

# A study of employee reported factors influencing wellness in a South African international call centre environment

## ABSTRACT

Strategies and programmes in organisations to address the physical, mental and social wellness of employees are becoming increasingly important. The call centre industry is experiencing phenomenal growth as businesses are responding to customers' expectations and demands in a 24 hour electronic customer service commodity. High turnover rates and absenteeism in call centres suggest that the working environment there may also negatively impact the wellness of employees. A qualitative study was conducted to determine the employee perceived and reported factors impacting on the wellness of these employees in a call centre environment. Data obtained through a questionnaire and focus group discussions showed that all three wellness areas had several factors that impact the wellness of employees and warrant attention in terms of effective wellness management in the specific work environment. The implications of the findings are discussed and some recommendations made for more effective employee wellness management in call centres.

**Key words:** call centre, employee wellness, physical wellness, social wellness, mental wellness

## INTRODUCTION

The high turnover rate and absenteeism in many call centres suggest that working in a call centre environment is a stressful experience.<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the call centre environment and various factors have been identified as potential stressors. Continuous attention to high volumes of differing customer demands, the regulation of emotions, shift work and high noise levels in open plan offices are only some of the factors that have been identified as potential stressors in call centres.<sup>2</sup>

Holman examined the extent and causes of stress in call centres and concluded that call centre work is not intrinsically stressful.<sup>3</sup> "The variation that exists between call centres is probably attributable to differences in job design and the management practices used."<sup>3</sup> This implies that call centre work can be designed to lessen its harmful effects on employee well-being.

"Wellness encompasses the active, lifelong process of educating ourselves and making choices that will lead to optimal health and a more successful and balanced existence."<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this study physical wellness is regarded as encompassing knowledge on good nutrition, physical activity and general lifestyle; about building endurance, flexibility, physical strength and cardiovascular health; and about

body awareness, understanding body changes and its physical needs throughout the life-cycle.<sup>4</sup> Mental wellness refers to a state of emotional and psychological well-being in which individuals use their cognitive and emotional capabilities, function in society and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Social wellness relates to developing healthy relationships and contributing to the welfare of the community. Healthy relationships, community involvement, interdependence and acceptance of diversity are factors influencing social wellness.<sup>2</sup>

Various factors affect wellness in the workplace. Working conditions and social stressors arising within the organisation are the two aspects most consistently linked to well-being, whilst task-related stressors and emotional dissonance were also identified as factors contributing to lower levels of well-being.<sup>6</sup> Hillier et al.<sup>5</sup> examined the impact of stress on wellness and found that too much stress can result in employees being unable to cope, causing psychological illnesses (severe depression, physical malfunctioning and mental illness).

Against the above discussed background, a study was conducted in 2009 with the objective of determining the employee perceived and reported factors impacting on the wellness of these employees in one particular call centre environment. The motivation

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for the study was the high employee turnover rates being experienced in these call centres. Resigning employees often indicated the reason as employment conditions negatively affecting their wellness.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach was chosen which allowed call centre employees to share personal work environment experiences relating to their wellness. The study was explorative as a social constructivist approach was followed, where the participants explored their world of work in terms of their understanding and experiences of their personal well-being and how it related to the realities of their working environment. Unstructured, flexible methods were used, through which "thick and rich descriptions" were gathered from participants.<sup>8</sup> These descriptions acted as guidelines to the understanding and interpretation of the information gained from the participants, and so the paradigm of enquiry was also interpretative.<sup>9</sup>

### **Research setting and sampling**

The participants were selected from an international assistance services company based in the Gauteng

province. It employs approximately 270 call centre personnel within its Medical, specialised services (referred to as Specialty), and Travel Outbound call centres. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select 36 participants for their specific perspectives. The researchers, with the aid of the supervisors and managers in the different call centres, targeted call centre employees who they believe were most likely to provide the best possible insight into the research topic.

### **Data collection procedure**

Data was collected from all 36 participants via a questionnaire. It requested biographical information which indicated that the sample reflected a diverse workforce in terms of race, gender, age and occupational levels (see Table 1). Three open-ended research questions asked what the factors were that influenced employees' physical, emotional and social wellness in a call centre environment, respectively.

Thereafter, 14 of the participants took part in four focus group discussions to clarify and obtain additional information. They were semi-structured and revolved around the central themes of physical, mental and social wellness. The researcher facilitated free, open discussion by all group members. The discussions were recorded through an electronic recording device, and transcribed verbatim after each focus group session.

### **Recording, managing and analysing the data**

A grounded theory approach<sup>7</sup> was used in the analysis of the data. The focus was on bringing order, structure and interpretation to the data.<sup>8</sup> The initial mass of data was reduced through open coding thematic content analysis.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter axial coding (procedures to put data together in new ways by making connections between categories) and selective coding (the selection of core categories, systematically relating them to other categories, validating relationships and identifying categories needing further refinement and development) were used.<sup>10</sup>

### **Data quality**

Credibility (or internal validity) was ensured through consideration of the richness of the information collected, data saturation, and method and investigator triangulation.<sup>10</sup> Transferability was ensured by providing a detailed description of the context, whilst an audit trail ensured dependability and confirmability.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ethical aspects**

Ethical approval was granted by the Research



**Table 1. Biographical data: 36 participants completing questionnaire**

	MEDICAL	Number	SPECIALTY	Number	TRAVEL OUTBOUND	Number
<b>Job title</b>	Supervisor	2	Team Leader	3	Team Leader	1
	Coordinator	10	Quality Assurance Coordinator	1	Travel Outbound/Inbound consultant	4
	Ambulance CMA	1	Concierge CMA/CMA	9	-	-
	GoCare Nurse	1	CDA	2	-	-
	GAN Manager	1	-	-	-	-
	Training Facilitator	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Gender</b>	Female	10	Female	4	Female	3
	Male	6	Male	11	Male	2
<b>Race</b>	Asian	3	Asian	5	Asian	2
	Black	6	Black	7	Black	1
	White	7	White	3	White	2
<b>Age range</b>		21-43		26-52		25-37
<b>Qualification</b>	Degree	3	Degree	1	Degree	0
	Diploma	5	Diploma	3	Diploma	0
	Certificate	1	Certificate	2	Certificate	0
	Matric/Grade 12	2	Matric/Grade 12	6	Matric/Grade 12	2
	AEA	1	-	-	-	-
	BAA	2	-	-	-	-
	Not stated	2	Not stated	3	Not stated	3

*“... high turnover rate and absenteeism in many call centres suggest that working in a call centre environment is a stressful experience.”*

Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria. Signed informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the recording of any data and confidentiality was maintained.

**RESULTS**

Table 2 presents a summary of the results, indicating the themes and sub-themes identified. The second column displays the number of participants who indicated that the particular theme or sub-theme affected their wellness. The third column indicates whether the same theme was confirmed in the focus group discussion or not. Examples of responses are also given.

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

*Physical wellness*

The results suggest that the physical environment has the biggest influence on employees' physical wellness in a call centre environment. Call centre employees spend between 8 and 12 hours of their day seated at their desks and thus the ergonomics of the office, the air-conditioning and office hygiene directly impact upon employees' physical wellness. This accords with

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Table 2. Results sheet

RESULTS SHEET			
Themes	Participant responses	Focus group discussion	Examples of responses received
<b>PHYSICAL WELLNESS</b>			
<b>Theme 1: Physical environment</b>	22	Confirmed	
Ergonomics	16	Confirmed	"Ergonomics – the table I sit at influences my posture...good chairs are a key factor for a healthy posture."
Air-conditioning	16	Confirmed	"Temperature – too hot or too cold result in employee getting ill."
Office hygiene	8	Confirmed	"Hygiene is also important as bacteria and dust cause illnesses."
<b>Theme 2: Working conditions</b>	10	Confirmed	
Nature of work	3	Confirmed	"Due to lack of activity and monotonousness of job employees become lethargic and tired."
Workload	3	Not confirmed	"Over-exertion affects the immune system, which increases the likelihood for illnesses."
Work hours	5	Confirmed	"Working shifts affects sleeping and eating habits."
<b>Theme 3: Personal health management</b>	6	Confirmed	
Nutrition	5	Confirmed	"Staff meals should supply physical energy which allows us to work faster and more accurate."
Physical health and fitness	4	Not confirmed	"Flu vaccines stop agents from being sick from work."
<b>Additional themes</b>	3	Not confirmed	
Management style	2	Not confirmed	"...changes made without being informed of it..."
Training	1	Not confirmed	"...training increases confidence, enthusiasm..."
<b>MENTAL WELLNESS</b>			
<b>Theme 1: Corporate environment</b>	20	Confirmed	
Management	14	Confirmed	"Supervisors and managers that support employees contribute to feelings of motivation and enthusiasm..."
Recognition	5	Confirmed	"Not receiving recognition for what you've done decreases levels of motivation."
Training and development	7	Confirmed	"Ongoing training...to better cope with stress."
Co-workers	6	Not confirmed	"Constantly hearing each other's complaints sometimes gets to you."
Counselling	1	Confirmed	"Ongoing counselling to create awareness regarding wellness."
Physical environment	6	Not confirmed	"Furniture and décor (plants, lighting) create either a vibrant or dull atmosphere; this creates mental alertness or apathy."
<b>Theme 2: Working conditions</b>	14	Confirmed	
Nature of work	12	Confirmed	"Type of calls (irritated clients)...dealing with bereaved clients who lost a loved one."
Workload	7	Not confirmed	"Large workload in limited time leads to being highly stressed and affects you emotionally and mentally."
Work hours	4	Confirmed	"The fact that staff has to work shifts leads to depression as they are not able to spend some nights with their family and children."
<b>Theme 3: Personal management</b>	7	Confirmed	
Stress	3	Not confirmed	"Stress plays a large role..."
Themes	Participant responses	Focus group discussion	Examples of responses received
Attitude	3	Not confirmed	"Passion for what you do...self-motivation and positiveness..."
Personal problems	1	Confirmed	"Personal emotional stress could also have a direct impact on employees' performance at work."
Physical wellness	1	Not confirmed	"...when your body is not well it is difficult for your mind to work with ease."
<b>SOCIAL WELLNESS</b>			
<b>Theme 1: Corporate environment</b>	19	Confirmed	
Recreational activities and team buildings	12	Confirmed	"Arranging events and functions encourage social interaction and assist one in understanding others..."
Physical environment	4	Confirmed	"Crèche facilities will contribute to family security."
Management	8	Confirmed	"Will feel appreciated if company keeps on informing us about new developments."
Rewards and recognition	5	Confirmed	"Motivate us by giving prizes for best agent..."
<b>Theme 2: Relationship management</b>	12	Confirmed	
Acceptance and diversity	10	Confirmed	"Knowledge of my own and my colleagues' social make up...learning about and respecting beliefs, values and culture..."
Interdependence	5	Confirmed	"Interaction and relationships with co-workers and management..."
<b>Theme 3: Working conditions</b>	10	Confirmed	
Nature of work	7	Confirmed	"Operators are constantly on the phone...seated at desks with partitions between them ...minimal contact with people around you."
Work hours	4	Confirmed	"Working shifts affects family life and has a negative effect on children."

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Holman's finding that causes of stress in call centres might include the physical environment and the ergonomic design of the computer equipment.<sup>3</sup>

Participants from the Specialty and Travel Outbound call centre indicated that the nature of work also influenced their physical wellness. In both these centres a fairly high level of control is exercised, agents must meet strict quantitative call targets requiring them to be deskbound and only allowing them to leave their desks at scheduled times. In the Medical call centre the degree of control is slightly lower and agents do not have such strict call targets. Holdsworth et al.<sup>11</sup> found that the organisational structure and climate of call centres are built on the concept of control. Often agents have no freedom to move around and permission is required to leave their workstation. They concluded that perceptions of self-determination (the belief that one has

on employees' mental wellness. Sickness absence surveys often suggest that work-related stress and mental health are the leading causes of long-term lost working days.<sup>5</sup> Work in the Specialty centre was described as boring and monotonous, with a need for job enrichment and more control over structuring of the working day. This confirms Wegge et al. finding that agents' attitudes and well-being should improve when greater variety and autonomy are provided through work redesign.<sup>2</sup> Sprigg et al. also recommend improving the levels of autonomy and giving agents more variety in their tasks as ways of addressing boredom.<sup>12</sup> In the Travel Outbound centre employees experience stress as they have to concentrate on making sales and reaching targets. These results confirm Holman's<sup>3</sup> statement that call centre work is not intrinsically stressful and that variations are likely due to differences in job design and the management practices.<sup>3</sup>

*“... the responses regarding management were formulated as negative statements.”*

autonomy or control over how one works) may have an indirect influence on mental and physical health. Sprigg et al. reported similar findings.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mental wellness**

The corporate environment, specifically the impact of management, was the theme with the biggest impact on mental wellness. It was emphasised by participants from all centres. The role of team leaders is exceptionally important as they are often responsible for coaching, monitoring, and assessing call centre agents.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that the majority of the responses regarding management were formulated as negative statements (e.g. lack of communication, no trust and tension). Hillier et al.<sup>5</sup> found that a workforce that is stressed and distrusting of its employer often leads to an unbalanced life and this could lead to unhappiness, stress, and physical and mental illnesses. A supportive leadership environment on the other hand can have a positive effect on employee well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Nature of work was identified as the factor with the second highest impact on mental wellness. In the Medical call centre employees constantly deal with emergencies such as motor vehicle accidents, heart attacks and deaths. Dealing with a lot of trauma, in a highly pressurised environment, has a definite impact

## **Industrial Audiometry Short Learning Programme**

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**Course Coordinator:**  
Dr Elize de Koker  
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**Duration of the Course:**  
4 Days

**Dates:**  
13-16 July 2010

**Venue:**  
Robinson Hospital  
Homestead Avenue  
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**Assessment on completion  
of Course.** Theory, practical  
and a case history will be  
required.

**Entry Level:**  
Senior Certificate or  
equivalent

**Cost:**  
R3 500.00

### **Description of the Course:**

This Audiometry course will enable the participant on completion of the course to operate in an Industrial/ Mining Health centre and be able to test the workers' hearing, do the necessary counselling and refer appropriately. The trainee will be able to follow the legal requirements as stipulated by South African legislation. Occupational health staff can obtain extra competency and contribute to the lowering of risks for the worker, insurance company and the employer. In preventing hearing loss there is a definite contribution to the well-being of human beings and a cost saving. The trainee will be able to do hearing tests, record the results, categorize the results and do the correct referrals. The trainee will manage the equipment, see to calibration and be able to counsel workers on the influence of noise on their hearing and the use of hearing protectors.



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### **Social wellness**

The corporate environment had the greatest influence on social wellness. Most referred to the value of recreational activities and team building, as they create an opportunity for employees to interact and get to know each other in an informal setting. Recreational activities would be exceptionally valuable as social interaction between colleagues is limited due to the nature of work. In most call centres organisational processes do not encourage personal relationships through casual chitchat with peers.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of relationship management on social wellness should also be considered. As part of this theme, knowledge regarding diversity management was indicated as important in contributing to building sound relationships with colleagues and managers. They also noted that employees are dependent upon each other and reciprocal respect and acceptance in the workplace is important. Work-related stress is caused by various factors including poor relationships with colleagues.<sup>5</sup> The value of support from colleagues when dealing with difficult cases was emphasised by numerous participants. There is increasing evidence that social support, both within (e.g. support from colleagues) and outside the workplace (e.g. help from family and friends) can buffer the impact of occupational stress.<sup>13</sup> The attitude and support of co-workers were also identified as having an impact on mental wellness.

### **General**

It is of interest that working conditions is the only constant theme identified as having an impact upon physical, mental and social wellness. According to Shen et al.<sup>14</sup> shift work can adversely affect physical and mental health, and social relationships and activities.

Therefore, establishing how to achieve optimal working conditions in order to contribute to the employee wellness is essential.

Within the Medical and Specialty centres nature of work, work hours and workload were identified as factors affecting working conditions, whereas in the Travel Outbound centre only the former was identified. Agents in the Travel Outbound centre work office hours, possibly explaining why work hours was not identified as a factor. Work hours might also have an impact on agents' abilities to cope with workload. However, further research is needed on why workload was not identified as a factor. This was the only notable difference in responses received regarding employee wellness within the three call centres. The study results seem to indicate that the same factors influence employee wellness in the Medical, Specialty and Travel Outbound call centres.

It should be noted this study was on one organisation, and the findings may not be true for all call centre operations. Additional research is needed to verify and extend the findings.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusions**

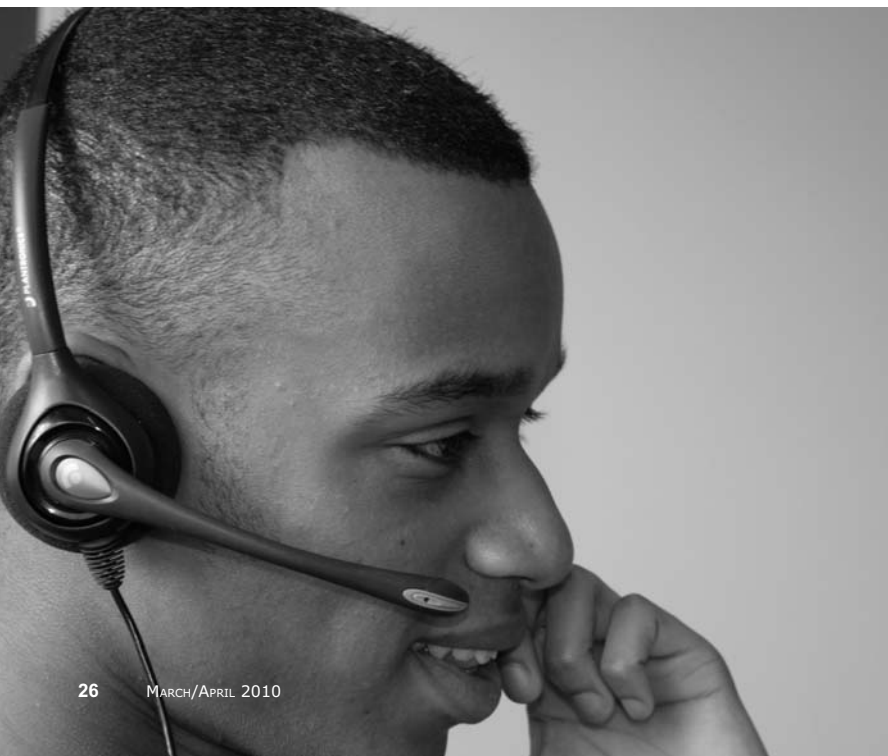
Employees identified factors that significantly impact on their wellness. The physical working environment and the nature of the work itself seem to negatively affect physical wellness. The corporate environment, specifically the impact of management, and the nature of their work, were important factors that adversely impacted mental wellness. Finally, the corporate environment and relationship management negatively impacted on social wellness. In general, working conditions was the only constant factor having a negative impact on all three wellness areas.

Despite some variations, it seems that the same factors influence employee wellness in all the centres.

### **Recommendations**

The results serve as guidelines in identifying the wellness related needs of the call centre participants. The creation of a workplace wellness programme that considers physical, mental and social wellness is recommended. Based on the intervention programme on the Work Smart Live Smart website,<sup>15</sup> such a programme would include the following strategies to improve employee wellness within the particular call centre environment:

- environmental strategies to create a physical work environment that enables optimal productivity;
- personal management strategies to equip employees to live in a healthy manner.



*“The value of support from colleagues when*

*dealing with difficult cases was emphasised . . .”*

- organisational dynamics and culture strategies to create a workplace where employees are recognised as a strategic resource in the achievement of business objectives;
- management development strategies to create a management culture of trust, commitment, and communication; and
- psycho-social support strategies to support employees in dealing with emotional and personal difficulties as well as work-related stressors.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

1. Continuous attention to high volumes of differing customer demands, the regulation of emotions, shift work, and high noise levels in open plan offices are potential stressors in call centres.
2. Call centre work can be designed to lessen its harmful effects on employee well-being.
3. Call centre employees spend long hours seated at their desks and thus the ergonomics of the office, the air-conditioning and office hygiene directly impact upon their physical wellness.
4. Employees well-being should improve when greater variety and autonomy are provided through work redesign.
5. Recreational activities would be valuable as social interaction between colleagues is limited due to the nature of work.

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