

THE USE OF NATIONALLY RECOGNISED TRAINING IN CALL CENTRES

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As a major growth industry, call centres require large numbers of staff who are new to the industry to be trained in short periods of time. To this end, call centres in Australia are major users of national vocational education and training (VET) qualifications, using the Telecommunications Training Package. Different types of government funding for training are available in this way and are heavily used. For example, Call Centre Certificate III showed the largest growth area for traineeships in New South Wales (Australia's most populous State) in 2003.

This article reports on three case studies of training in large call centres, carried out as part of a national research project on the use by enterprises of nationally recognised training for existing workers. The study found that such training was well-suited to the call centre environment and was integrated into performance management systems, but that there were some problems associated with the appropriateness of delivery and assessment methods. There was also some cynicism among workers and first-line supervisors about the training.

Introduction

This article reports on three call centre case studies that formed part of a research project that set out to examine the extent and nature of the engagement of Australian enterprises with nationally recognised training for their workers. The study (Smith, Pickersgill,

Smith and Rushbrook forthcoming) was funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) through the National Research and Evaluation Committee program. The term 'nationally recognised training' (NRT) refers to training based either on national Training Packages or (much less commonly) on courses/programs that have been formally accredited through State or Territory Accreditation Boards. Such training results in qualifications or Statements of Attainment (the latter certifying competence in one or more units of competency) that are recognised throughout Australia. A complex and rigorous national quality control system is in place for NRT, which has been recently strengthened as a result of criticisms in the late 1990s (for example, Senate EWSRBE 2000).

Training is always important for the purposes of meeting individual enterprises' skills needs. However, enterprises' engagement with nationally recognised training has further significance as follows. Public money and publicly-developed curricula are used and therefore there is a legitimate public policy interest in this area as well as the capacity to influence behaviour through subsidies, availability of learning resources and so on. Training which is nationally recognised has assured levels of quality and uses up-to-date curriculum developed from competencies suggested by industry stakeholders. Workers gain nationally recognised qualifications or statements of attainment, increasing the skill levels of the workforce as a whole and enabling easier transfer between companies and between States and Territories. The possession of qualifications enables workers to move on to higher-level qualifications, increasing their career prospects. While these advantages are great it needs to be recognised that the use of nationally recognised competency-based training has been heavily critiqued (for example Hampson 2002) and quality problems remain.

Background

The Growth of Nationally Recognised Training (NRT) in Australia

The period since the latter part of the 1980s has seen significant changes to the nature and operation of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in Australia. The Australian VET sector has grown considerably to around 1.75 million participants in 2001 (Smith and Keating 2003: 2) and demand from industry has been a prime mover in that trend. It has been argued that the national training system has become more flexible through enhanced choice processes, greater flexibility in delivery methods and changed industry advisory arrangements (ACCI 2002a).

An important feature of the training reforms has been a relative shift in importance away from training institutions towards industry; VET has moved significantly closer to becoming an industry-driven system whereby industry influence and responsiveness is fundamental (Ferrier 2003). To a certain extent VET has also moved away from a

strong focus on entry-level training issues to an increased emphasis on training for existing employees.

The 'opening-up' of the accredited VET training system has seen movement from a near monopoly by the Technical and Further Education system (TAFE), the public provider, to one in which over 4,000 Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) exist (Brennan and Smith 2002). There is therefore a shift of public funding from public to private training providers, partly as a result of 'user choice' (see below) in the funding arrangements for the rapidly expanding apprentice and trainee training market. Over four hundred thousand Australians are currently engaged in apprenticeships and traineeships. Apprentices and trainees are contracted for (generally) three years and one year respectively, and receive government-funded training during the duration of their employment contracts. Such training may be off-the-job on day release or block release, or may be on-the-job provided a certain amount of face-to-face training is included and other criteria are met. A proportion of apprentices and trainees are newly-recruited workers including school-leavers, but a large number are 'existing workers' that have been offered the opportunity to gain a qualification through training, often on-the-job.

Training Packages, progressively introduced since 1997, consist of national industry competency standards (units of competency) gathered into qualifications at various levels, together with assessment guidelines and, usually, a variety of support materials. Through involvement in the design and review of Training Packages, by partaking in national steering committees and consultations, industry has a more prominent role in determining the nature of the VET curriculum. Moreover, through provisions built into Training Packages, industry has also determined that much VET must be assessed in workplaces (Smith and Keating 2003: 172). There has been considerable controversy about the educational efficacy of Training Packages (see, for example, Smith 2002) but a current *High-Level Review of Training Packages* by ANTA has uncovered widespread support for the general concept (ANTA 2004). As with the English system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) (Fletcher 1991), assessment is a key focus of nationally recognised competency-based training, and the method of training delivery is not prescribed.

There are now around eighty Training Packages, many covering industry areas which did not have access to NRT previously. Training Packages and the ability of enterprises to gain registration as RTOs make it possible for enterprises to deliver NRT and award qualifications to their staff in the workplace using their own training staff. In other cases, enterprises work in close partnership with TAFE Institutes or other RTOs (Callan and Ashworth 2003). High engagement with the NRT system began with food processing and vehicle manufacturing in the early 1990s (Sefton, Waterhouse and Cooney 1995) and has now spread into other industry areas.

Funding Incentives

By far the largest source of government funding for NRT is New Apprenticeship funding. 'New Apprenticeships' is the umbrella term for apprenticeships and traineeships and is the preferred term of the Commonwealth government, although not used in some States and Territories. There are two sources of New Apprentice funding: Commonwealth government employment incentives paid to employers that take on apprentices and trainees, and 'user choice' funding which is provided by States and Territories to RTOs for the training given to apprentices and trainees (ACCI 2002b).

Employment incentives are available for newly-recruited apprentices and trainees at any level, but are only available for existing workers if the qualification of the apprenticeship or traineeship is Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level 3 or above, and additionally if the designated worker has no AQF qualification younger than seven years.¹ The incentives are paid at commencement and completion of the apprenticeship or traineeship.

User choice funding regulations vary quite significantly from State to State although all States and Territories adhere to the same nine underpinning principles (ANTA 2003). In Queensland there are lower payments for enterprise RTOs than for other RTOs because, it is argued, enterprises have lower infrastructure costs. In general, States and Territories have few restrictions for newly recruited apprentices and trainees, but fairly restrictive arrangements for user choice funding for existing workers. There are generally minimum-hours rules about part-time workers' eligibility.² There has been some evidence of inappropriate accessing of government funding in traineeships, which has been well documented in reviews of traineeships in several States (Schofield 2000) and was one factor that led to tightening of regulations in the past three years.

NRT for Call Centres

NRT for call centres utilises the Telecommunications Training Package. Like all Training Packages, it is subject to periodic review. In 2002 a revised version was introduced which replaced the former qualifications of Certificates II, III and IV in Telecommunications (Call Centres) with new Certificates II, III and IV in Customer Contact, as well as a Diploma of Customer Contact Leadership and an Advanced Diploma of Customer Contact Management. Details of the qualifications can be found on the National Training Information Service website, <www.ntis.gov.au>. As an international parallel, in England there are NVQ qualifications at several levels in call centre operations. Each Australian qualification has a number of core units and electives. Enterprises can select those electives that suit their workplaces best.

'Respond to inbound customer contact' (code ICTCC111A) is an example of a competency unit. It contains the following elements of competency and performance criteria (Table 1).

Table 1
'Respond to inbound customer contact' Unit
of Competency Details

Element of competency, code and title	Performance criteria
ICTCC111A/01 Prepare for customer contact	1.1 Obtain and study product or service details 1.2 Study prepared scripts or call guides 1.3 Clarify details with relevant manager
ICTCC111A/02 Process customer inquiries	1.1 Greet customer using enterprise protocol 1.2 Establish customer needs 1.3 Satisfy customer needs promptly and efficiently
ICTCC111A/03 Arrange provision of a product or service	1.1 Obtain details of customer's requirements 1.2 Select appropriate product or service in consultation with customer 1.3 Record details in enterprise systems 1.4 Discuss, agree and record supply arrangements with customer 1.5 Discuss and agree on payment options with customer (if required) 1.6 Conduct a credit check (if required)

Source: National Training Information Service, www.ntis.gov.au

Within each unit of competency, as with all national units, there is a Range of Variables and an Evidence Guide, the former listing the different circumstances of application of the competencies, and the latter giving information about underpinning knowledge and skills, and assessment requirements.

Call centre qualifications are an important part of the funded training landscape. User choice funding is available in all States and Territories for Telecommunications (Call Centres) Certificates II to IV for new-entrant workers. At December 2003 the Certificate II qualification in NSW was among the fifteen highest-growth qualifications for

new-entrant traineeships (over 20 per cent annual growth) and the Certificate III was among the eighteen existing-worker traineeships that showed over 20 per cent growth.³ Call centre training receives special user-choice funding in some States as a growth industry, but conversely in at least one State (Western Australia) there is a cap on the number of call centre traineeships that are funded (Davidson 2004). New apprentices studying call centre qualifications are always described as trainees rather than apprentices.

Call Centre Work

We now turn from discussion of national training policy and practice and its application to the call centre industry to an examination of literature relating to call centre work at the enterprise level. Call centre work has attracted wide and critical attention from academic researchers. The large interest is partly a reflection of the rapid spread of call centre work, with Barker (1999) reporting that a large proportion of customer service work was now being done through call centres. A central theme in the literature is the nature of the work and the work arrangements, and their impact on the employees in call centres. While much of this discussion is focused on the nature of working arrangements themselves there is an implication that the knowledge, skills and attitudes required by those working in call centres may be qualitatively different from that of other service workers. It is therefore important to have some idea of the unique aspects of work affecting person specifications.

Call centres have become a specialist customer service function dealing with a range of inquires and taking the place of separate functional customer service operations (Weinkopf 2002). At the operational level the work of call centre operators has been widely characterized as neo-Taylorist (Weinkopf 2002) because its particular mix of close supervision and surveillance in situations requiring high standards of quality. Many researchers comment on the tension between the efficiency objectives inherent in the creation of call centres, their particular technologies, and work practices with the objective of high quality customer service.

While there has been widespread comment on the neo-Taylorist aspects of call centre work a number of researchers have also drawn attention to the wide variance between work arrangements in the call centre industry (Batt 1999; Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski and Shire 1999). These authors suggest that the work arrangements and work requirements of call centres are likely to vary in relation to the market or service being addressed and the complexity of the service delivered (Kinnie, Purcell and Hutchinson 2000). However, there do appear to be some common aspects to the organisation and structuring of work in the call centre environment. These include both technical and normative elements. The work situation is dominated by the operation of the IT, and as a result can be readily supervised by both electronic and physical

means. Call centre technologies have reduced operator discretion in dealing with customers (Knights and McCabe 1998). Many researchers have suggested that these technical characteristics are not the defining element in work situations (Frenkel *et al.* 1999). Instead, they focus on the normative elements of work as the significant characteristic of the work process (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Leidner 1993; Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Korczynski 2000; van den Broek 2004).

While most literature on call centre work relates to work organisation and industrial relations, several researchers have examined recruitment and training practices in call centres and their influence over worker skills and attitudes (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Frenkel *et al.* 1999; Korczynski 2000). A study of Australian call centres by Russell (2004) concluded that the skills requirements of call centre operators varied within relatively narrow limits when compared with the wider variation in call centre operations. Russell's (2004) research suggested that operators felt over-qualified for their jobs because of the relatively narrow degree of discretion allowed over their work. This suggests also that there might be a core of common skills requirements for call centre operation. A more instrumental view of skills needs can be found in work relating to the management effectiveness of call centre operations. For example, Pontes and Kelly (2000) classified operator competencies along several dimensions relating to the overall role in the marketing relationship. These were divided into customer relationship management and oral communication competencies (2000: 43–4). They presented research evidence that high competence in these areas resulted in greater caller satisfaction. Other researchers have explored the considerable emphasis on operator personality and the pursuit of those skills through recruitment and training practices (for example, Belt, Richardson and Webster 2002).

A number of researchers from a more critical tradition have noted the high degree of stress associated with the operator's need to identify with and relate to the caller's problem and concerns. This has been referred to as emotion work (Hochschild 1983; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996). Wallace, Eagleson and Waldersee (2000) argue that call centres may pursue a 'sacrificial HR strategy', which accepts high levels of labour turnover resulting from the stresses of call centre work as a cost of gaining the quality of commitment and motivation necessary to undertake the work. However, managers may prefer to attempt to retain staff. It is interesting in this context that the unit of competency *Respond to inbound customer contact* described above does not refer to operator stress or even to enterprise time limits for calls which create stress by opposing the two imperatives of customer service and efficiency.

There has been relatively little research into the actual training processes and content of training in call centres, though some researchers have examined the fact that training appears to focus on the development of normative skills. Nor does the limited literature

on training address the contribution made by national qualifications in the area and the associated governmental investment in the costs of training. Such investment may be considered alongside other government incentives for establishment of call centres particularly in regional areas. The research reported on in this article helps to redress these gaps in the literature by describing the nature of the formal training given to call centre operators and the way in which call centres organise this training to comply with government requirements for NRT so that they can award qualifications to their staff and receive government funding to assist with training costs.

Research Method

The three case studies that form the basis of this article were drawn from the qualitative component of a study into the use that Australian enterprises make of NRT (Smith *et al.* forthcoming). This study, carried out in late 2003, included a national survey of enterprises, including all 195 enterprise RTOs, about their use of nationally-recognised training, as well as twelve case studies, three in each of four industry areas, that probed the use of NRT by enterprises in more depth. Call centres were selected as one of the four industry areas.

The three call centres were Centrelink Call, Foxtel and Sing Tel Optus. Centrelink was the federal government department offering social security services across Australia. Staff handled queries concerning federal government welfare policies and was therefore required to be well briefed on a range of complex policy and legal issues. Interviews took place at the head office in Canberra and in a Melbourne Centrelink call centre, with around 150 employees. Foxtel was the principal provider of Pay TV services in Australia and was owned by a consortium of Telstra, News Corporation and Consolidated Press. The call centre in Melbourne, where the case study was carried out, employed 600 people and handled sales queries for customers as well as Foxtel staff engaged in technical operations and installations. Sing Tel Optus was Australia's second telecommunications carrier behind Telstra. The case study site was in Sydney and handled queries from customers about Optus mobile phone services. About 800 staff was employed at the Sydney call centre, which was one of four major centres in the company.

The study as a whole had a number of research questions:

- Why do some employers (and not others) use NRT?
- What are the perceived benefits of such training for the enterprise?
- How is the training distributed among different groups of workers?
- What are the obstacles to be overcome in the establishment of NRT?

- What are the effects of government funding upon enterprises' decisions to utilise NRT?

In each of the call centres, the following staff were interviewed: one or two human resource staff, one or two learning and development staff, one or two line managers, between two and six employees that had undertaken NRT and a union representative in the one case where this was permitted. Interviews were taped and transcribed and case study reports for each site were compiled which then fed into a cross-case analysis (Smith *et al.* forthcoming).

There were found to be a number of common features in call centres' use of NRT and some features of call centres that made NRT particularly appropriate for them. This article begins to explore these issues by reporting upon the way in which call centres used NRT, the administrative arrangements set up to manage such training including their relationships with RTOs and the views of staff at different levels of the organisations about the efficacy of NRT.

Findings and Discussion

Work Organisation

The three call centres in this study conformed very much to the call centre norms in terms of working conditions. Operators were grouped into 'teams' of around six to ten people, but the work was highly individualised and the teams had little or no autonomy in terms of work organisation. Operators sat in cubicles in large open-plan offices and dealt with calls on their headsets, acquiring and logging information on computer screens. Calls to the centres were queued (in the case of Centrelink Call the queue was a national queue) and were routed to the next available operator immediately the previous call was completed. The work of the operators was standardised with specified performance targets for the average duration of calls and procedures for dealing with the various queries that arose from the calls to the centres. For example, at Sing Tel Optus, operators were given 330 seconds to take the call and carry out any follow up action that was required. Calls were routinely monitored and feedback given on performance to the individual operators or the team leader. This information was used as the basis for the performance management systems that were used in all the call centres. Giving feedback to operators was another element of the team leader's job.

The level of unionisation was low at Sing Tel Optus and Foxtel, although higher at Centrelink Call, which was a public service organisation. The average age of the workforce was young (in the twenties) and all three call centres experienced a high level of employee turnover; one site reported that the turnover was 40 per cent per annum.

Training

All of the call centres offered extensive structured training to their employees. All had adopted NRT as the major vehicle for the training of their operators. Training of new recruits was a critical part of the operation in each of the call centres with the requirement that operators were familiar with both the product knowledge of their organisations as well as with ways in which to deal successfully with complex and difficult queries from customers.

Training began with a period of off-the-job training to familiarise new staff with the products and services of the organisation and with skills of dealing with customers on the phone. During the initial induction period new recruits were gradually introduced to the skills of dealing with customers on the phone through a series of practical exercises. These often involved listening in to live calls as staff in the call centres took them. The training emphasised role-playing and progressed after a while to dealing with simulated calls on the phone. At both Sing Tel Optus and Foxtel this initial period had been considerably shortened in recent times. At Sing Tel Optus the induction had been shortened from six weeks to four weeks and, in some cases, to two weeks. This period was followed by a four week period in a 'development team' before the recruit was transferred to a live team. The development team dealt with real customer queries but was not subject to the same performance standards as the other teams in the call centre, thus allowing new recruits to adapt to the live operation in a less pressurised environment. At Foxtel, the initial induction had been shortened to only one week followed by a three-week transitional period in a live call centre team. Training at Centrelink Call was more protracted due to the complex nature of the work. Here, new operators underwent a five week, off-the-job National Induction Program, most of which was focused on aspects of benefit regulations, clients' eligibility for payments and so on. Progression through the induction program was assessed until operators achieved the status of Point of Contact Decision Maker. The induction period in all cases contributed to the achievement of units of competency in the respective qualifications.

After the initial induction training, all the call centres encouraged their operators to continue with and complete the Certificate III or Certificate IV in Telecommunications (Customer Contact), unless they already had the qualifications on entry. Centrelink Call offered the Certificate IV whereas Sing Tel Optus and Foxtel offered the Certificate III as the standard qualification for the call centre operators. Although progressing through to the conclusion of the Certificate training was not mandatory for staff at any of three call centres, it was expected that all staff would undertake this training and the training was at least begun by all staff who joined the call centres. Employees were placed on traineeships as a matter of course, enabling the call centres to access employment incentives.

In each of the companies, the post-initial training was delivered

on-the-job and took place over 12–18 months. In practice, the training was embedded within the job and involved the collection of evidence that the operator had met the competencies in the various units of the qualification. At different points during the 12–18 month period, the operators were assessed against the competencies in the qualification based on the evidence of performance that they had collected during the period. Both Foxtel and Centrelink Call had formal policies of allowing all operators a certain number of hours of ‘learning and development’ time each week and while they were still undertaking the Certificate courses, staff generally spent their learning and development time on their Certificate work. Centrelink Call employees were given module workbooks to complete, although the company was about to move to a system where there were no such learning materials. The workbooks were not well regarded by employees who had to complete them.

The training during the on-the-job phase was closely linked to the needs of the individual call centres. In most cases this meant customising the training to fit the behavioural profiles that were set for all operators. At Sing Tel Optus operators were coached to exhibit a standard set of behaviours known as “challenger” behaviours – Engage, Think, Deliver. At Centrelink Call the training was structured around three grouped themes reflecting the priorities for the call centre – delivering customer service, working in teams, and using technology.

The assessment process fitted in well with the performance management systems operating in all three call centres. Performance management was an integral element in the management of the call centre operations. Operators in all three call centres were given frequent feedback on their performance as a result of the routine monitoring of calls. At both Foxtel and Sing Tel Optus, the regular performance management sessions held by team leaders with operators fed directly into the training process so that deficiencies that were observed in the performance of operators could be addressed through the training. This was perhaps most developed at Sing Tel Optus where each operator received a monthly one-on-one performance management session with the team leader. Any performance deficiencies were addressed through on-the-job coaching that was carried out by the Customer Service Support Representative who acted as a trainer to the team. A close relationship between the performance management system and training also prevailed at Foxtel where the training was structured around the identified training needs of individual operators as well as the new product knowledge which they required in the job.

Two of the call centres had also moved beyond using NRT just for the training of new customer service operators. Sing Tel Optus was using the Front Line Management qualifications to train their future team leaders as well as the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training to train staff who assessed operators in the Certificate in Telecommunications. Centrelink Call was also using the Front Line Management qualifications for their team leaders. Sing Tel Optus was

considering the use of NRT for other groups in the organisation, for example, for project managers and for the training of managers as part of the career development system.

Relationships with RTOs

Two of the call centres, Foxtel and Centrelink Call, offered NRT through a partnership with a RTO. In the case of Centrelink Call, the parent organisation, Centrelink, had its own Registered Training Organisation (RTO), the Centrelink Virtual College. However, the training offered by the Centrelink Virtual College was not focused on the particular needs of the call centre operators. As a result, Centrelink Call did not use the Centrelink Virtual College but instead used a network of 20 RTOs across Australia contracted to each local office, with the central learning and development function assisting local offices in their arrangements. Foxtel had initially partnered with a private RTO but this arrangement had proved unsatisfactory and, at the time of the research, Foxtel was working with a local TAFE Institute. Sing Tel Optus was an enterprise RTO. The organisation had taken this decision due to the large numbers of new recruits to their call centres that required training and, in the first instance, the opportunity to attract funding to underwrite the training operation.

Relationships with RTOs for Foxtel and Centrelink Call presented some difficulties. Foxtel's original relationship with a private RTO had not worked well. Management at Foxtel felt that the RTO did not have adequate resources to meet their needs and had used their contract with Foxtel as a form of marketing. However, Foxtel's subsequent partnership with a TAFE provider had worked far better, especially as two TAFE staff were full-time on Foxtel premises. Centrelink Call's relationships with the 20 RTOs in their network had presented some difficulties. A comment was that the local call centres needed to ensure that

... they don't get the wool pulled over their eyes (by the RTOs) ... I think some RTOs have probably ... taken advantage of people who didn't fully understand what was in the contract.

These difficulties centred around getting local offices to work effectively with their RTOs and to understand the needs of the RTOs to meet the requirements of the recently-introduced Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Increased quality control by state accreditation bodies following the introduction of the AQTF had let partnering RTOs to introduce new demands on to the operators undertaking the qualifications. A manager at the Centrelink call centre said that staff had to keep a diary:

... some of them write in it every day. We expect an entry every couple of weeks, about certain calls they've had or about their coaching, what

they've learnt with the job, and the RTO request that it's emailed to them.

In general, Centrelink Call had found private RTOs to be more flexible than TAFE RTOs but often the flexibility depended on the relationship that the local co-ordinators established with their RTO rather than any inherent characteristics of the RTO itself.

Reasons for Using NRT

For all three call centres, the primarily on-the-job nature of NRT was attractive in that it allowed the organisations to train large numbers of people in a short period of time. Sing Tel Optus in particular was undergoing a significant expansion of its call centre operations when it took the decision to adopt NRT for basic operator training. Building the training into the day to day activities of the job ensured that formal and accredited training could be carried out without investing in expensive infrastructure required for a more traditional, off-the-job approach.

The availability of funding also played a role in the adoption of NRT. When the organisations made the decision to adopt NRT, the availability of employment subsidies for employing trainees was attractive to management in conjunction with the relatively low cost of on-the-job training. However, in all three organisations, funding appeared to be only a short-term factor in the adoption of NRT. As more people underwent training, the organisations realised that NRT offered more benefits than simply the ability to attract limited funding and NRT could be used to train other groups in the workforce such as managers.

A key benefit for all the call centres was that NRT provided a national quality benchmark for training. The competency standards contained in the Training Packages provided a consistent set of performance standards for operators. Managers could be reasonably confident that all operators, as a result of achieving the competencies, were trained to a particular standard of performance. This allowed the call centres to ensure a base level of quality throughout their entire operations. Traditional, in-house forms of training did not offer this national level of consistency.

A second major benefit that all three call centres recognised was the ability to use the provision of NRT to attract employees. All the call centres operated in a tight labour market with a high level of turnover. Employee exit was a considerable source of risk for the organisations and their human resource policies tended to be structured around recruiting and retaining the best employees. NRT played a key role in promoting the organisations as employers of choice in a competitive labour market. Many operators migrated from one call centre to another and so conditions and rates of pay were widely known and compared by employees. The ability to gain a nationally recognised qualification whilst working was something that the organisations felt helped them to attract employees.

A further advantage of NRT for the call centres was the extent to which NRT fitted with the broader human resource management functions of the organisations. The on-the-job nature of the delivery of the program already suited itself to the needs of the businesses enabling the call centres to integrate training into the daily working environment of the organisation. However, the structure of the Training Packages also suited the human resource strategy of the call centres in other ways. The competencies contained in the qualifications not only provided a national benchmark for the work of the trained operators but also provided a foundation for the performance management systems that underpinned the management of the organisations and for the recruitment of new staff. Thus the call centres used the competency standards in the training packages to shape other aspects of their human resource strategies. These included agreements about pay and conditions; the companies' enterprise agreements were structured around the payment of certain levels of pay for certain levels of qualification. Thus the motivation for staff in all the call centres to undertake the training was the financial rewards contingent on completing the qualifications. At Centrelink Call, for example, the central human resource manager described training as the 'backbone' of the enterprise agreement.

Sing Tel Optus had moved furthest of the call centres in the process of integrating NRT with HRM strategies. Here, the organisation was using the competency standards in the Front Line Management qualifications to devise sets of standards for management throughout the organisation. This enabled the company to identify those managers with specific deficiencies in management skills and to use the Front Line Management qualification to provide the training that was necessary to their further progression in the organisation. In this sense, Training Packages and NRT provided a foundation for all of the major functions of human resources, especially in a largely non-unionised environment where employee relations was not the central driving force in the human resource strategy.

Perceptions of NRT

NRT provided the call centres with a new approach to their training and other human resource activities, and the chance to acquire a qualification was appreciated by many staff. The Optus College manager said,

A lot of people really do value it [the qualification]. We actually have a graduation ceremony three times a year and quite often we get a rep. to speak about what the qualification has meant to them. Quite often we have had mature age students get up and say, 'This is the first qualification I've ever had and I can go home and say I'm really proud of it'.

However, not all individuals and groups of employees were fully convinced of the benefits of NRT. Some managers, especially middle and line managers, whilst they recognised the usefulness of NRT felt that the training was too general to meet the specific needs of the enterprise. In this case, operational managers would have preferred training that was tailored to the needs of their own operations. However, Training Package qualifications are designed to provide nationally consistent and portable skills. Thus, NRT tends to emphasise the general skills required for an occupation rather than the company-specific skills. The call centres had dealt with this problem of generality by customising the training as far as possible. Thus Foxtel had customised much of the training for the Certificate III in Telecommunications around the individual needs of operators as defined in the performance management system. Sing Tel Optus used the notion of ‘challenger behaviours’ to structure the post-initial training. But, even with this degree of customisation, operational managers still found the training rather generalised and not sufficiently focused on their immediate needs. The lack of specificity was more pronounced at Centrelink Call, where the operators were required to undertake the Certificate IV rather than the Certificate III used at Foxtel and Sing Tel Optus. The Certificate IV was viewed as rather too high a level for operator training, leading the trainees in the direction of management and supervision rather than operational activities. Yet some staff were university graduates and, it was reported, resented undertaking what they saw as a lower-level qualification, with the actual content widely regarded as simplistic and, as one staff member put it, ‘wishy washy’.

Not all operators were convinced of the benefit of the training for them. The mainly on-the-job nature of the training led staff to query whether NRT was ‘real training’. For many staff and managers, real training was synonymous with face to face delivery. Apart from the initial induction training at each call centre, most of the training was delivered on-the-job with staff required to keep written evidence of their achievement of the competencies in the Training Package qualifications. While this was comparatively easy in the closely-monitored call centre environment (one training officer said: “You can’t do a lot in a call centre without it being recorded somewhere”) for many staff, this process was indistinguishable from simply doing the job. Many, particularly at Centrelink Call, questioned whether they were learning anything new and one staff member commented that her learning was restricted because she did not mix with staff from other parts of the organisation as she had in other training that she had undertaken. One staff member said

I’ve got fifteen years’ working experience and then I have one year here and got the Certificate IV. I didn’t know how that one year is more valuable than the previous fifteen.

The continuation of NRT was subject to review with the case study organisations, with Human Resources and training staff needing to defend the system to management. The Optus college manager, for example, said

Last year we went through a period where we really had to weigh up do we need this qualification? Senior managers had to make a decision whether they wanted to keep it or not. So they made a decision that they wanted it because we provided our people with a qualification and it supported career development.

Conclusion

Call centres present many challenges for both management and staff due to the large volume of staff employed, high labour turnover and the pressured nature of the work. NRT offers a chance to improve the overall consistency and quality of performance through holding out a promise of assured levels of competency. The case studies presented here show that an assumption of such assurances was built into performance management and pay structures within the companies. In general, the Human Resources and training staff appeared to exhibit the requisite faith in the ability of the national training system and the qualifications to deliver the required levels of competency in staff.

On closer examination, particularly through discussions with line managers and the staff themselves, it was apparent that there were some problems with such assumptions. The qualifications were felt by some to be too general and by others to be of limited relevance to the work that was actually done. The natural tension between the awarding of national qualifications and the provision of firm-specific training was clearly evident here. Also evident were the tensions arising from the on-the-job nature of the training. While the training fitted in well with normal work processes and the detailed performance management processes built into call centre work, the very fact of its integration made it almost invisible to some staff so that they felt it was not really training at all.

NRT presented an extra layer of challenges for training staff. They needed to be accountable to the national training system through the various regulatory devices at national and state level, which required certain compliance measures. Relationships with RTOs, in the case of Foxtel and Centrelink Call, required the investment of a great deal of staff energy and time. There was a clear realisation in these two companies that some RTOs were simply directed towards profit rather than quality of training.

Despite these difficulties, NRT provided a useful structured framework to manage both training and wider human resource systems within the companies. Call centres appeared to be particularly well

suited to nationally recognised training. The on-the-job nature of NRT and its integration into the day to day work of the call centres meant that the organisations could train large numbers of staff in a highly consistent way over a relatively short period of time. This suited the high volume training requirements of the call centres. Overall, there is a need for more research into the use of nationally-recognised training in call centres because of its significance in extending qualifications to large numbers of workers and because of the public policy implications of its routine accessing of government funding.

Notes

- 1 AQF Level 3 is the level of an apprenticeship.
- 2 Information from States and Territories was gained from telephone consultations December 2003 – January 2004.
- 3 These figures exclude traineeships that, although they met the growth criteria, had low enrolment numbers.

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