

## Response to Call Centre Articles in IMAgenda

by Peter Robinson

The Anglican theologian Vernon White concludes his investigation into individualism and Christian belief by saying:

"Attention must be paid to individual people. People *matter* is an inescapable moral foundation of all healthy social order and written in to the very essentials of Christian faith and practice. In particular, the 'ordinary' salesman [and saleswoman] matters as much as anyone. He matters according to his individuality, and within the whole web of his social relationships, and within the whole narrative of his life. As such he is irreplaceable. We should pay scrupulous attention to him, as to every individual person. He should be loved."<sup>i</sup>[i]

The articles in this issue show how employment in call centres may be an affirmation of the fact that *people do matter*. In the narratives we have been given we can discern signs of individual flourishing in the context of interpersonal relationships and we have been given an insight into the way personal development links into the social vision for the North East region.

At the personal level, Lisa Williamson's testimony affirms the way a call centre environment may contribute to the unlocking of human potential in the local community.<sup>ii</sup>[ii] Clearly, this is an example of an individual's levels of skill being enhanced. However, it also affirms the way that potential skills are drawn out of the local community. North Tyneside College is one example of tailor-made training, but the network extends much further. The starting place for many is access to local Information Technology centres where very basic skills may be introduced. There are positive lessons to be learned here about the rootedness of globally oriented industry and also the importance of integrating training with the opening up of opportunities at the level of neighbourhood.<sup>iii</sup>[iii]

The progression from relatively informal training based in the community through to employment may be one reason why the majority of call centre agents are female. Another reason seems to be that part-time employment coupled with flexible working hours provides a significant benefit to women who are required to balance the needs of home and family with career development. As the percentage of women accessing the labour market increases call centres are providing some of the opportunities. However, if there is a perception that women are more suited to call centre work than men because they possess higher levels of communication and social skills there is a warning to be taken here. Encouragingly, some recent work suggests that more young men are now entering the industry and careful reflection will be required as a gender stereotype is challenged.<sup>iv</sup>[iv] Meanwhile the experience of women in the call centre environment is a timely reminder that the 'whole narrative' of our personal life matters, not simply our employment.

As we consider the 'whole web of social relationships' we hear from a major call centre employer about the importance of developing links with local communities. We also gain a sense that constructive relations between employee and customer and between employees themselves are seen to be crucial components for the individual's well being. In particular the opportunities for enhancing the productivity and skills of others through management were positively described. Nevertheless, I found myself wishing to hear more in all the articles about the

way individuals working at their own call stations may *work* together as a team, particularly when the pressure to meet targets may be high.

The narrative of Tyneside's industrial history supplied by the Job Centre manager at North Shields raises important questions about the place of new service industries in a local economy that until quite recently was reliant on manufacturing jobs in the shipbuilding and engineering sectors. A popular, and sometimes prominent, view in the region would be that employment in the information technology sector cannot substitute for the loss of "real jobs". For the Christian this is a challenge to our understanding of creativity. In the space available only the contours of a response can be made. If work has the purpose of continuing the creative work of God, then above all it is for the service of other human beings in acts of love. Human beings are formed in the image of God who is Trinity. In employment the Spirit, who is active within us, enables us to share in God's creativity. The Spirit however is not only at work in individuals and their relationships, but also in our social and economic structures. The Spirit's role is a persuasive one, constantly opening up new possibilities in the diversity of contemporary life for human beings to learn the art of loving through employment. Any employer needs to facilitate good working structures, so that human good may be established through the tasks of work.<sup>v[v]</sup> This not only puts my remarks about reaching human potential in perspective but it may help us to understand more fully that working in the service sector may be understood to be creative in a genuine sense.

Call centres have offered and will continue to offer routes to employment for many in our region. I hope that I have highlighted things that may be affirmed about the call centre sector, as I understand it. I hope also that in the areas of gender and creativity I have suggested themes for further exploration. However, R Richardson, V Belt and N Marshall have recently warned that the North East region should avoid becoming over-dependent upon this sector. The reasons they give are sound, not least because the challenges of a global economy gives this industry a necessary international flexibility and the need to seek out the most economic locations.<sup>vi[vi]</sup> The North East has been given hope through one aspect of its economic development, but we must be judicious in the weight we place on it, precisely because it is the potential of the region's individual that is at stake.

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i[i] White, Vernon. *Paying Attention to People*. London: SPCK. 1996, p.172; my addition in brackets in view of the forthcoming argument.

ii[ii] *Unlocking Our Potential: Regional Economic Strategy for the North East*. One NorthEast. 1999

iii[iii] I am grateful to Paul Whiston from the Economic Development Team at Newcastle City Council for this and other insights.

iv[iv] Richardson, Ranald; Belt, Vicki and Marshall, Neill. "Taking Calls to Newcastle: Call Centres and Economic Development in the North East of England". *Northern Economic Review*. Winter 1998-99. No.28, pp.15-34. I wish to record my gratitude to Vicki Belt, of the *Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies* at the University of Newcastle who has assisted me greatly in supplying background information for this reflection.

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v[v] See Goldingay, John and Innes, Robert. *God at Work*. Grove Ethical Studies No.94. Nottingham: Grove Books. 1994 for an introduction to the theology of work.

vi[vi] Op. cit., p.15

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