

Organizational Change and Dynamics of Control: An Analysis of Italian Call Center Workplace

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The main goal of the paper is to interpret the concept of organizational change in the perspective of critical management studies, by analyzing both the discourses and the control practices used by management. We aim at denaturalize the concept of change related to transition from a bureaucratic model to a professional (post-bureaucratic) model of the call centers organizational design, showing how these discourses and practices reproduce control systems. For this purpose, two cases study of call center outsourced industry are presented. On one hand, we emphasize the bureaucratic nature of call center A associated with standardization of processes and products and where work is highly controlled and routinised. On the other hand, we observe a different image of call center: call center B can be described as a place where work is customized, workers are considered key resources with higher competences and skills that are able to give customers unique solutions and to give answer to complex questions. We suggest that these “new practices” and “new organizational approaches” are merely illusions of change. We argue that in professional model (call center B), control institutionalized through technology is strengthened and deepened by the use of post-bureaucratic control in shaping organizational behaviors, reproducing a Panopticon structure both in terms of electronic surveillance and in terms of behavioral (self) regulation and discipline.

Keywords: call center, organizational change, post-bureaucratic control, self-regulation, Panopticon

Introduction and Aims

Call centers have become a convenient and widely used channel through which organizations communicate with their customers. They have been identified as a stressful place to work (Mulholland, 2002; Fernie & Metcalf, 1998; Knights & McCabe, 1998), due to the pervasive role played by computer information technology, in a workplace where the agent is isolated by the structured nature of their work. It has been argued that call centers represent a modern form of Taylorism (Callaghan, 2002): they evoke the factory typically based on Tayloristic

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principles and on assembly line that, especially in Italy, are the symbol of precariousness and little respect of workers' rights. Technology is the most obvious link between the contemporary call center and Taylorism. The application of technology to monitor and electronically scrutinize performance coupled with the use of targets to focus and evaluate worker activity—from the distribution of calls in queues to the calculation and assignment of roster schedules—have all conspired to contribute to an industry reputation for a back-breaking work environment (Wallace & Eagleson, 2004). Further, call centers is made up of a mix of information technology, organizational features and new services provided, where both features from past times, such as the Tayloristic principles, and new models to provide customer service live together.

The main goal of the paper is to interpret the concept of organizational change in the perspective of critical management studies (CMS), by analyzing both the discourses and the control practices used by management. We aim at denaturalize the concept of change related to transition from a bureaucratic model to a professional (post-bureaucratic) model of the call centers organizational design, showing how these discourses and practices reflect existing managerial objectives and reproduce control systems (Morgan & Spicer, 2009; Spicer et al., 2009).

For this purpose, two cases study of work practices of call center outsourced industry will be presented. The analysis will be based on a qualitative investigation conducted in terms of grounded theory.

The paper is organized in the following manner: In section 2, our theoretical framework is illustrated. In section 3, the research methodology is described. In section 4, the empirical research relating to the two case studies is presented. Finally in Section 5 our conclusions are explained and discussed.

Framework

Critical approach denaturalizes the mainstream (processual) concept of organizational change (e.g., Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), recognizing that change represents a socially meaningful and politically efficacious phenomenon (Fournier & Grey, 2000). A critical approach to the study of change would consider how model of change construct the change process they claim to describe. Further, CMS suggest that models of change are often the product of an alliance of different interest groups in an organization (Badham & Buchanan, 1999) and they are politically engaged: the creation of new models of change is often a way for different groups seek to advance their interest, consolidating the status quo, in terms of power relations and power of control (Spicer et al., 2009).

In CMS perspective the models to design and implement organizational control mechanism represent a key issue to evaluate the typology and level of change. These studies explore shift from simple control to technical control to bureaucratic control and most recently to normative control (Barker, 1993).

According to Kirsch (1996), it is possible to distinguish two main categories of control mechanisms: formal (behavioral based and outcome based) and informal (clan and self-control). Formal control mechanisms (e.g., technical control) are directly related with the possibility of managing information. In particular, the behavioral mechanisms are based on the control of the transformation processes, whose knowledge is the key variable. Wallace and Eagleson (2004) claim that many of the monitoring functions commonly associated with supervision are provided by the technology call center agents employ on the job, thus reducing the need for this level of organizational hierarchy. For critical studies of change (e.g., Feenberg, 1999) new technology often extended repression and control, affecting the dialectic interplay between agency and technical structure and extending

worker discipline.

Informal mechanisms or “soft” mechanisms are based on social and cultural values. Ouchi (1979) identifies the concept of clan as social mechanism to control organizational members (shared values, norms, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and other aspects of the organization’s culture). It is clear that, in this hypothesis, shared and common values play the main role, producing a sort of “isomorphism” in the members’ behavior. This typology is defined as self control (Kirsch, 1996) and reminds the idea of self-management. Each single member behaves autonomously, setting up his own goals, monitoring his own work and rewarding and sanctioning himself if necessary.

The recent and significant interest in soft management control tools can clearly be attributed to the influence, in theoretical debate as well as in management practices, both of contributions to organizational culture (e.g., Kunda, 1992), and that current of Foucaultian and post-structuralist literature (Willmott, 2005; Kondo, 1990) that considers power relations as the key to understanding organizational dynamics. As we said, we focus on the latter field of study.

It should first be noted that management control principles, techniques and tools have been a “privileged” subject of analysis in CMS literature over the past 20 years. This literature points out that corporate change is increasingly driven by the attempt to gain control over ever-increasing swathes of people’s lives and their subjectivities (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). It has generally been argued that management, in line with the particular features of post-Fordist organizational systems, has changed the methods of implementing organizational control, institutionalising a concept of it that is less geared towards heteronomy, based simply on respect for rules and the hierarchy, and more focused on self-regulation of behaviors and the creation/strengthening of a sense of commitment towards the organization (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). According to this approach, while the rationale of post-bureaucratic organizational programming is apparently oriented towards the pursuit of flexibility, autonomy and enhancement of personal qualities, in reality it operates as an attempt to extend and render more comprehensive the capacity for standardization and control. In this sense the organizational change related to the post-fordist principles and design does not represent the overcoming of principles pursuing efficiency at all costs, but on the contrary their improvement and extension, determined by the greater efficiency of self-regulation of the actions and behavior of the operatives. Management, also through its rhetoric, seeks to act on sense of responsibility and enhancement of individual (and group) identities in order to construe models of action for the organizational actors in a logic of self-discipline. CMS tend to reinterpret the dominant rhetoric concerning organizational change, which is aimed at stressing the positive effects of empowerment, emphasizing the role of managerial discourses as a tool for increasing the power of control. From this point of view, managerial discourses can be interpreted as a lever to create the illusion of change, a means designed to facilitate and support organizational change in the mainstream approach.

Under this respect, the power conceptualization can constitute the key to interpreting the difference between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. The distinction between control in a Fordist model and control in a post-Fordist model can be drawn starting from the concept of heteronomy (to be guided from the outside) and autonomy (post-Fordism). The Panopticon metaphor is important when considering the concept of Fordist and post-Fordist control: visibility is not being seen, but the possibility of being seen. From this point of view, power

is not expressed only when exercised, but in its capacity to be exercised, or in the knowledge that we may be observed. So Foucault suggests that behavioral change in modernity is achieved through “a general recipe for the exercise of power over men: the ‘mind’ as a surface of inscription of power, with semiology as its tool; the submission of bodies through control of ideas” (Foucault, 1974, p. 102).

Fernie and Metcalf (1998) have utilized Foucault’s adaptation of Panopticon to claim that electronic surveillance had rendered perfect the supervisor power. They presented their findings as a validation of applicability of the electronic Panopticon perspective of the call center. So Fernie and Metcalf invoke analogies to incarceration and omniscient scrutiny:

All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell... a worker... They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible... Visibility is a trap... Each individual is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication... This invisibility is the guarantee of order... there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect... power should be visible and unverifiable. In call centers, the agents are constantly visible and the supervisor’s power has indeed by “rendered perfect”—via the computer monitoring screen—and therefore “its actual use unnecessary”. (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998, pp. 8-9)¹

To sum up, the power of control in post-Fordist models would not be manifested through hierarchy, supervision, the formalization and standardization of movements, or even time and activities. Instead, control and coercion become self-control and self-constraint, and are carried out in accordance with the organizational design. In this sense, the new organizational formulas do not represent a victory over Taylorist principles, but an improvement and widening of them due to the increased efficiency of self-regulation in actions and behaviour on an operational level with respect to regulation, linked, for example, to the mechanism of supervision.

The Foucauldian post-structuralist approach, which is only part of the issue, needs to be highlighted: in particular, the part that emphasizes the role of communication and language as central elements in processes which develop meanings (Gergen, 1994; Litvin, 1997), without taking into account the “more material” aspects related to the design of the human resources practices, the structures, the processes and the rules of organizational change (Reed, 2000). We are interested in organizational re-design as an expression of managerial language, and in relation to its more “material” aspects.

Methodology

Our analysis is based on a qualitative investigation conducted in terms of grounded theory. As we said, we analyze empirical material collected at the call centers object of study. The collection of data was carried out using a heterogeneous plurality of instruments. Such pluralism is coherent both with our theoretical framework and with the differentiated nature of the information required to satisfy our research questions. The methods include: document analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. During a period of participative observation in two outsourced call centers located in Italy, we tried to acquire “from the bottom up”

¹ It should be noted that Fernie and Metcalf’s previously mentioned reference is categorically dismissed by Bain and Taylor (2000) as being “quite outlandish, abandoning any sense of historical accuracy ... It is absurd to compare conditions in even the most oppressive and target-driven call centres in the 1990s with those on the early assembly line” (Bain & Taylor, 2000, p. 7).

(van Maanen, 1979) an initial familiarity with the “lexical territory” of the companies. We speak of “participant” observation and not merely observation because, while the latter sets out to collect data of nonverbal behavior, the inclusion of the adjective puts the emphasis on the researcher’s direct involvement with the object of study (Sicca, 2006). Participant observation in the true sense of the term is always followed by meetings/interviews (most of them quite informal) with several of the interlocutors.

Empirical Research

By the end of 1990s, the Italian call center industry has growing up rapidly due to two different events: the de-regulation of telecommunications and public utilities, and the proliferation of mobile phones. Telecommunications has been the leading area in call center development, than evidence of the growth in importance of call centers could be seen in the finance, insurance and commerce sectors as well as the public sector.

In this context, Italian outsourcing industry of call center has been an expanding market made up of many small and very small companies and few multinational ones.

Outsourcing companies offer to potential clients’ customer services that would be more effectively conducted by contracting out on either a permanent or a short-term, campaign basis.

On one hand client firm could save costs, especially labor ones, being assured that the outsourcer will deliver a fixed quality of service. Moreover, the client and outsourcer negotiated a “service level agreement” (SLA) which specifies the levels of availability, performance or other attributes of the service.

Both call center “A” and call center “B” presented below could be labeled as “high quality call center”. With the term “high quality” call center, we refer to a type of call center where rather complex services are being delivered to the customer in a non-standardized mode of communication. Though there may well be standardized procedures for the agents how to handle each case in the company’s information system, the agents are not supposed to communicate that to the customer at all, but rather, to treat the customer in an “individual” way in order to keep up the customer’s attachment to the company.

Call center “A”. A is an outsourced call center operating on the behalf of about 10 clients. Call center A is a spinoff of a publishing company specialized in the publication of newspapers ads. It has been operating for about 10 years in direct marketing with particular experience in CRM and telephone services where it developed the technical and managerial know-how for the management of customer relationships. During the research period about 40 staff were employed on the site. Call center A offers both inbound and outbound activities: the services offered range from outbound telemarketing campaigns to telesales, credit reminder, telephone surveys to support the commercial network, as well as inbound activities such as customer care services, help desk, purchase orders.

The employees of this type of organization are able to interact with customers while at the same time working with computer-based systems which mark working time and control its quality. This call center epitomises a modern factory where technology plays a relevant part: information technology automatically allocates work, monitors employees performance, the amount of workload etc..

In the examined organization, call center operators are organized in teams and each team has a team-leader who doesn’t interact directly with customers, but is responsible to coordinate the members and to interface with

the middle management.

The call-handling process can be summarized as follows: when the customer calls, the call is switched to the first available operator. As soon as the operator receives the call, on his PC monitor personal and contractual data of the customer appears. The operator has to satisfy the need of the customer (efficacy) as soon as possible (effectiveness). In order to support the operators, the system includes also an intranet with a complex search engine which allows the operator to find the required information. Because all the process is mediated by the PC, it is manage the system in the best way. If the operator can interact effectively with the system, he will be able to concentrate the effort on the satisfaction of customer need, rather than on the use of the system.

The team leader manages and controls the team, coordinating the operational activities. Sometimes he helps the team to resolve complex issues which require a greater degree of autonomy. In addition, the team leader assigns tasks to various members of the group, encouraging job rotation, providing the right service level related to the expected workload.

The call center manager coordinates the team ensuring staff turnover and the resolution of any critical issues. He proposes and implements any corrective action. He also promotes the work of training and personnel management oriented to maximize the performance. In addition to staff dedicated specifically to customer contact, operates on site a number of employee carrying out support activities who control the functionality of systems, equipment and telephone lines, providing support to consultants for troubleshooting problems related to infrastructure and technology.

Call center “B”. Call center B is an outsourced company operating from 2001. It provides telemarketing services, customer care and market investigation. In practice, it combines lasting, high-value, important clients’ contracts with low-value, often temporary deals. “B” is made up of four different site located in the north of Italy. At “B” were employed about 150 people with a permanent contract and about 700 temporary workers, but it aim within few years to employ more than 60% of its staff with a permanent contract. Call center B considers motivation, empowerment and training of human resources as essential to provide high value services. Each site has a head manger and a recruiting manager. Training courses are periodically organized to teach sales and communication techniques as well as theater courses. In the organization object of study management stress the emphasis upon the quality of the employee-customer relationship. Although the management point out the calm environment and the different culture of the organization many quantitative targets apply across the call center generally, especially statistical measurement of operators’ output. In addition, other managerial practices are utilized to reinforce the centrality of target attainment: the prominence of promotion criteria, the use of charts to display team and individual performance and intra-company competition. In particular, the company encouraged team competition by publishing table grading and comparing the performance. The best performer is awarded at the end of each month.

From the empirical research two contrasting type of organization are emerging. On one hand, we have to emphasize the bureaucratic nature of call center A associated with standardization of processes and products where work is highly controlled and routinised. Computer technology plays a crucial part in call center processes as information systems always remind workers that “although no manager may be physically present, every aspect of their performance may be... constantly measured” (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996). In call center A workers are low skilled, follow instructions and procedures, have few careers opportunities. Tasks are designed

and simplified in order to minimize costs and to maximize productivity. This form of work organization is typical of stable environmental conditions: work is designed to require limited skills and knowledge.

On the other hand, we can observe a different image of call centers, call center B can be described as a place where work is customized to the needs of customers, workers are considered key resources with higher competences and skills that are able to give customers unique solutions and to give answer to complex questions. This type of call center can be pictured as knowledge center where agents “are armed with information rather than instructions” (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996). This kind of organization is suitable in uncertain environmental conditions with a higher degree of complexity. Work tasks are less routinised and more challenging, so little use is made of ingegneristic models and of standardization. As some authors pointed out call center B can be considered an hybrid form of managing call centers (termed mass customized bureaucracy) where human resource management assume a central role (Frenkel at al., 1998). Although a control component is still relevant this approach includes some typical elements of knowledge-based organizations and human resources practices with more precise hiring and training criteria.

Discussion and Conclusion

In order to understand more fully the way in which work organization and the labor process in call centers can be defined by the priorities of quantity and quality, it is useful to begin by suggesting the characteristics which might lie at the polarities. At one extreme are relatively simple and straightforward calls, which require standard agent responses to customer requests and which may well be scripted. These calls are invariably subject to tight call handling times and control mechanisms based on strict statistical criteria. At the other extreme are calls where the nature of customer interaction is more complex and unpredictable and agents, of necessity, respond more flexibly. Call times are more relaxed, and while temporal measurements might still apply, other criteria, emphasizing the quality of the agent’s service to the customer, are given higher priority.

In call center B, whereas behind a statement concerning “empowerment as source of development, innovation, creativity and change” we can recognize a more complex and contradictory orientation pertaining to human resources management. In this call center, control over the agents is exercised also in more indirect ways here. The agents receive general guidelines only, and training how to communicate, but are supposed to do the “fine tuning” themselves. Taylorist principles are, of course, still used to organize the call center in terms of division of labor; computerization, and standardization of processes; foremanship; or measurement of the agents’ productivity. Only in the organization of communicative performance, some post-Taylorist principle is at work.

A key consideration for call center management is that the essence of the labor process is located not simply in the quantity of calls (as measured in average call-times, time between calls, etc.), but also in the quality of each employee-customer interaction. Management in call centers workplace relies most heavily on technology to pace and direct work and to monitor and evaluate the behaviors. Control institutionalized through technology is strengthened and deepened by the use of post-bureaucratic control in shaping organizational behaviors, reproducing a Panopticon structure both in terms of electronic surveillance and in terms of behavioral (self-) regulation and discipline. Such dimensions are complementary rather than distinct: the overlapping between electronic and (post-fordist) behavioral control mechanisms aims at combine (and balance) quantity goals with quality goals. Under this respect, many of the so-called “new practices” and “new organizational approaches” are

merely illusions of change, by means of announcements of processes of change which prove to be merely superficial.

In call center B, the most commonly used concepts are increase in the sense of identification with the company, value sharing, a clearer perception of the sense of participation, responsabilization and commitment at all levels of the organization. In practice, reference is made to a set of elements designed to build and multiply internal consensus: the set of premises to decision-making which influence and shape the judgemental ability of the organizational actors. The difficulty of overcoming resistance and building consensus on the basis of elements of participation tends to be camouflaged by the modification of the actors' perceptions and evaluation abilities. So, the call center B embodies extensive forms of control, albeit reflective of the enduring influence of scientific management (Bain & Taylor, 2000).

The principles of post-fordism, in this perspective, become a tool for exerting influence and control: a sort of concerted control (Barker, 1993) in which the employees tend to internalize the dominant codes, until they themselves become the most active controllers and regulators of themselves, their behavior and, through peer pressure, of their colleagues. In this perspective, rhetoric can be identified above all as providing leverage for manipulation designed to create conditions and cognitive premises which have an impact on behavior, a sophisticated mechanism of indoctrination and socialization of the existing culture, fostering standardization and efficiency. Managerial discourses could be interpreted as a lever for standardizing values, a representation of the organizational ideology seen, in terms of Kunda (1992), as an authoritarian system of meanings construed like a map by the power holder in order to decipher the reality and act accordingly. In other words, rhetoric tends to act on individual and collective identity, having an impact on organizational action in terms of control management. In fact the controlling mechanism tends to self-regulation and self-discipline rather than the traditional heterogeneous form. In line with a critical approach, while the rationale of organizational programming is apparently oriented towards the pursuit of flexibility, autonomy and enhancement of personal qualities, in reality it operates as an attempt to extend and render more comprehensive the capacity for standardization and control.

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