

**WORKING AT THE PHONE IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: THE EXPERIENCE OF  
ITALIAN CALL CENTERS BETWEEN FLEX-WORK AND NEO-TAYLORISM**

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**Abstract**

*This study deals with labour organization and employment relations within call centers in Italy and it aims to contribute to the sociological debate on labour within this new form of organization and on its impact on the so called knowledge economy. Using data from a recent research carried out on over 1.700 Italian private and public call centers. We explore the main features such as the role and characteristics of the workers, their paths and expectations, working conditions, human resource strategies, employment relations, organizational environment. We also draw attention to the impact of different local contexts on labour organization and practices. With this regard, the research was carried out on call centers located in four areas of the country (Lombardia, Lazio, Calabria e Sicilia) from the more industrialized North to the less developed regions of the so called Mezzogiorno.*

*Keywords: call center, labor, employment, organization, services sector*

**INTRODUCTION**

**The transformation of work and new types of employment**

This study focus on employment and labor relations in Italian call centers drawing particular attention to workers, human resource management strategies as well as to the impact of such organizations in the service sector or *knowledge based* economy. By looking at the ongoing social and economic significant transformations as opposed to the past organizational fordist paradigm based on the supremacy of industry, full time employment along with a gender division of labor, several scholars (Crozier, Normann, 1990; Castells 2009; Negrelli 2013) argue that the new society of information emphasizes the importance of “knowledge”, capabilities and new technologies as key factors opposed to capital and labor considered as the basis of the previous model. In the new scenario new jobs and occupations are appearing, which seem to be characterized by greater flexibility and instability. Recent analyses of changes in organizational structures and labor markets posit crucial developments. All, to varying degrees, argue that changes in the macro-economic and socio-political climate are driving important

changes in the nature of employment and work. Standing (1999) points to the crumbling of what he describes as “labor market security”, which is a result of insecurity in employment, insecurity of income from employment and unemployment, and the fragmentation and detachment of social protection regimes. Others, (Felstead and Jewson 1999), point to a worldwide growth in flexible labor, where this refers to new forms of work, the erosion of voice, a break-down of internal labor markets, work intensification, employment insecurity, the return of labor brokerage, and outsourcing. In the European context, Grugulis *et al.* (2004) suggest the emergence of the ‘hourglass’ economy, where skills are polarized. They argue that while jobs become increasingly complex and skilled, the control employees have over their own work has not risen, and instead task discretion and autonomy has declined.

The recent Eurostat data for the EU- 27 (Table 1) clearly show an upward trend (albeit differentiated) of the “highly skilled non-manual” occupations (40,1%), with rates well above 40% in countries such as Luxemburg (57,8%), the United Kingdom (47,5%), the Netherlands (46,7%), Denmark (45,4%), France (45,2%), and the “low skilled manual” (27,1%)%, while there seems to be a decline in the “skilled-manual” professions and manual workers (from 13% in 2001 to 10.7% in 2010 till 9,1% in 2012). However, within this scenario, Italy is a notable exception with a percentage of “skilled non-manual” workers of 34,9% of the total labour force; on the contrary the number of “skilled manual” is 24,8%% as well as elementary occupations counts for 10,9% of the whole.

In Italy, in fact, the process of the service sector growing in the economy (2.9 million enterprises corresponding to 55.4% of the Italian firms, employing 15.5 million people) is linked to a never before seen level of professionals. Unlike other countries, the increase in employment in the service sector in Italy has not affected the knowledge sector and the service industry as well as (i.e. marketing, business consulting, advertising, etc.), but those areas that do not require particular specializations or skills.

This refers, for example, to the call centre industry, catering, fast-food and cleaning work. The reason for such an articulation of the tertiary sector in Italy is related to the traditional and poorly innovative nature of the manufacturing industry, which does not require particularly advanced services, together with the organizational characteristics of the reality of services that only with difficulty absorb educated workers.

Table 1: Employed person occupations in Europe – year 2012

	Skilled non	Low skilled	Skilled	Elementary
<b>EU 27</b>	<b>40,1</b>	<b>27,1</b>	<b>23,7</b>	<b>9,1</b>
<b>EU17</b>	<b>40,3</b>	<b>28,4</b>	<b>21,9</b>	<b>9,4</b>
<b>BE</b>	44,9	26,5	18,5	10,1
<b>BG</b>	29,8	28,7	31,4	10,1
<b>CZ</b>	37,4	24,6	32,6	5,4
<b>DK</b>	45,4	27,8	16,5	10,3
<b>DE</b>	43,9	27,8	21,1	7,2
<b>EE</b>	42	19,5	30,2	8,3
<b>IE</b>	41,6	30,1	19,5	8,8
<b>EL</b>	31,6	31,7	30	6,7
<b>ES</b>	32,7	32,5	21,8	13
<b>FR</b>	45,2	26,8	18,1	9,9
<b>IT</b>	<b>34,9</b>	<b>29,4</b>	<b>24,8</b>	<b>10,9</b>
<b>CY</b>	35,3	30,3	17,3	17,1
<b>LV</b>	39,8	21,4	25,6	13,2
<b>LT</b>	42,9	17,9	31,4	7,8
<b>LU</b>	57,8	19,9	13,7	8,6
<b>HU</b>	35,6	23,8	31,4	9,2
<b>MT</b>	40,2	31,6	18,5	9,7
<b>NL</b>	46,7	29	15,8	8,5
<b>AT</b>	38,6	28,6	24,4	8,4
<b>PL</b>	35,3	20,7	36,9	7,1
<b>PT</b>	31,2	24,2	32,8	11,8
<b>RO</b>	22,4	17,3	49,5	10,8
<b>SI</b>	41,8	21,2	28,5	8,5
<b>SK</b>	33,1	25,4	33,3	8,2
<b>FI</b>	44,2	26,2	22,9	6,7
<b>SE</b>	48	26,8	20,1	5,1
<b>UK</b>	47,5	28,9	14,6	9
<b>IS</b>	49,3	24	20,3	6,4
<b>NO</b>	47,7	29,4	19	3,9
<b>CH</b>	50	25,6	20,1	4,3

Source: EUROSTAT (2012)

Together with a small group of new highly skilled and creative jobs, there seems therefore to emerge a new figure of “service worker” which do not require a lot of physical effort, but the ability to flexibly adapt to shifts and organizational models of the traditional type. As can be seen from a recent survey on call centre operators (Fortunato and Palidda , 2012) the new factor is that even for these service workers there is also required intelligent dedication to their duties, sometimes not recognized neither contractual nor in terms of remuneration. Lower-skilled occupations and intellectuals professions live in the same sector and this mix allows a glimpse of a polarization between skilled jobs (professional workers) and unskilled workers (service

workers). The issue becomes more complicated when one considers the great increase in education across Europe. The intersection of these phenomena leads, in fact, to an increasingly common condition of over-education and mismatch between acquired learning and work carried out. Looking at the data on a European scale, if, on the one hand, the condition of over-education is widespread, albeit to varying degrees in all countries, on the other hand given the increase of the quality and qualification of the work, the organizational models adopted seem decisive, with a clear disadvantage for those countries in which in less complex and more traditional models are most prevalent. There is, therefore, a strong contradiction between the effects of the economic crisis, which has generated important changes in the organization of work and production, in the types of goods and services required in the application of new knowledge and skills, and the fragility of the Italian labour market which seems unable to develop “antibodies” to overcome the crisis. As demonstrated by the experience of Germany and other Nordic countries, the only viable strategy for an advanced economy such as the Italian one can only be that of the “high road to competitiveness”, the one that revolves around a knowledge-based economy concept, which has growth based on training, learning and research, in which there is a real correspondence between supply and demand of labour.

Starting from these assumptions, we explored call centers as a typical example of a new form of organization in the service sector economy. In fact, call centers have rapidly spread in all industrialized countries since the 1990s, as most countries undertook national deregulation of service industries and utilities, undergoing significant changes over the course of time. With regards to the Italian situation, it can be noted that in the last ten years call centers have been one of the fastest growing businesses. In particular according to Assocontact (Italian national Association of call and contact centers in outsourcing) data, despite the impact of the crisis in terms of job losses, at present Italian call centers still employ around 80.000 workers and count 200 enterprises (among which only five of them control 60% of the whole market) for a business that reaches around 1 billion a year (65% represented by the telecommunication network).

## THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In the last few years there have been several studies and research projects, mainly carried out at international level (Taylor, Bain 2007; Batt *et. al.* 2009; Batt, Nohara 2009; Huws 2009; Pierre and Tremblay 2011, 2012), that have explored the call center phenomenon from different levels of analysis. Nevertheless, in Italy this phenomenon has not been sufficiently understood and studied. The sociological debate on call centers is characterized by a polarization between those authors who underline the return to taylor-fordist models of production and labor organization (Taylor, Bayn 1999; Callaghan, Thompson 2002; Glucksmann 2004; Winiecki 2004) in which the main features are stress, monotony, repetitiveness of single tasks, de-

qualification of work, higher managerial control, and those scholars who instead recognize call centers as a symbol of flexible capitalism (Arzbacher *et al.* 2002) and who support the theory of a new organizational paradigm related to the knowledge based economy (Butera, *et. al.* 1997; Campi, Palamara, 2002; Holtgrewe, Kerst, 2002). In particular, this latter approach emphasises the greater flexibility in organizing as well as the workers' empowerment directly linked to additional skills and competences required in using new technologies and dealing with customers, problem solving activities, team-working and other work practices that should lead to a greater workers' involvement and participation within the organization.

In contrast with the international context, in Italy there is still a lack of studies on call centers and many of those that have been carried out have focused attention on local cases and specific areas of the country (Greco 2006; Corigliano, Greco, 2009), by using a qualitative methodology. In addition, usually research has been carried out in *in-house* call centers that pre-eminently work in *inbound*, due to the fact that it is easier to get access and these are often characterized by better working conditions (*better jobs*), higher salaries, greater career opportunities, as opposed to call centers that work in outsourcing, which means external firms (generally small or medium sized) that offer their services in both types: *inbound* and *outbound*. At present in Italy outsourcing companies represent the vast majority and are particularly difficult to examine, but just for this reason they are the most interesting and challenging to explore. The lack of information is mainly related to the "union free" nature of the vast majority of the workplaces in which managers unilaterally set employment terms and working conditions, as also noted by Brophy (2009, 2010), leaving still unsolved the relevant problem of labor representation for a significant number of these "new" workers (Huws 2009).

Thus, we consider that it is worthy and particularly interesting to explore the heterogeneous universe of Italian call centers by looking at different typologies that can be identified using criteria such as their private or public nature, the services delivered, their structure and size, in house or outsourcing activities. In particular, we suggest a relevant distinction between generalist or horizontal call centers and dedicated or vertical call centers. In the former type the assignments and organizational mission are multi-tasked, whereas in the second type call centers are specialized in single task activities. Looking at these criteria, we carried out a survey on call center operators working in 19 organizations located in four key areas of the country with different social, economic and institutional backgrounds and traditions. At present the greater number of call centers is located in the Northern regions (around 50%), followed by the Centre (35%) and then by the South (15%), even if the Italian *Mezzogiorno* is the area of the country mostly interested in the last few years (with an increase of 11% since 2009) by the "*callcenterisation*" process (Huws 2009).

In detail, findings are based on 1.715 questionnaires (consisted in 54 closed questions articulated in five broad sections) completed by workers of 19 call centers located in Lombardy, Lazio, Calabria and Sicily, selected by research groups in accordance with the size (in terms of number of workers employed), the private/public nature, the organizational typology (*in-house* or *outsourcing*), the kind of services delivered (generalist Vs dedicated), the workers' tasks (*inbound* and *outbound*). As far as methodology, we chose call centers, in accordance with the identified criteria, in some cases among those companies available to cooperate with researchers and in some others delivering questionnaires directly to call center operators outside the firm at the end of their working shifts. In addition, we also experienced problems related to specific typologies of call centers such as the public ones with more than 200 employees which are less diffused in the South of Italy and those private-dedicated with less than 200 employees; this meant that we covered 19 organizations instead of 24 as originally foreseen in the research plan. Finally, we delivered at least 50 questionnaires in call centers with less than 200 employees and at least 100 questionnaires in those ones over 200 employees. Table 2 shows call center typologies and the number of completed questionnaires for each of them.

Table 2: adopted classification of call centers

	N.	%
Private, generalist, out-sourcing, + 200 employees	638	37.2
Private, generalist, out-sourcing, - 200 employees	195	11.4
Private, dedicated , + 200 employees	355	20.7
Private, dedicated, - 200 employees	140	8.2
Public utility with more than 200 employees	156	9.1
Public utility with less than 200 employees	231	13.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.715</b>	<b>100</b>

The research presented in this paper addresses several questions. First of all, one of the aims is to fill the gap in international literature as far as Italy is concerned by increasing our knowledge on labor organization and employment relations in call centers. In particular, we look at call center operators and at their characteristic features, drawing particular attention to the contents of work and to the skills required by tasks. Another key point concerns the fact that call centers are traditionally considered high-turnover workplaces; with this in mind, we take into account that in Italy this may not necessarily be the case especially in some regions of the South characterized by high levels of unemployment among youths and women and the diffusion of the so called “black economy”. In fact, as stressed by Huws (2009), despite the similarities among call centers across the globe, national industrial relations systems, labor

market features as well as other aspects of particular locations make a significant difference to the working conditions of call center workers.

One of the hypotheses guiding the research is that, at present, call center jobs in Italy are not necessarily *bad jobs* associated to precarious forms of employment, low wages and weak social protections, which is what emerged in previous comparative research on call centers in Europe (Altieri 2002; Isfol 2008). On the contrary, thanks also to the State intervention, through the law n.17/2006, in certain contexts and in specific periods they may be considered as “socially acceptable”, not only as a first job or temporary occupation. In particular, to avoid negative outcomes for workers and to reduce the spread of non standard contracts in call centers, under Unions’ pressure, the Italian Government defined a specific law n.17/2006 better known as “*Circolare Damiano*” (from the name of the former Minister of Labor and Welfare), which declared illegitimate the management use of the “project work” contract for *inbound* and mixed activities, leaving it still possible for *outbound* tasks only. As a result, after the employment stabilization process started with the national law n.17/2006, the number of workers hired with full time contracts reached the 45.000 units.

This argument might also support a more positive image of call centers considered as an “opportunity” for those territories and local institutions able to attract and retain such organizations, at least in the medium term, by using those practices defined by Pierre and Tremblay (2012) as forms of “socio-territorial innovation”, and as a source of competitive advantages. Finally, we try to explore the role of management and its strategies to achieve workers’ involvement to reach firms targets as well as managerial strategies to secure control over the workers, looking also at the role of trade unions where they have been recognized.

## RESULTS

### A profile of call center operators

Nowadays, in our society working as a call center operator often represents the initial period of socialization within the labor market for young people with a medium-high level of education. This job also represents, above all for women, a period of re-socialization to work, of re-entry into the labor market after a period of temporary inactivity. Therefore, we analyze research data and we highlight the main operators characteristic features, the reasons behind this working choice as well as the required skills.

The framework emerging from our research confirms a significant gender based division of labor within call centers, in fact 70% of workers are women, mainly aged between 26 and 30. The need of flexibility required by this work seems to better fit with women searching to combine work and family care duties. Moreover, women seem to be also preferred due to their *life skills*



such as emphatic and communicative capacities, relational and cooperative skills, greater ability to get used to behavioral standard, which are considered priorities in this specific field (Belt *et al.* 2002). Not less important, women are usually more oriented to accept lower pay as opposed to men, particularly if they are married and consider their income as integrative to that of the male *bread-winner* husband. In fact, in our sample 46% are women who declare they have a family, as opposed to 30% of men. In general, 56.4% are currently single.

Research data (table 3) also show a significant percentages of workers over 35, as evidence that in different regions of the country, in different ways, working in a call center represents a more or less obliged stage for a relevant number of people searching for a job. Interesting considerations emerge when we analyze data disaggregated at regional level.

Table 3: Socio-demographic variables of the sample – % values

	Lombardy	Lazio	Calabria	Sicily	Total
<i>Gender</i>					
Male	27,6	25,0	36,4	32,3	30,0
Female	72,4	75,0	63,6	67,7	70,0
<i>Age</i>					
Less than 24 years	16,1	7,6	21,3	12,4	13,8
25 - 29	16,1	13,2	39,9	26,8	23,1
30 - 34	13,8	17,6	24,6	28,0	20,9
35 – 39	12,4	27,5	11,7	23,4	19,5
40 - 49	23,0	23,7	2,1	9,1	15,1
More than 50 years	18,5	10,5	0,3	0,2	7,5
<i>Education level</i>					
Middle school diploma	18,9	3,1	0,0	0,7	5,6
High school diploma	58,7	54,6	30,7	58,9	51,6
University student	11,8	11,8	24,6	23,3	17,7
Bachelor	10,6	30,5	44,7	17,1	25,1

For example, there is revealed a clear distinction between Southern areas, where the highest percentages are related to the younger age groups and which significantly decrease with increasing age, and the Northern regions (especially in Lombardy where 41,5% of workers are over 40 years old) with high rates also within older groups. On the two opposing sides, we have the case of Calabria where 61.2 % of operators are aged under 30, as opposed to the Lombardy region where the percentage of younger workers is almost half that.

A further element that strengthens the hypothesis of a polarization between two macro areas of Italy and, at the same time, allows us to define an identikit of call center operators, is the education level. In details, Calabria is, among the four considered regions, the one with the highest rate of young graduates and university students in call centers, amounting to 69,3%, followed by Sicily and Lazio. By contrast, in Lombardy the workers' education level decreases,



with a prevalence of high school diplomas and middle school leaving diplomas. With regards to the Southern regions, and above all the case of Calabria, we have to take into account the weakness and fragility of the socio-economic context, mainly based on the diffusion of small-sized enterprises in the field of construction as well as the scarce relevance of manufacturing activities. In addition, in these regions also known as the Italian “Mezzogiorno” the labor market is characterized by “extreme” levels of intellectual unemployment, mainly involving young people (33%) and women, through a strong effect of discouragement (Reyneri, 2010).

In Lombardy young people more easily find jobs in other economic sectors, so that working in the call center mainly interests less educated people or those who re-enter the labor market after particular events such as maternity for women. With regard to the education level and territorial contexts, in the Southern areas there seems to emerge the profile of an over educated operator in comparison with the characteristics of the job, with theoretical skills in different areas, often interdisciplinary; these features lead to a higher individual flexibility and adaptability in relation to performing tasks. In the case of Lombardy instead the operator profile is of someone less qualified and therefore more in line with the kind of job.

Young people who start working in call centers have different personal reasons (table 3). Sometimes they deliberately choose this job, but more frequently it represents the only possible solution to obtain a job with certain characteristics of stability and social protection. Overall, the more frequent motivation is the lack of opportunities; in fact more than a third of respondents (34.9%) chose to work in a call center because there are no other job opportunities.

Table 4: Youths’ motivations to work

<b>Motivations</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>
There are no other alternatives	599	34.9
Because it would fit in with my other commitments	402	23.4
Because of economic difficulties	163	9.5
Because it allows me to get in touch with other people	69	4
Because I needed a stable job	80	4.7
Because I needed a temporary job	61	3.6
Because it allows me to do other kinds of job	73	4.3
Because it was a regular and legally recognized job	32	1.9
Because of its flexible working time/shifts	44	2.6
Because I believed I had the necessary attitudes	46	2.7
Because I hoped to learn new competences	60	3.5
Because I was moved by the company	42	2.4
Other	26	1.5
n. r. (no response)	18	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.715</b>	<b>100</b>

An additional 9.5% accepts this type of job in order to face economic difficulties. Considering the expressive dimension (the construction of a life project) there seems to be prevalently, at least initially, a pragmatic approach among young people who attribute to work a mostly instrumental value, in order to procure necessary resources for changing work later. Despite working in the call center being perceived by the majority as a forced choice, but necessary to “survive” in a period of crisis and scarcity of opportunities, if we consider the other possible answers, we note other more positive factors which influence youths’ choices. Among these, the idea of a flexible work (23.4%) that allows them to reconcile life time and work time, that gives the possibility to combine this work with other paid activities, and that creates relationships with people (clients/users). Other respondents emphasize the need to have a stable job (4.7%) or at least to come out from the black economy (1.9%). It is interesting to observe that only 3.6% of our sample says they chose this job as a transitory work, while looking for a better one.

Still in the South, the experience in a call center is chosen because it represents a stable and regular job, not “in black”. Finally, the idea of working in a call center as a temporary job is more widespread in the North (where it is indicated by a third of respondents) whereas the percentage significantly decreases in the cases of Central and Southern regions.

With regard to education, we note that young graduates (25.2%) and people with a high school diploma (50.6%) mostly indicate scarcity of opportunities as the most important reason at the basis of their choice, followed by the necessity of facing economic difficulties (45.4% and 20.9%). These are young workers aged between 26 and 30 (24.5%) and those between 31 and 35. Among the university students, the main reason is the possibility to combine work with other external commitments (47.8%), and therefore with their study activities. Regarding gender differences, crisis and scarcity of opportunities mainly affect women (65.3%), but also those people who have external and study commitments (72.4%). Among factors influencing the work meanings construction, a significant role is played by those which have an objective nature concerning personal characteristics, such as young people’s age, gender and level of education. Furthermore, we have to take into account the social context and the family of origin in terms of social, cultural and economic status that significantly influence young people’s expectations of work.

After having examined the main reasons which lead young people to work in call centers, we can assert that often it represents a “pragmatic” choice involving sacrificing personal aspirations and study for the security offered by a stable job, even if low paid, without connections to the study background and with poor future work perspectives. Only few people chose the call centers as a temporary stage, while more often people made a conscious choice, in a period of their life in which there are no other chances for better jobs, adequate to their abilities. However, especially in Southern regions, socio-economically disadvantaged, the call

center in the mid-term becomes a trap for young workers, a “tunnel” in which it is very easy to enter but it is very difficult to get out of. In the South of Italy “ties” have more relevance due to the fact that opportunities for youths are drastically reduced. In fact, over a third of respondents (31.3%) have been working in the same call center from 1 to 3 years, but 66.9% are not currently looking for a new job (Table 5) because they have become used to this job or they are “happy with it”.

Table 5: At present, are you searching for a new job?

	N.	%
No, because it is alright	553	32.2
No, because there are no other opportunities	429	25
No, for other reasons	167	9.7
Yes, because I wish to work in another call center	6	0.3
Yes, I want a completely different job	344	20.1
Yes, I am looking for another job in addition to this one	94	5.5
Yes, for other reasons	72	4.3
n. r.	50	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.715</b>	<b>100</b>

### The contents of work

As emerges from the literature on this subject, only rarely (Paulet, 2008; Pierre and Tremblay, 2012) has research explored the relationship between call centers and the external environment in which they are located. More often attention has been paid to occupational dynamics and to organizational practices mainly related to each specific structure. On the contrary, using our data we propose a detailed analysis of such a relationship which seems to have a great influence on human resource management throughout workers’ recruitment and selection strategies. In fact, looking at our sample, data proposed in table 5 suggest that family networks deeply influence both workers’ motivations, as well as management recruitment practices. In particular, 42% of people interviewed declared that they found the job via family contacts or friends, while 44.1% spontaneously sent a curriculum to the company or answered a job advertisement. Less widespread is, instead, the support of public labor institutions and above all the role of private recruiting agencies set up at the beginning of the 1990s with the aim of promoting a better fit between labor supply and demand. This practice usually creates triangular employment relations in which workers establish connections with several employers. In Italy, and in the Southern regions more than in the other considered areas, finding a job is mainly related to a model which may be defined as “*do it by yourself*”. In addition *clientelism* prevails in

institutional channels by considering that acquiring a full time job as *inbound* operator may often require a recommendation or sponsorship by politicians or other local authorities.

Table 6: Job recruiting strategies

	N.	%
I answered a job advertisement	296	17.3
I sent an unsolicited application to a call center	460	26.8
I went to a public job center (CPI)	21	1.2
Through a private recruiting agency	74	4.3
Through relatives, friends or known people	721	42.1
Other	129	7.5
n. r.	14	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.715</b>	<b>100</b>

According to literature, most of the activities carried out in call centers require transversal competences, a short *on the job* training, working time flexibility along with a rather low hierarchical differentiation. All these combined elements lead companies to a low selectivity in recruiting their workers as well as to reduce their investments in training. At the stage of job interviews, the most required competences of applicants are mainly relational skills, not directly related to their education or professional qualifications (table 7). Concerning this, managers do not express any interest in skills achieved at school and certified by university titles. In fact, only 4.3% of applicants were asked for a university degree whereas for 39.6% the required level of education was the high school diploma. Unexpectedly, the knowledge of foreign languages and marketing principles do not also represent necessary conditions required by this kind of job, while technological competences related to the use of computers and specific software, as well as team-working orientation, are more important.

Table 7: Competences required for the job

	N.	%
University degree	74	4.3
High school diploma	679	39.6
Relational - communicative competences	1.220	71.1
Information technology competences	706	41.2
Knowledge of foreign languages	148	8.6
Sale and marketing competences	224	13.1
Team-working orientation	784	45.7
Other	97	5.7
I did not sit any job interview or examination	69	4

*Note: respondents could give more than one answer to the question*

Good communication and mainly *savoir-faire* skills in dealing with customers are particularly significant for managers who look for these competences in over 70% of the cases. As argued by Della Rocca and Fortunato (2006) this is an explicit recognition that worker' professional skills and abilities do not only and necessarily rely on their certifications such as school or academic titles or other public and corporation certifications, but they depend on how these certifications become effective behaviors and practices in delivering services. On the side of "acted" competences (table 8), those effectively adopted by call center operators, social representations confirm the above mentioned framework. In particular, 70% of the workers claimed that they "always" use relational competences in their working tasks, and 20% do it "often". The same results concern the use of information technology competences and the predisposition to team-working. Another confirmation is the rare use of foreign languages. The unique difference is related to a quite widespread use of sale and marketing competences, above all for *outbound* operators, due to the specific kind of activities such as telemarketing, sales, market analysis, etc.

Table 8: in your working activity, how frequently do you use the following competences?

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always	no response
Relational - communicative competences	2.7	5.3	20.1	70.2	1.7
Information technology competences	7.5	22.8	30	36.5	3.1
Knowledge of foreign languages	49.3	39.9	3.2	1.5	6.1
Sale and marketing competences	31.7	19.6	23.8	20.4	4.5
Team-working orientation	11.8	17.8	25	41.5	3.9

Of particular interest is the analysis of contracts with which workers are hired (table 9). With this regard our research shows that working in a call center is, at least formally, less precarious than it appears in social and media representations. In fact, there emerges a difference between "standard contracts" and "non-standard" or non-traditional ones (Regalia 2009). On one side, probably as a result of the law n. 17/2006 implementation, the great majority (50.4%) of the workers have a full time contract, the 16,7% a fixed term contract, as opposed to the 22% who are employed with project or short term contracts. Between the various areas of the country there are significant differences. For example in the Centre of Italy (Lazio) there is concentrated the highest percentage of full time workers (60.4%) whereas the lowest (42.3%) may be found in the South (Calabria) along with the highest percentage of atypical contracts (40.1%). In general, atypical contracts regard almost exclusively *outbound* operators (83,9%) who have the duty of calling customers and convincing them, with different levels of intensity, to buy the

product. The effort required of workers is therefore directed to persuade clients, along with the number of contacts and results achieved. *Inbound* operators instead are pre-eminently hired with permanent contracts (72%). In this case customers' calls are in-coming and this would require a more experienced worker who is able to professionally deal with clients, with their needs and expectations. For these tasks the effort is related to listening to clients, to the management of calls, to solving problems, always offering a good image of the company. For this reason it is necessary to achieve the greater workers' commitment through full time contracts. As far as the spread of temporary contracts, this kind of employment relation is particularly adopted by call centers located in Sicily followed by those in Lazio and Lombardy.

Table 9: At present, what is your employment contract (by workers' tasks)?

	Dependent with full time contract		Dependent with fixed terms contract		Labor training contract		Project contract		Occasional cooperation		Stage, placement training		Temporary contracts		Other forms	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
Exclusively inbound operator	393	45,5	92	32,2	17	37,8	29	7,7	3	16,6	8	66,8	50	65,8	3	15,8
Pre-eminently inbound operator	229	26,5	82	28,7	15	33,3	12	3,2	1	5,6	1	8,3	9	11,8	8	42,1
Both inbound and outbound activities	116	13,4	36	12,6	4	8,9	15	4	1	5,6	1	8,3	5	6,6	1	5,3
Pre-eminently outbound operator	42	4,9	20	7	3	6,7	50	13,3	3	16,6	1	8,3	6	7,9	2	10,5
Exclusively outbound operator	64	7,4	54	18,9	6	13,3	266	70,6	10	55,6	1	8,3	6	7,9	5	26,3
n. r.	20	2,3	2	0,6	0	0	5	1,2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	864	100	286	100	45	100	377	100	18	100	12	100	76	100	19	100

Working time is another key aspect that needs to be considered. In accordance with the latest national collective bargaining agreement (CCNL) signed in February 2011, which covers around 160.000 telecommunication workers, labor organization within call centers is based on a shifts system that may vary from a minimum of 4 up to 8 hours each on a five days week, arranged in order to cover the 24h of service activities. The agreement established a minimum pay, around

550 Euros per month, for those operators who work 4 hours a day (20 per week), while the salary reaches 1.000 Euros for those ones who work 8 hours a day (40 hours weekly). In addition, the role of trade unions has been finally recognized through their necessary involvement and negotiation in cases of company restructuring processes that may led to lay off or employment level reductions. Concerning this, looking at the weekly working time scheduling (including over-time work), there are no particular differences among workers. In fact, 23.3% of our sample work for thirty hours a week; 17.3% for forty hours; 17% for twenty hours, while only 4.1% declared to work less than twenty hours a week. Overall, the vast majority of workers (66.1%) affirmed that they appreciate their working time and shifts, with no difference by gender and age.

In order to better understand the organization and the labor practices within call centers it is crucial to draw attention to the task carried out by workers (table 9). In fact research findings confirm a clear difference between *inbound* call center operators, who represent 34.8% of the whole workforce, and *outbound* operators who account for 24.2%. These percentages become even higher if we consider those workers who perform their task pre-eminently in *inbound* or *outbound*. From a qualitative point of view both typologies have different characteristic features that allow us to define two different identikits of call center operators. In particular, looking at the education level, graduated workers are mainly concentrated (58.4%) among those who work exclusively or pre-eminently in *inbound*, while *outbound* operators generally have a high school diploma (48.7%). On the other hand, if we take into account the age, *inbound* operators tend to be a little bit older than *outbound* ones. 23.5% have an age included in the range 26-30 years, followed by another 22.6% aged between 31 and 35 as opposed to *outbound* workers whose highest percentage (23%) belongs to the range 20-25 years old. Another slight difference concerns gender; in particular 32.8% of women have an *inbound* job and this percentage decreases to 26.2% with an *outbound* task.

Table 10: At present, in your call center which task do you perform?

Tasks	N.	%
Exclusively inbound operator	597	34.8
Pre-eminently inbound operator	360	21
Both inbound and outbound activities	179	10.4
Pre-eminently outbound operator	127	7.4
Exclusively outbound operator	415	24.2
n. r.	37	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.715</b>	<b>100</b>



Table 11 gives us a detailed picture of tasks performed by call center operators within the different suggested typologies thus underlining the main differences and similarities. A first aspect concerns the private or public nature of the call centers, in particular public call centers and, above all, those with over 200 workers employ almost exclusively (91.7%) *inbound* operators whose profile we have seen above tends to be more specialized and less precarious than other operators. Similarly, the *inbound* task is more widespread in big size specialized or dedicated call centers (66.2%) and in the generalist ones (58.2%).

Table 11: Tasks performed by call center operators for call center typology

Tasks	Private, generalist, out-sourcing, + 200 employees		Private, generalist, out-sourcing, - 200 employees		Private, dedicated, + 200 employees		Private, dedicated, - 200 employees		Public utility with more than 200 employees		Public utility with less than 200 employees		Total	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
Exclusively inbound operator	226	36.6	39	20	168	47.3	3	2.1	77	49.4	76	32.1	597	34.8
Pre-eminently inbound operator	133	21.6	17	8.7	67	18.9	8	5.7	66	42.3	65	27.4	360	21
Both inbound and outbound activities	78	12.6	20	10.3	29	8.2	21	15	11	7.1	17	7.2	179	10.4
Pre-eminently outbound operator	26	4.2	20	10.3	28	7.9	43	30.8	0	0	10	4.2	127	7.4
Exclusively outbound operator	132	21.4	94	48.2	60	16.9	65	46.4	1	0.6	63	26.6	415	24.2
n. r.	22	3.6	5	2.5	3	0.8	0	0	1	0.6	6	2.5	37	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>617</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>355</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1715</b>	<b>100</b>

The second finding is that the “size”, in terms of workforce employed, is definitely important. In other words it seems that small sized call centers tend to be characterized by a greater use of *outbound* workers; this is particularly true for dedicated/single-task organizations as well as for the generalist/multitasking ones under 200 employees.

Even from the point of view of salaries earned by operators there are differences directly linked to workers’ tasks and to employment contracts (Table 12). Overall, almost half the employees of our survey (43%) are included within the *range* 500-800 Euros per month, but a significant percentage (about 20%) of the workforce can be found over the psychological edge

of 1.000 Euros. On the other hand, only 12% of call center operators monthly earn less than 500 Euro. In a more detailed analysis, we find that the *inbound* or *outbound* task deeply influences the payment structure. In particular, 47.6% of operators who work exclusively in *inbound* earn a salary that may vary between 500 and 800 Euros, but the other 50% is more or less equally distributed over that limit and, therefore, *inbound* workers may also earn up to 1.500 Euros per month according to their working time and length of time employed. On the contrary, 37.8% of *outbound* workers earn less the 500 Euros whereas 38.3% of them are included in the intermediate range.

Table 12: Salaries earned according to the call center operator task

Range (salaries in euro)	Exclusively inbound operator		Pre- eminently inbound operator		Both inbound and outbound activities		Pre- eminently outbound operator		Exclusively outbound operator		n. r.	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
Less than 500 euro	17	2.8	4	1.1	5	2.8	20	15.7	157	37.8	4	10.8
From 500 to 800 euro	284	47.6	165	45.9	82	45.8	43	33.9	159	38.3	5	13.5
From more than 800 to 1.000	168	28.2	102	28.3	48	26.8	36	28.3	44	10.6	6	16.2
From more than 1.000 to 1.300	92	15.4	59	16.4	32	17.9	17	13.4	35	8.4	11	29.7
From more than 1.300 to 1.500	19	3.2	12	3.3	7	3.9	8	6.3	8	1.9	1	2.7
More than 1.500 euro	9	1.5	15	4.2	4	2.2	2	1.6	5	1.2	3	8.2
n. r.	8	1.3	3	0.8	1	0.6	1	0.8	7	1.8	7	18.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>597</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>415</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100</b>

To support our analysis based on job inequalities related to tasks and employment contracts, research data confirm that among call center operators who earn less than 500 euro there are workers with temporary (73.4%) and fixed term contracts (13.5%). The highest percentage (35.9%) of workers with full time employment contracts are instead in the range 800-1000 euro and another 54.5% belong to the further ranges up to 1.300 euro. Furthermore, a basic (fixed) pay is the traditional modality of payment for *inbound* operators (60.3%) while *outbound* workers usually have both a fixed base pay integrated by incentives or economic bonuses related to the achievement of company objectives.

### Human resources, employment and industrial relations

As argued by Normann (1984) many service activities, among which call centers, may be considered as *personality intensity*. For this reason several companies mainly invest in “social innovation” (Pierre and Tremblay, 2012) which means to invent and re-define roles, to discover new ways to manage and improve workers’ capabilities, to define new systems of learning, developing a positive organizational environment and good relations among workers. In fact, such a positive approach within the organization makes the achievement of business targets possible and simpler. Starting from this idea, we asked our respondents some questions in order to explore the nature and “quality” of employment relations and the level of workers’ satisfaction on various issues concerning their labor activities.

Overall from workers’ social representations emerge a dynamic environment in which the level of interaction among call center operators, as well as with team leaders is quite high at the workplace. By looking at the relations with the management (Table 13) the majority of workers underline the attention of managers to the establishment of a good social environment within the organizations, as well as a focus on workers’ needs, at the same time it is clear the management concern about the results.

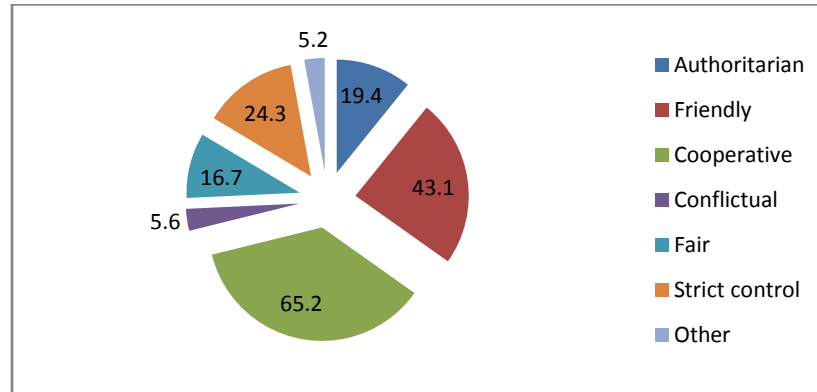
Table 13: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your managers?

	Completely disagree		Mainly disagree		Mainly agree		Completely agree		n. r.	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
They take into account the wellbeing of workers	271	15.8	498	29	769	44.8	142	8.3	35	2.1
They pay attention to what workers say	185	10.8	504	29.4	820	47.8	172	10	34	2
They allow workers cooperation	164	9.6	416	24.3	894	52.1	201	11.7	40	2.3
They do not pay attention to workers’ needs	436	25.4	683	39.8	442	25.8	100	5.9	54	3.1
They only care about company’ goals	257	15	479	27.9	554	32.3	383	22.3	42	2.4
They pay attention to working conditions	243	14.2	462	26.9	791	46.1	180	10.5	39	2.3

There, emerges therefore, a working environment, which is, at least apparently, without conflicts and tensions both at a horizontal level among workers, and at a vertical level, with superiors with whom workers establish relationships that are mainly based on collaboration (65.2%) and friendship (43.1%), as described in Figure 1. From this point of view, there seems to be a “democratic” leadership style based mainly on the informality of the relationships and a downwards devolution of responsibilities, in order to stimulate the sense of belonging and to

enhance the participation of workers. Only for 19.4% of them does the leadership assume an authoritarian character, and for 24.3% it has strict control over the workers.

Figure 1: managerial style in dealing with workers – % values



The just outlined scenario is strengthened by the data shown in Table 14 and relating to some aspects that are particularly important in the management of human resources such as, for example, the ability of management to motivate the staff, the quality and specificity of training offered, the clarity of the tasks and roles according to the operating contract. Some problems arise, however, from the difficulty of properly exploiting the potential of individuals within organizations, as well as to recognize and give credit to the results achieved by the operators.

Overall, also in the case of call centres, the search for organizational commitment by workers is a central element in managerial strategies to increase the efficiency of workers and, at the same time, to improve the quality of the service and this is substantially realized in the creation of a more pleasant working environment, free from conflict and tension, in which incentives and control over workers are carefully measured to obtain the best result. As noted by Pierre and Tremblay “*there are call centers that do make efforts to couple economic and social performance taking into consideration working conditions*” (2011, p. 54).

In particular, management does have an option offering better working conditions to increase its retention rate as well as workers’ involvement to achieve quality and better economic performance.

Table 14: Thinking about your call centre, how much do you agree with following statements?

	Completely disagree		Mainly disagree		Mainly agree		Completely agree		n. r.	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
The staff is motivated to work efficiently	253	14.8	440	25.7	816	47.6	166	9.7	40	2.2
The training offered is adequate to perform the tasks required	165	9.6	438	25.5	875	51	193	11.3	44	2.6
The organization is keen to exploit the individual potential	438	25.5	614	35.8	536	31.3	83	4.8	44	2.6
The work is consistent with the contractual status of operators	254	14.8	433	25.2	781	45.5	194	11.4	53	3.1
The results of operations are recognized and valued	390	22.7	580	33.8	596	34.8	98	5.7	51	3
Operators are not provided with appropriate means to accomplish assigned projects	388	22.6	671	39.1	494	28.8	111	6.5	51	3
The organization promotes the acquisition of new skills by workers	289	16.9	578	33.7	674	39.3	117	6.8	57	3.3

The policies of incentives and control do not seem to generate particular conflict or discomfort, at least at the aggregate level. Our sample indicates the existence of a system of incentives and penalties of a traditional matrix (Table 15). In this regard, 85.3% of respondents said that the failure to reach the goals set by the company has consequences. A verbal warning is the most common result (66.5%), followed by economic penalty connected to premiums (48.4%). Obstacles to career progression are a negative consequence that almost half of all workers (40.6%) expect, together with a penalty in the allocation of tasks (34.5). The system of sanctions perceived by the operators goes up to job loss, expected by 36.9% of respondents in case of failure to reach targets.

Table 15: Consequences deriving from missing the company targets

	N.	%
Verbal warnings	1.141	66.5
Penalties in terms of premiums and economic benefits	830	48.4
Worse employment relations	765	44.6
Obstacles in career opportunities	697	40.6
Non confirmation of the job	634	37
Job loss	633	36.9
Penalties in allocation of working tasks	591	34.5
Altro	43	2.5

*Note: respondents could give more than one answer to the question*

The type of contract affects fears of job loss; whereas for project workers it is expected, and to some extent inherent in the nature of the contract, such a concern is not conceivable in the operators with permanent contracts. However, 21.3% of these express the fear of losing their jobs. The type of call center and the dimensions suggest, moreover, a reading of more diverse business cases. In particular, it is known that of the people who are afraid of losing their jobs as a penalty for not achieving the results set 52.3% belong to the generalist type of call center with less than 200 employees. In contrast, call centers, especially larger ones, appear to provide peace of mind to operators in terms of job stability. Overall, as a result of quite effective human resources strategies, only 24,5% of the interviewed call center' operators decided to join trade unions, mainly to protect their interests at the workplace (16,7%), due to ideological reasons (2,6%), or for the services delivered (1,6%). Union membership is higher in Southern regions than in the North and in the Centre of the country; furthermore *inbound* operators (with full time contracts) are more willing than *outbound* ones to join unions especially in big sized call centers both specialized and generalists. More often (75,5%) instead call centers still remain *union free* organizations (Table 16) in which workers prefer a *vis-a-vis* relation with team leaders and company managers (20,7%), even because they do not recognize any significant role to unions considered scarcely visible and influent at the workplace or in line with the management.

Table 16: Why didn't you join the union?

	N.	%
No, in case of problems I directly talk to managers	354	20,7
No, due to Unions do not count a lot in the firm	213	12,4
No, I do not believe in the way unions behave	183	10,7
No, I do not trust in the shop-stewards	112	6,5
No, because of unions share company interests	45	2,6
No, due to the cost of the membership card	41	2,4
No, due to the lack of services delivered	37	2,2
No, due to I do not need of them	25	1,5
No, if you are a union member you have no chances in the company	19	1,2
No, I do not care	15	0,9
No, I fear to lose the job	12	0,7
No, but I think to join it	11	0,6
No, due to union' strategies weaken the company	9	0,5
No, I did not think about it yet	8	0,4
No, for other reasons	125	7,2
N. r.	85	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.294</b>	<b>75,5</b>

Less diffused, as reasons not to join the union, are the cost of membership, the lack of services, and unexpectedly the fear to lose the job (0.7%).

Finally, to better understand the impact and the effectiveness of managerial strategies on call center operators, we asked them to express their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Table 17) regarding some key items related to the workplace concerning both material and psycho-social aspects. Workers' social representations seem to confirm the Herzberg (1966) theory according to which there is a clear path to overcome the negative effects introduced by Taylor with *Scientific management*.

Table 17: to what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied about the following aspects?

	<b>Completely dissatisfied</b>		<b>Mostly dissatisfied</b>		<b>Mostly satisfied</b>		<b>Completely satisfied</b>		<b>n. r.</b>	
	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>
Possibility to count on a suitable pension	737	43	483	28.2	384	22.4	51	3	60	3.5
Career opportunities	748	43.6	609	35.5	271	15.8	36	2.1	51	3
Possibility to count on a stable job	403	23.5	473	27.6	624	36.4	167	9.7	48	2.8
Receive an income suitable to the person's needs	399	23.3	591	34.5	567	33.1	112	6.4	46	2.7
Decisional autonomy	425	24.8	549	32	602	35.1	93	5.4	46	2.7
Possibility to do interesting activities	401	23.4	588	34.2	598	34.9	82	4.8	46	2.7
Working relationship with superiors	259	15.1	436	25.4	822	48	148	8.6	50	2.9
Working relationship with colleagues	38	2.2	137	8	1.068	62.3	426	24.8	46	2.7
Possibility to make the most of the studies undertaken	754	44	532	31	318	18.6	54	3.1	57	3.3
Opportunity to reconcile work with private life	114	6.6	303	17.7	914	53.3	345	20.1	39	2.3

Call center operators are almost exclusively satisfied, and in different ways, by those contents which are "external" to labor such as salary, full time employment, working conditions, good relations with colleagues and managers. On the contrary, low level of workers' satisfaction concern the "internal" and more important content of labor which means career opportunities, greater involvement and participation, greater autonomy over their work, more creative tasks, a greater correspondence with their study background. It clearly emerges that management succeed in satisfying those aspects which are external to labor, but it becomes harder to accomplish with those requests that are instead directly linked and can definitely improve



workers' satisfaction, as well as motivation through a job-enrichment process. Therefore, looking at the examined call centers and at the specific tasks required by this job, we suggest that managers be more willing and pay greater attention to reduce workers' dissatisfaction rather than stimulate workers and increase their motivation.

## CONCLUSIONS

After having analyzed some of the most meaningful data emerging from this research, we briefly outline some inherent aspects related to labor organization and employment relations in the call centers in the survey areas. A first significant aspect to be underlined concerns the figure of the operators, the characteristics and the motivations that influence these people in their work choice. Without any attempt to generalize the results of our analysis, the data give a rather heterogeneous picture in which the work in the call center and, above all, the figure of the operator assume a meaning and peculiar characteristics according to the specific regional context (North Vs South). In particular, in Calabria there is the highest percentage of young people below the age of thirty (61.8%), and in Lombardy 35.8% are over forty. Analogous considerations are true for the level of education, in fact, among the operators of the Calabrian and Sicilian call centers there are the highest percentages of young graduates and university students. However, it is above all in the motivations and on the workforce choice that the social context and the relationship network have a fundamental impact contributing to define the different meanings attributed to work. Altogether, in this period of crisis and widespread absence of work, the lack of alternatives represents, in all the analyzed cases, the principal motivation pushing young people to work in a call center. In addition, in the South of Italy, in many cases this choice represents their only possible opportunity given the fragility of the economic productive system. In these areas call centers invest a lot and they occupy economic spaces left free by other entrepreneurial activities, absorbing the young work force which has a high-level of education and that cannot find any other position. In Lazio and especially in the case of Lombardy, instead, as well as the lack of alternatives, there is a wider acceptance of the idea of flexibility of work which is understood as the possibility to do other paid activities, to have work times that are not rigidly defined; or more simply to reconcile work and life time. Also the idea of temporariness gives us a measure of the differences between the analyzed contexts. In fact, almost a third of the interviewees (31.3%) have worked in the same call center for between one to three years. But above all, 66.9% of the interviewees declare not to be currently looking for a new job because they get on well where they are or because they are by now "resigned" to their lot. Among those people who are not searching for a new job "because it is okay like this", 39% are found in Lombardy and 34% in Lazio, while the highest percentage among those

people who declare they want to change jobs is recorded in Calabria and in Sicily (26.5%), or rather in those regions in which the operators are younger, with a higher level of education and more inclined to equate the studies done with the search for a better job. In substance, in the two Southern areas, which are more handicapped from the socio-economic point of view, the call centers become traps into which it is easy to fall, but from which it is difficult to get out even if you want to. While in the two cases of the Center and the North more weight is given by the interviewed workers to the subjective value of the rational choice, of the utilitarian dimension.

With regard to the sociological debate on de-qualification of work as opposed to greater flexibility and job enrichment, work in the call centers does not ask for particular skills or abilities. What is important is the ability to communicate positively with customers, to interact with the others, to know how to resolve the problems if and when they occur. The *savoir-faire* prevails, therefore, over the *know-how*. The mismatch between possessed competences and those enacted is meaningful, there is no professional enrichment, above all for the *outbound* operators who repetitively follow the same “script”, which in the long run ends up with producing anxieties and frustrations in the young operators. Notwithstanding this, the climate inside the analyzed organizations is predominantly positive; in fact, there are good relationships between the colleagues and with the management. These are characterized by a collaborative leadership style, which is scarcely authoritarian and is directed to favor the commitment of the operators through the creation of a working environment in which friendship and informality prevails. In reality, the harmony and the collaboration that seem to characterize the surface relationships between the subjects, and the appearance of operator autonomy in the carrying out of the job do not hide the imperative of the production and the objectives that must necessarily be reached. Nevertheless, despite the emergence of some contradictions in managing people at work as well as the recent development in terms of national collective bargaining and union recognition, the great majority of call center operators interviewed (75,5%) prefer not to join trade unions opting for a direct and more effective relation with the management.

In general it is necessary to underline that, however disqualified and alienating it can appear, the job in the call centers introduces some aspects that nowadays must necessarily be taken into consideration. Above all, there emerges a very great distinction between *inbound* and *outbound* operators, to which there is added the possibility of a greater or lesser formalization of the employment relationship, full time permanent contract or project contract. The reading of the data substantially confirms the clean split between the two modalities to which correspond tasks, safeguards, different retributive levels with relative different intensity in the degree of work satisfaction. If, therefore, the *outbound* operators job is traditionally translated into what can be defined as “bad job”, the *inbound* job, both in terms of content and of image, socially appears

more acceptable, to the point of becoming a “good job” even for the young graduates, especially in the regions of the South.

Besides the territorial variable and the difference between the two principal tasks, another noticeable aspect to be considered is represented by the typology of call center. The distinction we proposed between different types of call center in outsourcing, multi-tasking, specialization, being of public utility, suggests some important considerations that influence the modalities with which the work is done, on the operators’ condition, and on the motivation. A first aspect concerns the public or private nature of the service rendered. In general, in the call centers of public utility there is the highest percentage of operators that exclusively and primarily work in *inbound* (over 90%), while in the multi-tasking and specialized call centers the two modalities have the tendency to combine. A further element, tightly connected to the type of call center, is represented by the dimension in terms of number of posts and of operators. In the smaller call centers the prevailing modality is the *outbound* calls, there are generally better working conditions and a higher level of satisfaction. As far as regards the working conditions, the most problematic aspects are found, instead, in the large multi-tasking call centers in which a sense of unease is manifested more frequently and the workers report lower levels of satisfaction.

In conclusion, through these data the investigation suggests an image of the Italian call center as a non-homogeneous reality, since organizational work and production modalities vary in function of some fundamental variables, such as the context in which the center operates, the business dimensions, the specialization of the activities or the size of the offer of the services, the work modality that is predominantly used, the public or private nature. The combination of such characteristics leads to significant differences, both in terms of work organization and conditions, in the profile of the operator as well as in the management of the working relationships. Taking into account such differences, it is possible to understand the operation and the internal dynamics of the call centers and, above all, the choices of young people, who in various contexts opt for this type of career.

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