REPOSITIONING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN A LOCAL AUTHORITY: RATIONALIZING SERVICE ENCOUNTERS, ENCHANTING SERVICE USERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the analytical framework offered by the concept of 'productive systems' which shifts attention away from examining sites of work as self-standing units to one which places them in a configuration of relationships. The concept is used in this paper to track how the introduction of a call centre can reposition knowledge and skills from one part of the system to another. The empirical evidence for the paper draws from a case study of a call centre which was set up as the primary access point to services provided by a local authority in the Midlands. The paper argues that the productive system perspective highlights the ways in which this call centre facilitated the rationalization of organizational procedures and practices in its back offices, while simultaneously promoting a degree of personalized service.

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INTRODUCTION

Call centres have excited labour process researchers since the early 1990s, becoming 'one of the most researched' workplaces in recent years (Glucksmann, 2004: 795). There have been studies of: the varied nature of call centre labour processes (Batt, 1999 and 2000; Frenkel *et al.*, 1998 and 1999; Knights and McCabe, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999); mechanisms of workplace surveillance and controls over employee subjectivity (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Knights and McCabe, 2002); worker resistance, collectively and individually (Taylor and Bain, 2000); and the selection, recruitment and training of front-line staff (Belt, 2000; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Wallace and Eagleson, 2000). However, much of this analysis has focused on what happens *inside* call centres themselves. Less attention has been paid to how they fit into the overall structure of organizations and, in particular, how they mesh with other stages in productive systems, which link callers with services and/or products. This paper, therefore, shifts the focus of research away from call centres as 'self-standing sites of work' (Glucksmann, 2004: 795) to an approach which conceives them as one phase in a process linking callers' requests upstream to production and dispatch as well as downstream to delivery and consumption. It highlights the intermediary position of call centres within the backward and forward linkages that comprise productive systems as a whole.

In the empirical case study of a local authority presented here, this analytical perspective reveals the processes through which aspects of the knowledge and skills of a diverse range of 'back office' functions were captured, reconfigured and transferred to call centre operators. As a result, the later became a unitary 'front office' for a variety of service providers, while, at the same time, being enabled to engage with diverse service users in new ways. These transformations in the overall configuration of the productive system contributed to a shift in the locus of control within the organization away from semi-autonomous departments towards central strategic units. The question addressed in this paper, then, concerns how the introduction of a call centre (County Talk) into the overall

productive system of a local authority (Shire Council) shaped patterns of organizational control, the locus of knowledge and skills, and forms of service encounters.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next two sections briefly describe our research site and the research methods that guided our investigations. This is followed by a section setting out the conceptual backdrop for the paper and in particular, debate around the notion of 'productive systems'. We then turn to an examination of pressures to enhance both cost efficiency and customer care within service encounters. These form the two substantive empirical sections of the paper. The following section views our empirical data through the conceptual lens offered by the concept of productive systems, highlighting sources of resistance to the reconfiguration of the productive system prompted by the setting up and development of County Talk. The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

THE RESEARCH SITE

In 2001, Shire Council's switchboard, which had simply put callers through to extension numbers, was replaced with a call centre providing the primary initial point of access for users of an increasing range of council services via a single widely advertised telephone number charged at local call rates. From the outset, County Talk operators were expected not merely to pass on callers to other departments but rather to act as agents dealing with the needs and problems of members of the public. Some service requests were dealt with by operators over the telephone; others generated electronic service orders that operators passed 'upstream' to specialist departments. Between 2002 and 2004 call volumes quadrupled and have continued to rise ever since. By 2006, 34 full-time equivalent staff were answering on average over 4,000 calls every week, dealing with half of all the main types of enquiry the council received (an estimated 190 out of 360 'events'). Furthermore, in 2004 County Talk became a 24-hour operation with the addition of night time social services and social care calls. In 2006 the call centre also started to take day time social care calls for part of the county, with plans to extend the service at a later date.

Thus, at the time of our research, County Talk handled three different types of calls, with operators and numbers designated accordingly. First, generic operators (GOs) – from 8am to 8pm weekdays and 9.30am to 4.00pm on Saturdays – fielded the bulk of all calls (85.2 percent in our survey), covering a wide and expanding range of topics. The bulk of these were for predictable and routine service requests but some fell outside these familiar demands. Second, from late afternoon through until the following morning, night time operators (NOs) answered calls about social services and social care issues – such as meals on wheels, home helps, child protection, homelessness and residential/nursing care – from members of the public and professionals. These comprised 7.3 percent of total calls to County Talk. Third, a small team of operators dealt with social care issues during the day, referred to here as day time operators (DOs), handling 7.5 percent of total calls.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand how the call centre fits into the organization of the local authority, we carried out research at a variety of points in the productive system covering the political leadership of the council, managers at different levels (corporate, service department and call centre) and all three types of call centre operators (see Table 1). We also used a range of research methodologies, including:

- tape recorded interviews with Shire Council corporate managers, service managers and political leaders, as well as County Talk managers, team leaders, supervisors, GOs, NOs and DOs;
- document analysis;
- briefing and debriefing sessions with County Talk managers, team leaders, supervisors, GOs, NOs and DOs;
- on-site activity survey of 8,874 calls received by GOs, NOs and DOs during a two week period;
- on-site non-participant observation at County Talk over a two-week period;
- on-site work shadowing at County Talk.

Interviews took place during 2005-06, while the activity survey and associated forms of investigation were carried out in the last two weeks of February 2007. Material gathered during set-up meetings, briefings and debriefings for the survey were collected in fieldwork diaries kept by the first two named authors of this paper. The on-site 10-

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question survey of calls received by operators was carried out at the same time as we made observations of workplace practices and sat alongside call operators as they did their work. The use of these multiple methods enabled us to reflect on, and refine, our interpretations of findings generated by each data collection technique in a way which is not possible when relying on one method alone.

'Put Table 1 about here'

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of 'productive systems' has its roots in the critique of classical economics. Wilkinson, in his accounts of the development of productive systems in the 20th century (1983, 1998, 2002), constructs his analysis around a holistic, relational model of economic activity that identifies interlocking levels of institutional practices and controls. He conceives each element (such as labour, means of production, structure of ownership and control, wider institutional frameworks, etc) as relatively autonomous and bounded sets of social relationships, present in different forms and functions wherever commodities are produced. Bircree *et al.*, (1997) focus on the steps, or sequences, through which raw materials are turned into commodities that are ultimately purchased by consumers, highlighting the articulation of stages in the interconnected processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. A number of writers have drawn attention to asymmetries of power and relational dependencies characteristic of different stages within, and aspects of, productive systems (for example, Harvey *et al.,* 2002; Harvey and Randles, 2002; Konzelmann *et al.,* 2006; Felstead *et al.*, 2007). However, of particular relevance to the findings presented in this paper are those contributions which focus on the part played by call centres within productive systems.

Glucksmann (2004) concentrates attention on the location of call centre operations within the overall organization of production characteristic of different kinds of economic enterprises. She describes this approach as focusing on 'process, relationality and division of labour' (2004: 795), foregrounding 'overall processes' of

'provision and consumption' (2004: 799), She goes on to identify five ideal type configurations in which call centres play contrasting roles in coordinating parts of the economic process and linking the 'organizational ensemble' (2004: 808). She describes these models these as heuristic devices and insists that they are not to be regarded as a typology or as a comprehensive list. The objective of our paper is not to locate our empirical case study within, or outside of, Glucksmann's models (our research findings cut across her five types but this is not the point of our analysis). Rather, we wish to follow through Glucksmann's contention that in order to understand what happens inside call centres, we must consider their relationships with the wider institutional and organizational systems of which they are a part. Her approach draws our attention to the origins of inputs to, and the destinations of outputs from, County Talk.

Taylor and Bain (2006) congratulate Glucksmann's 'perceptive analysis' and acknowledge her work 'as one of the few attempts to reflect more generally on the overall significance of the call centre' (2006: 1). However, they also identify a number of weaknesses in her analysis. We do not seek to summarize the full range of their criticisms; nor is it our aim to adjudicate in this debate. Rather, we wish to incorporate some of the points made by Taylor and Bain into the analysis of the case study reported here. Taylor and Bain suggest that, notwithstanding her initial objective, Glucksmann fails to capture the processual quality of call centres within productive systems. Instead, they argue, she presents a series of static models which identify flows within closed systems but do not highlight sources of change and development. Her models, they suggest, are a series of snapshot pictures without any sense of the dynamics of change. Similarly, Taylor and Bain go on to criticize Glucksmann for failing to offer an account of the remarkable growth of call centres in recent years. Fundamentally, they suggest, this is because Glucksmann's account lacks a political economy. Taylor and Bain go on to draw attention to the ways in which the changing role and fortunes of call centres are driven by forces such as the need to enhance market competitiveness and cut costs.

Our analysis seeks to incorporate key themes from the work of both Glucksmann and Taylor and Bain. From the former, we take an emphasis on the role of call centres

within the totality of economic activities organized within a firm or other organization. From the later, we acknowledge the importance of identifying the dynamic forces integral to asymmetries of power constituted in and by relations of production.

It should be added that there is another body of work which also informs our approach, that of Korczynski (2002, 2005). Indeed, it will be our contention that the significance of Korczynski's work is best appreciated when viewed through the lens of the productive systems paradigm. Korczynski (2002) argues that service work in contemporary economies is imbued with two, potentially contradictory, logics; that is, the simultaneous requirement to be cost-efficient and customer-oriented. The requirement to be cost-efficient drives organizations towards greater rationalization of economic activities, placing a premium on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control over resources, time and space. These objectives are often achievable through the substitution of technology for human labour and the use of technological devices to monitor those aspects of the labour process that remain in human hands. However, at the same time, argues Korczynski (2002), the pressures of market competition increasingly require service providers to delight and enchant customers with the personalized and individualized quality of the care offered. As a result, service organizations encourage their employees to engage in emotional and aesthetic labour with clients. Such encounters rarely appear sincere and authentic to consumers when highly rationalized. Credible performances require that workers are accorded a degree of autonomy in order to express their own personalities and develop idiosyncratic ways of enchanting service users. Korczynski's work points us towards the importance of identifying ways in which these competing pressures in service encounters are, or are not, reconciled within particular productive systems. Thus, for example, cost efficiency and customer care might not bear down equally at different moments in the productive system. Pressures towards rationalization and enchantment may be more or less important at different points or stages in the productive process. The key to understanding the reconciliation of contradictory forces in service encounters may lie, then, in placing them within overall processes of provision and consumption.

RATIONALIZATION OF SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

The advent of County Talk generated a series of pressures to rationalize the operations of the local authority as a whole, which reflected the position of the call centre within the overall productive system of Shire Council. First, aspects of the operations of a variety of service departments were shifted downstream into the call centre. This process entailed, to a greater or lesser degree, capturing skills and knowledge from back office specialists and transferring them to front office generalists. This was achieved by redesigning, from first principles, those work tasks that were to be relocated into County Talk, thereby making tacit knowledge explicit and facilitating the introduction of common practices across departments. Second, any mystique surrounding these operations was removed as they became embedded as routine activities of non-specialist operators within the call centre. As a result, responses to service requests became more predictable, standardized and calculable. Third, by becoming the main point of initial public access to more and more of the services provided by the local authority, County Talk exerted influence over the conduct of operations which remained upstream in the hands of service departments. This was because the call centre became the principle channel of referral of work to back office service providers. It was, thus, able to shape the flow and format of service requests and to systematize complaints procedures and practices. The activities of departments themselves, therefore, became subject to new forms of standardization, predictability and monitoring, exercised by the call centre. We will now consider in more detail a number of illustrations of these rationalization impulses.

The introduction of the call centre heralded a major increase in the standardization and efficiency of procedures surrounding external recruitment. Previously, job adverts had been dealt with by departments, each with their own protocols, information packs and contact details. One estimate suggested that in a single year the council had used over 400 different points of contact for jobs and that the number of job packs produced and despatched was equivalent to one in ten of the county's adult population. Multiple lines of access had created duplication of effort, wastage of materials and variations in

practices between departments. Once the call centre become the only point of access for requests for hard copy job details and application forms, wastage fell drastically; reductions were made in the number of job packs produced, postage costs incurred and personnel time involved in processing requests. Furthermore, the paper trails surrounding recruitment became far more standardized, transparent and systematic across departments.

County Talk also introduced a more predictable and cost-effective system for dealing with night time social service calls. Previously, the night time service had depended on a specialized team of social workers. When the members of this team were out of the office dealing with emergencies, callers had no way of making contact until they returned to pick up answer phone messages. Thus, the quality of service offered to, sometimes desperate, service users was variable and potentially inefficient. It was also relatively expensive, requiring the payment of professional social workers at premium rates. With the introduction of County Talk, the process of handling night time social care calls was split into two operations (Carey, 2003). The receiving and logging of calls were vested in night time operators (NOs); the minority of calls requiring immediate response were referred by NOs to professional social workers, who were henceforth based at home and paid at call out rates (Kessler *et al*., 2006; Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006) . Thus, henceforth callers were guaranteed person-to-person access to social care services at any time throughout the night. NOs could signpost callers to other emergency services, arrange transportation or secure overnight accommodation by liaising with social workers, who might be on a call but still accessible by mobile phone. Social workers were screened from routine calls but were still available to respond to emergencies. Even where callers had to wait for the arrival of help, County Talk operators could offer verbal reassurance and keep abreast of changing circumstances.

In order to achieve efficiency gains of these kinds, some of the skills and knowledge held by back office departments had to be transferred to County Talk operators. This entailed a two-step process of 'service redesign'. First, localized practices and procedures across geographically-dispersed offices within the same service

department were standardized. Secondly, agreed standardized processes were codified into forms and guides that could be utilized by non-specialist operators working in County Talk. Thus, service redesign represented a powerful means to review and reform back office practices. This was not lost on management at a number of levels in Shire Council, ranging from those charged with delivering efficiency savings across the authority through to managers in the call centre itself.

> It actually gave us the opportunity to standardize all the processes … The localized interpretation of the rules has gone, because what we're actually working to is a standard (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project).

> The service redesign representatives, which have been in all departments, have literally gone in and done an 'as is' process map [on] the work that's current. And then they've gone away as a group and looked at potential for improvement and come up with redesigned process maps. And in some cases, as a recommendation from that, they've highlighted services that really are perfect for the call centre. (County Talk, Manager).

The urge to standardize extended to the corporate branding of Shire Council. The creation of a unitary point of access to council services made it possible to replace a plethora of different departmental house styles with a single authority-wide design for letterheads, logos, adverts, welcome messages, web sites and electronic formats.

> Since we've been pushing this corporate view … they must take the corporate approach again with everything. (Shire Council, Political Leader).

The objective of the redesign process was to generate tasks that were straight forward for non-specialists to undertake within the call centre. Hence, much (though, as we shall see, not all) of the work of County Talk operators was relatively routine, predictable, standardized and computerized. Their knowledge had been quickly acquired on a range of different topics which spanned the council's business; in the words of the call centre manager, operators 'know a little about a lot'. This 'fast knowledge' had been extracted from the back office and locked into systems and procedures (Besley and Peters, 2004). Operators could access these through electronic portals that swiftly lead

them to relevant information, service forms with pull-down menus, and call guides that helped to frame service encounters with callers.

In many cases, the infrastructure of the electronic system allowed relatively little latitude to operators in handling calls. Around a third of all calls (32.9 percent), for example, were for library book renewals, described as 'bread and butter work'. County Talk operators had direct access to the back office (i.e., library) database via a web link on their terminals. They had some discretion in providing callers with additional services (such book searches and reservations) and in over-riding 'traps' in the system. However, for the most part these service requests followed a highly predictable pattern and were concluded very quickly. Similarly, calls comprising enquiries about job details (5.8 percent) and parking concessions (5.8 percent) were also tightly framed, typically leading to completion by operators of electronic forms, e-mailed to the appropriate department. In these cases, then, the 'service form' framed service encounters.

> … we go through the script that they set up for us. It sort of leads us in the right direction, so to speak. (County Talk, Generic Operator).
>
> It's almost like multiple choice questions … ways in which to proceed. So, it sort of routes you through … a bit like telling you how to tie your shoes. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager).

County Talk also became a main portal for requests from the public for literature on a range of issues; such as, travel concessions, further education courses, countryside walks and information about schools. These calls, too, were mostly straight forward, requiring operators to relay electronic orders to a warehouse that dispatched materials to the caller's home. No further operator interventions were required and links to the back office were purely electronic.

A rather different impulse for the rationalization of operations within the productive system of Shire Council reflected the strategic position of County Talk as the source of referrals to service departments. We have seen that many service encounters were handled in the call centre through the execution of predictable and routine tasks. However, a group of calls required more proactive and skilled work by operators.

Typically, these were enquiries in which operators fielded the concerns of (sometimes distraught or angry) members of the public and set in motion services delivered by back office departments that depended on detailed data collection by operators. Thus, for example, around one in twelve calls received by GOs concerned faulty streetlights, poorly illuminated signs and bollards, malfunctioning traffic lights and potholes in the road. In these circumstances, operators were required to question callers in order to elicit crucial information that determined the character and speed of the service response. Often members of the public did not know the required information and/or did not understand its significance. Operators were required to summarize this information in electronic service forms, incorporating a range of free and fixed fields. It was crucial that this information was both precise and focused so that service departments could swing into action. Furthermore, on the strength of the call, operators exercised some judgement over the urgency and the priority with which service departments should address the concerns raised. In the case of emergencies, operators not only sent a service form to the department but also followed up with telephone calls. These service encounters, then, drew upon distinctive skills of call centre operators in questioning members of the public and in summarizing detailed data in a form that was sufficiently comprehensive, intelligible and relevant for service departments.

Call centre operators were, then, responsible for receiving and organizing the flow of service tasks sent to a range of back office specialist departments and had some say in the prioritization of the service department tasks. Call centre operators and managers knew, and could compare, the operational criteria employed by different departments and by different units within departments. Their position within the productive system enabled County Talk staff to apply common standards in handling calls, based on consistent and rationally calculated principles. They were aware if service providers departed from agreed schedules, protocols and guidelines. They received, and monitored, the complaints of members of the public when services were not delivered on time or in a satisfactory manner. They conveyed these grievances back to departments, eliciting the information necessary to placate disgruntled callers and/or connecting complainants to relevant managers within service departments. They evaluated and prioritized the diverse

service needs and requests of the population of Shire Council, scattered across a substantial geographical area. Thus, County Talk was a conduit of systematized service requests and focused feedback on performance that impinged directly on back office operations. Crucially, the call centre was able to perform these functions because of its position within the productive system as a whole.

The positioning of the County Talk within the productive system of the local authority, and the resultant pressures to rationalize service encounters that this generated, reflected powerful currents within the political economy of Shire Council. Two closely-related trends were of particular importance: first, a bid by strategically-located central units within the organization to recapture control from semi-autonomous departments; second, externally-generated pressures from central government to cut operational costs and/or achieve productivity gains. These twin pressures both found expression in the reconfiguration of the productive system of Shire Council around the call centre. To understand the drive towards rationalization of service encounters, then, we need to examine these broader forces.

From the beginning of the century, a series of major changes in the operations of the local authority had been planned and introduced under the remit of the Organizational Transformation Project (OTP), run by a tightly-knit dynamic team located in the Chief Executive's department. This project had been strongly supported by the Cabinet, which itself came into existence in 2001, and the Chief Executive. Departmental heads and other elected members were also linked into the programme but it was very much the initiative of strategically located elites among officers and politicians. The OTP encompassed a wide range of ventures, many of which were IT-based. However, the objective was not simply that of replacing old technology with new. The process of service redesign, which was critical to the development of County Talk, was at the heart of the initiative. Service redesign had the effect of breaking up established ways of carrying out tasks and delivering services that were embedded in the practices of back offices.

I'm encouraging … the Service Re-design route for process. Because we can do an awful lot of things differently to achieve efficiency gains – and *then* put a new system in. If we just go out and replace a box with a box, we'll end up with all the old crap processes still being tried to be tweaked into a new box. (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project).

In rationalizing and transferring to the call centre some of the most challenging work tasks conducted within the local authority (e.g., night time social service calls), the service redesign process had faced down the claims of specialist departments to be the sole locus of expertise in these areas. The call centre was, thus, a central outcome of, and vehicle for, the Organizational Transformation Project. This, in turn, facilitated a shift in the balance of power within the organization as a whole, away from insulated departmental silos towards central strategic elites. The restructuring of the productive system of Shire Council, focused around the call centre as front office, facilitated a reconfiguration of power relations within the organization as a whole.

Because what we're really doing is taking control off a department and putting it back in the organization …. we were very much silo based. We were a huge silo based organization …. And I'm not saying we've transformed completely that but this programme has certainly helped … there was also this vision, or perception I think that we were several organizations within one building. …. So there was this whole branding, you know, "are we one employer, who do we work for?" … And that's been part of the role as well. To basically put this corporate framework together, to make sure that everything does go in the same direction. (Shire Council, Head of Transformation Project)

… this is [Shire Council] Council. It's not [Shire] education and [Shire] social services …people are now looking at it more corporately, we're all part of the same job, this council. (Shire Council, Political Leader)

During recent years, Shire Council, like other authorities, had been constrained to cut costs and enhance productivity. Many of these pressures came from central government, via the setting of local authority grants, controls over local taxation levels, monitoring of council performance, and programmes aimed at achieving efficiency gains. Budgetary pressures grew as central government tightened the purse strings and, at the same time, issued targets for greater accessibility. Most notably, the Gershon Review, driven by central government, recommended efficiency savings of 2.5% across the public

sector (HM Treasury, 2004; Coats, 2004). The Review pinpointed economies to be made by streamlining back office functions and by conducting service encounters on-line or through call centres. Shire Council council leaders, managers and staff were acutely conscious of Gershon-related pressures to produce the same level of service with fewer resources or to produce enhanced services without increasing expenditure. County Talk represented a response to these demands and figured prominently in performance reports to central government.

> So sometimes you're saving money to use for another service or sometimes you're saving money to enhance a service. … We're very much aware of Gershon. (Shire Council, Social Services Manager).

Night time social care arrangements were a prominent example, generating both 'cashable' and 'non-cashable savings'.

> We've operated it [night time social care] with qualified social workers in the past, which has been a huge waste of the skills of highly qualified and experienced social workers … at the top of the scale (Shire Council, Corporate Manager).

> We had either one or two qualified workers up all night and we just thought that was ridiculous. Because sometimes they took no calls at all or very few calls at all, or they were so routine that "why would I be paying somebody whatever" – they got the social worker grade plus 20% for working unsocial hours. Shifting to [County Talk] meant that we tell our qualified staff to "go home at midnight and sleep and we'll wake you if we need you" (Shire Council, Head of Social Services).

County Talk, then, represented a response to the climate generated by the Gershon. However, the pressures towards efficiency savings from central government dovetailed neatly with the objectives of those senior officers and politicians who sought to engineer a shift in organizational power structures.

> [Finance] wasn't the driving force behind setting it up. The programme was already there when the targets came in, so it was that way round. But I mean it's a useful impetus sometimes when you've got a target to meet, and people are being a bit resistant. (Shire Council, Deputy Political Leader)

I'd get slaughtered if I said, "I think Gershon's great!". But think it's great for me because it gives me a lever to make the improvements. (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project).

ENCHANTMENT OF SERVICE USERS

The call centre, then, constituted a powerful vehicle for the rationalization of procedures within the productive system of the local authority. However, County Talk was also devised, and functioned, as a device to enhance the quality of customer care experienced by citizens who contacted their local council. The call centre was in the business of enchantment as well as rationalization. This impulse, too, reflected the dynamics of the political economy of the local authority. Both officers and elected members were keen to improve the quality of the services provided by the council. Above and beyond financial pressures, senior officers had a professional commitment to service improvements, and a public service ethic, that reflected their awareness of the underlying mission of the local authority.

> The drivers for us are obviously satisfying the requirements of the ODPM [Office of Deputy Prime Minister] and ticking the boxes in relation between government and on-line services and services through call centres etc., which we do as a matter of course. I think, while that is important and we have to do it and certainly sorts of things like finance and stuff rests on that, our own key driver is our own Council Plan. And as part of the Council Plan, within the vision of the Council Plan, we have a sort of overall vision of making services available to customers. You know, when it's convenient to them, by whatever channel they would like to contact us by. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

Elected members, too, were committed in principle to improving services and were conscious of how perceptions of the council impacted on them via the ballot box.

> They [councilors] see it as a good selling point for them with their electorate. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

> … the members were dead keen to offer really good services, you know …There was the whole thing around access to services … I think gradually they got to the stage where they recognized it was poor, the way we were dealing with some of this. (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project)

> … our driving force was … improving lives for local people, and that's the be all and end all from every member to every officer in this authority. (Shire Council, Political Leader)

In this context, both officers and elected members sought organizational transformations that impacted on perceptions as well as outcomes. The aim was not only that of improving services but also to be seen to deliver improvements. Thus, County Talk was judged to be central to the service improvement agenda because of its high visibility.

> We had a variety of criteria on that matrix and one of them, quite interesting, was a "Mrs Smith at [small town name]" criteria … It's basically, if we spent £1 on this project would Mrs Smith at [small town name] actually notice any difference to her life, as opposed to £1 on another project. And things that scored well were obviously access type projects. You know, the call centre scored particularly well on that. … The things that scored badly was all the internal focused projects. So things like replacing our core financial systems. She'll never notice any difference at all … We've gone for the high volume, high transactional stuff first, the high impact things. (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project)

Thus, from the outset, County Talk had, in part, been conceived as a brand image that demonstrated the corporate presence of the local authority in the community.

> They [operators] are, if you like, the face of the county council; the ambassadors for it. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

> So it made the people of [Shire Council] feel as if they was getting a decent service at the end of the day. (Shire Council, Political Leader)

The widely advertised County Talk telephone number was intended to represent the council to voters as accessible, friendly, reliable and effective. County Talk projected the message to local citizens, voters and service users that the council cared about their welfare.

> Local government has this awful reputation of, you know previously, of being a waste of time if you like. People think they phone through and, you know, it's never my job and you need to speak to so and so and you speak to them saying "oh no, it's never my job". … people have sort of perceived you put stuff through and nothing ever happens. So, you know, I feel that it's very important for the people here to try and get through to the customer that we are actually going to deal with it. We are taking you seriously and something will happen. (County Talk, Team Leader)

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> … the public perception of quality of services is often based on the last contact. And if that contact experience was good, it was professional and it was a good response and they got what they asked for when they asked for it, they'll think "oh, [Shire Council] – not bad after all really". (Shire Council, Head of Organizational Transformation Project)

As with our analysis of the rationalization of service encounters, three aspects of the process of enchantment of service users will be highlighted here, all of which reflect the position of the call centre within the productive system: first, the relocation of knowledge and skills from back office departments downstream into County Talk greatly improved consumer access; second, centralized control over in-house operations within County Talk enhanced the quality of emotional labour delivered by call operatives to service users; third, the disciplinary gaze exercised by County Talk over upstream service departments increased opportunities for disaffected service users to be appeased and compensated. We will now consider these in turn.

County Talk improved the access of members of the public to local authority services in a number of ways. A unitary point of access to a wide range of services, via a single low rate telephone number, made getting in touch easy and simple. Having made contact, callers were guided through the available services by operators whose job was not to close the service encounter as quickly as possible but to find out what the caller needed and draw attention to whatever might be available.

> … before they might ring, "I've got a street light out", and depending who were on the telephone, they might, "oh they want environmental services". So they put them through to environmental services reception and they say: "no you don't want us, you want street lighting section, just a minute I'll put you through" ... And by the time they were done, people were that fed up of ringing up. [Now] they just ring [County Talk] with a street light out, "thank you very much, do you know the number on it, put it on, it'll be done within so long". (Shire Council, Political Leader)

In most cases, County Talk operators had a far better understanding of the complexities of local authority administrative structures than callers. Some service departments had titles that did not make their functions clear to the general public. Sometimes the division of tasks between sections, departments and councils were difficult to fathom, even

downright bizarre, for service users. However, County Talk staff could navigate their way through the productive system on behalf of callers.

> … everybody got that frustrated that you'd ring an authority up, a local authority, probably not knowing the basics of the authority … And you'd got, if you were lucky, put through to the right department at the right time. And you'd got to be very lucky. And you might have to have three or four different phone calls before you eventually got there. So we wanted one port of call where somebody could answer a question. They got a name behind the person who was answering the question and they got an answer or got a response immediately on it. (Shire Council, Political Leader)

> … people don't necessarily feel very, you know, well connected with the county council. … it's sort of quite an imposing organization, unless you make it easier for people to get in. You know, and rather than put the onus on the individual to know who you want and which department … you know, find an easier way through that for people. And it [County Talk] has achieved that I think. People now do feel more confident about ringing in. (Shire Council, Deputy Political Leader)

Access to services was also improved because County Talk mitigated the effects of local customs and practices within service departments in dealing with queries. Callers to County Talk received the same quality of service, irrespective of their geographical location within Shire Council or the service they needed. The call centre thus provided a level playing field for all service users, via the consistent application of common criteria.

> But what it actually gave us was the opportunity … to equalize this factor that if somebody called an area office in the north of the county they got exactly the same service as if they'd called an area office in the south of the county (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

Improvement in the access of service users was a function, then, of the position of the call centre within the productive system. Ease of contact, simplified navigation and equal treatment reflected the role of County Talk as the generic front office for multiple specialist service departments.

As well as improving access, enchantment of service users was also achieved through the emotional labour that call centre operatives were encouraged to deploy during interactions with the public. Thus, operatives were required to use an expressive, friendly and soothing tone of voice, including smiling down the telephone.

> … how important it is to be, you know, smiling when you're talking even on the phone. Because people can detect that in your voice. And how you use your voice over the phone. How, when you're on the phone, it takes away body language so that, you know, makes your voice that much more important. (County Talk, Team Leader)

Similarly, talk was deliberately kept jargon free and informal.

> … we try to use the language that people would use. … So what we're trying to do is to develop it much more in the language that people use. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

One of the ways in which friendly informality was achieved was by allowing, and indeed encouraging, each operator to develop their own distinctive way of conducting service encounters that reflected their individual personalities. Authenticity and freshness of response were conveyed through the individuality of the demeanor adopted by each operative. Thus, service encounters even of the most routine kind were not scripted in the sense that they were not confined to the use of specific formulations, words or terms.

> We're not chickens. I think that's good. We're allowed to do it our own way (County Talk, Night Time Operator)

Operators were encouraged to adapt their interactive style to match the background and circumstances of the caller.

> … if you're ringing meals on wheels customers, they're a different type of customer … so your soft skills will have to change accordingly. (County Talk, Team Leader)

Furthermore, operatives (of all three types) would on occasion make time for a certain amount of small talk and general chatting with callers. It was recognized that some callers were lonely or isolated and welcomed human contact. More generally it was said that, even when it was not possible to fulfill the specific requests made by callers, it would always be possible to make them feel that they had been treated well and with respect.

> Very often they're not ringing us about positive things but we're trying to make a positive experience out of it. (Shire Council, Social Services Manager)

We don't work like a lot of call centres in that they have to answer so many calls a day and they're only allowed to spend so much on a call. The emphasis is on customer care. (County Talk, Team Leader)

… the main thing is, we want to give customer satisfaction, (County Talk, Operations Manager)

For similar reasons, the instigators of County Talk had deliberately avoided introducing key pad numbering as a second level filter after callers got through. It was felt that technology of this kind was alienating and annoying, distancing callers from the human contact that was the essence of the call centre.

A machine can't interact with you. A machine can simply follow a voice command or a button press. It doesn't have that sense of showing an interest, showing concern (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

The success of County Talk was such that it had increasingly perceived by members of the public as an all purpose help or information line. As a result, operators had to live on their wits by fielding a proportion of calls that touched on a wide variety of issues that went well beyond the scaffolding provided by call guides and, indeed, in some cases beyond the remit of local authority services. During our on-site fieldwork, for example, there were, *inter alia*, calls about dead swans, dead pigeons, bus timetables, local shopping centres, petrol contamination, parking regulations for HGVs, mortgage advice, neighbourhood nuisances, services provided by other local authorities, private sector services and Viking helmets. Operators, thus, had to draw on qualities of initiative, humour and personality in responding to a steady stream of unpredictable and unusual requests.

… the call centre is like Pandora's Box - you can't say it's open for this, but not for that. So, they'll take anything that's thrown at them. So we have what we call "non-event events" where there is no script for it! (Shire Council, Corporate Manager).

We do get sort of unusual requests … every call's unique, I suppose, the different things coming through. (County Talk, Generic Operator)

Indeed, this diversity represented one of the greatest challenges for newly appointed operators learning the job.

> … the biggest thing I think is the volume of learning that's required for this job because we offer so many different services. You know, you might be taking a library book renewal one minute and, like I said, a pothole or a street light or somebody's, you know, a report from the police of an accident or a traffic light knocked down or something like that. Or we could get a call about domestic violence … It is so diverse, but that I think is what people have the most trouble with. (County Talk, Team Leader)

However, more routine calls also provided scope for customer enchantment. As we have seen, some service encounters were framed by the need to complete service request forms on line, driving the interaction between operatives and callers. However, even in these circumstances, there were opportunities for operators to personalize customer care. Operators frequently helped callers through the completion of the forms, interpreting obscure questions, suggesting suitable answers and, in some instances, skipping or working round parts of forms that might seem irrelevant or intrusive to callers. Largely unknown to callers, operators used 'work rounds' to navigate service forms in ways that minimized the frustration or disappointment of members of the public. Operators also frequently offered callers the benefit of their considerable practical knowledge about the realities of service eligibility criteria. Thus, for example, applicants might be appraised that formal bureaucratic regulations were less important in getting a particular service than support from key gatekeepers. Operators might, in effect, coach potential service users in how to pitch their service requests to departments. In addition, operators did not simply confine their responses to the immediate parameters of service requests but rather sought to find out what callers really needed and, thereafter, to their draw attention to possibilities of which they had previously been unaware. Even simple requests for verbal or written information could turn into an investigative process. For example, operators might draw the attention of callers who requested details of a particular job to other similar vacancies. They might then go on to do a geographical search for all posts in the caller's locality or to read out job specs over the phone to see

whether callers were tempted to apply. This proactive approach to callers' needs called for distinctive skills by operatives.

> … it was about developing an empathy with the caller. … We were much more interested in this nurturing of our service users. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

> … the questioning techniques are equally as important, really, as the listening. Because if you haven't got one, you're going to struggle with the other. So I mean obviously communication is the big thing, but also I think being able to feel that you've dealt with that call as best you can and that you have managed to satisfy the customer, that they've gone away thinking "oh, they actually seemed interested in that and I think they might do something about it", is I think is really important. (County Talk, Team Leader)

From the outset, it had been made very explicit that the call centre was not simply a device for passing callers onto a merry-go-round of contacts within departments. The intention was that as many enquiries as possible would be handled by operators within the call centre; for example, by providing verbal information over the phone or carrying out simple tasks, such as library renewals. If the request could not be dealt with there and then, the operator would seek out further information and get back to the caller, by telephone, within a specified time. This might be the case where the enquiry was complex or unusual. In these circumstances the operator was expected to stick with a call until it had been resolved, acting as an advocate or agent of the member of the public.

> … the accent here isn't on cracking through the calls as quickly as possible. The accent is keeping the caller until you've satisfied as much as you can their every need. (Shire Council, Corporate Manager)

A third aspect of service user enchantment concerned dealing with complaints. Where calls resulted in service forms being passed upstream to back office departments, the call centre remained the point of reference and remedy if something went wrong. The role of the call centre, thus, included that of making apologies to irate citizens who felt that they had not been fairly or efficiently dealt with by service departments, even though the fault was rarely the direct responsibility of operators themselves. Operators also had the task of conveying complaints back to departments, possibly initiating procedures

which required service providers to make immediate and direct contact with dissatisfied members of the public. Furthermore, where errors had occurred (e.g., the non-appearance of requested job details) the call centre operator could negotiate with the department on behalf of the caller to obtain recompense (e.g., an extended deadline for application). The call centre operator was, typically, in a better position than the member of the public to achieve such a remedy by virtue of their superior knowledge of council organization, practices and procedures – and their strategic position within the productive system.

Thus, as with the rationalization of service encounters, enchantment of service users was facilitated by the structural position of the call centre within the productive system of the local authority. Its breadth of activities, position as the unitary point of contact and connections into back offices enabled operators to offer a high quality service. The position of County Talk within the productive system enabled operators to offer multiple services in response to a single call, direct callers to a variety of appropriate service points within diverse back offices, and turn around the bad experiences of service users by taking complaints upstream. This was an on-going project, with more and more service enquiries and functions being relocated into County Talk. Each additional service added to the breadth of the interventions available to operators. Hence, standardization and rationalization were conceived as going *hand in hand* with customer enchantment.

> We're trying to streamline. We're trying to simplify. We're trying to make it less complicated for the customer and we're trying to make the customer have a better experience. (Shire Council, Social Services Manager)

THE CALL CENTRE WITHIN THE PRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

Before the advent of the call centre, the council comprised a series of semi-autonomous departments, each surrounded by heavily defended boundaries. Moreover, some departments were further subdivided into sections, functions and geographical areas – silos within silos. These relatively bounded units had developed their own distinctive practices, covering service provision, recruitment and selection procedures, and customer access. Hence, service users were faced with navigating their way through multiple

offices, personnel, telephone numbers and access points. The productive system of the local authority at this juncture, then, can be represented, albeit in simplified form, by Figure 1; that is, a series of independent, semi-autonomous and self-referencing service streams.

'Put Figure 1 about here'

The introduction of the call centre represented far more than just a new access point bolted onto the front of existing service streams – a smile pasted onto the front of departments. Rather, its mission – still in progress – has been to become the single point of access to all the departmental service streams offered by the council. Thus, the introduction of County Talk transformed the overall structure of the productive system in the local authority. The call centre became the front office of Shire Council as a whole; the separate and divergent service providers became a suite of back offices. This configuration is graphically displayed in Figure 2.

'Put Figure 2 about here'

The primary function of the call centre within the productive system was, thus, to translate the incoming problems, comments, complaints, needs and desires of potential service users into the language and formats of service departments. The messy, lumpy demands of the outside world were processed, ordered and arranged into the smooth and laundered formats required by the internal world of local authority institutions and organizations. This work entailed identifying, classifying and prioritizing. Incidents were translated into cases; cases were processed as representatives of categories. Call centre operators, therefore, carried out the vital initial work necessary for the subsequent functioning of the entire complex of service departments. In addition, the call centre was charged with dealing with the most routine and predictable categories of service users. Departments had largely been left in charge of upstream stages in the productive system, such as raw material sourcing, value added production, storage, and service delivery. The call centre became responsible for organizing consumption, mediating between service

providers and service users. The call centre has become the bridge between producers and consumers. It was, then, the structural position of the call centre within the productive system of the local authority as a whole that enabled it to exercise powerful pressures towards *both* the rationalization of service delivery *and* the enchantment of service users and potential service users.

Nevertheless, there were a number of aspects of the functioning of the call centre within the productive system that were problematic. There were structural lacunae and tensions, which impacted on the quality of services received by the public and the work experiences of operators. The effectiveness of channels of communication between the front office and multiple back offices within service streams was variable and sometimes subject to breakdown.   Put another way, the 'pipe' connecting the call centre to departments was subject to blockages, breakdowns and leakages.

These structural problems in the functioning of the productive system were partly fuelled by resistance to the advent of the call centre mounted by some service departments. We were repeatedly told, by interviewees at all levels of the organization that, initially at least, service department staff had perceived the call centre as a direct threat to their jobs. Non-cooperation signaled their anxiety and a desire to undermine County Talk's effectiveness. Much of the most vehement opposition had been attenuated by the time of our research but there remained a residual distrust. This reflected the continuous importing of new services downstream into the call centre, resulting in the elimination of functions and posts elsewhere. Shire Council had been committed to redeploying those employees affected and avoiding redundancies. Nevertheless, insecurity remained as posts disappeared and structural shifts broke down bureaucratic silos and organizational fiefdoms.

> Environmental Services … is a very big department and originally when the call centre opened there was some reluctance … not exactly hostility but definitely they were very wary and not really wanting … to share information … they were concerned for their jobs. … Street Lighting was another one. They were very concerned about their jobs … now we have a good working relationship with them. I think just on occasions some of the

older hands are still a little bit nervous. (County Talk, Operations Manager).

Those within service departments who sought to resist the structural pressures of the new productive system had a variety of tools at hand. County Talk was required to answer and respond to all calls from the public; however, back office service departments did not always take calls from call centre operators. As we have seen, not all enquiries from the public required operators directly to contact back offices; sometimes operators issued verbal information to callers, delivered services themselves or passed standard service request forms to departments. However, when there were complaints or complex cases, operators needed to speak to officers in back offices. In these circumstances, we were told by call centre operators, some back office personnel were difficult to contact, or obstreperous, or passed the operator around from one unhelpful person to another. Operators found themselves negotiating with back office personnel in order to get the help they needed, regarding a positive response as a favour or gift rather than as a professional obligation. Operators not unnaturally tended to steer enquiries towards cooperative contacts whenever possible. This distorted the flow of work from front to back offices, with some service department personnel taking on work loads and responsibilities way in excess of their pay grade. In short, links in the productive system from front to back office could be vulnerable, idiosyncratic and unsystematic. It is interesting to note that our questionnaire revealed that calls involving contact with back office personnel are the most emotionally stressful for operators.

Difficulties in maintaining effective channels of communication from the call centre to some upstream service departments in part reflected the way in which knowledge and skills had been repositioned within the productive system. The knowledge capture and service redesign process had had variable impacts on departments. In some instances, substantial portions of service delivery were now wholly located in the call centre. In others, however, operators had only very shallow knowledge of, or skills in relation to, service requests. The reach of the front office into these back offices of the productive system had not been extensive or deep. This might have been because, as senior managers admitted, 'sometimes it's hard to pull this data away' from departments,

either because they did not have the information to hand or because they felt wary about the whole service redesign agenda. In these cases, enquiries from the public to County Talk were more likely to be passed back to service departments at an early stage, rather than dealt with in-house. However, where call centre knowledge capture had been limited, operators were vulnerable to negative feedback and complaints from departmental staff. They could be accused of making mistakes or presenting information in a way that was badly translated into the language and networks of service departments. This could be represented as evidence of failure on the part of individual operators and/or the call centre in general. Departments, then, could exercise sanctions on the call centre, as well as visa versa.

Another way in which service departments could exert passive resistance to the call centre was by failing to update County Talk on changes in back office personnel and functions. Service departments were not required to down load the names and telephone numbers of new staff or to keep County Talk operators informed. A web link existed for this purpose but sometimes service departments (in the words of a generic operator) 'forget' to use it. As a result, when operators were required to contact back offices directly, they might get in touch with the wrong person or section. As a result, call centre operatives could appear ill informed or fumbling to back office staff. Some operators sought to remedy this situation by periodically calling up departments themselves in order to investigate the latest moves of people and posts. These calls added to the work of back offices and might appear to be unfocused to those receiving them. The result of these countervailing pressures was that, on occasion, operators were unable to gain the information they needed to advise potential service users or could not put members of the public through to departments. Sometimes operators themselves gave advice that they believed should have come from service departments because they were reluctant to send the caller away empty handed. This meant that potential service users did not get always receive the best service and that additional pressure was placed on operators.

In order to reassure service departments and placate fears about job losses, frequent references were made, by call centre staff, to departmental personnel as the

'experts' or 'specialists' in the field. The call centre, it was emphasized, offered upstream departments protection from abusive callers, escape from tedious routine enquiries and opportunities to concentrate on their core activities.

> We were just relieving some of the basic calls, to free them up to doing more of what they were best at. … we're doing the nitty gritty of just reporting the faults, but then it's passed to them. (County Talk, Operations Manager).

> … we're not taking their jobs, we're assisting with the service. (County Talk, Team Leader).

Ironically, however, this division of labour constituted one of the problems in the new productive system. Service departments were now even more insulated from the general public, and pressures to enchant service users, than in the past. In some departments, back office personnel rarely interacted with customers except when there were complaints, tending to reinforce defensive attitudes towards service users and the call centre. Other departments were shielded by the call centre from a mass of routine feedback encounters with the public. In effect, customer enchantment had become a specialist task of the front office. Back offices were able to protect their own professionally-generated service priorities, leaving the call centre to apologize and explain when these were not congruent with those of service users.

> We're dealing with the abusive … they get the nice bits … Not all of our customers are abusive, they're not at all. But, you know, what I'm saying is we've taken that away from them, if you like, and they get to process everything (County Talk, Team Leader).

The advent of the call centre, then, represented a fundamental change in the organization of the productive system of Shire Council but this transformation was not without problems and weaknesses. The links between front office and multiple back offices remained tenuous in places.

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of County Talk entailed capturing aspects of the knowledge, skills and practices that were the preserve of specialist service departments and transferring them to generic customer care agents in the call centre. As a result, operators became familiar with a multiple, ever increasing and continuously changing body of practical knowledge relevant to the delivery of a range of diverse services. Skills once regarded as unique and specialized became the common currency of generic operators who had received limited training. These processes entailed not only the transfer of knowledge but also the redesign of job tasks. To enable call centre operatives to answer queries and deal with service requests, a 'job redesign' process was developed which typically entailed the reshaping of work tasks from first principles. Job redesign introduced a dimension of rationality, standardization and planning into procedures that had previously often been fragmented, unregulated and unsystematic. The reconfiguration of the productive system around a front office also introduced new elements of centralized surveillance over service departments. When departments failed to deliver services, or delivered them below standard, members of the public contacted the call centre to complain. As well as apologizing on behalf of the department, operators could send complaint forms through to departments, requiring a rapid response by departments and comprising a measure of service quality for outside auditors. However the position of the call centre in the productive system also enabled operators to offer enhanced customer care to callers. Enchantment of callers did not simply entail a pleasant telephone manner and long hours of opening. The structural position of the call centre within the productive system enabled it to function as a unitary access point to a diverse range of services. Operators were enabled to adopt the role of 'advocates' or 'agents' for members of the public because of their strategic position in the productive system. They could navigate on behalf of service users through complex and opaque administrative bureaucracies. They could chase queries and complaints back, along and across service streams. Similarly, the breadth of operators' knowledge enabled them to prompt callers to seek support from a variety of services they might not have considered or known about before.

The position County Talk within the overall productive system of the local authority is, then, crucial to understanding its structure and functions. Our case study suggests that Glucksmann's (2004) injunction to look at the big picture does indeed yield important understandings of call centre operations – including their impact on work processes throughout the organization and the shaping of service encounters with consumers. However, the situation in Shire Council is dynamic and unfolding. Hence, following Taylor and Bain (2006), we have drawn attention to the underlying drivers of change embedded in the political economy of the local authority. In Shire Council a series of different pressures all pushed towards the reconstruction of the productive system around a unitary front office and multiple back offices. These included external demands for cost cutting and efficiency gains, internal struggles over control of the organization and the desire of officers and politicians to be seen to be improving services. Finally, we have seen that impulses towards the rationalization of service encounters and enchantment of service users via the call centre were a function of the design and development of the productive system of the local authority as whole. Rationalization and enchantment are best understood, then, within the context of relational networks of specific productive systems rather than as general attributes of all service encounters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Table 1:
Research Process

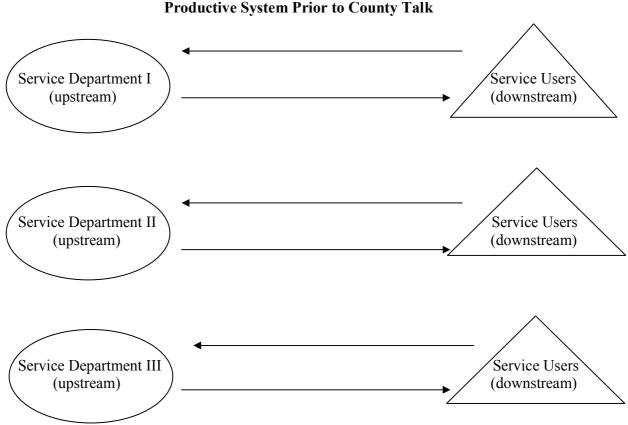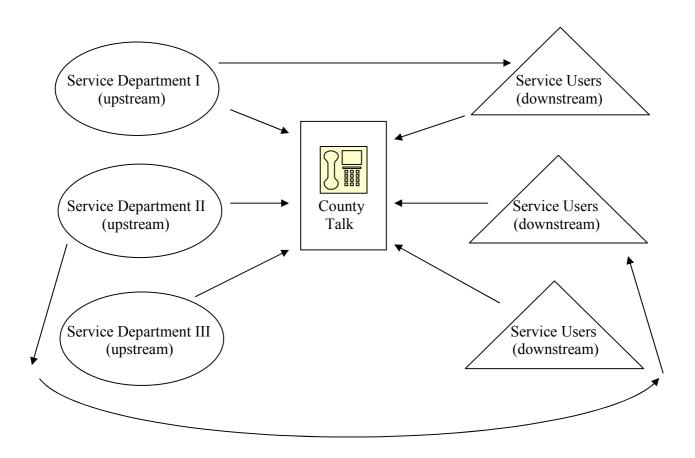| Point in the Productive System	Research Technique	Numbers and Volumes
Council leaders	Interviews	2 tape-recorded interviews
Central management	Interviews	3 tape-recorded interviews
Service department management	Interviews	2 tape-recorded interviews
Call centre management	Interviews	4 tape-recorded interviews
	Survey negotiation and development	2 interactive meetings with instrument development
	Briefing and debriefing sessions	6 team leaders and supervisors
	Document analysis	Service redesign, training manuals, call guides
Call centre workers	Interviews	3 tape-recorded interviews
	Activity Survey	Collection of 8,874 returns over 13 day period
	Survey briefing	32 call operators in groups of 2-4
	Survey debriefing	10 in groups of 1-2
	On-site observation	13 hours a day for 13 days with 2 days set-up time at 10 hours (at least 2 researchers on site throughout)
	Shadowing	Sat in listening to calls with operators – 2 sessions for 3 hours = 6 hours

Figure 1:
Productive System Prior to County Talk

Figure 2:
Productive System After the Introduction of County Talk

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