A Pie In The Face Of Management:  
The Staging Of Slapstick And Kitsch In The “Fun  
Industry” Of Call Centres  

*Stream 4 Theatrics of Capitalism*

**Joan Eveline**  
*University of Western Australia*

**Patricia Todd**  
*University of Western Australia*

**Leonie V. Still**  
*University of Western Australia*

**Judy Skene**  
*University of Western Australia*

**CONTACT DETAILS:**  
Dr. Joan Eveline,  
UWA Business School  
University of Western Australia,  
Telephone: 61-8-9380-3446  
Fax: 61-8-9380 1055  
E.mail: jeveline@ecel.uwa.edu.au

Dr. Patricia Todd,  
UWA Business School  
University of Western Australia,  
E.mail: ttodd@ecel.uwa.edu.au

Professor Leonie Still,  
Director, Centre for Women & Business,  
Graduate School of Management,  
University of Western Australia.  
E.mail: lstill@ecel.uwa.edu.au

Dr Judy Skene  
Student Services  
University of Western Australia,  
E.mail: jskene@admin.uwa.edu.au
Scene 1
In the Delhi training centre the Australian consultant holds up a board covered in icons. Young women in saris and young men in crisp shirts pick out a koala, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and a back street ‘dunny’, then guess what they mean to a Downunder audience. These university graduates, it seems, are putting aside their cultural identities, modifying their accents and changing their names so they can ‘pass’ as ‘dinkum’ Aussies with their international customers. The TV documentary predicts: ‘Its only a matter of time before tens of thousands of Indians will be saying “g’day mate” when they answer the phone.’

Scene 2
Large red plastic hearts festoon the restaurant for the ‘Bumper Breakfast’. When the National Call Centre Manager of the Year takes the stage her performance is chummy and punchy. Today is Valentine’s day and the perfect vehicle for displaying her own call centre’s heart-shaped emblem. But while ‘having a heart’ is central to both her own performance and that of her operators, she claims, ‘having fun’ is the way to ensure everyone understands the team effort of customer care. Her final ‘treat’ for the audience of call centre managers is a video showing how to do it – complete with team leaders in muppet costumes using kids’ tricycles to get a laugh out of the operators as they monitor timing and techniques.

Introduction
This paper analyses the theatrics of call centres, played out in management techniques and performed through the working lives of managers. Our focus is on the staging of the industry in one of the newer sites for call centre development in Australia. In particular we investigate the theatrics surrounding the crucial double-bind for call centre management — where globalising economies propel a drive for ever-cheaper, fast-turnover teleservices, contradicted by a simultaneous need for the time-consuming labour of ‘customer care.’ The capitalist script of mass consumerism, we suggest, encourages both operators and managers to act out a relational intimacy that readily resolves into kitsch. We argue that this instrumental relationality attains the properties of kitsch in that it is mass-produced, necessarily cheap and is supposed to be taken perfectly seriously, even when the task is ‘making fun’.

Importantly, we show that the production of relational kitsch is tightly gendered. Our two-stage process of analysis assesses how managers ‘do gender’ in the performance of their roles as both producers of kitsch-like relationality and as instrumental ‘fun-makers.’ The first stage of our analysis examines the role of selection, supervision and evaluation of employees in churning out mass produced relationality designed to prompt desire for the consumption of ‘customer care’. In the second we examine how the concept of ‘fun’ shapes a similar form of instrumental relationality in the call centre environment itself, emphasising staging techniques of slapstick and audience participation. As we show in this paper ‘having fun’ and ‘making fun’ may be fast becoming more than a technique for managing the hearts and responses of employees. They can also be techniques for helping call centre managers to learn their lines and seriously perform their gendered roles in the new
'fun-making' industry.

The paper is based on an extensive study in Western Australia (WA). It uses survey and interview data from call centre operatives, team leaders and managers on how the work is organized, including selection, training, incentives and performance management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 managers from a variety of call centre types (in terms of industrial sector, size, number of agents, and nature of work). We deploy the term Customer Service Agent (CSA) for employees, as used by both the Australian Teleservices Association (ATA, the peak national employer body) and the unions.

The ‘Fast Capitalist’ Script
Recent interest in call centres has been sparked by reported high labour turnover rates (Kinnie et al, 2000), and Orwellian descriptions of call centres in some academic research (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). More recently still, attention has focused on call centres as the ultimate example of labour markets competing on a global stage. Newsprint and TV talk shows depict customer service operators in Delhi or Soweto being trained in acting and performance skills — learning their lines about Aussie rules and koalas with a downunder drawl for the Australian market while watching The Bill and Yes, Minister to perfect their British accents and scripts for UK customers (McKay, 2001:19; ABCTV Documentaries, 2003).

A decade ago, being accessible meant having a call centre with a toll-free number and reasonably good telephone support. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, multiple channels of access (telephone, email, internet etc), 24 hours x 7 days a week operations, and one-stop shopping had become the ‘best’ practice for which to strive. Given the emergence of wireless standards (e.g. Wireless Application Protocol — WAP), speech recognition capabilities, global positioning systems (GPS) and other new capabilities the development of call centres may have as far to go as Thursday’s child. Some seers even predict that before the industry has established itself in a systematic way (that is size of centres, capability etc.) technological developments such as voice recognition technology will render most established structures and processes redundant (Boreham, 2000:33). The industry, then, is in some ways difficult to examine and understand because of its ever-changing diversity of roles, markets, technologies and wide range of types (Cleveland and Minucci, 2000:45). One of the questions that may well keep call centre managers awake at night is how many of these types will disappear in the near future, as globalisation finds new labour supplies and technology introduces more sophisticated forms to stimulate and satisfy consumer demand.

Despite such threats of future decline, the call centre industry is expanding rapidly throughout western economies. Knights and Odih (1999) cited a prediction of 20 per cent annual growth in the UK, which would have equated to one in every 50 jobs being held by a call centre worker by the year 2000. Australia is in a similar situation. According to a recent survey conducted by the Australian Services Union (2000:4), call centres are one of the fastest growing industries in Australia, with an annual growth rate of 25 per cent. There are estimates of 200,000 staff in approximately 4000 call centres in Australia with the numbers increasing each year, albeit at a slower rate as the industry matures. Call centre jobs accounted for almost one-half of new private sector jobs in 1999 (ACTU, 2000).

Time management dictates the overarching problematic for call centre managers in the conflict they face between keeping customers happy and maximising cost efficiencies (Knights and Odih, 2001). This continual tension produces a key
problematic for the shaping of human resource techniques: how to keep call centre operators motivated while optimising managerial and environmental control. Control comes through work intensification, intense behavioural shaping by non-stop electronic and co-worker surveillance, and expectations of high proficiency in translating micro-electronic data into meaningful customer communication (Vaught et al, 2000). Yet overt control strategies also bring their costs of high staff turnovers, the need for continual training (Knights and Odih, 1999; TARP, 1997), and customer resistance (Bennington et al, 2000).

The theatrics of the HR industry leads management to look for the answer in the enculturation of customer service operators (Taylor and Tyler, 2000). In much the same way as the graduates in India or Soweto are expected to ‘pass’ when deploying the vernacular and cultural mores of their international customers, operators are expected to ‘pass’ as ‘genuine’ creators of emotional and relational connection, in a process that Hochschild (1983) called ‘deep acting’. Yet like the process of ‘growing up’ in a particular culture, the process of building sustainable relationships is as time consuming and highly tuned as a well-learnt craft and is therefore apt to be costly (Fletcher, 1999).

Meeting the demand for quality service presents a problem for call centres as sector growth depends forcing down labour costs. Throughout the history of capitalism, large-scale cost-cutting has traditionally involved both mass production and cheap labour. In the management of call centres, however, production is nothing without consumption (du Gay, 1996). To achieve call centre viability, therefore, we suggest that the aim of management is to mass-produce an instrumental relationality that will activate desire for consumption at the lowest possible cost.

In the 1860s the Schwabischer artists of southern Germany made quick money by churning out cheap and formulaic paintings for the tourist market. In so doing they earned their products the title of ‘kitsch’ — taken from the verb verkitschen ‘to churn out cheaply’ (Linstead, 2002:660). In kitsch the key to consumer desire is the production of mass sentiment: ‘kitsch works because it reminds us that we are not alone’ (Linstead, 2002:665). The consumerism that the 21st century call centre management seeks to produce deserves no less a label since it also relies on such relational sentiment. The ‘visual, verbal or aural’ images of kitsch achieve their impact in social organisation, according to Montgomery (cited in Linstead, 2002:660), through ‘their ability to turn thought and feeling into formula, therefore into “products” for consumption.’

From individual managers to peak industry bodies, a vast amount of energy and resources goes into producing the formulae for the instrumental relationality of call centres. In selection and training, for example, key requirements of employees are ‘Customer Service’ and ‘Attitude’ (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). In fact, some centres do not engage new employees unless they have ‘heart’. Psychological testing and behavioural assessment, rather than prior experience or ‘hard’ skills, are becoming standard techniques to assess selection and performance ‘suitability’ in some of the larger call centres in Australia (Kinnie et al, 2000). Ongoing coaching, mentoring and observation by both one-on-one and remote practices are also used to ‘help’ the employee in performing the ‘right’ attitude and ‘relationship’ approach to the customer (Houlihan, 2000).

A significant majority of the cast selected to perform these tightly scripted roles are women. The job is woven through with the feminised work that Hochschild (1983) calls ‘emotional labour’, since it demands ‘appropriate telephone manner and behaviours including the ever-present necessity to “smile down the telephone”’.
(Taylor and Bain, 1999:103). No Australian research on how call centre management ‘do gender’ has yet been conducted, and research on the gendered nature of work in call centres elsewhere is rare. However, in one useful study Knights and McCabe (2001) examine the masculine characteristics of managerial control in call centres, while the account by Sturdy (1998) of subjectivities produced by customer care and consumerism draws on the gender dynamics of ‘deep acting’ and ‘surface acting’ outlined by Hochschild (1983). Yet in emphasizing the ‘wars’ over competing masculinities in call centres, Knights and McCabe (2001) fail to ask what such wars might mean for women, despite an analysis which shows an implicit understanding of how masculinities are defined against a devaluing of the ‘feminine.’ Similarly, Sturdy has some important points to make in his interpretation of the literature on ‘deep acting’ and ‘role embracement’ among service workers, yet he ignores gender when it comes to the core of his argument on consumer culture.

A more comprehensive attempt at a gender analysis of call centres comes from Taylor and Tyler (2000), who use the ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ of the ‘emotional labour’ framework of Hochschild (1983) to examine the gendered consequences of ‘quality’ initiatives in airline teleservices. Importantly, Taylor and Tyler argue that managers in their study believed that effective performance of emotional labour cannot be achieved without a degree of autonomous discretion being given to customer service agents. Thus they see quality management being built on the ‘expectation that service employees will work beyond managerial prescription when interacting with customers’ (Taylor and Tyler, 2000:91). Management of call centres, they conclude ‘assume that women workers in particular can accomplish this “discretionary” aspect of the job, utilizing skills which they supposedly possess by virtue of their sexual difference from men.’ In short managers tend to view women as having a ‘natural’ capacity for emotional labour which promises to require less rather than more training and monitoring (2000:91-92).

Similarly, other writers have identified a tussle between autonomous discretion and performative control as the ‘self-management’ of subjectivity in which ‘the (gendered) self has become a commodity . . . as we remake ourselves to meet the changing needs of (the organization)” (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001:49). In the act of self-management performativity is ‘as much a focus on “being seen to perform” as on the performance itself’ (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001:46). Although Taylor and Tyler make little of it in their analysis, they also show how in their study ‘being seen to perform’ operates through an expectation on female flight attendants to ‘pass’ as truly feminine. Female flight attendants, they write, ‘were seen as inherently capable of presenting themselves as “feminine”, as aesthetically pleasing’ (2000:87). In the analysis of the call centres in our study we show how the expectation on women to pass as ‘properly feminine’ is enacted in the requirement for an instrumental relationality that claims to pass as ‘genuine’. We suggest that because relational work is historically aligned with the feminine, the doing of gender in call centres is naturalized in the production of instrumental relationality.

**Setting the Scene**

In Australia the majority of call centre employees are located on the east coast. From the late 1990s in Australia, call centres began to move to regional areas and to other Australian cities. A number of factors have driven this change: incentives provided by State Governments and regional areas; the promise of cheaper wages in out-of-capital city locations; cheaper establishment costs; and reduced staff turnover. Because of the technology-dependence of the industry, rapid change is a constant dynamic with recent reports predicting a decline in the numbers of call centres (through rationalisation into larger units), and the advent of new generation
technology which will alter the way services are provided. Telstra, the biggest call
centre operator nationally with more than 200 centres has been in the process of
closing a centre a week since late 2000, with a loss of 7000 jobs over three years, in
a drive to cut costs (The Australian, November 24, 2000). As government centres
close, outsourced providers move in to take their place. As a rule staff in the newer
centres are employed at lower wages, they get fewer benefits and are more likely to
be casualised (Van den Broek, 2002).

As is typical of the Australian call centre industry, the 21 call centres included in our
research were quite diverse in size, operating hours and the industry in which they
were located. Eight were part of government business enterprises or the public sector
while the others were drawn from telecommunications, travel and transport, health,
finance, building and more general services sectors. The size of the call centres
ranged from less than 10 seats to up to 260 seats. Nine of the 21 were operating
seven days a week and six of these were operating 24 hours a day. Those not
operating 24 hours a day commenced work earlier than normal business hours,
reflecting their linkage to customers in the eastern states of Australia, who are in an
earlier time zone. The work at 11 of the centres was all inbound calls, only two were
fully outbound calls, the remainder involved a mix.

Rapid and dramatic change was a common theme. Eleven centres had been
established less than five years and two were under two years old. Half of the
managers interviewed had been in their current jobs for less than a year, suggesting
a substantial amount of change in management personnel was quite usual. As the
CCs became more established other changes occurred: the number of seats had
increased in half of the centres, there were ongoing changes to the technology and
two CCs had moved into new buildings. Major changes within the broader
organisation was the case also - ownership (four CCs), management (two CCs),
management structure (two CCs), organisational structure and work flow (seven
CCs).

The gender profile of their workforce showed a common pattern. Seventeen of the
call centres provided such data and in 14 of them more than 70% of their employees
were female. No centre had a majority of male employees. The supervisors (team
leaders) were predominantly women (although the proportion was less than that of
operators). Only one centre, with outbound sales, had a larger number of male than
female supervisors. The sex profile of call centre management contrasted with that of
employees: twelve CCs had a larger number of male than female managers,
including five that had only one manager.

In all other demographic respects there was wide variation. Employee numbers, for
example, ranged from less than 10 to 355, employee length of service varied
markedly, the age profile was diverse and half of the centres had a majority of part-
time employees. The physical conditions in which the CSAs were working also varied
substantially in terms of work space, arrangement of desks, noise levels and general
ambience. The complexity of the work varied both between and within the centres. In
seven the work was very routine and closely scripted. Others required far greater
discretion in the advice to be given by the CSAs although there were set protocols to
be followed.

**Principal Actors, Chorus and Mass-produced Customer Bonding**

Eleven of the 21 managers interviewed were male. Almost half of the interviewees
had been in their current jobs for less than a year. Four of the managers had
university degrees, five had a specific CC diploma and one had a Diploma in Training.
Fourteen had previous CC experience while 12 had worked in other jobs within the
industry in which their centre was located. More than half had worked in other states as managers or team leaders. In outlining how management practices develop instrumental relationality in pursuit of customer bonding we demonstrate some comparisons across our sample, interwoven with interview material. In order to produce depth of analysis within word length limits we draw our quotes from only 3 of the managers interviewed, two of whom stressed quality over fast turnover, and one who stressed the reverse.

All managers interviewed were very satisfied with their career prospects and none saw their current employment as a ‘dead end’. In some of the bigger centres we were told remuneration packages for managers exceeded $150,000 a year. The skills they had developed were regarded as portable to other CCs. Seven of the managers anticipated that their career would take them interstate. There was a sharp contrast in most of the centres between salaries and career prospects for managers and those offered their CSAs. The award rate paid in Western Australia is not as high as in Sydney and Melbourne, the full-time annual rate of around $30,000 is a long way from the salaries reportedly going to most managers and almost half of the centres were hiring predominantly part-time staff. Fifteen of the 21 managers acknowledged that there were no prospects of advancement for the majority of their operators, and that their selection procedures were based on gaining a ‘stable’ group of people who wanted no further advancement. On investigation the ‘people’ they employed for this turned out to be women, the majority in part-time jobs. As the male manager of “Y” noted:

A lot of people attracted to call centres are mothers, who want that bit of extra income. Not as attractive to men because you’re never going to get rich as a CSA. So we probably are dominated by women here, who just want to do it while kids at school. (Y, male)

Here, ‘dominated by women’ meant no more than that 80% of the operators were female. In terms of supervisory control, however, domination was a masculine prerogative: “Y” was the one site in which the majority of team leaders were men, and the two managers were also male. Y’s management strategy was now offering an environment in which ‘the brightest and best’ could be trained for bigger things:

we’re getting a few more guys, university students etc, who can see what kind of training we offer here and are going to say ‘I might become team leader, work in the credit department, become an analyst’ (Y, male).

But career mobility was only for the few. As this manager’s response with regard to recruitment shows, those who are expected to provide the organizational stability for customers are gendered into feminine roles, and those who provide future managerial material are gendered masculine through association with notions of ‘mobility’, ‘push’, ‘excel’ and ‘leaders’:

You need some of both. You need this core group of people who don’t want to move on, give you stability, happy to do the same job and not go anywhere, and our rosters are designed to fit in with people’s need to pick up the kids or whatever. Then you get these others who want to excel, push your overall benchmark up — develop your image as a top provider — and they’ll either become your team leaders and managers or go on to make a career in the industry. That’s good for us, gives us a lot of credit.

Being seen to perform ie developing ‘your image as a top provider’ was as important here as the actual customer service. Being a top performer, however, was not only
about career mobility but also about generating an image of ‘a bonding customer experience’ while keeping labour costs low:

Then too, if we’ve passed on a couple of good guys to other places and word gets around, the best people say ‘let’s go to Y where we’ll get that training.’ They’ll then be willing to forgo the extra few bucks an hour that they might get somewhere else. Money’s not everything.

The notion of ‘money’s not everything’ was carefully associated with the idea of some ‘higher’ motivating force, such as the value-adding to educational capital, in the effort to associate the ‘bonding customer experience’ with the idea of non-monetary care and consideration. This was linked with an expressed desire to overcome an earlier image of ‘cheap’ goods and service. We suggest that associating the call centre with quality or ‘genuine’ customer service was an attempt to overcome an impression that its relational products and manufactured goods could be seen as ‘kitschy’. In fact, under its new management regime Y was looking to establish itself as a leader in quality service. The new management strategy meant ‘taking the long-term view that would give us a stable workforce and show our customers that quality was our business, it was not just cost-driven.’ The strategy paid off as it won the centre an employer of the year award.

While a few students and ‘backpackers’ remained, the majority of Y staff were now women with family responsibilities, in stable part-time employment on individual contracts. Although labour costs were a little higher than with casuals, the stability the part-timers provided had paid off in overall cost benefits:

We’ve established a lower cost ratio than competitors. Ours are 30% less than others. But we don’t rest on that, we ask ‘how can we drive it down further?’ We now deal with four times as many customers for the same cost base (Y, male).

Ensuring that CSA’s were trained to ‘get all the necessary information out of customers first time up’ was one explanation for this cost benefit. Providing the context for generating the instrumental relationality needed here was assisted by regular and stable work hours, and a stable group of female employees who could be given the discretion to use their relational skills because these were something they had ‘naturally’. The work of Joyce Fletcher (2002) is useful here. Fletcher (2000:2) argues that behind the doing of gender at work lurks the tendency to see idealised images of two very different forms of effort: the private world where we ‘grow people’ and the public world of ‘producing goods’. These images shape in powerful and gendered ways our expectations of how women and men should act. The double bind for women is that conventional femininity is associated with nurturing or relational skills, which means that women can often (and are expected to) practice those skills more easily. However, relational skills are also associated both with the domestic sphere and with servicing the needs of the more powerful. As Fletcher (2002:3) notes “strong, societal beliefs about individual achievement and meritocracy” ensure that in workplaces relational skills are unconsciously associated “with a lack of power” in those practicing them. In this study of call centres management control assumes such a feminised lack of power in its formulae for instrumental relationality.

When it came to recruitment managers were far more likely to rate customer service skills and evidence of reliability higher than computing qualifications, although most noted basic keyboarding as important. Only in three cases did management require prior knowledge of the industry in which the call centre was located. Being a team player was listed by nine of the managers as important while being capable of
problem solving/exercising initiative were also identified by a number of the interviewees. Being able to manage relationships, however, was the most important aspect of quality. As the manager of “Maincorp” put it:

We are the ‘relationship managers’ of the whole company. We want clients to get a very positive experience from their time on the phone. They are distressed and we want to soothe and reassure them. You even have to think for them, make a call for them. On top of that we send out a knight in shining armour who fixes what’s wrong, tells you what’s wrong and gets you operating. So we see ourselves as the relationship builders and maintainers. Through that relationship we market all our other services. Our brand is extremely strong and its up to us to see it doesn’t get damaged or muddied. (Maincorp, male).

The narrative here feminises the organisation’s phone work (soothing and reassuring) and masculinises the fixing of equipment (knight in shining armour). Such descriptions of work tasks reflect and shape the ‘doing of gender’ within the labour process, naturalising the fact that 70% of the CSAs in this centre were female.

There was some evidence that relational skills used by women operators were less visible, since they were seen as natural for women, whereas the characteristics attributed to men were more visible and highly valued:

We have predominantly women staff, that’s because mainly women apply. Lots of phone contact attracts more women. Part-time here because more suited to women. The money’s very good here and we expect the best. They have to be friendly, outgoing, customer focused, but they also have to be quick-witted enough to deal with people who can be quite distressed. That means being reassuring, but also problem-solving, thinking on your feet, being positive. But I’d never say that women do that better. When we get to dispatch you could say men do THAT better. There’s certainly more men in there, more of your logical process type of work, but I might be stereotyping as we’ve got some fantastic females in there as well. (Maincorp, male).

When it came to describing essential customer service attributes, however, the terms used invariably carried associations with relationality and softness. In short they signified feminine qualities. Some examples were “bright personality”, “passion”, “friendliness”, “good rapport” “emotional fitness” “pleasant” and “empathy.” Describing his recruitment practice the manager of “Y” said he asked himself the following:

Do they have all those ‘soft’ skills? Good listening style, emotional fitness, communicate effectively, can they problem solve? We’re looking at behaviours in recruiting and they’re not the sort of things you can teach easily. Its no good just having someone who can sell. It has to be someone who can transfer all their selling skills into their voice. You cant use your hands and body language here. We can teach them all the ‘hard’ skills, to navigate the computer, but its not easy to teach ‘em how to make that bonding customer experience happen. (Y, male).

Making that ‘bonding experience happen’ was a quality that ‘people’ had naturally, except that 80% of those who evidently did t best in his centre were women. This manager controlled the recruitment process by swiftly replacing anyone who didn’t show the capacity to ‘shape up’. In an effort to reduce turnover costs he came up with what he saw as a novel idea. Singling out his better operators he offered them a deal — bonuses for recruiting friends who did the job as well as they:
I say to them ‘check out your friends and decide whether you think they’ll shape up’. ‘Say to yourself I’m a Y role model, is this person a clone of me? Then if you recruit someone good, who stays for a year, there’s a bonus in it for you.’ But I say to them, ‘be sure they’re as good as you. Because if they don’t shape up — you go with them’. That way they work hard on the ones they recruit to make sure they last the distance (Y, male).

He had found that female students responded best to this tightly controlled relational recruiting. In fact, ‘I like to get young girls just starting their degree. We have ‘em for 3-4 years that way and the money’s not bad for students.’ Managing through cash incentives was one way of boosting his centre’s chances of being seen to do more than ‘churn out cheaply’ the mass sentiment that results in ‘customer bonding’ and ‘relational management’. “Y” was not alone in finding it difficult to recruit CSAs who could cheaply mass-produce ‘customer bonding’ in ways which satisfied the demand for ‘genuine’ quality. Five managers reported receiving plenty of applications but ‘difficulty in obtaining the right person’. And as we show in the final section, incentives and the ‘fun industry’ turn the need for ‘relational management’ back onto the employment relationship itself.

Performance Management, ‘Fun’ and Kitsch

The ‘fun’ phenomenon operating in call centres has been noted in earlier research (Alferoff & Knights, 2001). Coming from a labour process perspective such accounts clearly show ‘fun’ as an attempt to use aesthetics as a form of control, with the emphasis being on the contested terrain between managerial directives and forms of worker resistance. Similarly, Taylor and Bain (2001) examine the role of humour in call centres, arguing it has well-hidden capacities as a collective counterweight to managerial power. Before the current interest in call centres, however, the ‘excellence’ literature of the 1980s helped enshrine the notion that managers would do well to insist that employees have ‘fun’ at work. That idea has given credence to the seriousness with which Waterman and others nowadays cite fun as a key factor in the success of multi-billion dollar enterprises (cited in Linstead, 2002). In our sample, most managers took the idea of fun just as seriously, with fifteen out of the 21 saying they liked to create a ‘fun’ or ‘happy’ atmosphere. Linking ‘fun’ to work was designed to increase energy levels and team-based behaviour: ‘[Need to] keep up good spirits, is stressful work’ (CC4); ‘A performance based environment but have to have fun…. Can be boring’ (CC5); ‘It's a sales centre... so have to keep energy up’ (CC19); ‘fun environment where people want to work, be part of the team’ (CC1).

Some managers said they used ‘fun’ or fun-making as a way of ‘bonding’ staff to the organisation. For several of them achieving the required mix of relational management and cheap mass production of service could make staff retention a difficult exercise. The female manager of one of the largest call centres reported that her centre had a 50% yearly turnover rate. Her biggest problem was not so much getting operators who can do the job as ‘getting ones who can do the job and are happy to do it’ (Manager, “Sky”, female). “Sky” operates on a 7day a week, 24 hour basis and target call waiting time is 70% in 10 seconds. Despite using psychological testing to select potential recruits, Sky’s management team had been unable to develop the ideal recruitment profile for a CSA, since the only correlation between previous employment history and long-term employment was having worked in a fast food outlet. Like almost all of the others, Sky’s manager also claimed a gender-neutral stance on the suitability of women and men for the CSA role. Nonetheless, 70% of her CSAs were women, with a large proportion of them casuals. In creating a fun atmosphere Sky used ‘special events’ such as birthday celebrations or food fests, as well as competitive games (often thought up by CSAs) to generate that
atmosphere. Rewards ranged from dinner tickets to electrical goods. On-the-spot rewards such as chocolates and movie tickets were used ‘to reinforce the right behaviours’. The manager also liked to show that Sky had a policy of ‘we’re all in this together’: the day of the interview she was in shorts and T-shirt as she’d been washing the cars of the winners of that week’s competition. ‘This is quite boring work and you have to do something to keep up the energy. We put up decorations, use flowers etc just to bury the dullness.’ Unlike some of the other centres, which tended to downplay fun-making in favour of big cash incentives, Sky preferred to offer incentives which increased bonding between CSAs: ‘Big cash incentives just increase competition and undermine teamwork.’

For another manager, generating a fun-filled atmosphere was tricky because staff ‘have a huge resistance to teams because of fear of a competitive environment.’ Nonetheless, he was pressing ahead with persuading his mainly female, part-time staff to accept the need for a team-based approach, ‘and that’s been a process of constant reassurance.’ The challenge was never-ending. ‘It’s taken 3-4 years of pain and suffering, and we still get that rocky kind of response “oh, oh, more competition”. Its time they got over that.’ (Maincorp, male). Maincorp was attempting to shift the focus from ‘purely customer service to customer retention’ (repeat sales) ‘because to be able to grow that’s where we have to go.’ Like Sky, therefore, fun-making was a serious business designed to generate team-like behaviours and effervescent energy. Also like Sky, this manager preferred ‘team-building outings, such as taking a team to a cheap restaurant’ to the divisive (and costly?) incentive of cash prizes. Here then we find the ‘customer service’ orientation of Maincorp deploying ‘fun’ in a similar mode to the ‘fast-turnover’ performance of Sky.

Overwhelmingly, managers combined close monitoring with a ‘soft’ HRM approach to motivate CSAs to achieve operational targets while keeping down labour turnover. The monitoring process was ‘softened’ by the use of strategies to engender the CSAs’ commitment to their workgroup and the organisation’s goals. One method used to motivate the CSAs was to offer performance-related prizes and incentives. Knights and Odih, (1999) indicate that, in the UK, performance-related remuneration is found in 70% of call centres. Our sample reported performance related wage incentives in ten centres, all in private sector organisations.

Three-quarters of managers interviewed reported that they sought to generate a ‘fun-filled’ atmosphere. Those who expressed no such aim were mostly in the public sector. As part of their goal to ‘keep CSAs happy’ eleven managers reported providing at least one incentive that was not cash-based. These included discounted company products, free massages, paid maternity leave, subsidised gymnasium facilities, a free weekly fruit basket for each CSA, subsidised annual party or ball, one had an excellent super scheme. One offered a round-the-world trip each year to the CSA who reached the highest target, one offered free flights across Australia and overseas. “Y” (with 190 seats) provided by far the greatest combination of non-cash benefits: weekly massage, subsidised parking, discounted company products, free food days, an annual ball, an annual Christmas party (estimated by the manager to have cost $80,000) and free life skills courses.

‘Fun-making’ had a particular relationship to the self-management of managers’ performance as well as to performance management of their operators. For the manager of Y, it was crucial for CSAs to see their workplace as:

a fun company, which is very serious about what it does. If people are underperforming we’ll get rid of them. Makes everyone whose doing a good job feel better. But its gotta be fun, challenging people should be fun. We build our
Our organisational chart is a football field, we use acronyms like “make the play”. Girls cope with it well, come up with their own names for things, like ‘flying high’ and being the first to jump out of the plane. No hierarchy here, people are treated as equals, everyone’s important.

To reinforce a ‘one of the boys’ self projection this manager mounted a competitive ‘game’ of slapstick in which ‘everyone was invited to the main event’ — at the end of the month he fronted up to the operator with the best sales score, who was invited to throw a pie in her or his manager’s face. Such ‘boysy’ examples of slapstick and exuberance was not the mode of HRM prescribed for most of our sample. Nonetheless, the goals of generating team-like behaviour, of ‘bonding’ management to worker, of providing an outlet for the deflection of boredom and resentment and of enculturating CSAs with a commitment to operational targets, were held in common.

Thus instrumental relationality directed the manager/worker relationship in a performance that demanded full audience participation in the project of making fun. But as with kitsch, which Linstead (2002:660) describes as ‘the capacity to take the disturbing and make it comforting’, fun-making was a serious business. The final test of kitsch, however, is the degree to which it is able to move one ‘to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection.’ On that score the manager of Maincorp provides the final quote:

So we set up this open day, balloons and streamers, our introductory video, sausage sizzle and ice-cream van, but the best of it was we showed the quality of our people. Our own CSA’s got up there and made presentations, absolutely excellent, so professional. That was astoundingly effective. People actually stood up and said — young women who you wouldn’t think could — “I’ve learnt so much here’, ‘I’ve got Maincorp to thank for this.’ And it was just so (pause) And I thought, ‘Wow! We’ve been responsible for that.’

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