



# Vulnerable Jobs in the New Brunswick Call Centre Industry

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## **Abstract**

The New Brunswick call centre industry is a “created” industry. It is not based on any natural advantage that New Brunswick may have. Nor was it created at the initiative of local entrepreneurs. Rather, in this age of globalization, companies are “lured” to the province to carry out operations that could be carried out anywhere in the world. The government promises low costs, the availability and assets of the New Brunswick labour force and, in competition with other jurisdictions, incentives for the start up or expansion of facilities in the province. All of these factors make the industry a very vulnerable one. Global companies can come to the province but they can also leave it—and suddenly. In the global economy, companies have no loyalty to any particular jurisdiction.

In this paper, the means by which the New Brunswick call centre industry was created is examined and the findings from interviews with twenty call centre workers about their experience with vulnerable jobs in the industry are presented.

## **Author Biography**

Joan McFarland is a professor of Economics and Women’s Studies/Gender Studies at St. Thomas University. She has been doing research on the call centre industry in New Brunswick since the 1990’s.

## **Vulnerable Jobs in the New Brunswick Call Centre Industry<sup>1</sup>**

A recent period of global restructuring and new technology has seen a global expansion of the service economy in relation to the production economy. Developments in information technology and communications through the telephone, fax and internet have meant that these services can be performed just about anywhere. Not only has this led to the reorganization of the workplace but the industry has also been taken over by larger and larger global players.

One manifestation of this aspect of globalization has been the growth of the call centre industry worldwide. Starting in the financial, travel and marketing industries in the 1990's, it has spread to virtually all industries. A recent call centre directory shows the United States having the most call centre companies of any country in the world (1001), followed by the United Kingdom (160), the Netherlands (128) and Canada (93). India (46), France (37) and Australia (33) also have significant numbers, followed by Romania (23), Israel (19), Belgium (12), Singapore (12) and the Philippines (11), Sweden (9), Denmark (8), Germany (8), Hong Kong (6), Finland (5), Argentina (5), New Zealand and South Africa (4). Other countries with one to three call centre companies are Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, the Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>2</sup> In terms of call centres themselves, a 2003 estimate identified 55,100 call centres in North America of which 50,600 were in the US and 4500 in Canada.<sup>3</sup> There were 3.07 million agent positions in North America: 2.8 million in the United States and 212,000 in Canada. Canadian employment in the industry increased fourfold between 1987 and 2004.<sup>4</sup> The outlook for 2003-08 is for negative call centre growth in the United States, but positive growth in Canada — 7.6% in terms of agent positions.<sup>5</sup>

The current trend in the call centre industry is outsourcing. Outsourcing is when services- in the present context, call centre services- are carried out by one company for another company on a contract basis. The outsourcing company claims to be able to provide the service at a lower cost than the client company could provide it for itself. The location where the outsourcing takes place, the “outsourcing destination”, could be almost anywhere. The outsourcing could be performed by a national or foreign company and it could be provided for a national or foreign company. For example, MarketBridge, an American outsourcing company, had a call centre marketing contract with Ikon, an American photocopier company. The call centre was located in New Brunswick. Thus,

New Brunswick was the “outsourcing destination”.

The newest outsourcers are BPOs, or Business Product Outsourcers. BPOs are transnational companies whose *raison d'être* is to provide a range of business services, including call centres, on a contractual basis, to other companies, mostly transnational companies as well.<sup>6</sup> As with other outsourcers, the location for the actual provision of the services can be spread to different parts of the world based on cost/profit criteria. MarketBridge is a BPO, as is Accenture, Minacs, ClientLogic/Sitel, CentreBeam and others which have call centres located in New Brunswick.

Some call centres in Europe, the United Kingdom Canada are unionized. This tends to be in public and previously unionized sectors of the economy. However, outsourcers, particularly foreign outsourcers, can be virulently anti-union, explicitly or implicitly threatening to pull out from a location if a centre is unionized.<sup>7</sup> To counter this, workers have formed global unions such as UNI, Union Network International, whose rationale for existence is that when companies are global, unions must be global. UNI has drawn up global framework agreements and global objectives for decent work and decent rates of pay, among other demands. For example, on December 21, 2006, a global agreement was signed between UNI, France Telecom, and telecommunications unions around the world. In all, 200,000 employees, including 80,000 outside of France, are covered by the agreement.<sup>8</sup> The most important issue for UNI and in the global agreements is “to get companies to recognize effectively and in practice the right of everybody employed by them anywhere in the world to join a trade union of their own choosing without fear of threat or reprisals or interference of any kind from the company” as well as “(to agree) to bargain collectively and in good faith with the union chosen.”<sup>9</sup> The global framework agreements follow those with transnationals in other sectors of the global economy such as Volkswagen, Daimler-Chrysler, Renault, Danmone, Chiquita and Club Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup>

### **The labour process in call centres**

Because of the nature of the work, the labour process in call centres has some very distinct characteristics. Being hooked up to a computer every working minute means that the agent's use of each minute can be recorded and evaluated. In addition, being on the phone and having all calls recorded, and some monitored, means that each word uttered by the agent is subject to scrutiny. Moreover, since productivity is measured quantitatively by the number of calls, speed is an important factor. It is well known that outbound calls are met with resistance and more often than not a rude response from

customers. However, inbound calls which involve complaints, questions and demands can also be from angry, rude customers. Call centres may operate 16-18 hours daily, and some operate 24 hours. This means shift work for many workers which causes health problems, including stress. Further health consequences result from the sedentary nature of the work, while other aspects of the workspace can lead to hearing, voice and tendinitis problems.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the pay scale for most call centre workers barely puts them above the poverty line, and would certainly not be adequate to support a family.<sup>12</sup>

In a 2000 UK study, call centre workers were asked what they liked most and least about their jobs.<sup>13</sup> Their top “likes” were “colleagues, workmates friendly etc” (46.7% of those surveyed), “assisting customers, customer contact, giving customers satisfaction etc” (40.4%), “hours, shifts, flexible hours, part-time hours” (30.7%). The “dislikes” are in the table below:

<b>Top Ten Dislikes</b>	<b>%<sup>14</sup></b>
Targets, sales targets - unachievable etc.	39.5
Boring, monotonous, answering phones all day, repetitive, no variety	37.0
Management, supervisors - bad, dishonest, general treatment, lack of respect, understanding	34.6
Pressure - stress, not enough time between calls, overloaded, speed-up, understaffing	16.3
Hours, shifts - inflexible, expected to do overtime etc.	13.0
Breaks - not enough, not long enough	11.7
Lack of career opportunities/prospects/development	10.8
Monitoring, surveillance, having calls taped, big brother, scripts	9.6
Customers - difficult/abusive, contact with	8.1
Pay, basic pay, wages, salary	6.0

Source: “Trade Union and Call Centre Survey”, Philip Taylor and Peter Bain for Finance Sector Unions, 2000.

These likes and dislikes make an interesting contrast with those of the Fredericton area call centre workers interviewed for this study. A discussion of these results will follow.

### **The creation of an industry**

The New Brunswick call centre industry is a “created” industry. It is not based on any

natural advantage that New Brunswick may have, nor was it created at the initiative of local entrepreneurs. Rather, in this age of globalization, companies are “lured” to the province to carry out operations that could be carried out anywhere in the world. The companies are lured by the government promising low costs, the availability and assets of the New Brunswick labour force and, in competition with other jurisdictions, incentives for the start up or expansion of facilities in the province. All of these factors make the industry a very vulnerable one. Global companies can come to the province but they can also leave it—and suddenly. Companies have no loyalty to any particular jurisdiction in the global economy.

### **The New Brunswick call centre industry**

The call centre industry in New Brunswick has grown from one centre in 1991 to approximately one hundred ten centres with 21000 workers in 2007.<sup>15</sup> This number includes both entry and exit from the industry. In other words, considerably more than one hundred ten call centres have operated in the province since 1991—perhaps one hundred fifty or so.

From the beginning, New Brunswick has been an outsource destination. The only New Brunswick call centres which are not owned outside of the province are government ones and the NBTel- now Aliant- ones. Most of the companies are American, and not one of the ninety-three Canadian call centre companies listed in the directory described earlier is based in New Brunswick.

In the nineties, the main call centres in New Brunswick were either American telemarketers such as RMH, ICT and Connect North America, or inhouse call centres of Canadian and American companies. The latter included such Canadian companies as Purolator, CP Express, Canada Trust, Sun Life and Royal Bank, and American companies such as Xerox, IBM and UPS.<sup>16</sup>

By 2000, American hotel and car rental companies such as Cendant (Budget/Avis), Delta and Marriott Hotels had call centres in New Brunswick. There were also a number of Canadian survey companies such as Insight Canada, Responsive Marketing and DMS Market Services located in the north of the province.

In the last few years, Business Product Outsourcers or BPOs have arrived on the New Brunswick scene. Accenture describes itself as operating “multiple call centres 24/7 across 5 time zones producing 50 million bills and conducting 30 million metre readings

annually.”<sup>17</sup> ClientLogic/ Sitel “operates in 52 facilities in 13 countries throughout North America, Europe, Asia and Africa.”<sup>18</sup> Minacs claims “a market capitalization of \$120 million and sales over the last year (2006) of \$200 million.”<sup>19</sup> CentreBeam is a California Silicon Valley company “specializing in customer outsourcing.”<sup>20</sup> Marketbridge, which left the province in 2006, described itself as an “integrated sales and marketing consultant offering managed services to Fortune 500 companies such as Microsoft, IBM, SAP, Merck, Philips, Siemens, Mastercard and BT.”<sup>21</sup>

It is currently difficult to get complete listings of call centres in the province. Contact NB, the industry association, gave these numbers for 2006: 41 centres in Moncton with 6500 employees, 23 in Saint John with 5800 employees, and 17 in Fredericton with 3500 employees.<sup>22</sup> These numbers are high since Enterprise Moncton puts only 32 centres in the greater Moncton area and Enterprise Fredericton puts only 11 centres in the greater Fredericton area.<sup>23</sup> Another document gives the following distribution of call centres in the province: 32% of in Moncton, 32% in Saint John and 16% in Fredericton.<sup>24</sup> There are also a few centres located in the north of the province (i.e. in Campbellton, Bathurst, and Miramichi City).<sup>25</sup> As well, Virtual Agent Services (VAS), an Illinois company which entered the industry in 2000, has set up call centres in rural communities. The company’s goal is to have twenty call centres in rural New Brunswick. The government has been supporting the company with \$7500 for every job created, with a total coming to over \$5 million to date. VAS call centres carry out hotel reservations, roadside assistance and other contracts for American companies.<sup>26</sup>

## **Unionization**

In terms of the unionization of call centres in New Brunswick, apart from the call centres within the provincial government, only Air Canada in Saint John and the federal government’s Canada Post in Fredericton are unionized. None of these was a result of a call centre unionizing drive in New Brunswick. The government employees were already members of unions before call centres came along and the Air Canada and the Canada Post call centres were organized before they were moved to their New Brunswick locations.

Various attempts at unionization in the province have failed. After successfully organizing the Purolator Courier administrative centre in Moncton, the Teamsters tried but were not successful in organizing Purolator’s call centre there in 1995.<sup>27</sup> In 1997, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) undertook a unionization drive at UPS in Fredericton. The company put up a strong fight, bringing in staff from their head office in the United

States. The workers felt quite intimidated.<sup>28</sup> At the vote for unionization, the 50% + 1 requirement for certification was narrowly missed.<sup>29</sup> After winning some unfair labour practice complaints with the Industrial Relations Board, the Canadian Paper and Energy Workers Union (CEP) was close to getting workers certified at the new Phonettix Intelcom centre in Bathurst in 1998 when Phonettix closed the centre and ended up leaving the province.<sup>30</sup> In 1999, CAW did manage to organize the ICT call centre in Saint John but, within a year, that centre was closed and its work moved to an unorganized ICT call centre in Moncton.<sup>31</sup> In 2005, Aliant outsourced 129 of its CEP unionized call centre jobs to ICT in Miramichi City, a non-unionized centre.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the tide will change. Currently, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) is in the early stages of trying to organize workers at the Fredericton Accenture call centre.<sup>33</sup>

### **Government initiatives**

New Brunswick traditionally has been a resource economy with agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining as its main industries. During the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's, most efforts were devoted to the expansion of the manufacturing sector of the economy. However, to this date, that sector has not been able to provide more than 15% of employment in the province.<sup>34</sup> The service sector is the fastest growing sector of the economy. The business services sector, of which call centres are a part, plays a leading role, especially in terms of government support. At the present time, call centres are said to provide one out of every twenty jobs in the province.<sup>35</sup>

In the context of the Canadian economy as a whole, New Brunswick is one of the so-called "have-not" provinces. New Brunswick's per capita income ranks third from the bottom amongst Canadian provinces.<sup>36</sup> Only PEI and Newfoundland have lower income levels. To counter this, New Brunswick has been on the receiving end of equalization payments from the federal government. In addition to such payments, the federal government has mounted various economic development programs for the have-not provinces. For example, during the Trudeau era, DREE, the Department of Regional Economic Expansion, gave grants to firms for new investment in, or expansion of, manufacturing facilities in specified regions of the country which included New Brunswick. The present federal program is ACOA, the Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency, which gives grants for infrastructure programs and loans to firms.



The provincial government has also been in the grant giving business. In the past, these grants have been given mainly to resource based industries, particularly forestry and mining. However, a new thrust to create a knowledge based industry began in the 1990's with Premier McKenna's election promise to create 25,000 new jobs. Most of the jobs brought to the province were in call centres. The first, Camco, came to Moncton in 1991. A \$2.7 million forgivable loan was given to the company to locate in New Brunswick, ostensibly to cover the cost of training.<sup>37</sup> Purolator Courier followed in 1992. In 1994, UPS moved its call centre from British Columbia to New Brunswick. New Brunswick gave UPS a \$11 million forgivable loan, or \$10,000 per job.<sup>38</sup> Many other call centres and forgivable loans followed. By the end of McKenna's term in 1997, the government credited itself with 52 new call centres and 6000 new call centre jobs.<sup>39</sup>

The program of giving incentives to call centres to set up in the province was pursued by the succeeding Lord government (1999-2006), although perhaps not with quite as much zeal. The forgivable loans were lowered to \$7500 per job. Lord was criticized by some for not having been the salesman that McKenna was.<sup>40</sup> During Lord's time, an effort was made to get call centres into rural as well as urban areas in conjunction with the government's overall thrust to spread economic development outside of the province's main urban settings.

The present Liberal government of Shawn Graham seems to be trying to pick up the McKenna torch. Recently, a \$1.6 million forgivable loan was given to Teletech Holdings of Australia to set up a new call centre employing 300 in St. Basile. Another \$1.6 million was given to Rogers Communications for the creation of 244 new positions in its Moncton call centre.<sup>41</sup> Tellingly, the Self-Sufficiency Plan of the new premier, Shawn Graham, counts on the creation of 15,000 further call centre jobs in the province over the next fifteen years.<sup>42</sup>

### **Selling New Brunswick as a location for investment**

Foreign investors such as BPOs can only be attracted to a location that is "competitive." In addition to direct financial incentives, the government sells the province as a low cost location for a call centre with an available, loyal and docile workforce. "New Brunswick's wages are among the lowest on the continent", the Business New Brunswick web site boasts<sup>43</sup> while the call centre or "customer contact centre" investor is told:

If productivity is important, then New Brunswick fits the bill. New Brunswickers are natural innovators, and you simply won't find a more

loyal workforce. Salaries and benefits remain very competitive thanks to our lower cost of living, and recruitment and training costs are minimal thanks to unsurpassed low turnover.<sup>44</sup>

To offer evidence of lower costs, the web page offers data from a study by KPMG, an international accounting consulting company. The study compared costs using 27 location-sensitive cost factors in ninety-eight cities in North America, Europe, Japan and Australia. Of the ninety-eight cities, Moncton “ranks third,” meaning it has the third-lowest costs. In a chart using data from the same study, Moncton is shown to be the lowest-cost location of ten North American cities based on the cost of labour, lease, transport, utilities, interest and depreciation, and taxes.<sup>45</sup> Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver are other Canadian cities used in the comparison. The other six are in the United States. In another chart comparing the same ten cities, Moncton is shown to have the lowest labour costs in terms of salaries and wages, statutory plans and other benefits.<sup>46</sup>

Another table gives data on 2006 fringe benefit costs for the ten Canadian provinces. These costs include annual vacation pay, statutory holidays, employment insurance, Canadian Pension Plan, Workmen's Compensation, payroll tax, provincial medical costs, labour standards and manpower training. In this table, New Brunswick's fringe benefit costs rank third-lowest after PEI and Nova Scotia: 14.66% of payroll, compared to 14.02% and 14.16%, respectively, with the Canadian average being 16.4%.<sup>47</sup>

Labour availability in New Brunswick is also promoted on the government website. Record numbers of entrants to the labour force are cited, as well as labour pools of the unemployed, underemployed, waiting, discouraged, income assistance recipients and part-time workers who all presumably could be drawn into the workforce on a full-time basis. Even the 42,000 New Brunswickers currently in retail, restaurant and other basic customer service operations could be potential workers.<sup>48</sup>

The website proclaims that New Brunswick has “exceptionally low employee-initiated turnover at only 5%,” and that:

The average New Brunswicker remains in one place of employment for eight years, more than double the norm in the United States. Turnover is a huge hidden expense - firing, hiring, training, and learning curve costs add up. With low turnover in New Brunswick, business can expect to save \$4,300 CDN per employee. Factor in very attractive wages and

benefits, and the actual savings are actually greater.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, absenteeism rates are claimed to be “among the lowest in Canada, with only 8 days lost per worker per year on average”.<sup>50</sup>

On previous websites, the low rate of unionization was explicitly cited to attract investors. For example, on the 1996 website, we were told that “the telecommunications industry in New Brunswick has the lowest rate of unionization in Canada”, that “some call centres that were unionized elsewhere have consolidated as non-union operations in New Brunswick” and that “NBTel is Canada’s only telephone company with non-unionized clerical staff”.<sup>51</sup> This message is not as blatant on the current website. Instead, “favourable management-labour relations” is listed as the second point in an eight-point discussion of New Brunswick’s “productive workforce.”<sup>52</sup> What this means, exactly, is left to the potential investor to figure out.

### Survey of incentives to call centres

Table 1 below shows the result of our survey of the grants given to call centres locating or expanding in the province for the period of 2000-2006.

**Table 1: Forgivable Loans for Call Centre Openings and Expansions 2000-2006**

Company	Forgivable Loan (Date)
Minacs	\$4.5 million (2000) + \$2.26 million (2006) <sup>53</sup>
CIBC (President's Choice)	between \$3.75 million and \$5 million (2001) <sup>54</sup>
Marriott	\$427,500 (2000) <sup>55</sup>
Qualiflyer	\$3.6 million (2001) <sup>56</sup>
Virtual-Agent Services (VAS)	over \$5.1 million (2001-2006) <sup>57</sup>
Asurion	\$150,000 (2001) <sup>58</sup>
ClientLogic (Sitel)	\$4 million (2001) + \$2.8 million (2004) <sup>59</sup>
Rogers Communications	\$5.25 million (2002) <sup>60</sup>
Moneris Solutions	\$1.7 million (2002) <sup>61</sup>
AOL Canada	\$1.2 million (2002) <sup>62</sup>
Archway Marketing Services	\$1.5 million (2003) <sup>63</sup>
CentreBeam	\$1.7 million (2004) <sup>64</sup>
ExxonMobil	\$2.64 (2004) <sup>65</sup>

Help Desk NOW	up to \$1.5 million (2005) <sup>66</sup>
Salesbridge (Marketbridge)	\$1.98 million (2003) + \$2.25 million (2005) <sup>67</sup>
SNC-Lavalin ProFac Inc.	up to \$1 million (2006) <sup>68</sup>

The total amount spent over the period in forgivable loans is \$48.56 million. This includes grants to companies that later pulled out of the province.

Table 2 shows the companies that pulled their call centres out of the province over the same 2000-2006 period. There are eight of them on the list which collectively received a total of \$10.9 million in grants from the province.

**Table 2 Closures of Call Centres and Forgivable Loans, 2000-2006**

<b>Company (Date of Closure)</b>	<b>Forgivable Loan</b>
CanJet (2001)	\$831, 000 <sup>69</sup>
Fulford Enterprises (2001)	\$150,000 <sup>70</sup>
Star Choice (2003)	almost \$1 million <sup>71</sup>
CAI (2004)	\$425,000 <sup>72</sup>
RMH (2004)	\$2 million <sup>73</sup>
Archway Marketing Services (2005)	\$1.5 million <sup>74</sup>
Salesbridge (2006)	\$1.98 million + \$2.25 million <sup>75</sup>
ICT Group Inc. (2006)	\$760,000 <sup>76</sup>

Star Choice's early pull out from New Brunswick in 2003 was dramatic. The Star Choice call centre in Lincoln answered service calls for Star Choice satellite dishes. The company had received \$413,400 in forgivable loans in 1998 and another \$444,600 in 2000.<sup>77</sup> Its closure was sudden and unexpected. The reason given for this closure was internal restructuring of the company. The two hundred and forty-three workers who lost their jobs were left to scramble for employment. A number of them were unable to get unemployment insurance due to a mix-up over when they should leave work after the company's announcement.<sup>78</sup> In 2004, another call centre, RMH (an American based transnational telemarketer) suddenly closed its doors.<sup>79</sup> No reason was given for the closure, but the rumour was that RMH's sizeable AT&T contract in Oromocto had been awarded to India. Six hundred workers lost their jobs. Workers claimed to have been "robbed of four weeks pay" when their status was changed from "terminated" to "laid off" in a last minute shuffle.<sup>80</sup>

Looking at New Brunswick call centres in light of the above information—e.g. the globalized call centre industry, provincial development strategies, and the trajectory of the NB call centre industry since the early nineties—it appears that in order to bring call centre operations to the province, trade-offs are required. However, while there are heavy trade-offs for the government and for the workers, there are no apparent downsides for the companies. For the province, grants have to be given and they have to be high enough to outbid other jurisdictions within the region, nation and the world. Furthermore, the government's success in luring centres is dependent upon keeping costs low and the labour force docile—i.e. unorganized. Corporations' tax savings result in lower provincial revenues, which must then be compensated for by either raised taxes or lowered levels of service for New Brunswick citizens. Workers in the industry accept jobs for lower wages (compared to other call centres in Canada), low levels of job security (due to the footloose nature of the industry), and to subtle or not-so-subtle opposition to their right to organize. The companies, on the other hand, receive the grants and benefit not only from low costs but also from an atmosphere which creates barriers for the workers who may wish to exercise their right to organize in addition to taking all of the profits from their operations out of the province. These companies also have the right to leave the province at any time for greener profit pastures.

### **Interviews with Fredericton-area call centre workers**

Interviews were conducted with twenty Fredericton area call centre workers in April and May of 2007. Ads were put up requesting present or past call centre workers to volunteer for a confidential interview. About half of the interviewees were found this way. The other half were located using a snowball technique through professional and personal contacts. At the interview, the call centre worker was asked to sign a consent form, to complete a written questionnaire and answer a series of questions. Notes were taken on the responses to the questions posed orally and, except for two interviews which were conducted over long distance telephone, the responses were recorded.

The workers interviewed were from twelve Fredericton area call centres (includes Oromocto). Another worker was from an Oromocto call centre that had closed and one was working at a rural call centre outside of the Fredericton area. The call centres represented in the interviews are listed below. The number of workers at each, estimated by the workers interviewed, and the nature of the centre is also given.

### Call Centres in Fredericton and Area

Call centre	Ownership	Nature of business	Start-up in	Number of
NuComm	US	telemarketing	2004	100 <sup>82</sup>
UPS	US	courier service	1994	560
Accenture (Enbridge)	US	outsource utility service	2002	370
President's Choice (CIBC)	Can.	financial service	2000	275
Budget/Avis (Cendant)	US	car rental/hotel	2000	200
Connect NA	US	telemarketing	1994	100
Canada Post	Can.	postal service	1994	110
MarketBridge	US	outsource telesales	2005	50
Delta	Can.	hotel reservations	2000	150
Marriott	US	hotel reservations	2000	300
Fredericton Police	Can.	911 calls	early 1980's	20
VAS at Bristol	US	outsource hotel	2006	100
RMH (closed 2004)	US	telemarketing	1998	600

There was some variety in the sample of workers interviewed. Twelve were female and eight were male. Twelve were less than 30 years of age and eight were 30 years of age or older. Only one was over 40. Their education levels varied. One had an MA and five had BA's. While two had college certificates (not in call centre programs), five were currently university students. Four had completed high school only. One of the interviewees had been working in her call centre for more than ten years; five had been working in their call centres for three to six years; four had worked for their present employers for one to two years; and ten had been working or had worked at a call centre for less than one year. Except for the two who were presently working at unionized call centres- Canada Post and Fredericton Police- none had ever been members of unions. Eight were no longer working in the call centre about which we had interviewed them.

To compare the characteristics of the workers in the sample with those in the industry,

the interviewees were asked to give a profile of fellow workers at their call centres. In four of the twelve call centres, the workers thought that there were more females than males, but for six of the call centres, they thought that the numbers of males and females were more or less equal. Two of the interviewees felt that there were more males than females where they worked but both had been working the night shift, which may have affected their perception. In terms of age, the workers felt that most were in the 24-32 year age range, but there were also workers in their mid and late 30's and 40's and, in some centres, those who were just out of high school. In terms of education, the interviewees thought that there were some call centre workers who had university degrees, but that most of the workers only had high school credentials. The interviewees noted that some workers were at that time job-hopping between call centres, but that this was mainly done by workers in their twenties and early thirties.

Workers were asked to give their starting wage at the call centre. These are listed below in a chart which also indicates the workers' starting years. Apart from the two workers who were on annual salaries, the starting wage ranged from \$7.50 to \$12.75 per hour. The average starting wage was \$10.36 per hour. Raises varied. For example, one call centre gave annual raises of \$1 per hour for good performance. Another gave only minimal raises. One worker who started at \$11.50/hr. was only making \$12.58/hr. after three years. Some call centres gave significant bonuses for sales, including some of the telemarketers or the big hotel chain reservation call centres. In one, it was claimed that up to \$250 monthly could be made based on sales statistics, while for another, up to \$400 extra could be made monthly. At Canada Post, one of the unionized call centres, the present starting wage is around \$22, twice the average in the local industry.

<b>Wages in Fredericton Centres</b>		
Call centre	Wage rate, starting	Bonus, raise etc.
NuComm	\$10.00/hr. in 2006	possible raise \$.25/3 months
UPS	\$10.00/hr. in 2004	raise \$1 per year
Accenture (Enbridge)	\$11.50/hr. in 2002	small yearly raises
President's Choice	\$12.75/hr. in 2000	prizes
Budget/Avis (Cendant)	\$9.00/hr. in 2006	\$1.50/hr bilingual
Connect NA	\$7.50/hr. in 2006	prizes
Canada Post	\$12.00/hr in 1994	3.5% based on yearly
Marketbridge	\$31,500/yr. in 2006	commissions up to

Delta	\$9.75/hr. in 2004	\$0-\$250 monthly based
Marriott	\$10.50/hr. in 2007	\$30-\$400 monthly
Fredericton Police	\$1400 bi-weekly in	\$350 each June & Dec.
VAS	\$8.00/hr. in 2007	prizes
RMH	\$11.00/hr. in 2003	bonuses

The workers also described the job search and hiring process. Often, they had heard of the job from friends. Most dropped off their resumes at the centres. At some, particularly the telemarketing call centres, workers were hired almost immediately with little screening. At others, there was more screening, including some testing. Workers reported not having been accepted at all by the call centres they were interviewed for, yet their friends had experienced the opposite. One group had been hired where the others had been refused, and vice versa. It is difficult to say whether this inconsistency reflects some irrationality in the hiring process or the fact that each centre was looking for unique qualities in their employees which were distinct from the qualities being sought by the other employers.

The workers did not describe much training. It ranged from a few days to a few weeks. Often, workers were put on the phones as trainees. In such cases, for an initial period, their stats were treated more leniently than those of other workers.

Workers were not considered to be at work until they logged onto their computer. This led to some workers being counted as late on a regular basis. Their day's schedule would be waiting for them when indicating break times which are staggered among the various workers on the shift. Workers were evaluated according to their "stats"—the number of calls taken, the time spent on each call, number of sales made, etc—and coaching by team leaders was frequently given to help workers improve these stats.

Call monitoring was performed mainly by local management. It took place several times a day at some of the centres; however, the norm was once every one or two weeks. The workers could not always tell that their calls were being monitored. It was also possible for management at head office— e.g. in the United States— to monitor calls, and this is known to have happened.

A few of the call centres were open twenty-four hours a day. Most had at least a night shift which closed down when California customers were no longer available—3 AM Eastern Standard time. Some of the workers felt that they had been able to choose their



shifts at the point of hiring, and some did choose the night shift for various reasons such as school, childcare, other daytime interests, etc. Others had the night shift imposed upon them. In some call centres, the choice of shift depended on seniority and stats. This became a problem for workers in those centres. Gripping about the allocation of shifts was the major topic of discussion in a Facebook group for workers at one centre. Others felt that discrimination may have played a role in the assignment of shifts. Workers with accents were put on the night shift, when there was less interaction with customers. These workers' requests to be shifted to daytime work were refused. Night shift work had serious health consequences for several of the workers interviewed: in particular, they mentioned migraines and sleep deprivation.

In almost all of the centres, the general discipline of the workers involved a "three strikes" approach. In the more formal centres, the warnings were put in writing and placed in the worker's file. The warnings were accompanied by intensive coaching. The reasons for discipline varied somewhat among the centres. It could arise in response to workers having unsatisfactory stats, missing days, being late, or giving customers incorrect information.

The variation in emphasis on particular infractions among centres is quite interesting. Although all centres paid attention to stats, quite different approaches were taken to attendance at the various centres. At one telemarketing centre, missing time was totally unacceptable. At another, workers were hounded to come into work by their managers even if they were sick. In this case, the manager's bonus was likely tied to the workers' attendance. A worker for a telemarketer reported that nothing was said if he didn't come in for a shift or took off after a break. He thought that this was because he was good at sales and his boss's bonuses were tied to sales rather than attendance. At some centres, particularly those of the telemarketers, giving incorrect information was tolerated if not indirectly encouraged, whereas at financial call centres giving incorrect information was grounds for dismissal.

The style of management in the call centres seems to have changed from earlier years when it could be very harsh.<sup>83</sup> Most of the workers said that they "liked their bosses". Some liked them a lot, one boss in particular. Almost all of the bosses were local people, a number of them having risen through the ranks at local call centres. At one of the call centres, a "fish philosophy" was used. Under the fish philosophy, developed in a Seattle fish market, everything is done to make work "fun"- a place where workers would want to come each day. However, at some of the centres, the workers noted problems with aspects of human resource policies: e.g insufficient vacation pay at one call centre, and

unpaid breaks at another. When this was pointed out by the workers, the response from the companies was defensive. It is difficult to say whether these infractions occurred because of lack of knowledge of the laws, or whether they occurred deliberately, as part of broader company policy to save costs.

The bosses engaged in a great deal of coaching to improve workers' performance. Although their manner may have been kind and gentle, some of the workers could not stand this "micro-management" or "hassling," as they called it. The introduction of scripts by head office upset other workers who saw this as another form of micro-management.

Socializing with other workers both at work and in off-hours was an important aspect of the call centre experience for some of the workers. This would include being involved in the bar scene after hours for some of the "twenty-something" workers at the telemarketing centres as well as dinners and other activities—with or without family—for other workers in other age groups. On the other hand, a large number of workers didn't get involved in any of these activities.

One worker complained that there wasn't enough possibility socializing possible at work. At some centres, workers were either not allowed to talk to each other between calls or didn't have enough time to do so, and since breaks were staggered, there was not anyone to talk to during breaks. At other centres, workers were free to communicate with each other between calls, as well as play games, do crafts and/or browse the internet.

### **Do the workers like their jobs?**

When the twenty interviewees were asked whether they "liked their job," there was a range of answers. However, those who liked their jobs slightly outnumbered those who did not. Two said that they "loved their jobs." Another said that she "loved her job compared to her old job" (at a fast food restaurant). Five said that they "liked their job," but with various qualifications: complaints included "bad air," "slow," "don't like being micro-managed," "could be monotonous," "not for the long term." Others said that they "didn't like their job" but that it was "not the worst," that they "liked it more than they would have thought," that they "liked their current position enough to still be there" or that they "just didn't like that industry." Others were more adamantly negative. They "didn't like it," "never intended to stay," "didn't like anything about it," "hated the company," and/or "hated the job."

When the workers were asked what they liked best about their jobs, seven of the twenty said “the pay.” Four mentioned “the bosses.” Three mentioned “co-workers” and “being around lots of people.” Other aspects that were mentioned, but only by a single interviewee in each case, were “benefits,” “working with people (e.g. customers),” “working in service rather than sales,” that the job was “easy” and that it offered “autonomy.”

This last aspect calls for some explanation. Whereas one might expect that the computer recording of stats and the monitoring of sales might be seen as oppressive, one worker liked this aspect of the job. He saw his day as being “just between me and my computer.” He compared it favourably to a previous job he had as a bank teller where he had bosses constantly telling him what to do, had to stand all day, and had to get dressed up.

When the workers were asked what they “liked least about their jobs,” “rude customers” was mentioned by six of the twenty people interviewed. It was pointed out that this was not just a problem for telemarketers in outbound call centres making unsolicited calls, but also for agents at inbound customer service centres receiving calls from customers who are upset about their service or bills. According to the workers, even customers making reservations for hotels or cars can be very rude and demanding.

The next biggest “dislike” of the workers was the “ethics” at their call centres. Five mentioned the ethical aspects of call centres. For some, there was a contrast between their own values and the values at the centre. They treated their jobs as service representatives seriously and took pride in offering excellent service on their calls. They felt that although the centres paid lip service to the “quality” aspect of calls, the real concern was over the amount of time spent on the call and the amount of sales emanating from it. Rushing calls left them feeling frustrated and compromised. One customer service representative said that although she was supposed to be offering service to customers, in reality, she was being pressured to turn the call into a sales call and earned bonuses for doing so. In fact, she was ill-equipped to offer service to customers. She didn’t have the information or power to adequately address customers’ complaints or concerns. Two other workers mentioned what they considered to be unethical sales practices by telemarketers. One was told to say whatever was necessary to make the sale. Another was very aware that “it was very easy to screw people over”. Being told that customers could always cancel if they changed their minds later did not assuage his conscience. Two workers listed “the company” as their major dislike, and they did so on ethical grounds. They were considering how the company carried out its

business beyond their own individual call centre. For example, they felt that the company treated its customers unfairly. They didn't agree with the company's policies, yet they had to try to justify them to customers. Furthermore, they saw the company as a huge transnational operating wherever it could get the lowest costs, highest incentives and most docile workforce.

Three workers cited "the lack of choice of shifts" and the health impacts from this as their greatest dislike. Other dislikes that were brought up by two workers in each case were "micro-managing", "monotony" and "bad air."

It is interesting to compare this list of likes and dislikes with the likes and dislikes of the UK workers in the table presented earlier. Ethical aspects were not brought up by the UK workers. Difficult customers were brought up by the UK workers, but ended up near the bottom of their list of ten. On the other hand, targets (stats), monotony, bosses, pressure and shifts (labour process issues) are at the top of the UK dislike list, but of these, only monotony and shifts were mentioned very infrequently and by few New Brunswick workers. Whereas bosses were at the top of the UK dislikes list, they were near the top of the New Brunswick "most liked" list!

When asked if they had a union or thought that having a union would be a good thing, nine of the twenty workers interviewed had not heard any mention of unionization at the centre where they worked or in conversations with other workers. Some scarcely knew what a union was. Others could see the benefits of having a union to address workers' concerns, such as shift allocation. However, most saw obstacles to having a union. They had been told at one centre, erroneously, that it was illegal to solicit union membership at a workplace. One worker held the stereotype that unions might be corrupt. Two felt that unions were only needed in the past, not now. Others had heard negative family stories about unions and strikes that scared them off. They saw practical problems for unions where workers were temporary, and therefore difficult to organize. However, at the heart of the hesitation about unions was the feeling that, if workers organized a centre, the company could, and likely would, close leave New Brunswick. The workers did not want to see this happen, since they valued their jobs. They seemed to feel powerless in the face of the power held over them by the companies in the industry.

### **Conclusion: where from here?**

There are many players in the call centre industry in New Brunswick. First, there is the

provincial government with its call centre strategy for economic development and job creation acting in conjunction with the fifteen regional Enterprise agencies— e.g. Enterprise Fredericton, Enterprise Greater Moncton, Enterprise Chaleur etc. Then there is the industry which is comprised, almost exclusively, of out-of-province companies— one transnational company and BPOs from outside the country. Each of these companies is in New Brunswick to increase its overall corporate profitability. Finally, there are the workers who need jobs and are working in the call centre industry because they see it as their best alternative at the present time, given the opportunities available to them in the province. Is this the best that the province can do?

Since the early nineties, provincial representatives have talked about creating better, “high-tech jobs” in the industry. ACOA has gone as far as to stop supporting outbound call centres in 2003.<sup>84</sup> However, the “high tech/better jobs” goal really only plays out in terms of which companies the province most wants to attract, and it is unlikely that any companies are actually turned away for not meeting it. Once firms are here, not much more than lip service is paid to improving the quality of the jobs and the province has remained neutral, or worse when workers have attempted to better their situation by forming unions. For example, in 1996 Human Rights and Employments Standards representatives were instructed not to attend a meeting to which they had been invited where the Saint John District Labour Council was advising ICT workers of their rights in the workplace.<sup>85</sup> Mostly, the province seems to have taken a TINA (“There Is No Alternative”) position on the globalization approach that the call centre strategy represents. Yet adopting such an approach puts the province in a very vulnerable position in terms of the resulting dependency on foreign capital. This in addition to the financial investment required by the province because of the competition in attracting call centres between jurisdictions, and nations. Despite this, the province has made it clear in its Self-Sufficiency Plan that it is going to continue to pursue a call centre strategy for at least another fifteen years.

The call centre industry in New Brunswick is described as having reached a “state of high-tech maturity” involving slower job growth. Employment in the industry reached its peak in the 2000-2003 period when it employed 21,400 workers. By 2006, that number had declined slightly to 21,000.<sup>86</sup> Competition in the attraction of new call centres has only increased. This includes competition from “offshore” locations such as India. In 2006 there was a fear that Minacs, the BPO with a centre in Moncton, would move its centre to India when the company was bought out by an Indian company. However, this offshore move did not materialize, and the company insisted that none was planned.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, authorities put on a brave face, suggesting that offshoring

is not an imminent danger for New Brunswick. Although some might disagree with McKenna that all or even most of New Brunswick's call centres could be called "high-end", he was quoted as saying:

We've been aware for a long, long time that Third World countries like India and the Philippines were becoming very active in the space, and that's why we focussed many of our energies on inbound centres with (high-interaction), high-tech operations...I think we're quite safe with the niche that we occupy at a very high end.<sup>88</sup>

In another move to fend off offshoring the province has advertised itself as a "near-shore" location, suggesting that it has the low-cost advantage of an offshore location but a more culturally appropriate workforce.<sup>89</sup>

The provincial authorities' major concern at present in terms of their call centre strategy is the availability of labour in the province. The labour market has tightened since the early days of call centre development, yet new call centre firms cannot be attracted unless they are convinced of the availability of labour and low turnover rates. To this end, the province is turning its attention to those other pools of available labour on its website in addition to the unemployed who mentioned earlier. It is also trying to dissuade young people from leaving the province and to bring back those who have already left. Finally, the province is tapping the rural labour force not only by supporting the establishment of call centres in rural communities, but also encouraging companies to adopt the use of home-based agents in call centre work.<sup>90</sup>

The concerns of the companies in the industry are represented by ContactNB, their industry association, and the regional Enterprise agencies who consider their role to be keeping the present call centre companies in their regions happy as well as attracting new centres. The companies' concerns coincide with those of the province and involve workforce issues—specifically labour availability and turnover rates. With reference to the former, some companies have resorted to hiring bonuses to attract and retain workers, at least for an initial period.<sup>91</sup> Current workers bringing in new recruits can also earn bonuses. One company which tried to establish itself in Dalhousie in 1999 became involved in a dispute with some of its workers and ended up leaving the province. The company cited the lack of availability of employees as the reason.<sup>92</sup> With reference to turnover rates, a 2006 Enterprise Greater Moncton study found turnover rates (measured over a year's time) of over 40% in more than one-third of its call

centres. Moreover, contrary to what the Business New Brunswick web site would lead one to believe, the call centre average turnover rate in the province has been calculated at 48.4%.<sup>93</sup>

Such turnover rates are very costly for the call centre industry. The industry attributes the problem to its “bad image”--the creation of which is attributed to the media. The industry is seeking to correct its image through a public relations campaign. Call centre jobs are purposely being referred to as “careers.”<sup>94</sup> For example, a recent ad from Oromocto's telemarketer NuComm tries to entice prospective employees by saying “Your new Hi-Tech *Career* is waiting at NuComm International in Oromocto (italics mine).”<sup>95</sup> The call centre industry also plans to get the media to publish positive profiles of call centre workers who have accepted the definition of call centre jobs as careers.<sup>96</sup> This controlled media attention would presumably occur in lieu of any investigative reporting by the media.

The position of the call centre workers we interviewed is that, for the most part, they “like” or at least “accept” their jobs, and are indeed “grateful” to have them. This position is based on the workers' perception of their alternatives in the province at the present time. Due to fears of their call centre leaving the province and a lack of knowledge about what unions can offer workers, only a minority of the workers interviewed could likely be persuaded to try to improve their job situation by forming a union. On the other hand, another form of resistance is evident. Only three of the twenty workers that we interviewed wanted to stay in their centres long-term, and one of these has already lost his job due to the company leaving the province. The other seventeen only planned to stay in the industry temporarily or until they could find a better job. These workers most certainly did not see their jobs in the call centre industry as “careers”. Only one worker—who was one of the three who wished to stay—intended to pursue advancement in the industry. The other workers showed no such interest either because they were planning to leave anyway, or because the advancement possibilities, although perceived as available, were not attractive. They did not wish to become call centre bosses, at any level.

There seems to be a trade-off for call centre workers. They take these jobs and, for the most part, do their best at the jobs, but in their minds, this is all just temporary. Their career plans lie elsewhere. We can see this attitude as a type of worker resistance to their situation- a resistance which is not as overt as organizing a union, but which is resistance, nevertheless.

All of this puts the province and the industry at cross purposes with the workers. Having the workers regard their participation in the industry as temporary is exactly what the province and the industry do not want. One might say that this is the basic contradiction that lies at the heart of the situation of the call centre industry in New Brunswick at the present time.



## Endnotes

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  4. *Ibid.*
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82. This number and the number for Connect North America differ quite significantly from the numbers given in the InPro Solutions Dec. 2006 study on the Enterprise Fredericton website. It lists 500 workers in each centre. Perhaps the workers were just describing what they saw on their shifts.
83. See, for example, some of my earlier work in which such a management style is described: "Many are Called But What Are the Choices? Working in New Brunswick's 1-800 Call Centres", *New Maritimes*, Vol. XIV, Number Six, July/August 1996, pp 10-19.
84. "ACOA shifts call-centre policy: Official says agency no longer funding outbound call centres", *Daily Gleaner*, July 3, 2003, p C1.
85. Notice from Saint John District Labour Council dated Apr. 15, 1996.
86. David Shipley, "Ringing in era of stability: Province's call-centre industry reaches state of high-tech maturity", *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, June 4, 2007, News Section.
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88. Aloma Jardine, "NB industry facing competition but still growing", *Daily Gleaner*, July 7, 2006, p A5.
89. *Ibid.*; "Make a Smart Decision: Invest in New Brunswick", Business New Brunswick Web site retrieved 5/7/07 at <http://www.newbrunswick.ca/0398/index-e.html>
90. Mary Moszynski, "High-speed internet opens doors in NB: Completion of provincial connection program brings broadband access to 327 rural communities", *Times and Transcript*, June 30, 2006, Money Section.
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93. David Shipley, "Call centres becoming career decision", *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, Jan. 11, 2007, pA1; Jardine *op. cit.* (fn. 88).

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94. Shipley, *op. cit.* (fn 86).

95. *Daily Gleaner*, Aug. 11, 2007, Classified Ads.

96. Khalid Malik, "Family reaches out and touches their clients", *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, Oct. 6, 2006, News Section.