



Health and safety in call centres

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■ INTRODUCTION

If you work in a call centre you are covered by the same health and safety laws that cover most other workers. However, there are many health and safety issues specific to working in a call centre and this guide provides information on what to look out for. The final section gives a general overview of workplace health and safety requirements.

It is a well established fact that workers benefit from being in a trade union, and even more so in a workplace where a trade union is recognised, one of the key benefits being better health and safety. After reading this guidance, the first step for dealing with a non-life-threatening health and safety problem in your workplace is to speak to your Unite safety rep.

If you do not have a safety rep, or do not know who it is, speak to your Unite workplace rep – or consider becoming a safety rep yourself! Unite provides considerable support for safety reps including free residential and non-residential training courses around the country. If Unite is recognised in your workplace, your safety reps have a right to paid time off to attend Unite training and to carry out their tasks as a safety rep. The HSE has provided comprehensive advice on the health and safety regulations and guidance applicable to call centres. See www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-2.pdf for more details.

More information on the following sections, and health and safety more generally, can be found at <http://www.unitetheunion.org/hsresources>

■ MUSCULO-SKELETAL DISORDERS (MSDs)

Musculo-skeletal disorders is the name given to a variety of physical conditions, which affect joints, limbs and muscles. These are also known as RSI (repetitive strain injury), ULDs (upper limb disorders) and WRULDs (work-related upper limb disorders). Specific conditions include tenosynovitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, writers' cramp, tendonitis and tennis elbow. Symptoms include numbness, pins and needles, pain or aching, muscle weakness, loss of grip strength and stiffness.

MSDs can be caused by a number of factors, including moving or lifting heavy loads, poor posture (especially when sitting at a workstation), repetitive movements, vibration, pressure or a blow to the body, and forceful movements such as twisting or gripping. If caught early, most MSD-type conditions can be treated, or simply prevented by changing behaviour and work patterns. If left to continue they can develop into serious injuries.

Most call centre work is carried out at a workstation so the risk of developing some kind of MSD is considerable, and poor workstation layout and poor job design are the main hazards. Your employer must assess your workstation before you start using it, ensure you are trained in how to use it, and reassess if any problems develop after use.

Intensive use of a mouse, trackball or other pointing device may cause problems as activity is concentrated on one arm, hand and a finger or two. Users should try to limit the amount of time, speed and repetitiveness with which they use their mouse. Use the mouse close to the body so your arm is not stretched too far and rest your arm or wrist on the desk or on a wrist rest. If problems persist, try a different device or different type of device (mouse, trackball etc), or one with a different shape or size. Many users find it helpful to switch from using one hand to the other from time to time. This can take some getting used to, but is well worth it.

Workstation checklist

- seat back adjustable
- good lumbar support
- seat height adjustable
- no excess pressure on underside of thighs and backs of knees
- foot support if needed
- space for postural change, no obstacles under desk arms should be bent approximately at right angles with your elbows close to the sides of your body, not stretched out in front or close together, and forearms nearly horizontal
- mouse close to the body
- wrists not excessively bent (up, down or sideways) screen height and angle to allow comfortable head position
- space in front of keyboard to support hands/wrists during pauses in keying
- display screen should be at approximately arm's length, with the top of the screen at eye level
- chair should be stable (with five wheeled "feet" at the base), adjustable (in both height and angle) allowing your back to be vertical with support for spinal curves and tilting the pelvis forward slightly
feet should be flat on the floor or on a foot rest
- keyboard should be tiltable and separate from the screen, with sufficient space for hands and arms
- wrist rests should be available when requested, for both mouse and keyboard
- document holder must be available, stable and adjustable
- work surface must be large enough for a comfortable layout of screen, keyboard, mouse, documents and other related materials

Your work should be planned with your employer and safety rep to ensure there are breaks and changes of activity. Short frequent breaks are more useful than longer less frequent ones, at least 5 minutes every hour is a rough guide. These breaks do not have to be rest breaks, just breaks from repetition, and away from the workstation setting.

If you find you are not comfortable at your desk or you are developing any MSD-type symptoms you should speak to your safety rep and your GP then, following their advice, consider asking your employer to carry out a workstation assessment and change your working patterns.



Seating and posture for typical office tasks

Diagram courtesy of HSE

■ EYE STRAIN

There is no evidence that DSE (display screen equipment) or VDUs (visual display units) can cause disease or permanent damage to eyes. But long spells of VDU work can lead to tired eyes and discomfort, caused by screen glare, poor image quality, a need for different spectacles, reading the screen for long periods without a break, or a combination of these.

Symptoms can include soreness of the eyes, headaches, blurred or double vision and sensitivity to light (photophobia). By giving your eyes more demanding tasks, it might make you aware of an eyesight problem you had not noticed before.

To overcome these symptoms, proper care needs to be exercised in the working environment. Ensure your DSE is well positioned and properly adjusted, have regular eyesight tests, frequent breaks from the workstation and adequate lighting levels with additional levels of light for “night work” or where there is no natural light.

The heat generated by computers and other equipment can make the air seem drier, and some contact lens wearers find this uncomfortable. If you have this problem but don't want to change to glasses, you can try blinking more often or using tear substitute drops. Where the air is dry, employers can help by taking steps to increase the humidity. If you wear bifocal or varifocal glasses you may find them less than ideal for DSE work, and will probably need to lower your screen so that you are looking at it through the lower part of the lens, which is designed for close work. It is important to be able to see the screen easily without having to raise or lower your head. If you can't work comfortably with bifocals or varifocals, you may need a different type of spectacles. Consult your optician or doctor if in doubt.

Your employer has to pay for any glasses necessary for you to use DSE, though there is no guidance on how much these should cost – most employers make a contribution towards the cost of basic spectacles which can be offset against a purchase of anything more than basic. Your employer also has to pay for your eye test.

■ VOICE LOSS

The term voice loss is used to mean more than just being unable to speak. It also describes a host of vocal conditions and symptoms that can include, pain, smarting, burning, tension, swelling, irritating cough, croakiness, change in pitch, sore throat, squawking, whispering, poor or no vocal power. One of the main causes of "voice loss" can be traced to the way in which operators in call centres have to use their voices. Unlike normal speech, operators usually speak to their customers from a prepared script and use a particular voice style, not unlike that used by actors or presenters. The problem is, unlike actors and presenters the vocal style is used every day and all day which is very unnatural and stressful, and because of the noise of other operators talking and telephones ringing, voices may have to be raised to compensate.

If any of these symptoms are experienced over a prolonged duration then an operator may be diagnosed as suffering from a classified occupational disease of the vocal apparatus. This includes the larynx, resonating cavities and lungs. A medical examination may discover nodules and polyps of the vocal cords, thickening of nerves, fibres and blood vessels, excessive blood on the edges of the vocal chords or ulcers on the larynx.

Taking regular breaks from talking is vital to avoid excess vocal stress. Drinking fresh water regularly will also help, unlike caffeine drinks (tea, coffee, coke etc) which are diuretics and dehydrate you.

■ NOISE

It is vital that headset equipment provided is designed to fit the operator and not the operator having to fit the equipment. Old and/or faulty headsets can distort customers' voices. The usual solution adopted by operators, is to turn up the volume in order to make them audible. By doing so the operator then becomes exposed to a continuous level of noise which results in them having to raise their voice to be heard over the increased level of noise. Equipment needs to be in good working order with a stable volume level, and protection against "spiking" of intermittent high levels of volume and feedback. For more information on acoustic shock see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/acoustic.htm>

It is not only unwanted noise from headsets that operators have to contend with. The general noise in the workplace such as air conditioning units, other operators, general office noise, VDUs and printers, can add to their fatigue and stress levels.

Regulations that control exposure to high and dangerous levels of noise in the workplace are not usually relevant to call centres, as the average level of noise is much lower than noise action levels under noise regulations. However, exposure to persistent noise over a prolonged period may become debilitating to the health and well-being of individuals and may cause anxiety and stress.

■ STRESS

“Burn out” as it is euphemistically known, is a result of stress, and stress may result from the physical and psycho-sociological attributes of a multiplicity of hazards such as, boredom, monotonous work, lack of control, VDU work and abuse from customers.

Other stressors which call centre staff may be exposed to include frequent repetitive tasks, high workload fluctuations, long periods at the workstation, shift work, unsociable hours, inappropriate noise, pace of work, badly designed workstations and working environment. The HSE defines stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. Pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated, but excessive pressure can lead to stress which undermines performance, is costly to employers and can make people ill. Stress is a health and safety issue that employers should address through risk assessment, and the full involvement of Unite safety reps.

The HSE's stress management standards is a comprehensive guidance and a set of standards for employers to guide them in reducing stress in their workforce. The overall aim of the stress management standards is to reduce the number of employees who get sick from workplace stress, or whose work is affected by stress.

HSE's view regarding safety representatives is that they should be fully involved, leading to a process of continuous improvement, this will lead to full involvement of all the workforce which is conducive to good business.

The Standards and supporting processes are designed to:

- help simplify risk assessment for stress;
- encourage employers, employees and their representatives to work in partnership to address work related stress throughout the organisation;
- provide the yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

The Management Standards define the characteristics, or culture, of an organisation where stress is being managed effectively. They cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words, the six Management Standards cover the primary sources of stress at work. These are:

- Demands** – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- Control** – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
- Support** – such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- Relationships** – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- Role** – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- Change** – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Employers have a duty to ensure that risks arising from work activity are properly controlled. The Management Standards approach helps employers work with safety representatives to undertake risk assessments for stress.

- Existing information can be used to see how organisations shape up. Sickness absence or staff turnover data could help, as could any surveys of the views of employees.
- Use the HSE survey (indicator tool for work-related stress) to give an indication of performance against the Standards.
- Look at the Management Standards website located at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/ for more information and use HSE's survey.
- The HSE has produced research into the psychosocial risk factors, evaluating design and well being in call centres at www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr169.pdf

■ VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND LONE WORKING

The HSE defines work-related violence as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This can include verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Customers speaking to call centre staff are often dissatisfied with the answers they are getting from staff and may become rude, abusive and even threatening. No-one has to put up with abuse or threats in their job, whether these are physical or verbal. Employers should have a policy on how to deal with such instances, which should have been included as part of employee training so that everyone is familiar with it.

Call centre work is often located in isolated or remote areas and call centre workers often work shifts during the dark. Employers must ensure that employee safety is taken into consideration in the immediate surroundings of the workplace, including car parks, bus tops, train stations etc.

■ HYGIENE

Any headset or other wearable equipment should be used only by one person, to avoid any transfer of bodily fluids, germs, bacteria etc. All equipment that comes into contact with the body should be cleaned regularly, including keyboards, mice, telephones, desk surfaces etc.

Eating at workstations leaves food debris, particularly on keyboards which are a magnet for bacteria, which will be transferred to your fingers and from there to your hair, face, food or anything else that you touch. If your workstation is not cleaned regularly, accumulating food debris can even attract insects and vermin.

■ WORK ENVIRONMENT

The working environment plays a crucial role on the health problems associated with call centres. Issues such as temperature, lighting, space, design and layout of the office furniture, and the equipment itself are factors that need to be carefully considered in order to reduce any ill-health effects.

The equipment used in such workplaces must be the right equipment for the job, i.e. headsets should be light weight and adjustable, VDU's, photocopiers and printers should not emit high frequency noise or noxious smells, and should be regularly serviced and cleaned. The workstation should be easily adjusted, allowing it to accommodate any worker who has to use the workstation. This is particularly crucial for those on a 3 shift system providing 24 hour cover. It should be designed so that it easily accommodates the work being carried out and allows the operator plenty of workspace including personal space.

Lighting levels should be such that no-one needs to strain their eyes to see, or cause such glare as to be counter productive. Lighting levels at night should be even higher than those used during the day to emulate the effects of normal daylight. Often workers at night experience lighting levels that are below that used during the day. The effects of this upon "night workers" is that their circadian rhythms (body clocks) are severely affected and result in an increased risk of accidents.

Maintaining a room temperature that is consistent is a difficult task, however it is vital that temperatures do not become either too hot or cold. Consideration should be taken to ensure that temperature controls take into account the amount of heat generated by electrical equipment, i.e. VDUs, printers, lights etc. Other factors that need to be considered include the numbers of people, extent of physical activity as well as external factors such as sunlight, external temperature variations both day and night.

All of these factors contribute towards the well-being of the workforce and if they are not properly managed and controlled, will lead to ill-health.

■ WORKING TIME, REST, BREAKS

The Working Time Regulations provide workers with:

- A maximum working week of 48 hours – this can be averaged over a reference period, usually 17 weeks, which cannot include holiday, sick or maternity leave.
- Workers can opt-out of this 48 hour limit but employers cannot force them to do so, nor make signing such an agreement conditional on employment, nor part of a contract of employment. Unite advises members to never sign an opt-out. An opt-out can be cancelled with between 7 days and 3 months notice, depending on the wording of the original opt-out.
- An uninterrupted rest break of at least 20 minutes, away from any workstation, if working 6 hours or more. This does not have to be a paid break.
- A daily rest period of at least 11 consecutive hours in any 24 hour period.
- A weekly rest period of at least 24 hours in a week or 2 periods of 24 hours in a fortnight.
- Where shift workers cannot take their daily or weekly rest on a day in which they have changed shifts, employers must allow for compensatory rest as soon as possible thereafter.
- 4 weeks paid leave per year. This can include bank holidays, depending on what your contract of employment states. Employers may give more than this minimum. A week is equivalent to the normal working week. Leave must be taken in the leave year for which it is due and cannot be substituted with payment in lieu except where the worker's employment ends.
- Night workers should not work more than an average of 8 hours in every 24. Night work is defined as a 7-hour period that includes midnight to 5am, usually 11pm to 6am. Anyone who normally works at least 3 hours of their working day during this night period is classed as a night worker – this does not have to be every day, just on a regular basis. Before starting night work, workers should be offered a free health assessment to determine their suitability for night work, and at regular intervals thereafter.

- For young workers (aged 16-17) the working time limit is 8 hours a day and 40 hours a week, not averaged over a reference period. There is no opt-out available. They may work longer hours if necessary to maintain continuity of service or production, or to respond to a surge in demand for a service or product, provided that there is no adult available to perform the task and the employer ensures that the training needs of the young worker are not adversely affected. If a young worker is required to work for more than four and a half hours at a stretch they are entitled to a rest break of 30 minutes.
- Young workers may not ordinarily work at night between 10pm and 6am, or between 11pm and 7am if the contract of employment provides for work after 10pm. However the same exceptions apply as in the paragraph above and, in addition, young workers must be allowed an equivalent period of compensatory rest and be adequately supervised where necessary for their protection.

Employers have a general duty of care for the health, safety and welfare of their employees. This includes providing:

- a safe workplace without health risks
- safe work equipment, properly maintained and used, suitable for the purpose and safe systems of work
- adequate welfare facilities
- information, training and supervision necessary for health and safety

Employers must also:

- assess and record health and safety risks and any measures deemed necessary by a risk assessment
- write a health and safety policy and notify employees about it
- appoint a competent person to ensure health and safety laws are followed and consult employees or safety reps about this appointment
- provide first aid facilities
- set up procedures to deal with emergencies
- co-operate on health and safety with employers sharing the same workplace
- prevent danger from flammable or explosive hazards, electrical equipment, noise and radiation
- avoid manual handling and reduce risks from it where it cannot be avoided
- provide health surveillance where appropriate
- provide and maintain appropriate safety signs

■ HEALTH AND SAFETY IN GENERAL

- report specific injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences under RIDDOR reporting rules

Employers must set up a health and safety committee when requested by two safety reps in a unionised workplace. They must consult safety reps on the details of how health and safety is managed in the workplace. This includes consultation on:

- any changes in work or equipment which may affect health and safety
- information on any risks and hazards associated with work, how these are managed and how to deal with them
- planning of health and safety
- any health and safety issues arising from the introduction of new technology
- If you have no safety rep or if Unite is not recognised in your workplace, your employer must consult all employees or their representatives.

Employees also have responsibilities, including:

- taking reasonable care for their own health and safety and anyone else who may be affected by what they do or do not do
- co-operate with their employer on health and safety issues
- use work equipment and any protective equipment in accordance with training and instructions
- not interfering with, damaging or misusing anything provided for health, safety and welfare



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