

Examining Health and Safety in Contact Centres

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Abstract

In 2003, a study was conducted to add to the knowledge available on issues relating to occupational safety and health in contact center work. General Guidelines on OSH are set by the Occupational Safety and Health Standards (OSHS) which cover practically all workplaces in the formal sector but the peculiarity of certain hazards and risks in Contact Centers needed addressing.

In addition to susceptibility to health problems from computer use, contact center workers have to deal with work organization and psychosocial factors such as fear of not being able to meet performance quotas, anxiety over constant electronic monitoring of performance, predominant night work to coincide with regular working hours in Northern America or Europe, disruption in social or domestic life and safety concerns because of night work.

This rapidly expanding industry also has to deal with concerns of women especially working mothers as well as with work issues of young workers. It also relates to the aspirations of young workers in terms of career opportunities and training.

Based on the previous case study carried out by the Occupational Safety and Health Center of the Department of Labor and Employment, specific case study focusing on psychosocial concerns was carried out from Y 2006 to 2007.

The main objective of the study was to look into the occupational safety and health conditions in selected contact centers in the Philippines. Specifically, it aimed at:

- Ascertaining the psychosocial concerns of workers and their ergonomic conditions
- Documenting any occupational safety and health programs being implemented, in particular psychosocial programs
- Studying the relationship between exposures to ergonomic and physical hazards and stress experienced by workers

These included a survey of ten selected contact centers using focus group discussions, individual interviews of workers, of key informants and management of respondent establishments as well as the following:

- History of the company, nature of the business, size, type of clients, tasks of workers, etc.
- Elements of their occupational safety and health program
- Health and safety audit checklist
- Checklist on the computer workstation, with emphasis on the characteristics of the computer and peripherals, furniture (table, chair, etc.), and workstation layout.
- The noise, air velocity, temperature, and relative humidity in the vicinity of the selected employee's workstation were also measured. Evaluation of the indoor air quality was done in the room where the selected employee is assigned.

The odd work schedule is a peculiarity in contact centers in the Philippines. This is characterized by predominantly night work to coincide with the regular business hours of the clients in Northern America or Europe Night work, thus, becomes an important occupational safety and health issue. Prolonged nocturnal work forces the worker to invert the "activity-rest" cycle

and has been documented to have negative impact on the health and well-being of the workers. Health effects may include sleep disorders, eating disturbances and gastrointestinal disorders, mental problems and cardiovascular disturbances.

The present study was able to determine job-related psychosocial stress factors, working conditions in contact centers often have high workload, excessive supervision and monitoring, job insecurity, and unpredictable work schedules have been found to be quite stressful. The possible association of psychosocial stress factors with somatic symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders had been noted by many studies. An increased awareness or perception of symptoms may lead to increased reporting of physical symptoms..

Contact centers usually employ young workers often in their first jobs. Many might hesitate to complain against tasks that might place them in peril or press for better conditions at work. In effect, the symptoms solicited from the subjects of the study may be an underestimate of the true state of their health..

The study make recommendations which have impact on policies and programs for the contact centers, as well as the integration of major psychosocial concerns in the existing technical guidelines on health and safety for workers in contact centers, in training and in information dissemination programs.