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Author(s): Norene Pupo and Andrea Noack


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Standardising public service: 
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Canadian federal government

Norene Pupo and Andrea Noack

Norene Pupo is Director of the Centre for Work and Society and an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at York University in Toronto, Canada. Andrea Noack is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada.

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the impact of the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and practices on public sector jobs within the Canadian Federal government. In recent years, employment in the public sector has been increasingly shifted to a call-centre format, thereby transforming the working conditions of public servants as well as access to services enjoyed by Canadians. By adopting work practices, technologies and managerial techniques usually found within the private sector, we argue that the call-centre format fundamentally transforms the notion of public ‘service’ from secure employment and a dynamic career to that of a routine, Taylorised job. In this process, standardised interactions redefine the notion of public service and the role of the public servant.

Introduction
Over the past decade Canadians have witnessed substantial shifts in the structure of the federal public service, impacting both public sector workers and the services they administer. Challenged by the processes of globalisation and relentless pressures to maintain economic competitiveness, the Canadian state has joined with its counterparts in Western economies to abandon its earlier commitment to a Keynesian economic approach, replacing it with policies and practices of neoliberalism. Under a neoliberal regime, the state seeks to strengthen and promote a free market agenda while reinforcing the primacy of private property and capitalist social relations. It does so through privatisation, deregulation, outsourcing, flexibilisation, free trade, financialisation, and de-unionisation. Neoliberal economic policy and its powerful ideological underpinnings represent the social form of rule under globalisation and advanced capitalism (Albo, forthcoming; Shalla, 2007; Broad & Antony, 2006). As a result, public policies and processes have been reorganised, broadly affecting the public sector, including the provision of social services and social welfare and the restructuring of work within the public realm.

To remain competitive within the global sphere, the State has undertaken numerous measures to trim its spending. These measures, including private-sector
management practices promoting efficiency and lean operation, have ultimately shaken Canadians' long-held notion of the public sector as an oasis of secure lifelong employment. Instead, new work arrangements adopted within the public domain mirror those usually identified with the private sector. On the one hand, these new forms of work, including flexibility standards, promise to empower workers while promoting organisational efficiency. On the other hand, public sector workers have faced a variety of restructuring exercises, new management practices, and technological changes that are causing them concern about their working conditions as well as their ability to meet the public's expectations in relation to service delivery. Compared to the private sector, jobs in the public sector have typically been regarded as having more 'good job' characteristics, including lower rates of unemployment, higher rates of unionisation, higher wages, better benefits, and overall, greater job security (Stinson, forthcoming; Duffy, Glenday & Pupo, 1997). As a result of recent restructuring initiatives, what Canadians traditionally regarded as the stable pillar of employment - the federal public service - now shares a number of work practices and features with the less predictable private sector. These new trends and practices consequently affect public service workers and their families as well as the quality of service provision.

In this article, we focus on the case of the Canadian Federal government, where there has been a substantial move towards the use of call centres to provide the public with access to services that were previously available through face-to-face contact in regionally located government offices. This shift to tele-service delivery has brought with it many features of private sector call centres, such as standardisation and the imposition of performance targets. The result is a fundamentally changed working environment for some members of the Canadian civil service; what were once respected, high-skilled jobs have become increasingly technical and high-surveillance positions. Workers argue that their ability to provide effective service to the Canadian public has been circumscribed by the changing organisation of their work and workplace. For them, the idea of what it means to be part of the civil service has radically shifted as a result of the implementation of neoliberal practices of standardisation, monitoring, and time management in this sector.

The Canadian public sector in context
In the face of intensifying economic pressures to maintain a Canadian presence in the global economy, the Canadian State has undertaken steps to restructure the administration of its services by adopting new management structures and workplace practices. The purpose of these initiatives is to lower the cost of maintaining the public sector labour force by incorporating technological innovations and adopting new management structures and flexibility initiatives. These changes have raised many questions for public sector workers and their unions regarding working conditions, deskilling, and growing precariousness as well as the risks and benefits to the general public (Pupo, 2007; Pupo & Noack, forthcoming).

Over the past thirty years, governments at all levels have adopted the ideology and practices of neoliberalism in an attempt to remake the Canadian state as a 'lean'
operation, trimming redundancies in its workforces and shrinking its reach by cutting programmes and budgets (Broad & Antony, 2006, McBride 2001, Evans & Shields, 1998). The transformation of the public service has meant moving work from the public domain to the private sphere of the household in areas such as education and health care (Sears, 2003; Pupo & Duffy, 2007) and from the public domain to private enterprise, thereby corporatising many aspects of service delivery. Analysts who have studied such transformation have raised questions regarding the impact on the meaning of social citizenship (Siltanen, 2007) as well as on the erosion of trade union rights and freedoms (Panitch & Swartz, 2003). As a means of addressing unrelenting economic pressures and fiscal crises, both the state and governments have imported management practices from the corporate world, including the operation of call centres, into the public domain.

Recent literature on work restructuring primarily considers the changing conditions and structures of work within the private sector. Few studies have considered the state as an employer and the particular pressures to downsize and reorganise within the public sphere. In the light of fiscal crises and the call to implement measures of greater restraint, the state has aimed to exemplify the ‘do more with less’ approach by streamlining and standardising its operations wherever possible. This approach has had myriad effects on public policies, accessibility of services, and governments’ responsiveness. For example, practices of restraint have left unemployed Canadians to wrestle with an Employment Insurance policy that is woefully inadequate, with dozens of regional differences across the country in the preconditions needed to meet the qualifications for benefits.

As an employer, the state has been concerned with the rising costs of its services, especially sustaining the cost of its workforce. In 2007 the overall unionisation rate in Canada was just under 30%, while rates for the public and private sectors stood at 71% and 16.3% respectively (Akyeampong, 2008: 1). Within both private and public sectors, the union advantage is clear: unionised workers have higher wages and better benefit coverage and generally enjoy greater employment security. However, within the highly unionised public sector, the union advantage extends to non-union members of the public service who also enjoy pension plan and health and dental insurance coverage, thereby reaping the benefit of the collective agreements of their colleagues (Akyeampong, 2002).

In its practice of fiscal restraint, the Canadian state has turned to the private sector for means by which to trim the cost as well as the size of the public sector labour force. The state has engaged in a variety of cost-cutting practices to promote efficiency, including a growing reliance on telemediated work arrangements, turning public servants from workers who engage in more time consuming face-to-face or over-the-counter interactions with citizens into call-centre workers with little or no face-to-face contact with the public. Removing public interaction and transforming it into indirect intervention through the ‘back office’ allows for greater time efficiencies, managerial control and standardisation. As a result of the adoption of a call-centre format for delivering a variety of public programmes, the state is able to amass multiple services, creating the notion of a ‘one-stop’ government service, while eliminating a number of
smaller, regionally-located offices, formerly public contact centres. More importantly, and beyond savings gleaned from operating through fewer centres, the new service format allows for close monitoring of employees who are increasingly subjected to intensified working conditions.

While the call-centre format generally simplifies the labour process and enhances the efficiency and capacity for managing vast amounts of data, the central impact of this use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is the elimination of spontaneity in interactions, resulting in deskilling and dehumanising working conditions (Huws, 2003). Moreover, the increased possibility of the relocation of work escalates workers’ insecurities and thereby makes the search for meaningful work even more elusive (Huws, 2003; Buchanan, 2006). With workplace restructuring, the main concern is that there has been a measurable decline in the social condition of work and insecure, poorly compensated and non-standard work at the expense of quality work. Even unionised public sector workers, who were once envied by their non-unionised private sector counterparts for the security and status they enjoyed as public servants, have faced changing parameters within their workplaces, forcing some to rethink their aspirations to remain within the public sphere. Key processes of public sector restructuring, including privatisation, contracting out, commercialisation, the use of temporary workers, and the reformulation of work to fit a call-centre format are raising new issues for public sector unions attempting to mitigate the new insecurities through collective bargaining processes as well as through legislative change. Public sector unions are currently arguing that the new work arrangements contravene existing collective agreements by removing guarantees of working rights, security, and in some cases, seniority. It is within the context of these transformations, particularly the standardisation, deskilling and intensification of work within the public services, that we examine work arrangements and conditions within federal public service call centres in Canada.

Compared to the extensive research on call centres in the UK, the largest and most established call-centre market in Europe, there is comparatively little research available about call-centre work in North America, despite its growing prominence. In Canada, employment in contact centres (or call centres) increased five-fold between 1987 and 2004 (Statistics Canada 2005). Generally, there are two competing characterisations of call-centre work that recur in the academic literature: call centres as high-tech, high-skilled work environments in an information economy and call centres as sites of highly regulated, de-skilled jobs in a service economy (Belt et al., 2000). While we certainly acknowledge a range of differences in conditions and experiences of work within various types of call centres, including those located in the public sector, descriptions of call-centre work as involving difficult and intense working conditions, physical relocations, repetition and scripted and highly-monitored client interchanges tip the balance toward negative characterisations in conceptualising call-centre work.

Methodology
This research was a joint project between the Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which is one of Canada’s largest trade unions, representing over 150,000 workers in more than 230
bargaining units (PSAC 2006). In the spring of 2006, survey questionnaires were mailed to PSAC members working in federal Contact Centres. Potential respondents were identified by the PSAC officers who represent them. The four-page questionnaire was divided into six sections (Demographics, Work Status, Work Organisation, Job Satisfaction, Working Conditions, and Satisfaction with Union Representation) and was sent to respondents in both English and French, along with a postage-paid return envelope. Two weeks after the initial mailing, a reminder card was sent to all members. The overall survey response rate was 30%. It is not possible to determine how the perceptions and experiences of members who did not return the questionnaire differ from the perceptions and experiences of those who did. It is possible that members who participated in this research are less satisfied with their work environments than members who did not. Questionnaire data was entered into SPSS for further analysis.

Respondents were quite forthcoming in the open-ended questions to the surveys, and in response to the final question asking for additional comments, many wrote extensively, sometimes attaching additional pieces of paper. The final question asked respondents whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview and 40% volunteered to do so. Among those who volunteered, a representative sub-sample was randomly selected and contacted for an interview in either French or English in the summer or autumn of 2006.

These results reflect the responses of 369 PSAC members who spend more than half their time doing call-centre work1 and who are employed at Service Canada, the Canada Revenue Agency and Canada Post.2 Service Canada was launched in 2005 as a ‘one-stop service delivery’ network for the federal government and now provides services from Human Resources and Social Development Canada (such as employment insurance and pensions), Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Veteran’s Affairs (Service Canada, 2006). All of these workers provide services to members of the general public and to business owners who phone the Canadian government’s toll-free telephone contact numbers.

Public sector call-centre workers in context
The characteristics of public call-centre workers are slightly different from those of the larger Canadian labour force, workers in Canadian contact centres (both public and private) and the public sector more generally (see Table 1). Most strikingly, this is a feminised workforce compared to both the larger Canadian labour force and the public sector workforce as a whole. Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) were women. Women tend to be over-represented among call-centre employees because they are able to provide the impression of being ‘smiling’ and helpful service providers, with an even-toned voice and manner (Glucksman, 2004; Belt et al., 2000; Hochschild, 1983). The proportion of visible minorities (15%) is comparable to that in the Canadian labour force overall, although visible minority men are over-represented among federal call-centre workers. Among men, 21% were visible minorities, compared with only 12% of women.

1 Seventy percent of respondents spend 100% of their time doing call-centre work.
2 In conjunction with this project, PSAC members at Statistics Canada were also surveyed, but since these employees spend the majority of their time making outgoing calls (instead of receiving incoming calls) their concerns are somewhat different and thus they are excluded from this analysis.
Like public sector workers more generally, however, public sector call-centre workers tend to be slightly older, especially in comparison with workers in other Canadian contact centres. Many Canadian contact centres rely on college or university students as a portion of their labour force. Van Jaarsveld, Frost and Walker (2007) estimate that 9-13% of the contact-centre workforce are students. Though we did not specifically ask about student status, the age distribution and educational status of respondents suggests that public sector call centres tend to rely less on student labour. In fact, in comparison to Canadian contact centres overall and to the larger Canadian labour force, public sector contact workers tend to be highly educated. Seven out of ten respondents (71%) reported having some post-secondary education; and about a third of respondents (32%) had a university degree.

Table 1: Characteristics of federal government call-centre workers compared with other labour-force groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>PSAC Call Centre Respondents</th>
<th>Canadian Contact Centres</th>
<th>Public Sector Workforce</th>
<th>Canadian Labour Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (average)</td>
<td>42 yrs</td>
<td>32 yrs</td>
<td>45 yrs</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible minorities</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some post-secondary education</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: data on Canadian Contact Centre workers, from Van Jaarsveld, Frost and Walker (2007); on the public sector workforce, from Treasury Board of Canada (2005); on the Canadian labour force, from the 2006 Census of Canada summary tables.

Call centres jobs are most often characterised as sharing the features of the proverbial ‘McJobs’, frequently providing only short-term, part-time employment and precarious employment (Huws 2003, Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002, Buchanan 2002, Mulvale 2006). Although government call centres have a slightly smaller proportion of full-time workers (57%) than most Canadian contact centres, more than two-thirds of survey respondents (68%) were permanent employees.\(^3\) The average job tenure of respondents was 5.2 years. Although there were a few long-time employees, about half of respondents had been employed for five years or fewer, and 90% of the sample had been employed for 10 years or fewer in 2006. This reflects the relatively recent shift

\(^3\) Tellingly, in the Canadian public sector, these workers are labeled as having ‘indeterminate’ status, discursively rejecting the idea that employment could be permanent and reinforcing the idea that a termination date has simply not yet been determined.
by the Canadian government towards providing services by telephone. Although these call-centre positions appear to be relatively new within the context of the Canadian civil service, these results suggest that they have become a permanent part of service delivery in the public sector.

Under the state’s neoliberal cost-cutting agenda and its programme of work intensification in the public sector, call-centre work may seem to be an entry point into employment in the civil service. Sixty-three percent (63%) of respondents worked outside of the federal government before starting in a federal call centre and the vast majority (64%) of respondents had never worked in a call centre before starting this job. Of those who had previously worked in a call centre, most worked in non-government contact centres (31% of all respondents). However, many workers do not anticipate advancing in their jobs. Seven out of ten respondents were not satisfied with their opportunities for advancement. In contrast, in the public service more generally, about five out of ten workers (52%) agreed that there were opportunities for promotion within their department (PSES, 2005). About 40% of these call-centre respondents anticipate that they will still be working in the same job in three years time. Notably, however, only 7% of respondents anticipate working outside of the government in three years time, whereas most others anticipate moving into a different (presumably better) job in the same department (29%) or in another federal department or agency (19%). This is a slightly lower proportion than among the public service more generally, where about a third of workers (30%) anticipate leaving, though most declined to provide information about the timeline of their departure (PSES 2005).

Overall, the majority of federal call-centre workers (62%) are satisfied with their jobs, though in the public service overall, 87% of workers agree that they are satisfied with their current work arrangements (PSES, 2005). Many call-centre workers express pride in being a member of the public service and pleasure in being able to help the public. Respondents made comments like: ‘I enjoy the opportunity to help people whenever it is possible to do so’, or ‘I can make a difference in a stranger’s life’ or ‘What I really like about my job is the fact that I’m helping people in need’. Unfortunately this enthusiasm for helping the public was almost universally paired with concerns about the difficulties of providing effective public service within the context of the high-speed, standardised call-centre environment.

The Stress of High-Speed Service provision
Time pressures and intensification have become benchmarks of work in the new economy. A substantial body of literature addressing the speeding up of work in contemporary work environments points to the use of ICTs and the supervisory and management practices employed in knowledge industries as exacerbating stressful conditions within work environments (see, for example, Huws, 2003; Boisard et al., 2003; Menzies, 1996, 2005; Buchanan, 2002). This has also been reflected in the Canadian public service. For instance, nearly a third of public service workers (31%) report that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ have unreasonable deadlines and 15% of workers report that they can ‘never’ complete their assigned workload (PSES, 2005). The call-centre environment seems to intensify these time pressures and the stress
that can be associated with them. In this survey, 69% of call-centre respondents ‘strongly agree’ that they work in a stressful environment. The key stressor for many of these employees seems to be the pace of work that is required when they are on the phones. Approximately seven out of ten (69%) say that the pace of their work is not manageable. Relatively few respondents (18%) say that they have some control over the pace of their work, suggesting that these employees’ working days are structured by the technologies that they work with. Not surprisingly, respondents who reported having some control over the pace of their work were far more likely to say that the pace of their work was manageable (85% of those with some control over their pace of work said it was manageable, compared to only 33% of those who said they have no control over their pace of work).

One issue that was routinely raised by interviewees was their inability to pause between calls. Only 13% of survey respondents indicated that they were able to take downtime between calls. One interviewee commented that ‘two seconds between calls is not possible to take a breath between each call’. Another reported that, ‘the calls come in three seconds apart. [There’s] not enough time to have a drink of water in between calls.’ One worker explicitly compared her conditions in the call centre to the dehumanising conditions found in the informal economy, saying: ‘I like my work a lot, however employees are treated like machines and not humans for those stats. Three seconds between each call is like a “sweat shop”’.

Only 45% of respondents said that they were able to take time to respond sufficiently to each call. For many employees, this high-paced environment conflicts with their idea of public service. As one respondent noted, there is more of a focus on ‘quantity not quality. Increasingly, over the years, numbers seem to matter more than the people we serve.’ Another notes that ‘it is called client services but it’s more about their “numbers”’. Several respondents reported feeling conflicted that they were not actually able to help people in the time allotted. Others reported situations where they were told to deliberately misrepresent information to the public in order to meet their hourly or daily quotas, and how this left them feeling ineffective in serving clients and in respecting the tradition surrounding their role of trust as public servants. Yet, nine out of ten respondents (90%) agreed that they were able to take regular breaks, as specified in their collective agreement, suggesting that the issue is not one of overwork per se, but rather the structure of their jobs and the intensified conditions that characterise these jobs.

While they are on the phone, workers are continually aware of each call’s time score and the way in which this may affect their overall numbers. One worker described the balancing and time management the work involves:

Statistically they ask us not to take more than 300 seconds per call. That’s five minutes, 300 seconds… that’s an average for the week. Not for a day, but for the week. If you have an average of 300 seconds or less, that’s a good score. The issue of time pressures and keeping scores, as if the work were a basketball game, conflicts with the human service capacity of the job at hand. A worker presents the dilemma of taking a ‘long’ call:

Sometimes, when we have two or three situations that surface during the call, well the call will end up being 45 minutes. And a 45-minute call massacres your stats. And
because I am part time, it's even worse. One 45-minute call in a week, given that I work only 3 days … it will massacre my stats even if I would work five days.

In the context of performance monitoring, it is statistically more advantageous for a single caller to phone in several times with short queries, than to make a single, 20-30 minute call where all of their questions can be answered. For the call-centre employee, a series of short calls increases their performance statistics by increasing the number of calls they complete and decreasing their average call length. Especially in the case of Service Canada, this system seems to contradict the explicit mission to provide ‘knowledgeable, one-stop, personalised service to Canadians’ (Service Canada 2006: 8). Instead, it is in the workers’ interests to answer a caller’s questions as superficially as possible and encourage them to call back at another time. In this context, it seems clear that the application of standardised performance monitoring creates a situation in which technological control structures the pace of the work environment without attention to the quality of the services provided.

The Challenges of Standardised Service Delivery

While the pace of work at the phones is heavily monitored and expectations regarding employees’ efficiencies are high, there is little time provided for workers to update themselves on new departmental procedures, legislative changes affecting service delivery, or other matters. Only about a quarter of respondents (24%) felt that they had adequate preparation time each day. Workers reported that they are allotted 15 minutes a day ‘to read up on our information bank, which is national, to update ourselves in our emails, and to read a whole bunch of readings related to work…’. Respondents routinely referred to the complexity of their work and the difficulty of providing a good service to the public. Because the work is ‘too complex and there is too much to read,’ many interviewees reported that they used personal time to review material so that they could be confident that they were providing accurate information to callers.

Taken together, this information on the speed-up in the pace of work illustrates the results of imposing performance monitoring in public sector call centres. It is telling that workers who had previously worked in a private sector call centre were less likely to agree that they worked in a stressful environment. The practices that are routinely used to monitor performance in private sector call centres may not translate effectively to delivering services in the public sector.

Private sector contact centres are often oriented towards selling a product, or gathering information about consumers. By contrast, public sector call centres are the nexus through which citizens (or potential citizens) are able to contact their government and access government services. Call centre workers understand that in their capacity as ‘information specialists,’ they perform a valuable service for Canadians, often providing information and services that make a considerable difference in people’s lives. In many cases, these interactions are complicated and require a detailed exchange of information. Especially in the case of agencies like Veterans Affairs and Citizenship and Immigration, callers may have complex case histories that need to be understood in order for services to be delivered effectively. In these cases, the conflict between quotas and the time allotted per call, and quality and efficiency is a constant source of tension:
Time around calls can get pretty tense. It sometimes feels like you have no breathing room … There’s something like [a] 300 seconds goal to finish calls; but that’s not the reality. It just doesn’t always work like that. We have some people with real issues and sometimes they need to vent frustrations, ask a lot of questions, or they need a lot of information explained because they’re just not familiar with the procedures.

The disconnection between workers’ understandings of and commitment to the notion of ‘public service’ and their experience of time pressures and heavy monitoring is reflected in the expectations that the Canadian public has of government telephone services. In focus group research asking Canadians about their expectations for telephone-based government services, the Institute for Citizen-Centred Research found that ‘participants expected agents to be polite, friendly and resourceful, demonstrating empathy for the callers.’ They wanted to know that the person at the other end of the telephone was doing everything he or she could do to help them and not simply trying to ‘get rid of us’ (Institute for Citizen-Centred Research, 2006:14). Focus group participants also identified the need for telephone agents to demonstrate ‘the patience to listen, particularly with regard to a situation that is difficult to articulate, or allow the caller to finish before being transferred somewhere else’ (ibid:24). While most call-centre workers surveyed expressed a desire to meet these expectations, they reported increasingly feeling pressured by the need to meet externally determined performance criteria.

Unlike their counterparts in the private sector, fewer than a third of respondents (30%) report that they work from pre-established scripts. Based on interviewees’ reports, this appears to be the case because the interactions are too complex to be easily scripted. Instead, these public services must negotiate complex interactions accurately, without a script, but within a designated time period. The result is that this job requires a high level of skill, but workers still lack the flexibility, the resources and the autonomy that would allow them to feel that they are helping the public effectively. Subjecting the work of public service call-centre employees to time monitoring and intensification not only devalues the service these workers provide, but may also erode the public’s confidence in their government services.

The emphasis on speed of service seems to be particular stressful for employees who work in French only (16%), the majority of whom also speak French at home and are likely native Francophones. Those who work in French, are substantially less likely to agree that the pace of their work is manageable, that they can take regular breaks, or that they have some control over the pace of their work. They are also less likely than Anglophone workers to report working from pre-established scripts. One Service Canada employee explains why working in French simply takes longer:

The information is there, you just need more time to look for it and integrate it. Because our French clients they have French documentation, but we are a lot faster in English because we are used to it and the English documentation is easier to access. In French or in English, things are termed this or that way.
Another bilingual worker located outside of Québec explains that:

…we are trained in English. We are not trained in French. The terminology kills us, really. Completely. Because, it's not… [the same]… see I am Acadian, not ‘Québécoise’. Our French is not the same … [as] the one in Québec. The terms we use are not the same. So if I have a client that calls from Québec, on line, who has the proper terms, the right terminology, I am completely lost.

As Budach et al. (2003) argue, being bilingual in a standardised environment like a call centre is effectively ‘being unilingual twice over, with each [language] being used in a standard, normative form’ (Budach et al, 2003:619). Multilingual agents in call centres often draw upon a complex set of skills to interact in one language and interface with a computer programme in another language (Belt et al., 2000), and they do so under intense time pressures and heavy monitoring. In New Delhi, India, for example, call-centre workers are trained to adapt their speech patterns and accents to blend with those of their North American clients, masking both their geographical location and more significantly, their own identities (Mirchandani, 2004). As required by their jobs, these workers undertake mandatory cultural training, learning to adopt accents and diction appropriate to the clientele they are serving. Moreover, this adoption of new occupational identities affect the workers’ core relationship to the labour and production process, raising questions regarding their class location, class consciousness and commitment to workplace change (Huws & Dahlmann, forthcoming). These workers straddle the line between the skilled and the deskilled as they often find themselves having to think ‘on their feet’ and respond quickly, thereby drawing on their knowledge and skills, while carefully balancing their need to remain ‘on script’. They are further constrained by the regular evaluation of their heavily-monitored performance and the need for a courteous and respectful response to the client. The same effect is found in Canadian public sector call centres, where, in addition to the numerous tasks workers juggle simultaneously, Francophone workers must negotiate training and instructional materials developed in English, and translate and interpret across a variety of regional dialects.

According to many of the call-centre workers interviewed, the techniques of supervision and micro-management are primary sources of stress on the job, leaving workers looking over their shoulders and fearful of drawing on their own experience and intelligence in responding to calls. Sixty-three percent of respondents report that they are routinely monitored—a practice that is common in large call centres. A number of workers commented on the heavy-handed intensity of the monitoring, suggesting that the techniques went well beyond what they would expect for quality control and assessing performance. For example, workers referred to ‘The “Big Brother” aspect of the call centre’, the feeling of ‘being under a microscope’, and the ‘zero tolerance’ for minor infractions such as being late by a minute. For many, these conditions were more stressful than the work itself. One respondent described being ‘timed and required to explain every moment of the day outside of breaks to the point … [of harassment].’ Another worker expressed the view that the management system is not simply stressful, but is ‘overwhelming’ in every way and another referred to the supervisory and management system as ‘a dynamic of surveillance.’ One worker described it in these words:
...it's the police. And the police is very serious... It's really like the police; it's surveillance. It's like at school. But there is a lot of policing, in the sense that they impose things on us, norms toward people, certain sentences we have to say. Extremely ridiculous. Like, … robotised. … but if we didn't say it, we lost points. And it was a big thing.

Overall, the result of a pace controlled via technology and high levels of time-accountability is a high-stress work environment.

Compounding the surveillance by management, the spaces of work have become increasingly compressed, with workers seated back to back in crowded cubicles. Workers complain that their workstations are in ‘open cubicles’, or ‘not closed off enough’, and that their ‘neighbours are too close.’ Only about a third of workers (36%) indicated that they are satisfied with the level of privacy in their workplace. With four agents to each cubicle, one worker described the workspace as resembling ‘veal pens more than work stations.’ As one respondent commented, ‘the environment we work in could be likened to a “sweat shop”. The work itself is manageable, it’s the environment ... that’s hard to work with or in.’

Under these conditions and ‘shackled to a phone’, workers say that their work is made to feel ‘like a production line’ rather than a government service. The working conditions are reminiscent of a Fordist assembly line, as one worker suggests: I call it a ‘factory of voices.’ That's all it is. Instead of assembling parts for cars, you’re just processing people or processing calls - ‘a factory of voices’. Everybody is sitting there in their little stalls talking and producing customer service.

By comparing their work settings to factory-like conditions and by characterising their work as ‘repetitive, stressful and tiring’, these workers’ sentiments resonate with the findings of Belt et al. (2000). Their characterisation of call-centre work as similar to that of an assembly line contrasts sharply with the popular conception of work in the public service as reasonably autonomous, high-skilled, white-collar administrative work, and further obfuscates the skills and qualifications of workers in call centres.

Conclusion
The implementation of a call-centre delivery model has substantially transformed the working conditions and experiences of Canadian public service workers. This workplace transformation has taken place as part of the transition toward a globalised economy and the adoption of neoliberal government structures. In the past, the importance of meeting the public face-to-face to attend to diverse and complex needs related to various forms of legislation was the force behind public servants’ careers. Canadians had easy access to public service as rights of citizenship. Today, however, new work structures and managerial techniques condition the civil service, transforming the growing number of workers in public service call centres from members of a ‘helping’ profession to simple bureaucrats paced by advanced technologies and monitored by a super-bureaucratic management. Regardless of the complexity of the questions and problems brought forward by members of the public, call-centre workers must respond to them while remaining mindful of the efficiency measures utilised by their superiors to assess their performance. As a result, the structure under which they operate forces
them to offer pat answers and draw upon a formulaic inventory of responses or risk admonishment by their superiors.

In the context of the public sector, the promotion of call-centre jobs replaces the notion of the civil service position as allowing for a degree of autonomy and a modicum of decision-making, based on the educational credentials and career orientation of the civil servant. Within the structure and format of the call centre, the ‘civil servant’ has become a bureaucratised, standardised employee. Call centre employment destabilises the notion of ‘serving’ the public and replaces what were formerly secure and well respected positions with precarious, primarily lower level, bureaucratic jobs. Under these conditions, the notion of public ‘service’ is linked to the idea of interchangeable employees offering standardised interactions with the public. In this process, these standardised interactions then ‘stand in’ for public service.

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