

UNISON calling



A guide to organising in call centres

Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
UNISON and UK customer contact centres (call centres)	4
UNISON in call centres	9
Health and safety: the physical workplace	13
Supporting physical health through good working practices	25
Sickness absence in call centres	30
Promotion of health and safety awareness	32
Stress	35
Shifts/security	40
Part-time staff	43
Homeworking and lone working	43
Key findings	45
Call Centre Charter	46
Further reading	47

Foreword

Over the last ten years the number of UNISON members working in call centres has risen dramatically. No longer is it just the private utilities who provide their customer services via call centres – there is an increasing trend for many public authorities including local authorities, health trusts and the civil service to use call centres as well.

Whereas many call centres are kept internal, an increasing number are being outsourced to specialist service providers. In some cases UNISON members are being TUPE'd over to these new employers. However, these specialist call service providers have also encouraged their clients to use off shore facilities in places like India and South Africa. Despite what many companies say, the real reason off-shoring has become so popular is that it is dramatically cheaper than providing the service here in the UK. In recent years there has been a welcome rethink by some companies which, faced with customer resistance to overseas call centres, have decided to bring the work back to the UK.

It is very clear to me that UNISON needs to focus attention on the needs of our members working in call centres. The nature of call centre work poses unique challenges that need specific solutions. UNISON wants to ensure that the interests and needs of call centre staff are fully reflected in all that we do in UNISON.

UNISON Calling is a valuable resource for our workplace reps who organise and represent members working in call centres. It is based on fresh research into real call centres operating in 2012 and is aimed at providing information and advice on good employment practices in call centres. Included in *UNISON Calling* is a *Call Centre Charter* which can be used as a checklist to



see how well or badly your own workplace matches up.

We want our members to know what they have a right to expect and we want employers to recognise and understand the needs and concerns of call centre staff and to treat them properly.

This report is based on information collected from surveys and site visits by two academic researchers from Portsmouth University where discussions were held with employees, managers, supervisors and trade union representatives.

Many call centres are much better places to work in than their press image perhaps suggests. Raising standards requires partnership between the employers, their staff and their trade unions. We hope that the publication of *UNISON Calling* will help promote best employment practices in all call centres.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Prentis". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Dave Prentis
UNISON General Secretary

Introduction

UNISON and UK customer contact centres (call centres)

‘Customer contact centres or call centres have become the most important single source of customer contact in the developed information economies’ (Russell 2008) and as such represent a crucially important part of the business of many organisations. By the end of 2012 it is predicted that 3% of the total British workforce will be employed in customer contact centres (contactbabel).

In the UK currently there are approximately one million workers who work in roughly 5,000 UK based customer contact centres. Many of these centres are in areas of historically high unemployment and are located in business parks, which are often close to good transport hubs such as motorway junctions. As such they tend to be cut off from access to high street facilities that staff may use at lunchtime for example and therefore have to be relatively self-sufficient. This can make them feel quite isolated as places to work in. Most contact centres have between 300 and 700 staff who work around the clock in shifts, mainly between the hours of 7am and 10pm but there is also some work undertaken during the night. The centres tend to have an open plan structure all on one level with the workforce divided into teams in related areas of work.

They provide a vital point of contact between customers and service suppliers. To quote the director of customer services in a major British multi-utility,

“ Customer services are a crucial function in managing the relationship between the customer and the company, and the customer contact centre is the front line of that relationship. It is the voice of the company; it is an important facility and contact point. It therefore has to be managed with sensitivity and with an understanding of customer needs. ”

The continued and expanding use of customer contact centres has not been confined to one part of the economy but is widespread across both the private and public sectors. The growth of competition in many areas of the private sector means that commercial pressures are increasing all the time. There are also increased demands on the public sector for more efficiency and better response times due to public demand and government austerity cuts. Pressure on customer service centre employees is rising correspondingly to provide a faster and more immediate response to these demands.

For these reasons some customer contact centres have been branded by a number of observers as ‘the sweat-shops of the 21st century’ or ‘modern satanic mills’. UNISON wants to ensure that such images do not persist. In some customer contact centres though, these descriptions are close to the truth, with management being inhumane when dealing with customer service centre staff, particularly in terms of breaks, general working arrangements and pressures to increase the number of calls taken. The

dramatic increase in the use of modern information technology has played an important role in transforming how people work. Call monitoring systems and the use of exacting scripts when answering callers, have increased pressures on staff.

Although sophisticated technology can take much of the monotony out of work, in customer contact centres it often appears that it has done the opposite – rather than freeing workers up to enable them to take on more creative tasks it is often being used to chain them more firmly to their workstations.

As a major customer contact centre union, UNISON wants to work positively and in partnership with employers and managers to ensure best practice is implemented. In acknowledging that there are good and bad employment practices in different customer contact centres, UNISON does not want to dwell on the negative issues but is determined to see remedies put in place to bring all centres up to ‘workplace of excellence’ standards, providing employees with comfortable and healthy places to work in.

Working in a customer contact centre

The main areas of concern are dealt with in separate sections for ease of reference and the correct working standards we feel should apply. These sections include a charter and checklist for action. These can be used by UNISON representatives, members and branches to raise concerns with customer contact centre owners and managers.

A customer service centre is defined as a work environment in which the main business is conducted via the telephone

while simultaneously using display screen equipment (DSE). This includes parts of a company dedicated to this activity such as internal help lines, as well as the whole company.

A call handler or agent is a worker whose job requires them to spend a significant proportion of their working time responding to calls on the telephone while simultaneously using DSE.

There are many **employment issues** which are common across all types of customer contact centres which need to be dealt with properly by management in consultation with stewards and safety reps. However, in dealing with them UNISON’s starting point is to identify the standards that can be achieved to make customer contact centres as pleasant as possible to work in.

These standards are explained in more detail in this guide and include:

- adequate levels of health and safety
- a good working environment based on sound ergonomics
- flexible working arrangements
- monitoring systems that are not oppressive
- adequate training and development
- a management that consults and listens to concerns raised by trade union representatives.

Employees in customer contact centres need to be treated properly and fairly and not just be seen as an extension of technology. They are human beings who have a pivotal role in making the system work. All customer service centre

employees have one thing in common – they are the front line contact between the customer, the client, and the community. If that front line contact is to be a success then customer contact centre staff need the right environment and good employment practices. A discontented customer service centre agent means the company or organisation will end up with discontented customers. In reality, poor job satisfaction leads to a poor service and disappointed customers. Because of the pressured environment in customer contact centres with people often answering calls relentlessly, a high level of health and safety standards is crucial if problems are to be avoided.

In order to ensure that **customer service centre employees** are comfortable, there must be:

- high quality and flexible workstations that can be adjusted to individual needs
- regular breaks away from screen and phone (our survey results show the biggest area of complaints shown is the lack of breaks)
- recognition that general health and safety standards have to be regularly checked and maintained in relation to the equipment used
- recognition by management of the role of the health and safety representative
- a management that listens to complaints and issues raised
- access to healthy, affordable food/ catering facilities and drinking water
- excellent training
- an environment which minimises stress.

Pay and flexible working arrangements are also very important if staff are to be retained in what is now a competitive market, especially if the company or organisation wishes to avoid a high turnover of staff. Just as important are flexible working arrangements and job design. A growing area of concern is stress and how to deal with it. Managers need to look at how an individual employee's work content could be more varied to break the monotony.

Another contentious issue is oppressive monitoring, where individuals are continually checked on the number of calls they are handling in any hour or day. UNISON believes that any monitoring by management needs to be implemented in a non-threatening and non-stressful manner. Too often targets for numbers of calls handled and sales are set at unrealistic levels and based on simple quantity measures, ignoring the all-important quality of service factor. Staff shortages can make this situation worse. Setting artificial and unreasonable targets, including flashing digital signboards which tell customer contact centre staff when to 'wrap up', does nothing for staff morale, create more stress and adversely affects performance.

This guide provides advice to UNISON negotiators in different types of customer service centre irrespective of which sector of the public they are dealing with or the particular service being provided. UNISON believes that with goodwill this can be achieved by joint working with employers. As one manager said,

“ It’s really interesting sometimes to get a union’s perspective on a decision that you’re about to make, because they’ll consider things that you wouldn’t even have considered, so it’s a good sounding ground... So we have a great relationship with the union, really supportive, very honest and open, and I wouldn’t go into anything without speaking to them first to check if they thought that any decision I was about to make was bad. ”

The research level

Prior to writing this report, UNISON asked Portsmouth Business School to undertake research of two kinds. The first involved visiting call centres around the country that had good ideas around health and safety and its management. Feedback from this research is shown in the report using quotes.

The second component was to ask UNISON call centre members to tell us about their experiences using an e-questionnaire. These replies are shown throughout in boxes and include the results.

Who replied to the questionnaire

Almost 800 replies were received. The spread of replies is therefore extensive - about two-thirds were from women and most respondents classified themselves as ‘White, UK’ (89%), with ‘White, other’ and ‘Asian’ accounting for a further 5% of the respondent group. Around 10% described themselves as disabled. The majority did not follow a religion (65%). There was a bias towards older people replying to the questionnaire.

The majority of respondents had worked in the call centre environment for over five years (73%), and held jobs spread between back-office and operators, with a small number of managers and supervisors also replying. Most people (64%) worked day shifts, and very few worked night shifts only (three respondents). Many had worked for their current employer for more than five years, and this was their main (possibly only) call centre employer.

The replies were dominated by the energy sector (70%), with local government also having good representation (17%). Analysis by sector used these two categories; and ‘Other’. Job type, years worked for this employer and hours worked did not differ by sector.

General feedback from UNISON members

We asked everyone some general questions about how they viewed health and safety themselves and how well managed it was at their workplace. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

We asked employees how much they agreed with the following statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
My employer takes health and safety seriously	81%	12%	7%
My employer takes UNISON seriously	51%	29%	19%
My employer takes work/life balance seriously	36%	27%	37%
UNISON has high visibility at my work site	57%	21%	22%
Health and safety at work is important to me	92%	7%	1%
Health and safety provisions are made for disability at my site	72%	23%	5%
Health and safety provisions are made for pregnant workers at my site	63%	29%	8%
I think health and safety is well managed at my site	68%	21%	11%
I know where to go at work for advice on health and safety	76%	12%	12%
I know who to go to at work if I see something wrong	82%	10%	8%
I feel able to report any health and safety problems at work	79%	13%	8%

The results show that employers were generally seen to take health and safety seriously with only 9% being judged to the contrary. However the scores for work/life balance were far less positive, with around half respondents reporting they did not think their employer took this seriously. Around 20% found that UNISON does not have a high visibility at their worksite and with 20% being neutral; this meant only 56% agreed on UNISON’s visibility. 10% of respondents didn’t know where to go for advice when reporting health and safety problems.

There were similarities in replies in these statements. For example if someone judged their employer to take health and safety seriously they were also likely to judge

positively that the employer took work/life balance seriously, took UNISON seriously, had provisions for disability and pregnancy and managed health and safety well.

The majority of members who replied to the questionnaire thought health and safety was certainly ‘on the agenda’, which will be due in part to the work of UNISON stewards and members alike. However the situation is not perfect and in Chapters 4 and 5 we show evidence that workers experience both physical health problems and psychological stress. So it is crucial that work continues with employers to ensure that health risks are removed or reduced and improvements achieved.

UNISON in call centres

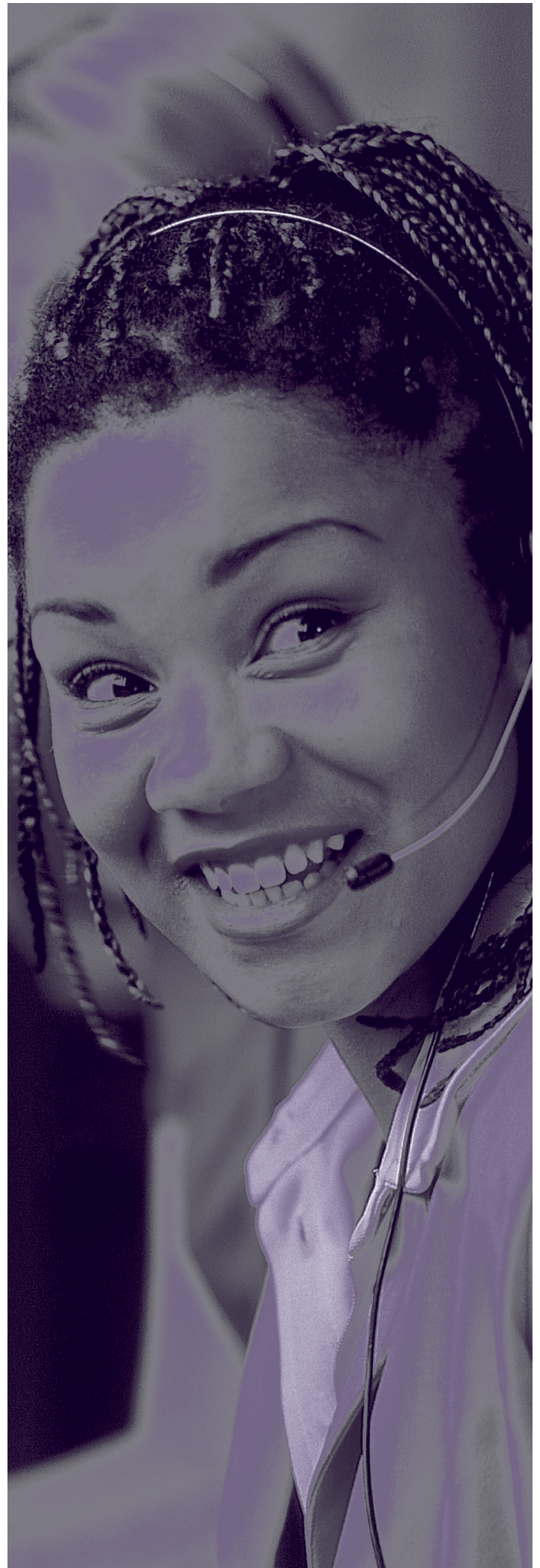
As described in the introduction the characteristics of a call centre are common to most sites even though the nature of the business or service may vary.

Call centres have a number of unique characteristics that affect how we as a trade union can interact with members.

Working in a call centre means surrendering a considerable amount of personal freedom. Staff are usually required to be at their work station with head sets on ready to go from morning to night. Because of this communication with and between staff is discouraged during working time. However staff should be able to take regular breaks and should additionally have lunch breaks away from their work station. It is during these breaks where informal communication takes place

The type and the size of call centres vary from small switchboard operations through to large, modern information technology-based centres. Some organisations have chosen to contract them out to an established private call centre operators such as Capita or Serco. Where this happens the existing staff are sometimes transferred under the Transfer of Undertakings (protection of employment) (TUPE) regulations which, while protecting their terms and conditions, is not sufficient to guarantee good working practices or the pay, terms and conditions of new starters. It is therefore important that UNISON branches insist that they are fully involved from an early stage where outsourcing is being planned.

The operators of call centres are above all else concerned with processing as many callers as possible and as quickly as possible. We all know how frustrating it is to be left hanging on the phone listening to



some trivial music! However in some cases where customer service standards must be kept very high then the time spent on a call is of a lesser importance than the quality of information or advice given. NHS Direct is a good example of this.

In other cases the staff need to be highly trained, for example in the systems, products and prices that exist at any one time. UNISON believes that a great deal of evidence exists which shows that the speed and efficiency of call handling depends directly on the training and experience of the staff concerned. For example this was found to be the case within the police service.

Many call centres need to be open for business from early morning to late evening and some are open 24/7. This requires operators to organise staff into shift rotas. Provided staff are given some choice over what shifts they are allocated this can be a popular pattern of work especially for those who need to fit in other domestic responsibilities.

The pay of call centre workers varies from operator to operator but generally falls within a band of £15K to £18K. This is not a high salary by anyone's standards. Moreover many call centre workers are part-time so their salary is pro-rata to the full time equivalent.

Some call centres have been set up by more than one employer to provide shared services to a range of different organisations. In the transport field the Greater Manchester Public Transport Information Limited (GMPTI) call centre is jointly funded by Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive and local bus operators. It opens every day

from 8am to 8pm except on Christmas, boxing and new year's days.

Most energy call centres are large and employ many hundreds of call centre agents at one location, with a six-day opening period from early morning until mid-evening. Small sections of all the utility call centres operate on a 24-hour/365 days a year basis to deal with emergencies. In at least one national energy company the call centres are linked to each other so that the volume of telephone traffic can be managed and routed to the site most able to deal with them swiftly. In these cases even though the sites might be hundreds of miles away from each other they still operate like one work place providing the same service. It is in this sector where off-shoring of call centre work has been most commonplace to reduce costs and keep prices down and profits up.

In most call centres where UNISON organises there is a very strong trade union presence both in relation to collective bargaining agreements and trade union facilities. Joint trade union/management structures and procedures exist to deal with issues within an overall human resources management structure, although the relationship between trade unions and management varies between organizations and from site to site.

A trade union/employer joint agreement should involve proper recognition for stewards or safety representatives with agreed paid time-off and provision of facilities for them to carry out trade union work. The facilities agreement should allow them to be consulted on issues affecting members on their site. And also to represent members involved with grievances, disciplinarys, and unfair dismissals.

Organising in call centres

Organising is an approach that means members are actively involved together in resolving their issues. It makes the union stronger because it uses members' collective strength, skills and experience to solve problems. This way the union builds a sustainable trade union presence that delivers for the members and also encourages non-members to join and become active in the union.

Organising in call centres can raise specific problems, but these can be overcome. Most staff in call centres are tied to their desks and almost constantly on the phone. This in itself can be problematic if stewards or safety representatives wish to talk to them. Call centre employees are the most heavily supervised of any group of workers. Because of the specifics of call centre work and the pressure most staff are under in terms of answering calls, representatives should try to ensure that management provide proper facilities for talking to members and potential members.

The ideal time to speak to call centre members potential members will be during their rest breaks, which they are entitled to have under health and safety laws. Alternatively, or additionally, union surgeries can be set up during lunch breaks or after work when members and non-members can receive advice and information from the union. Every opportunity to talk to members should be used. If possible, a UNISON stand could be set up in the canteen on a regular basis, so that members and potential members can talk to representatives.

It is essential not to forget that call centres are open for long hours and that there is a need to have stewards/representatives to cover all shifts. UNISON is strongly committed to the principles of fair representation, which means that there should be a broad balance of representation of members from all parts of the employee spectrum. This is not only democratic, but makes good sense from an organising point of view. It is important that all members, whatever shift they work on or whether they are full or part-time, are able to keep in contact with UNISON.

There can be a considerable turnover of staff in call centres. However during a recession turnover rates can be much lower. Whatever the case it is important to recruit new members of staff immediately they start working for the company.

Members should be kept informed about what UNISON is doing on their behalf. A UNISON newssheet for your call centre is a good idea. Just a few paragraphs on a single sheet of paper telling people about latest developments would be sufficient. Although some employers may object, it is also sometimes possible to use the company's email system to let people know what is going on. This is an ideal way to get a message to every member quickly and effectively.

There should be a UNISON notice board in a prominent position in the call centre where information can be displayed. This should also be used to display names and contact telephone numbers of stewards or safety representatives and to highlight campaigns and health and safety matters. Change and update material regularly.

Organising checklist

1. Create arrangements where members and non-members can speak to a UNISON steward/representative during breaks.
2. Organise UNISON surgeries at lunchtime and after work and invite outside representatives. (For example, UNISON regional officers, membership services, equality, welfare officer and learning representatives.)
3. Use the public areas to speak to members and non-members.
4. Have a UNISON stand on a regular basis in the canteen or other suitable public area.
5. Ensure that there are stewards to cover all shifts and be available to help members with problems.
6. Try to keep in touch with members by producing a call centre branch newssheet or using other methods such as email.
7. Ensure that there is a trade union notice board in a prominent position which contains and displays standard information on union contacts and how to obtain advice, plus campaigning material that regularly changes.
8. Maintain recruitment. This can be done by holding recruitment drives, prize competitions and encouraging all members to become recruiters for the union.

The health and safety organising guide can be found at unison.org.uk/file/B12995.pdf

Another way of maintaining interest in the union is to organise activities around particular issues of importance to staff, eg health and safety, dealing with stress and bullying, or pay and working conditions. In planning activities it is essential to think about the nature of the membership in terms of age, gender, balance of full-time/part-time workers etc.

As in many other workplaces, in call centres it can be difficult to persuade members to become active in the union. This may be because they have a false impression about what is involved. Women in particular may feel that they don't have enough time to devote to UNISON if they have domestic or other caring responsibilities. Surveys also suggest that women may require more reassurance about skills and training to do a union job. It is important that branches take account of these differences when trying to improve active participation from members. For example, job sharing of a union representative's position halves the workload and makes people feel more supported. It is also important that people know there is a range of training courses that UNISON or the TUC can provide, details of which can be obtained from the branch officer or UNISON's regional office.

Call centres tend to attract younger workers. For many young people, coming to work in a call centre is often their first experience of a trade union organised workplace.

In many cases young people want the same as older workers eg proper training and career prospects, as well as decent pay levels, but are concerned that a lack of experience does not allow their voice to be heard. Call centre representatives should therefore encourage young people to join UNISON and encourage them to become active.

Health and safety: the physical workplace

In 2009/10 26.4 million working days were lost due to work-related illness and workplace injury and workplace injuries and ill health (excluding cancer). This cost society an estimated £14 billion according to the Health and Safety Executive. Sickness and the absence associated with it costs workers and employers in different ways, but everyone loses.

Health and safety should be of paramount importance in all workplaces and call centres should be treated no differently. However, there are clear health and safety issues pertaining specifically to call centre work. One worker says how health and safety works at their place of work;

“ When I came through, it was very much drilled in from day one around health and safety and the responsibility I had for my team was to create an environment where people feel part of it, rather than feel like they’re being told off for doing something wrong, because I think health and safety, rightly or wrongly sometimes can have a same label as things like insurance. It’s my role to make sure that everybody is kept safe whilst they’re at work. So we encourage people to report any slips, trips, and near-misses that they may have to an accident helpline and then it goes onto a website.

It is called My H and S; (My Health and Safety), and any near miss or problem that we have on-site is automatically put in the database, and we get trigger alerts, to say what’s happened. It also goes to the manager of the individual concerned. ”

The legal framework

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) employers have a duty to protect the health and safety of their employees. In addition the Management of Health and Safety at Work (MHSW) Regulations require employers to assess health and safety risks in order to identify measures needed to reduce them.

Risk assessments

By law, every employer must conduct a risk assessment on the work carried out by their employees. Risk assessments help to identify hazards in the workplace and the likelihood that these hazards will cause harm to employees and others. It is part of a systematic approach that employers are required by law to adopt in order to manage health and safety effectively. It helps spot the prevention or control measures needed to protect workers and the public from harm. Risk assessments have to be undertaken regularly ie annually and a new risk assessment should be carried out if any substantial changes to the call centre or to working practices take place. Risk assessments have to be carried out on the workplace as a whole, as well as on individual workstations.

In large call centres, management will often assess only one workstation in a team area and use that information to cover all other workstations. Typical risks will be those associated with using VDU screens and headsets, type of desks and chairs which, if not properly assessed, can cause musculo-skeletal and eyestrain problems. Where hot-desking is common this may make proper assessments and the taking of preventative ergonomic measures difficult.

As part of good practice, stewards/safety representatives should try to persuade management to introduce the idea of having a DSE checklist on screen which would appear each time a new user logs on. Training on how this should be used and the time needed to do this should be provided.

Risk assessments must be undertaken by competent people ie those with sufficient time, training and resources to know what they are looking for. Safety representatives should be consulted by the employer before such competent people are appointed and before risk assessments are carried out, but risk assessing is not a joint exercise. Basic training for health and safety reps on risk assessment is offered by both UNISON and the TUC but safety reps should not be expected to carry out risk assessments for their employer in their trade union role.

Good health and safety practice means that if checks are carried out on a regular basis by team leaders, risk assessing becomes easier and hazards are reduced as shown in the following quote:

“ We have to look at the safety of the team as a whole so we ask, are we not leaving data protection work on the desk? Are we closing down our monitors correctly? Is the area nice and clean? Have you got coats at the back of the chair? There’s a variety of things that make everybody more aware about what we’re looking at. So it gives our staff a greater awareness and a little bit more in their development. We’ve also added common issues raised onto our health and safety checklist so that when we walk around these issues can be identified. We do our audit once a month, we don’t quite tell everybody because that defeats the object but it’s about making sure that we’ve put things in practice that we need to do, written up the action log. I’m responsible for going into the contact centre, make sure it’s been actioned, record what we did, when we actioned it and to close it down. ”

The HSE recommends that staff surveys are carried out to get employee feedback on health and safety issues and their own health and personal experience of the working environment. The research undertaken for this booklet asked respondents how recently they had completed a staff survey. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

When did you last have a staff questionnaire to fill in that included health and safety questions?	
Within last six months	33%
Within last year	24%
Within last two years	15%
Longer than two years ago	9%
Not since I have worked here	19%

A strong link was found between those staff who reported a recent survey and also judged their employer as managing health and safety well.

The results of a staff survey can be useful to include in the Risk Assessment for a site. Other data should include incidents from the Accident Log, sickness absence data, complaints that have been lodged and the results of exit interviews. Together they can add the workers view into the mix so that a full assessment of effectiveness can be understood and areas for action identified.

What branches can do about: risk assessment

- Does your call centre management comply with the law by undertaking risk assessments using competent people and review these risks from time to time as deemed necessary?
- Has your call centre management taken appropriate and adequate measures to reduce perceived risks in the call centre?
- Has a staff survey that includes health and safety questions been carried out in the last 12 months and results fed back into prevention strategies?
- Are all employees aware of the hazards the face in the call centre?
- Are safety reps consulted on risk assessments?
- Are safety reps given time off for basic risk assessment training, in accordance with their entitlement?
- Have all health and safety reps been on joint management/trade union and/or TUC-organised health and safety training courses?

Working environment – key issues

In this section we focus first on good overall design of the workplace and then look at specific workstation issues and related equipment. Working practices concerning breaks will conclude these ‘physical’ aspects of the working environment.

Optimal environmental conditions for the comfort of call handlers are essential, because they sit for long periods at their

workstation without breaks. Sitting in a draught for example, is not only uncomfortable – it can cause muscular tension which can, in turn, contribute to musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs). The Workplace Health & Safety Regulations set out the legal requirements and how these should be addressed. UNISON's guide to these regulations can be found here unison.org.uk/acrobat/10349.pdf.

Occupancy

Call centres can be occupied for up to 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. An environmental conditions control system which covers temperature, humidity and air quality should be designed to cope with the demands engendered by this. The distribution of this occupancy can change dramatically depending on the shift. Problems with environmental conditions may arise if a building is only designed for a specific number of occupants and this is exceeded. If no allowance is made for expansion in the workforce, the environmental conditions control system may not be able to compensate for additional occupants and equipment and, as a result, the temperature and relative humidity may become unacceptable.

Overall layout level

Hanger-style buildings are favoured by many call centre employers as the layout is flexible. For example, re-organisation of teams can be easily reflected by rearranging the layout of the workstations. Again, problems may arise if this has not been anticipated in the design of the environmental conditions control system.

A common problem is the erection of screens interrupting airflow and leading to pockets of stagnant air. Feedback from members suggested air quality in their

workplaces is inadequate, so we will deal with this issue first. Slips, trips and falls are also common problems as shown by the 20% of survey respondents who reported persistent trip/slip hazards at their site.

“ We then looked at how open the stairs were. There are railings that go around stairs, but there are gaps, between them. And so if someone actually slipped coming down the first flight of stairs, and lost their footing on their back, they could in effect actually slide straight through those railings and down three floors.

So we've had stainless steel in-fills all around the bottom. We've put those in place. No drinks are allowed to be carried on the stairs, no mobile phones should be used on the stairs, so we've banned all of that. Also what is going to be happening within the next few weeks, right on the edge of the top stair, they're going to be putting a different coloured carpet so that you can see exactly where the first step is, because if you did slip on the very top staircase here, you could cause untold damage, it would be horrendous. So it's things like that which we've constantly got in place. ”

Table 3

We asked employees to describe the air quality in their workplace	
Very good	7%
Good	30%
Adequate	42%
Less than adequate	21%

Air quality

It is important that the air is filtered thoroughly and frequently to eliminate germs, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and dust. VOCs are released by certain glues, paints and carpets. Many call centres are in buildings that have been recently constructed or refurbished and these materials have been used. Dust can irritate the throat and lungs and may contribute to voice loss or trigger asthma. A thorough cleaning programme can remedy this in conjunction with air filtering to control dust levels. A good turnover of air is also important as call centres have a high concentration of computers. The heat generated by these dries the air as well as raising the temperature. The air should be fresh and of a comfortable temperature. It should also be of sufficient humidity to prevent eye and throat dryness and irritation. Members' responses to environmental quality were worst for temperature, as can be seen from Table 4.

Table 4

We asked employees to describe the temperature in their workplace	
Very good	3%
Good	17%
Adequate	39%
Less than adequate	41%

Temperature

Most modern call centres have sealed windows and air conditioning, but access to fresh air is an asset if it can be achieved. Plants can assist in keeping the air humid and provide a more pleasing environment.

Lighting

Is there sufficient light to allow work - on screen and paper - to be carried out without eye strain? Most people prefer to be in an environment with some natural light, though windows in call centres are often covered by blinds to reduce glare.

Research suggests that lighting levels that are slightly lower than daylight are more comfortable on the eyes than some types of artificial lighting. The frequency spectrum of the light source should also be considered as some are easier on the eyes than others. Lighting requirements may differ depending on whether call handlers are only operating DSE or whether they have to consult and complete paperwork too. We asked members about their experience of lighting and less than 50% agreed it was 'good' or better as shown in Table 5 overleaf.

Table 5

We asked employees to describe the overhead/desk lighting in their workplace	
Very good	9%
Good	34%
Adequate	38%
Less than adequate	19%

Lighting requirements for night shifts may also differ from those for the day shifts. A dimly lit rest room can provide a welcome to take a break from the brightly-lit call centre environment.

Artificial lighting should be to current standards ie utilising baffled reflectors on ceiling lights. It should produce no glare on VDU screens. If there is little or no natural light more frequent breaks from screen working should be allowed.

Decor and interior furnishing

Paint, wallpaper, carpeting and furniture textiles should be calming on the eye and pleasant to look at. A regular change of pictures, wall hangings, plants and other visual aspects can help overcome feelings of monotony and boredom. Materials such as carpeting, ceilings etc. should be designed to minimise noise by being sound absorbent and sound insulating. Tropical fish tanks installed in some call centres has also had a calming influence.

In any refurbishment or decoration of offices there should be, from the earliest stage, full consultation with trained health and safety/ergonomic experts and safety representatives. This will ensure that furniture and equipment conforms to the latest and best health and safety standards.

Photocopiers

Photocopiers should be situated in an area separated from the general office and have a separate air duct to ensure toxic gases do not enter the main air conditioning system.

Workstation layout

Every office worker has a legal right to minimum office space (at least 11 cubic metres per person and this includes space taken up by chair and workstation, but excludes other equipment). The main problems with workstations are usually to do with space. Often there is insufficient space on desks for monitors to be positioned at the correct distance from a user. On desks that face each other, monitors have to be staggered. We asked several questions about layout of workstation desks and the results are shown in Table 6.

Each desk should have all the necessary reference material and stationery. However, many call handlers like to make notes and carry these with them when they hotdesk. They also carry stationery, as the desk sets are usually incomplete. Often there is nowhere secure to store these personal items. Some employees carry boxes which can become trip hazards if placed by workstations. It is of concern that cleanliness around workstations was ‘Less than adequate’ in many cases. Bins for rubbish need to be accessible. Employees’ finishing their shift by clearing away any rubbish is a useful and important routine to establish.

Ideally each work station should offer a degree of privacy even in open plan offices and give workers the opportunity to ‘personalise’ their desks with things like family photos. This helps to make the working environment less anonymous and

alienating. Half-size dividing screens ie ones that protrude no more than half a metre above desk height are ideal. These allow staff to see the whole office and talk to colleagues, but also provide a sense of 'private territory' and reduce noise levels.

minimised by installing good, ergonomically tested workstations and training employees to use equipment and desk flexibility so that have the best possible ergonomic environment. One manager said:

Table 6

We asked employees to describe the cleanliness around workstations in their workplace	
Very good	12%
Good	33%
Adequate	32%
Less than adequate	23%
We asked employees to describe the desks space/size of workstations in their workplace	
Very good	20%
Good	40%
Adequate	31%
Less than adequate	9%
We asked employees to describe the space between desks in their workplace	
Very good	17%
Good	36%
Adequate	32%
Less than adequate	15%

Workstation design

The desk, equipment and chair should be suited to individual needs. Bad workstation design can lead to strain and muscular problems in the back or limbs, aches, pains and headaches. These risks can be

“ We do DSE assessments to make sure that everything is safe and that the equipment works, so it’s not causing them any kind of headaches or back problems. We do a similar kind of assessment, but for pregnancy, or people with a disability, so you’ll see some of the screens are a lot bigger, or some people have got different chairs. We work with a company called Access to Work, so anything that we do, or if people need some kind of specialist equipment, we speak to them. They come out, they scope out that person and what they need and we buy the equipment they recommend.”

Management should be encouraged to introduce the use of on-screen prompts which appear when screens are switched on, reminding the operator to ensure that their work station is ergonomically adjusted and is comfortable to work at.

For VDU work, the call centre worker needs to sit at a comfortable distance from the screen and this is often achieved by having desks of a minimum depth. The desk should

be at a height to allow comfortable keyboard work and the chair must be height-adjustable, give adequate back support and be comfortable to sit on.

If the work involves heavy keyboard activity, the worker should be seated at a comfortable height so that arms and wrists are positioned in to minimise strain or uncomfortable movement. We asked about musculo-skeletal issues in the survey and found a disturbing pattern of problems that began with aches and pains, as shown in Table 7 where over two thirds of people reported problems.

Table 7

We asked employees if they currently experienced any aches/pains caused by posture at desk	
All the time	10%
Often	23%
Sometimes	38%
No	28%

The cause of aches and pains could come from one aspects of workstation design, but it is more likely to come from several different factors (for example poor screen height with poor chair adjustment), and the problem may vary for different employees.

Ensuring that staff are given adequate breaks so that they can stretch and change position may also help to reduce the risk of headaches and MSDs (musculo-skeletal disorders).

Seating is a straightforward area for employers to help employees minimise aches and pains from posture. Although some survey respondents found their

workplaces ‘less than adequate’ (see Table 8), the results also showed advances are being made.

Table 8

We asked employees to describe chair comfort in their workplace	
Very good	18%
Good	34%
Adequate	31%
Less than adequate	16%

We asked employees to describe Chair height/position in their workplace	
Very good	21%
Good	40%
Adequate	30%
Less than adequate	10%

Most call centre workers use VDUs. Some employers may attempt to avoid complying with VDU regulations by denying that certain staff are VDU users, and ‘only use the screens irregularly’. The HSE definition of a ‘designated VDU user’ is someone who ‘habitually uses VDUs for a significant part of their normal work’ and will include almost all call centre workers. More details on the legal requirements and employers duties can be found in the Display Screen Equipment Regulation. UNISON’s guide to these regulations is here unison.org.uk/file/B164.pdf

It has been established that when working on-screen an individual’s blink rate tends to drop and this can cause dry or sore eyes. Intensive on-screen work can be a strain on the eyes and it is essential that conditions

are optimal to minimise eye-strain. It is also good practice for employers to encourage VDU users to take short breaks away from their screens. VDU equipment achieved reasonable feedback in the survey, as can be seen from Table 9.

Table 9

We asked employees to describe the brightness of the monitor in their workplace	
Very good	24%
Good	52%
Adequate	21%
Less than adequate	2%

We asked employees to describe the placement of the monitor in their workplace	
Very good	24%
Good	51%
Adequate	21%
Less than adequate	3%

We asked employees to describe the ease of mouse handling in their workplace	
Very good	25%
Good	50%
Adequate	22%
Less than adequate	4%

Eyes and eyesight

More people now use computers for work causing a marked increase in the number of people complaining of eye strain. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) extensive research has found no evidence that visual display units (VDUs) can cause

disease or permanent damage to eyes. However extended or prolonged periods of VDU work can lead to tired eyes and discomfort. As the eyes now perform more demanding tasks, it may make VDU workers more aware of an eyesight problem. It may also make those with pre-existing vision defects more aware of them if these are not corrected.

Focusing at a fixed distance for extended periods, as call-handlers and many back-office workers do, can cause eyestrain and headaches especially when working under pressure. Frequent breaks of sufficient length would mean the eyes could focus at a different distance and be given the chance to rest. Hence VDU users are entitled to regular breaks or changes in activity from keyboard work to allow eyes and muscles to recuperate. We asked UNISON members about their experience of eye strain, and it can be seen from Table 10 that for only about a third of call centre workers this was not a problem.

Table 10

We asked employees if they currently experienced eye strain	
All the time	6%
Often	18%
Sometimes	44%
No	31%

Eyesight tests for employees at induction are important, not only to establish baseline data for future reference but also to identify individuals who may be at a higher risk than average of intensive VDU use causing eyesight problems. They should also undergo a regular eye test (at least annually). The employer is under a legal

obligation to provide or pay for eye tests and to contribute towards the cost of spectacles if these are deemed necessary for VDU work. At one call centre a rep describes their usefulness;

“ Yeah but we’ve also had somebody from Boots that brought in the machine to test people’s eyes and we’ve had two people that actually had serious problems, one inside the brain and one right at the back of the retina that was picked up through that test. ”

VDU work checklist

- Have all workstations been assessed by trained staff and are they comfortable for work in all aspects?
- Are all desks with VDU screens of a non-reflective surface to minimise glare?
- Are screens adjustable?
- Are all staff aware of their entitlement to free regular eye and eyesight tests as well as the cost of spectacles if they are needed specifically for VDU work?
- Is all electrical equipment regularly tested eg PAT tested?
- Are VDU screens arranged at a reasonable distance from other screens?

Hearing

The nature of the work means that call centres are inherently noisy places. The major component of background noise in call centres is the voices of other call handlers. The HSE rule of thumb method used to assess noise levels is if a conversation can be conducted between two people standing two metres apart without either having to raise their voice, then the background noise level is acceptable. We asked UNISON members about noise levels generally and the results are shown in Table 11. Again about a third of people thought the environment generally was ‘less than adequate’.

Table 11

We asked employees to describe the noise level in their workplace	
Very good	3%
Good	23%
Adequate	44%
Less than adequate	30%

Special material, often in ceilings, can minimise reverberations, but many call centres are in hanger-style buildings without ceilings. However, carpet, chairs with soft seats and padded screens between call handlers are also effective noise absorbers.

Ideally, any call centre should have minimal noise levels and modern, well-maintained audio equipment with user volume control.

Noise-cancelling headsets filter out background noise so that only the call handler’s and caller’s voices are heard through the earpiece. It is essential that headsets have the facility to adjust the volume. As one team leader said’

“ We can go and have the hearing tests as part of occupational health, and I believe that we can get that done. We’re just in the process of changing all the headsets over from what we have at the moment to digital headsets.

Digital makes the actual call itself a lot clearer, it’s not as distorted because some people will say they’ve got a bad line and it’s not, it’s actually the headset but because we’ve changed from analogue lines to digital lines we will then eliminate the need for the new voice tubes. I’ve tried them and the call is so clear. The other thing that we find is that a lot of people complained about hearing but rather than managing the call correctly, they’ll put the volume to maximum so it’s very distorted. ”

Table 12

We asked employees if they currently experienced hearing problems	
All the time	8%
Often	18%
Sometimes	30%
No	43%

To establish some idea of the actual risk level UNISON stewards may face, we asked a question regarding hearing. The results reveal quite a problem, as shown in Table 12.

One way of reducing hearing problems is to reduce the overall noise level. Hence microphone positioning is important so that call centre employees can speak softly. As well as reducing noise levels this can help avoid voice strain (see below). There is frequently an optimal position for a microphone related to a call handler’s mouth, and call handlers should be trained to position the microphone correctly. If they are not, they may have to speak louder to be heard and increase the headset volume to hear themselves.

Headset type

There is no difference in the impact on hearing associated with whether the headset has two ear-pieces or only one. Some people feel it is easier to concentrate wearing one or the other. Call handlers should be given the choice of either. Since call handlers wear a headset all day everyday it is important that it is fully adjustable to ensure a comfortable fit. Headsets should be checked regularly and repaired immediately if necessary. If this is not possible, a call handler should be fitted with another headset.

Headset hygiene

There is an increased risk of ear irritation and infection because headsets are worn so intensively. To reduce this risk, staff should be trained in headset hygiene and given the time and the materials to complete a hygiene programme.

Hygiene is usually looked after through the use of cleansing gels and wipes. A pool of headsets used by a number of different

individuals should be avoided, as they will not be adjusted to a particular individual and there is an increased risk of cross-infection. If pool headsets are unavoidable, call handlers should be given the opportunity before starting work to adjust the set to make it comfortable and, when they finish work, to clean it properly using wipes and gels. As a critical issue, it was disappointing to find poor results from UNISON members regarding access to gels and wipes. This is an issue that can be improved simply, and should not constitute the problem it does.

Table 13

We asked employees to describe access to cleansing wipes, gels etc in their workplace	
Very good	12%
Good	18%
Adequate	25%
Less than adequate	45%

Acoustic shock

Hearing is not only affected by poor hygiene. Acoustic shock results from freak sound bursts on telephone headsets and can leave users in pain and with loss of short-term memory. British Telecom, in a recent case, recognised acoustic shock as a genuine industrial injury, but many organisations do not. Acoustic shock can be avoided by the use of noise limiters. Headsets should have automatic sound level cut-off controls to prevent freak sound bursts happening.

Hearing tests at induction may be appropriate to ensure that new staff do not have an undetected hearing impairment that may become worse by intensive telephone use. This will also provide baseline data for

reference at a later date if an individual complains about their hearing.

Voice loss

Voice loss, or dysphonia, is not just the inability to speak, it also includes pain, tension, croakiness, irritating cough, inability to modulate, poor or no vocal power and breathing difficulties.

The survey asked respondents whether they currently experienced voice problems. About half said ‘no’, but a few suffered all of the time.

Table 14

We asked employees if they currently experienced voice problems	
All the time	4%
Often	16%
Sometimes	31%
No	49%

Call centre employees should be made aware of the risk of dysphonia, be able to recognise the symptoms and be trained to take preventative action. Drinking water rather than tea or coffee is helpful for dysphonia, and will be looked at when eating later in the report. Also useful can be stretching the neck and shoulders to relieve tension. There may be some benefit in breaking scripts into shorter segments, giving call handlers frequent micro-breaks while callers respond to their questions.

The idea of employers offering voice training – how to use the voice effectively, to avoid strain and possible damage – for call centre workers is worth exploring. Staff who use their voice continuously and as an integral part of their job should have voice training.

Supporting physical health through good working practices

In call centres there are two other factors which can affect physical health - breaks and eating/drinking.

Breaks

VDU users are legally entitled to regular breaks or changes in activity from keyboard work to allow eyes and muscles to recuperate. A call centre worker describes;

“ All the staff should be getting up, standing up, having a stretch every 20 minutes because it’s not normal to sit for a long period of time, it’s not good for you. So we’re trying to educate managers and staff and trying to see if somebody has got a problem. If they haven’t then we are just being preventative, so we’re looking at the preventative stuff as well. ”

Guidance to the Display Screen Equipment Regulations sets out the advice for on breaks. EU legislation specifies that VDU users have a right to regular breaks or changes in activity away from the screen. This legislation is unfortunately not very specific and it will be up to union reps to insist on proper, paid breaks being guaranteed for all call centre operators. Breaks can also be requested for all call centre staff on the grounds of reducing stress and promoting employee welfare.

The HSE suggests a significant break (which can be a change of work activity) after 50-60 minutes continuous screen work. A change in work activity, though, should not preclude proper breaks from work being taken during the day. Ideally there should be a separate ‘quiet’ room where staff can enjoy short breaks away from the office environment.

Different employers have different policies on breaks. Some have agreed fixed breaks, others allow a percentage of time for breaks and some have no breaks at all. We asked UNISON members if they could take breaks. 16% replied ‘never’, which is potentially problematic if they are experiencing stressful calls or workload. One important reason for breaks is the need to use the toilet – we asked members if access to toilets presented problems for them. The replies are shown in Table 15. Around 28% said this does occur sometimes, for this minority the issue will be of major importance and concern for UNISON.

Table 15

We asked employees if they currently experienced restricted access to toilets	
All the time	5%
Often	6%
Sometimes	17%
No	72%

There is undoubtedly pressure by many employers to cut breaks to an absolute minimum and to actively discourage workers from taking them. One worker said:

“ Everyone is really so busy that you have got to put your hand in the air to go the loo. I suppose it just gets to that point because you got totally busy because there were so many calls in the queue. ”

Table 16

We asked employees if they were currently able to take breaks from work when needed	
Never	16%
Sometimes	59%
Always	24%

Some employers actually question workers who go to the toilet or for refreshments and demand to know why they are not ‘logged on’. This behaviour constitutes harassment. UNISON representatives can ensure that members know their rights and are not intimidated by managers. Frequent short breaks are better than fewer long ones.

Call handlers should have their break allocation clearly explained to them by management, understand why it is important to take them and appreciate the benefits of leaving their workstation at break times.

It is important that members are encouraged to use their breaks for maximum benefit. Focusing at a fixed distance for extended periods (as call-handlers do) can cause eyestrain and headaches especially when working under pressure. Frequent breaks of sufficient length mean the eyes can focus at a

different distance and are given the chance to rest. Walking around stretches muscles, relieves tension and reduces the risk of headaches and MSDs. The risk of dulled hearing and tinnitus may also be reduced by giving the ears a break from the headsets. Giving the voice a break from talking to callers may also reduce the risk of voice loss.

What branches/ reps can do about breaks

- Is there an automatic right for individuals to take breaks away from their workstations? Such a right should be jointly agreed by unions and management.
- Is there a designated rest area provided away from the work area?
- Is a decision on when breaks are taken, other than those officially laid down in any agreement, at the discretion of the individual (subject to consultation with their supervisor to ensure cover)?
- Is there access to refreshments during late shifts?
- Are individuals entitled to take regular breaks or undertake changes of activity from screen working?
- Are workstations draught-free to avoid muscular tension and the risk of musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs)?
- At induction, are new members of staff informed about possible health and safety risks involved in VDU working?

Eating and drinking

Provision of refreshments should be adequate, particularly for night shift workers. Rarely are canteens in call centres open throughout the night. Vending machines and microwaves are provided in some call centres, but these alternative arrangements may not be sufficient. Headaches and migraines can be prompted by not eating enough and night-shift workers may be at particular risk due to the irregular and unsocial hours worked.

Sitting at desks all day is a sedentary job and UNISON is aware of the health risks from obesity and lack of exercise. In addition many workers spend a considerable amount of time talking, and water is important for such workers. Hence a good number of questions in the survey covered eating and drinking. Tables 17 and 18 show level of access to water and food.

Table 17

We asked employees if they currently lacked access to cooked food	
All the time	10%
Often	10%
Sometimes	15%
No	65%

Table 18

We asked employees if they currently lacked access to drinks	
All the time	3%
Often	5%
Sometimes	11%
No	81%

We know that access to water is the important issue for health, helping voice specifically, but in general water is the best beverage for overall health. Almost all respondents had access to water (98%), with the majority (90%) using water dispensers. But access is not enough – workers have to drink it. A small group reported they never drank water (5.6%) and 54% that they always drank water. Only 34% judged that they drank enough and around half that they ‘sometimes’ drank enough (Table 20). This raises the question of whether members’ not drinking enough is limited by the layout and nature of the job and supervision or whether it is from their own choice. A role for stewards is to encourage employees to drink water. Many workers would choose tea and coffee but as one worker illustrates this can be a cause of accidents,

“ The most regular thing onsite is people burning themselves. We’ve had nine accidents to date and seven of them are burns with hot water spillages, either at desks or in the canteen so after investigations advice is to hold the cup at the top. They’re either walking into somebody or they’re not putting the lid on properly so it’s their errors, it’s about re-educating people to put the lid on properly. We’ve even asked the canteen to put the milk by the hot water whereas before people would get the hot water and put the lid half on and then when they paid they would put in the milk. ”

Table 19

Do you drink any water during the day?	
Always	54%
Sometimes	40%
Never	6%

Table 20

Do you drink enough water during the day?	
Always	34%
Sometimes	52%
Never	14%

Eating at work

Many larger call centres have canteens and refectories, often because they are situated away from food providers on industrial estates. It is in the employer’s interest to provide a canteen that offers affordable cooked food because this is a fundamental underpinning of good health and will help prevent sickness absence and the costs associated with it. One call centre manager said;

“ Yes, absolutely, eating, trying to get them to eat healthily. We’ve actually worked with the canteen downstairs as well, trying to get them to offer healthy foods, which there are, there are healthy options downstairs: salads, pastas, that sort of stuff, and jacket potatoes. So we’re really pleased with that. But yeah, I wanted to bring fruit onto the site, so we did that. ”

Almost all workers (97.5%) in the survey reported having a separate area to eat their food. This should enable a better experience of ‘time away from the desk’ and enable genuine breaks from work.

We asked where members got their food. Recognising food habits vary, we allowed respondents to answer ‘yes’ to as many questions as they liked. The results are shown in Table 21 where on-site vending was used by a substantial minority (19%) and bringing food in from home by a substantial majority (78.5%). There was another group that used the canteen (39%).

Table 21

Where do you get food to eat while at work?	
I bring it in myself	78%
Vending machines on site	19%
Canteen on site	39%
Van outside site	2%
Other	11%

Around half of respondents reported they did not have a healthy option in their canteen. Of the group who did have a healthy option, only 14% took it all the time and more reported that they never took it (25% of those who had the option), with most replying they did this ‘sometimes’ (62%) (Table 23). Hence it is possible that some staff bring in food because it might be cheaper or they might judge their food to be healthier than the employer’s. However staff who use the canteen need to be encouraged to use healthy options if they are available. It may be useful to

discuss the importance of diet with the employer and request that healthy options are introduced.

People who rated their diet as good were more likely to have access to affordable healthy food, and take this option. There was a good correlation between people with better diets and lower reporting of health problems. We found clear evidence of a link between diet in call centre staff and their reports of better health.

Worryingly over 22% judged their workplace diet 'poor' in terms of healthiness, compared with 27% who rated it 'good' and the remainder (51%) judging their workplace diet as 'variable' (Table 24). Assuming people over-rate their diet, this is not an encouraging finding and represents an area where UNISON can make considerable impact and work with the employer to provide circumstances to maximise physical health at work.

Table 22

Do you have an affordable 'healthy option' available in your canteen?	
Yes	51%
No	49%

Table 23

How often do you choose the 'healthy option'?	
Always	14%
Sometimes	62%
Never	25%

Table 24

How would you rate the healthiness of your workplace diet?	
Good	27%
Variable	51%
Poor	22%

Sickness absence in call centres

Surveys suggest that levels of sickness in call centres tend to be relatively high. This is not surprising when the conditions and nature of the work are considered ie large open plan offices where germs are easily spread, added to the intrinsically stressful work. Studies have shown that sickness levels are likely to be much higher in workplaces like call centres where there are intense productivity demands, few or short breaks, shift working and little control by workers of their workload and actions.

Call centre employers in the utilities are in intensely competitive markets and are keen to minimise sickness levels. Unfortunately this often takes the form of punitive and mechanistic measures and procedures for dealing with absence rather than positive measures to create a healthy workplace. Nearly all utility employers have sickness absence or capability procedures which are designed to formalise the ways that sickness absence is dealt with. Although this can be seen as a way of introducing fairness and consistency into proceedings there are a number of problems with this approach. Unless managed fairly staff can sometimes be 'managed out of the business' owing to a rapid escalation of capability stages.

What branches can do about: sickness absence procedures

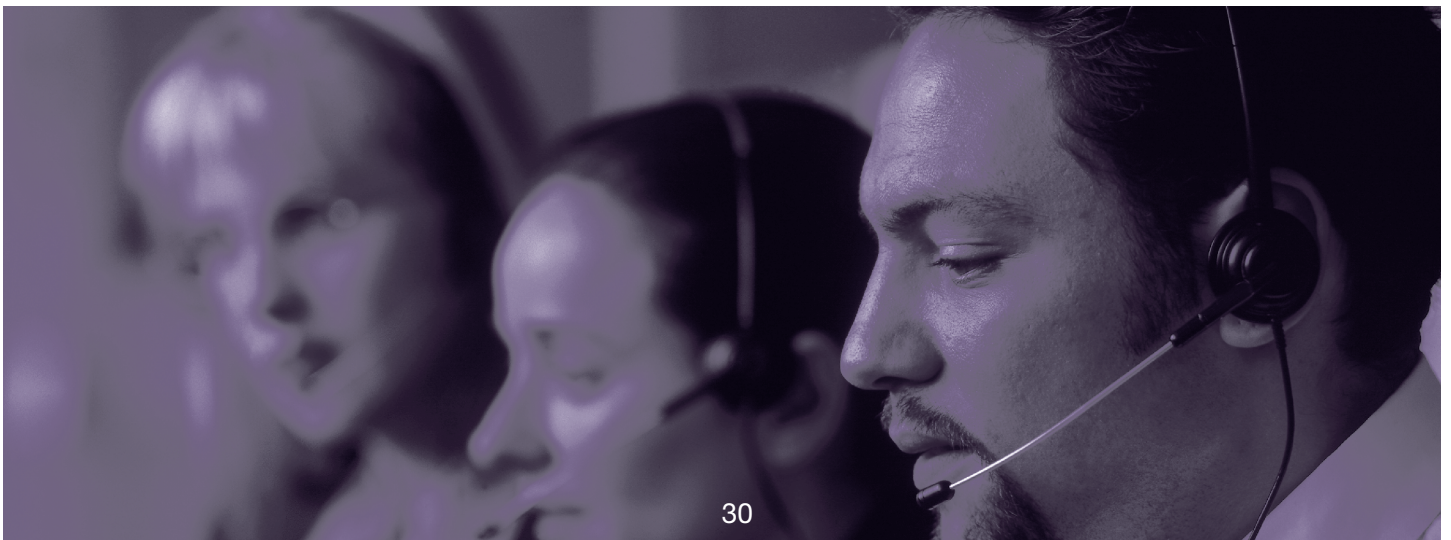
Where employers are intent on introducing sickness absence procedures stewards/ safety reps should seek to resist any detrimental proposals and to build in as many safeguards as possible.

Some groups of workers eg women, black and disabled workers are likely to have different patterns of sickness absence. This needs to be taken into account by employers who could be faced with discrimination cases if they impose rules with which one group would find it harder to comply.

UNISON's guidelines on sickness absence

The Equalities Act places an obligation on employers to make adjustments to accommodate disabled employees. The range of adjustment can be broad and includes furniture adaptations and time off for doctors' appointments.

Stewards/safety reps should encourage employers to look at preventative measures to reduce sickness, such as better job design and supervisory standards, eradication of bullying and any other



measures which would promote healthier and less stressful conditions. There is a separate section on stress on page 35.

UNISON stewards/safety reps should be seen to have a proactive role. Where management seeks to introduce absence procedures, union involvement at each stage should be insisted upon. This should include ensuring that management provides a detailed analysis of sickness patterns over the previous year, to allow the union to make an informed judgment on the extent of the problem. Stewards/safety reps should ensure that members know their rights and ways in which UNISON can support them. Branches should also consider conducting surveys of members to identify when sickness absence is work related.

UNISON guidelines on sickness absence agreements can be found at unison.org.uk/acrobat/18267.pdf

Occupational health

Each large workplace should have an on-site occupational health unit and occupational health nurse on duty. Smaller work places should provide access to an occupational health unit. This is an essential adjunct to a company's good workplace health and welfare policy.

The health of employees should be regularly monitored. They should be actively encouraged to register workplace health and safety concerns in confidence in a workplace health and safety book. Accidents are entered in an accident book or on the intranet. Any symptoms which could be associated with work (stress, headaches, limb aches, eye strain etc.) should be raised in a confidential manner with the occupational health nurse and the safety rep.

An occupational health professional said:

“ We raise awareness for prostate cancer, breast cancer, all those sort of things. We have a big board that there's lots of information on. We have a site as well, that's on the intranet that every member of staff has access to that they can go on to, and look at different things that we have.

We carry out DSE assessments which obviously make sure that people are sitting at the desk correctly, their computers are in the correct place, there is a specific way they should be set out, and we make sure that that's where they are. We make sure that people have wrist-rests, foot-rests, back-rests. But if it's picked up in that DSE that they're suffering from backache, or they haven't approached their manager to say they have stress, that is a major report to occupational health and we will take over from there. If there is anything that needs to be done in the workplace, then that will be fed back to the manager, the manager will then come to me to make it happen.”

Promotion of health and safety awareness

As far as possible staff should be empowered to ensure that health and safety is maintained as a high priority. It should not be left to management alone to monitor health and safety and do something about it. There should be ongoing consultation. Stewards/safety reps and employees have a legal right to be consulted on all workplace health matters – as demonstrated by the following quote:

“ Every month the ‘Health and Safety panel’ get together, which all the managers and staff, to have a look to see if there is a common theme. We see what is happening, why it’s happening, what we need to be doing about it, is it something that’s unsafe within the building, or is it a behavioural issue, and then we address that. Then obviously we do health and safety walkabouts every month, where we pick up actions from there. Every team’s got a health and safety checklist.

What the business wanted us to do was to pick four things that we believed that we could improve on. So we picked fire warden; health and safety training; slips, trips and falls, and first aid. Then we scored ourselves where we believed we were and where we wanted to get to. And what we’ve been doing all year is putting improvements in place to get to that score.”

The visibility of health and safety can be a virtuous cycle, with high visibility leading to higher awareness and better workplaces. We asked if respondents had health and safety boards, and 83% had them, but with less than half reading them with any regularity. Conversely 62% reported they got feedback on health and safety and accidents. We also asked if management recognise health and safety initiatives, and only 6% said not.

Health and safety – work systems

The call centre context: controls and monitoring

Call centre employees experience two types of monitoring and both can cause stress. The first is the automated side of monitoring which is embedded into the software which workers use every day. The other type of monitoring and control is that undertaken by supervisors and managers and sometimes this is linked into the software system.

Automatic call distribution (ACD) controls (through software) is used when call handlers take calls and how many calls they take. As soon as a call and the post-call administration are complete, another call is automatically relayed to the call handlers. A limited task variety and low control is characteristic of poor job design. Such jobs offer limited satisfaction and may be inherently stressful as operators cannot themselves control the demand on their workload which is a known stressor.

Any monitoring of work by designated VDU users can only be carried out with the knowledge of the users. This is clearly laid down in the Display Screen Equipment

regulations. The right to privacy is also incorporated in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act. Hence an employer is under a duty to inform employees of any surveillance that may take place. Monitoring should only take place after consultation with safety rep/stewards, and can take several forms. Electronic performance monitoring (EPM) uses two methods: quantitative and qualitative. As a call centre worker describes:

“ It’s all monitored. You accept that and obviously it’s monitored for reasons, it can be financial indications or something like that and most people accept it. So most people who have been here for a while know how the system works, they know what they’re into, they also know how to improve their own performance, and I think most people here are treated as adults, so it’s your performance, you sort it out. ”

Quantitative monitoring

Minute-by-minute quantitative data is collected automatically by computer. Data is analysed to provide a range of statistical information for both individual call handlers, for teams and also for the call centre as a whole. The information collected about an individual typically includes: the percentage of a specified period that a call handler is on the telephone; the average duration of a call handler’s calls; and the average time spent

in ‘wrap up’ after a call. Individual data then feeds into team statistics. Additional information monitored for the call centre as a whole includes the average length of time a caller has to wait before he or she is put through to a call handler; and the abandonment rate ie the number of callers who ring off before they are put through to a call handler.

Targets

Monitoring is used as a basis for training, improving customer service and determining performance-related pay. Targets are set for each statistic that call handlers are required to achieve. For example, some employers aim for their call handlers to be on the telephone for as much 80% of their shift (despite it being argued that 60-70% utilisation is optimal); call duration to average at two minutes 15 seconds; and ‘wrap up’ time to be as fast as possible. The longer callers have to wait before speaking to a call handler, the higher the probability that they will ring off. Employers, therefore, aim for as short a wait as possible and to answer as many calls as possible to keep their abandonment rate low. An almost ubiquitous feature of call centres is an overhead LED display showing the number of calls waiting and the longest time waited.

Qualitative monitoring

Team leaders listen to call handlers on the telephone to callers both in real time and also by recordings. This type of monitoring is done to check that call handlers are giving customers correct information, as often there are legal implications if information is incorrect. Team leaders also assess whether call handlers have achieved a variety of criteria including whether the call handler

follows the script closely, listens to the caller, speaks appropriately, uses their knowledge of the products or services effectively and, in commercial call centres, exploits sales opportunities. Monitoring provided in a supportive and constructive manner can reduce the inevitable stress to having one's work examined so closely. Praise for tasks achieved well can also turn this from a 'Big Brother' situation to one of learning and engagement. The onus is on the supervisor to create an optimal style of managing these situations which need to occur in call centres.

Feedback

Team leaders feedback the information collected by the quantitative and qualitative performance monitoring to call handlers. This can either be immediate if the team leader has been actively listening to a call or later in a one-to-one session.

Some form of supervision and monitoring in call centres will always be deemed necessary. It needs to be recognised, however, that this can be stressful for staff. A significant amount of research has been devoted to performance monitoring. A common conclusion has been reached that the way monitoring is implemented in many centres is bad for workers' health.

For example, monitored workers reported higher workloads, decreased job satisfaction, more supervisory-relations problems and less skill use. Highly monitored workers also reported more boredom, tension and anxiety, depression, anger and fatigue than non-monitored employees, as well as more stress and stress-related illnesses. It is therefore essential that call centre monitoring is used

to help staff and encourage better performance rather than as a means of discipline or intimidation. Supportive styles of management where supervisors not only 'tell' but also listen to and interact with workers too are to be encouraged and are more likely to help an employee improve their performance to everyone's benefit.

What branches can do about: supervision and monitoring

- Has the introduction of any monitoring system been subject to joint agreement on how it will be operated?
- Are procedures in place to deal with performance problems or grievances which may arise as a result of monitoring?
- Have supervisors been trained to provide feedback in a supportive, clear and interactive manner to their team members?
- Are you confident that performance monitoring is not used to the detriment of individual members health?



Stress

Stress is a major contributing factor in work-related illnesses and in sickness absence according to the Health and Safety Executive. Stress can be caused and exacerbated by many factors. Here is a quote from a call centre worker:

“ It sounds a nice thing, to speak to somebody; however, without knowing it, it is a stressful job. You’ve got people screaming at you on the phone, you’ve got to not take it personally but people can’t, yes we are monitored; the system and everything we do is monitored. ”

We asked about training, workload, abuse and bullying in the survey. Training reduces stress as it gives workers a sense of capability – without which the work would be more stressful. The researchers found it surprising that only 28% reported they had been trained for the technical aspects of their job ‘completely’ (Table 25). Bridging gaps in training may reduce stress. This represents an area for more action and research.

Table 25

Were you trained adequately for the technical aspects of your job?	
Completely	28%
Mostly	49%
Not really	23%

Even if an employee is well trained, working in a call centre is by its very nature stressful. The lack of control workers have over their working lives is intensified by their use of equipment, surveillance and monitoring. Working with the public is also recognised as a significant stressor. Frequent refocusing of targets to meet market demands and monitoring, are demotivating and stressful for some call handlers. The effect on mental health of such high levels of call handler surveillance by EPM is poorly understood.

It is also possible that the combined workload of listening and responding to customers while looking at the VDU and inputting information may be more stressful than the simple sum of each task. Many call handlers describe their job as monotonous, rather than stressful, which reflects the poor job design of call handling.

The amount of work (workload) can lead to increased stress directly. Asking questions in this area is difficult as it can be hard for many people to admit a problem. Only 14% replied they experienced no stress from workload (Table 26). Of the rest most managed it, but disturbingly, 23.5% reported that it was damaging to them – undoubtedly an area for concern. Of those who had reported stress we asked if it affected work and home. Around half were clear it affected work (Table 27), and for a similar number it affected home life (Table 28).

Table 26

Does your daily workload cause you to feel stressed?	
Yes, to a damaging level	23%
Yes, but I manage it	62%
No	14%

Table 27

Does this experience affect your work?	
Yes	57%
No	24%
Don't know	19%

Table 28

Does this experience affect your private and personal life?	
Yes	60%
No	27%
Don't know	13%

Perhaps the most telling analysis came when we examined the 'managing stress' group with the 'damaged' stress group.

A significant minority of respondents (181) found the stress damaging. For 148 of this group it affected their home life as well as their work life. This is a significant risk for health for these workers, as they cannot get away from stress to be able to recover.

Many workers said they managed the stress (480). But in this group less than a quarter (114 people) reported no impact on work or home – which would be truly managing the stress. More people said it affected work and home – in result an actually larger number than those who reported being damaged by the stress. The lesson is to be very vigilant with staff who apparently shrug off stress – more questioning can reveal there is an impact – for work this will affect the employer directly. For those having an impact at home one wonders when they can get away from

stress. Stress may show itself through being managed in the wrong way, and the unintended consequences of this may be drinking too much alcohol, increased rates of smoking, and the possibility of domestic violence. UNISON should be working with management to make the working experience more humane in nature and therefore less stressful.

Stress can also come from abusive calls, and we asked how often respondents had such calls. Fortunately few people (8%) had constant abusive phone calls to deal with. But for many this did occur sometimes (78%). As a known stressor, many workplaces have managers and specialists who can 'debrief' or assist staff to de-stress after abusive calls. Many respondents were critical as to the efficacy of such systems as is shown in Table 30 below.

UNISON guidance on reducing stress in the workplace can be found at unison.org.uk/acrobat/18596.pdf

Table 29

Are you subject to abuse during calls?	
Always	8%
Sometimes	78%
Never	14%

Table 30

How effective is the help you get if you have an abusive call?	
Very effective	16%
Quite effective	28%
Slightly effective	24%
Poor	31%

Bullying

Stress can also come from working relationships. Abuse does not only come from callers but can occur inside workplaces too. We asked about this in our survey and 23% said they were bullied or harassed by other workers. This is a worrying number and higher, for example than bullying in the NHS. In previous UNISON surveys we have enabled respondents to 'multi-tick' the source of bullying.

Typically bosses are seen as the most likely source of bullying and this is confirmed in Table 32 with 65% of those bullied attributing it to managers. However a relatively large proportion is peer bullying. This is likely to be to do with team targets, and it highlights another area for vigilance. It may also come from operator/back office tensions where there are difficulties between teams.

Table 31

Are you bullied or harassed at the moment?	
Always	2%
Sometimes	21%
Never	77%

Table 32

Always or sometimes (177 people) bullied or harassed by:	
Boss	65%
Peers	49%
Subordinates	12%

Like the stress question, we asked those bullied whether the experience was affecting work and/or home and we found that for the vast majority of bullied workers, this experience affected both work and home (124 of 177). Bullying will be a component of causes of stress, and affect the employer and the employee in a negative way.

Responding to stress and bullying

Most companies have a reactive approach to stress and treat it once it occurs by offering a range of services from Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and counseling through to lunchtime interest and fitness classes and evening social events. Some health professionals believe that the main source of stress is domestic, rather than work-related, due to variable shift patterns making childcare and domestic arrangements problematic. However this UNISON survey suggests this is likely to be interactive, with work stress being taken home and then other problems occurring in a nasty escalation of stress.

The employer should be encouraged to see stress primarily as a result of the nature of the job rather than as a result of someone's personal make-up. They should be discouraged from using terms like 'stress management', but rather encouraged to look at means of reducing workplace stress by improving working conditions and aspects of the job. The HSE states: 'Ill health from stress at work must be treated in the same way as any other problem of ill health due to physical causes in the workplace. In other words stress should be treated the same as any other health hazard.'

It is vital to ensure that procedures for coping with stress are in place. This means that it is recognised by management and taken seriously as a work risk, that employees themselves are aware of the dangers of stress and are trained in how to recognise and avoid it and that opportunities to obtain advice and help in a confidential manner are provided. Employers should be persuaded to monitor for signs of stress-related behaviour, to establish to what extent stress is occurring and put in place effective control measures.

Staff need to be properly trained to make sure they have the tools to do the job, and confidence in their ability, otherwise stress will result.

A policy should be jointly agreed to deal with such instances. The least that should be done is that recipients are allowed a break after taking a distressing call. Counseling should be on hand and, if calls are monitored, action is taken to ensure that known abusive callers are dealt with appropriately. Our survey shows that measures in place are generally seen as inadequate to support staff after abusive calls, so improving the support in this area represents a clear area for action.

What branches can do about: stress

- Is there a negotiated and written agreement on stress?
- Is proper training provided to new workers?
- Are new systems installed with sufficient training for staff?
- Are regular breaks permitted? The length of such breaks is as important as their frequency. The times and duration of these should be clearly communicated to staff, so that they know their rights and take their breaks.
- Are calls monitored for decibel levels so that they do not exceed an acceptable frequency?
- Is monitoring as non-stressful as possible?
- Has extraneous noise been reduced to a minimum?
- Is counseling offered after abusive calls?
- Is training in handling stress provided?
- Is a stress monitoring system in place to identify stress-related situations and measures taken to reduce these?
- Are staffing levels maintained, particularly at peak call times, and do staffing rotas take into account the needs of staff in terms of family and other commitments, as well as safe travelling to and from work?

What branches can do about: harassment and bullying

- Negotiate procedures for bullying and make sure different types of harassment that can take place according to UNISON's guidelines are all covered by the policy.
- Make sure the policies are widely publicised both among staff and managers. Training on its implementation should be provided for all staff.
- Ensure safety representatives are involved at all stages.
- Bullying should be dealt with quickly. If it can be resolved in days the damage to a worker will be far less than if it takes weeks or months.
- Conduct confidential surveys of members to find out the extent and nature of the problem.

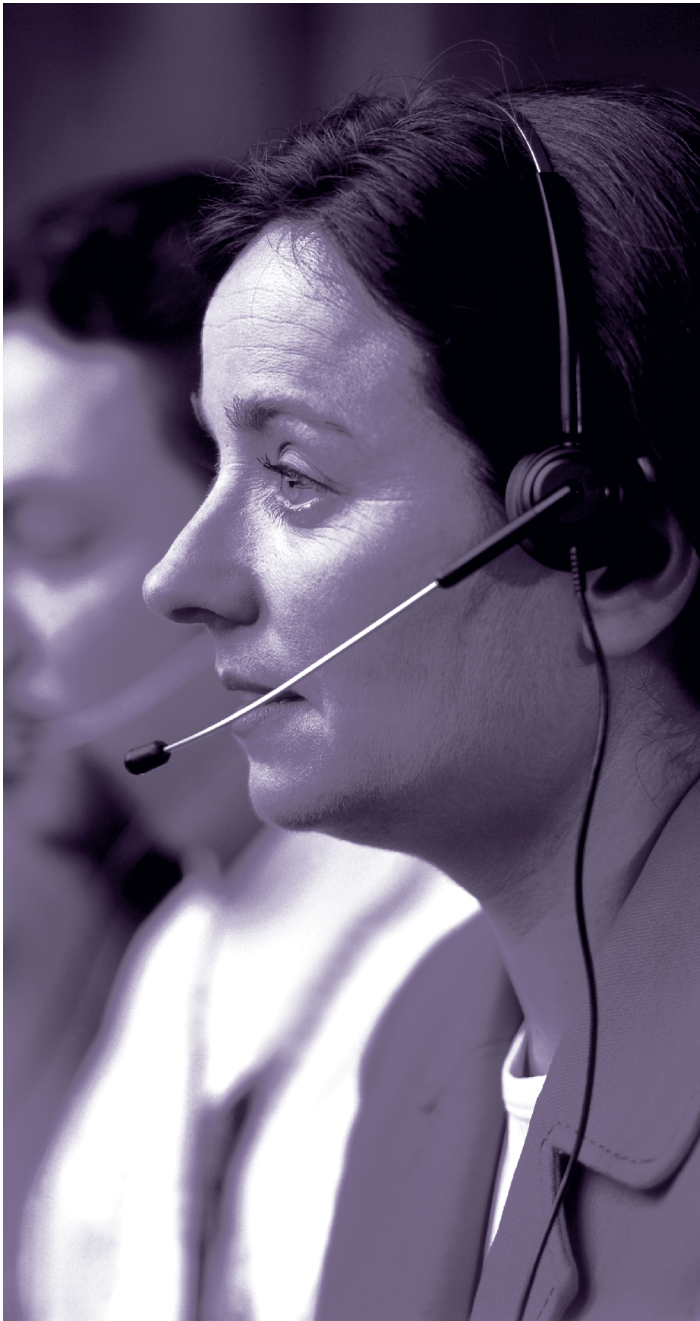
UNISON's guide to tackling bullying and harassment at work can be found at unison.org.uk/file/B19203.pdf

It is management's responsibility to manage stress at the workplace and there are tools available from the HSE that will help.

Shifts/security

Call centres may be different from other office environments as many operate shift systems. On-site, special consideration should be given to first aid and security to ensure adequate cover, particularly in call centres operating 24 hours a day 365 days a year, where staff are working nights and leaving or arriving very late at night or very early in the morning. Secure travel facilities,

well-lit areas outside the building to allow for safe exit to transport and a specific risk-awareness exercise on safety outside the building are essential. Some employers ask staff to reverse-park their cars on arrival so that when employees are leaving they always drive forwards to minimize accidents in reversing cars when tired. This is illustrated by this quote,



“ Come four o’clock, when people leave, it will be dark. They’re tired, they’ve had a long, hard day, they’re quite possibly stressed with the day, they want to get home in a hurry and the only thing they’ve got to guide them out of that parking space is two little brake lights. Wouldn’t it be easier and less stressful to drive out with your headlights? It’s easier to park in the morning and reverse-park when you’re fresh and alert. That was our way of thinking. So that’s why we brought reverse parking in on-site and we’re doing it on the off-site car park. Also we’ve just had all the off-site car park resurfaced because it’d gone in dips and in the winter the dips filled with rain, or they iced over, and it made footing a little bit iffy.”

Sometimes staff are hired with the intention that they will always work the same hours, covering the same shift, but this is not always the case. Those staff working evening and night shifts may need to be given extra consideration in terms of security, both on and offsite. Call centre rotas and shifts should, as far as possible, be fitted around individual needs, particularly those of women with caring responsibilities. In this respect work-life balance may be a necessity for some staff rather than a 'nice-to-have' perk because of their home commitments.

Table 33

Do you have a choice with your shifts?	
Always	10%
Sometimes	30%
Never	59%

The competitive world in which call centres operate means that employers need to provide a package of conditions at work in order to attract the best staff. With a mostly female workforce this means that employers need to adopt good work-life balance policies. Stewards/safety representatives need to ensure that conditions offered in call centres are no less favourable than those offered in other parts of the organisation or business. With a predominantly female workforce, any attempt to offer better conditions only to staff in other (possibly male-dominated) parts of the company would be discriminatory.

Flexibility

Flexibility is important for many employees, especially those with childcare or caring responsibilities. Members who have children to look after or those who are responsible for

an elderly or sick relative, need flexibility in their arrangements at work.

There are a number of ways employers can help. In addition to the parental leave and time off for dependants provisions, additional special leave specifically for caring responsibilities, reduced hours working (either permanently or for a specified time), term-time working, career breaks, or job sharing can all help.

Call centre employers are often very keen on flexible working. However, this is usually flexibility for the employer rather than the employee. Long opening hours mean that call centres normally operate some kind of shift system, with a variety of full and part-time staff available to cover the required hours. This is illustrated by a quote from a call centre manager:

“ We try and get that complete flexibility without giving them too much indication as to what the shift is. We have to give people notice obviously, and we’ll give them about a month, but it means that their shift pattern will change. We’ll try and do that as little as possible because you realise it impacts on lives but the necessity of the contact centre will always be that. Once they are in training, we try and do it on the first day if we can, they’ll get their shift patterns so they know whose team they’re going to, hours they’ll be doing, and they’ve got sort of a good four to six weeks forecast. ”

Working non-standard hours may suit many members' caring responsibilities. However, it is important that there is a degree of control for the individual. Our surveys of members suggest that workers often find it difficult to change shifts and are also often told to change their working hours at short notice. This is likely to be more difficult for women to do than for men and is therefore potentially discriminatory. Remember too, that some members may have religious reasons for wanting to work particular patterns.

Examples of ways that flexibility can be guaranteed for individuals can include protocol agreements which bind supervisors to consultation before changes to an individual's working hours are made. The aim is to achieve any changes by mutual consent.

What branches can do about: flexibility at work

- Check that flexible working hours offered to all workers. For example, team leader or management jobs are often seen as full-time jobs only. This unnecessarily excludes many women who would otherwise be able to do the job and is therefore discriminatory. Stewards/safety representatives should take care that opportunities for promotion are available over the full range of working hours.
- Negotiate special leave arrangements to help staff who have sick relatives or dependants, in addition to parental leave and time off for dependants. Ensure that special leave arrangements are paid and that they are as flexible as possible. This includes sympathetic consideration to requests when a whole day or half-day is not needed but the carer needs, for example, to change their working times. Arrangements should include all staff.
- Negotiate career breaks which allow staff to take an unpaid break from work and to return to a guaranteed job. Such schemes should be available to all staff, not just women. Although women can benefit by being able to take time off work while their children are young and then pick up the threads of a career afterwards.
- Get agreement for a job share scheme which splits hours and divides pay and benefits on a pro rata basis. The organisation should be positively committed to promoting job sharing in job advertisements etc and the scheme should be available to all staff and in all jobs.
- Make sure that all schemes are jointly monitored so that the success of the schemes can be determined and any problems or inequalities that emerge put right.
- Further information about negotiating flexibility can be found in the list of publications at the end of this booklet.

Part-time staff

The majority of part-time staff are likely to be women. It is important that all of the conditions and benefits available to full-time staff are also available to them on a pro rata basis. These should include not just obvious things like pay and holidays etc but should also address issues such as access to training, development and promotion.

The Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations make it unlawful to treat part-time workers less favourably than comparable full-timers. Successive employment tribunal decisions have also made it clear that a failure to allow women to switch to part-time work is discriminatory.

What branches can do for: part-time workers

- Ensure part-timers rights under the Part-time Workers Regulations are enforced.
- Examine any new proposals to identify the likely effect on part-time staff. Use surveys to assess part-timers' views.
- Further information about protecting part-timers can be found in the list of publications at the end of this section.

Homeworking and lone working

Some call centres are now looking to expand into home working as an alternative to employees working from call centre premises. Modern technology has facilitated this development, but safeguards are needed, especially in relation to health and safety standards. There is also the issue of isolation: recognising that an employee who is spending all or the majority of time working at home may feel a loss of identity and alienation from colleagues.

From a health and safety point of view, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines lone working as: "those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision", but UNISON prefers the definition set out in Croner's Health and Safety, which is: "A worker whose activities involve a large percentage of their working time operating in situations without the benefit of interaction with other workers or without supervision."

From a call centre perspective there are different categories of home workers, which include:

- permanent home workers: employees who are required to work at home as part of their contractual arrangements
- flexible home workers: employees who are required to be flexible and may undertake work at home, ie participants of a hot-desking scheme who may be required to work at home
- employees who choose to work at home: with the agreement of their manager.

Setting up home working

In setting up call centre home working arrangements consideration should be given to having an initial six-month trial period for

individuals. At the end of this period if home working is agreed by both sides, the home will be deemed to be the workplace. This is on the basis that home workers will enjoy the same rates of pay and employment benefits as call centre-based workers, including childcare provision and family leave.

However, it may become evident that an employee during the trial period feels unable to continue working from home. In these circumstances, arrangements should be put in place to provide as much sympathetic assistance as possible to overcome any difficulties. Failing that, consideration must be given to returning to call centre-based working.

Health and safety in the home

Home workers should be treated no less favourably when it comes to health and safety standards than those who work in an employer-supervised centre.

The siting of equipment in the home will be at the employee's discretion, provided that this does not interfere with the proper operation of the equipment and conforms to health and safety requirements. The employer should also pay reasonable costs of adjustments if current rooms/space in the home are unsuitable eg lighting, sockets.

All employers operating home working schemes have a duty to protect the health and safety of their employees and for ensuring that all furniture, stationery and equipment supplied to the home worker, either directly or indirectly, to carry out his or her work is suitable for the purpose intended. Before any equipment is installed, a proper risk assessment of the home must take place.

All home workers should comply with the health and safety policy for home working, including reporting any equipment defects. Equipment should also be inspected on a regular basis in line with health and safety requirements.

This means that access to the home will be needed for supervisory and support reasons as well as for the maintenance, replacement or removal of equipment. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, this would be by appointment and during normal working hours.

Included in these visiting arrangements should be a provision that allows female call centre home workers to request that male colleagues be accompanied by female colleagues when making such visits. The workstation and other equipment placed in the home worker's home should be insured by the employer.

Access to trade union representatives

Working at home could isolate home workers from their trade union. Arrangements should therefore be put in place for home workers to have access to their trade union representative and be able to attend appropriate meetings within working hours. Safety representatives should also be able to visit home workers if requested or required.

Wherever available, safety representatives should also be able to keep in contact with home worker members through the organisation's email and the intranet.

UNISON guide on reducing the risk to lone workers can be found at unison.org.uk/file/A227.pdf

Key findings

This research found overall that good employers working with knowledgeable union representatives ensure that there are supportive systems in place for health and safety, well designed work stations with provision made for workers with specific needs, easy access to healthy food and drink alongside adequate and flexible breaks. Where management and UNISON can work together the benefits are clear to see with good health and safety practice ensuring a better quality of working life for all.

The report dealt with a wide range of health and safety issues that apply to call centres. Although members replying to the survey thought their employers took health and safety seriously (80%), it was often the case that health issues remain a problem. Good employers demonstrated such problems can be minimised, and our data suggest that employers providing for employees will in any one area get benefits from better health (and likely lower sickness and turnover). The opposite is true for employers who ignore health and wellbeing.

The report examined stress for the first time, finding 85% felt their workload caused them stress, and in many cases this stress spilled over into their home life. A clear priority is to minimise stress, and help workers cope when they are distressed. Few members felt adequately trained for their jobs (28%) and many had inflexibility on breaks. Tackling these, together with other issues, could have a positive impact on employees' psychological well being and health.

Physical health problems included eye strain (62%), voice strain (51%), and hearing (48%) issues. Work-station cleanliness includes using gels, but 45% had less-than-

adequate access to them (45%) – something that can be changed. Physical health problems correlated with mental health issues and also food and drink consumption.

Water (specifically) helps employees protect against voice damage, and although workers had access to water many employees did not drink enough. Part of the reason relates to access to toilets. Some members report having to put their hand up if they require the toilet, while some employers question why workers are not logged on when they are on a toilet break. Access to food was also shown to be a problem too. Those employees who had access to healthy affordable food options did not always use them.

There is an opportunity for health promotion initiative in both cases. Good eating and drinking was linked to fewer health problems; employers could consider providing only healthy affordable hot food that employees can be encouraged to consume. Employees should be free to go to the toilet in work time, and not have to raise their hands for permission as if they were back in school, or have their employer keep notes on how long or how often they go for. Not being able to use the toilet when nature calls can cause real health problems including those relating to digestive and urinary tract problems which can develop into more serious health issues and individuals on certain medications, women who are menstruating or those going through the menopause may need to go more often than usual.

Call Centre Charter

This charter provides workplace representatives and stewards with a checklist of features and standards that any decent UK call centre should comply with. Use it to assess how your workplace meets the standards and if you identify any shortcomings then present your findings to management for their attention and action.

Systems of work

- Do management consult the TU reps on the design of working practices and the on line scripts used by employees?
- Are there sufficient breaks away from the workstation?
- Are employees monitored to an unreasonable extent?
- Do employees get proper training in call handling and especially on how to deal with abusive or offensive calls?
- Are employees allowed to take toilet breaks when needed without any detriment to their earnings?
- Is there a sickness/absence policy and procedure in existence? If so was it agreed with the TU?
- Are there targets aimed at limiting the amount of sickness absences? If so were these agreed with the TU?
- Where sickness absence targets exist, are disability and pregnancy related absences exempted?
- Are there special measures in place to deal with stress related sickness absences?
- If various shifts are worked do management consult and agree with the TU when changes are sought to the existing working patterns of employees?

On site facilities

- Is there a rest room for employees to use during breaks?
- Are there suitable and adequate refreshment facilities including easy and convenient access to drinking water?
- Are healthy food options made available?

- Are all workplaces kept clean and tidy?
- Are accumulations of waste paper and other refuse removed at least daily?
- Are workplace temperatures kept at reasonable levels throughout the year?
- Is the lighting adequate for comfortable working and glare free?
- Are photocopiers and other noisy/polluting pieces of office equipment located in separate vented rooms?

Workstations

- Have risk assessments been carried out, either by management (a statutory duty) or jointly with TU reps?
- Are workstations comfortable, ergonomically tested by experts and adapted to suit individual requirements?
- Do the screens comply with the HSE regulations including for glare?
- Are employees able to get financial assistance towards the cost of eye tests and where needed, spectacles?

Relations with UNISON

- Are there health and safety and other TU reps covering the workplace?
- If so, do management recognise and liaise with them in connection with the standards and conditions that exist at the workplace?
- Is there a health and safety joint committee where your workplace is represented by a TU rep(s)?
- Is it made clear who from management is responsible for the working conditions and practices at the workplace? Does that person(s) inform and consult the TU as necessary?

Further reading

Health and Safety 'six pack' – UNISON's guide to the six pack set of regulations
UNISON stock no 1660

Repetitive strain injury pamphlet
UNISON stock no 1057

UNISON H&S Reps Guide
UNISON stock no 1684

Work - it's a risky business – UNISON's guide on risk assessments
UNISON stock no 1351

Stress at work – a guide for safety reps
UNISON stock no 1725

Stressed out by Work? – a leaflet for members and potential members
UNISON stock no 0848

Bullying at Work – a guide for safety reps
UNISON stock no 1281

Harassment at Work – a UNISON guide
UNISON Stock no 1359

Violence – It's not part of the job – a guide for safety reps
UNISON stock no 1346

Safety Reps and Committees (brown booklet) – provides UNISON safety representatives with information about their legal rights
UNISON stock no 1819

Health and Safety Inspections Work - a guide for safety reps which outlines details on how to carry out safety rep inspections to identify potential hazards before they cause harm. It also explains how inspections are a recruitment and organising opportunity and includes checklists, draft forms, and suggested further resources.
UNISON stock no 1939

You can email orders to
stockorders@unison.co.uk
or order from the online catalogue at
unison.org.uk/resources/onlinecatalogue.asp

Information sheets and other information can be found on the health and safety pages on the UNISON website
unison.org.uk/safety

Health and safety guides are also available from the TUC at
tuc.org.uk/

Further information and resources on health and safety can be found on the Health and Safety Executive website at
hse.gov.uk

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The logo features the word "UNISON" in a bold, sans-serif font. Above the letters "I" and "O" are three stylized, overlapping purple and blue swooshes that resemble waves or a ribbon. Below "UNISON" is the tagline "the public service union" in a smaller, lowercase, serif font.

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