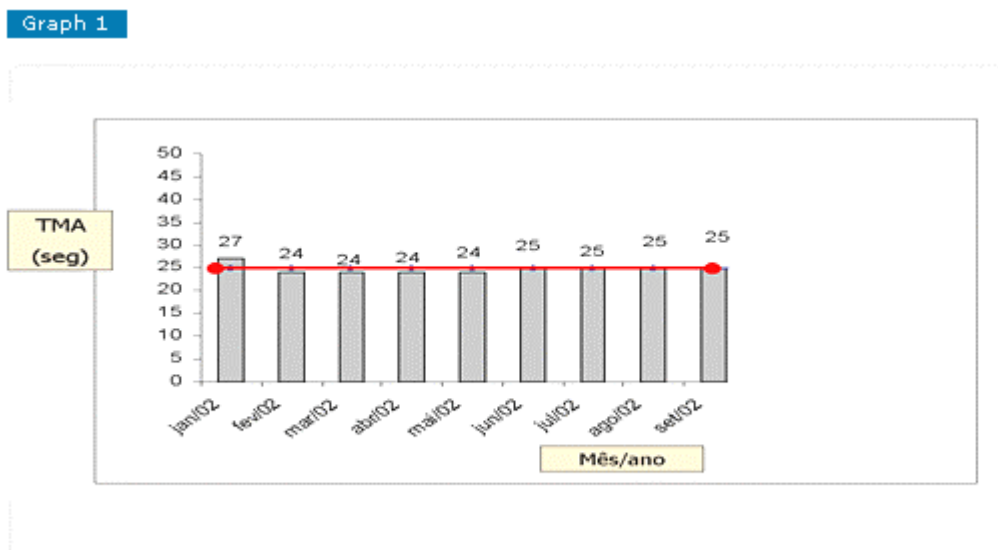
Like workers in traditional plants telemarketing operators work following pre-established routines and, as a result, are faced with a number of largely repetitive tasks. Furthermore, parallel forms of remuneration based on productivity are very common.

These principles are similar to Taylorist systems and have been considered to be the "industrialization" of service activities (INRS, 2005). Detailed ergonomic analyses, like Assunção and Vilela's (2003) study in large telemarketing companies in the telephone sector, clearly and in detail show the cognitive workload of telemarketing operators, the time pressures under which they work and the strict way in which they are controlled. Their performance evaluation is carried out based on "service quality, average time taken to answer calls (TMA), diligence and punctuality, logged[‡] time of call and interpersonal relationship". Productivity drives, involving "motivational campaigns" and the offer of days off linked to the number of sales or calls answered targets, are frequent.

Pressures on time are explicit: the computer screens have a measurement system in real time that is color coded, showing the length of time for each call. For example, one of the sectors adopts the following code: "Blue, less than 20 seconds; Yellow: from 20-25 seconds; Red: over 25 seconds" (id.).

The following graph, taken and adapted from the above mentioned research, shows the average call times, as being around 25 seconds; this is sustained month after month by operators in the "Directory Enquiries" sector:

‡ Logged time refers to time during which the tele-assistant is actually connected to the call system able to answer calls. Interruptions to attend to 'physiological necessities', for example, are considered as unlogged time.



Taken and adapted from Assunção and Vilela (2003).

[Mean of average call times (in seconds) in the "Directory Enquiries" sector

The strictly controlled use of preformatted scripts is an attempt on the part of companies at standardization and to speed up call times. As shown in the research, however, this tactic was not enough to solve the real problems. When observing the calls answered by an operator, 66 calls were taken in thirty minutes. They required 69 questions over and above those in the standard text in order to better understand the customers' demands; this is approximately two extra questions per minute, on average. According to the authors, this shows just how difficult it is to understand customers' request (Assunção and Vilela, 2003).

In addition to the strict time management, working routines, using the previously formatted dialogues to which we have already referred, are always rigidly imposed. Studies show, however, that the operators are constantly submitted to problematic situations and the replies they give and the way they solve the problems vary according to the changing demands made of them; they format them in real time using their own competences and in accordance with the time pressures under which they find themselves working. (Mascia and Sznalwar, 2000). They need to reconcile the language being used; on the one hand there is the colloquial language of the customer and on the other the technical language of informatics that is prescribed and codified. It is the operator's own cognitive and memory competence that will allow the dialogue to be intelligible to the user, while at the same time being agile and technically correct, with the appropriate registers being recorded on the IT systems. Contact with the public involves receiving complaints and listening to a variety of problems; this requires a continuous cognitive effort in concentration, understanding and synthesis (Echternacht, 1998).

Swedish authors (Norman et al., 2002) similarly showed that in call centers rigorous quantitative demands occur at the same time as strong qualitative demands. The operator has to both serve the customers well and reduce call times. According to the authors, this process makes major demands on perception and attention span and involves different emotional interactions. In addition, Fernandes et al. (2002) showed that in call centers individual productivity bonuses and prizes exist that speed up the process and create a continuous environment of competitiveness.

The literature we looked at considers there are various factors that produce suffering and pathologies, including time pressures (average call times of around 30 seconds), an insufficient number of breaks, restricted dialogue, major demands on attention span and memory, incentives for competitiveness and electronic call monitoring

(Sznelwar and Massetti, 2000).

Other complaints are reported by the workers themselves and by those who study them, such as having to maintain an unsuitable posture, the continuous use of the voice, exposure to sounds created by the earphones and environmental noise, thermal discomfort, inadequate lighting and restrictions when it comes to physiological needs (Sinttel-MG, 2001; Torres, 2001; Toomingas, 2002).

The intensive use of IT is clearly shown in the study of Assunção and Vilela (2003), we mentioned above: the number of screens consulted in typical calls in one particular sector varied between 11 and 70, ranging from customer identification to the issue of a service order, with average planned time of 130 seconds: the time allocated for consulting each screen becomes extremely short and the worker has to speed up the calls to keep within the times demanded by the company.

The interval between calls is the key point in the management evaluation of the system, because this avoids the customers having to wait and, in the case of the telephone sector, avoids breaking the legislation. In Assunção and Vilela's study the intervals are very short or non-existent, with the operators occupied throughout the whole of their six hour working day, with only one formal break of fifteen minutes during this time.

Glina and Rocha (2003), studying call centers in various sectors, observed that "in the operators' work (...) major demands were made, of both a quantitative and a qualitative nature".

After a detailed ergonomic analysis of telemarketing tasks, the researchers conclude that in call centers that are very busy there is a natural selection of operators, or a selection by the company itself ("those who cannot stand the work are dismissed or resign") and that this clearly shows that we are "faced with a new taylorization of the tertiary sector, which in this case preaches rigid control over average call times, thereby imposing great mental and psychological demands on workers" (Santos, 2004).

As we have seen, the scientific literature is consistent with what workers all over the world report to their unions, that their mental and emotional capacities are being overused. Therefore, in addition to those occupational injuries considered to be "traditional", other, less visible damage to the health of the worker, is occurring (Sinttel-MG, 2001).

THE EVIDENCE REGARDING THE STATE OF HEALTH OF TELEMARKETING OPERATORS

The pathogenic potential of the working conditions in telemarketing call centers has been sufficiently well described by researchers who deal with this issue (Dejours, 1987; Assunção and Souza, 2000; Abrahão, 2000; Glina and Rocha, 2003).

The reflections of this situation exist, but they are not obvious, or even always explicit. Constant complaints, symptoms of stress and high absenteeism (Torres, 2001) are evidence of the damage resulting from the cognitive regulations and the excessive affective and psychological demands made on workers in an uncomfortable and noisy environment where the furniture that is used is precarious (Abrahão et al., 2003).

Over the last twenty years or so studies have pointed to symptoms of a physical and mental order, with an emphasis on the psycho-affective aspect, thus providing evidence of the relationship that exists between these symptoms and organization of the work, given that fact that it has intensified and given the complaints mentioned (Le Guillant, 1984; Dejours, 1987; Wisner, 1994; Echternacht, 1998; Glina and Rocha, 2003).

We can also see a tendency to underestimate the risk factors mentioned in the scientific literature. Glina and Rocha (2003) showed the association between quality/quantity conflicts, the number of customers waiting for their calls to be answered, lack of control over the work, electronic performance monitoring and other factors, and the psychological tension, anxiety, depression and fatigue found in telephone company operators. The authors confirmed that a major emotional, cognitive and physical overload exists in the work of telemarketing operators.

They described the clear relationships that are to be found between the working activities and the symptoms presented by the telephonists they studied, including eyesight fatigue, sleep disturbance, digestive and general symptoms of problems, personality disturbances and problems in personal relationships. The findings are universal in nature and have been validated by workers and their organizations in extensive studies carried out by union organizations, governments and research institutes in developed countries.

Recent research involving 3,500 French telemarketing operators provided some particularly significant results, with complaints of anxiety, stress and fatigue (71% of those interviewed), sight and hearing problems (16%) and back pains (6%) (CFDT, 2002) being reported. Telemarketing operators proved to have a higher incidence of disorders of the neck and upper part of the body when compared to other professional computer users, as was shown in an extensive study of 28 call centers in Sweden (Norman, 2005).

Table 1 below provides a summary of the main results of the ergonomic analyses of telemarketing operations' work, listing the factors that generate the pathologies and

suffering reported by the authors who have dedicated themselves to this subject.

Figure 1

<i>The work and health of operators</i>	
Components of the activity	Factors that cause suffering and pathologies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cognitive demands - Time pressures - Strict performance control: "quality answering service", amiability and patience, diligence and logged time - Dialogue restrictions ("scripts") - Productivity incentives, with "motivational campaigns" <p>(Torres and Abrahão, 1999; Fernandes et al., 2002; Assunção and Vilela, 2003; Santos, 2004; INRS, 2005)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong demands on memory and attention span - Accelerated rhythms, insufficient breaks - Threatening electronic monitoring - Deficient communication process - Competition between colleagues, constant conflicts <p>(Le Guillant et al., 1984; Wisner, 1994; Echernacht, 1998; Szelwar and Massetti, 2000; Glina and Rocha, 2003)</p>

High turnover and difficulties in recruiting and managing staff, principally as far as retaining personnel is concerned, are the problems faced by management. These are not, however, always perceived as being the negative consequences of the harmful working environment (Abrahão, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999; INRS, 2005).

From the point of view of telemarketing operators carrying out their tasks, the variety of different situations, associated with demands for speed, strictness with regard to behavior and talking and their relationship with the public are, according to Wisner (1994), Echernacht (1998), Fernandes (2002) and INRS (2005), aspects that all add to the workload. The notion of workload used by the authors refers to the result of the processes for regulating the variables in the activities carried out by the workers. Workload increases

as the operating alternatives decrease when faced with the variables that arise in the work situation. Telemarketing operators, using strategies and competences acquired in their work, try to manage the ambiguities of the task they have been given, which is to answer variable demands quickly and in a standardized way, without compromising quality. This commitment is not without its cost when it comes to the internal state and the physical and mental integrity of the operators, as shown in the studies we have mentioned.

The now classic study by Le Guillant, in 1956 (Le Guillant et al., 1984), describing what he called the "neurosis of telephonists", showed that the nervous tension generated by the working process was a factor that related to the efficiency and increasing speed with which task were carried out, with the deterioration in the symptoms suffered by telephonists being attributed to control systems and the fact of having to note down call details. Given the current importance of technological processes and the issues of time control, it is obvious how appropriate these statements are today when dealing with the health of workers in the telephone area.

We can see how the findings of the authors we have studied and the ergonomic work analyses we have presented clash with the rational logic of productivity and the search for maximum profit at minimum cost; as Taylor and Bain (1999) and Fernandes (2002) state, the process is one of constant pressure and competition, in an attempt to have total control over ways of working that do not take into account the damage and the competences necessary for performing the tasks prescribed.

DISCUSSION: PULLING TOGETHER THE VARIOUS PROSPECTS

All the studies relating to the growing telemarketing sector that we consulted in this brief overview show intense working situations, high staff turnover, precarious ergonomic conditions and obvious risks to health. We can see the need for a greater dissemination of what is known about the effects on health produced by these different ways of working and an increase in research into the issue. There is also an urgent need for regulation by the state, accompanied by public policies for the telemarketing sector, in the sense of bringing about a certain equilibrium of forces between those who organize and command the production and those who, in producing it, suffer repercussions as a result of the work they do (Marinho-Silva, 2004). Political intervention, with its prospects and objectives, may form new relationships between the State and the stakeholders from the private sector, ensuring that the economic power, when it comes to organizing its work, and even though it may go against its one interests, starts taking into account those aspects relating to the

preservation of workers' health that science has already pointed out.

Various governments and workers' organizations are trying to intervene in the telemarketing sector with their recommendations of "good practice" specifically aimed at working conditions³. Legislation relating to the organization of working time, however, has proved to be incapable of keeping up with the speed of the changes, and not only in Brazil. This is particularly apparent in countries that have a peripheral economy, where the State does not stand up to the force of capital. The recent privatization of public services and the creation of state agencies involved exclusively with economic development are evidence of this. It has become essential to revert this trend, by creating favorable prospects for the sector. This can be done with public policies that make it easier for workers to be able to act with regard to the way their work is organized, with a particular emphasis on time issues, in order to preserve their health and develop their experience.

In short, with unequal forces involved, the challenges posed are conditional upon economic, political and social circumstances. Only broad social support, based on scientific knowledge, explicit political will and the organization of workers, will give substance and strength to any attempt at opposing the predatory organization of work that is currently used in the economic activity of telemarketing.

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³ See "Health & Safety Executive (HELA) – United Kingdom - Advice Regarding Call Centre Working Practices", dez. de 2001; ver também HSE - HEALTH & SAFETY EXECUTIVE. Psychosocial risk factors in call centres: An evaluation of work design and well-being. 2003. Available at: <<http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr169.htm>> . Along the same lines, consult also <<http://actu.labor.net.au/public/papers/minstandscod.html>>

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