“Let Me Tell You Who I Am”: A Qualitative Study of Identity and Accountability in Two Electronically-Monitored Call Centres

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis describes and analyses the ways in which employees in two front line call centre settings report their experience of qualitative and quantitative monitoring in the workplace, and its impact on their work and work life. I conducted ethnographically informed fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews, in two financial service call centre sites. Emerging from the rich descriptions participants shared about their work life, identity and accountability stood out as key themes. The sites, which use similar methods of monitoring and performance measurement, had quite different management strategies in place which affected staff perceptions of identity and accountability. I modified an activity theory framework to create a model of organisational, professional and peer identities and accountabilities, and to examine the ways these connect, interact, and sometimes disconnect, with one another. Call centres are contentious workplaces in the literature, generating ongoing debate about the extent to which electronic monitoring is effective as a method of control and about the way monitoring and surveillance affects workers. Using this framework allows me to look at common call centre
issues, such as the quality/quantity dichotomy, through a different and potentially helpful lens, one that is novel in the call centre literature. My findings suggest that when the various facets of identities and accountabilities are poorly aligned, workers are forced to prioritize one over the other, often to the detriment of both. In the financial service call centres I studied, workers often chose to prioritize professional and peer identity over organisational accountability when organisational requirements were strongly felt to conflict with the ways in which a professional banker should behave towards customers and colleagues. Workers made these choices despite clearly understanding the potential consequences to themselves in terms of achieving performance metric targets and supervisory approval. Conceptualizing call centre workers’ responses to monitoring and measurement from an identity and accountability perspective offers new insights into the reasons why financial service call centre workers are often dissatisfied or frustrated with standard call centre measurement practices, leading to potential practical solutions.
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Chapter One: Experiencing workplace monitoring

“For good or ill, we are known and we know ourselves by the work we do.” (Gini 1998, p. 708)

Interviewer: “How are you evaluated?”
Participant: “Let me tell you who I am…..” (VB Interview 3)

Participant: “I want them [statistical performance reports] to see where I talk too much and get talk time down, that’s something I got told to do last performance review. Don’t want to be letting everyone down, not doing my share. Everyone knows I think.” (CU Notes 25)

I begin with these three quotes because they encapsulate what this thesis is about. Gini points out the centrality of work to our lives, and indicates that work and identities are inextricably linked. The work we do, the way we do it, and the ways that evaluation happens in the workplace, affect the ways in which people experience themselves at work, and the ways others see them. And part of being seen at work is to be evaluated, to be held accountable for performance, through formal means such as performance reviews and informal means, such as the sense of collegiality that contributes to not “letting everyone down.” Increasingly, in white collar workplaces where digital networks have become the norm, the way that workers are seen by others, or can be seen, is mediated through the technological systems on which they work. Furthermore, these same systems are increasingly used to monitor, or surveil, work performance. Our workplace identities and accountabilities are multiple, situated, and contingent, “achieved rather than ascribed” (Clarke et al. 2009, p. 347). The ways they are achieved, however, in work environments where identities are shaped and accountabilities are enforced through systems of surveillance, and what this means for workers, require study.
Employers have the right to monitor their workers’ performance, and are increasingly exercising those rights in a variety of workplace settings ranging from blue collar factories to white collar workers in positions ranging from telephone operators to judges, particularly in the case of technologically-mediated transactions (Shulman 2001; AMA 2008). Technological changes including decreases in the cost of data storage and processor power, combined with increasing ability to integrate multiple technologies within large-scale information systems, have contributed to this trend. So has a volatile economy in which organisations are facing unrelenting challenges to boost productivity and reduce costs to remain competitive. A workplace provides a relatively closed system which has the legal right to track individual work activities in detail, the technologies that permit this kind of real time one-on-one tracking, and increasingly, the motivation to do so, whether in the name of productivity, company security, or protecting proprietary information. Given the centrality of work in contemporary society, and the development and increasing use of the technological infrastructures of workplaces for surveilling work and workers, it is important to explore the types and effects of workplace surveillance on the people who are its subjects.

As Ball has pointed out, when it comes to surveillance, “frequently where the action is, and where the interest lies, is in the interactional nature of our relationships with surveillance technologies from within our different domains of action: in the street, on the road, at work, in the shops and at home” (2010, p. 574-75). This thesis presents a study undertaken in one ‘domain of action,’ a technology-intensive, heavily-monitored and extensively networked workplace—the call centre. Gad and Lauritsen noted in their ethnographic study of Danish fish inspectors, that “situating surveillance strongly encourages researchers to explore surveillance in practice” (2009, p. 56). The study on which this thesis is based is similarly ethnographic in method, and situated in two Canadian financial service call centres. It examines the effects that some specific performance monitoring technologies have on people working in two singular systems, each chosen, implemented, managed, and maintained by a single organisation. Marx (1996) states, “Surveillance technology is not simply applied, it is also experienced by users, subjects, and audiences”; my research seeks to focus on the experiential nature of workplace surveillance. In this thesis, I explore concepts of identity and accountability, as expressed by participants in my study, and as encoded in the monitoring systems and larger organisational settings they work within. This will, in turn, further our understanding of the way people are
influenced by, and seek to influence, the systems which impose workplace identities and accountabilities, and the ways in which workers seek to project their own versions of each of these elements within the workplace with supervisors and peers.

In referring to workplace monitoring as a form of surveillance, I rely on Introna’s definition. He takes workplace surveillance to “mean the multiplicity of formal and informal practices of monitoring and recording aspects of an individual or groups’ behaviour ‘at work’ for the purposes of judging these as appropriate or inappropriate; as productive or unproductive; as desirable or undesirable” (Introna 2003, p. 210). Similarly, David Lyon’s widely accepted (although sometimes debated) definition of surveillance as ‘focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purpose of influence, management, protection or direction’ (Lyon 2007, p. 14) aligns rather precisely with the explicit and implicit purposes of financial service call centre monitoring, which is conducted at the level of individuals, designed in both nature and effect to influence workers and manage their time and pace. Other authors, such as Botan and Vorvoreanu propose separate definitions that draw a distinction between monitoring and surveillance. They characterize “monitoring” as “applicable to all automated collecting of information about work, regardless of purpose” while surveillance is linked specifically to information collected, perhaps by monitoring, to facilitate attempts to control behaviour (2005, p. 125). By these definitions, however, call centres are both monitored and surveilled at the same time, and since all information collected through monitoring can be used to measure performance, the practical difference between the processes in a call centre setting is minimal. The term “monitoring” is generally used over “surveillance” in management literatures, possibly due to the potentially negative popular connotations of the term surveillance. Since both monitoring and surveillance as they relate to work performance are, essentially, about control (a term which also might be perceived negatively but is, like surveillance, sometimes good as well as bad), I use them interchangeably in this text.

Call centres are an excellent site for monitoring and surveillance research: they are sites where information and communication technologies are used intensively, and interestingly, the literature indicates that the technologies used tend to be largely the same across industries and even international boundaries. They are also at the forefront of the trend towards monitoring in white-collar workplaces. Call centres have been sites of thorough monitoring since they became popular with businesses in the early 1990s, and so have an established set of technologies and
work practices related to monitoring which may be explored and described. In fact, the call centre environment is unique, it has been argued, because the technological infrastructure actually “forms the basis of how work is carried out” (Houlihan 2000, p. 229). Databases, transaction terminals, and the automatic call distribution systems (ACDs) are linked together to provide “a series of business advantages such as efficiency, a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness, reduced dependence on employee skills and substantial cost savings” partially by making it “possible to routinise, monitor and control performance in far-reaching ways” (Houlihan 2000, p. 229). Thus in call centres, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used to both create the conditions of work and then maintain and monitor them.

I approach this topic by looking through a specific analytic lens, one that is drawn not directly from either the call centre or surveillance literatures, although it is, I believe, relevant to both. It is instead a perspective that emerged as the study progressed and data was analysed. Workers often talked to me during fieldwork about how they felt about themselves as workers, how they wanted to position themselves at work, and how this sometimes conflicted with how they felt the organisation was trying to make them position themselves. Although few of them used the words ‘identity’ or ‘accountability’, those concepts describe very well what these project participants were talking about. Identity and accountability—the multiple ways in which workers seek to identify themselves at work and as workers, and the ways in which they negotiate the different kinds of accountabilities that are both imposed on them by the organisation, and that they take upon themselves—provide a unique perspective on the reasons that workers respond as they do to workplace monitoring.

After an examination of the nature and development of call centres, and a detailed description of the research sites to provide context, this thesis will discuss data collected from interviews, observation and chats with front-line call centre workers in two different research sites, listening to how they talk about themselves and the experiences they describe when working in an environment where it is commonly accepted that their employer can review every computer keystroke or phone conversation at will. The ways that workers talk about identities suggest that they see identity not just as an internal construct but a social one. This accords well with Grayson’s definition of identity as “the set of characteristics that somebody recognizes as belonging uniquely to him or herself and constituting his or her individual personality for life” and also those characteristics which others recognize about that individual as well (Grayson
He goes on to suggest that: “Identity characteristics are given power as contributory parts of an identity only after they are recognized by others. Thus identity, for our purpose, does not inhere within us; it is a social construct and granted by others” (Grayson 2002, p. 2). If it is true that identities are formed in social interactions, then what is the effect on workers when social interactions with customers are tracked, peer interactions are limited, and the organisational identities that matter are linked to digital compilations of performance statistics? Work organisations are, Watson claims, sites where people must take on various corporate personas, making them “particularly appropriate settings … for attempts to understand how, in modern times, people deal with questions of who they are and who they might become” (2008, p. 122).

Like identity, accountability is a social construct that is both pervasive and ubiquitous in work settings: “Any setting organizes its activities to make its properties as an organized environment of practical activities detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-about-able, analyzable—in short accountable” (Garfinkel 1967, p. 33). Accountability has both social meaning and a specific orientation within organisations, where accountability tends to be specifically about making workers “answerable for producing outputs or the use of resources to achieve certain ends” (Sinclair 1995, p. 222). In either context, we both tell stories about ourselves, and act to influence the stories others might tell about us. How we tell the story of ourselves reflects an attempt to project a particular image which corresponds with the way we see ourselves and the way we would like to be seen; the way others respond to our accounts of ourselves or construct their own accounts reciprocally affects our self-image. Identity and accountability, in this framework, develop together. As Roberts puts it, drawing on Mead, “our awareness of self develops simultaneously with our awareness of the world and our relation to others” (Roberts 1991, p. 357). Or, put another way, social structures, cultures and local discourses (all of which impose their own kinds of accountabilities on individuals) interact with internal perceptions and processes in identity formation (Watson 2011).

I will explore three kinds of identities and accountabilities that were in evidence in the two worksites where I conducted my fieldwork—organisational, professional, and peer identities—and look at the ways that workers in each site perform their various work-related identities in an environment where much is imposed, but also where monitoring is viewed as an inevitable and generally acceptable part of the work environment. Goode and Greatbatch (2005) have observed
that call centre agents define and negotiate professional status through relationships with other actors, including supervisors, peers, and technologies in the workplace. These relationships provide the focal point to observe the ways that workers attempt to project their own sense of their multiple identities into their work and workplace. Within these relationships, identity work can be studied as an activity, one in which “people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Alvesson & Wilmott 2002, p. 626). Much of the call centre literature focuses on situations of conflict around monitoring practices; in my two field sites, the level of conflict varied widely, due to differences in the organisations’ approaches to monitoring and employee relations in general. In both sites, however, whether workers generally expressed comfort or discomfort with the monitoring system and associated practices, effects on the ways in which workers positioned and projected their identities and discussed their accountabilities in the workplace were acknowledged by workers during conversation, and recognized during observation.

1.1 Research Context and Settings: What is a call centre?

As a first step, it is useful to establish a definition of a call centre. This is not a completely straightforward task, as there are considerable variations between types of call centres, which are spread across several sectors of the economy, and which perform different functions for different organisations, both within and across sectors.

The broadest definition in the call centre literature is that provided by Norling, who states that “a call centre is any communications platform from which firms deliver services to customers via remote, real-time contact” (2001, p. 155). Callaghan and Thompson apply a similarly inclusive definition, stating that call centres may be "broadly defined as workplaces that integrate telephone and computer technologies" (2001, p. 14). While these definitions usefully highlight the centrality of communication technology integration in the call centre field, it leaves the boundaries of the industry somewhat ambiguous. Taylor and Bain narrow the definition by specifying the types of technologies used: “we define a call centre as a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound—or make outbound—telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) or
predictive dialing system. The call centre is thus characterised by the integration of telephone and VDU technologies” (1999, p.102; see also Taylor & Bain 2001, p. 40).

Other authors narrow their definitions by focusing on the types of services which these integrated technologies are designed to provide. For example, in an early definition, Richardson states that “telephone call centres are specialist technology-intensive offices that are established by organisations in order to deliver services to customers over the telephone, replacing or complementing face-to-face interaction with the public” (1994, p. [1]). Similarly, Kinnie, Purcell and Hutchinson provide a tripartite definition incorporating technology, technological control, and tasks:

We define call centres in the following way: (i) employees are engaged in specialist operation which integrate telecommunications and information systems technologies; (ii) their work is controlled by automatic systems which virtually simultaneously distribute work, control the pace of that work and monitor their performance; (iii) they are in direct contact with the customer through dealing with in-bound calls, making out-bound calls or a combination of the two. (1999, par. 6)

Houlihan also includes the types of operations typically performed in a call centre within her definition. She lists the tasks most effectively performed by call centres: “Call centres are centralised, specialized operations for both inbound and outbound communication handling. Call centre operations are especially suited to information delivery, customer services and sales operations” (2000, p. 228). Buchanan and Koch-Schulte go one step further and include in their description the organisational rationale for establishing call centres:

Call centres are a relatively recent phenomenon made possible by the dissemination of telecommunications and information technologies. The technology enables telephone service representatives to deal quickly and remotely with customer needs by connecting the representative to the customer’s account information on his/her computer as the call is relayed to the headset. As call centres can be centralized in locations far from the customers of a business, they allow firms to cut costs by reducing the number of local service outlets. (2000, p. 4)
In reviewing these definitions and descriptions, it becomes clear that although there are variations in stress placed on different elements, there is general agreement about which elements are key. Borrowing from this accumulation, we might, therefore, define a call centre as a specialized office where agents remotely provide information, deliver services, and/or conduct sales, using some combination of integrated telephone and information technologies, typically with an aim to enhancing customer service while reducing organisational costs.

Carrying out transactions over the telephone has a long history, beginning with operator services and later, reservations lines, particularly for airlines (Houlihan, 2001, p. 209). But in the last 20 or 25 years, the introduction of information technologies and telecommunications advances has expanded the types of work it is possible to undertake, while reducing costs. Concurrently, ideas of ‘service’ and service relationships continue to be redefined as technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous, rendering the public more receptive to mediated service interactions. There are a variety of factors which have led to the increase of telephone services, suggest Richardson and Marshall, including the transformation of telephony by “the development of digital exchanges, intelligent telephone networks and their integration with computer data bases”; falling telephony costs and the introduction of toll-free numbers; the high degree of penetration and familiarity of telephone technology; and the ability to communicate complex information by phone in real time (Richardson and Marshall, 1999 par. 11). In addition to technological progress and social advantages, another likely reason for the burgeoning of the call centre industry in the early 1990s was a significant period of retrenchment in a number of business sectors, including a drive towards reducing costs and cutting staff—both of which can be accomplished by centralizing services, reducing branch offices close to the customer, and taking advantage of lower cost real estate and labour costs in locations outside main business centres. Most recently, as businesses move towards self-service, internet based transaction models, call centres have also become the ‘backup system’ used to support these sites, and workers often are responsible for responding to telephone and email requests for assistance from customers having difficulties with the website.

It is important to recognize that call centre technologies are, in fact, a product of their times, having been developed “within a socio-economic context with particular objectives in mind” (Russell 2008, p. 197). Ellis and Taylor note that, in western nations, the call centre developed in part in response to the need for increased efficiency in information and service provision in an
increasingly de-regulated economic regime facing increasing global competition (2006). Glucksman refers to the call centre as, essentially, a “hi-tech factory” (2004, p. 796). As with any factory, the management focus is on efficiency, Taylor and Bain claim, with its concomitant reduction in labour costs, even though this often comes at the cost of improved customer service (2005). Although much of the call centre literature, and most of the popular press about call centres, focuses on the effects of technologies that lie at the heart of the call centre labour process, it is necessary to recognize that these technologies were developed and implemented in a particular socio-economic context (Russell, 2008). Furthermore, it has become increasingly clear that the ways in which call centres diverge in practice is as important to understanding them as they ways in which they are similar in technology (Van den Broek 2008).

1.2 Situating the work: Types of Call Centres
To understand my research, it is useful to have a generic picture of the kind of work that takes place, and the conditions of work, in different types of call centres. There are two primary types of call centres: inbound and outbound. An inbound call centre is one that is designed to receive incoming calls from customers and prospective customers, with the goal of providing information, technical support, or services. Agents in an outbound call centre may perform a variety of functions, but some of the most common include survey research, fund-raising, and telemarketing. This may be done through “cold-calling,” which involves calling customers on randomly generated lists. A variation on this approach is “warm-calling,” a slightly more targeted approach which uses lists generated or purchased by the company which contain customers in a particular demographic group. Charitable organisations frequently buy lists containing names of people who have donated to other groups; banks will generate lists of customers who use a certain service and whose assets within the bank are at a certain level when attempting to sell other related products. While some call centres combine inbound and outbound functions, and many inbound call centres also expect agents to engage in sales activities, it is useful to examine the distinction between the two types of call centres, as existing research suggests that they may provide significantly different kinds of jobs.
1.2.1 Inbound call centres

In Canada, HRDC notes that inbound centres “are leading the growth in this [call centre] industry” (HRDC, par. 17). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, “inbound activity in the fields of banking, insurance, order processing, sales, help-lines and customer services” are “the dominant activities in the industry at this time” (Houlihan 2000, p. 229). Inbound centres also seem to provide the best jobs in the sector, with more full time jobs, better wages and benefits, and slightly less stressful working conditions. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte report based on their survey of New Brunswick, Winnipeg and Toronto call centres that inbound call centres were more likely to hire full-time workers, and tended to pay wages to part time workers which were close to those earned by their full time colleagues (2000, p. 21). In Canada, banks, insurance companies, and computer hardware or software companies are among those types of organisations which often have inbound call centres in-house, and which hire primarily full-time staff. With a high level of product knowledge required, and in the case of the computer industry, specific technical knowledge or skills, these call centres are often considered to be at the top of the wage and training curve. Interestingly, they are also noted for having more male workers in a sector where approximately 80% of workers are female.

An inbound call centre agent typically spends her day sitting in a cubicle or at a desk in front of a computer, wearing a telephone headset. She is often a member of a ‘team’ of 10-15 people, who work under the immediate supervision of a ‘team leader’ who in turn reports to a floor supervisor or manager. When a customer telephones, the call may be “pushed” onto her line (be routed automatically when the agent is on ‘ready’ status) or picked up manually, depending on the operating system used in the organisation. Activities may range from answering questions about the customer’s business with the company to taking orders, solving problems or dealing

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1 Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000) found that the average wage for a full-time permanent inbound call centre worker was $12.50/hour and for a part-time inbound call centre worker was $12.20/hour. In 2012 in Ontario, Human Resources and Development Canada gives a range of $11-$26 dollars an hour for full time call centre agents, although it is useful to note that wages tend to be higher in Toronto than elsewhere in Canada and relatively few workers would ever achieve the top end of that range outside of a few very specialized centres such as Telehealth.

2 There is an interesting division here between Canadian and UK studies. In the UK, financial services call centres tend to pay less, provide less training, and hire more women (Stanworth 1997).

3 Given the predominance of women in call centre work, I will use feminine pronouns to refer to agents.
with complaints. Some part, or all, of customer interactions may be scripted, with agents instructed to respond to customers using stock phrases, (e.g. 'is there anything else I can help you with?') or expected to follow a defined set of steps for each type of customer request. These scripts are, as Belt, Richardson and Webster note, “designed to control the content, pace and structure of the telephone conversation” (2000, p. 373) and to facilitate monitoring. In a call centre with a fully-integrated information system, the script may appear on the screen as the call comes up, along with a ‘pop up’ containing the caller’s name, location, and other pertinent details. In less technologically advanced centres, scripts may be paper based, and are typically expected to be memorized.

At the close of each call, agents are often required to key in codes classifying the type of transaction. Similarly, there are codes to key in when they need ‘wrap’ time, which is time to complete paperwork, data entry, or other follow-up actions resulting from a call, or when they leave the phone (‘not ready’ status). The use of these codes, in conjunction with automatic monitoring, permits the tracking of agents’ actions continuously throughout the day, and there are typically targets and limits set for time on and off the phone. In some centres, agents automatically receive 30 seconds or so of ‘wrap’ time before a new call is routed, while in others it must be coded in as an exception or a new call will follow immediately when the previous call disconnects.

Calls are usually recorded, with the stated goal of maintaining customer service quality, and in most organisations team leaders and/or supervisors will spot check, or listen in, to a random selection of calls at regular or semi-regular intervals as part of their employee performance monitoring process. Recordings of calls may be used as ‘coaching’ tools in one-on-one meetings between team leaders and agents, or they may be evaluated as part of an employee appraisal process, or both. Recordings are also maintained in case of customer complaints or disputes, particularly in the closely-regulated financial services industry.

Call queue management is a key concern in inbound call centres, and supervisors will generally have the ability to monitor the rates of calls answered, calls abandoned, average wait times, and specific details about the work status of each individual agent such as whether she is on the phone, and whether her phone is set to accept calls. To keep agents attuned to the queue, real-time statistics for calls waiting and average wait times, calls answered and average call duration,
and calls abandoned are often displayed on large electronic bulletin boards hung in one or more central locations. Smaller call centres without bulletin boards will often have telephones which use flashing lights, messages on an LED display panel, or both, to indicate a buildup of calls in the queue. Either way, pressure to continue taking calls steadily is maintained.

1.2.2 Outbound call centres

The outbound call centre is most firmly linked in public perception with the practice of telemarketing, although survey research firms and fund-raising organisations also use outbound calls to fulfill their mandates. Types of industries employing outbound call center services “include long distance telephone service providers, investment dealers, non-profit organisations, retail outlets, credit card companies and insurance brokers” (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 4).

An agent in an outbound call centre also typically spends her day sitting in front of a computer, wearing a telephone headset. An automatic dialer goes through an assigned list of numbers and routes answered calls to her headset. The list of numbers that an agent is assigned can have a great impact on her success, and one study found that giving out lists which were expected to produce low sales was one way in which organisations would rid themselves of agents who were burning out or complaining about work conditions (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 22). Activities may range from attempting to sell products or services, to conducting public opinion or marketing surveys, to soliciting funds for charities. For supervisory purposes, agents are often assigned to teams, but competition for positive results is frequently encouraged amongst team members as well as with members of other teams.

There is often a greater reliance on scripts in outbound call centres, as it is essential to ‘hook’ the potential customer in the first 15 seconds to keep them on the phone. Calls may be recorded to maintain call quality, and, as in inbound call centres, supervisors may spot check, or listen in, to a random selection of calls as part of their employee performance monitoring process. In outbound centres, however, it is more common for sales figures, conversion rates (number of calls converted to a sale), or surveys completed, to be the predominant performance measure, and sometimes the only measure. Quotas or productivity figures are standard, and may be set
arbitrarily without reference to the demographic characteristics of the calling areas which influence the likelihood of success. Further, missed targets may be a reason for dismissal.

1.2.3 In-house call centres and outsourced call centres
Both inbound and outbound call centres may be in-house divisions of larger organisations or outsourced to third-party companies who deal with calls for a number of organisations at once. In Canada, banks, computer help lines, insurance companies and other large companies with complex product lines, or which are under provincial and/or federal regulation, or which require highly specialized knowledge, tend to remain in-house. In-house call centres often have more full-time positions, and are more likely to provide skill-based as well as product-oriented training. While it might appear that in-house call centres would provide the most opportunities for advancement since agents may be eligible to apply for job opportunities elsewhere in the parent company, there is research that suggests that this is rarely the case due to, among other reasons, the typically low status of call centres within their parent companies (Belt and Richardson 2000, par. 44).

Alternatively, some organisations hire out their inbound or outbound calling work to outside companies on contract. Those organisations engaged in outbound calling for fund-raising or survey administration are among those which often use outsourced services. Norling provides an enthusiastic description of the benefits of outsourcing:

The driving force is that this type of [outsourcing] organisation as a rule cuts costs when you look at the everyday work from the client’s (the company outsourcing certain parts of its activities) point of view, and it also means that the work outsourced can be handled quicker and more precisely by the SSC [shared service centre] out towards the customer. Expert knowledge is focused, and both the SSC and the company outsourcing parts of its business can concentrate on accumulating knowledge and focusing on their core lines of business. (2001, p. 156)
From an agent’s perspective however, outsourced call centres may be more difficult workplaces. Because third party service providers are dependent on winning contracts by making low bids, there is immense pressure to decrease costs and increase worker productivity to remain competitive with other outsourcing firms. Once a contract is obtained, it must be kept, and there is typically considerable tension between providing good service to maintain the contract while increasing efficiency and productivity to cut the cost per call and thus increase profits for the company (Mason et al. 2001, p. 12). Contracts may come and go, and thus these organisations often require a more ‘flexible’ workforce, resulting in a larger use of part-time and non-standard employment arrangements, including hiring temporary workers through employment agencies. Wages are often lower than those paid to full time workers in in-house call centres and may be partially performance-based (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 11).

My research, along with the majority of the academic research on call centres, focuses on inbound, in-house call centres. There are a variety of reasons. First, despite media attention and public concern about outsourcing, these remain the most common types in the industry. They are also the most likely to have a relatively stable employee base, as inbound jobs are considered ‘better’ call centre jobs within the industry. Staff are similarly more likely to perform non-routine tasks and require greater job-related knowledge, making monitoring tasks more challenging and potentially contentious. And, most importantly, from an access perspective, inbound centres of large, stable and reputable companies are more likely to permit access to their centres for fieldwork.

1.3 Call centres as site and subject

In the opening passages of this introduction I positioned call centres as valuable and interesting sites for conducting research into workplace surveillance, and a rich source of insights into the way that monitoring brings to the fore agents’ sense of themselves as workers when faced with accountabilities that are ever-present, embodied and embedded in the systems on which work takes place. But it is also true that call centres are in and of themselves an interesting topic for workplace research more generally.
This is in part because there are, quite simply, a lot of them, and they employ a lot of people. Over the past 25 years, call centres have emerged as a significant sector of the Canadian economy. This is due to three factors: technological conditions, including rapidly converging computer and telecommunications technologies; changing customer demographics as the number of time-strapped, convenience-seeking two income or single-parent families increases; and increasing economic competition (HRDC Overview 2002, par. 3–4). Or more succinctly, “call centre development is situated at the intersection of rapidly expanding information and communication technologies (ICTs), reengineered business processes, a changing (or changed) profile of customer needs and expectations and a prevailing culture of occupational restructuring” (Houlihan 2000, p. 228). One of the relatively few Canadian studies available estimates that employment in call centres is growing at a rate of 20–25% annually (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 4). Revenue growth has been similarly precipitous; Vincent and McKeown (2008) estimate using data from Statistics Canada that annual average call centre revenue increased by 27.7% between 1998 and 2006 (p. 3). Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), in their 2002 profile of the call centre report that there were 218,000 full-time and 330,000 part-time call centre jobs in Canada (HDRC HR Profile 2002, par. 3), 40% of which were in Ontario (HDRC Overview, par. 3) at the time of the report. A contributory factor in the growth of the Canadian call centre sector is a proactive attempt by several provincial governments seeking job creation to attract call centres into their jurisdictions, using a variety of incentives as encouragement.

Despite the active role different levels of government have taken in encouraging call centres, and the overall importance of the call centre industry in Canada, there is very little in Canadian academic or policy literature concerning call centres or the nature of work that they provide.4

4 A notable exception is Buchanan and Koch-Schulte’s study Gender on the Line: Technology, Restructuring and the Reorganisation of work in the Call Centre Industry. The authors were funded by the Status of Women policy research fund, with the goal of providing research to inform policy decisions about economic restructuring, and provide data about the construction of the labour market and the feminization of labour in Canada. They chose to accomplish this through a study of call centres because, they claim, the call centre industry is “representative of
This is particularly significant given the typical composition of the call centre workforce. Employees tend to be women (about 80%). Few have university educations, and with a small number of exceptions (mostly men in high-tech areas), tend to be relatively low-paid. Consequently, the workplace practices in this industry affect a large number of people who may not have many choices about employment.

Much of the existing literature originates in the United Kingdom, where there has been significantly more interest among academics in examining the nature of call centre work. In this literature, “call centres have been subject to considerable criticism by both the media and academics, particularly in regard to the Tayloristic and routinized nature of work, to the levels of control and surveillance developed by management, and to lack of trade union representation and scope, or otherwise, for alternative forms of worker resistance” (Richardson & Belt 2001, p. 68).

It is reasonable to assume that the literature originating in the UK and elsewhere in Europe is of direct relevance when considering call centres in a Canadian context, as research has revealed remarkable similarities between technologies used, work practices and key issues including monitoring, control, training, and labour demographics for workers in countries as diverse as Germany, Japan, Australia, Greece, Canada, the US, the UK and the Netherlands (see, for example, Michel 2001; Korczynski et al. 2000; Tsoukas & Vladimirou 2001; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Breathnach 2000; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000). There are naturally, as Holman and colleagues (2007) found in their global call centre project, cultural differences that affect management strategies and their effects on workflows. Differences in labour practices, regulations and traditions, combined with differences in national culture, make it desirable to also study Canadian call centres from a Canadian perspective. While analysis of the general nature of call centre work in Canada is not the goal of this thesis, my work does provide several key characteristics of the current transition: the shift towards expanding employment in the service sector; the reorganisation of firms driven by applications of information and communication technologies; and the competition among localities for investment and jobs” (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000 [v]).
sustained and detailed attention to the nature of work in the specific Canadian call centres participating in the research. Viewing this work through the lens of the identity and accountability framework naturally prioritizes particular aspects of this work and focuses on participant’s comments and actions as they relate to the key concepts, but this framework and analysis are grounded in the call centre sites. Furthermore, as in most qualitative work, the insights gained in this study are most directly relevant to the sites in which they were gleaned. Thus, although this thesis begins and ends with a discussion of the ways in which what we learn from call centre surveillance may speak to the larger issues of workplace surveillance that are increasingly topical in contemporary white collar workplaces, the core implications of this work are specifically for and about call centres.

1.4 What is the point?: Research goals and objectives

Ball, several years ago, highlighted two gaps in surveillance studies research: “first, in respect of a coherent understanding of the surveilled subject, and second a consistent examination of the connectivity between actors, technologies, organisations, and society as a whole” (Ball 2003, p. 126). Although my thesis is not framed primarily within the field of surveillance studies but is rather situated explicitly as a call centre study, it does make a step towards addressing one of these identified gaps, in that one of my goals is to explore the effects of electronic and electronically-enhanced monitoring and performance measurement on the work-life and work environment and experiences of a particular group of surveilled subjects, front-line financial services call centre workers in Canada. My second, overlapping goal is to examine the ways in which identity and accountability are discussed and enacted by workers in this surveilled environment, and to examine and document the interactions between different kinds of workplace identities and accountabilities in this call centre setting.

Russell has suggested that the “important distinction” to be made when considering the nature of call centre work is “not in the objective conditions of work, but in the responses to them” (2002, 484, emphasis in original). The narrative thus generated provides insights into the ways in which monitoring, in those settings where it is required for business functions, can be conducted in ways which consider the needs of workers as well as the demands of the organisation. It explores concepts of identity and accountability, as expressed by participants, and as encoded in the
monitoring systems and larger organisational settings they work within. This is accomplished via the use of a framework, based on activity theory, that models organisational, professional and peer identity and accountability within the call centre setting and looks at the way these elements are influenced by the tools, rules, roles and workplace community within which work takes place. This will, in turn, further our understanding of the way people are influenced by, and seek to influence, the socio-technical systems which impose workplace identities and accountabilities, and the ways in which workers seek to project their own versions of each of these elements within the workplace.

1.5 What did I do and why?: Research Design

This ethnographically-informed study attempts to create a detailed narrative describing the monitored call centre environment from a front-line perspective. To accomplish this, data was generated via participant observation ‘on the floor’ of two financial service call centres while participants were variously attending training, answering calls and responding to email. Informal conversations over lunch or on breaks supplemented the observation during work time. Interviews were also conducted with willing participants, but were brief as staffing levels and call volumes did not permit staff to be away from the phones for long periods of time. Documents were collected from the organisation’s web site, training materials, and the participants, all of which contributed to the analysis. A detailed description of the research approach can be found in Chapter Three.

1.6 Why does it matter?: Research significance

Increasingly, practices of monitoring and surveillance are something that either affect our lives now, or are likely to do so in the future, both in the workplace and beyond. My thesis project is an attempt to figure out the effects that some specific performance monitoring technologies have on people working in two intensively surveilled, relatively self-contained, workplace environments.
The central questions that this study explores include learning how workers identify themselves and their colleagues in the workplaces, and how the electronically-mediated measurement and monitoring systems in their workplaces affect those kinds of identifications. I ask people what they think about the ways that the computer systems they used represent them, and whether there was alignment between those digital representations and their own sense of identity. I also want to learn more about the ways in which accountability to clients, colleagues and company were conceived, perceived, controlled, and reconciled. And finally, I wish to explore whether links can be discerned between accountability practices and individuals’ perceptions of their identities.

My current work will contribute towards a better understanding of the effects of performance monitoring on workers in the inbound call centre environment. In considering the effects of call centre monitoring, it seems useful to keep in mind David Lyon’s caveats regarding surveillance, and resistance to surveillance. Surveillance is not necessarily negative; it is complex, political, and situated; and the technologies of surveillance may or may not achieve their intended results, due to design or practice (Lyon 2007, p. 162). Further, many surveillance systems, including some workplace systems, are accepted as legitimate, even necessary (Lyon 2007, p. 164). This is certainly the case in the two call centre sites where this thesis research took place. The financial services industry is tightly regulated in Canada; monitoring transactions and recording calls provides a necessary audit trail for financial transactions conducted over the phone. In these sites it is not the presence of monitoring but the performance-measuring practices associated with it that workers focus on in conversation.

There are a variety of factors that help determine the way workers react to these monitoring technologies; the factors that emerged as key in my data set, identity and accountability, provide a helpful ‘way in’ to understanding why workers react as they do to particular situations and practices in the call centre workplace. Conceptualizing call centre workers’ responses to monitoring and measurement from an identity and accountability perspective offers new insights into the reasons why financial service call centre workers are often dissatisfied or frustrated with standard call centre measurement practices, and begins to suggest some potential ways to alleviate some of this frustration. Finally, while it is never the case the qualitative research in one context can be ported with impunity to another, it is at least possible that some of the findings from this kind of study of workplace surveillance might provide insight into what might happen more broadly to individuals subject to ongoing and consequential surveillance in settings outside
the workplace. Increasingly, practices of monitoring and surveillance are something that either affect our lives now, or are likely to do so in the future. The kinds of surveillance that we as citizens, customers, and data subjects experience in our day to day lives outside of the workplace is often intensive but is seldom integrated. In other words, my bank might know that I stood at the ATM at 2:00pm, a CCTV camera might record me crossing a major intersection in my home city at 2:15, and my university might film me (“for my safety”) entering the library at 2:25. When I check my email using my University account, it is possible that a University employee might be monitoring my usage, the size of my stored files, or the destinations of my messages. If anyone is paying attention, many people behind the systems I encounter might know about a small part of my day’s activities. Even if someone is paying attention at one or more of these sites of surveillance, barring dire circumstances such as an intensive criminal investigation into my movements, each site knows only the details of my interactions at that location. The bank doesn’t know where I crossed the street, nor does the library know that I took out enough money from the bank to pay my fines. The integrative possibilities that arise from digitally mediated surveillance are, for the most part, not yet in place in connection with public, broad-scale types of surveillance such as CCTV, government use of facial recognition software, or others. It is often seen as increasingly likely to happen in the near to mid-future, but we are not there yet, for both technical and political reasons. Workplaces, however, are sites where this kind of integration is possible. Through this examination of the ways in which call centre workers experience changes and challenges to the ways they see themselves and define their accountabilities to themselves and others in these workplaces, it is possible that we might, cautiously, identify factors that may be significant to people if they were to be subject to similarly integrated surveillance in other environments.

1.7 What to expect: Dissertation Overview

This dissertation contains six chapters that introduce the research, outline the foundational literature and relevant theory, and discuss methods used and the results obtained in this project.

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5 And that is, in fact, a serious “if”; as Ball and Haggerty note, “the mere existence of these technologies does not necessarily imply that their surveillance potential will be exploited” (Ball and Haggerty 2005, 136).
Chapter 2 begins an exploration of the multiple literatures of relevance to my dissertation study. This includes a large body of work relating to the nature of work in call centres, including a look at the issues that others have identified as having a significant effect on front-line call centre workers, such as emotional labour, stress, intensity, changing supervisory relationships, and the quality-quantity dichotomy (all of which will subsequently be defined). Because call centre monitoring is primarily positioned as a performance measurement tool within the organisations I study, I then turn to a review of the electronic performance measurement literature, again from the perspective of its effect on front-line workers. The literature review then selectively addresses the key concepts of accountability and identity, looking at both as social processes that are negotiated and nuanced.

Chapter 3 turns to method. In it, I discuss the methodological and theoretical literatures that have influenced my work. This includes ethnographic methods, the grounded theory approach to study design, data collection and analysis, and the theoretical framework of Activity Theory. I also lay out the questions that motivated my research and describe my research process.

Chapter 4 sets the stage for my fieldwork by providing a detailed description of my two field sites, drawing on my weeks of ethnographic work including participant observation and interviews, and my study of organisational documents such as training materials, staff manuals, and other items. This chapter includes a discussion of the way these two sites are situated within their parent organisations, the physical layout of the sites, and the people who were my participants. It also describes what I have termed –linking call centre and identity performance terminology--“the scripts” of each organisation. There are both conversational scripts, which are literal scripts workers are intended to use to guide conversations and transactions, and organisational scripts, the rhetorical constructions and explicit and tacit norms and behavioral expectations within each organisation.

Chapter 5 moves from the stage setting in Chapter 4 to an exploration of the key issues of identity and accountability as they manifest themselves in the data collected from these two sites. Inspired by the vignette approach of Julian Orr (1996) in his ethnographic study of Xerox repair technicians, I present three “scenes from the field” that serve to make the work I observed vivid and concrete. These scenes also providing a launching point to discuss findings relating to the
three categories of identity and accountability that emerge from my data: organisational, professional, and peer identity and accountability.

Chapter 6 concludes my thesis. In it, I reiterate the key findings that emerge from my study. I also embrace the principle of critical self-reflection, which is so important in qualitative research where the assumptions, biases, and practical experience of the researcher can have a significant effect on the results of the study. My conclusion thus includes a section that reflects on the process of doing the research. I then turn to a discussion of the contributions my research makes to broader understandings of call centre workers’ lived experience of working in a constantly monitored environment in terms of the effect this has on their identities and accountabilities. The limitations of my research are acknowledged, and the potential for further research is highlighted.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Literatures of interest and selection criteria

There are a plethora of literatures of potential interest and relevance for this thesis. Most obviously, there is a burgeoning call centre literature that, despite beginning only 25 or so years ago, spans several disciplines and has expanded rapidly in both quantity and scope. But because I am interested not just in call centres, although these sites form the focus of my research, but in the ways that identity and accountability is constructed and manifests itself within these closely monitored environments, there is also a vast body of literature on identity and accountability that is relevant. Finally, because accountability is deeply enmeshed with performance monitoring and measurement in these sites, and the electronic nature of this monitoring is one distinguishing feature of a call centre workplace, the literature on electronic performance measurement is also useful. Furthermore, all of these topics—call centres, identity, accountability and electronic performance measurement—have been addressed in a variety of disciplines, including management, sociology, psychology, industrial relations, gender studies, and others. This has made it necessary to take a cross-disciplinary approach in choosing the literatures on which this thesis is grounded. And although all literature reviews involve a selection process, I have found it necessary for this one to focus relatively narrowly within the vast general areas of identity and accountability in order to keep the scope of the review reasonable and constructive. Thus, in the area of identity, although there are multiple theoretical and pragmatic conceptions in the literatures, I have focused primarily on theories and discussions of identity as socially constructed, multiple and situational; within this work I have further limited my search to primarily to studies that look at workplace identities in particular, and additionally studies that look at the ways in which identity is affected by the increasingly digital environments of contemporary workplaces. Similarly, in the area of accountability, although I begin with a characterization of the different approaches authors often take to the topic, my primary focus is on the pragmatic approaches to workplace accountability as it links in particular to performance measurement.
One factor to notice is that within the literatures examined for this thesis, there is relatively little cross-referencing across disciplinary boundaries, or across topics. For example, while one might expect call centre literature to draw on work studying electronic performance measurement, this happens relatively rarely.

This review is organized by topic, beginning with the call centre literature, and then moving on to selective reviews of key issues within the topics of electronic performance measurement, accountability, and identity. Finally, I will discuss the questions that seem to remain unanswered in the literatures as they relate to my topic.

2.2 Call Centre Literature: themes and preoccupations

Belt, Richardson and Webster write that “two very different images of call centre employment exist in popular consciousness” (2000, p. 367). They contrast the “very positive image of call centres as new ‘high-tech' working environments” put forward by consultants, economic developers and employers, with criticism in the popular press and early academic articles that characterizes these organisations as the ‘new sweatshops’ (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, p. 368). As we will see in this Chapter, a review of the academic call centre literature is largely successful in countering the high-tech hype, but it also reveals that the workplace reality in call centres is more varied than either the press or the earliest (and most widely reported) research would indicate. Call centres are complex workplaces.

There is an active and growing academic call centre literature, with papers beginning to appear in the early 1990s and proliferating in the 2000s. Researchers in the fields of geography, industrial relations, economics, management, sociolinguistics and women’s studies, many of them working in the United Kingdom, have looked at different aspects of call centres, ranging from their economic impact on the areas in which they are sited (e.g. Richardson & Belt 2001; Richardson, Belt & Marshall 2000) to the impact of standard practices, particularly the intense control mechanisms embedded in the work, including electronic monitoring, on workers (e.g. Callaghan & Thompson 2001; Bain & Taylor 2000). There is work on human resource practices and business performance (e.g. Kinnie, Purcell & Hutchinson 1999, Holman 2005), and on workplace privacy (e.g. Lankshear et al., 2001). There is also a number of authors who write
about gender issues and the construction of call centre work as “women’s work” (e.g. Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, 2002; Cameron 2000).

In some cases this literature is explicitly interested in exploring the nature of work in call centres as a growing industry, employing a significant proportion of the working population—almost 3% of the US working population was employed in call centres in 2002 (Moshavi and Terborg 2002) and 2.2% of employees in the UK were in that industry (Marr and Neely 2004). Research by Houlihan (2001, 2000), Belt, Richardson and Marshall (2000), Taylor and Bain (2001, 1999), and others fall into this category. In other cases, call centres are seen as useful sites to examine larger trends in service industries. In this category, for example, Cameron (2000) examines the feminization of service language, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000) look at the impacts of globalisation and labour restructuring on women’s work, and Mason et al. (2001) explore the impact of surveillance-capable technologies in the workplace. A large number of studies which span both categories—call centre as workplace and call centre as exemplar—address issues of surveillance, control, and resistance (for example, see Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Bain & Taylor 2000, Taylor & Bain 1999; Callaghan & Thompson 2001; Lammont 1999; Ball & Wilson 2000; Lankshear & Mason 2001; Townsend 2005; van den Broek 2004; Winiecki 2004). While much of the work focuses on the effects of all of these trends on front-line workers, there is also a body of research that explicitly examines managerial work and perspectives (Houlihan 2001; Norling 2001) or conducts data collection primarily (although not necessarily exclusively) at the managerial level (e.g. Taylor & Bain 1999; Fernie & Metcalf 1998). For an overall picture of the call centre literature from 1998-2008, Bob Russell’s excellent review provides a good introduction (2008).

Interestingly, much of the research reported in each of these areas of study is predominantly qualitative. There has been some extensive survey research (Richardson & Belt 2001; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Taylor & Bain 2001 and 1999; Holman 2002) as well, conducted in some cases as a sole data collection method, but more often as one element of a mixed method research project. Work has been done at several hierarchical levels within organisations, often within the same study: with front-line workers, middle management, human resources managers, executives, and union representatives.
The call centre literature is sufficiently wide-ranging that there is advantage to be gained in narrowing the focus of investigation for the purposes of this thesis. Accordingly, I have restricted detailed discussion to those issues of working conditions, performance measurement and monitoring, and control and resistance, all broadly construed, as these are most relevant to my specific research questions which focus on identity and accountability constructions and experiences.

2.2.1 Working Conditions

In the large body of work that deals with employee experiences of working conditions, Batt and Moynihan’s classification of call centre work (2002) has been influential in directing researchers’ attention to differences in the way work is structured across call centres, which has then led to studying how these structural differences affect employees’ work lives. Batt and Moynihan’s structural categories are ‘classic mass production’, ‘mass customisation’, and ‘professional service’, running in a continuum that relates to the degree to which employees actions are constrained by technological design and workplace practices. At the far end of the spectrum, ‘professional services’ is characterized by more complex interaction between customers and workers, with more individual discretion and judgment allowed on the part of workers, and requiring more knowledge and skill in order to perform successfully (Batt & Moynihan 2002, p 17). This work is conducted at a macro, institutional level; when attempting to explore these categories in site-specific studies, researchers have characterized these categories as simplistic or problematic (Collin-Jaques & Smith 2005; Smith et al. 2008; Pritchard & Symon 2011) or have called for further exploration and refinement of this category of ‘professional service’ in particular (Russell 2008). Nonetheless, Batt and Moynihan’s model calls attention to the fact that despite similarities in technology infrastructures across most call centres internationally, there are significant differences in the ways workers experience these technologies. Further theorizing as to the nature of these differences as they affect the way that workers see themselves and their roles can link this high level structural approach to the more qualitative approaches in call centre studies.
2.2.1.1 Skilled Labour?

One of the key topics that early call centre researchers turned to was the issue of skills: do the work conditions in call centres require skilled labour? Do they foster improved skills?

“Production in call centres is highly specialized and associated with a fine division of labour” note Richardson, Belt and Marshall, leading to the frequent assumption that “call centres often host only a limited range of occupations” (Richardson, Belt & Marshall 2000, p. 358). However, despite the relatively narrow range of tasks most call centre workers perform, as they work “extensively and intensively” on the telephone,

many agents, supervisors and managers were very keen to emphasize that call centre work was far from ‘unskilled’. ... Despite the repetitive and standardized nature of much of their work, the majority of agents emphasized that certain sets of skills and competencies were required in call centre work. In particular they stressed the expertise involved in handling customers ‘professionally’ yet also efficiently and under strict time pressures. Related to this, agents highlighted the skill involved in conveying the ‘right image’ to the public over the telephone….In addition, on the issue of skill, agents were keen to highlight the elements of discretion and responsibility involved in their work. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, pp. 374-75)

There is widespread agreement amongst academic authors that call centre work is indeed skilled labour. “The agent job is mythologised as simple and routine, which is a surface fact beyond which there are many complex role and skill demands,” notes Houlihan (2000, p. 230). For example, Tsoukas and Vladimirou marvel at the “perceptual skill” of the agents they observed in a Greek telecommunications firm, where workers could quickly recognize nuances in callers’ voices and respond accordingly (2001, p. 987). Lankshear and colleagues provide a good example of the kinds of skills agents need to bring to bear on their work. In their travel services call centre study, the site organisation had recently implemented pricing changes which were highly unpopular with clients. Call volumes went up, call time increased by 20%, and ‘difficult’ calls similarly increased as clients adjusted to the change. Agents were responsible for “successfully reconciling the tension between corporate and client needs,” although they received no additional training to help them explain changes to clients or manage unpleasant calls. In this case, they were judged highly successful by management, with one manager quoted as saying “I think the staff have been absolutely brilliant” (Lankshear et al. 2001, p. 597).
Emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) is also frequently mentioned as an element of call centre work—employees must display and project through the telephone public emotions that they do not necessarily feel—and it is a skill that many managers believe women possess to a greater degree than men. This points to a body of work that positions call centre work explicitly as gendered work; the majority of workers are female (Belt 2006), and this is positioned by management as a deliberate choice. As Belt, Richardson and Webster discuss in their examination of social skills in interactive call centre work, they found that employers would explicitly admit to recruiting women from the assumption that they would be more able to perform this kind of work: “Call centre employers expect women to perform emotional labour over the phone, and they actively use femininity in order to secure competitive advantage” (2002, p. 26-27). Behavioural traits such as patience and empathy, so critical in emotional labour, are often seen as female traits (Durbin 2006); researchers have also been told by female workers about ways in which they used “their femininity” at work, particularly when dealing with male customers (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002, p. 27). A darker aspect of the requirement to perform emotional labour in call centres is expressed by Mirchandani in her study of Indian call centre workers in transnational call centres. She states that “emotion work in the context of call centers involves learning to not take the rude behavior of customers personally, maintaining self-worth in the face of abusive customers, and handling rejection” (2008, p. 90).

However, while there is often internal recognition within call centres of the specific skill set needed for the call centre environment, research finds that women working as agents feel that their skills are not sufficiently valued by those outside the centre, neither in the call centres’ parent organisations nor in the general public (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, p. 376). The skills that tend to be least valued outside the call centre are those which are often claimed to be most important: Belt and colleagues found that in their survey of 100 European call centres, “‘communications skills’ and ‘customer service skills’ were deemed by call centre managers who responded to their survey to be the most important skills for call centre employees” (Belt et al. 1999, p. 4). Some researchers speculative that the lack of value placed on communication skills such as ‘building rapport’ with the customer, ‘smiling down the phone,’ and soothing disgruntled customers is due to the general perception of these abilities as innate to women (see for example, Cameron 2000, p. 337). “Research has shown,” notes Webster, “that skills which are held by women become redefined and degraded simply by virtue of the fact that it is women who hold
them. It is possible that interpersonal skills, despite being highly sought after in contemporary service organisations, may become similarly degraded as a result of their gender association (Webster 2001, par. 5). Buchanan and Koch-Schulte would agree:

Common perceptions of this work as unskilled, we argue, are related to its construction as “feminized” work. Because skills required for “dealing with people” are culturally considered to be personal characteristics more common to women and women predominately perform these jobs, these attributes are more likely to be represented by call centre managers as the natural “talents” of their employees rather than as valuable and valued “skills.” (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. vi)

Like the operators in Michael Muller’s paper “Invisible Work of Telephone Operators: An Ethnocritical Analysis” (1999), much of the “knowledge work” accomplished by call centre workers may be undervalued because it is invisible—managers miss it because of the “preconceptions” about what agents do, and, if researchers use inadequate tools, they will miss it too (Nardi & Engeström 1999, p. 3). The ethnographic approaches which predominate in the call centre literature discussing skills are well suited to revealing the important role these communication-based skills play in call centre work.

Despite general agreement that there is skill involved in call centre work, it is nonetheless frequently observed that these skills fall within a relatively narrow range, which, moreover, tended to vary between industry sectors. Belt, Richardson and Webster found that financial services firms typically provided a narrow range of tasks, leading some women to comment on their frustration at being unable to really use existing skills or develop new ones. They quote an agent as saying: “I think it's hard to show your skills. Your job is to be logged in for seven hours. It's hard to show what else you can do when you are only dealing with calls. You have to make a supreme effort to do anything that's not your job (Agent, financial services call centre)” (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, p. 375). Stanworth suggests that banks in particular are “creating a

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6 Cameron makes an interesting point, however, when she notes that women and men alike are being trained to use characteristics of “gendered style” in their service interactions with customers (2000, p. 337).
new deskilled workforce in [call] centres, where there is no longer a need for qualifications” and workers are expected to function with as little as three weeks training (1997, p. 58). Alternatively, agents in the computer services industry, who performed specialized technical roles, were found in case studies to exercise the greatest range of skills as they required specialized technical expertise as well as the same kinds of communication skills needed in all call centres to perform their work (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, p. 376).

Call centres are often cited in economic development literature as “high-tech” workplaces, capable of providing jobs that can help develop computer skills in a local workforce. It is true that call centre workers operate computers, performing data entry and accessing and moving between databases. And, depending on the configuration of the system, navigation can provide no small challenge, particularly since the agents must always perform under time pressure, and maintain conversation to prevent ‘dead air’ with the customer while manipulating the information system. However, researchers have found that

when the issue of IT skills was raised, most of the women we interviewed had very little to say about the technological skills that they used at work… when they were questioned about the IT skills that they used in the call centre environment, most agents simply did not appear to particularly value the computer skills they had gained. The view amongst most was that these skills were very 'basic' (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, p. 374)

As Alferoff and Knights note, while call centres are often technologically sophisticated workplaces, “the success of call centres is related to non-technological interaction between advisor and customer and the old technological device of the telephone” (Alferoff & Knights 2001, par. 3). Agents seem to orient to the interactive nature of the job, and value those skills that improve their ability to perform with customers.

When researchers turn their attention to on-the-job skill development, there is little optimism. Belt, Richardson and Webster (2002) note that “the nature of work organisation used in call centres acts to constrain skill development” (p. 28, emphasis in original). Agents consistently use words like ‘repetitive’, ‘tiring’, and ‘stressful’ in describing working on the phones all day, and some in Belt, Richardson and Webster’s study compared it to “working on an assembly line” (p. 29). Agents also noted that while they had developed their ‘people skills’ and appreciated the
training they received in this area when beginning the job, many felt that they had not actually learned new skills while working in the call centre. Even team leaders, who tend to be promoted up from the front-line staff, often receive little or no management training, making it difficult for them to learn the skills they would need to be considered for the next level of promotion (Belt, Richardson and Webster 2002, p. 30-31). Buchanan and Koch-Schulte argue that “employees leaving call centres are not more fully prepared for other, more challenging types of employment because they are not ordinarily expected to utilize more than basic keyboarding skills, and the communication and interpersonal skills that they do acquire are undervalued” (2000, p. 54).

2.2.1.2 Stress

For many employed in the call centre sector, “the daily experience is of repetitive, intensive and stressful work, based upon Taylorist principles, which frequently results in employee “burnout” (Bain 2001, par. 5). Brown, more vividly, characterizes the work as “repetitive brain strain” (1999, p. 1). These descriptions are not surprising, in a way, given that call centres are established by organisations to “create an environment in which work can be standardized to create relatively uniform and repetitious activities so as to achieve economies of scale and consistent quality of customer service” (Belt, Richardson & Webster, 2002, p. 28). This means, in other words, that workplaces are organized in ways that weaken employee autonomy and enhance the potential for management control over pace: management is “conscious of the power of the call queue in maximizing production pace” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 20). This is significant in that “a loss of control is generally understood to be an important indicator of work-related stress” (Wastell & Newman, 1993, p. 128).

There is almost universal consensus that call centre work is stressful. Even in studies that report the observation that some staff actually enjoy their work (e.g. Lankshear & Mason 2001; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000), mention of stress is still the norm, and a significant portion of the call centre literature is devoted to detailing the sources of stress in call centre work. Table 1, excerpted from Taylor and Bain (2001), lists the sources of stress most commonly mentioned by agents, and the sections below will discuss in more detail the four key stressors which come up repeatedly in the literature.
Table 1: Causes of stress in call centre work: To what extent do the following aspects contribute to the pressure of the job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Job</th>
<th>A great deal (%)</th>
<th>To some extent (%)</th>
<th>Combined (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Targets</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time between calls</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult customers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitiveness of calls made/taken</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaks not long enough</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too few breaks</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time to talk to colleagues</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from a supervisor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having my calls taped</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always having to ‘smile down the phone’</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monotony of the job</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to keep to a script</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer monitoring</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to make bonus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not given enough information to do the job</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Taylor and Bain (2001). ‘Trade Unions, Workers’ Rights and the Frontier of Control in UK Call centres. Economic and Industrial Democracy, 22: 52. Data was derived from a survey of six financial services call centres in the UK, where n=345.
2.2.1.2.1 “Can we get off the phone for a while?”

The primary source of stress reported is inherent to the nature of the job: spending all day on the phone dealing with people one after another, day after day, is difficult. Doing it under constant pressure to keep call volumes up, with no time between calls to “recover from an awkward call or from ‘customer rejection’” is even more difficult (Richardson & Marshall 1999, p. 103). And doing it with “very little authority or autonomy to rectify problems” that arise is perhaps the most difficult of all (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 30). Many studies report agents as wanting to ‘just get off the phones’. For example, Belt and colleagues note that “agents in all three sectors [financial services, IT, and third-party services] spoke of the phenomenon of ‘burnout’, caused by the pressure of working exclusively ‘on the phones’” (Belt et al. 1999, p. 4). In the same study, the authors mention that the issue of ‘burnout’ was also recognized by some managers: “It was pointed out that managers face an inherent conflict between the need to reduce staff boredom and labour turnover, and the pressure to concentrate staff energies on telephone based work” (Belt et al 1999, p. 4).

“The question of how call centre employees deal with stress is an important one, particularly in view of evidence that a build-up of stress leads to illness, absenteeism and turnover,” writes Houlihan (2000, p. 230). Many authors agree, and there are a variety of individual coping mechanisms described in the literature. Tricks to circumvent control mechanisms, such as those discussed above, are sometimes mentioned as attempts at stress reduction, although they are unreliable in this role as they may also increase stress. Others mention social interaction squeezed into brief moments--Callaghan and Thompson describe agents using humorous (or rude) gestures towards the phone, or making faces at colleagues to defuse stress over angry or abusive callers, and making jokes to combat the tedium of the day (2001, p. 32). Lankshear and Mason describe a similarly social approach to reducing tension in one of the sites they observed, where staff often laughed and joked with one another in intervals between calls, with management’s approval (2001, p. 8). More formally, some call centres include stress management as a component in training programs, and many have, or claim to have, team debriefings which permit staff to vent frustrations while discussing difficult calls or dissatisfactions with elements of work.

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7 Belt & Richardson 2000, p. 373.
Knights and McCabe take a different approach to stress in the workplace. They note that although much organisational analysis and most of the call centre literature tends to conceptualise stress as an individual problem, it is actually located within “a framework that emphasizes the interrelationships between structural relations of power and the subjective interpretations and actions of employees” (1998, p. 172). This more nuanced positioning may provide more insight into call centre conditions, as it allows a researcher to consider the response of employees “forced to interpret the often contradictory demands management place upon them” including “contradictions…over service quality versus the quantity of work output” (p. 173). “Clearly,” these authors write, “staff face some fundamental contradictions over unity versus conflict, uncertainty versus certainty, quality versus quantity and these are at the heart of the reproduction of stress, resistance and control” (Knights & McCabe 1998, p. 181). This focus on the “contradictory” nature of demands strikes at the heart of the second inherent sources of stress in (primarily inbound) call centre works: the quality/quantity conflict.

2.2.1.3 Quality/Quantity conflict

Typically, organisational rhetoric in inbound call centres is concerned with ‘customer care’, or ‘keeping customers happy’ (providing quality service), yet these goals are juxtaposed with an ongoing pressure to keep call times down and call volumes up. Houlihan describes the difficulty concisely:

> Call centres are rooted in contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes, and confront a number of trade-offs on that basis. These set a context for attitudes towards the organisation and can impose conflicting role requirements on agents. A core example is that of the pressure for quantity versus the aspiration for quality, the guiding logic of which is the conundrum of trying to get closer to the customer while routinising, centralizing, reducing costs and prescribing standards. (Houlihan 2000, p. 232)

The dichotomy is not completely straightforward, it is important to note. Part of providing quality service from a management perspective is making sure customers do not wait too long for their calls to be answered, even though the push to keep queue waiting times short is typically categorized as part of the pressure towards quantity. As Bain and colleagues write, “efforts to
attain what is perceived to be the desired balance between the quantity and the quality of calls presents a perennial challenge” (Bain et al. 2002, p. 172). And while no two call centres are exactly the same, the consistent pressure to keep costs down, combined with the ‘Taylorization’ of work, means that there is a relatively small range of variation possible in management approaches to this dilemma (Glucksmann 2004; Russell 2004). Although front line workers bear the brunt of this systemic problem, managers too must try to balance their mandate to process the maximum number of calls with the lowest number of staff while retaining or even expanding their customer base (Raz & Blank 2007). Houlihan is one of the only authors to focus very specifically on the manager as a mediator between the contradictions of call centre work. She concludes that in most situations, there is relatively little flexibility for managers to affect work processes that are designed by others and driven by technologies with that design embedded within them (Houlihan 2006).

The practice of ongoing work practice modification and target revision as management swings from one side to another of the quality/quantity debate is a major source of stress for call centre agents. As Houlihan notes: “The practice of putting a ‘drive’ on particular targets for improvement (for example, the collection of renewal dates, the up-selling or cross-selling of products, the quality of data input, or the intensity of sales push) and continual reprioritisation means that the ‘goalposts’ are constantly shifting” (Houlihan 2000, p. 230). Virtually all of the call centre authors who write about work conditions mention the difficulty of dealing with these competing goals. While “interactions with specific customers may be an important arena for meaning and satisfaction within the work” for front-line workers, management may prefer workers to identify with a generic category, ‘the customer’, since “such a disembodied image of the customer will encourage workers to deal with individual customers efficiently because they will be conscious of the concerns of other customers waiting in a queue” (Korczynski et al. 2000, p. 671).

2.2.1.4 Intensity

The third central stressor in call centre work is its intensity. As Bain (2001) argues, “far from being either in terminal decline or on the wane, Taylorism—in conjunction with a range of other control mechanisms—is not only alive, well and deeply embedded in the call centre labour
process, but its malevolent influence appears to be spreading to previously uncharted territory” (par. 10). There is widespread consensus that “call centres are a new, and particularly effective, manifestation of the increasingly capital intensive ‘industrialization’ of service sector work, and work performed in them is highly intensive and routine” (Richardson, Belt & Marshall 2000, p. 358). Buchanan and Koch-Schulte quote one call centre worker who describes the constant pressure graphically:

Ellen: It’s almost like the army. It’s very regimented. You punch in with a time clock. You come in and you sit down, and the numbers are all computerized. As soon as you finish a call, the minute you hang up another call comes up just this constant, all day, repetitious…constant sort of like beating on a drum, but day after day. (2000, p. 34)

The pace of work is determined by the combination of technologies that deliver calls to the headset and account details to the screen, and workers often have no control over this process. Workers describe their work as “exhausting,” “robotic,” “controlled,” and “machine-like” in other research (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 33). Houlihan expands on the idea of controlled, machine-like agents by suggesting that this is in fact exactly the way that the organisation conceives of them:

Call centres are information handling organisations. As currently characterized, the job of the agent is to be the voice of the organisation, interfacing with the client or customer. The organisation rehearses the things it wants said and feeds them through the agent. The agent is largely constructed as a mouth-piece rather than as a brain. (Houlihan 2000, p. 234)

Buchanan and Koch-Schulte spoke with a call centre worker who articulated her feelings about the organisation’s expectations of its agents in very similar terms:

Rosa: You are standing waiting to be used by the technology, and it’s a physical embodiment of that. You are standing, waiting until that call comes in to use you to make money. And you are simply another part of that machine. (2000, p. 33)

When this feeling of being a cog in a machine which never stops as it grinds on, repeating the same actions over and over again, is combined with “the cumulative emotional demands presented by the interpersonal nature of the work”, stress is inevitable (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 33).
2.2.1.5 Targets

There is a fourth feature of some call centre work that may engender stress: performance targets. There are various types of targets, which may vary between inbound and outbound centres. Inbound centres typically have targets for call duration, ‘wrap time’, and daily call volume. Outbound centres often also have sales or ‘completion’ targets, which are closely monitored and upon which pay may be partially based. In addition, in some sectors, inbound call centres are attempting to introduce the practice of cross-selling, where agents attempt to sell additional products to the customers who call in for another purpose. In these centres, sales targets similar to those in outbound centres are often in place.

Taylor and Bain (2001) argue that particularly in the financial services industry in the UK, targets are a significant source of stress for workers as more and more importance is placed upon meeting them in an increasingly competitive business environment. Sales targets, in particular, are difficult to accept, or meet, for workers who often consider themselves as service personnel, particularly when these targets are set centrally and implemented locally: “Cross-selling is seen by employees, not as an opportunity to engage in creative work, but as an additional and acute source of pressure” (Taylor & Bain 2001, p. 53). This is especially the case when sales targets are parachuted in on top of service targets set originally when there was no pressure to produce sales. As a CSR in Taylor and Bain’s study emphasizes: “When somebody phones in for a balance you have to try to get a sale or get them interested as well as turning the call round in 155 seconds” (2001, p. 53).

Even in centres that claim not to prioritize targets, researchers have found that agents often feel significant pressure. Targets simply intensify the stress produced by the quantity/quality debate, or, as one agent is quoted as saying, “They say that they’re not really interested in numbers. They say that they are more into quality. Well, that’s a lie. They’re usually more into numbers than anything” (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 35). It is important not to over generalize however. While most call centres do have some targets, they are a source of stress that is directly under management control. Some call centres are managed in such a way that targets are set to realistically reflect local conditions, are interpreted in light of other, more subjective information, and are not used punitively or to intensify work. In some they are even used effectively to
motivate and encourage staff. For example, Lankshear and Mason describe a series of conversations with managers in their call centre site where management consistently contextualized their performance reports (for example, one commented that it’s ‘human nature’ for productivity to drop before and after a holiday), and used their stats as an excuse to praise good performance and coach those who consistently had difficulty meeting targets: “Our best bet is to develop the people we have got” one manager is quoted as saying (Lankshear & Mason 2001, p. 16).

2.2.2 Monitoring and Measurement

Houlihan claims that the critical literature has been “largely side-tracked by the monitoring and surveillance issue and addressing and identifying evidence of resistance to reject the ‘totality of control’ argument” (2001, p. 209). It is certainly true that these topics are well represented in the literature. However, it is hardly surprising that researchers have chosen to focus on one of the primary characteristics that make this type of workplace unique. It is the studies that most explicitly focus on monitoring and surveillance and the ways that these activities contribute to performance measurement that most clearly reveal that, despite structural and functional similarities across sectoral and national boundaries, not all call centres are created equal. In reviewing the work of authors conducting ethnographic or other forms of qualitative work at different sites, wide differences are revealed in monitoring practices, and hence widely varying conclusions may be drawn based on site-specific data. The lack of generalizable results is of course an ongoing criticism of qualitative research. It can be transcended, however, when there is a sufficient body of work to permit comparisons to be made and patterns to be discerned across studies. My work contributes to this literature and provides a Canadian perspective that remains largely absent (with the notable exception of Buchanan and Koch-Schulte’s study on the effects of labour restructuring and globalization using call centres as an exemplary industry).

The popular rhetoric links call centres to “big brother” and the Panopticon, yet there is an interesting split in the research between researchers who document tightly controlled surveillance regimes inflicted on stressed-out workers and those who report that for many call centre agents, monitoring is not a primary source of concern. Thus we have Fernie and Metcalf (1998), Taylor and Bain (1999, 2001), Mullholland (1999), and to some extent Buchanan and
Koch-Schulte (2000), who describe call centres which strictly implement every possible measurement of worker performance. This approach may be contrasted to studies by Cameron (2000), Belt, Richardson, Marshall and Webster in their various combinations of authorship, Lankshear and Mason (2001), and Frenkel, Korczynski and colleagues (1998, 2000), who all report fairly consistent degrees of acceptance of monitoring amongst the agents they interview and observe. Where there is acceptance of monitoring, as Houlihan summarizes, it is not necessarily due to the same reason(s) in each site, but is generally “due in various parts to its uneven application, its potential to be utilized or interpreted supportively, to stoicism and organisation-identified interpretive repertoires, and not infrequently to the more over-riding influence of other factors such as monotony, frustration and frequently, a sense of injustice caused not least by shifting targets” (Houlihan 2001, p. 209). The largest differences are often found between inbound and outbound centres, with outbound often found to be more measurement-focused. Financial services sites also seem to amongst the most intensely monitored, and often are measured on a mix of service and sales targets. In general, those call centres which are more target-focused or, in Taylor and Bain’s terminology, quantity-focused, are the most heavily monitored while those which lean towards the service, quality-focused end of the spectrum are less likely to apply the full range of surveillance mechanisms the technology permits (Taylor & Bain 2001, pp. 44-49).

This distinction illuminates an important point: call centres are monitored for specific business purposes and the priority placed on monitoring will depend on various features of the call centre, its industry sector, its purpose, and its management. Thus, Mason and colleagues point out, “the first point to make is that the availability of a technological capacity does not mean it will necessarily be deployed” (Mason et al. 2001, p. 10). They go on to state:

Managers may or may not be aware of the potential of technologies for monitoring, and if they are aware, they will still weigh the benefits of implementing surveillance processes against the perceived costs and benefits to the organisation. Further, even in sites such as call centres where surveillance is routine, whether or not staff are disciplined or penalized for variations from the normative procedures depends on management practice and priorities (Mason et al. 2001, p. 10).
How employers use monitoring systems depends on many factors—it is not technologically deterministic. Or in other words, “technology does not in itself supervise workers. It is a tool giving data to be interpreted and used by supervisors or managers. It is their choice of how to use it that affects the nature of social interaction within the call centre” (Lankshear & Mason 2001, p. 19). Furthermore, as Bain and Taylor note, “one should not underestimate the massive commitment of supervisory time and energy employed in the interpretation of statistics generated by the monitoring software and in implementing coaching or disciplinary measures…control is what matters most to management, not surveillance” (2000, p. 12). One should also not overestimate the capacities of technology, or to confuse reality with potential: “An additional criticism of those writers mesmerized by ostensibly all-powerful electronic or peer surveillance systems is that they confuse the formal characteristics of such systems and managerial intention with actual practice and outcome (Smith & Thompson 1999, p. 559, qtd. in Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 12).

How employees view the systems is also dependent on many factors, such as the extent to which they have previously been monitored and supervised and the nature of the work that they do. In addition, “the way data is used for evaluation may also influence worker views on the legitimacy and fairness of any monitoring taking place” (Lankshear 1999, par. 5). Botan and Vorvoreanu, in a study attempting to determine what employees thing about electronic workplace surveillance, found that heavily surveilled employees were more likely to believe their organisation valued quantity over quality, but also reported reduced motivation to increase the quantity of work and a similar lack of motivation to improve the quality of their work (2005, p. 135). They suggest that surveillance is a kind of meta-communication with employees that conveys messages that may or may not be meant by management. They perceived themselves as less trusted by management, and more likely to be subject to punitive discipline in heavily surveilled work environments (Botan & Vorvoreanu 2005, p. 135). It is interesting when considering employee perceptions and reactions to monitoring to note a fact reported by Belt, Richardson and Webster (2000). These authors found in their study of 13 European call centres that women constituted the majority of workers in those types of call centres which are most intensively monitored, those in the financial services sector. In this sector, 70-91% of the work force were female. In contrast, in computer services, the sector where monitoring was least used, only 46-60% of employees were
women. In outsourced call centres the proportion of female agents varied between 62-82% (p. 373).

It is also useful to distinguish between the two kinds of monitoring which take place in call centres. There is quantitative monitoring, based on the statistical information generated by the ACD system, and qualitative monitoring, based on supervisor’s ability to listen in or record and evaluate calls. These types of monitoring and measurement are distinct in many ways, and may be usefully discussed individually.

2.2.2.1 Quantitative measures—call statistics, productivity

No matter what their conclusions about monitoring practices in the sites they study, researchers all agree that the combination of technologies and work organisation in call centres provide an unprecedented ability for generating quantitative measures of work performance. Furthermore, as Korczynski and his co-authors note, the measures are “not only pervasive in the sense of covering many aspects of behaviour and output, but also pervasive in relation to the dimension of time—performance in many of these areas was constantly monitored and this information was frequently (often on a daily basis) distributed to the worker involved” (2000, p. 675, emphasis in original). Typically, the measurements that are used to manage a call center include: average number of minutes per call, average number of rings or seconds before an answer, number of calls handled per person per hour and call abandon rate (Willis & Bendixen 2007, p. 2). Also common are measures of the ‘wrap’ time between calls and the amount of time agents are available (‘ready’) or unavailable (‘not ready’) to take calls. The differences between studies are related to how these numbers are used in practice, and the reasons researchers impute as to why particular organisations adopt particular practices.

There are a range of practices described in the literature. For example, Knights and McCabe provide an example of an intensively measured financial services site where the measures explicitly put pressure on staff to maintain a rapid pace:

Staff are individually measured according to wrap, idle and live ‘time’. …Direct customer contact time is known as ‘live’ time. If there are queries that cannot be answered within 20 seconds, any additional time that it takes the staff to make a note of the query is known as
‘wrap’ time. Staff must make notes, rather than deal with queries immediately, so as to maximize direct customer contact time, during their allotted period. Only when the member of staff is relieved, can they deal with queries. ‘Idle’ time refers to the time when an individual needs to use the toilet or goes for coffee. Probank is currently trying to reduce ‘wrap’ time as this detracts from productivity, which is only measured in terms of ‘live’ time. Productivity being measured by the amount of time an employee is engaged in answering calls divided by the number of calls received. Thus there are pressures on staff to continually answer telephone calls. (1998, p. 176)

In a similar vein, Richardson, Belt and Marshall describe a target-oriented site: “Each agent has targets to meet, often linked to performance-related pay. Targets can include numbers of calls taken, the time spent on each call and the amount of time spent between one call and another. So although the agent can, in theory, log out of the system at will, the pressure is to keep taking calls” (2000, p. 363). Common to these descriptions is the observation that monitoring is explicitly linked to maintaining the pace of work and thus contributing to the intensity and stress of the work. Typically, this kind of very close-grained monitoring is designed to highlight instances where individuals fail to adhere to group norms. Thus, team supervisors can view ACD statistics for each individual in their team, including the time each agent is taken on his or her present activity:

Thus, the supervisor can be aware of what the agent is doing at any moment of the working day. The computer screen also allows the supervisor to see if a call is taking more than the prescribed time. The ‘timer displays’ adjacent to each agent’s name flash at a predetermined threshold of average call time. When an agent’s box flashes, the supervisor can listen in to determine why the call is so lengthy. The supervisor can also listen in to any call, and this is done on a regular basis, to assess the agent’s performance. (Richardson, Belt & Marshall 2000, p. 363).

It is of course important to note that what supervisors do with the information that individuals are ‘out of adherence’ with the group varies from centre to centre. Thus Buchanan and Koch-Schulte report on employees being disciplined, deprived of hours, or fired on the basis of statistics (2000, p. 35) while Lankshear and Mason describe an environment where a failure to meet targets would be seen as a reason for extra coaching and support (2001, p. 16). Similar contrasts abound.
Bain and Taylor describe a call centre in which call handling times are measured to 100\textsuperscript{th} part of a second, with a target of 30 seconds, while call wait times are set to a target of 15 seconds (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 9). In this site, almost nine out of 10 employees found tight measurement of targets oppressive and stressful. The authors themselves contrast their results to those of Frenkel and colleagues, who find that supervisors in their sites did not ascribe “overwhelming significance” (1999, p. 141) to performance statistics, and say that “by and large workers in the workflows we studied viewed call centre monitoring positively” and felt that call monitoring sessions were “participative” and facilitated coaching” (p. 144). In this latter case, Bain and Taylor also provide one reason for the difference: “The highly-competitive business environment in which Telcorp has succeeded in winning contracts on cost and performance criteria against rival outsourcers is the fundamental reason for this quantitative assessment of output. Neither surveillance nor control mechanisms are ends in themselves but are the consequence of the process of perpetual benchmarking by which call centres assess their performance, and their ability to compete and make profits” (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 9).

It has been suggested that one reason staff may say that they do not mind monitoring is that they accept that it is management’s prerogative to exercise control over the workplace (Belt et al. 1999; Lankshear & Mason 2001). Furthermore, despite the fact that management choose to use the technology, set the thresholds, and choose which statistics to pay attention to, technology can be seen as providing an accurate reflection of what is inherently important in work, rather than what has been actively deemed to be important. Callaghan and Thompson argue that the illusion that statistics provide an ‘objective’ evaluation also contributes to their acceptance: “With CSRs inhabiting a workplace heavy with statistics, not only are they more likely to exercise self-control over their output, when confrontation does take place the power of a major evaluation tool is recognized and largely, but not always, accepted” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 22). However, they also note that “When employees say they ‘hate the stats’, we should not be misled by the language. They are aware of the human agency that designs and enforces the system….CSRs also distinguish between the use of surveillance data to control and to coach” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 28). In organisations which are incessantly concerned with turnover, the importance of this awareness on the part of agents needs to be recognized, argue Korczynski and her co-authors, since “monitoring undermines the trust necessary for active commitment” (Korczynski et al. 2000, p. 679).
2.2.2.2 Qualitative measures—call monitoring and rating

In general, there were fewer contrasting results when authors discussed qualitative monitoring such as listening in on or taping calls. Thus the finding Belt and colleagues report is generally commonly supported in other work:

Contrary to our expectations, the majority of agents we interviewed did not particularly object to the heavy monitoring of their work in principle. Most seemed to accept the heavy monitoring carried out in call centres as a ‘part of the job’. In fact, some agents stated that they preferred their calls to be recorded or listened to because it protected them from customer complaints. It was the focus on the timing of calls rather than the quality of the service provided which agents found de-motivating, and not the principle of call monitoring itself. (Belt et al. 1999, p. 5)

Callaghan and Thompson also found that CSRs were not excessively concerned with their calls being monitored, and quote workers as saying that they accept that the recording is for their safety, and that they appreciate the opportunity to get constructive feedback on their performance (2001, p. 23). Similarly, Lankshear et al. discovered that in their sites, the general consensus was that agents consider call taping and monitoring a legitimate part of the job, and some even stated that they like it because it can protect them from unreasonable customer complaints by providing a record of their interaction (Lankshear et al. 2001, p. 600). It is important to note that this was in a company which staff characterized as a “good organisation to work for” (Lankshear et al. 2001, p. 602) and where relations between staff and management seemed cordial and generally trusting. Further, as the authors note in a related paper, most agents seemed not to have trouble meeting targets after they had been on the job for a few months, and managers tended to interpret statistics based on their knowledge of individual situations and rarely used the numbers for disciplinary purposes (Lankshear & Mason 2001, p. 16).

The one area of concern about taping that Lankshear and colleagues found was around private telephone calls. There was no separate facility for making private calls during breaks, and staff when asked about privacy concerns in the workplace frequently mentioned a concern that their private calls might inadvertently be listened to in the course of monitoring. It is interesting, the
authors note, that agents clearly distinguished between “illegitimate trespass into matters that were regarded as occupying the realm of personal privacy and legitimate monitoring of occupational performance” (2001, p. 603). These authors are the only ones to directly address the issue of workplace privacy in call centres; it would be interesting to see whether the observations made in their study hold true in other sites. Certainly, this was something that I also found in my field sites.

Lankshear et al. note that “in studies which do not involve direct access to, and observation of, the work situation, it may be all too easy to assume that the availability of a technology will lead automatically to its deployment” or to assume that “because managers say that taping of staff is undertaken, this is indeed the case” (2001, p. 598). In fact, during her five months of fieldwork in a travel services call centre, Lankshear found that remote monitoring of staff rarely occurred outside of the initial training period, despite a company policy which stated it was done regularly, and despite managers who claimed to do so. There was a common perception among managers that routine taping was “resource hungry and time consuming” (Lankshear et al. 2001, p. 598), and observation showed that in practice, it was rarely used except for the appraisal period at the end of the initial three months probationary employment, and even then rarely resulted in staff being let go for poor performance. Instead, supervisors were constantly keeping track of calls and agents by walking about the floor, and seemed to have a clear idea of performance levels without taping.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, then, there is little evidence in the literature that qualitative monitoring is a significant contributor to the workplace stress so prevalent in call centres. It would appear that other factors are more serious contributors to the difficulties staff face in coping with these environments. Quantitative measurements are more problematic for workers, it would seem, but this is not just linked to their role in performance measurement but, perhaps more significantly, their role in intensifying the pace of work.

2.2.3 Control and Resistance

While much of the literature on measurement deals implicitly or explicitly with the issue of control, be it of workers pace, words, or manner, there is a body of literature that also deals with
control and worker attempts to resist that control more broadly. This includes debates about whether workers do or do not have the ability to resist in any meaningful way. Much of this literature comes from earlier entries in the call centre literature. While some of the more extreme formulations have been discredited in later literature, these pieces are still an important part of the early academic examination of call centres.

2.2.3.1 The sweatshop analogy

One of the earliest, most extreme, and most influential academic studies to look at call centre work was that by Fernie and Metcalf (1998), entitled *(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops.* Based on their study of payment systems in 4 different organisations, three of which were call centres of a sort, these authors announced: “This occupation [computer telephony] merits study because the possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output are amazing to behold—the “tyranny of the assembly line” is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony” (Fernie & Metcalf 1998, p. 2). The popular press in the UK and elsewhere apparently picked up this sweatshop image enthusiastically, and it remains embedded in popular consciousness. Bain and Taylor, for example, cite a call centre union organizer who complains that every time he is interviewed by the press, he spends the first twenty minutes of the session convincing them that call centres are not prisons: “I have tangled with this (the Fernie and Metcalf thesis) on the radio and television on a number or (sic) occasions. It is a ludicrous proposition, borne of academics who have no experience of the real world” (Jacks, qtd. in Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 3). While terming Fernie and Metcalf’s conclusions ‘ludicrous’ seems to be taking an equally extreme position in the opposite direction, there were few academic studies published near that time which do not either take up or debate their position. There is reasonably widespread agreement throughout the academic literature that Fernie and Metcalf’s position is overstated based on their evidence, and over the years their conclusions have been thoroughly discussed (see for example Bain & Taylor 2000; Knights, Odih & Calvey 1999) but their work is perhaps responsible for the tendency for early academic articles on call centres to focus on issues of control and resistance. Similarly, there are a considerable number of trade press articles that feel it necessary to discuss and dispute the comparison, while industry associations have also begun to try to counter this
image. For example, the Call Centre Association, a Glasgow-based professional organisation for the UK call centre industry, unveiled new minimum standards of practice in 2001 in an explicit attempt to improve working conditions and counter the image of call centres as ‘sweatshops’ (Anonymous 2001, p. 4).

2.2.3.2 The panopticon
The predominant metaphor initially used for call centre surveillance and management control is that of Bentham’s panopticon, as taken up by Foucault. Although it had been used previously in literature on electronic workplace surveillance which discuss call centres (e.g. Botan 1996; Clement 1992), Fernie and Metcalf’s (1998) controversial paper denouncing call centre work helped this image catch the attention of the mainstream press, and (like the sweatshop analogy discussed above) it is now sufficiently pervasive that it is mentioned at least in passing in much of the academic call centre literature of the late 90s and early 2000s, albeit occasionally disparagingly. “We shall show” write Fernie and Metcalf, “that, for call centres, Bentham’s Panopticon was truly the vision of the future and these organisations are the very epitome of what Foucault had in mind” (1998, p. 2). Bain and Taylor, in a self-proclaimed “explicitly polemical” article that argues against Fernie and Metcalf’s interpretation of call centre surveillance, provide a concise description of the panopticon:

In Jeremy Bentham’s late-eighteenth century design for a prison, later adapted by Foucault (1977) as a metaphor for societal surveillance, the central observation tower is constructed in such a way that isolated, individual inmates could never be sure when they were being watched. From the vantage point in the tower, the observer could see the inmates in their peripheral cells at any time without being seen. Thus, the prisoners come to act as though they are under the carceral gaze at all times and so ‘internalise’ the gaolers’ objective of exercising discipline and control. Foucault summarized the effects thus, ‘the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action’ (1977: 201). (Bain & Taylor 2000, 4)

Among those who use a Foucauldian analysis of control and resistance in call centres, there are two streams. One steam, typified by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) and, to a lesser extent,
Mulholland (1999) and Botan and Vorvoreanu (2005), suggest that technological advances in workplace surveillance have permitted management to achieve ‘panoptic control’ over workers, leaving no room for collective resistance, and very little, if any, space for individual resistance. In this stream of thought, the fact that supervisors can view real-time statistics encompassing just about every action and keystroke agents perform, and listen to any call without notice, creates the ultimate surveillance regime. Another branch of thought is represented in the work of Bain and Taylor (1998, 2000) and Knights, Odih and Calvey (2001). They argue that a more nuanced reading of Foucault implies that subjects are “constituted through rather than by a variety of disciplinary technologies that reinforce and reproduce existing inequalities at work and within society more broadly” (Knights, Odih & Calvey 2001, par. 1). This group examines the ways in which workers “participate in the construction of their own discipline” (Knights, Odih & Calvey 2001, par. 1) and documents instances of individual and collective resistance to technological control. Bain and Taylor warn that “the problem with looking at the workplace from a surveillance perspective lies in a narrowness which reduces the range and complexities of management control strategies to Foucauldian notions of discipline” (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 5). They believe that this is particularly reductive when Foucault’s theory is interpreted simplistically, as they suggest it has been in its application to call centres.

There is often a strong tinge of technological determinism in some of the writing about control in call centres. For example, Callaghan and Thompson credit the ACD system with primary control of the workplace:

> Technology is used to control the pace and direction of work in call centres such as Telebank in much the same way as assembly line production. Such ACD technology systemizes control, with the power to push and pace work flowing not from a boss or supervisor but from the technology. This system of control is strongly embedded in the physical fabric of production and is therefore less obtrusive. (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, 21)

Furthermore, they point out, the technology does more than pacing and directing work—it also assists in the monitoring of work. Or, as Callaghan and Thompson put it, “monitoring and evaluation” become “part of the system of production” (2001, p. 22). While there is human agency involved in interpreting the figures, managers are “assisted and to an extent driven by the
sheer volume and sophistication of management information available to them” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 22).

Other authors resist this trend. It is a mistake, claim Bain and Taylor, to believe that “because the software claims to be able to perform miracles of monitoring, then complete managerial control will inevitably result. It is a superficial view which ignores the complexities of managerial practice and the contested nature of the employment relationship. It also eliminates subjectivity” (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 16). Further, they remind the reader, “A key point is that what management would like to achieve is often very different from what they are able to achieve” (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Other authors agree, arguing that technology has merely changed the nature of control, rather than rendering it perfect. “While management is achieving increased control in one way, they are losing it in another” write Knights and McCabe:

Management had more personal or ‘direct’ control before and could isolate individuals’ movements, now control has shifted towards more statistical or indirect means …Thus management can pinpoint their staff’s productivity in terms of idle, wrap or live time; however, statistics can be, and are being, manipulated by staff.” (1998, p. 183)

These authors highlight a key issue in technology-intensive workplaces such as call centres: the relationship between management and staff is changing, as the once personal task of supervision is increasingly mediated by technologies. Others touch on this issue peripherally, when they document cases of team leaders complaining that they have difficulty making time for personal contact or motivating staff in workplaces where they have little control themselves over work conditions, and are themselves judged primarily on their team’s productivity (see for example, Houlihan 2001 and Belt, Richardson and Webster 2002). Although Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell contend that “tight control and extensive measurement of the workplace does not necessarily have to produce a ‘satanic mill’ if HR practices are well designed and aligned with
employee needs and customer expectations” (2000, par. 1), few studies present evidence of human resource policies which meet these criteria.  

Mason and colleagues, in their paper “Getting Real about Surveillance and Privacy at Work,” also note that the issue of surveillance as a means of control, and worker resistance to this control, is not as simple in real life as it is made out to be in the currently popular theories. They see the primary debate as taking place between management texts and gurus, which frequently claim that workers are empowered by new technologies, and authors writing in the labour process tradition, who see technology as a management tool for tighter control. In the latter model, technology permits the accumulation of more information about individuals that may be used to evaluate workers in ways that may not be to the workers’ advantage (Mason et al. 2001, p. 4). Workers are seen as “either subdued by panoptic surveillance or faced with a constant struggle to devise resistance strategies in pursuit of individual and collective autonomy and privacy” (Mason et al. 2001, p. 9). However, in their ethnographic work, based on an empirical study of a number of sites in which surveillance-capable technologies are utilized (including two call centre sites), Mason and colleagues discovered that real life is more complicated than either school of thought might predict, as the complex social relations of work had a clear and variable effect on the ways in which “technology was variously deployed, struggled with, sidelined, manipulated, circumvented and appropriated, often in surprising ways” (Mason et al. 2001, p. 9). Similarly, Russell in his study of an Australian call centre, observed a variety of “individual fiddles” (2002, p. 487) and a high level of intention to leave the workplace in the short term, but he also found that managerial strategies such as “team cultures, manufactured sociability, and temporization” (p. 487) had ameliorated, to some extent, worker’s attitudes towards their work.

While the effects of technology and management practices on the nature of control in call centres are debated in the literature, the basic processes are, somewhat surprisingly, not. As Belt, Richardson and Webster note, it is interesting that strategies for work organisation, monitoring and control are similar across many types of call centres, in all three countries—England, Ireland and the Netherlands—they studied (2002, p. 29). Korczynski and colleagues found that this is

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8 Lankshear and colleagues in the several works mentioned in this paper report on a call centre environment which seems to come close in their HolidayCo site. Similarly, my second research site, C-Union, where staff had a trusting and supportive relationship with management and the organisation as a whole, would support this contention.
also the case in their study of call centres in Australia, the US and Japan, while Buchanan & Koch-Schulte record parallel experiences in Canadian call centres. No one, as yet, has thoroughly explored the underlying reasons for this remarkable alignment across international borders and industry boundaries. Perhaps the main cause is the most obvious, however: “neither surveillance nor control mechanisms are ends in themselves but are the consequence of the process of perpetual benchmarking by which call centres assess their performance, and their ability to compete and make profits” (Bain & Taylor 2000, p. 9). In capitalist economies, the profit motive is transcendent.

2.2.3.3 Resistance?

Just as there are debates in the literature about the nature and extent of control in call centres, so are there debates about the potential for effective worker resistance. Predictably, those authors who argue for the panopticon model see the least opportunities for resistance, while those who argue against the model do so in part by documenting observed instances, claiming that control cannot be total if resistance exists. Thus Bain and Taylor painstakingly hunt out instances of call centre agents who ‘beat the system’ in some way. They found those who had learned to anticipate when they would be monitored and adjust their performance accordingly, who would hang onto calls after callers disconnected to get breaks,9 and who talked of exploiting supervisory inconsistencies (2000, p. 12). They also cite instances of collective organizing (p. 12)10, and management problems such as turnover and absenteeism (p. 11) as evidence of workers exerting their own control.

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9 Many of the techniques noted in observational studies of specific call centres are examples of ways in which staff have learned to exploit the loopholes in their particular set of information systems. Thus techniques used in one centre would not work in another—in this example, the agents had to manually disconnect calls, and had a special category of calls that were expected to take longer and had higher time limits. If such a call turned out to be short, staff could extend it without affecting their call duration statistics unduly. The effectiveness of the strategy is thus dependent on a combination of technology and task-specific performance criteria.

10 It is interesting to note that there is a significant and growing labour union presence in the call centre industry in the UK, while unions have made few inroads into these organisations in Canada and the US.
Slightly further along the continuum in the literature, Mulholland (1999) accepts Taylor and Bain’s argument that workers are not rendered powerless by ‘panoptic’ surveillance, but she notes that “it is important to qualify the scope for resistance and define its effectivity in the context of power characterizing this particular labour and capital relationship” (Mulholland, par. 2). Her case study of a telecommunications call centre found that the primary opposition took the form of high rates of labour turnover, including many who chose not to begin work after completing the training, a form of resistance likely to prove costly to the worker who then has no job, and which renders possibilities for worker resistance extremely low in a climate of high unemployment. Knights and McCabe, writing in a similar vein, cite individual acts of resistance as a means to undermine the notion of total control, describing agents who keep calls short to meet difficult duration and volume targets by providing partial answers or cutting customers off (1998, p. 183). They admit, however, that workers are risking disciplinary action by adopting these somewhat risky methods, and are perhaps worsening the work for themselves and their colleagues, as they antagonize customers who will then call back angry and frustrated.

This willingness to take risks is important to note, Callaghan and Thompson claim, because it is an indication that no system can completely deprive agents of all power over the way in which they perform their job:

> Work is organized so they have little autonomy—they remain stationary, calls come automatically, the tasks they perform are technically constrained and they are taught conversational control techniques and particular scripts. But despite the ability of the system to coerce and bribe, the emotional content of each service encounter is ultimately controlled by individual CSRs. (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 32)

These authors stress something that is important to remember: “Customer service representatives (CSRs) are shown as active agents, using their own emotional skills, tacit knowledge, humour and willingness to exit employment as means to challenge control structures and bend work norms” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 16).

Other studies focus on different aspects of the potential of “active agents.” For example, although studies of control relations typically centre on the manager/worker relationship, Mason and colleagues note that often one or both of these players is also actively and deliberately orienting to other significant players. In the call centre they studied, this other player was the
customer. Agents, faced with contradictory management demands for quantity of calls, up-selling, and quality of service, clearly defined themselves as concerned with behaving ‘professionally’ and providing good service, even to the point of putting their convictions about the ways in which to provide this service above the possibility of receiving bonuses from pushing additional products to customers. As Mason and his co-authors put it,

Employees clearly possessed their own conceptions of professionalism which involved striking a balance between corporate and client interests, and acting with a sense of ethical and personal autonomy. Their own definitions of professionalism and good performance were, therefore, neither at complete variance with, nor simple clones of, management definitions. (Mason et al. 2001, p. 19)

It is interesting to contrast Mason’s argument with that of Korczynski and colleagues, who argue that control in their study sites “was informed by both pervasive (bureaucratic) measurement and monitoring, and the use of customer-related norms” (2000, p. 674). In their work, they felt that management sought to foster empathy for the customer as a way to encourage staff to internalize service standards. Thus, in their argument, a customer-orientation was not an opportunity for resistance but an insidious form of indirect control that is constantly reinforced by more direct control in the form of monitoring and evaluation. Their work is an important reminder that in focusing on technologically-enabled control, as does most of the call centre literature, researchers should not lose sight of the less topical but no less effective methods which have been practiced in organisations since long before the advent of computers.

More recently, Townsend (2005) furthers this train of research in his study of the way cohesive teams of call centre workers in his ethnographic study site use the management-imposed team structure to provide ‘strength in numbers’ and cooperatively resist management controls via the workplace surveillance system. In a contrasting example, however, he also notes that different workplace practices encourage, or enforce, different channels of resistance.

Houlihan notes that the academic research on call centres seems to have comprehensively demonstrated the means by which agents individually and collectively assert their agency and resistance and manage to more or less ‘avoid the gaze’ (2001, p. 209-10). However, she cautions, “in their thoroughness in critiquing the work of those who have applied this [Panopticon] metaphor, Bain and Taylor (2000) and others may find themselves in the bizarre situation of
minimizing concerns about what is still an important and potentially harmful tendency” (Houlihan 2001, p. 210). Perhaps the debate over the literal accuracy of the comparison between a call centre and the Panopticon has obscured what should be the main point of the metaphor—information technology can and is being used as a tool to affect “social power relationships” (Botan & Vorvoreanu 2000, p. 3) between workers, whose actions are made more visible through electronic surveillance, and supervisors, whose ability to observe work increases and becomes less visible at the same time. Botan and Vorvoreanu in their work on electronic surveillance describe “panoptic effects,” which may be “internal—the realization of vulnerability because of the visibility-invisibility contrast—and behavioral, the social behaviors undertaken, or not undertaken, in response to that perceived vulnerability” (2000, p. 5). These effects, they argue, may result from surveillance whether or not the system provides total control.

Rooksby and Cica take the position that electronic workplace surveillance is essentially a form of “covert non-constraining control of others” that seeks to manipulate “people’s motivational attitudes, their informational attitudes, and their executive qualities such as skills, capacities and habits” all of which, they argue, undermines personal autonomy (2005, p. 249). Covert non-constraining control is essentially the effort to control the “principles or values an agent takes for granted” (Mele 1995, p. 148 qtd. in Rooksby & Cica 2005, p. 249); in the case of electronic monitoring, this happens by embedding them in a system of technologies and practices that (re)inforce those values chosen by management. As they note, “continuous surveillance of all aspects of workers’ behaviours creates an environment in which they may find it difficult to resist compliance with guidelines for workplace behaviour set down by employers and managers, even where those guidelines are not coercively enforced” (2005, p. 250).

Despite the relatively large (when considered in the context of the totality of the call centre literature) number of authors focusing on monitoring issues in call centres, the published research tends to be looking relatively narrowly at the issues. Is monitoring good or bad? Does it cause stress or not? It seems to be assumed that measurement systems provide value to upper management, but there is little examination of whether other stakeholders including front-line supervisors and workers perceive value in any of the measurement processes. Further, while a few authors identify the quality/quantity dilemma as inherent to call centre measurement systems, there is little discussion of the competing interests within the system, or the differential values across hierarchical levels which may contribute to this dilemma. Finally, there is almost
no mention of the ways in which individual accountability in these workplaces is increased, objectified, and at the same time distanced as quantitative measures displace interpersonal worker/supervisor relationships. In her influential book *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, Zuboff describes the use of ICT media to record and locate the organisation’s activities as the “textualisation” of the organisation (1998). Houlihan connects this concept to call centre work in a rare explicit mention of accountability in the call centre literature:

Textualisation happens on two levels in the call centre. First, processes are streamlined by the simultaneous creation of records and databases at the point of transaction. Second, the same process records a footprint of the activities and performance of agents in minute detail. In this way agents are located in a cycle of accountability which aims to increase reliability and performance accuracy. (Houlihan 2000, p. 234)

An exploration into what this actually means for those workers who are incorporated in this way into the system would be interesting and potentially valuable to add to the ongoing attempts to assess the value and impact of call centre work on the people who perform it. The larger question extends beyond call centres into any technology-intensive workplace: how do workers constitute themselves as subjects in highly technologically mediated and intensively managed work settings?

### 2.3 Performance measurement literature

It seems clear that local utilization of performance measurements for performance management is extremely important to the work environment in call centers. It is also clear that practices vary widely from one call centre to another. In a search for an explanation for these differences, it is useful to look at the standard ideas about performance measurement, and specifically about electronic performance measurement, in the literature as they may be applied to call centers. This look at the concept of performance measurement is of necessity selective: as Neely points out, “news reports and articles on the topic have been appearing at a rate of one every five hours of every working day since 1994” and there are “more than 12 million web sites dedicated to it” (Neely 2002, p. xi). While these figures may be exaggerated somewhat, there is a plentiful and diverse literature produced within a variety of disciplines, including accounting, economics, human resource management, marketing, operations management, psychology and sociology, with, as Neely notes, little cross-referencing between them. Such a massive body of work, with
so little cross-field integration, means that there “appears to be no agreement as to which are the important themes and theories in the field” (Neely 2002, p. xii). It is not the goal of this thesis to provide an exhaustive survey of the field, nor to provide integration where none has yet been attempted, useful though this might be. Rather, a brief summary of some common concepts and conceptions of performance measurement will be followed by a look at issues of particular importance to electronic performance measures and an exploration of the ways in which performance measurement concepts are and are not evident in call centres according to the call centre literature and in my own research.

As Halachmi notes, types of performance measurement systems are as diverse as the types of organisations employing them (2000, p. 88). He also points out that “there is no consensus on how performance measurement should be accomplished” although it “has long been recognized, both in the private and public sectors, as a key to organisational success” (2000, p.88). Not everyone agrees even that far, however: in a summary for a course in performance measurement at Carnegie Mellon University, the instructor notes

> It is much easier to find instances where performance measurement had dysfunctional consequences, actually worsening organisations, than where performance measurement led to improvements. It is very difficult to find examples of performance measurement systems in real business or government organisations that survive their implementation, much less implemented systems that survive over the years contributing demonstrably to improved organisations (Heinz School 2001, par. 4)

Despite this reported lack of evidence for its efficacy, performance measurement in some form has likely gone on since the concept of work as a cooperative activity came into being. It began as a subjective process, based on face to face interactions between workers and supervisors. The concept of systematizing the process, and managing it as a means to increase the amount of work individuals would do, arose early in the study of management practices. Harmeyer claims that it “can be traced back to Frederick W. Taylor’s writings in the early 1900s as he created the concept of scientific management and the modern field of public administration, through the famous experiments at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant, to the writings and statistical techniques of Walter A. Stewart, and through the efforts of W. Edwards Deming to rebuild the broken Japanese economy after World War II” (2000, p. 30). Taylor developed his theory of scientific management in steel factories, where he broke “each job down into simple, basic
elements” (Sheldrake 1996, p. 15) and then timed and recorded them, applied weightings to account for things like increasing fatigue during the course of a day, and then established targets for workers based on these measurements. His methods have been both celebrated and reviled, but have had a lasting influence on management theory. It is interesting then, that he is the management theorist most often mentioned in relation to call center performance measures, often with negative connotations: for example, authors write of the “Taylorisation of white collar work” (e.g. Bain 2001; Taylor & Bain 1999) when discussing work intensification caused by tight, inflexible time limits for task completion.

There are various ways in which performance measurement has been viewed over time, and various schools of thought. The oldest and most entrenched is the school that promotes reliance on financial indicators of performance, and remains firmly focused on ‘the bottom line’. Shaw suggests that this “could be said to reflect the capital market’s obsession with profitability as almost the sole indicator of corporate performance (Shaw 1999). The other school claims that financial indicators, while important, provide a “one-dimensional view of corporate activity” (Shaw 1999) and that multiple indicators are needed to accurately assess complex corporate activities. Kaplan goes so far as to suggest that “if senior managers place too much emphasis on managing by the financial numbers, the organisation’s long term viability becomes threatened (cited in Shaw 1999). The success of Kaplan and Norton’s balanced scorecard approach (1996) in penetrating the American business community bears witness to the fact that this claim resonated with many managers: in 1999 data suggested that “somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of large US firms will have adopted the balanced scorecard by the end of 2000” (Neely & Austin 2002, p. 41). The idea that performance measures can fulfill multiple roles in the organisation and requires multiple perspectives is perhaps the predominant one in much of the recent literature. For example, Eccles argues that there is a significant change going on in performance measurement:

At the heart of this revolution lies a radical decision: to shift from treating financial figures as the foundation for performance measurement to treating them as one among a broader set of measures. Put like this, it hardly sounds revolutionary. Many managers can honestly claim that they—and their companies—have tracked quality, market share, and other nonfinancial measures for years. Tracking these measures is one thing. But giving
them equal (or even greater) status in determining strategy, promotions, bonuses, and other rewards is another. (1991, p. 26-27)

Eccles suggests that the important questions are “Given our strategy, what are the most important measures of performance? How do these measures relate to one another?” What measures truly predict long-term financial success in our businesses?” (1991, p. 27-28).

Neely, with reference to Otley, itemizes three roles of performance measures in modern organisations, which he claims are all implicitly but not necessarily explicitly recognized in organisations or by academics: he says that “First they provide a tool for financial management. Second they provide information on overall business performance. Third they provide a means of motivation and control” (Neely 2002, p. 1). It is the latter role that has the most intimate impact on workers.

The foundation of performance measurement as a means of control is the assumption that without performance standards and a means of enforcing them, workers will not work as quickly or efficiently as employers deem appropriate. Indeed, Taylor’s methods were his way of countering what he termed “soldiering”, or the tendency of workers to “work at a slow, easy gait” particularly when working in groups where the pace of the “poorest and least efficient” became the norm (Taylor 1903/1972, qtd. in Sheldrake 1996, p. 15). Taylor’s understanding of group dynamics may have been superficial, but his method of setting standards and then penalizing those who failed to meet them did succeed in increasing the pace and productivity of workers in the factories where he introduced his methods. Much of contemporary performance measurement features the same concept of pre-defined standards. Erven goes so far as to include the idea of pre-defined standards in his definition of performance measures, which, he states, “are thought to provide the information necessary to take corrective or preventative action as required to ensure an organisation is meeting its predefined standards (Erven 1999). He goes on to note that the control process is cyclical, and that employees often view such control negatively, as it typically includes expectations of changes in employee behaviour. The City of Grande Prairie, in a measurement planning document, puts it this way: “Measurement of any kind will affect the behavior of individuals within the organisation [for better or for worse]. It has nearly universal capacity to focus attention” (City of Grande Prairie, 2002).
Setting performance standards, measuring actual performance, and comparing the two are therefore, to reiterate the obvious, a means of control. Simons suggests that performance measurement systems are part of a larger management control system; he “argues that management control systems can also be used as a means of surveillance, motivation, monitoring performance, stimulating learning, sending signals or introducing constraints” (cited in Neely, Gregory & Platts 1995). Hatten and Rosenthal make a similar distinction, albeit with different terms, when they draw a distinction between “measures of organisational performance that are routinely aggregated and widely communicated” and “the localized indicators of an individual’s performance that are traditionally used for personnel appraisal” (2001, p. 59), and suggest that it is the former to which they would apply the term “performance measurement”. They list four structural elements of a typical performance measurement system and what they do:

- Linking objectives and metrics to customer need focuses effort.
- Widening the scorecard honors constraints, such as the need for profit and environmental compliance.
- Monitoring organisational competencies ensures the company’s future.
- Timing and tilting the measures and stretching the targets speed up or slow down strategy execution, add pressure, and move risk levels up or down (Hatten & Rosenthal 2001, p. 61).

Despite Hatten and Rosenthal’s defining performance measurement as a ‘big picture’ activity, as opposed to the individualized staff appraisal process that occurs concurrently, the term performance measurement seems to be also conceived more narrowly and at an individual or work-group level by other authors. Shaw suggests that there are four basic questions organisations need to ask: “What has happened? Why has it happened? Is it going to continue? What are we going to do about it?” and goes on to claim that of these four questions, only the first is answered by performance measurement (Shaw 1999). This ties in well with the work of Neely and colleagues, who define performance measurement as “the process of quantifying the efficiency and effectiveness of action” where effectiveness “refers to the extent to which customer requirements are met, while efficiency is a measure of how economically the firm’s resources are utilized when providing a given level of customer satisfaction” (1995, p. 80). This definition suggests performance measurement operates at the level of individual customer interactions, which in turn suggests that individual actions can be units of measurement. They go
on to define a performance measure as “a metric used to quantify the efficiency and/or effectiveness of an action” and a performance measurement system as “the set of metrics used to quantify both the efficiency and effectiveness of actions” (Neely et al. 1995, p. 80). Neely and his coauthors’ definition also seems more in accord with the ways in which the term is used in the call centre literature, where researchers evaluate organisations’ performance measurement systems in terms of specific metrics such as call quality rating systems and call statistic thresholds (e.g. Taylor & Bain 1999).

Amick and Smith use the term performance evaluation to refer to much the same concept, and define it as “the assessment of a variety of employee behaviours and accomplishments considered relevant for organisational performance” with the intent of holding employees “accountable” for their actions (1992, p. 8). Westin also notes that while monitoring data may be collected at various levels and put to various uses, it is the individual, evaluative uses of monitoring, the “collection of individually-identified performance data for purposes of pay, promotion or discipline” by which employees are most affected (1992, p. 37). Hatten and Rosenthal, too, provide links between the organisational and individual aspects of performance measurement: they note that “when you review your performance targets and ask what impact they are having, recognize that performance improvement is a social process. Assess how well your process performance targets are tied to accountability and then rewarded. Rewards should be crafted to encourage behavior that is consistent with the company’s objectives” (2001, p. 69).

The notion of holding staff accountable for their actions through a performance measurement system underlies many discussions, yet it is most often explicitly mentioned in relation to reward structures. Frost suggests that the concept of accountability should be fundamental. He suggests a model of a performance measurement system in which there are four elements: “reporting performance; improving performance; aligning organisations; managing accountabilities” (n.d., p. 1). He goes on to claim that:

Managing accountabilities is what people usually mean by ‘performance management.’ Accountability management includes the entire process: defining jobs; setting goals with individuals and groups; tracking results; reviewing performance, providing rewards, and, yes…kicking butts when necessary. If accountability management is central to improving
performance, what’s central to accountability management? The answer: performance measures. (Frost n.d., p. 3)

There is a great deal of research into the ways in which the act of performance measurement influences work and workers. Many of the arguments in support of performance measurement highlight the prospect that when dedicated employees receive objective feedback and have a concrete idea about how well they are doing, they are more likely to improve performance than if merely ordered to do so by management” (Halachmi 2000, p. 88). There is some evidence to support this idea. For example, Niehoff and Moorman consider the ways in which performance measurement might contribute to employee’s perception of fairness during performance evaluations. These authors hypothesize that the act of overt performance monitoring by supervisors contributes to employee’s perceptions of fair and objective performance evaluation. They found this to be the case in their survey of theatre employees, although they also found that what they termed ‘citizenship’ (for example, helping others) behaviors declined in a monitored environment, where such actions were not seen to be rewarded by the measurement and evaluation system (Niehoff & Moorman 1993, p. 527).

Other authors suggest that it is the way in which monitoring and measurement is undertaken, more than just the fact that it is undertaken, which will affect worker’s perceptions of fairness. So, Halachmi notes that “to be economical and effective, performance measures must assess the right things from the users’ point of view and be understood by those whose behavior can affect the performance that is being measured, as well as by those who use the performance data to make business decisions” (Halachmi 2000, p. 89). He goes on to note, “opposition is likely to occur, in particular, when requests for data to comply with performance reporting needs seem to interfere with efforts to do what needs to be done from employees’ point of view” (Halachmi 2000, p. 97). Similarly, Stanton (2000), in a study comparing traditional and electronic performance measurement (EPM), provides evidence that the ways in which organisational policy about monitoring are justified, and the amount of acceptance this justification is granted by employees, plays a critical role in the way people respond to performance measures. Stanton and Weiss also found that “employee reactions to monitoring appeared to depend on whether and how the organisation planned to use information gathered from monitoring” (2000, p. 434). The ways and extent to which EPM systems monitor activities also affect employee reactions; Carayon found that systems that monitor every activity continuously (as many call centre
systems do) and make individual performance public are the most stressful to employees (1993). Zweig, in his review of the research comparing monitored and non-monitored employees and EPM concludes that most studies suggest that employees almost always experience some negative outcomes from EPM, although, he also notes that these negative effects “can be mitigated if EPM systems are designed to offer employees some respect and control” (2005, p. 104).

Studies such as these, which examine the nature and implications of conventional performance measurement systems, are foundational for studies of electronic performance measurement. However, there is also a fairly substantial body of work dealing strictly with, or primarily with EPM. In the following section, this paper will describe and discuss selected research which attempts to determine the specific effects of electronic performance measurement systems, including a discussion of the ways in which such systems differ from non-electronic systems.

2.3.1 Electronic performance monitoring and measurement

Electronic work monitoring may be defined as “the computerized collection, storage, analysis and reporting of information about employees’ workplace activities” (Clement 1984, p. 260). There is a fairly large body of work on electronic performance monitoring, much of it dating from the early 1990s when such practices were increasingly coming into use within white collar workplaces. Many authors start from the assumption that “EPM systems change the work environment through the integration of management control principles, work measurement concepts and computerized information systems….Modern work measurement systems codify human activity into finite elements which can be captured electronically” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 7). This process may be beneficial to organisations, workers, or both, depending on the way it is conceived and implemented. Clement lists the potential advantages of electronic work monitoring as “not interfering with productive workflow; of being more detailed, reliable, and accurate; of reducing possible employee resentment over filling out personal work records; and of being cheaper and faster to process since the data are already in machine-readable form. Results can be available immediately and at a distance” (1992, p. 19-20). He also notes that it is “precise, fine-grained, relentless, and increasingly pervasive” (p. 20). The ‘fine-grained’ nature of measurement made possible by electronic monitoring systems is a recurring theme. As Amick
and Smith state, EPM permits every element of an employees work output to be “codified and monitored” (1992, p. 7) while also generating data on non-work activities and unproductive time, all in real-time. In other words, workers’ may be evaluated not just on work accomplished, but on every action made in the process of accomplishing a unit of work, whatever that unit may be. There are various forms of electronic monitoring which collect this degree of detailed data, including “telephone call accounting, keystroke or computer time accounting, cards and beepers to monitor locations, computer file monitoring, screen sharing capabilities on networks, telephone call observation, and video camera observation (Alder & Tompkins 1997, p. 259).

Stanton and Weiss divide the effects of electronic monitoring and surveillance on employees into “two broad domains”; they suggest that “first, these techniques may affect employees’ feelings about work and the workplace: attitudes, emotions, beliefs, norms, etc.” and [s]econd, monitoring may modify on-the-job behavior” (2000, p. 425). Much of the literature can be divided broadly into discussions of these two domains. For example, Westin (1992) discusses the ways in which employee perceptions of fairness and the degree of trust employees have for their employers influence their reactions to monitoring practices. Along the same lines, Amick and Smith (1992) explore the ways in which computer-based work monitoring causes stress for workers, and provide suggestions for ways that this can be alleviated. Others look at ways in which computer-based performance monitoring affects workers’ behavior. For example, Aiello and Kolb (1995), Nebeker and Tatum (1993), Stanton and Barnes-Farrell (1996) and other researchers have documented a variety of effects, not all positive, of monitoring on productive behavior. Stanton and Weiss also note that “transcripts of hearings in the US House of Representatives (1989) on the activities of monitored telephone operators indicated that monitoring can also affect unproductive behaviors; during these hearings, telephone operators admitted intentionally hanging up on customers who might have adversely influenced their monitored average call handling time”(Stanton & Weiss 2000, p. 424). The call centre literature documents similar practices among call centre workers in banks and other service industries (see, for example, Taylor & Bain 1999, 2001; Knights & McCabe 1998).

Not surprisingly, concerns and issues discussed in the context of EPM correspond quite well with those discussed in the call centre literature. The primary issues around which groups of papers cluster are those which explore EPM and stress, fairness, and privacy. These categories will be used to organize the subsequent discussion.
2.3.1.1 Stress

There seems to be considerable agreement that there are features of EPM which contribute to worker stress. As early as 1990, Schleifer concluded based on a literature review of EPM research that there was both theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that when EPM is implemented in such a way as to increase workload and decrease worker’s control over their job, it also increases stress. Amick and Smith review some of the early literature which arises from the basic question “How do new computer-based work monitoring and measurement systems affect worker health?” (1992, p. 6). They take a balanced approach, neither vilifying nor glorifying the technology. Rather, their thesis is that:

The design and implementation of computer-based work monitoring and measurement systems create new work arrangements with new jobs, tasks and work relationships. Depending on the management and design principles guiding the system development and implementation effort, there are two major consequences. (1) These new working arrangements can enable the employee to cope better with job demands, lowering the risk for stress-related health effects. (2) The new work arrangements can disable the employee from coping in a positive way with the demands, increasing the risk for stress-related health effects. (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 6)

They also admit, however, that “electronic performance monitoring is not a neutral concept and typically denotes the use of information technology to initiate organisational changes that simplify jobs…and enhance management control” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 6). They posit an “information-enriched work environment” as a potential alternative outcome to an EPM environment, and stress that the effects of an EPM system are “mediated by the design of the job and social opportunities in the work environment” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 6-7).

There are three primary areas in which EPM systems have the potential to increase employee stress: human resource management (including performance evaluation, pay, career progression and job security), communication systems (including changes to supervisor/staff relationships) and organisational information policy (particularly employee privacy policies) (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 8). The EPM literature offers many examples of the ways one or more of these areas are changed or affected by the introduction of EPM in specific organisations or sectors. For example,
in a survey of American telecommunications company workers (directory assistants, service representatives and clerical workers), Smith, Carayon and colleagues found that when comparing monitored and unmonitored groups, the top five factors that differed between groups were “(1) client relationships, (2) control, (3) variety, (4) lack of fair work standards and (5) workload dissatisfaction” (1992, p. 22). These five factors also appear again and again in literature documenting the ways in which EPM contributes to stress.

Role conflict in client relationships can be a serious stressor for service employees in EPM environments, resulting from the difficulty in “having to comply with the differing expectations of the customer and the demands of the production standard” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 12). Amick and Smith use the example of telephone sales or assistance jobs to illustrate this point. They note that the goal of maximizing the number of transactions—meeting the needs of the system—may often conflict with meeting customers’ needs. This is a common theme in call centre literature also, where the perpetual ‘quality/quantity’ dichotomy receives considerable attention. It is a frequent complaint of call centre workers that they cannot provide good customer service (quality) if they have to focus on completing each call within tight time constraints so as to keep their productivity statistics high (quantity).

Control over work is also often identified as another area which EPM may affect. Stress not only arises from performing work under pressure, but is also linked to “the amount of discretion employees’ exercise in their activities” (Clement 1992, p. 29). EPM can be used to “provide feedback and knowledge of results about performance that helps the employee to exercise control in the work process…in task planning and goal setting” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 13) or it may be used to pace work and constrain worker’s task discretion, such as when an automatic call distributor automatically routes calls to call centre agents. In my thesis research, workers at one site could control when they receive calls by pressing a button on their phones while those at another site have calls ‘pushed’ directly through to their headsets. Workers who had control over receiving calls repeatedly mentioned this feature as one which made a difference to their stress levels: as one worker said, “sometimes I have to take a deep breath before I answer and then I can cope with whatever comes up” (CU Notes, p. 24). A recurring theme in call centre literature is that the technologies which permit EPM also permit tighter control of work processes and pace. Thus, it is suggested, "technology systemizes control, with the power to push and pace work flowing not from a boss or supervisor but from the technology. The system of control is
strongly embedded in the physical fabric of production and is therefore less obtrusive” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 18).

While there is relatively little mention of the ways in which EPM may simplify work or reduce variety outside of articles which deal specifically with call centres, it emerges as a key concern in the call centre literature. Spending all day on the phone, answering call after call and dealing with customer after customer, is repetitive. Doing it under constant pressure to keep call volumes high means that there are few chances to use social coping strategies to alleviate boredom or stress. Belt and colleagues studied call centres in three countries and three sectors (financial services, IT and third-party services). They found that “agents in all three sectors spoke of the phenomenon of ‘burnout’, caused by the pressure of working exclusively ‘on the phones’” (Belt et al. 1999, p. 4). In the same study, managers were also reported to be aware of the danger of ‘burnout’: “It was pointed out that managers face an inherent conflict between the need to reduce staff boredom and labour turnover, and the pressure to concentrate staff energies on telephone based work (Belt et al. 1999, p. 4, emphasis in the original).

The issue of fairness arises often in EPM literature, in relation to the imposition of an EPM system, the establishment of standards, and the administration and implementation of the measurement system. Fairness will be explored more thoroughly below, but it is related to stress by Westin, who postulates that employee perceptions of fairness of the work standards and measurement process, and the climate of employee trust in management, serve as “major mitigating or intensifying elements” in the stress experienced by workers in an EPM environment (Westin 1992, p. 35).

Dissatisfaction with heavy workloads is closely linked to discussions of productivity in EPM literature, and work intensification in the call centre literature. That productivity is a key issue is logical from a business perspective. As previously noted, the initial technology investments, the main cost to an organisation for a call centre is labour (HRDC, HR par. 3). This places pressure from an organisational perspective to increase individual workers’ productivity and agent-generated revenue, but this pressure, transferred to staff, creates an intense and often stressful workplace. For example, Aiello and Kolb conducted a laboratory study to determine the impacts EPM has on productivity and stress. They found that workers who were highly skilled were more productive when monitored than unmonitored; interestingly, the opposite effect was observed for
less skilled workers (1995, p. 339). All participants, skilled or not, reported increased levels of stress when monitored. There is widespread consensus in the call centre literature that “call centres are a new, and particularly effective, manifestation of the increasingly capital intensive ‘industrialization’ of service sector work, and work performed in them is highly intensive and routine” (Richardson, Belt & Marshall 2000, p. 358). The pace of work is determined by the combination of technologies that deliver calls to the headset and customer details to the screen, and workers typically have no control over the process.

It seems clear that there are a variety of stressors related to EPM. With the exception of intensification, these stressors are not necessarily exclusively linked to the monitoring technology, but rather to the larger organisational context in which performance monitoring takes place. The argument is often made that differences in an electronically monitored workplace are those of degree rather than of kind; however, it becomes important to ask, particularly in relation to stress, whether the increase in stress levels negates the intended gains in productivity and control that the monitoring system is intended to deliver to the organisation. Although it valuable to identify and explain individual stressors in research studies, it seems useful to then take a step back and look at the manifestation of stress more structurally. The questions that now need to be answered are not ‘what do people find stressful and why?’ The literature shows that the answers to those are largely known, and the response all too often is to suggest it is an individual problem “the symptoms of which can be cured by equally individual means such as exercise, time-management or changes in one’s diet” (Knights & McCabe 1998, p. 172). Instead, it would be useful to look at the phenomenon of workplace stress “within a framework that emphasizes the interrelationships between structural relations of power and the subjective interpretations and actions of employees” (Knights & McCabe 1998, p.172). This leads to another of the themes in the EPM literature which has begun to be explored, and which could support more work in the future, namely, the ways in which EPM affects the relationships between people in the workplace.

2.3.1.2 Changing supervisory roles and social relationships

An ideal supervisory relationship may be conceived of as one of direction and support. Indeed, “supervisor support can be an essential social resource for coping with the demands of work.
Good relationships between supervisors and workers have been shown to lead to decreased labour turnover, improved mental well-being and increased productivity” (Coch and French 1948 cited in Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10). However, various authors studying the effects of EPM systems point out supervisory relationships are one of the first things to change in an electronically monitored environment. Amick and Smith summarize the issue as follows:

Implementing an EPM system can change the relationship between the supervisor and the employee and the substance of the feedback or interaction. Where once the supervisor was important for ensuring that a worker completed a work quota or maintained the appropriate level of service, the computer can now be programmed to monitor this. EPM systems can reduce the supervisory function to checking data to ensure that the employee is not at variance with current production norms. (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10)

This process has implications for both supervisors and workers. When feedback is exclusively or primarily based on data from the monitoring system, staff may become a “faceless stream of information” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10) for supervisors. For some supervisors, being an enforcer for the system rather than a decision-maker or leader is also a source of stress. These issues are relatively seldom discussed in the EPM or call centre literatures, the majority of which looks at the implications of performance monitoring systems on employees. However, there is some research exploring the significant organisational and personal challenges and contradictions that front-line supervisors also face as a result of such systems. At the organisational level, call centre rhetoric is often couched in terms of “teamwork, mentoring and support,” but “the moderating and overriding message is about ‘meeting the stats’. This induces a culture of authoritarianism and institutionalized defensiveness, with each level of the organisation thus putting pressure on the level below (Houlihan 2000, p. 233). When this kind of culture is combined with the nature of the industries in which many call centres operate, which tend to be those with “fluctuating demand and unpredictable competitor actions” (Kinnie, Purcell & Hutchinson 1999, par. 30), managers are faced with the difficult task of balancing a number of different, sometimes competing factors including the perennial difficulty of balancing a customer orientation with efficiency and productivity goals. Further, although management is often considered to be an “undifferentiated category,” this is not necessarily the case:

Even if ‘management’ (an inevitably reified category) could be said to have a disciplinary interest in the minute control of all aspects of work, it is not at all clear that all managers
will share that interest in any simple way. To the extent that they do, it will be attuned to the exigencies of their day to day lives and the targets which they are expected to achieve. (Mason et al. 2001, p. 11)

It is further useful to note that the targets imposed on supervisors may be, and often are, just as contradictory as those by which they in turn are expected to evaluate their staff.

In one study which looked at both supervisors and staff, Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) conducted 91 interviews with call centre agents with a tax collection branch of the American Internal Revenue Service, and then used the data to develop a survey instrument which was administered to 960 employees within the same organisation. Their interviews revealed that both supervisors and staff were highly aware of shifts in their relationships which they attributed to electronic monitoring. Some were positive, as when staff talked about increased objectivity in measures, and the ability to get meaningful feedback on actual calls, or when supervisors described feeling more aware of staff performance levels. Others were negative. These included staff feeling that feedback was not timely, and that managers looked only for bad calls to criticize rather than good ones to praise. Supervisors talked about how time-consuming it was to keep on top of the monitoring, and expressed worries that it was creating divisions between them and their staff by promoting a less flexible method of evaluation.

While the supervisors’ lot is not necessarily an easy one, Clement notes that “the characteristically asymmetric flow of information about employees to their supervisors confers an obvious advantage on the latter in their mutual dealings” (Clement 1992, p. 28). A key difference between EPM and traditional monitoring, as has already been discussed, is the perpetual, fine-grained stream of data generated by employees in the course of their work. It is, of course, not the mere availability of constant and detailed information about behaviour and output, but rather what supervisors choose (or are compelled) to do with it that affects relationships them and their staff. When quantity is stressed over quality, as is often the case in systems relying heavily on statistical compilations to reflect work, workers may feel depersonalized, unrecognized for her/his unique characteristics and abilities. Further, losing supervisor support and professional identity due to conflicting priorities can be stressful (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10).
Another type of relationship which may be changed by implementing new technologies into the workplace is that between co-workers. For example, Amick and Celentano (1991) suggest that technology can reduce the level of support amongst co-workers by reducing their opportunity to use social strategies to deal with work demands. Or more simply, they have less opportunity to talk to one another when the EPM system is pacing and monitoring work. The sense of social isolation that may result can be demotivating and stressful (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 13). In the call centre literature this topic emerges through discussions of teamwork. The use of teams and teamworking are central to the management strategy across the call centre industry, but many authors point out that the terms are used very narrowly. It tends to “refer to employees working in physical proximity to other members of their “team”, carrying out similar tasks, with shared productivity targets and rewards, a shared supervisor, and sometimes socializing with each other outside office hours” (Belt et al. 1999, p. 4). Callaghan and Thompson state that while organisational rhetoric at the call centre they studied was all about teamwork, teams were actually used to decrease “individualism through some element of sociability, and to introduce competitive mechanisms for boosting productivity (2001, p. 28). More generally, EPM is regularly observed to increase employees’ isolation from colleagues and increase competition (see, for example, Belt et al. 1999; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Braendengen 1999).

2.3.1.3 Fairness

The third issue around which seems prominent in the EPM is the concept of fairness in monitoring. Fairness in this context is defined as the degree to which workers evaluated monitoring practices affecting them as reasonable and appropriate (Stanton 2000). The core idea that emerges from studies examining perceptions of fairness in electronically monitored work environments is that the technology is neither inherently good nor bad, but rather it is the ways in which it is used within organisations that determines the effect it has on work and workers. For example, in 1992 Westin conducted a macro ergonomic analysis of Federal Express, after new monitoring technologies and processes were introduced. Employee morale and job satisfaction plummeted; stress rose. Staff clearly identified “the way FEC management is abusing the technology’ and ‘driving people’ as the source of the problems” (Westin 1992, p. 41). A primary concern reported was that new targets interfered with staff members’ ability to serve customers well, despite the fact that ‘excellent customer service’ had been presented to them as a primary
work goal both before and after the implementation. He concludes that it is important to study “(1) the value orientation of employees as to what is considered fair or unfair in work standards and measurement process; and (2) the climate of trust or distrust prevailing at the worksite or in the industry under analysis” (Westin 1992, p. 41) in order to determine how staff will react to monitoring systems. He also develops a series of questions which can be used to help determine perceptions of fairness in workplaces. Aiello and Svec (1993) also contend that the way information collected using monitoring systems is used by employers, managers, and employees, and the kind of relationship that exists between management and staff are the most important indicators for the potential impact of an electronic-based monitoring system.

A number of authors link the idea of giving employees’ input into EPM design, or into the ways in which data collected by the system is used, with the ideal of fairness (e.g. Alder & Tompkins 1997; Kidwell & Bennett 1994). Stanton (2000) developed a framework in which perceptions of fairness, satisfaction with monitoring, and monitoring invasiveness were examined as interrelated attitudinal outcomes of monitoring, while Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) found that five factors, including rating criteria and feedback from monitoring, predicted satisfaction with monitoring. Dulebohn and Ferris note that a primary finding of performance evaluation research that is explicitly directed at determining factors which affect employees’ sense of fairness or justice in relation to measurement systems has been that when individuals are given the opportunity for voice in the performance evaluation process, their evaluations of fairness are enhanced (Dulebohn & Ferris 1999). In their work, they conclude that this holds true whether employees are assessing the measurement process or the decisions resulting from it.

It is interesting to note that there is virtually no mention in the call centre literature of any of these studies detailing the ways in which EPM systems might be adjusted to improve perceptions of fairness. Indeed, although there is abundant evidence that one of workers’ primary concerns about the measurement systems in their workplaces is, fundamentally, fairness, these concerns are seldom labeled as such. Instead, various authors couch the issue in terms of the question of objectivity. It may be generally argued that electronic performance measures are more objective than supervisor evaluations; the system does not play favorites. However, as Callaghan and Thompson note, even when employees phrase their discontent with the system in terms of hating the statistics, they retain a clear understanding that the employer is the one collecting the statistics (2001). In other words, it is management, not the system itself, which choose which
technology to use, set the standards, and decide which statistics matter. A system which objectively applies unreasonable standards may treat everyone in the same manner, but it is unlikely to be perceived as fair.

2.4 Accountability

Accountability is a complex concept, studied in different ways and from different perspectives in disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychology, law, political science and management. It is clearly a central concept in any study of performance evaluation, which is fundamentally a means of ensuring accountability. That said, it is not however a concept which lends itself easily to explanation or empirical research. Indeed, “[i]t is an irony of accountability that the term itself has often evaded clear definition” (Ebrahim 2003, p. 193). Perhaps because of the differing disciplinary foci which enter into the question of definition, accountability is defined in a variety of ways in the research literature, often depending on the background of the author(s) and the purpose of the research. However, the definitions can be grouped roughly into two categories: philosophical (focused on process) and pragmatic (focused on product).

Those definitions that I have tentatively categorized as philosophical (or process-oriented) address accountability as a fundamental characteristic of human interaction during life encounters. Accountability in this sense is inescapable: “Any setting organizes its activities to make its properties as an organized environment of practical activities detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-about-able, analyzable—in short accountable” (Garfinkel 1967, p. 33). Munro and Mouritsen describe accountability as “an everyday and all pervasive process of mundane expressions and mutual understandings” (1996, p. x); “we spend our lives,” suggests Czarniawska, “planning, commenting upon, and justifying what we and other people do” (1997, p. 13). This process, moreover, is inextricably linked to identity, since, in turn, “our identities are created by the mundane things that we say and do; and by how these are heard, seen or felt” (Munro & Mouritsen 1996, p. x). Or, in other words, how we tell the story of ourselves reflects an attempt to project a particular image which corresponds with the way we see ourselves; the way others respond to our accounts of ourselves reciprocally affects our self-image. Identity and accountability, in this framework, develop together. Accounts, the narratives of our daily lives, act “to produce subjects of a certain form, to mould, shape, and organize the
psyche, to fabricate individuals with particular desires and aspirations” (Rose 1988, 196, cited in Willmott 1996). Thus, according to Willmott,

the giving of accounts has consequences for how subjectivity is organized as well as influencing the way others perceive and relate to the person giving the account. Through the medium of these accounts, the capabilities and possibilities of those that they identify are routinely shaped, guided and appraised. (1996, p. 25)

Accountability, in other words, is both internal and external, and may play a variety of roles for an individual. Sinclair suggests there are at least five such roles, moving along a process/product continuum: “Like power, accountability can be understood as something a person is or feels (a personal attribute or affect), something a person has been granted (an obligation bestowed or part of a job contract), something a person exchanges for authority (a property of a relationship), a more abstract and impersonal property of an authority structure, or an artifact of scrutiny” (Sinclair 1995, p. 221).

The pragmatic (product) approach to accountability might also be termed an organisational approach; it seems to presume situations in which there is a hierarchical authority relationship. At its broadest, this may be “the process of holding actors responsible for actions” (Fox & Brown 1998, p. 12), or even being “held responsible” by others and “taking responsibility” for oneself (Cornwall, Lucas & Pasteur 2000, p. 3). Edwards and Hulme introduce a reporting relationship into their definition, which describes accountability as “the means by which individuals and organisations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions” (1996, p. 967). Several authors attempt to break the term accountability down. For example, Kearns distinguishes “three dimensions” of accountability: “the higher authority to whom organisations and individuals are accountable, the standards of performance…for which organisations are held accountable, and the responses to the accountability environment…from inside the organisation” (1996, p. 43). Ebrahim differentiates between the external and internal effects of accountability: “accountability may thus be defined as the means through which individuals and organisations are held externally to account for their actions and as the means by which they take internal responsibility for continuously shaping and scrutinizing organisational mission, goals, and performance” (2003, p. 194).
Definitions also vary depending by discipline. So, for example, from a legal perspective accountability may be “either an obligation to meet prescribed standards of behaviour or an obligation to disclose information about one’s actions even in the absence of a prescribed standard” (Chisolm 1995, p. 141). This legalistic definition is somewhat similar to the ways that traditional accounting literature addresses the issue of accountability, treating it as a purely financial or numerical matter (Sinclair 1995, p. 221) and stands in contrast to the political economics perspective, in which “accountability may be viewed as relational in nature: it does not stand objectively apart from organisations but is reflective of relationships of power among organisational actors” (Ebrahim 2003, p. 196). The relational and socially constructed nature of accountability is also stressed by social scientists. For example, in a historical analysis of accountability in American democracy, Weber observes that accountability mechanisms change significantly over time (Weber 1999, p. 453). Similarly, Miller discusses the ways in which accountability mechanisms embedded in accounting practices change over time and from place to place, arguing that accounting itself is a “social and institutional practice, one that is intrinsic to, and constitutive of social relations” (Miller 1994, p. 1). While the mechanisms change, however, the goals remain relatively constant. From a managerial perspective, accountability “requires those with delegated authority to be answerable for producing outputs or the use of resources to achieve certain ends…. The values embodied in this sense of accountability are cost effectiveness, efficiency and managerial autonomy” (Sinclair 1995, p. 222).

There are two conceptual methods of studying accountability reported in the literature which might prove useful in workplace settings. The first, stemming from both economics and political science, which seems particularly relevant to workplace studies is the principal-agent theory. This theory “is premised on the observation that some individuals (principals) attempt to have their agendas carried out by other individuals (agents)” (Ebrahim 2003, p. 196). In microeconomics, this would be represented by attempts of business owners (principals) to determine whether workers and managers (agents) are working effectively. This leads to a definition of accountability as the principal’s “right to require an account” from the agent and also “the right to impose sanctions if the account or the actions accounted for are inadequate” (Leat 1988, cited in Ebrahim 2003, p. 196). Ebrahim argues this perspective has inherent limitations. First, he notes that there are problems when agents’ and principals’ interests are not perfectly aligned; this incongruence is typically managed through performance based
compensation and monitoring the agents’ activities, although neither method can ensure agents will not continue to act in their own interests to some extent. Second, he suggests that it matters whether accountability is experienced as a monitoring process, or as an enabling one. Focusing on “external means of ensuring accountability, such as monitoring measures, controls and laws” leads to ignoring internal means, such as integrity and mission, through which agents and principals may come to agreement on accountability (Ebrahim 2003, p. 197). He goes on to quote Fry, who notes that the key question from this perspective is not, “how can a principal enforce accountability?” but rather “how accountability can assist in framing a common script about organisational roles and expectations?” (Fry 1995, p. 182). Third, Ebrahim notes that principal-agent theory tends to focus on the agents’ requirements and downplay the principals’ influence, despite the fact that principals clearly influence the performance of their agents in many and variable ways, including imposing requirements without adequate understanding of front-line conditions:

In short, a principal-agent perspective contributes to our understanding of accountability by focusing attention on relationships between actors (principals and agents) and the strategies used by principals to have their agendas fulfilled. This perspective falls short, however, in addressing accountability problems arising from incongruent interests between principals and agents, internal rather than external mechanisms, the roles of principals in shaping agent performance, and ambiguities and conflict arising from multiple principals. (Ebrahim 2003, p. 199).

It seems that many of the shortcomings Ebrahim documents in the principal-agent perspective could be addressed using a qualitative research approach, as opposed to the more quantitative, survey-oriented approaches directed to managers which are commonly reported in such studies.

The second approach to accountability to some extent spans the process/product divide, and is discussed by Munro. He believes that “an analysis of the methods by which participants engage in accountability relationships” will provide the best insight into the concept of accountability in organisations (Munro 1996, p. 4, emphasis in the original); implicit in this statement is the need for observation of actual interactions. He talks about two key aspects of accountability, alignment and identity work. Alignment “reflects a concern over the ‘line’ which accounts, when considered together, offer a participant. For simplicity’s sake, you might consider this as the ‘story-line’, or ‘narrative’, told by individuals. However, he points out, it is important to note that
there is never just a single story-line in use: “Accounts involve an intricate, and continuous, process of embedding accounts in other accounts, one in which a multiplicity of readings is always possible” (Munro 1996, p. 4). Identity work “is concerned with the self-portrait that is being painted through a participant giving, and asking for, accounts. Again, in terms of identity, a multiplicity of readings are possible. However, some of these will be stabilized, or ruled out, through the story-lines that emerge out of the processes of alignment” (Munro 1996, p. 4).

Between the two, there is a “two-way flow”: “First, the ‘line’ which is being followed may be elicited precisely by a concern of participants to put up one form of identity, rather than another. Second, identity work helps set up the conditions for a stable alignment of accounts. And these together help set limits to interpretability, even if the limits are not always strict” (Munro 1996, p. 5).

There are a few studies of accountability from a pragmatic perspective which deal specifically with performance measurement systems, many of which occur in the management literature. It is not surprising that some attention has been paid to measurement in relation to accountability; measures, clearly, are one way to focus the managerial gaze on aspects of work which are deemed important. Or, as Munro puts it, “one important effect of measurements being set as targets is the creation of lines of ‘visibility’ into which participants are drawn by being held accountable—as individuals—for meeting these targets” (Munro 1996, p. 3). For example, Ahrens and Chapman investigate the role of accountability, which they define as “the demanding and giving of reasons for action” (2002, p. 152), in a restaurant chain which uses a complex standard set of performance measures to assess managers’ performance and to award bonuses. They state:

We observed that performance measurement systems held different meanings for different organisational members. Organisational members exercised discretion in their uses of performance measures; their ideas of legitimate organisational practices were shaped by performance measurement systems, but their perceived self-interest also lead them to selectively appeal to different measures at different times. (Ahrens & Chapman 2002, p. 152).

The relationship between performance monitoring and accountability has also been studied by psychologists. Lerner and Tetlock, in a review of psychological accountability research, describe
a laboratory study of performance monitoring in which intrinsic motivation to perform a task was inhibited if the surveillant revealed controlling intentions and/or a lack of trust. “When people perceive accountability as illegitimate,” they conclude, “such undesired effects as attitude polarization away from the advocated position, decline in intrinsic motivation, and excessive stress are all possible responses. Legitimacy is, however, a notoriously multidimensional concept and isolating its effects from overlapping constructs—power, expertise, trustworthiness, likeableness—has proven to be a daunting task” (Lerner & Tetlock 1999, p. 259). They go on to summarize:

Two decades of research no reveal that (a) only highly specialized subtypes of accountability lead to increased cognitive effort; (b) more cognitive effort is not inherently beneficial; it sometimes makes matters even worse; and (c) there is ambiguity and room for reasonable disagreement over what should be considered worse or better judgment when we place cognition in its social or institutional context. In short, accountability is a logically complex construct that interacts with characteristics of decision makers and properties of the task environment to produce an array of effects—only some of which are beneficial.” (Lerner & Tetlock 1999, p. 270)

Lerner and Tetlock note that the majority of the research they summarize was conducted in laboratory conditions, which cannot reproduce actual work conditions, where a complex set of factors influence behaviour. Their implication is that empirical work in work settings is needed.

In the management field, there are also authors who suggest there is a paucity of actual workplace studies about accountability (see for example Frink & Klimoski 1998; Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002). The work that has been done suggests that accountability is a complex concept, interlinked with a variety of other elements in the workplace. One study, by Thoms, Dose and Scott, suggests that where good interpersonal relationships exist, there are likely to be shared expectations for accountability, which will improve job satisfaction (2002, p. 311). Workers moreover also “often have accountability to multiple constituencies…the accountability requirement may have different effects, depending on the constituency” (Thoms, Dose & Scott, 2002, p. 309). In contrasting their results with other work in the field, these authors note that both positive and negative results have been observed in studies of accountability. On the one hand, “research has indicated that individuals who were held accountable to their supervisors for
their performance were more likely to be high performers, develop greater accuracy, and be more attentive to the needs of others” (Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002, p. 309). Similarly, Fry suggests that under ideal conditions, accountability may become an integrative force between workers and managers:

This perspective on accountability involves building a shared vision among principals and agents such that traditional relationships of authority and control break down and evolve into collaborations of collective responsibility for outcomes. From an agent’s perspective, the extent to which this intrinsic form of accountability is developed depends on the agent’s having a voice in the development of expectations, standards, and monitoring regimes; developing a congruence of intent with principals, such that conflicts of interest are worked through or minimized; and creating a history of exchange with the principal that is established on fairness and dignity” (Fry 1995, in Ebrahim 2003, p. 199-200).

On the other hand, research also suggests that increased accountability may result in increased stereotyping, increased stress, increased impression management and information manipulation, and wasted resources (Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002, p. 310). Other authors note that problems can occur when inappropriate expectations are enforced, when individual differences are ignored, or enforcement strategies for increased accountability are poorly designed (Frink and Klimoski 1998). One study in particular stands out in relation to the call centre and EPM research. Ferris and colleagues (1997) found that ambiguity in the job has been found to be negatively related to accountability; in a call centre setting where the quality/quantity dichotomy is a longstanding issue, and where targets and goals are often in conflict, this may clearly be problematic.

In the electronic performance measurement literature, the concept of fairness emerged in many studies. In accountability studies, the related concept of trust has been suggested to play a role in accountability relationships. If one extrapolates from the reported research, it seems that call centres are not well set up to improve employee attitudes about accountability: for example, it has been shown that frequent communication with supervisors and coworkers, and less frequent monitoring can increase trust and feelings of accountability (Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002, p. 312). The same authors also found that “workers who believe that coworkers and managers are aware of their work have higher job satisfaction than workers who do not believe so” (Thoms, Dose &
Scott 2002, p. 318). In a situation where workers believe supervisors cannot take into account key tasks which do not fit into the evaluation system, this seems likely to decrease satisfaction. Thoms, Dose and Scott also discuss the relationship between trust and accountability; they note that their study does not answer the question “does accountability lead to trust or does trust lead to accepting more accountability?”

Other management research compares and contrasts the multiple roles and types of accountability in the workplace. The role most relevant to my research is professional accountability, which “occurs where administrators perceive a duty to adhere to the standards of professional or expert groups of which they are a member” (Sinclair 1995, p. 223). This type of accountability values “expertise” and “professional integrity”, although the meanings of these terms might differ between individuals and between professions (Sinclair 1995, p. 229). Professional accountability is, of course, closely linked to professional identity and is a means of subtly enforcing the values of the group, to which individuals are acculturated during their education. It is a means of both asserting and protecting “a privileged and knowledgeable position in society” (Sinclair 1995, p. 229). Professional accountability may clash with organisational goals, however, if it does not fit well with organisational goals or culture. It is always interesting to ask “what accountability counts for whom and why?” (Sinclair 1995, p. 232).

As Ebrahim concludes, “In sum, accountability is highly contingent on relationships and on mechanisms put in place to ensure it” (2003, p. 203). The study of workplace relationships and performance measurement systems seems likely to provide some insight into this difficult concept, and it seems clear from the literature that there is relatively little qualitative field work-oriented research which has been conducted around the topic. “Accountability is about making the invisible visible” notes Munro (1996, p. 5). Ethnography, too, attempts to make visible those practices which are invisible, often because they are taken for granted within the culture, so a qualitative approach to studying accountability, such as that undertaken in this thesis, is a productive avenue for research.
2.5 Manifestations of Identity

The concept of identity is commonplace yet contested, and it is used often yet is not in well-defined in literatures relating to workplaces generally or call centres specifically. As Deschamps and Devos assert, "Few concepts are as polysemic as identity. The idea of identity appears in the first texts of Antiquity (the famous 'Know Thyself' of Delphi) and is used in both everyday language and scholarly discourses; it is also the concern of many scientific disciplines" (1998, p. 1). Because identity as a topic of study has been addressed so widely for so long, it is necessary to strictly limit the focus of interest for the purposes of this thesis. This section of the literature review will concentrate on a small selected body of works on the social construction of identity as background for the way I position identity in my study. Because the interaction between the ways workers see themselves and the ways in which they are constructed within the information systems with which they work is an important element of my work, I then look at work that discusses the concepts of digital identity, or the ways that identity is constructed in digital environments. Finally, I turn to a similarly selective review of studies that examine different kinds of workplace identities, including works that specifically deal with call centres.

2.5.1 Socially Constructed Identity

From a social constructivist perspective, identities, by their nature, are dynamic and changeable: "identity is a work in progress, a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being re-appraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meanings in a society" (Taylor & Spencer 2004, p. 4). Richard Jenkins puts it more simply when he says that, “as a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity—rooted in language—to know ‘who’s who’ (and hence “what’s what’))" (2008, p. 5). He argues that using the word ‘social’ in connection with identity is in fact redundant, since identifying ourselves and others is “a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation” (2008, p. 17). In his opinion, “one’s identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular and plural—is never a final or settled matter” (Jenkins 2008, p. 17). There is a growing body of work that focuses on what is now often
referred to as “identity work”, or the efforts that people put into developing and maintaining identities. As Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock point out, to call the activity of making meanings about oneself work “is to call attention to it as involving purposes, strategies, and, sometimes, the overcoming of resistance” (1996, p. 115). They, too, stress the communal nature of this process: in their view, “identity making” is “something that people do together” (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996, p. 114). Phillips, too, writes of identity as a process that requires self in interaction with others when he states that identity is “the negotiated performance of meaningful relationships” (2009, p. 303). Furthermore, identities are fundamentally important to people, as "differences in the ways we define ourselves affect the ways we live our lives, what we find meaningful, and how we understand the world and our place in it" (Schwenk 2002, p. 1). Or, as management scholar Fombrun puts it, identity “is more or less functional—it helps organize the sense-making experiences of individuals” (2002, p. xvii).

Identity in this way of thinking might be considered an activity, one in which people engage both consciously and unconsciously in an ongoing way, influenced by (to use the terminology of activity theory) the rules, community and roles that are relevant within the individual’s multiple and changing identity contexts. An early and influential theorist whose work is often cited in the identity literature is Erving Goffman, whose performance metaphor brings the active role individuals play in creating and managing their constructions of self to the fore. In “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1959) Goffman suggests that people identify with particular roles at different times. He uses the notions of “frontstage” and “backstage” presentations of self to place emphasis on the concept of an ‘audience’ for what I would term identity performances, and develops a model that suggests individuals actively try to project their own sense of their role in order to influence others’ conceptions of them, even while other factors (things like the setting within a community, which may include asymmetrical power relations between viewer and viewed) may reinforce or contradict their attempts. Although Goffman’s theories have had both adherents and detractors over the years, the general idea that individuals behave in ways they hope will influence others’ perceptions of them is widely

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11 Terms like identity construction or identity management are often used to mean the same thing; Identity work was first defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson to refer to the ways people are “engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2003, p. 1165).
accepted and echoed by many others. For example, more recently, Fearon contends that “strategy and choice” are “fundamental to, and inextricably bound up in, processes of the social construction of identity” (1999, p. 31).

Because identity is a social process, it is also a situated one. Garfinkel was one of the first to assert this point; when he termed gender identity a “situated accomplishment” (1967, p. 121). This theme of contextuality runs through much of the identity literature. Watson, for example, writes that identity work “projects ‘outwardly’ as well as ‘inwardly’ and involves both “the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives” (2008, p. 129). Other work looks at the specific contexts in which identities are formed. Looking specifically at organisational studies, for example, Kenny and colleagues study the ways in which organisations seek to encourage workers to identify as organisational members, with the expectation that employees who identify strongly with the organisation may be “more pliable and productive” (Kenny, Whittle & Willmott 2011, p. 8). An often cited article by Alvesson and Willmott looks at the ways organisations attempt to achieve control “through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses” (2002, p. 628) and concludes that individuals’ ability to bring other discourses to bear based on life experiences means that identities are often resistant to this kind of attempt at manipulation. The idea that identities are constructed through and within situated discourses is also put forward by Thomas and Linstand, who find that middle managers identities “are not only affected by but also affect the social and political discourses making up management” (2002, p. 75). Similarly, Musson and Duberley find that supervisors often draw on resources that contradict those produced or promoted by the organisation (2006), while Symon and Clegg’s (2005) study of information system developers also found these workers to actively engage in constructing their work-related identities. Jenkins reminds us that “identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations” (2008, p. 45), a reminder that is particularly relevant in a workplace setting.

The notion of identity as a social, interactive construct is a common one, yet it is important to note that the relevant interactions do not necessarily have to be directly between humans, and they do not occur only in direct social relations (Kilger 1994) but may occur in mediated relations using a tool such as a computer or networked system. Indeed, as digital technologies
become increasingly common as a means of communication at home and at work, it is likely that changes in the ways identities are established and maintained will occur. The section below looks at literature relating to the emerging topic of digital identity, then turns to the other manifestations of identity that are relevant to my subject area, the various constructions of workplace identities.

2.5.2 Digital identity

It should be noted that while information and communication technologies offer the potential for changes to the expression of identity, this relationship should not be perceived as deterministic (Viseu 2003). Rather, as Barnard-Wills points out, “identity is a social phenomenon, and how we decide to build it into technology is a political question” (2012, p. 9). Digital technologies are defined by their code (Lessig 1999); code is conceived and written by people; further, it is not immutably fixed but may be altered or rewritten to meet changing requirements. Nonetheless, once a system is established, it does present a particular context and set of constraints within which users must function. It is useful to remember, however, that the ways in which these constraints are interpreted, and on occasion, worked around, by users, means that the uses of a system may at times vary significantly from what those who wrote the code might have expected.

The term digital identity or digital persona is used differently by different people with different interests. For example, “digital identity” is often used interchangeably with “single sign-on” (Grayson 2002). The term ‘digital persona’ is commonly used by software engineers and computer scientists to refer to a user’s online profile, or to products or programs which act as agents to establish and/or protect personal identity online during economic transactions. However, it is Roger Clarke who first articulated the concept in a 1993 conference paper. Clarke originally defined the digital persona as “the model of the individual established through the collection, storage and analysis of data about that person” and went on to note that “dataveillance techniques operating on the digital persona provide an economically efficient means of exercising control over the behaviour of individuals and societies” (Clarke 1993). He further develops his idea and his definition in a subsequent paper, where he states “the digital persona is a model of an individual’s public personality based on data and maintained by transactions, and
intended for use as a proxy for the individual” (Clarke 1994). He goes on to say that the “ability to create a persona may be vested in the individual, or in other people or organisations, or in both” and, depending on who creates the persona and for what purpose, the individual represented may or may not have control, or even knowledge of, the resultant construct. He also points out that:

a digital persona is a model of an individual, and hence a simplified representation of only some aspects of the reality. The efficacy of the model depends on the extent to which it captures those features of the reality which are relevant to the model’s use. As with any modeling activity, it suffers the weaknesses of the reductionist approach: individuals are treated not holistically, but as though a relatively simple set of data structures was adequate to represent their pertinent characteristics. (Clarke 1994)

In discussing digital personas, Clarke makes a distinction that is particularly useful in considering workplace identities. He suggests that there are two kinds of identity that can be socially constructed: “imposed” and “projected” identities. In Clarke’s work, an “imposed persona” is created when outside individuals or systems attempt to fix a particular identity construction onto another specific individual, while “projected personas” are those the individual chooses to present. Although Clarke’s model was devised with the digital identification context clearly in focus, the concept of imposed and projected digital personas transfers well to other contexts. In other work, we have used the concepts of imposed and projected identity model to look at identity and identification in face-to-face service transactions. In this thesis, it is useful to highlight the contrast between the ways organisational managers, or perhaps programmers, choose and impose a set of attributes deemed relevant for identification and evaluation purposes, and the ways in which workers attempt to project themselves to customers, co-workers, and supervisors. Multiple projected identities might be used by an individual depending on the context; people often, for example, attempt to project a particular version of self with peers that may vary significantly from the identity they choose for the boss. A projected identity is, in fact, a kind of identity performance such as Goffman describes, during which an individual actively attempts to influence the way another person perceives him or her in a specific context. An imposed persona, in contrast, is one created by others beyond the control of the individual. The danger of such imposed personas is that they are unlikely to provide a full, rounded representation of an individual, yet may be used in effect to substitute for the actual person.
While it is true that for some purposes a full representation is not required, there is also a concern with imposed personae that those elements selected by others as part of a specific representation may or may not reflect the elements that the individual feels are important or representative of themselves for the specified purpose. In the case of digital representations, actions which are invisible to the computer, no matter how important, will not be represented. Individuals may thus be reduced to a set of recordable patterns (Lyon 1994). These patterns, or compilations of data, have also been termed digital individuals (Agre 1994), virtual selves (Kilger 1994), and data shadows (Westin 1967). These descriptions of projected and imposed personae are, of course, ideal types. In many situations and systems, the reality is that digital representations are hybrids, a combination of external imposition and self-projection, where a system prescribes the attributes that may form a part of the representation, and the individual has some control over the content of the attribute fields, such as when filling in an online form.

Clarke makes the point, and this arguably still holds generally true, that it is primarily members of particular (often subordinated) populations which are subject to monitoring via their digital persona. He cites social welfare recipients and government employees. Within a call centre, it is the front-line workers, the bottom of the hierarchy, who are monitored. Groups in both situations might reasonably be considered among the more vulnerable in the system.12 These are also individuals who are least likely to be in a position to dispute which of their possible characteristics, as represented by data, are indeed “pertinent” for the purpose at hand. Fewer red flags tend to rise at the thought of work monitoring than do at the thought of government monitoring of citizens, or company monitoring of individuals who may or may not have chosen to have any formal interactions with that business. This stems in part from the common assumption of “employment at will”, which states more or less that people enter employment of their own free will and are similarly free to leave by quitting if conditions do not meet their expectations. Particularly in the case of low-level, front-line workers, this assumption is problematic as it fails to take into account the power differential between employer and employee. Nonetheless, being monitored in a workplace where your persona will be routinely

12 As monitoring spreads to other white-collar workplaces--and it has been shown in a variety of studies to be doing just that (e.g. Shulman 2001), it will be interesting to study how different groups accustomed to increasing levels of autonomy in their work respond.
imposed and compared with an ideal which you have had no input into constructing, and when you will potentially be penalized for failing to conform to, or exceed the ideal, has a daily impact on a large number of people. Being looked over for promotion because your numbers don’t measure up despite being known amongst your peers as a good coach and conscientious worker is not so far removed from being turned down for a loan due to errors in your credit record due to poor data matching.

In searching for a framework in which to examine the implications of electronic performance measurement on call centre workers, and to facilitate an exploration of the ways in which electronically mediated transactional data is used to measure work and evaluate workers, the concept of digital identity discussed above appears to have some explanatory power. Typical automatic call distribution systems have the capacity to generate ~200 statistics about work and workers in real time, and when these systems are integrated within a wider performance measurement system, a worker’s every action can be monitored and every word spoken on the telephone can be recorded, easily and inexpensively (Schulman 2001). Using Clarke’s terminology, the practice of using these surveillance technologies and the statistics they generate at an individual level in effect creates an “imposed digital persona” composed of those numbers and details deemed to have significance for the organisation. This compilation of statistics and records of network interactions can have considerable consequences for workers who are judged by them during performance evaluations, yet workers typically have little formal control over, and limited access to, the information collected about them. While they do, to a degree, control the values recorded about them, in that they are at least nominally in control of their actions which in turn generate these values, they have no input into which attributes are monitored or ‘counted’ as significant. Similarly, front-line supervisors often have little if any discretion in choosing which statistics should be generated, which ones to take into account, or how they are interpreted during performance reviews.

2.5.3 Workplace identities

While the concept and language of digital identity provides useful context and potential for insight into the ways identities are constructed in call centres, when workers talk about the subject of identity, they tend to talk about identity in a more personal and colloquial sense, as
‘who they are’, or at least, in a work setting, ‘who they are at work’. There is a body of literature, primarily in the fields of sociology, organisational behaviour and organisational psychology, which looks specifically at the nature of professional and organisational identity, and also team identity, which corresponds in some respects to what I have termed peer identity. Call centre researchers, too, have begun to draw on the concept of identity, although call centre work most often deals with the issue of identity less as a focus and more as a peripheral construct. The following section briefly highlights some work in the areas of organisational, professional and peer identity that are relevant to my study.

Organisational identity is significant at a macro level within a company “because it provides meaning, stability, and distinctiveness (Moingeon & Soenen 2002, p. 1). Moingeon and Soenen provide an interesting five-level model of organisational identity that includes the “professed identity”, or what an organisation collectively professes about itself; the “projected identity” the organisation puts forward via communication to specific audiences; the “experienced identity” that organisational members collectively experience from within the organisation; the “manifested identity”, or historical identity that has characterized the organisation over time; and the “attributed identity” that audiences ascribe to the organisation (2002, p. 4). This model is helpful in that it pulls apart the unitary concept of organisational identity to show the different factors, at different levels, that go into creating an organisational identity in the eyes of both insiders—workers—and outsiders—customers, investors, and members of the public. While this thesis will go on to define organisational identity primarily from a workers’ perspective, or in Moingeon and Soenen’s terms, the experienced organisational identity, it is useful to remember that just as workers have multiple identities, projected and imposed, and targeted at different audiences, so, too, does the organisation itself.

Professional identity is an interesting concept in that perceptions of it have changed over time. Thus early sociological studies of professional identity tend to define it in connection with jobs that have traditionally been considered part of “professions,” i.e doctors, lawyers, and so on. This is reflected, suggests Faber, by Friedson’s “professional dominance model” that “assumes that professionals have subject-area expertise that elicits credibility, authority, and social power and prestige” and that professionals are “highly educated experts” (2002, p. 322). More recent work, reviewed here, looks more generally at the social construction of professional work in a range of workers which includes the traditional professions but extends beyond to service work. For
example, Zabusky, when studying computer technicians, noted that they too identified themselves as professionals, in the sense of having “specialized knowledge combined with commitment and dedication to do whatever it took to get the job done” (Zabusky 1997, p. 149). Zabusky talks about professional identity in terms of the way the computer technicians she spent time studying self-defined it: as “a person who does their job well, no matter what their job is” (p. 147). Brown and Lewis suggest that professionals “may best be regarded as reflexive appropriators of organisational discourses in pursuit of valued work objectives and preferred identities” (2011, p. 886), a formulation which provides sufficient scope for considering a range of workers within the context of a “professional” worker. Adams and colleagues position professional identity as a form of social identity, noting that as such it involves group interactions in the workplace and relates to how people compare and differentiate themselves from other professional groups (Adams et al. 2006, p. 56). Clarke and co-authors also write about the social nature of professional identity. When looking at managers in a large UK engineering firm, these authors document the occasionally conflicted nature of identity narratives at their site. They describe the ways “individuals broker and adapt to their competing demands as they negotiate conflicts” between professional roles, and call for more research to investigate “how common antagonisms are in work identity narratives” (2009, p. 347).

When we turn to the idea of professional identity in call centre work, it is important to note that in general, call centre work is not often highly valued in Western cultures. This, however, is a reflection of the kinds of work we as a society prioritize rather than a reflection of the skills required to do the job. The degree to which an occupation is publicly esteemed “is a product of particular cultural, ideological, and market conditions”; messages about the value of the jobs we do are what Fineman calls “first-line identity messages” that workers must face and work into their own narratives of their organisational roles and individual value as workers (2008, p. 5). Not surprisingly, most of the small body of call centre work dealing with the concept of professional identity either centrally or peripherally has been conducted at call centres staffed by workers with professional credentials in fields such as medicine or social work. In particular, there have been studies of the British NHS Direct (National Health Service) call centres, either on its own or compared to other tele-nursing sites such as Health-info CLSC in Quebec, Canada or a similar service in Sweden (e.g. Collin-Jacques & Smith 2005; Goode & Greatbatch 2005; Valsecchi, Andersson & Smith 2007).
One very interesting piece that focuses more directly on identity in call centres is work by Pritchard and Symon (2011), who look specifically at the ways in which call centre CSRs, who are not part of a separate socially-defined professional group, characterize their professional identities. They found that workers linked their sense of professional identity to their perception of their work as complex, valuable, and unique within the organisation (Pritchard & Symon 2011, 434). They conclude by suggesting that common outsider perceptions of call centre work and standard academic conceptions of professional identity should both be tempered by the realization that these topics are contested and locally constructed (434).

I have found relatively little work dealing with the ways in which peer identity is affected by monitoring in the workplace. The ways that workers’ inter-relations with colleagues and peers alter is touched upon in some work dealing with control and resistance. So, for example, Bain and colleagues (2002) discuss the ways in which staff members support others’ attempts to elude the system, or undermine these attempts in their study of resistance to monitoring. They suggest that creating individualistic climates where competition is encouraged makes it increasingly likely that workers will attempt to achieve competitive advantage. This tendency is tempered when there is a consensus that management’s requirements for work thresholds are unreasonable, creating an ‘us and them’ dynamic. Similarly, Botan and Vorvoreanu (2005) talk about concerns workers’ expressed to them in their study of surveillance experiences regarding the possibility that colleagues might use the surveillance systems against them by reporting infractions of rules or attempts to ‘dodge the system’ to managers in order to gain an advantage.

2.6 Conclusion: Open questions in the literatures

There are four primary literatures reviewed for this project: literature discussing call centre research, performance measurement literature, particularly that addressing electronic performance measurement, literature about accountability, and work discussing identity issues, including a small body of work discussing the concept of the digital identity, or persona. What follows is a brief summary of some perceived gaps in these literatures that my work will address.

The literature identified as key to my research comes from a variety of disciplines, including industrial relations, sociology, psychology, management studies, economics, and political
science. There is relatively little cross-referencing across disciplinary boundaries, or across topics. For example, while one might expect call centre literature to draw on work studying electronic performance measurement, this happens relatively rarely. Integrating some of this work in the course of my research will be one contribution to the field.

Within the call centre literature, ICTs are central to the way call centres are defined and call centre work takes place, but “it seems that there is still more work to be done in exploring the history of these technologies, the intentions that informed their design and the outcomes (intended and unintended) associated with their utilization” (Russell 2008, p. 199). While my research does not specifically concern itself with technological history or design, it provides a workers’ perspective on the outcomes of using these technologies. At the same time, call centre technologies are firmly embedded in a set of management practices and processes that work with, and sometimes against, the functionality of the IT systems. The managerial role in call centres generally, and in control systems more specifically, is less fully explicated in the overall literature than the role of front line workers. While my research is focused on the front lines, it nonetheless situates worker experiences within the activity system of the workplace, where not just the tools—the IT systems—but the management structures around them are all taken into account.

Russell notes that in a literature that is so often informed by labour process theory (e.g. Braverman 1974; Edwards 1979; Knights and Willmott 1990) there is relatively little attention paid to skills, de-skilling, or skills trends, with the notable exception of Ellis and Taylor’s 2006 study of British Gas’ transition from clerical centre to call centre (Russell 2008, p. 199). While I think he is neglecting work by Koch-Schulte and Buchanan, or Belt and colleagues that I have discussed earlier in this review in making this assessment, it is undeniably true that the area of worker skills—both their acquisition and recognition—is important to further explore. It is also an issue that has a clear connection to the question of the ways workers see themselves, or as I discuss it, in terms particularly of their professional and organisational identities. While my approach is not one of labour process theory, my research does have contributions to make through a description of everyday call centre skills and through the insights front-line workers provide into their perceptions of their own job skills, those of peers, and their sense of the ways in which these skills are or are not useful to them, or valued in the organisation as a whole.
Another gap is around the topic of accountability. There is considerable research discussing the workplace conditions which facilitate or negate accountability, some of which also relates to the impact of traditional performance monitoring on individuals’ acceptance of accountability requirements. However, there is little discussion of the ways that accountability is affected when electronic performance measures are implemented (although accountability is often implied when discussing performance measures) either in those literatures discussing EPM in general or call centres in particular. Some of the accountability literature specifically suggests that monitoring for the stated purpose of control, or monitoring when job requirements are ambiguous, are likely to lead to negative consequences, a finding that is clearly useful to explore within a call centre setting. These conditions are certainly present in my research sites and provide an opportunity to explore any effects that may be detectable. Finally, relatively little accountability research has been qualitative, and various authors (e.g. Lerner & Tetlock 1999; Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002; Sinclair 1995) have called for more research located within workplaces, in order to study the complex set of conditions and practices which are likely to affect feelings about, and practices of, workplace accountabilities.

Finally, in the area of identity, while there are large literatures in and across multiple disciplines which discuss identity as a variable social construct, these, according to Barnard-Wills (2012), primarily discuss identity in terms of subjectivity, or the ways in which identities are created and “the ways in which individuals come to recognize themselves as a subject” (p. 36). Little attention, however, has been paid in the literature to “the way that identity itself is articulated in particular contexts—to the form as opposed to the content” (Barnard-Wills 2012, p. 36). Yet the purpose of many identification systems is essentially to fix (and therefore privilege) forms of identity (often using data doubles) which are permeable to surveillance techniques (Barnard-Wills 58). The individual’s interior sense of self is not easily surveilled; call volumes are.

If, in fact, as Jenkins argues, “individual and collective identity are as much an interactional product of ‘external’ identification by others as of ‘internal’ self-identification” (2008, p. 200) and identity is, in fact, “produced and reproduced both in discourse—narrative, rhetoric and representation—and in the practical, often very material, consequences of identification” (p. 201) then listening to what people say about identity, and watching the ways they perform identity, is a viable method of studying identity. Sveningsson and Alvesson say that the “understanding of specific processes and situations of identity construction in and around work and organisations is
…somewhat poor” and suggest this as an area for further research. They suggest that “we need to listen carefully to the stories of those we claim to understand and to study their interactions, the discourses and roles they are constituted by or resist—and to do so with sensitivity for context” (2003, p. 1190). And finally, Clarke et al. (2009) call for further investigation into the conflicts that arise between and within identity constructs in workplaces as workers negotiate organisational demands that may carry inherent contradictions. My call centre sites provide a fertile ground for examining these areas of identity research where others have identified a need for further investigation.
Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this thesis to investigate the ways that identity and accountability are revealed and inter-relate in two electronically-monitored Canadian financial services call centres. Methods were chosen based on an evaluation of the goals and purposes of the research. This research focuses on the nature of workers’ experiences in their intensively-monitored environment, and intends to provide a dense, richly-contextualised description of these experiences. An ethnographic approach seemed most appropriate to provide the data to achieve this goal. Consequently, the qualitative methods of participant observation, interviews, and document analysis were used to generate data for this study, and descriptions of these methods as they were applied during the research process will be provided. The two theoretical frameworks within which these methods were utilized are activity theory, and grounded theory, and the nature, advantages, and limitations of these frameworks will also be discussed here. Finally, this chapter will discuss the research design of this study, including the initial research questions, site selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical concerns.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

3.1.1 Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

I have pursued a qualitative approach to this research for a number of reasons, several of which are well described by Strauss and Corbin under the heading “Why do qualitative research?”:

Some areas of study naturally lend themselves more to qualitative types of research, for instance, research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons’ experiences with a phenomenon….Qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known. It can be used to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known. Also, qualitative methods
can give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods. (1998, p. 19)

In other words, qualitative data emphasize people’s ‘lived experience,’ and are thus “fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives…and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 10, emphasis in original). While qualitative methods are best suited to my research goals, there are also well established limitations to a qualitative approach. Primary among these limitations, and perhaps particularly in student work, is the fact that findings are necessarily based on the researcher’s ability to interpret her observations. Particularly when using participant observation, the researcher is the primary data-collecting instrument, and this brings with it the dangers of bias and pre-disposition.

3.1.1.1 Ethnography

Ethnography has been described as a research approach “in which the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting during a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational data” (Wallen & Fraenkel 1991, cited in Creswell 1994, p. 11). Very simply, ethnography is an approach to observing and developing interpretations of human behaviour in an attempt to understand a cultural world from the point of view of the members of that culture. And a culture, reduced to its basic components, is essentially a group of people with the same learned behaviour patterns and shared values. While one might most often associate anthropological studies of ‘foreign’ cultures with the term ethnography, there is a well-established tradition of workplace ethnography which posits that workplaces, too, are sites with distinct cultures. An ethnography focuses on developing a detailed picture of a culture by structured observation of material items, individual behaviours and performances, as well as attempting to discern ideas and arrangements that exist only in people's heads (Schwimmer 2003). Or as Miles and Huberman describe this latter task, the ethnographer seeks to “uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular (work) settings come to understand, account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p.
The “material items” primarily of interest in this research are the information systems that provide the platform for work, and its monitoring and evaluation. But the focus is not on the technologies themselves but rather, “the way in which technologies…relate to how work is understood and ‘gets done’” (Strelitz 2003, p. 35). The workplace ethnography seeks to provide rich accounts of the relationships and practices around the technologies. There are three important advantages to the ethnographic process, according to Morey: “(a) more intimate contact with subjects, (b) first hand knowledge of subjects and context, (c) easier identification of practitioners’ problems” (1986, p. 236).

The primary research techniques used in an ethnographic approach are participant observation and key informant interviewing, both of which were used in my study. The advantage of ethnographic methods over surveys and experiments is that they provide the researcher with the opportunity to note the natural context within which behaviour is played out, and develop a rich and context-specific account of the field site. Limitations of the ethnographic method are similar to those of all qualitative data collection, including the likelihood of nonrepresentative sampling, difficulty in generalizing results from one site to a larger context, theoretical biases which may affect data collection including interview design, personal biases, and ethical considerations. Ethical considerations are particularly important to consider in workplace situations with frontline workers, both to ensure truly voluntary participation, uncoerced by management, and to protect participants from any possible repercussions due to their participation.

3.1.1.2 Grounded Theory

At the outset of my field research, I followed a grounded theory approach. As Strauss and Corbin define it,

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 23)
During research conducted within a call centre for purposes outside of my Ph.D. program, a recurring topic arose during interviews with call centre workers: the practice of electronic monitoring and the implications it posed for the way they did their work, and the way they felt about it. Thus, the genesis of the thesis arose from data collected originally for another purpose altogether; identity and accountability emerged as often-discussed categories during iterative data collection and coding for this previous project on job-related training software. Subsequently, I decided to pursue that data trail for my own research, and was fortunate in being able to collect data concurrently for both the original project and my thesis, with permission from my participants. Thus, in one sense my research is well aligned with a pure approach to grounded data collection, in that the central categories were not preconceived or imposed but came organically from the rich data set provided during the fieldwork. In another sense, however, my work has been conducted more in the spirit of grounded theory than following the sometimes rigid methodological processes that have emerged around it in practice. In addition, a pure grounded theory approach often has as its goal the generation of theory, which is not a goal of my work. However, the iterative and organic methods of data collection and analysis as specified in the grounded theory approach provide a structured, established method with which to conduct thorough and reflective exploratory research. Grounded theory also provides a useful way to think about and conceptualize data, and, at the coding stage, it provides some specific techniques to help prevent researcher bias from intruding into the results (as will be discussed below). It is also, as Orlikowski notes, able to “produce accurate and useful results by incorporating the complexities of the organisational context into an understanding of the phenomenon, rather than simplifying and ignoring them. While a purist might argue that one cannot be using grounded theory if no theory will be generated, the idea of a using grounded approach for data collection and analysis in what is primarily a descriptive ethnographic study is not unprecedented (see, for example, Becker 1993).

3.1.1.3 Activity Theory

Grounded theory encourages approaches firmly rooted in the context of the research to reveal the lived reality of participants. One promising theoretical approach which has been proposed to help researchers and designers to address questions of system design and use in context is activity
Activity theory has increasingly been attracting attention among information technology designers and work practice researchers internationally. At its core, as it has been taken up in these fields, is the basic premise that information technology and work practices can only be adequately understood, and therefore effectively designed, in the context of the larger social or organisational system in which they are embedded. As such, activity theory has been used in studies centering on technology introduction (Bellamy 1996; Bødker 1996), interface design (Bødker 1990; Kaptelinin & Nardi 2006), technology-mediated communication in work and education (Heeren & Lewis 1997; Lewis 1997), and technology mediated, work-related learning (Favorin & Kuutti 1996; Hart-Landsberg, Braunger, Reder, & Cross 1993) to list only a few. There have also been a number of attempts to explain activity theory and relate it to the fields of information research, Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) (for example, see Kaptelinin & Nardi 2012; Kaptelinin, Kuutti, & Bannon 1995; Kuutti 1991, 1996). In all of these cases, activity theory permits researchers to discuss the roles and constraints of information systems within the complex organisational contexts within which they function, which is a goal of my proposed research.

Activity theory is not a theory in the strictest sense of the term. Essentially, it provides a “set of basic principles which constitute a general conceptual system which can be used as a foundation for more specific theories” (Kaptelinin, Kuutti, & Bannon 1995, p. 191). It is perhaps most useful to think of it as a framework rather than a theory, and indeed, as Kuutti (1996, p. 25) defines it: “Activity Theory is a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as developmental processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time.” This definition emphasizes the dynamic nature of human practices, which have historical origins, present characteristics, and future potentials. It also draws attention to the necessary linkage between individual and social factors which together comprise human practice; individuals function in a social environment, and are motivated by, and informed through, the social setting in which human actions take place.

When discussing what activity theory is, it is useful to specify also what it is not: the activity framework is not in itself a research method. As Engeström notes, activity theory doesn’t offer “ready-made techniques and procedures” for research; rather, its conceptual tools must be “concretized according to the specific nature of the object under scrutiny” (as quoted in Nardi 1996, p. 8). It provides a structured way to look at a field research setting, be it a workplace, a
family, or a school, to use examples of domains to which activity theory has been applied. Within the particular standpoint of activity theory, a variety of methods have been or may be used, particularly ethnographic methods, and case study approaches. Generally, then, “Activity theory offers a set of perspectives on human activity and a set of concepts for describing that activity” (Nardi 1996, p. 8). Data to permit the descriptions to be applied to a specific setting may be collected in a variety of ways considered appropriate to that setting.

There are three core concepts of activity theory which make it so potentially relevant to research into work practices in conjunction with information systems (Kuutti 1991). First and foremost, activity theory posits whole activities as the basic units of analysis. The behavioural and social sciences have always suffered from a dichotomy between the individual and the social. If social systems are studied as a unit of analysis, it is almost inevitable that human agency will be subsumed; if an individual is considered to be the unit of analysis, it is difficult to maintain contextuality. Social systems are too big, but individual actions without context are meaningless (Kuutti 1991, p. 531). This has been addressed occasionally in studies by arbitrarily imposing limits and terming that which falls within those limits the study’s ‘context,’ but this reduces the possibility that meaningful theory can be generated from the results. Activity theory offers one solution--an intermediate concept, which is the minimal meaningful context for individual actions. This concept is better defined than an arbitrarily limited context, but more manageable than a whole social system: the activity. Leontiev clarifies the definition of activity: “The real function of this unit is to orient the subject in the world of objects. In other words, activity is not a reaction or aggregate of reactions, but a system with its own structure, its own internal transformations, and its own development” (Leontiev 1981, p. 46). The idea that there is one “fundamental type” of context, called an activity, leads to the contention that it is pointless to look at human behaviour in social situations using a smaller unit of analysis, since without the basic context of the entire activity, it is not possible to truly understand the phenomenon (Kuutti 1991). For my research, while the initial research focus is on individual front-line workers, activity theory provides a way to extend that focus to the organisational setting in a precise, structured manner.

Secondly, activity theory situates activities in the context of their own history and development. In order for differences between individuals, groups of actors or work practices to be understood, it is necessary to analyse the historical development that has led to their existence. Activities and
their elements are under constant development, which is uneven and non-linear. In the context of systems design, in particular, which often seeks to intervene or alter an activity by providing new tools, knowledge of why the work practice exists in its present form can be vital information.

Finally, activity theory provides the key idea of mediation. Relations within an activity are not direct, but are mediated by various artifacts: tools, instruments, signs, procedures, machines, methods, laws, forms of work organisation, accepted practices, etc. These artifacts have been created with a purpose and history, are transformed as the activity has developed, and carry with them a particular culture. Further, humans have the capacity to control their behavior by using and creating artifacts. In my work, the information system in general and the monitoring components in particular are easy to cast in the role of mediating tool or artifact. The perspective this provides, in which it is incumbent that there be a human subject and some sort of object between which the computer mediates, leads us away from the notion that the system is alone in imposing work constraints, but rather encourages a more holistic view that incorporates the workers, the organisation and its culture, and the goals of the workplace.

3.1.1.4 The Activity System Model: Elaborating the Framework

Vygotsky’s original ideas provided the genesis for what has become known as activity theory, but of the several authors who have worked with his ideas in the ensuing years (e.g. Bruner, Ilyenkov, Leontiev, Luria) it was Yrjö Engeström who took the ideas beyond individuals in relationships and formally explicated and modeled the relationships of the larger activity system (Holt & Morris 1993, p. 98). Engeström’s activity system model (see figure 3.1) is pervasive in studies of technology using activity theory (e.g. Favorin & Kuutti 1996; Lewis 1997; Georg 2011).

Engeström builds on the core concept that an “activity” is a minimal unit of analysis, which he defines as “systems of collaborative human practice” which generates a continuously emerging context (1988, p. 30). In other words, context does not consist of preset conditions to which an individual responds, but rather is dynamic and transformative. He writes that an activity system “integrates the subject, the object, and the instruments (material tools as well as signs and symbols)” and “comprises the individual practitioner, the colleagues and co-workers of the
workplace community, the conceptual and practical tools, and the shared objects as a unified dynamic whole” (Engeström 1991, p. 126).

**Figure 3.1: Engström’s Activity Triangle (1987)**

“A conceptual model of the activity system” Engeström contends, “is particularly useful when one wants to make sense of the seemingly individual and accidental disturbances, deviations and
innovations occurring in the daily practice of workplaces. What motivates the actions taken by practitioners in these problematic situations? In more general terms, what makes activity systems change and develop?” (1991, p. 127). He represents the relations that comprise an activity system in a triangle-shaped model, which consists in turn of a number of triangles. At the top is “the basic subject-instrument (mediator)-object relationship, which comes from developmental psychology and the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues” (Cole 1995, p. 113). The “subject” is either an individual or group seeking to fulfill goals or motives through action. “Instruments” can be defined as means (tools, concepts, theories) that mediate the subjects’ activity toward the “object” which may be a material thing, or something less tangible (a plan) or intangible (a common idea). Transforming the object into an outcome motivates the existence of an activity (Kaptelinin, Kuutti, & Bannon 1995, p. 27). At the bottom of the triangle, “community” consists of those who share a set of social meanings (Holt & Morris 1993, p. 98), “rules” refer to explicit and/or implicit norms and conventions which constrain actions, and “division of labour” refers to task specialization by individuals or groups in the community. An action exists only in relation to the entire triangle, with tools, rules and division of labour in the role of mediators between subject, object and community (Hart-Landsberg, Braunger, Reder & Cross 1993, p. 6). As Favorin and Kuutti describe the process, an activity:

consists of three main parts: the active subject enacting the transformation, the object to be transformed and the community that shares this object. Furthermore, human activity is mediated so that the structure contains other essential elements mediating the relations between the main parts. Thus, a subject uses tools (material or knowledge) in transforming the object of work. A set of tacit and explicit rules covers the relationship between a subject and a community, and there is a certain division of labor in a community with respect to the transformation process of the object.” (Favorin & Kuutti 1996, p.111-112)

It is important to stress that the activity system is not a static entity, a conclusion one might reach based on the apparent stability of the model. The concept of continuous transformation is central to Engeström’s characterization of activity. Changes to one element in the system affect all the others, either directly or indirectly; hence, the system is in continuous transformation. As a system is acted upon by other systems, and changes become internalized within the original
system in response, contradictions and tensions are created. Resolutions create new conflicts, in an expansive cycle.

One of the strengths of activity theory is its stress on contextuality, which makes it important to explore the way the theory poses context. Activity theory both defines the elements which comprise the context of an activity, and at the same time, states that activities are situated and cannot be understood in the absence of that context. This is a relational view: The various components of an activity system do not exist in isolation from each other, but are “constantly constructed, renewed, and transformed as outcome and cause of human life” (Cole 1995, p. 113). Context in activity theory is not a “container” for behaviour, untouched by human actions, nor is it context as contained solely within interpersonal interaction. Lave summarizes the shortcomings of both of these views of context by declaring that “one has system without individual experience, the other experience without the system” (Lave 1988, p. 150). Rather, “activity theory views all mental processes as being situated, because it asserts that individual cognition always takes place in, and is responsive to, socially created activities” (Smith 1994, p. 181). In other words, it is necessary to understand how human behaviour contributes to changes in activity systems and how particular systems of activity contribute to changes in individuals (Cole 1995, p. 114). Furthermore, “an activity system does not exist in a vacuum” (Engeström 1991, p. 128), but rather within a network of other interacting activity systems. Activities may be linked through a common object, overlapping subjects, shared tools or other mediating devices (Engeström 1992). Or as Laufer and Glick argue, an activity approach allows examination of work practices “as performed by people within natural settings” and which consequently “allows aspects of the work activity to be revealed that may not be visible when interpreted as problem-solving from a logical/rationalist model of thinking” (Laufer & Glick 1996, pp. 177-178). Particularly, they suggest, it permits researchers to take into account “elements of personal sense in relation to organisational meaning that may produce performance domains with different properties” (Laufer & Glick 1996, p. 178), and to look at both the “structure of knowledge and motivation” in a work activity (p. 180).
3.1.2 Research Design

This project examines the ways that electronic and electronically-enhanced monitoring and performance measurement affect the work-life and work environment of financial services call centre workers in Canada, with a specific focus on issues of workplace identities and accountabilities. It also looks at the ways that workers respond to, and affect, the systems and technologies of surveillance. Surveillance technology, as Marx reminds us, is experiential (1996); my research focuses on workplace monitoring as a situated, contextualized and experienced process. The detailed narrative that I produce describes the monitored call centre environment from a front-line perspective. It is intended to generate ideas about the ways in which monitoring, in those settings where it is required for business functions, can be conducted in ways which consider the needs of workers as well as the demands of the organisation. It develops an activity-inspired framework to explore the three kinds of identities and accountabilities that act on workers, as identified through my qualitative fieldwork. This framework allows exploration of the complex ways in which organisational, professional and peer accountabilities are linked to, and interact with, projected and imposed organisational, professional, and peer identities. Finally, this work considers the effect on these identities when statistical measurements are to a greater or lesser extent coming to stand in for human actions during performance evaluation, and the implications this has for work, workers, and organisations.

3.1.2.1 Research Questions

During the course of this exploratory and descriptive qualitative study, a number of specific questions were posed and addressed. Following a grounded research approach, the research sites were not approached with a series of specific formal research questions based on a specific theory. Rather, they emerged before and during the field research, and were extended and elaborated during the course of the research in response to the evolving fieldwork experience. The initial questions were general in nature, centred around the occurrence and nature of monitoring and measurement in the call centres, intended to explore how the monitoring and measurement systems function in the workplaces and what people wanted to say about these systems.
1. Nature and extent of monitoring/measuring systems in these worksites
   - How is work measured in the workplace? How is this measurement accomplished?
   - How is the measurement system described in official documents? By supervisors? By staff?
   - What are workers’ perceptions of the way measurement systems function in their workplace?
   - Does the measurement system as it currently exists in these workplaces provide value to the different stakeholders in the system, including upper management, supervisors, call monitors, and front-line workers?
   - What are the competing interests within the system, and how are differential values accommodated within the system?
   - To what extent is electronically-generated data being used to evaluate performance?

As an understanding of the nature and extent of monitoring emerged from the initial data gathering, an activity theory framework was introduced into the data collection process in order to structure the observations around the key elements in the monitoring activity: the individual performing the action, the tool(s) she uses, and her output, all in the context of the larger organisational context in which they occur (specifically, community, rules and division of labour).

2. Impacts of monitoring/measuring systems on workers
   - How does the monitoring/measurement system affect individual’s behaviour in the course of daily work?
   - What are the issues and/or concerns workers talk about in relation to the measurement system?
   - What are the rules inscribed in the measurement system? How are they enforced? (rules)
What kinds of work must individuals contribute to the measurement system? Who is responsible for what tasks? (division of labour)

As the research proceeded, two key issues began to emerge as significant factors, accountability and identity. Although these topics came up in different ways and were expressed using different words from participant to participant, they seemed to be of recurring interest and importance. Consequently, questions specifically addressing these key emergent topics began to be incorporated into the data collection and these topics became the focus of the final stages of data collection.

3. Accountability

- What role does numeric data generated during monitoring play in the formal and informal systems of organisational accountability for workers? For supervisors?
- To whom do workers believe themselves accountable? In what ways? How do they talk about it, if they do?
- How is accountability to clients, colleagues, company and self reconciled within the structured demands of the monitored workplace?


- How do people see themselves in their workplace? How do they identify themselves? Their colleagues?
- How are issues of control over quality standards and skill valuation reflected in the measurement system, and what impacts do these issues have on the workplace?
- To what degree, if any, has electronically-based measurement altered the roles of workers and supervisors?
- How do people think about the ways computer systems represent them?
- How are staff represented in the organisations’ information systems?
- Does the way they are represented in the system align with the ways they self-identify?
- Who has influence over these representations?
- Are there links between accountability practices and individuals’ perceptions of their professional, organisational or peer-to-peer identities?
This ongoing and iterative approach to developing questions to guide the research process, informed by earlier phases of data collection, is a standard technique in grounded research to allow the research to develop as the researchers understanding of the topic and the site develops.

3.1.2.2 Researcher Assumptions

As Creswell notes, “qualitative research is interpretive research” (1994, p. 147). All researchers bring their own experiences, expectations and biases to a research project. In a qualitative, grounded research study, in which the researcher is also the research instrument, it is important to foreground these, as it is generally acknowledged that the ideas and beliefs of the researcher have an impact on the research process and results (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Van Maanen 1990). While my study of the call centre literature occurred subsequent to my entry into the field sites, I did have a particular impression of call centre work, composed primarily of the negative stereotype perpetuated by popular media—the call centre as a contemporary version of a “sweat shop.” It was an ongoing task to go beyond the initial bias against this form of workplace during data collection and analysis, but one in which I was aided by the participants themselves, who continually kept me grounded in their own messy reality—“it’s good, yes and no” (CU Notes, p. 26).

I also had a particular set of impressions and understandings of the parent organisation of the first call centre site, based on previous research in another area of the organisation. This earlier exposure to a different part of the organisation was extremely useful in many ways, particularly because it provided me with the vocabulary and background knowledge to communicate easily with my participants. It also provided me with another set of preconceptions about the organisation itself and their approach to measurement in other settings, and these preconceptions had to be acknowledged and guarded against during data collection and particularly during analysis.

There is always a danger, when using participant observation, that the researcher may become less objective over time as she begins to identify with her participants. In my case, studying individuals with demographic characteristics very similar to my own (university-educated, of a similar age as myself, primarily women), this possibility was exacerbated to some degree.
However, the characteristics of the workplaces, where it was physically always evident that I was an ‘extra’ sitting with a worker rather than a member of the group mitigated against this problem to some degree, as did my practice of spending time with several different workers rather than one for a longer time span. The time interval between data collection and final analysis also provided some emotional as well as temporal distance between the participants and me. Finally, the guidance of my supervisor during ongoing conversations during my data collection and continual review of my data analysis process and written work encouraged me to constantly question my interpretations of my data and the resulting categories and themes that I have derived.

3.1.3 Accessing the Field Sites

The two field sites for this thesis were chosen and accessed in different ways. The initial site was the call centre of a large Canadian financial institution. Initial access to this site was via another research endeavour; I had done some work on a consulting project with my current supervisor, Andrew Clement, and this work was sufficiently well-received that the contact for that division of the bank recommended us to head of the call centre learning division to do similar work. As the original work had progressed, the genesis of this thesis project arose from my observations and findings around the issue of performance measurement and monitoring in a manual setting. At the call centre, the automation of much of this process introduced a number of new elements that I found intriguing. We obtained the written permission of the call centre staff for me to collect data on all of the topics of interest to their project, including measurement issues, with the understanding that some of this data would also be used for my own work in the future. Data collection proceeded as described below.

The second site was accessed as part of joint research project for Bell Canada University Laboratories. It was chosen specifically as a site in which to explore the concept and formation of digital personae in a call centre. Access was via a personal contact initially between Andrew Clement and a bank executive whose bailiwick included the call centre. Via this executive, I was introduced to the call centre supervisor as a researcher and my access to people in the call centre, and the site, was negotiated with this individual.
3.1.3.1 Data Generation and Collection

There are three commonly accepted steps in data generation and collection, according to Creswell:

(a) setting the boundaries for the study, (b) collecting information through observations, interviews, documents and visual materials, and (c) establishing the protocol for recording information. (1994, p. 148)

The boundaries for the study were defined by limiting the data collection to two sites, by focusing initially on issues relating to monitoring and measurement within the larger organisational context, and by time constraints in the access provisions negotiated with the site organisations. The research was also bounded to some extent by the use of activity theory as a framework to provide focus to the data collection, which it accomplished without limiting or precluding the ability to follow interesting lines of enquiry that emerged during the course of data collection.

The data for this project was collected at two field sites, both financial services call centres. The first site is the call centre division of a major Canadian bank. It is a large organisation, with approximately five hundred staff at the time of my fieldwork. Workgroups consisted of ‘pods’ of four people; two pods formed a team under the supervision of a ‘team leader’. The call centre engaged in both inbound and ‘warm’ outbound calling. I spoke with people working in both areas, although my primary focus was on the inbound, service area. Staff members are a mix of individuals with branch banking experience and those without, about 60% female. The second site is the call centre division of an Ontario Credit Union. It is a small division of eight staff (two men and six women) and one supervisor, all of whom had previous branch banking experience prior to coming to the call centre. It is also primarily an inbound call centre, although staff would on occasion initiate service-related calls.

The two sites are similar in many ways. Both are technologically intensive, with telephone, database, and monitoring systems all linked. Both centres expect staff to provide good service to customers who call in, while at the same time promoting and selling products based on the customer’s profile and/or any current sales drives underway in the organisation. In addition, both
organisations use standard call centre systems and software to monitor all calls and collect a variety of statistics about every call taken by every agent. Workers in both sites require extensive knowledge of financial services, products, and regulations. They deal constantly with complex, non-routine requests, yet perform their jobs in an environment where they are evaluated to a greater or lesser degree based on the duration and volume of calls to which they respond, and the dollar value of sales they generate. Workers are also rated on call quality, but the concept of quality is fairly rigidly defined and linked to sales scripts. Performance evaluation is largely based on statistics generated through telephone monitoring. The most immediately apparent difference between my two field sites is the size differential. A 500 agent workplace has different challenges than a 9 person one. However, the workgroup units within the larger site are the same size as the smaller one, so there is some degree of comparability.

In both sites, participant observation took place ‘on the floor’ of the call centre while participants were answering calls, but with some differences in method necessitated by access provisions within the organisations. Informal conversations over lunch or on breaks supplemented the observation during work time. Interviews were conducted with willing participants at both sites, but tended to be brief as permission to take staff away from the phones was difficult to obtain at either site. Documents were collected from the training program, the organisations’ web sites, and the participants at both sites.

The protocol for recording information generally followed a grounded theory approach, in which data is collected, organized, considered, and used to feed into the ongoing research in an iterative manner. Raw data were initially organized by type—interviews, field notes, documents—and then arranged into increasingly descriptive categories that crossed data types. The software package NVivo, which is designed to aid in qualitative data analysis, was used to facilitate analysis.

The following section of this chapter will elaborate on the data collection methods.
3.1.3.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at both financial service call centre sites with selected representatives from the staff, supervisory, and management levels. In the first site, interview questions were developed after spending a significant amount of time in a training course with a group of new employees, which provided an excellent overview of the jobs they were expected to do. I had also previously been involved in a project in the branch banking system of the same organisation, so I was familiar with the bank’s processes and issues when I began this study. From the first site however, I have relatively few tape-recorded interviews due to the difficulty inherent in taking a worker off the phones for any amount of time.

At the second site, I spoke with seven out of eight staff members, the supervisor, and the two individuals responsible for information system choices and implementation. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Interview questions were partially the same as in the first site, and partially intended to explore previous findings from the first site, using an iterative design suggested by the grounded theory approach.

At both sites, interviewing was primarily used to gather some basic demographic data, to ask participants to describe what they did at work, and to establish a feeling of comfort and rapport to facilitate the job shadowing during which the bulk of the data was collected. None of these interviews exceeded 15 minutes, and most were closer to ten, so there was relatively little time to engage in probing discussion; most frequently the interviews resulted in a list of questions that I documented and tried to fit in during the more casual conversations during participant observation. I tried to ensure that each interview subject was interested or willing to be interviewed prior to asking for supervisory permission to take each worker away from her/his phone, but I felt some concern that when supervisors were concurrently “given permission” to come away to talk to me, they might feel some managerial pressure for participation.

Consequently, I began each interview with an assurance that their consent was genuinely voluntary, and if they chose not to be interviewed we could sit out the time allotted. While no one used this option, participant comments to me showed that it was appreciated and helped to establish trust that facilitated future fieldwork interactions.
3.1.3.3 Participant Observation

Participant observation is “the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives” (Burawoy et al. 1991, p. 2). Participant observation as a research technique has, as all techniques do, advantages and disadvantages. Burawoy summarises these succinctly:

According to convention, each research technique has its own advantages and its own distinctive biases, ways in which it distorts the reality it seeks to comprehend. Thus, the advantages of participant observation are assumed to lie not just in direct observation of how people act but also how they understand and experience those acts. It enables us to juxtapose what people say they are up to against what they actually do. The dangers of participant observation are said to derive from the same source as its virtues. Too close contact with the participants can lead to loss of objectivity or to contamination of the situation. The problem of objectivity is compounded by the problem of validity, namely, intensive research limits the possibility of generalization. It is sociology’s “uncertainty principle”: the closer you get to measurement on some dimensions—intensity and depth—the further you recede on others—objectivity and validity.” (Burawoy et al. 1991, p. 2)

In the first site, I had permission to wear headphones and could listen to calls while sitting with participants, or, infrequently and with their permission, listening to calls from a monitoring desk. Participants always knew the time frame in which my listening would occur if it was conducted remotely, and were asked every day if they continued to be comfortable with this process. At this site, the researcher also spent several weeks attending an in-house training program for call centre agents, during which time she became acquainted with the organisation, the job, and developed relationships with participants which led to permission to shadow several of them when they began work on the floor. In the second site, the researcher sat with agents but did not have headphones on to hear the customer side of the call. As the focus was on participants’ experiences of the work systems and practices around monitoring and measurement, this variation made relatively little difference to data collection.

I spent approximately 3.5 weeks observing call centre training for the bank call centre, and then spent approximately 7 weeks over the following three months observing work, conducting interviews and shadowing workers. As noted previously, this project followed a similar project
in the branch network of the first fieldwork site, so I was extremely familiar with financial
services processes and issues when I began this fieldwork. Particular attention was paid to the
work environment, measured processes, and staff perceptions of both of these criteria. All
participation was voluntary and informed.

At the second site, I observed seven out of eight staff members for a full shift, and spent several
hours with the supervisor. One staff member declined to participate. As in the first site, my focus
was on the work environment with specific focus on the information systems, measured
processes, and staff perceptions of these criteria. At this site, I also explored the ways in which
staff are represented in their information systems in an attempt to approach the concept of digital
persona creation. Again, all participation was voluntary and informed.

There is clearly a difference between the amount of time spent in fieldwork at the first and
second sites, due primarily to a difference in the access that could be negotiated. It was also the
case, however, that the research at the second site was far more focused, with the experience at
the first site feeding into the questions explored and the observation plan. This accords with the
concept of “theoretical sampling” in grounded theory, in which time at research sites subsequent
to the first may be reduced by focusing on those issues identified as key during preliminary
analysis of the data from the initial site (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 65). The lesser time in
which to establish relationships with participants and acquire the status of a workplace fixture,
around whom people act naturally, was compensated for in a way by the high degree of trust
participants expressed and exhibited in the organisation. People seemed almost surprisingly
candid from the beginning in sharing their opinions and feelings, with little sense that anything
was being held back. Although the fieldwork time was short in site two it was also quite intense,
and the opportunity to speak with and observe almost every member of the small staff as well as
attending staff meetings and interviewing the key people who support them in the systems area
meant that a comprehensive picture of the entire group could be formed more quickly than in the
much larger organisational structure of site one.
3.1.3.4 Field notes and Documents

Field notes were used to record participant observations at the two research sites. It is standard that these notes should include “a chronological running description of the setting, the actors, their activities and the processes under way, and conversations and other things that are heard” (Buchwald 1999, p. 34). Notes towards analysis that occur in situ, and inferences by the researcher are also included and marked as such. A collection of several hundred written pages consisting of field notes and bank documents resulted from this research (later typed in word-processed transcripts for reference purposes). While there were relatively few interviews at the first site, there were multiple and ongoing conversations over the course of the fieldwork which are documented in the field notes. Informal chats over lunch or coffee were documented at the earliest opportunity. I also have more focused data (again, written field notes) from an intensive two week period of observation and interviews at the small credit union call centre.

In addition, I have, from both sites, a significant number of documents that people gave me or that I saw were important during the course of the observation. So, I have system-generated statistical reports, training manuals, policy documents, call scripts, quality assurance rating sheets, and screen shots of real-time system monitoring data and charts. These were used to substantiate things I was told, detect gaps in policy and practice, and fill in background information. A primary disadvantage of looking at official documents is that they frequently tell you what is supposed to happen, not what does happen. However, when they are examined in conjunction with the observation and interview data, variations become interesting points at which to probe in the different types of data.

3.1.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is fundamentally a process of deriving sense from field data (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 202). It involves taking “a voluminous amount of information” and reducing it “to certain patterns, categories or themes” (Creswell 1994, p 154). This process is accomplished by coding the data. The information thus taken apart is then recombined and interpreted in a way which has descriptive or explanatory value.
3.1.4.1 Coding the Data

Weston and colleagues note that “coding is not what happens before analysis, but comes to constitute an important part of the analysis. There is a reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (Weston et al. 2001, p. 397). Three steps of coding were followed in this study, corresponding to Strauss and Corbin’s initial three categories of codes. First, open coding, which is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (1998, p. 61), was performed on the data to break it down into coherent units for analysis. Second, concepts were identified, and conceptual labels were placed on discrete happenings, events, and other instances of phenomena (p. 61). Finally, categories were identified. A category is essentially a classification of concepts. This classification is discovered when concepts are compared one against another and appear to pertain to a similar phenomenon. Thus the concepts are grouped together under a higher order, more abstract concept called a category (p. 61). It is important to note that while grounded theory methods informed both my data collection and analysis, I adhere to the spirit of a grounded approach as it was originally proposed, rather than engaging fully with the many complex variations of coding later developed and discussed by Strauss and Corbin which speak more directly to a level of theory development that I felt inappropriate for this study.

As Lincoln and Guba warn, “categorization can be accomplished most cleanly when the categories are defined in such a way that they are internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible” (1985, p. 349). As analysis proceeds, categories may be subsumed by others, or subdivided. For this research, an activity theory framework was used to inform the categorization of concepts, which then allows the categories to be examined and discussed in terms of their position and role in the monitoring activity. For this study, using NVivo software, raw data were broken into textual units expressing a complete idea. These textual units could then be manipulated to attach them to one or more concepts and categories as the analysis proceeded, and reports could be generated to allow perusal and comparison of all of those text units comprising different concepts and categories. At the same time, by initially entering the data according to collection method (field notes, interview transcripts, bank documents), it remained possible to also determine whether data supporting concepts and categories originated from more than one collection method, a type of triangulation which
contributes to a sense of trust in the results. Although intercoder reliability was not addressed, other means of ensuring trustworthiness in the study include the creation of an audit trail documenting methodological decisions and research activities, prolonged engagement in the field, and triangulation through the use of multiple sources and methods at more than one research site. Coding terms were defined and recorded as part of the audit trail and data was continually re-coded as terms were refined, a process facilitated by the flexibility of the NVivo software.

3.2 Ethical Concerns

Every effort was made to interact ethically with participants in these workplaces. While the principle of voluntary consent is always a significant concern in research involving people, in workplace research this principle becomes particularly important, and occasionally difficult. To access the worksites, permission from an upper level of the organisational hierarchy is necessary. However, once this is obtained, the researcher runs the risk of finding that potential participants feel obliged to cooperate simply because the project has upper management approval, or worse, because they are afraid that non-participation will be noticed by their supervisor, and reflect badly upon themselves in some way. The question becomes, how can voluntary participation be assured in these circumstances? I used a variety of techniques to attempt to ensure that research participants were truly willing to contribute to the research.

First, at both sites the researcher obtained a written agreement from the senior level individual who facilitated access that only participants who freely chose to participate would be considered for the study, and that the researcher reserved the right to choose from among those willing participants as the needs of the research dictated. This meant that if I learned at some point in the project that an individual who had spoken with me had not really wanted to do so, I had the ability to say that I had chosen not to further speak or sit with that person without having to reveal the reason. This written protocol further confirmed the private nature of all written notes and recordings made by the researcher, so that the organisation could not ask to see these original documents and view individuals’ comments.
When entering a site, all potential participants were informed verbally and in writing of the purposes and methods of the project. When individuals agreed to participate, they provided verbal (site one) or written (site two) confirmation of their voluntary participation. As a further precaution, at the beginning of each interview or observation session, the participants were given the choice of proceeding or choosing not to proceed. In interviews, I told them that if they had only agreed because they felt their supervisor expected them to do so, that we could sit in the interview room for the allocated time and not actually conduct an interview; thus, they would appear to have participated and not incur the censure of their supervisor, and their participation status would be protected by the confidentiality agreements the researcher had with the organisation. In observation sessions, I offered to doodle rather than taking notes, if requested, or, if permission was given to take notes, to show all notes taken during that specific session with that individual to them at any time.

These techniques seem to have been successful. I did have one person tell me that she felt better about talking to me knowing that she really did have the choice not to. I also had several participants take advantage of my offer to view my notes about their activities, and one person who chose not to allow me to sit with her.

In written work, care has been taken to avoid identifying the specific organisations studied. Further, individuals are not identified by name, and genders have occasionally been altered if it does not affect the context of situations or quotations, since the majority of call centre workers are women and it might in some cases be clear who “he” might be to someone reading the research if they knew the organisations involved.

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter presents the methodology used in this study of two financial services call centres’ monitoring and measurement systems and practices. This research was approached qualitatively, within a framework of grounded theory and activity theory, to create a rich narrative description of the surveilled environment and the monitored subject.
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and through document collection and review. These data were entered into the NVivo qualitative analysis software for coding and analysis. Attention was paid to the trustworthiness of the data and analysis, and ethical concerns were addressed through the strict adherence to practices of informed consent, and by masking identities and precise organisations in the written documents generated from the research.
4 Chapter Four: Setting the Stage

This chapter describes in some detail each of my field sites, what I did there, and what I learned about their monitoring practices. It is primarily descriptive, setting the stage for Chapter Five when I will engage in depth with the themes and topics emerging from the fieldwork, using a series of scenes derived from my fieldwork to launch the discussion and analysis. To effectively set that stage for the scenes introduced in the next chapter, this chapter will discuss the backdrop, the setting, the characters and the script (in its multitudinous manifestations) of this research for each field site. Ethnographic research is often characterized in terms of ‘telling the story’ of the research; I have chosen to employ a theatrical metaphor rather than a narrative one as a structural device primarily because of its affinity with call centre work. So much of call centre workers’ time is spent projecting a particular image of themselves and the organisation over the phone, while negotiating call-scripts, that a metaphor implying elements of performance seems somehow more appropriate than the more standard narrative trope. This metaphor also summons to mind Goffman’s performance theory of identity, and allows the social and interactive nature of identity work that I study in this setting to be foregrounded. There is the danger when using this metaphor, however, that the researcher might be seen in the role of director, manipulating the events for the audience, or as a playwright, creating the events. I see my role rather as reviewer, who summarizes the events and elements of the drama from her own perspective, while endeavoring to discuss what is fundamental to an understanding of the drama within a critical framework.

4.1 Fieldwork Site One: V-Bank

4.1.1 The backdrop

In the mid-to late nineties, there was a strong sense in the banking industry that the path to competitive advantage was through technological systems, a sense strengthened by the clear cost savings possible when customers used self-service electronic access rather than in-person branch
services. Canada’s financial services landscape, then as now, was dominated by five large full-service banks, each with a massive coast-to-coast branch network. My first field site was created by one of these five to be a unique entity in the banking sector. When it was founded in October 1996, the site I’ll call V-Bank was positioned within the banking industry as “neither a new product nor a new add-on delivery channel, but an entirely new virtual banking enterprise designed to meet the needs and the realities of time-pressed, financially active consumers” (V-Bank announcement, 1996). It was positioned as an independent entity within its parent company’s (which I will call Big Bank) electronic financial services division, and claimed the distinction of being the first major Canadian bank to offer internet banking. In a national campaign, the bank touted the convenience of access to banking services every day, 24 hours a day via multiple delivery channels including phone, fax, mail, courier, personal computer, and the parent bank’s national ABM network. Initial announcements promised that every customer would have an individual portfolio manager to help them manage their finances; the Big Bank’s then-CEO characterized it as providing a level of service previously reserved for wealthy clients, a “democratization” of banking services (V-Bank announcement, 1996). The parent bank started this venture with a large capital investment and an optimistic outlook about its potential for success, particularly in the demographic category of young, professional, technologically-aware customers. According to one V-Bank executive, the uptake of bank services by this group of customers proved smaller than anticipated, and within three years, the parent bank quietly folded the independent virtual entity back into its other call centre and branch operations operating under its primary name. The organisation thus no longer exists in the form that I observed.

When I entered the field site in August of 1997, however, the bank was aggressively pursuing its goal of achieving 100,000 accounts in its first year of operation, the end of which was approaching, and was actively expanding its workforce which numbered approximately 500 people at the time I was there. It was also actively claiming, in training programs and official documents, that it was not in fact, a traditional call centre but rather a completely unique kind of

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13 One estimate suggests that banks can reduce operating costs by 37% by moving to electronic transactions (Valverde, Humphrey & del Paso 2004, p. 1).

14 While other banks at the time permitted banking via computer, they were using systems requiring dial-in to secure servers, rather than allowing full service over the internet.
organisation. While it is true there were some aspects of the operation that varied from a more
conventional call centre, this claim to uniqueness was contradicted by the V-Banks’ corporate
structure, the call-centre specific call management and monitoring software it used, the way it
measured staff performance based on standard call centre criteria, the fact that the vast majority
of business was conducted over the phone, and, most importantly from my front-line perspective,
the opinions of the majority of staff members with whom I spoke. Although many self-identified
as bankers rather than call centre agents, most felt that they were expected to adjust their
performance as bankers to meet what they explicitly identified as “call centre standards.” In this
study, although the definition of the organisation was contested internally, I have chosen as an
external observer to discuss this site as, for all intents and purposes, a call centre, albeit one with
some variance in some processes. However, when I refer to it, I generally call it ‘the bank’ as
opposed to ‘the call centre’, as this is how the workers I spent time with most often referred to it.

I first entered the site not as a Ph.D. student but as a member of a consulting team who had been
hired by V-Bank’s learning division to conduct a qualitative study exploring the success of their
on-site training programs. This assignment, in turn, had come about as a result of our group
undertaking a similar qualitative review for the Big Bank’s learning materials and their uptake in
the branch-banking system. My interest in measurement systems had been piqued during this
first study, where one of my key findings was that one of the most significant environmental
stressors preventing branches from taking full advantage of available learning materials was their
concern that taking time to complete them would prohibit staff from meeting sales and
performance targets instituted as part of a new measurement program. It soon became apparent at
the V-Bank site that the issue of measurement was similarly significant to the people I talked to,
both in the learning division, where their programs were expected to produce agents who could
excel in the set measurement categories, and on the floor of the call centre. At the same time, I
was preparing to enter the Ph.D. program in the Faculty of Information Studies, and I came to
believe that this issue provided an excellent topic for a thesis, one grounded in the concerns and
issues arising directly from the site. The consulting project provided initial access, and a set of
participants, a group of new employees who I followed through their initial training program and
then onto the call centre floor. My professional purpose there was to determine contextual factors
affecting learning; clearly, measurement was one such factor, and there was no objection to my
using my observations for my academic work in addition to the report I prepared for the bank,
provided that the appropriate standards of confidentiality and voluntary consent were adhered to at all times.

I was aided in this work by my familiarity with the parent bank, gained firstly as a result of having a family member who had been employed by one of the major Canadian banks for over 30 years, and secondly during the many months spent in the bank branches which served as field sites during the initial consulting project. Having worked through the basic learning materials designed for bank employees during my study of their learning program, I had a valuable knowledge of their technological systems, their product offerings, and, to some degree, the bank culture which facilitated my acceptance by the people who participated in my thesis study. I was able to talk to them from the position not of an insider, but at least as an outsider who knew their language. Going through the V-Bank training program with a group as an observer consolidated this position. While this served as an advantage from the perspective of gaining participation, I had to also be cautious not to impose what I thought I knew from past experience on what I was seeing at this site, and to resist becoming so attuned to the mind-set of the people I was talking to that I lost the analytic distance necessary for a researcher. This was particularly the case given that the people I was working with were similar to me in terms of age, education and background, and many of them in gender as well.

4.1.2 The setting

V-Bank had two main physical locations, the head office in downtown Toronto, Ontario, and a subsidiary office in Montreal that provided more extensive bilingual services and covered the overnight hours between 11 pm and 7 am. My work was exclusively in the Toronto office, where the bank occupied several floors of a high rise. The building itself was located near to a stop on Toronto’s subway line, and close to a variety of shops and entertainment facilities; it was billed by the organisation as providing a central, convenient workplace environment for their employees.

Inside, the primary groups with whom I worked were on three different floors. On one floor, on the north side, there was an outbound calling group, who were engaged in calling people to attempt to sign them up for an account in an attempt to meet the account targets set by the bank’s
CEO at its founding. These calls were primarily from lists of potential customers passed on from the branches of the parent bank, and also from lists of desirable demographics purchased from an outside company. The service division, where inbound service calls were handled, were on the south side of this floor. This included groups specializing in lending and investments, and corporate services; calls requiring their expertise were transferred to the group by other inbound agents. Fulfillment and Support, Audit, the mail room, and a small Internet Support group were on another floor. The learning division was also in the same building, on another floor, as were the Executive offices.

I spent most of my time on the inbound floor, where the majority of my participants worked, although I also spent some time observing on the outbound side of the floor. Both were organized in the same way. Each side was primarily a large open space, accessed by doors off the elevator shaft foyer that required a staff card to open. In the area immediately through the entrance doors, there were mail slots, and a white board was posted prominently. Written on it and updated daily were sign-on times, number of true calls handled the day before, average handling time, and the names of the top two performers in each of three categories: quality, sales, and productivity. Inside the room, around the walled-in foyer were a series of small conference rooms for team meetings, and washrooms. A larger lunch room took the place of some of the conference rooms on the same floor as the Fulfillment division.

Big windows along the outside walls provided natural light to the rows of desks that lined the room. The desks were organized into “pods” or groups of four desks in a semi-circle, enclosed on three sides by low cubicle walls in a light shade of the corporate colour. The walls were of a height that a seated worker could see over with a bit of effort, and that a supervisor, or “team leader” walking past could see over easily. Two pods made a team, and team leaders typically were responsible for two teams. There was also a floor manager, who wore a white hat to identify himself, and who was responsible for keeping an eye on the statistics and scheduling, and supervising team leaders. At the western end of the floor which housed the inbound group was a large pixel board sign which provided ongoing updates to the significant call statistics, including the number of calls in queue, calls answered, average wait times, number of hang-ups, and average call duration. This sign was positioned in such a way as to be readily visible from most angles of the room.
Within each pod, there were individual workstations and some shared items. For each staff member, there was a configuration of two monitors with a mouse for each, three keyboards, a switch box and a telephone. Each staff member was given her or his own headset during training. Shared resources included a variety of reference materials, a printer, and a mainframe terminal, required to access legacy systems that were not accessible via the networked PCs. During training, staff were informed that although “the system looks intimidating with its two monitors, three keyboards and two mouses (sic)” that “the system is designed to be user friendly and maximize user efficiency by allowing multiple systems to operate at the same time” (training manual WRT-6). One monitor was used to access the telephone banking system, which allowed agents to set up biller information for customer payments, set up bank cards, and enroll customers in telephone banking services, while the other was used to run the applications required to access customer information and accounts and perform financial transactions. The switch box was used to toggle between the new windows-based customer management system and the older backbone system, upon which many transactions still needed to be done. This configuration of technologies was not considered especially awkward by those agents that I spent time with who were former branch bank employees; they were accustomed to bouncing between the legacy and windows-based systems in that environment as well, although they would not have had both on their own desks in the branch. Indeed, because the networked PCs tended to be a little slow at peak times, many staff actually seemed to appreciate the ability to have the billing system, which they used often, on a separate system as they could leave it open, rather than having to reload it each time they needed to go between it and the customers’ account information. Non-branch staff, however, expressed more dissatisfaction with the systems; the most common comment was that “we try to seem so high tech and if customers could see what we work with…” (VB Notes, p. 2). This discontent was in part because the legacy systems were somewhat difficult to learn, and the training for them was limited by the fact that they were ‘live’ systems, so that practice was very difficult to arrange.

Theoretically, each workstation was supposed to be set up in exactly the same way and contain the same reference materials. In reality, workers supplemented the standard collection with a variety of materials that they compiled on their own, including in some cases copies of the procedural update memos that circulated almost daily, personal contact lists, personal notes, copies of customer files that they had retrieved from the file room to work on (a process that was
strictly regulated, as phone personnel were not supposed to spend time on paperwork unless absolutely necessary), and a variety of post-it notes with personal work-related reminders. Since many workstations were shared, as there were two shifts in the centre (7 am-3 pm and 3 pm-11pm), personal touches such as family photos were seldom present, although occasionally a WOW certificate\(^{15}\) with a personal name on it might be seen stuck to the divider above a desk.

When staff arrived at their desks for their shift, their first move was to put on their headphones, then sign in on their computer system, and on the phone system. At most times during the day, there was a hum of conversation ambient in the air, but no phones rang. Instead, when a call came through to the centre, it was pushed through to an agent who was on “ready” status. A brief beeping sound signaled to the agent that there was a caller live on the phone, and he or she would then begin speaking, using the standard authorized bank greeting. If the system worked well, and if the customer calling had keyed in a customer number during the introductory interactive voice response (IVR) sequence that began each call, the agent might also get what they called a “pop up”, a window with the calling customer’s name and account information. Many customers however, having learned that they could skip the IVR by pressing zero, did so, and so agents had to begin by identifying the customer and locating their details before verifying the customer and proceeding with their transaction. For verification purposes, customers set up a series of answers to set security questions; before conducting any financial transactions, agents were supposed to ask one or more of these questions on every call. This was mandatory, and skipping the verification process was grounds for a failing grade in a call that was monitored. While outbound call agents were expected to adhere to a script, service agents had slightly more flexibility for variation in between the standard opening and the proscribed closing statement. During the call, however, agents were supposed to adhere to the structure of a “relationship sales conversation,” a sales technique taught as part of training in the centre and in bank branches. This essentially involved probing for possible sales opportunities even during routine transactions. Someone transferring money between a savings and a chequing account near the end of the month might be interested in a line of credit or overdraft protection; someone with a sizable balance in a chequing account might want to open a savings account, or better yet, an investment account. To

\(^{15}\) A WOW certificate is what one might expect, an award for having impressed a customer sufficiently that the customer brought their high level of service to the attention of a supervisor.
encourage the use of this technique, agents were given monetary sales targets. During particular sales campaigns, held during various points of the year such as RRSP season, agents were also given sales targets in the specific products that were part of the promotion.

All calls that came into or went out of the call centre were recorded, for regulatory and legal purposes as well as for performance monitoring. Since many consents that would be given in writing in a branch setting, such as permission to conduct a credit check, were given verbally for telephone banking, it was necessary that there be a permanent, traceable record of the customer’s agreement. The two standard kinds of call centre monitoring were both employed by V-Bank. Qualitative call monitoring involved a call monitor listening in on a call, which could be accomplished remotely without the knowledge of the agent, and grading it based on a set of specific criteria testing adherence to rules, procedures, scripts, and standards of courtesy, and quantitative monitoring was based on a number of individualized statistics generated by the information system as agents took calls, particularly call volume (how many calls they dealt with during a shift), call duration, and time on ‘not ready’, a state when they are not accepting calls from the queue. Staff categorized each call by entering a category code on the phone keypad while a customer is on the phone, and a resolution code before they hung-up, and these categorizations (for example, account transaction, investment, inquiry) were also compiled. Call statistics were generated in real time, and supervisors could view the stats for each of their team members from a supervisory terminal; call monitoring was intended to occur at regular intervals. During the training session that I attended, the course facilitator said that 10 calls by 10 people were listened to every 2 weeks by each call monitor (VB Notes, p. 4). While I was on the floor, it seemed that people received graded call review sheets sporadically; no one could say when they expected their next one although generally everyone had received one after they had been on the floor between six and eight weeks. Supervisors could and did also listen in on calls, but call monitors were individuals who were specifically trained to apply the grading criteria consistently and it was they who were responsible for the formal call ratings that were entered into the performance record for each staff member. At the time I was on site, the call monitors were a relatively new addition to the monitoring process and scores averaging 3-4 out of 10 were angering staff, who questioned the validity of the measurement and the coaching value of a process that left them feeling incompetent. As one person put it, “you can do great calls and get
slammed for saying bye instead of goodbye.” She went on: “Makes you feel bad, it’s a crappy job and you’re not even doing it well” (VB Notes, p 45).

There was a considerable emphasis at V-Bank on responding to the statistics. In addition to the prominent pixel board sign which shows call queue numbers, wait, answer and talk times for the group, and the daily posting of ‘winners’ with top productivity, sales, and quality stats daily mentioned earlier, team leaders kept a close eye on the numbers. When calls built up, I often saw a floor manager walk along between cubicle pods exhorting staff to “get the numbers down” and visually checking to ensure their team members were actively taking calls rather than finishing paperwork or doing other tasks. This activity was viewed unfavorably by the person I was sitting with the first time I saw it happen: she commented that the staff name for the person who was doing it was originally “floor weasel” but had recently changed to “floor ferret.” Weasels, she explained, are wild but ferrets are tame for their masters (VB Notes, p. 49). Concern over the queue numbers also extended to the individual workers, who regularly glanced up at the board, especially when engaged in a call that seemed to be taking a long time, and who also were clearly aware of when their neighbours were on or off line. Agents were also actively engaged in managing their own statistics. For example, although the official policy was to attempt to deal with customer problems in one call, this often meant lengthy calls that then led to long (i.e. poor) call duration statistics. Agents would therefore often attempt to transfer difficult clients, or offer to investigate and call them back, in order to break up the call into smaller units of time.

Although I did not see anyone actually deliberately sever a connection when a call dragged on, I was told that some agents did this, on the theory that when the customer called back, they would be unlikely to reach the same agent.

This technique for attempting to control individual statistical records flew in the face of the rhetoric of teamwork that prevailed in the organisation and revealed a contradiction between the official bank positions on customer service and their reliance on statistical performance measures. Staff talked to me about the difficulty of balancing this dichotomy. One person talked about it in terms of her desire to help colleagues conflicting with the way she was evaluated: “People come to me for help but if I go on ‘make busy’ (a call category meaning the agent expected to be offline for less than five minutes) too often to talk to them, it shows up. But when someone asks me, what am I supposed to do?” (VB Notes, p. 49). This was a serious problem for this individual, as I noted when sitting with her that people came to her regularly with questions.
She had a great deal of branch experience, which had given her both product and system expertise, and clearly enjoyed acting as an informal resource for less experienced colleagues. Further, because calls were pushed to the agents with only a single beep before the call was live, it was difficult to have a conversation of any length with someone without temporarily blocking calls. Conversations when the phone remained live were interesting, as agents would regularly start talking to customers and drop what they had been saying to a colleague or to me in mid-sentence. Too much time on ‘make busy’ or ‘not ready’ however, would show up on the statistical record, and affect individual and team statistics, so helping team members was also harming not only her own but also the team’s performance results (at least in the short term). There was no call category, for example, that might indicate ‘helping colleague’ or ‘team facilitation’, despite the company’s official recognition of the need for ongoing learning. This dilemma is an example of the way that formal scripts for behaviour contrasted with formal measurement processes in a way that left staff with difficult choices to make.

4.1.3 The characters

There were two primary groups of characters alongside whom I had the privilege to sit. The main group was a class of 21 former branch-banking employees who had been hired mainly from the parent bank, although a few came from other major banks. None of them had any prior call centre experience. I joined them at the beginning of their five-week full-time training course. Slightly more than half of these were women, and 11 had university degrees. Their previous banking experience ranged from six months to more than 15 years and although half of them were from the Greater Toronto Area, the other half came from as far away as Vancouver to the west and Ottawa to the east. The bank’s employees on average were a young group, mostly under 35. This group of recruits had only one member clearly past that threshold, a man who was recruited to join the specialist lending pod. Many of the others were closer to 20 than 30, although only three said they were single.

When asked why they would switch from the branch to V-Bank call centre, the response received from more than one person runs along the lines ‘anywhere has to be better than the branches right now.’ Given my previous work in the branch banking system, I can understand
how they might think so, as the branches experienced wide scale lay-offs relatively recently, and were in a stage of restructuring amid rumours of yet another round of branch closings.

I spent a considerable amount of time with this group, attending their training sessions several days a week and then following them out onto the floor in two stages, once at the beginning of their work experience, and again later after they had been working for two months and had had time to settle into the job. Sitting in on the training allowed me introduce myself to them, let them know what I was doing there, and get to know a number of group members in a more relaxed environment than exists on the floor, where staff are expected to talk on the phone, not with researchers. This in turn facilitated obtaining their consent for me to sit with them and watch them working, and most of them permitted me to do so at the end of the training. The majority of this group went into the inbound, service call division although a few were also placed in the outbound calling area, and I was able to sit with people in both areas.

The second group was a smaller set of 17 people who had been hired with no banking experience. These nine women and eight men all had university degrees, some in business or commerce but most in other fields. All were under 30, and almost all came from in or around the Greater Toronto Area. They had undergone their eight-week training course prior to the group that I worked with primarily, so my encounters with them consisted of brief interviews and casual chats on the floor. Most of this group had been assigned to the outbound calling section. This group was, in general, less happy with their V-Bank experience by the end of my study than the former branch banking employees; many of them felt they had been misled about what they would be doing. One stated directly, “I should have been told it was telemarketing and I wouldn’t have come” (VB Notes, p. 44). She went on, “And they don’t admit what we’re doing is telemarketing and cold calling, so problems relating to those things don’t get addressed directly.” This is an issue that will be addressed below.

### 4.1.4 The scripts

There are many variants of “script” in this study and at the V-Bank site. First, and most obviously, there are the literal scripts—written-out conversational guidelines—that bank staff were trained to use in specific work situations. These were written in the marketing department
of the organisation and designed to create smooth, quick and thorough exchanges with customers while attempting to maximize sales opportunities during the conversation by encouraging staff to probe for financial needs or, at different times of the year, to promote particular products such as, for example, RRSP options, or mortgage transfers or renewals. Observing the emphasis placed on using these scripts during training, and contrasting it with their use on the call centre floor, provided me with one very interesting view of the gaps between principle and practice in the bank. This leads to the second form of ‘script’ I am interested in exploring, the formal ways in which the bank as an organisation presented itself in documents, in training manuals, and in conversation with facilitators and senior personnel. In discussing this version of V-Bank’s script, I am particularly interested in how the people with whom I spoke reflected on that organisational positioning. Finally, there is the figurative script, or transcript, composed of what people had to say to me, in front of me, and around me as I spent time in the organisation. As in any ethnographic study, this ‘script’ was a mix of formal and informal comments, made when people knew I was there but sometimes seemed to not really care if I was listening. This script, and the actions I observed which underlie it, reflect it, and sometimes contradict it, informs all of my comments about the organisation. While I briefly introduce these three types of script in this chapter, using the third type to elaborate on the first two, deeper reflection on the contradictions that are inherent in all of these versions will emerge in Chapter Five, when specific fieldwork scenes are explored in depth and detail.

4.1.4.1 Conversational scripts

V-Bank was committed to a policy of one-stop service. It was the bank’s stated intention that customers should be able to receive uniform service from any and every staff member on the phone. Additionally, conducting financial operations primarily over the phone necessitated particular strategies to ensure compliance with financial regulations and laws, and to maintain security. One way the bank attempted to achieve these goals was through the use of conversational scripts providing bankers with a set of sentences to use during various types of conversations. This included a standard way to answer the phone, a standard sequence to verify customer identity, and standard questions or “probes” to ask during conversations, customized for standard functions such as opening accounts and recommending investments. It also included
standard disclosures about information collection practices and requests for authorizations (made, for example, prior to conducting credit checks during account openings and loan applications), a detailed sequence of questions to be followed when opening accounts, and standard conversational closings. These scripts were introduced to staff during the training program, and a significant portion of training time was spent reading, discussing, and practicing using all of these scripted elements during role-playing exercises. Emphasis during these sessions was twofold—“getting it right” and “making it your own.” While it might seem that these are somewhat contradictory goals, the process of “making it your own” during training primarily consisted of memorizing the correct phrases and practicing until the bankers sounded fluent and comfortable uttering the approved wordings. Once on the floor, “making it your own” assumed a slightly different meaning as bankers, particularly those in accounts acquisition making outbound calls, tweaked their scripts to fit their own sales approaches or to match the forms they were supposed to fill out as they went through the account opening process. It was, in fact, a regular complaint that the forms and scripts were not well-aligned in terms of sequence, since the forms were designed for easy processing while the scripts were written in the marketing division with sales goals in mind.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the frequent tinkering with sales and transactional scripts that occurred, adherence to the formal scripts was strongly encouraged by supervisors and enforced using the call-monitoring process. Call monitors used a call grading sheet which made a point of evaluating the use of scripts, with particular emphasis on using the standard conversational openings and closings, and the security-related question sequences, verbatim. Not authenticating a caller was grounds for an automatic failing grade on the call. While it might seem instinctually correct for performance monitors to focus on delivery of security questions and authenticating every caller, this practice actually led to difficulties for staff members dealing with customers who only wanted general information rather than to conduct transactions, and with customers calling in to complain generally about the bank. Staff had to decide whether to annoy customers by asking for security information which was not actually needed to satisfy the customers’ needs, or to risk being heard by a call monitor while responding to a customer before going through the security process.

Bankers expressed widely varying opinions about the formal scripts they were expected to use. Some individuals commented favorably during training on the level of security provided when
they knew exactly what to say in particular situations, and thought the uniform means of answering and ending conversations contributed to the professional tone of their customer interactions. Others struggled with “sounding like a machine instead of a human being” (VB Notes, p. 19) and resisted the level of control exercised by the organisation when it attempted to proscribe their words and conversational tone. This proved a rich area for exploration during data gathering, and the ways that participants talked about and responded to formal scripts will be further examined in Chapter Five.

4.1.4.2 Organisational scripts

Organisational scripts include the official information that staff, and I as a researcher, were provided with during the training program, and on an ongoing basis during work on the call centre floor, describing the way V-Bank saw itself and the ways it wished its staff to see themselves. Central to the banks’ self-positioning was its value statement, featured in its self-promotional materials for staff and customers. The bank identified five key values for the organisation to promote, and for staff to live out:

- Change is good;
- We believe in better;
- A promise is a promise;
- Simple rules that work;
- Everyone is important. (internal document A97 1997, p. 5)

The official position stated that the bank was attempting to create a new customer/bank relationship, and that, although efficiency was important,

the aim of [V-Bank’s] customer service is not just to handle incoming call volume, but to provide total customer service. Staff are expected to take ownership of clients’ needs and try to resolve whatever they can before referring to another team member. Customer service goals include: addressing clients’ needs as quickly as possible, and avoiding deferral and multiple-person handling. (internal document A97, 1997, p. 5)
The reality that I observed was somewhat different, as staff struggled to balance the customer service imperative with the measurement protocols. When it came to choosing between service or statistics, some chose one way and some another, and the choices brought various degrees of stress into their work life. This was a central feature of the site, and one that will be explored in detail in Chapter Five.

Interactions with customers were guided not just by the conversational scripts discussed previously, but also by a series of eight core guidelines internally titled “World Class Nevers”:

- **Never** quote policy and procedure
- **Never** use acronyms and jargon
- **Never** say, “I don’t know” unless it is followed by “however I will get back to you”.
- **Never** say can’t.
- **Never** make members work when you can do it for them.
- **Never** break a promise.
- **Never** let it show.
- **Never** let a day go by without having WOWED a client. (internal document A97, p. 5)

These guidelines were taken seriously by management to the point that adherence to the first seven was written into the call performance measurement grading sheets. Staff also generally seemed to accept that they represented professional business practice, although there was some discomfort over “Never let it show.” As one worker put it, “only a machine could NEVER let it show” (VB Notes, p. 20). The implication seemed to be a discomfort with the organisation’s attempt to control not only their words and practices, but also their emotions, or at least the ways in which they were allowed or not allowed to display them. While an attempt at this level of control is common across call centres and indeed in much service work (Hochschild 1983), it was questioned at this site by a number of the people I sat with.

V-Bank’s ideal employees are described in one internal document as “entrepreneurial, client driven, marketing experts who are versatile technology users” (internal document A97, p. 5). This description is particularly interesting when compared to the ways in which performance was measured and calls were graded. An entrepreneurial individual might reasonably be expected to
take the initiative to call customers when product offers which matched their financial profile arose; however, service staff in inbound calling were discouraged from initiating calls, as that might tie them up when call volumes rose and increase waiting times for callers. A client driven individual would take seriously the injunction to provide service over maintaining call volumes, but this would lengthen call durations, which was also discouraged both by promoting and rewarding productivity, as measured by the number of calls taken in a specified period. The one point which is clearly non-contradictory is that staff should be versatile technology users. Given the number of different systems and the technological configuration on their desks, only people comfortable with computer technology generally could cope well with the ongoing demands of switching between systems, monitors and keyboards while simultaneously keeping up a conversation with callers.

During the training course, the class and I were informed that the dress code was business casual: “at [V-Bank] as of today establishing guidelines is not part of the [V-Bank] culture” (VB Notes, p. 2). While this statement is clearly aligned with the value statement “simple rules that work,” it is difficult to find an area other than work-wear to which it applies. There were guidelines for conversations, as discussed above, including scripted openings and closings and scripted interjections designed to fit various situations (for example, staff were instructed to always respond to a complaint with “I understand” before beginning to attempt to resolve it). There were guidelines for how long an average call should be, how long a staff member should be on ‘ready’ status during a shift, and how long staff should take to ‘wrap’ a call (i.e. complete any paperwork or data entry arising from the conversation that couldn’t be done during the call itself). Not only did these guidelines clearly exist, but adherence to them was enforced via the monitoring and measurement system. Team leaders had access to live data about every team member and could compare it with the centre average in real-time, so it was not unusual for a team leader to check on his or her team’s statistics multiple times in a shift, and to stop by the pod to check on workers whose numbers were less than optimal. This might take the form of a friendly warning in passing—“watch your wraps,” or “get on ready”—or a more detailed conversation in a formal “coaching session.” Coaching was intended to provide performance feedback based on statistical records and call monitoring, and to facilitate goal setting for sales and service targets; staff varied in their attitudes towards these sessions with some finding them very constructive and others expressing unhappiness that the conversation regularly centred on their numbers rather than other
parts of their performance such as their skill with difficult customers. While it was generally feared that consistently poor statistics would lead to discipline or dismissal, no individuals in my study group were subject to anything more than gentle warnings in the time I observed. Further, no one I spoke to could cite an instance of someone fired for poor numbers, although some knew individuals who had quit the bank because they were feeling stress and unhappiness over being unable to meet their targets. Since statistical lists were posted daily, and top performers singled out for praise, not meeting productivity or sales targets was embarrassing for individuals and evident to their peers. The fear participants expressed about keeping up the statistics was also linked to their concerns for their annual performance evaluation that was linked to potential salary increases, and to a sense that opportunities for promotion within V-Bank required a strong statistical record.

The official ‘script’ that was resisted most forcefully by the people I spent time with was the organisational position that it was a virtual bank, not a call centre. Similarly, there was resistance to the distinction that was made in the training that the outbound callers were “teleselling” rather than “telemarketing,” the implication being that they were participating in something a banker might do rather than something in which a call centre agent might engage. There was actually a debate during class on the topic, and the ‘students’ were distinctly cynical about being told they were not being asked to make cold calls as telemarketers but rather “warm calls” (i.e. calls from branch referrals, despite the fact that the people they were calling were not told by the branch that they had been put on the calling list) as “telesellers.” While one individual during a training session argued the difference was part of “a culture they’re trying to create” most of his classmates were not convinced. Another countered, “it’s like we’re ashamed of what we do” to which a facilitator replied, “no, we’re looking at it in a way we think works” (VB Notes, p. 24). There were a number of times during my fieldwork, however, where it became apparent that although the distinction may have worked for management, it was not working for staff. Some of those in outbound felt as though they had been hired as bankers and employed as telemarketers, while those in inbound calling pods found that their branch-instilled and self-identified standards of service were compromised by the call-centre style performance measurement practices. Despite these issues, which staff frankly discussed as problems within the organisation, there were a number in the group who expressed overall satisfaction with their work at V-Bank. Particularly within the primary group that I worked among, who had worked previously in bank
branches prior to moving to V-Bank, there was a feeling that whatever problems they faced, they were still in a better position with V-Bank than they had been in the branch where lay-offs, rumoured branch closings, new measurement targets, high sales expectations and a shifting management structure had left staff stressed over their increasing workload and frightened for their future. The people in the group I spent time with who had not been bank employees previously tended to be less positive; many had entered V-Bank with a different picture of what kind of work they would be doing, and, as they were all originally assigned to outbound calling to potential customers, were grappling with the stress of rejection during calls and pressure to meet ambitious sales targets. Still, as one participant told me, “V-Bank is what you make it” (VB Notes, p. 31); he, for one, felt that there was room for improvement in the organisation, but also room for advancement.

4.1.5 Summary, Site One

This section has discussed the general outlines of work life in V-Bank, with specific reference to the backdrop of the study, the physical setting in which fieldwork was undertaken, the general characteristics of the people who I had the privilege of talking with and watching, and the multiple types of scripts that over- and underlay the organisation’s interactions with customers and staff.

4.2 Fieldwork Site Two: Credit Union

4.2.1 Backdrop

The second field site that I studied during my thesis work was the call centre of an Ontario-based credit union (C-Union). The call centre was physically located in the central office of the organisation in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Although both banks and credit unions are financial service institutions, a credit union differs from a bank in significant ways. A credit union is, by definition, a non-profit, cooperative organisation, owned and controlled by members through an elected volunteer Board of Directors chosen from among members. Members are all those who have accounts in the credit union; each own shares in the company as a condition of
opening an account, and each receives dividends on those shares and can participate in choosing the Board. While credit unions need to ensure loan and investment revenues exceed operating expenses, they are often noted for being member-friendly and socially-responsible organisations.

The credit union that allowed me to access their call centre for my research was founded in the late 1940s and termed itself “a full-service financial cooperative,” with a network of 12 branches in the Greater Toronto Area. At the time I was at the site, it had about 42,000 members; the organisation has undergone a merger with another credit union since the time I was there, expanding its numbers and network. C-Union positioned itself as an alternative to the “Big Five” Canadian banks, and promoted its member-oriented services and commitment to social responsibility, both embedded in its operating philosophy, as reasons for people to become members.

Unlike V-Bank, which explicitly operated separately from its parent-bank’s brick and mortar branch network, C-Union’s call centre was an integrated part of the parent organisation. Its function was to serve as an initial point of contact for all customers, or members, of C-Union who chose to contact the organisation by telephone, including those who wished to ultimately speak to a branch contact. In an attempt to ease demands on branch staff, call centre workers were told to attempt to determine what members who asked to speak to branch staff wanted to do, and to attempt to assist them before putting them through to the branch. The official target was that no more than 10% of calls into the call centre should be transferred through to branches. This policy led to some apparent frustration for callers who wished to deal specifically with their branch contact, and, on the other hand, some conflict with branch staff who would object when call centre staff put calls through to branches that could technically have been dealt with on the phone if not for the members’ insistence on speaking to a branch representative. Unlike V-Bank staff, C-Union call centre representatives did not provide the complete range of financial services available in a physical banking site. At C-Union, they could conduct basic account transactions, provide investment advice and sell investment products, provide lending advice and set up appointments with branch lending staff, but not provide lending products over the phone.

The call centre, which was explicitly called “the call centre” or “the teleservice centre” within the organisation, was relatively small, with nine staff members including the centre supervisor. It was treated in the organisational structure as an entity on a par with a branch in many ways; for
example, the call centre supervisor attended manager’s meetings along with the branch managers and reported to the same superior officer in the organisation. Call centre positions were sought after by branch staff below management level, as “teleservice officers” were rated at a higher position level in the organisational hierarchy than customer service representative positions in the branch and received a higher rate of pay. This position and pay level were justified within C-Union by the higher qualifications required of call centre workers, who were supposed to be able to provide almost the complete range of financial services over the phone. To accomplish this, they needed extensive knowledge of all of the bank’s products and services, and additionally were expected to take and pass Canadian Securities courses and examinations required to become licensed to sell mutual funds (a process internally called “getting their risers”) within the first year of being hired into the call centre. They were also expected to acquire lending credentials, although the centre did not yet take loan applications by phone, because, as one staff member noted, “we couldn’t spend that long on the phone with one person” (CU Notes, p. 11). There were plans to add lending services to the call centre’s functions in the future, once staffing issues were addressed.

I first entered this site as a researcher affiliated with a project funded by Bell Canada University Laboratories and headed by my supervisor, Andrew Clement. The project was explicitly conceived as part of my thesis research in addition to accomplishing other project goals, and, since I had already completed my fieldwork at V-Bank and done some preliminary analysis, I used that experience to structure my questions and observations in this second site of my study, as per standard practice in grounded theory research which suggests an iterative data collection and analysis process.

My previous research and experience with banking services and call centres helped to smooth my entry into C-Union as an observer, as did my student status and my very obvious pregnancy (about seven months at the beginning and getting bigger as the time progressed) which seemed to provide an initial talking point with the predominantly female staff.
4.2.2 Setting

C-Union’s call centre was located in the head office building of the organisation, a two-story complex located in a semi-industrial area in one of the five former cities and boroughs now amalgamated into Toronto. The location was near to a major highway and easily accessible by car, although reaching the site by public transit would have been a time-consuming challenge. There were relatively few amenities nearby; a bakery and a small “greasy spoon” restaurant were within walking distance, but very little else. With 45-minute lunch breaks, staff seldom went out, but instead brought their lunches and snacks; occasionally, the call centre group would hold a pot-luck lunch, partly, the supervisor explained, as a team-building activity but mostly as to get something other than sandwiches to eat once in a while. There was no sense that staff were concerned about the lack of services or shopping near their workplace however, and no overt complaints about the location beyond some sharing of tips about the best places to connect with the highway during high traffic periods.

The call centre itself was in one large room on the main floor of the building. Desks within chest-high walled cubicles were laid out in three rows. Against the interior wall was located a shared desk with the phone which received voice-mail left for the central number outside of office hours, then one agent’s desk within a cubicle, and a larger area with a table and desk for the centre supervisor at the far end of the room from the door. Her desk was up against a window in the end wall, covered by vertical blinds that were often slit open to provide natural light but were not, in the time I was there, ever pulled back. In the centre row there were four three-sided cubicles, open towards the interior wall and the supervisor’s area. On the outside wall were another three cubicles, open towards the centre of the room. At the end of the room opposite to that with the window, there was a communal file and storage area, with a long counter containing a printer, the binders containing branch staff schedules, and the fax machine. On the wall above was a whiteboard on which branch and call centre holidays were noted along with the names of branch staff able to provide lending services, listed with their availability for appointments. By standing at their desks or craning their necks around the cubicle wall, each call centre staff member could see the board and referred to it regularly when making appointments with branch staff for members. They also frequently had to get up and retrieve the scheduling binders, which each contained appointment sheets for the staff members of an individual branch. Appointments were entered manually on a scheduling form, and every evening one staff member had the
responsibility of faxing through the individual schedules to the branches for the next day. This system caused some difficulties for both call centre and branch staff—branch staff did not know ahead of time what their next day will be like, while call centre staff noted that when branch staff made their own appointments (an act frowned upon but unavoidable particularly when booking follow-ups with members during an appointment) they often forgot to let the call centre know. This had the potential to result in double-bookings, which were often not discovered until the day of the appointment. It also resulted in some delays on the phone, while one agent was forced to put a client on hold to hunt for a binder that another has sitting on his or her desk. Office etiquette dictated that binders be returned to the central area immediately after use, but if the phones were especially busy, this requirement took second place to the dictum that all calls must be answered as quickly as possible to avoid leaving members waiting in the call queue. An online calendar management system would have facilitated this booking process, but was not included when the call centre upgraded its information systems, which it had done a few months before I entered the site.

Each staff member had his or her own cubicle, which they decorated as they chose with family photographs, children’s art-work, or other personal touches. Notebooks, product information binders and brochures, and other paper materials were stored in small cabinets above the desk or in desk drawers, along with calculators, pens, paper clips, staples and other standard office equipment. Most staff had a selection of key documents or notes tacked to the cubicle wall above the desk, such as branch phone lists, memos about current campaigns, and other such information. On each L-shaped desk sat a computer monitor, keyboard, and mouse. By each phone was a card containing a keying guide for resolution codes, although most staff, with the exception of the very newest, knew the codes and rarely glanced at it. The phones featured a small LCD screen to indicate the duration of the current call, the time accruing as the call continued. When there were calls in the queue, a small light on the phone beneath the screen flashed and the number of calls currently in the queue and the wait-time for the oldest call also displayed on the screen. When the light was flashing, staff were supposed to move on to the next call as quickly as possible, although, as more than one person noted, this could be difficult. The phone also displayed the time of day, date, and phone numbers for internal calls (i.e. calls from branches). On each desk there was also a small standing mirror. These were supposed to be positioned so that staff could see their own facial expressions when talking on the phone; they
were the result of a customer-relations training session in which staff had participated before I came to the site. The idea behind the mirrors, I was told, was that if staff were to “smile down the line” their voices would reflect their action and the member on the other end of the line would “hear the smile in their voice” (CU Notes, p. 8). Staff varied in terms of their response to this concept, and in their treatment of the mirrors. Some people had the mirror placed in the officially-sanctioned position by the phone where it could be viewed during a call, while others propped them backwards against their computer monitors, and one used the mirror as an impromptu paper support to prop up documents.

The C-Union call centre, as part of the entirety of the C-Union organisation, had shifted from a DOS-based financial records system to a windows-based system, about seven months before I entered the site. Workers received three days of training on the new system, and had to pass an examination with a 90% grade. One person referred to this training as “the most intensive” she had ever experienced in the organisation. When I asked questions about the computer programs, staff had mixed comments about what they still referred to as their “new” system. Teleservice officers who knew the old system well claimed that it was more difficult to learn but easier and faster to use, as all the functions were accessible from one central menu. The new system featured four ‘managers’ or program components: the teller (for financial transactions), a relationship manager (customer information), a lending manager and an administration manager. Workers had to switch from one to the other and occasionally re-enter information in more than one screen, for example, account numbers had to be entered on both the financial screen to do account transaction and the administration screen to check messages on the account, an extra step that annoyed some staff members. Despite this, most of them expressed their liking for the extra features the new system provided, such as reminder pop-ups on accounts, additional member information, and the ability to print lists. However, there was no information on the new system from before August 1, 1999. Information dating from 1996 to 1999 was still accessible through the old Ovation system, while all information dating prior to 1996 had to be requested from central record keeping. Staff who had worked on the old system had no problem switching systems to look at historical records, although, as one noted, it was a “nuisance [to] have to hop back and forth,” but newer staff who had not used the old system for long, or at all, found the process more difficult.
Staff were expected to be signed in to their computer and their telephone at all times during their shift with the exception of regularly scheduled breaks (45 minutes for lunch and two ten-minute coffee breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon). When calls came in, the phone of an agent who was on ‘ready’ status but not currently talking to a member would ring. Protocol dictated that ringers be set to low volume and that the phone be picked up within two rings, by pressing the button that would send the call through to their headset. When the centre was very busy, however, staff would occasionally allow an extra ring between calls, to “take a breath” (CU Notes, p. 21) as one person put it, before picking up. Breaches of pick-up protocol were clearly noticed amongst the staff, however. When one individual turned up the volume on her phone ringer, it only rang twice before two others were calling to her to “turn that down” (CU Notes, p. 14); similarly, if someone’s phone rang more than three times, another person often peered around the cubicle wall to see what was wrong. Even with the peer-enforced adherence to formal guidelines, the small degree of control over the timing of calls was one factor people referred to favorably when asked about the pace of their work. Agents typically fielded 80-100 calls per day and each had some non-phone duties to accomplish as well in between calls. Some were responsible for returning messages left on the overnight message service, others responded to customer or branch e-mails, or enquiries about the website, dealt with cheque orders, ordered office supplies or took care of the postdated file. Additionally, each was responsible for ensuring one branch binder was updated with scheduling information and liaised with that branch regarding schedules.

Qualitative and quantitative monitoring activities at C-Union were similar to those at V-Bank. Calls were taped, and the centre supervisor could also listen to live calls whenever she wished, without staff knowing. There were no separate in-house call monitors who formally rated call performance, as was the case in the larger V-Bank. Instead, the supervisor indicated that she listened to calls about once a month and provided immediate verbal feedback as part of her “coaching” strategy. More than one staff member told me that the supervisor’s approach was helpful, as they either were reassured that they were doing well or were given specific suggestions about what to do to improve. It was interesting to hear that three staff members when asked about the way calls were monitored said that not all calls were taped, although further probing revealed that what they really meant was that not all calls were listened to live. Qualitative monitoring also took the form of occasional “mystery shoppers”, outside callers hired...
by C-Union to assess calls, often during specific sales campaigns or near year-end, in October. These calls were formally graded on rating sheet using a five-point scale. Criteria included the amount of time the customer waited before the line was answered, different stages of the call including correct use of opening greetings and closing salutations, product knowledge, courtesy, maintaining a professional tone, and appropriate call pacing. The resulting grading reports were shared with staff and used by the supervisor during performance appraisals, which were held twice a year, in November and April. Failing these externally-graded calls had a financial consequence, as individuals whose marks were below the passing threshold were not given dividends for the year, a disciplinary action one staff member referred to as “a slap on the wrist” (CU Notes, p. 26). Finally, all staff were given individual sales or referral targets by the supervisor, and were supposed to keep daily track of these manually. Consensus seemed to be that these targets were achievable (for example, one person gave me the example of her own goal, set with the supervisor, of referring two members per month to financial advisory services) and further, that meeting them was rewarded: you “know you’ll get a good mark” if you meet them, I was told (CU Notes, p. 1).

Quantitative monitoring involved the ongoing real-time individualized collection of call statistics, including the number of calls taken per person, time to response, average call time, broken down into incoming and outgoing calls, (with no specified number of permissible outbound minutes), login and logout times, and times spent in the various states (ready, wrap, not ready). Although the supervisor could check on the statistics in real time on her computer, summary reports were only generated once a month. Staff could see their own information from the report if they wished, but they had to ask specifically to see it; otherwise, the reports were reviewed by the supervisor and discussed with staff only if particular issues arose or to support points raised in coaching sessions. The supervisor annotated a copy of the report if she felt anything on it required explanation (an important ability, and one that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) and then it went on up the hierarchy. Staff could check on aggregate call volumes and average wait-times daily, and many of them did. Another report was generated based on the categorization of each call by staff. At the end of each call, before hanging up, staff entered a one or two digit code (1-14) to indicate what the call had primarily been about.
Categories ranged from branch hours and locations, transfer requests, and member enquiries, to financial transactions and complaints.  

Every staff member I spoke with was aware of the statistical reports and knew that they were monitored quantitatively, so that the supervisor always knew “what are the main things people are calling about; who’s done what, where, when, how and how long it took” because it “comes back to you in the report” (CU Notes, p. 18). However, there was a perceptible difference in the way C-Union staff discussed the existence and use of these reports when compared with similar conversations with V-Bank staff. There was very little overt concern expressed that the statistics might affect them negatively. As one person told me, “every single thing you do is measured, it’s good, yes and no, how your manager handles it makes the difference” (CU Notes, p. 26). The person I spent time with who seemed most concerned with keeping track of her own stats told me that she asked for and used the report as a tool to help her get her “talk time” down, as that was a goal identified in her last performance review (CU Notes, p. 25). The statistics, despite having been the ostensible source behind this injunction from the supervisor, were also positioned as a means to improving performance as defined by the terms of the job—a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. This same worker, a relatively new staff member, said that she was more concerned with “letting the others down” and not answering her fair share of calls by virtue of taking too long on each one than she was about improving her numbers for their own sake. The supervisor actively encouraged this “team mentality” as she called it, and consciously used it as a way to encourage willing compliance with call centre norms. For example, during one staff meeting which I attended, she discussed a series of complaint that she had been getting from branches regarding calls which were being put through to branches when members had questions or needs that could be answered by call centre staff. She noted that she “always considers who the complaint is coming from and what it’s in reference to” but added

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16 To get a sense of the kinds of calls the staff deal with, it is interesting to see the category listing in its entirety: 1. branch hours and locations; 2. non-member enquiries; 3. statement enquiries; 4. posting transactions; 5. loan applications; 6. investment appointments; 7. member complaints; 8. ATM card problems; 9. dormant/inactive letters; 10. car facts; 11. new car loan enquiries/rates/pre-approvals; 12. autobuy; 13. membercare; 14. call relay (Internal document).
that when complaints are legitimate, “it doesn’t make individual staff stand out, it’s the whole call centre including me” (CU Notes, p. 23).

In the C-Union setting, there was also less overtly discussed conflict over the quality/quantity dichotomy that was often mentioned in V-Bank and appears regularly in call centre literature (e.g. Bain 2001; Callaghan & Thompson 2001; Knights, Odih & Calvey 1999). This is not to suggest that it was not present, or felt by staff. As one person told me, “it’s hard sometimes to balance between service and speed” (CU Notes, p. 14). There was also the suggestion, from two staff members on different occasions, that having more people in the call centre would help. In distinguishing between the attitude at the two sites, it seemed that at C-Union, no one talked about the possibility of discipline or negative consequences if they allowed their idea of correct professional practice (providing complete service) to override the imperative to keep calls short. Their concern seemed to be around balancing their own standards and the call centre standards in a way they could live with, rather than around what might happen to them if they failed to meet the quantitative call centre standards all of the time.

4.2.3 Characters

The small size of C-Union meant that I had the opportunity to sit beside and speak with almost everyone in the call centre, with the exception of one staff member who chose not to participate in my research. I spent time with seven teleservice officers and the site supervisor, sitting beside them while they worked, watching and asking questions. I also conducted brief formal interviews with each teleservice officer, and a longer one with the supervisor, in addition to conducting interviews with the telephone system administrator, and with the head of information technology for the organisation as a whole.

There were six women and two men answering the phones, and the supervisor was also a woman. Ages ranged from mid-20s to late 30s, with most falling in the centre of that range. All of the staff had banking experience, all but one in branch banking and the remaining individual in both a brokerage house and another institution’s call centre. Time spent in the financial services industry before joining the call centre ranged from two to eight years. There were two staff members at the centre who had been there since it had been created by the organisation in
December of 1997; the newest staff members had joined the call centre about eight months before I entered the site. All of the staff had some college or university, although some had not completed degrees, and all in addition had taken or were taking the courses required by the call centre to attain their lending certification and mutual funds licenses.

Most of the teleservice officers had come up through the ranks internally at C-Union, with the exception of the two most recently hired who came from other financial services organisations. One of those people noted that the external hires had caused some dissatisfaction within C-Union at the time, since moving to the call centre from a branch position as a member services officer was a significant promotion in terms of both progress through the ranks and from a financial perspective (from employee pay grade level 4 to level 7). This individual said that “initially [branch] people were hard to deal with,” and “cut me no slack while I was learning products,” but rather chided “you should know that” (CU Notes, p. 12). His opinion was that because the call centre is “full service” and staff need to know more and have more credentials than branch workers, the higher grade is appropriate, but it was his impression that “there is always a bit of discontent between call centre and branches over the disparity” (CU Notes, p. 2).

Perhaps partially because of the relatively high status of call centre work within the organisation, the people who worked there all expressed, to a greater or lesser degree, satisfaction with their jobs. Each had particular aspects of the work that he or she found less enjoyable than others, but no one talked about wanting to leave the job or the organisation; in fact, the concern was more often that from the call centre there were relatively few opportunities to move upward in the hierarchy within the organisation, as loan officers and assistant branch managers were also level 7 positions, leaving only branch management and executive-level positions as goals for the upwardly-mobile.

4.2.4 Scripts

As was the case with V-Bank, there are three variants of ‘script’ that I discuss that contributed to the plot line of my C-Union research. There were conversational scripts taught to teleservice officers and tested in supervisory evaluations and, more explicitly, in mystery shop evaluations. There were also organisational scripts, written and oral ways in which the organisation explicitly
positioned itself to its members, staff, and the community at large. And of course, there was the figurative script of the research activity itself, that evolved as I spent time at the site, listening, asking questions, and watching people work.

4.2.4.1 Conversational scripts

C-Union staff were encouraged to use a limited number of conversational scripts in telephone interactions with members. The most scripted encounter was the account opening process, which in addition to the standard opening, collection of specific information, probing for sales opportunities, and closing, included sections informing the new members of the differences between a bank and a credit union, and telling them about the unique services offered by C-Union. The account opening process was one of the types of calls most frequently ‘mystery shopped’ to evaluate staff members’ performance on the phone. While I was sitting beside one staff member, she regularly referred to an account opening process sheet, provided to her during her initial training some months previous, during account opening calls. She told me that it was important for the evaluation process not to miss any of the required steps, so she always took care to double-check her memory by referring to the sheet, just in case the call was being evaluated. Although she did note, when asked, that all of the information she obtained from the members was required to fill in the appropriate forms to open the account, and that most of the information she provided was needed for the new member to understand the way the account worked and the benefits of belonging to C-Union, it was clear that in her case, it was her concern with the evaluation process rather than concern for the business process that led to her being particularly careful to follow the protocols. This is notable simply because it was one of the only instances I observed in this site where staff behaviour was explicitly self-described as being strongly influenced by the monitoring processes in place.

The need for formal authorization to perform credit checks also required staff to provide members with a specific scripted explanation of that process and get their explicit consent for the process. Outside of the account opening process, however, calls were more process-oriented than closely scripted. Between the standard opening greeting and closing salutation the conversations were expected to make the member calling feel comfortable and welcome; ways in which staff attempted to accomplish this goal included using their own first names in their greeting, referring
to customers by their first name (unless they specifically requested otherwise), and maintaining an overtly friendly tone in the conversation. Many of the staff told me that they knew some customers by name from their former branch work, and that they used these past face-to-face relationships to help them establish friendly relationships on the phone. In general, there was less reliance on conversational scripts in C-Union than observed at V-Bank.

4.2.4.2 Organisational scripts

C-Union prided itself, and promoted itself, on its friendly, member-centered service. The foremost organisational script, then, is one that emphasizes the differences between a credit union and a bank. The “credit union advantage” is closely linked to the concept that those who use its services are members, as opposed to customers. As it stated on their website, “Not only are our members joint owners of the credit union, we are directly accountable to them and committed to helping the communities we serve.” Thus, there are organisational scripts that focus on social responsibility, responsibilities to members, and responsibilities to staff, who are also members of the credit union community. Banks in general, of course, and V-Bank in particular, also espoused such general values. The difference that emerged when talking to C-Union staff is that staff expressed a high degree of belief in the general positions taken by the organisation, and a high degree of trust that the organisation would treat them fairly and that the general principles would be upheld. This was particularly the case in terms of the organisational statements reflecting the value of staff to the enterprise, and the institutions’ commitment to maintaining good working conditions. This is in direct contrast to my experience at V-Bank. For example, when talking to V-Bank staff, one expressed concern about the monitoring of personal calls—she was concerned that even the break-room phones might be monitored and said outright that supervisors “don’t tell you the truth” about what is monitored or when it happens (VB Notes, p. 45). At C-Union, however, monitoring practices were not expressed as a troubling issue. One staff member referred to monitoring as follows: “at some companies…kind of a big brother thing” with the clear implication that such was not the case in this workplace (CU Notes, p. 11). A similar opinion was expressed by the VP of Information Technology who expressed his own conviction that the organisation would never “go too far with monitoring because everyone is aware of privacy concerns” (CU Interviews, p. 61). Both staff and the executive agreed that
the monitoring that was undertaken was reasonable for business purposes, and both seemed confident that the monitoring policies in place were appropriate.

Staff also expressed satisfaction with the organisation’s explicit position towards staff as valuable members of the organisation. When asked how this was made manifest in their daily work, more than one employee referred to the fact that the CEO of C-Union knew her name, and recognized her by sight. I too experienced the degree to which the CEO was familiar with his staff. While walking across the reception area of the building on my way to the call centre one morning, the CEO stopped me, introduced himself, and noted that he didn’t recognize me. When I introduced myself in turn and explained what I was there to do, he recognized my name, indicated that he knew that I had been given permission to come in, and seemed genuinely interested in what exactly I was doing there. More material evidence that the call centre staff were valued came in the form of their relatively high level in the organisational and pay hierarchy, the financial support that C-Union provided in the form of tuition assistance for their required certification courses (provided that they passed), the dividends paid out based on performance, and occasional non-monetary bonuses for meeting specific targets. For example, just before I came to the site, the call centre group had met an important target during a promotional campaign, and while I was there, staff voted on the kind of group outing they would like to attend as a special reward for their achievement.

4.2.5 Summary, Site Two

This section has discussed the general outlines of work life in C-Union, with specific reference to the backdrop of the study, the physical setting in which fieldwork was undertaken, the general characteristics of the people with who I had the privilege of talking to and sitting alongside, and the multiple types of scripts that over- and underlay the organisation’s interactions with customers and staff. Some differences between the two sites have also begun to be highlighted here, a process that will continue in more depth in chapter five.
4.3 Conclusion: looking forward to Chapter Five

This chapter has reviewed the key characteristics—backdrop, setting, characters, and scripts—required for a basic understanding of my research sites. It is evident that there are some significant differences between the two sites. While both are set against the backdrop of their membership or affiliation with a larger institution, these institutions vary in size, degree of connection to the call centre, and organisational culture. The first site is relatively large, with about 500 employees on the call centre floor, and is affiliated with an even larger organisation. The relationship between these organisations, officially arm’s length, was complicated by a number of factors, including the fact that many of the staff and all of the financial services-related technology used in the centre came from the parent organisation. While both of the sites used standard call centre technologies and measurements to assess workers, the first organisation explicitly attempted to distance itself from the idea that they were actually a call centre, although that description of the organisation was firmly entrenched in the minds of all the staff with whom I spoke. This led to some interesting gaps between the ostensible goals staff were given and the ways in which performance was measured. In the second site, which positioned itself explicitly and proudly as a call centre, organisational goals and worker performance measurement was believed by workers to be comprehensibly aligned. While staff might question the ways some measures were used, they did not question their collection or express the same feeling of disjunction between what they believed they were expected to do, and what they were evaluated on during performance reviews. Similarly, the differences between the organisational philosophies and cultures of the two sites revealed themselves in the scripts the organisations themselves circulated regarding themselves and their attitudes towards employees, and the ways that employees in each site responded to those scripts.

Of the three differences between these two sites—size, institutional connections and organisational culture— it would seem that the latter looms largest in the responses that staff have towards policies, procedures, and specifically to monitoring and performance measurement practices and procedures. In looking at these responses, the following chapter will focus on two overarching themes that particularly emerged from the data collected in these two organisations. The first is accountability. The ways in which workers in both sites interpret and internalize their accountabilities to the organisation, their peers, and themselves, frequently arose when they discussed their work, how they were expected to do it (i.e. what was measured and evaluated),
and how they actually did it. The second is identity. Workers regularly called upon their own personal identities, beliefs and standards, their identities as professional bankers, and the ways they wished to be seen by peers to explain their actions or responses to organisational practices. These two themes are linked in a variety of ways, and both the themes and these linkages will be explored in chapter five.
5 Chapter 5: Exploring the Scenes

This chapter is one of discussion and analysis. It describes my experiences in the field at my two field sites, the self-titled “virtual banking” arm of a major Canadian bank, essentially a large financial services call centre, and the smaller call centre of a Canadian Credit Union, and then explores the themes and topics arising from these experiences. If Chapter Four set the stage, Chapter Five presents the drama.

It is a simple story on one level, a story of talking to people and watching them in these places, and recording what they told me and what they did. As such, it might conceivably be told linearly: I went to A, I saw B, someone said C. This approach might lend itself to thoroughness and clarity of structure, although it would also tend towards considerable length. However, on another level, as with any fieldwork experience, this is not at all a simple story. Going to site A may or may not lead to seeing B; when people say C, it may or may not coincide with what was seen. It is not simple at all to reduce the complexity of work life and the real people who live it to a string of events and interpretation. Real life is messy, and confusing, and overwhelming on occasion; it defies reduction and demands reflection.

I have attempted to maintain some of the complexity, and provide space for the necessary reflection and reflexivity demanded of qualitative work, in the structure of this chapter. Borrowing from an exemplary book by Julian Orr, entitled *Talking About Work: An Ethnography of a Modern Job* (1996), I have structured this section of my thesis as a series of scenes, (similar but slightly different from what he calls “vignettes”), describing specific situations encountered during my fieldwork. This method has several advantages. First, it provides the luxury of selection. A linear and exhaustive recounting of a long period of fieldwork would quickly become tedious. Further, while there is no such thing as a ‘typical day’ in service work (Orr 1996, 14), some situations do arise more often than others and may thus serve to illustrate central issues at the sites. This is the case in the first two scenes, both of which are specific instances which might be considered representative of the kinds of situations that I observed that linked to the ways in which work was measured at the sites. The first scene serves as a launching point for the exploration of the ways quantitative monitoring was used in the organisations I study to attempt to control work pace and productivity. The second scene leads into a look at the kinds of
qualitative call monitoring processes that were in place, the ways they were received, and their effects as described by front-line workers.

Conversely, events which occur but rarely may be equally revealing, showing up gaps in practices, systems, and responses, or provoking conversations that would not have occurred had work been flowing smoothly. The third scene is of this nature, and serves to call attention to some of the “givens” of the call centre environment, the embedded accountabilities, and the interplay between quantitative monitoring systems and work processes. Finally, using the scenes as an entry point into the data permits an attempt to invoke the ‘flavour’ of the field experience, to make the settings and people spring more vividly from the page.

In these scenes, I have attempted to provide sufficient contextual detail, based on my observational data, to give a sense of the settings and people involved in these events. At the same time, in order to preserve anonymity, all names and certain circumstances have been altered in order to remove potentially-identifying details. The first two scenes are from the first site, the large Canadian bank, and the third is from the Credit Union site.

Each scene is an attempt to create a window into the field, and is followed by a commentary section in which background information to clarify the scene is provided, as necessary, and the themes it reveals are laid out and discussed. At this point also, the breadth of data from the fieldwork that speaks to each theme is brought into the discussion. Each section, then, mirrors the triangular shape of the activity triangle, narrow and focused on top, and widening to a broader discussion at the end. It is important to remember when reading these scenes that, when we look through a window, we have only the illusion of seeing the actual, unaltered scenery outside. In reality, we look through the mediating layer of glass, and our view is only as clear as the glass itself is clear. Even if it is perfectly made and exquisitely translucent, it remains a barrier between us and what we see outside. Furthermore, the glass is a relatively small and clearly defined area within a larger wall; the window not only filters the view, but also frames it.

In this thesis, I have created the glass, and have placed it within its window frame. As a qualitative researcher, all that is recorded here has filtered through my consciousness a number of times, from the seeing, to the recording, to the analyzing, to this writing. I try to be as transparent as possible, but the view through me is inevitably distorted, affected by my perspective, my opinions, my biases and my observational and writing skills or lack thereof. The
choices I have made about where to look and what to look at, and the constraints imposed on those choices by the organisations I worked within form the frame, and this frame also limits the scope of the view this work provides. Despite these limitations, I hope that my writing approaches these fieldwork experiences honestly and richly, and does justice to the participation of the many call centre workers who gave so generously of their time and voices.

5.1 “Let me tell you who I am”: Identity and Accountability in the Field sites

It was during one of my first interviews at my first site, when I asked what seemed to me to be the relatively straightforward question, “how are you evaluated?” that the response began “let me tell you who I am” (VB Interview 3). This person expressed both a clear sense of the ways he wanted to be perceived as a professional in the workplace and the ways in which the monitoring systems, which were key to evaluation, affected the way the organisation could see him. Much later, when I began my first round of data analysis it became clear that almost all of my participants had made comments at one time or another about identity, and the ways in which the systems monitoring them enforced accountabilities that often did not correspond with their personal sense of themselves and their appropriate workplace roles. Questions more specifically about identity and accountability became part of the iterative data generation at the first site and in the second part of my study at the second site, and then I used this data to develop the following definitions and model.

As has been stressed previously, identity and accountability emerge as closely linked in this study. In chapter two, I use literature relating to these topics to explore and define these terms, while in chapter four I begin to demonstrate and discuss the ways in which these two concepts emerge in the study settings. In this chapter, I will proceed to further describe the way in which identity and accountability as concepts are used in the subsequent discussion and analysis, and then elaborate the model that I developed and used in the course of this research. Subsequently, I will discuss the analysed data using this identity and accountability model.
5.2 Forms of identity

The various ways that workers at the two study field sites talk about the way they see themselves at work, as employees, as professional bankers, and as colleagues, suggest that they see identity not just as an internal construct but a social one. There is a substantial body of literature on the social construction of identity, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis, which provides support for this intuitive conception of identity expressed by these call centre workers. I’ve previously referred to Grayson’s description of identity as “a social construct … granted by others” (Grayson 2002, p. 2). This construct, by nature, is fluid and subject to change, or, as Taylor and Spencer note, "identity is a work in progress, a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being re-appraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meanings in a society” (2004, p. 4). Workplaces also have their own unique cultures, and there are often overt and tacit attempts within organisations to define the ways in which workers should self-identity within the organisation; identity in this sense becomes a “compelling construct because it roots the individual in the organisation” (Ashforth et al. 2008, p. 325). Of course, this implies that constructing identity is both political and often contested, an ongoing site of change, reflecting and often reinforcing power relations (Taylor and Spencer 2004). As workers engage with organisations that are “complex social constructions, partly of their own making” (Ardener 2007, p. ix) they experience a variety of tensions, pressures, and dictates springing not just from organisational rules and norms, but also from peers and from themselves. Worker’s identity construction within organisations thus becomes a process in which “people continually define, redefine, question and cross boundaries in their daily working lives” (Moore 2007, p. 14). Further, identity is not a singular construct: “any individual includes multiple identities” each with different, possibly overlapping, “values, preferences, and ways of framing problems, and multiple social roles within each identity” (Schwenk 2002, p. xi). Work identities, then, might include roles like mentor, subordinate, colleague, or supervisor. Furthermore, work identities are created not just in direct interaction with customers, supervisors or peers, but also through digitally-mediated interactions with any of these categories of others with whom everyday work activities occur (Kilger 1994).

If it is true that identities are formed in social interactions, whether face to face or digitally mediated, then what tensions arise when social interactions with customers are tracked, peer interactions are limited, and the organisational identities that matter are digital compilations of
performance statistics? There was considerable variation between the two study sites in terms of the levels of trust in the employer which in turn affected responses to the ways in which work was surveilled. However, even in the second site where workers said they considered their employer to be generally fair and trustworthy, and where workers generally expressed a certain degree of comfort with the monitoring system, effects on the ways in which people positioned and projected their identities in the workplace were still acknowledged by workers and recognized during observation. Three kinds of identity emerged from the data generated at the field sites,\textsuperscript{17} which I have termed organisational identity, professional identity, and peer identity. Although these terms appear elsewhere in identity literature, and were discussed based on that literature in chapter two, I use them here in the ways in which they emerged from the data based on participants’ comments and explanations during the course of the field work.

\textbf{5.2.1 Organisational identity}

Organisational identity includes the ways in which the organisation imposes or defines workers’ identity. When participants described their own interpretations of ways in which the organisation projects, manipulates, or mandates the ways that they were required to present themselves to others, or the ways they felt defined by the organisation, these statements helped to form a picture of the way they perceive organisational identity. Concepts such as worker’s titles and job grades contributed to workers sense of how the organisation sees them, as did the ways in which they felt the job they had to do, did or did not fit well with what the organisation held them accountable for doing. The concept of organisational identity that I use here assumes that while organisational discourses and practices attempt to inculcate particular organisational identities, and encourage identification with organisational values and norms, this type of identity, like other forms, is fundamentally social, and “social identities cannot be read off from organisational prescriptions but are crafted through practice” (Webb 2006, p. 34). Thus, workers constructed their sense of organisational identity from their workplace experiences. A key part of these experiences were the monitoring systems, and the compilations of statistics used to represent the

\textsuperscript{17} I observed signs of a fourth category, personal identity, but the difficulties I would face in generating adequate data about it put it outside the scope of my enquiry.
employees’ performance during merit reviews played a large role in employees’ sense of the way
the organisation saw them and controlled them. When individual call centre agents’ performance
statistics become the central focus of their performance reviews, those numbers on the screen or
printed page, generated and mediated through system interactions, easily measured and
compared, take precedence over less tangible job actions, such as skill at maintaining strong
customer relations. In fact, taking the time to foster customer relationships would impact
negatively on two of the central measures deemed organisationally significant: call time (how
long is each call) and call volume (how many calls an agent processes during a shift). One
participant said it directly: “the way this place sees me is in my numbers… the numbers matter
more than anything else” (VB Notes, p. 34).

5.2.2 Professional identity

Participants in the financial services workplaces I studied had a clearly articulated sense of
themselves as ‘professional’ bankers, and held clear, and relatively uniform ideals about what
constituted appropriate levels of conduct and service with customers. Influenced by recent
studies broadening the definitions of professional identity from its customary institutional
framing to looking at professionalism as an emergent, contingent and localized process (see for
example Watson 2008; Pritchard & Symon 2011), professional identity in this thesis is broadly
considered to be enacted by workers who possess and act based on a set of characteristics self-
identified as central for the competent and professional fulfillment of their job. While
organisational identity is externally imposed or acculturated, professional identity at these sites
was characterized by the workers as internal and self-motivated. Of course, it is clearly the case
that beliefs about what constitutes professional behaviour are learned from multiple, external
sources, throughout ones’ career. Professional identity is ultimately a form of social identity, and
as such it involves group interactions in the workplace and relates to how people compare and
differentiate themselves from other professional groups (Adams et al. 2006, p. 56). The purpose
here however is not to examine the ways in which external norms, attitudes or values are
promulgated and internalized, but rather the ways in which these call centre workers
characterized their own identities as professional bankers, and the effects that these
characterizations had on their experience of work in the monitored environment. Moving from a
concept of professionals as members of discrete professional groups—doctors, nurses, engineers, and lawyers—to look at professionals as “a person who does their job well, no matter what their job is” (Zabusky 1997, 147) allows us to consider and value the extensive skill set and knowledge base required of many service workers generally, and financial service workers in particular. North American call centre workers are very conscious that their profession is not highly valued in western society but if anything, this social stigma contributes to their internal need to believe in the value of their skills. It also caused them to focus on the particular knowledge of banking practices and policies that they felt distinguished them from other kinds of call centres. The workers at my field sites are for the most part university educated, many have a number of years of banking experience, and all need to possess a wide range of knowledge on a variety of financial principles, regulations, and products in addition to knowledge of sales techniques and technology-related knowledge to perform their jobs. Further, they deal with people’s money, something that is fundamentally important to most of us, and the way they talked, with me and among themselves, indicates that they take that responsibility very seriously.

5.2.3 Peer identity

Finally, the third type of identity construction that emerges in this study is peer identity, which is as I define it simply ways in which workers present and project themselves to one another, or the ways the information and monitoring systems present them to peers. Needless to say, these are not always the same, and it is this inability to exercise self-control over the management and maintenance of peer relationships that was the basis for many of the comments workers made that link with this concept. Peer interactions occur in a variety of ways in a call centre, from face to face interactions, to ways of connecting themselves to customer accounts via notes, to online and telephone interactions, to statistical reports containing both individual and amalgamated team performance indicators. As Munro and Mouritsen point out, “our identities are created by the mundane things that we say and do; and by how these are heard, seen or felt” (Munro & Mouritsen 1996); peer identities are both worker’s projections of self, and also the ways in which

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18 This is less the case in, for example, India, where call centres are considered good jobs, in modern environments and with reasonable wages (Mirchandani 2006).
these projections are received. In general, workers lean heavily on their sense of professional identity when interacting with peers—these categories are all interlinked—in that workers often expressed the desire to be considered ‘professional’ by colleagues and would comment about their own, or other’s actions in terms of the degree of professionalism they showed in difficult circumstances. There is also a sense of bonds between workers, an attitude of ‘us versus them’ between workers towards management (although this varied in intensity at different times and was less prominent at the second field site than the first), and also ‘us versus them’ between workers with reference to customers, who were generally acknowledged to be at best, slightly clueless and at worst, difficult, demanding, and unreasonable. People expressed a clear sense that getting the job done in the way it is supposed to be done required all of them to be working, all of the time, and there was a great deal of evidence that workers felt the force of peer pressure to keep up their end of the job, to keep answering calls, keep the queue down, keep the stats in good shape. As one staff member put it, “I don’t want to be letting everyone down, not doing my share” (CU Notes, p. 25).

5.3 Forms of Accountability

The variants of workplace identity, detailed above, are integrally connected to workplace accountability. How we tell the story of ourselves reflects an attempt to project a particular image which corresponds with the way we see ourselves; the way others respond to our accounts of ourselves reciprocally affects our self-image. Identity and accountability are integrally linked (Munro & Mouritsen 1996). And just as identity is a socially constructed product of relationships, so too is accountability a relational and socially constructed product. In a call centre, the monitoring and measurement systems hold workers to external standards of accountability, based on individual statistics, reported in detail in order to ensure individual accountability for meeting organisational targets and complying with organisational norms. However, this somewhat rigid form of organisational accountability acts both with, and sometimes against, other accountabilities that exist in the workplace, including accountabilities for workers to adhere to standards of “professional practice” however those are defined within the industry, and accountabilities to co-workers. As Ebrahim notes, “accountability is highly contingent on relationships and on mechanisms put in place to ensure it” (2003, p. 203).
Workers moreover also “often have accountability to multiple constituencies… the accountability requirement may have different effects, depending on the constituency” (Thoms, Dose & Scott, 2002, p. 309). These constituencies—in my sites, supervisors, customers, and peers-- aligned with the three forms of accountability identified as significant to workers based on participant’s comments and observed interactions. Organisational accountabilities were discussed in relation to the organisation and supervisors’ expectations, while professional accountability was most often discussed in terms of customers, and peer accountability related to interactions with colleagues. Supervisors, depending on the site, seemed to sometimes be considered part of the organisation, particularly as relating to their performance monitoring roles, but at other times relationships with them were seen as being linked to peer accountabilities. This was the case particularly in C-Union, where the supervisor, Zena made an effort to stress to me during conversation that she was judged in many of the same ways the front-line workers were when her performance was assessed, and where her role included filling in for workers in a way that did not regularly occur in the larger V-Bank. She also emphasized this to her team, in a meeting that I observed, when discussing some criticism she had received from branch managers about the call centre not meeting call interception targets (call centre agents were supposed to try to help callers before acceding to a request to transfer the call to a branch). She began by assuring her staff that she always considered “who the complaint is coming from,” but said that with legitimate complaints, “it doesn’t make the individual staff member stand out, it’s the whole call centre including me” (CU Notes, p. 23)

5.3.1 Organisational accountability

Organisational accountability as a category developed from participant statements describing their interpretations of ways in which the organisation holds them accountable for work performance. The statistical reports compiled from the real-time call tracking figured largely in this category, as did various concepts of adherence to standards. Audit trails, account notes, transaction tracking, and supervisory habits and expectations also came into these discussions. So, for example, once while I was sitting with one of the workers, one of my questions reminded her of a situation she had recently faced. She turned to her shelf and pulled down a fat coil-bound scribbler, one of several, and flipped through the pages until she found what she wanted to share
with me. She said, “I keep all my notes, just don’t want to ever get stuck…it covers me and it covers the company” (CU Notes, p. 26). Another issue that often came up in conversations was management’s choice of statistics to prioritize, and the targets set around these statistics which included, most prominently, call volumes. This was criticized to differing degrees between the two field sites. Particularly in the larger call centre, the posting of individual worker’s statistics publically at the entrance to the call centre floor meant that meeting targets became not just a private matter between an employee and a supervisor, but rather highly public and visible. This in turn increased workers’ dissatisfaction over the disjunction between organisational rhetoric about ‘excellent service’ and the primacy placed on getting through calls quickly and keeping call volumes up.

5.3.2 Professional accountability

When participants described the ways in which they felt accountable as professional bankers to their customers, and to had adhere to both the standards of the banking industry generally and those of their own employer specifically, the category of professional accountability emerged. As people talked about it to me, this is experienced as largely an internal accountability, although obviously the principles have been formed as part of a process of acculturation to the profession which includes learning organisational and banking industry rules and mores, from peers and from organisational expectations explained during training and subsequently reinforced by supervisors. Mason and his co-authors found something similar in their study of workplace surveillance and privacy:

Employees clearly possessed their own conceptions of professionalism which involved striking a balance between corporate and client interests, and acting with a sense of ethical and personal autonomy. Their own definitions of professionalism and good performance were, therefore, neither at complete variance with, nor simple clones of, management definitions. (Mason et al. 2001, 19)

In the two field sites I study, the concept of professional accountability was fraught for many participants. To the degree that they felt the call centre measurement and monitoring system was in conflict with how the organisation told them, in other settings such as during training, to
behave towards customers, they experienced an uncomfortable tension of expectations that played itself out in various ways during the workday. “Sometimes I would rather be in a branch,” one worker said, “here there is pressure because [supervisor] knows how many people are in the queue, she’ll say hurry through…but I feel you have to serve each customer completely” (CU Notes, p. 14).

5.3.3 Peer accountability

Participant statements describing interpretations of ways in which their peers hold them accountable for work performance, or ways in which they expect peers to perform, I assigned to the category of peer accountability. As with professional accountability, there were tensions expressed between those members of the workgroup who chose to conform to the performance measures enforced within the surveillance system and work towards keeping their statistics in good shape, and those who preferred, at least some of the time, to focus on the quality of their customer interactions rather than their duration, or just needed a bit of a break from the phones once in a while. Since, in both field sites, statistics were reported individually and for team-units, there was a clear performance aspect to peer accountability as workers wanted to avoid ‘letting the team down’ while also being aware that colleagues are both watching and evaluating individual contributions to the team.

5.4 “You want what you do to make sense, you know?”: The Identity and Accountability Activity Framework

To model these three types of identity constructions and to place them within the workplace, I have adapted an activity theory framework, as described and explained in Chapter 3. As noted previously, activity theory is not a theory in the strictest sense of the term; rather, it is a “cross-disciplinary framework” (Kuutti 1996, p. 25). One of the primary functions of the model in my work initially was simply as a way to structure observations; by focusing on the key activity categories of rules, community and division of labour and the ways these underlying organisational elements were affected by, and affected, workers (subjects), workplace tools, and
the results (or object) of the various work actions, the study was bounded with categories shown to be consequential in other workplace studies.

I have modified the activity model to include identity and accountability categories corresponding to the primary influences at the base of a standard activity triangle. Thus, organisational identity and accountability are closely linked with organisational rules and expectations, while professional identity and accountability are internalized reflections of the formal and informal role hierarchies that comprise the division of labour, and peer identity and accountability are linked to the concept of community within the organisation (see figure 5.1). All types of identity are part of, and act on, an identity subject as she works in a tool-mediated environment to achieve work-required goals. The tools with which she works, with their built-in monitoring capacities are also linked to the ways in which rules influence behaviour and organisational identity, the ways in which the community relates to one another and chooses what to value about one another as peer identity is enacted, and the ways in which formal and informal roles affect and are affected by subjects’ sense of professional identity. Similarly, each type of accountability is present and acting to a greater or lesser extent on the subject. The technological tools and practices around them, including both qualitative and quantitative performance measurement activities, are designed to both externally enforce, and internally encourage adherence to organisational standards of accountability. For example, the system can individually highlight those who are “letting down the team,” and the ways this information is shared or used can affect the way workers perceive both organisational and peer accountabilities.
Figure 5.1 Activity Model of Workplace Identity and Accountability (adapted from Engeström 1987)
In both of the field sites from which the following scenes are drawn, the ‘top’ of the activity triangle, the subjects, in this case the workers, the tools, and objects of the activity relate to each other in the same way. Despite a significant size difference in the two organisations, the call centre workers had similar branch banking backgrounds, were acculturated into their organisations in similar ways through detailed training, used very similar tools, networked information systems which included monitoring software that permitted the same kinds of individual and aggregated real-time statistical data to be both displayed to supervisors and collected in daily, weekly, and monthly reports. And the object of the monitoring activity was also very much the same in both organisations, with a goal of controlling customer interactions quantitatively by focusing measurement on call speed and volume, and qualitatively by subjecting calls to evaluation on the basis of adherence to scripted elements.

However, in the ‘bottom’ tier of the pyramid, which links most closely to the highly contextual and organisationally idiosyncratic elements of rules, community, and divisions of labour within formal and informal role hierarchies, there were both similarities and differences between the field sites studied here. In the area of ‘rules’ there were more similarities than one might initially expect two different organisations to share, partially due to the regulatory requirements of the banking industry in general, and partially due to the use of similar technologies which essentially encode the possibilities for the ways work at these sites is undertaken and measured—in other words, organisational accountabilities were in some ways imposed by the systems used to actually do the work. Of course, differences between the two organisations in terms of the way they situate their organisational identity in terms of mission and priorities, and the ways in which they expect their workers to express this organisational identity when acting as the “face”, or in a call centre, “voice” of the organisation, did arise. The differences between sites were even more evident in the area of ‘community’, which in my model I have linked most particularly to peer identity and accountability; the ways in which workers were able to identify themselves to one another, and with one another, and the ways in which they accepted or rejected the accountabilities linked to the prevailing ‘team’ rhetorics depended to varying degrees on the degree to which teams specifically and community generally were felt to be a genuine rather than imposed construct. For example, the response to the team concept by and among workers was very different between the larger site, which published and used individual stats to rate workers and the smaller one, which only shared aggregate stats publically in the group and gave
individual stats only to the worker her/himself. This in turn affected the ways workers could and did identify one another in relation to their performance. Finally, and interestingly, despite the variation in organisational identity and in community more generally, the division of labour, and formal and informal role hierarchies were, like the rules, remarkably similar (and again, possibly industry-specific). This is in part due to the fact that both call centres had the same structural organisation, a largely lateral configuration with many workers of similar level and a relatively small number of supervisors. Furthermore, the way work was done was largely controlled and constrained by the information systems on which it took place, with software controlling task sequence. This leads in the data discussed below to very clear commonalities in the ways workers conceive of their professional identities and accountabilities as they seek to fulfill their roles, although organisational differences in the ways that these identities and accountabilities were accommodated in practice created differences in the way staff members talked about their work roles.

Just as this modified activity framework was used to organize the structure of field observations for this study, it is similarly used below to help organize the discussion of the findings. Its use is primarily pragmatic, a way to organize the data sensibly and highlight key categories, rather than an attempt to generate a comprehensive theoretical model.

5.5 Scenes and Model Elements

Each of the three scenes that will introduce discussion sections in this chapter has been chosen to reflect a number of the identity and accountability categories that I discuss in this thesis; taken together, they address all categories. Table 2 illustrates which categories are highlighted and discussed in each of the scenes that will form the introductions to the analysis below.
Each scene puts the spotlight on a particular kind of work monitoring and surveillance in the call centre setting. The first focuses on quantitative measures, the many statistics, captured in real time, collected about each agent during each transaction, by the integrated information systems used to conduct calls. The second highlights the qualitative measures used in the call centre sites, most often call recording and listening to live calls. This listening is typically accompanied by rating practices that may include checking on script adherence and providing oral or written feedback reports to workers as part of a “coaching” process for performance improvement. Lastly, the third scene deals with what I’ve called the “immeasurables”; aspects of work performance that are highly significant to workers and that are difficult to capture, measure or assess using standardized evaluations, be they quantitative or qualitative. Here I focus on those things that workers describe as being significant to their jobs that are not captured in monitoring systems, or at least, not easily or well. These are the elements that workers bring to the fore when discussing their sense of themselves as professionals, in particular, but they are also part of
organisational rhetoric—things like “wowing the customer” as my first site described it in training literature—and link to the way workers perceive and relate to one another as peers and colleagues as well. As previously noted, while each scene describes a particular incident that occurred on a specific day and time during the fieldwork, the subsequent discussion casts the analytic net more broadly and incorporates the wider range of data generated at both sites to generate conclusions.

5.5.1 Scene One: “Look at the numbers people!”

Quantitative measurement is a dominant feature of performance evaluation in call centres. They are, in fact, as has been discussed previously in chapter 3, workplaces which are specifically designed in such a way that the technology which provides the means to conduct the work is also the means by which real-time statistical measures can be collected to evaluate that work. A great deal of the call centre literature, reviewed earlier, demonstrates that there is a great deal of tension that may arise as a result of a combination of this built-in, individualized and yet depersonalized measurement capacity, and policies or targets put in place around the results of this technology. In my field work this tension came through very clearly, but what also came through is that even in two sites using exceedingly similar technology, even relatively small differences in practices in using the statistics generated made a difference to the overall attitudes and perceptions workers had towards the monitoring. The following scene will serve to launch a discussion of quantitative monitoring in these two sites.

5.5.1.1 Preamble

The first scene takes place at the first field site, V-Bank. This narrative describes a call that came in to one of the staff members I was shadowing after she had been finished training for about a month. In order to preserve anonymity, all names and certain circumstances have been altered in order to remove potentially-identifying details.
“Look at the numbers people!”

Imagine, if you would, that you have joined me at my first field site, V-Bank. We’re on the sixteenth floor of a downtown office tower in a major Canadian city. The floor is mostly open-concept, divided into “pods”, which are cubicles with low dividers, each set up to hold four workstations. Because there are three inbound and two outbound shifts, many staff do not have the exclusive use of a workstation but rather share with a colleague working a different shift. This means that there are relatively few personal touches on the cubicle walls or on the desks, with the exception of work-related awards. Occasionally you’ll see a “WOW” certificate stuck to a cubicle wall, awarded when a customer was so “wowed” that he or she wrote a letter to the organisation praising the staff member’s level of service. Mostly, it is company memos and updates about products or procedures that decorate the cubicle walls. In an environment where procedures are still developing and changing regularly—staff like to show me copies of procedures they were given on one day that were rescinded literally the next day—this is a popular form of wall adornment.

The most dominant item on the wall, however, is neither personal nor confined to one cubicle wall. It is a large pixel board sign, with glowing red type, that hangs on the far west wall at the end of the room, situated so that it can be easily viewed from almost every cubicle on the floor. This board contains real-time updates of the crucial statistics that the centre wants staff to be aware of at all times: number of calls in queue, average wait times, longest wait time, numbers of staff who are logged in who are and are not on a call at any given time. The information on this board has a palpable and immediate effect on the atmosphere of the room. When no calls are stacked up, one might see staff moving from cubicle to cubicle carrying files or documents, checking their mailboxes, thumbing through the day’s memos
and procedural updates, or chatting briefly with one another in their pods. When calls are stacked up, however, every staff member is expected to be on the line, and there is further an implicit expectation and an explicit pressure to move on to the next call as soon as possible. I initially observed these pressures while sitting with Rena, one of the women in the cohort of new staff members whom I’d sat with during their initial training and followed out onto the floor. Rena had been out of training for about a month at the point of this incident, and was pleased to have been moved to the inbound service division of V-Bank, after a two-week stint in the outbound acquisition division, which she told me had “got her down”. I joined her at 9:30, two and a half hours into her 7 am to 3 pm shift. At the time she first logged on to the phone and computer systems, call volumes were modest although steady, so there was a bit of time for us to talk.

She began by commenting that she was generally enjoying the job, and was still happy to be out of the branch system where she’d begun her banking career. She noted that people who had not come from the branches generally were more dissatisfied, which she put down to the fact that they “knew less what to expect”. She then asked me if I had any questions I wanted to get out of the way while it was quiet, since, she said, the one big thing she’d learned about this job was that she had no control over the work or its pace. Almost concurrent with her finishing that sentence, a call clicked through to her headset, then another, and another. After the third call she had a brief pause—she glanced up at the board, then shared a wry glance with a pod-mate: “42 people to serve the country—atrocious”. A couple calls later, when she had another brief pause, she tells me that “this week has been really busy, and people have been calling in sick so staff is short”. That is the last time we speak for about an hour, as she fields call after call. She glances up regularly, between almost every call, at the board, where the numbers show that the callers wait times are increasing as call volume
continues to build. Just then, a floor leader wearing a white hat so that he stands out between the cubicles walks by briskly, pausing briefly at every cubicle, checking to see who’s on the phone, who’s doing something else. As he walks by he barks out “look at the numbers people”; I see a woman two cubicles down the row standing at the printer startle as he speaks, then snatch her document and slip into her chair as he passes. He looks down at her as he goes, but does not stop, merely repeats, “look at the numbers”.

When he is well past, Rena tells me in a low voice “We call them floor ferrets now instead of floor weasels”, and when I look confused, having never heard either term, she explains briefly. “What they do, make us feel guilty for taking a second off the phone, is pretty weasel-like, but weasels are wild animals and these guys are tame employees, so we switched to ferrets. They look like weasels, but they’re pets.” (VB Notes, p. 49)

5.5.1.2 Discussion
This scene makes visible a number of elements of the quantitative surveillance apparatus in this workplace setting. The huge sign flashing the ever-changing queue numbers and real-time performance figures makes the gaze overt. As one worker put it, “now we have the jumbo-tron here they can see how many are ‘not ready’ and get after us” (VB Notes, p. 35). Whether or not staff are fulfilling their accountability to the organisation, in the form of keeping the numbers at recommended thresholds, is highlighted every minute of every shift. Autonomy in the job is diminished as work pace pressures build; maintaining the pace is further enforced by the floor monitors, who roam the room with the explicit goal of making sure ‘bums are in seats’ when the call volumes are high. This pace is also to a large extent determined by the combination of technologies that deliver calls to the headset and account details to the screen, and workers at this site have no control over this process. In other sites with similar technologies, descriptions such as “exhausting,” “robotic,” “controlled,” and “machine-like” are often used by agents discussing the nature of their work (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, p. 33). In this scene, Rena explicitly describes her understanding that she has no control over her time when she is on “ready” status.
on the phones. Implicit in her comment is acknowledgement that being ready for calls is one of the key organisational accountabilities expected of her, a recognition reinforced by the presence of statistics reflecting the number of agents on calls displayed at all times. Peer accountability is similarly linked to this expectation; when Rena makes her commiserating comment to her pod-mate regarding the paucity of staff on duty, there was a clear sense of ‘us facing the world together’ in her words and her colleague’s response of lifted eyebrows and slightly twisted grin.

Floor leaders, when they are not making their physical presence felt, are known by staff to have access to the real-time transaction records of every employee on the call centre floor. Workers, however, have to reconcile these active attempts to impress upon them their responsibilities to the queue with a competing rhetoric, one we see active in this scene in the organisationally-encouraged display of “WOW” certificates in cubicles. Typically, organisational rhetoric in inbound call centres is concerned with ‘customer care’, or ‘keeping customers happy’ (providing quality service). The pressure for keeping customers happy at the same time as keeping the numbers up to keep the supervisors happy and meet organisational accountabilities is a core conundrum in call centre work (Houlihan 2000, p. 232). Of course, from an organisational standpoint, service quality is about more than just having a good customer interaction, it is also about answering the call quickly, to avoid irritating customers or having calls abandoned. It is a difficult balance to achieve for workers and supervisors alike, as Bain et al. point out, in that “any prioritization of quantity has implications for quality, and vice versa” (Bain et al. 2002, p. 172). Virtually all of the call centre authors who write about work conditions mention the difficulty of dealing with these competing goals. Korczynski and colleagues suggest that this dilemma is particularly difficult for front-line workers because they may be likely “to identify with embodied individual customers, for interactions with specific customers may be an important arena for meaning and satisfaction within the work” (2000, p. 671). Formally, within the formal role hierarchy of the call activity, management requires both quality and quantity of calls. Most visibly at this site, however, quantity is stressed, while for most of the staff members with whom I spoke, it is quality which more closely aligns to their sense of professional identity, which is integrally connected with providing good service to each individual caller.

This is not to suggest that workers don’t recognize that speed is an element of good service. Indeed, callers would routinely open a call with a comment about the time they were waiting on the line during busy times, requiring staff members to apologize and soothe those who were
annoyed before moving on to the purpose of the call. Those conversations, in fact, extended the
call duration and exacerbated wait times for the next callers, creating a difficult cycle. Even staff
members who openly spoke of resisting the push to rush through calls acknowledged that the call
statistics affected their behavior to some extent, particularly when queues were long. Most
frequently, however, they would not explicitly say they were conforming to organisational
expectations by doing so (although they were, willingly or not), but would attribute the steps
they would take to expedite calls to ‘helping the team’, or pulling their weight, giving priority to
peer accountability. This sense of needing to support peers seemed to be given strength by the
recognition they all had that one of the largest factors affecting wait times was staffing levels,
over which they had no control. In the smaller site this was less of an issue since the centre had
very little problem with absenteeism and very little variation in staff levels over the course of the
day. In the larger centre, however, they seemed to be having more difficulty ensuring staffing
levels were high at peak call times, partially because there were often a significant number of
people calling in sick on any given day. As one agent put it during a fieldwork visit I made near
to the time of this scene with Rena, “We’re getting hammered on the numbers today, there’s a lot
of people away but it doesn’t matter” (VB Notes, p. 38). The knowledge that the organisation
would hold them accountable for the same call and queue targets regardless of whether staffing
levels were optimal led to mixed feelings about team members calling in sick. On the one hand,
everyone acknowledged that the stress of the job could “get you down”; on the other, skipping a
shift put additional pressure on everyone else. In general staff would express their concerns
about staffing levels to me while I sat with them in their pods in terms of what they perceived as
the organisation’s failure to schedule enough people at peak times. However, there was at the
same time a recognition, revealed most often in casual critical comments about an absent
colleague, that people not coming in as scheduled was exacerbating the problem.

The internal tension between quality and quantity, between organisational accountabilities and
professional identities, finds outward expression in Rena’s reference to her floor leader as a
“floor ferret” (VB Notes, p. 49). Interestingly, neither she nor any other participant had
developed a derogatory name for the monitoring system itself; their scorn and dissatisfaction
were focused on the low-level supervisor tasked with enforcing the targets ostensibly set by the
system and confirmed via upper management policy. Front-line supervisors themselves had little
if any discretion in choosing which statistics should be generated or how they could be
interpreted during performance reviews. While there is human agency involved in interpreting the figures, managers are “assisted and to an extent driven by the sheer volume and sophistication of management information available to them” (Callaghan & Thompson 2001, p. 22). The relationship between management and staff is changing in technology-intensive workplaces such as call centres, as the once personal task of supervision is increasingly mediated by these automated systems. And in this site, the floor leader’s vigilance in reviewing the statistics and patrolling the floor reflects the fact that he himself is judged primarily on his team’s productivity as measured by those same statistics.

Even at C-Union there was sometimes tension between the supervisor and staff. As one worker put it, “I feel you have to service each client completely before moving on” (CU Notes, p. 14). This is not a problem exclusive to call centre workers. Certainly in other research I conducted in the branch banking system there were also issues with line-ups putting stress on front-line agents to speed customers through transactions while supervisors watched. The nature of the electronic monitoring system however, which not only records the length of every transaction in seconds but also creates a permanent record of every daily transaction changes the nature of the supervisory gaze in the call centre.

Various authors studying the effects of electronic performance measurement (EPM) systems point out supervisory relationships are one of the first things to change in moving to an electronically monitored environment. Amick and Smith summarize the issue as follows:

Implementing an EPM system can change the relationship between the supervisor and the employee and the substance of the feedback or interaction. Where once the supervisor was important for ensuring that a worker completed a work quota or maintained the appropriate level of service, the computer can now be programmed to monitor this. EPM systems can reduce the supervisory function to checking data to ensure that the employee is not at variance with current production norms. (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10)

This process has implications for both supervisors and workers. When feedback is exclusively or primarily based on data from the monitoring system, staff may become a “faceless stream of information” (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10) for supervisors. For some supervisors, being an enforcer for the system rather than a decision-maker or leader is also a source of stress. In terms of my sites, this was visibly more the case in the first, larger site and much less in the second.
The smaller size of the second call centre site, and the organisation within which it was located, mitigated against an impersonal approach by the supervisor. Further, there was an emphasis right from the top of the organisation on keeping in touch with staff. As one recent hire to the call centre put it to me, “I like this company. I know the CEO here, at [the bank I worked at previously] I was just a name” (CU Notes, p. 12). He went on to say that he felt the CEO has employee needs as a priority along with member’s needs: “I have no complaints” (CU Notes, p. 12).

In the first, larger site, it would simply not be possible for the CEO to have known his workforce that well, both because there were so many workers, and because the turnover rates were so high that faces came and went frequently. To draw on the activity theory model, the difference in the nature of the community underlying the two sites clearly affected connections, or lack of connections, between peers both in terms of who workers identified with, and who they felt accountable to. Thus, while in the first site the supervisor/staff relations were, at least sometimes, sufficiently strained that staff could refer to their floor leader as a “ferret”, in the second site, the supervisory relationship was most frequently characterized by staff as supportive, even when staff had concerns about particular targets or performance measures used to judge their work. In part the difference related to the ways in which the two sites used the quantitative reports generated by the monitoring system. At V-Bank, individual statistics were published in lists posted at the front entrances to the call centre floor, with high performers (identified as those with the highest productivity as indicated by call volumes) singled out for praise with their name written large under the heading “The Best”. In contrast, at C-Union, while the same individual-level statistics were collected, only aggregate statistical reports were circulated to staff. One worker noted “You just get to look at a brief general report, you have to ask for it, they print it monthly for reporting but it’s not given to staff as a matter of course. Zena uses reports if there’s a specific issue to take up with a staff member” (CU Notes, p. 13).

Attitudes to the quantitative measurement linked to the electronic monitoring of calls varied, of course, not just between sites but between individual study participants. While one made a point of telling me his favorite thing about the job was the fast pace and that he enjoyed seeing how many calls he could “push through” in an hour (VB Notes, p. 44), others identified the constant pressure to keep their stats in good shape as their least favorite element and wished they could have more control over the pace of calls. In general, however, when asked “If there was one
thing about your job that you could change, what would it be?” the most frequent answer was a variation on the idea of ‘less focus on quantity and more on quality for calls.’ Similarly, other authors have found that call standards that focus on low call time thresholds lead to stress and dissatisfaction with the monitoring and measurement system. Taylor and Bain (1999), for example, describe an organisation in which stress soared when not one call centre team was able to meet newly reduced call standards, yet there was no admission by management that this indicated an unrealistic standard rather than an underperforming workforce. In both my sites workers generally accepted the employers’ right to quantitatively monitor their work, and acknowledged the importance of call queue management; what made them unhappy was the priority placed on the quantitative measures, which, they felt, were unable to take into account things about the call that mattered more than how long it took, such as whether the customer hung up happy.

In summary, staff who think of themselves as professionals, and base their professional identity on providing good customer service and advice, often express frustration at being judged primarily by productivity statistics which can only be improved by taking more calls in less time (or in other words, spending less time with each customer). Other researchers have found similar results (e.g. Bain & Taylor 2000; Knights & McCabe 1998). When quantity is stressed over quality, as is often the case in systems relying heavily on statistical compilations to reflect work, workers may feel depersonalized, unrecognized for their unique characteristics and abilities. Further, losing supervisor support and professional identity due to conflicting priorities can be stressful (Amick & Smith 1992, p. 10). The effects of this varied markedly between my two field sites. At the V-Bank site, I was told “The numbers are the most important thing, they care about them more than service or anything else” (VB Notes, p. 45); this is in contrast to one worker’s comment at the C-Union site, “it’s not so bad here, the whole numbers thing, but I know some places are really bad about it” (CU Notes, p. 12). This is not to suggest that the numbers were not a performance focus at site two, which used precisely the same call measures and statistics as site one to contribute to staff performance evaluation. But there was a sense that those numbers were not the only thing taken into account, and staff acknowledged
5.5.2 Scene Two: “Hope I wasn’t being monitored because I’d flunk”

As previously discussed in chapter 3, qualitative measurement is also a part of worker evaluation in call centres. It is conducted primarily by ‘listening in’ to calls using the built-in capacity in the system that allows supervisors, or call monitors, to listen in covertly to any telephone conversation of any worker at any time. This listening is, of course, subject to policies developed by the organisation and in my field study, varied significantly both in frequency and use of the information thus obtained. In theory, qualitative call monitoring might be expected to balance the effects of the quantitative measures, allowing for intangibles such as a good manner with customers to be recognized and included in the overall performance measurement process. In practice, this may or may not be the case, depending on the way this kind of monitoring is conducted. The following scene sets the stage for a discussion of the ways that qualitative monitoring was conducted in my two field sites.

5.5.2.1 Preamble

The second scene also takes place at V-Bank, after the group of trainees who I have been shadowing have been ‘on the floor’ of the call centre for several weeks and are settling into the job. The participant I write about here is an experienced banker, although not an experienced call-centre agent. The incident described in this scene is one which demonstrates concretely and succinctly the disconnect that many of the participants who spoke with me also described: a gap between how they felt they should behave with customers as professionals, and how the way they were evaluated within not just the quantitative monitoring structure, but also within the qualitative, call monitoring process. Or, in the terms I use in my framework, this section will discuss organisational identity and accountability, and professional identity and accountability, as illustrated in the scene below. Although this scene stood out during data collection because the person I was shadowing was so explicitly clear about the expectations the organisation had for her, and about why she chose to act in a way which contravened those expectations, the conflict between the way calls were evaluated and worker’s conceptions of “good service” came up again and again in the fieldwork, to a greater or lesser degree in both sites. This scene also brings to the foreground the tension that workers experience when trying to negotiate a conversational script, speaking prescribed phrases in a required order, while remaining responsive to the customer on
the line who has no interest in adhering to the elements of the conversation that the script writers’ deemed appropriate.

“Hope I wasn’t being monitored because I’d flunk”
We’re at the same site as the previous scene; I am sitting with Susan, a member of the group that I met while sitting in on their five-week in-house training session. She is in her early thirties, and worked for the parent company for ten years prior to transferring to V-Bank, moving up the ranks from teller to financial services representative in that time. She speaks frankly about the unhappy nature of some of her past experience in the branches of the parent bank, and is clear about having come to V-Bank in the hope that the atmosphere and work environment will be less stressful and more secure. Her previous branch experience included working in a branch, and with an individual who I spent some time with during a previous project I did within the branch system of the parent bank; having an acquaintance in common has helped to facilitate my relationship with her.

The pod in which we sit is on the north wall of the building against the windows. It is C-shaped, with two desks facing into the room and two facing opposite ends of the room. There is a narrower desk against the back wall, in front of the windows, that holds a mainframe terminal, printer, and some document binders. Susan’s desk is the one facing the east end of the room, towards the wall on which the pixel-board status display is hung. Next to her, facing into the center of the room, is a colleague, Carrie. The other two desks in the pod are empty today. It is just past 3 o’clock, but Susan and I have been here for more than an hour despite the fact that Susan is scheduled for the 3:00 to 11pm shift. She tells me that she regularly comes in early to catch up on paperwork before her shift starts because she finds it difficult to keep up with when the phones are busy while still keeping her
phone stats strong. Susan has logged into the phone system promptly at 3 and dealt with a couple of routine transactions. I have permission to listen in on the calls at this site, so I have my headphones on and am listening as she transfers funds for one caller, and pays a bill for another. Susan is confident on the phone, despite having only been on the floor for about a month. She credits her long experience with the organisation, her detailed knowledge of its products, and her strong customer service background with providing a certain comfort level when dealing with customers.

The next call that comes in begins with an angry male voice demanding to know why he had not heard back from the bank about a problem with his account that he had reported several days previously. He said he wanted to close the account, and had several derogatory things to say about the level of assistance he had received from bank staff. Susan kept her voice level and sympathetic. She managed to convince him with her words and tone that she personally would investigate right that minute, then proceeded to do so. First, she checked the note area of his file to see what had been done about his complaint. When she discovered no notes had been entered onto his file about the matter, she went into his accounts and soon had the issue sorted out, a process she accomplished while carrying on a soothing conversation with the customer. When she had fixed the problem, she offered him apologies for the delay and a discount on service fees for the next three months to compensate for his inconvenience. She also promised to print out and fax a copy of the correction to his account so that he could confirm that the problem was now fixed. By the end of the call, the customer was happy and did not close his account with V-Bank. Susan closed the call according to the script, entered a resolution code on her phone, and then went on ‘not ready’ so that she could print and fax the document immediately as promised. Then she turned to me and said, “I hope I wasn’t being monitored, because I’d flunk.” I expressed surprise at this statement,
and told her that I was impressed by her skill, which had clearly just saved a customer for the bank. “But it wouldn’t matter” she told me, “because I didn’t authenticate the caller, and that’s an automatic failure on the monitoring grade sheet.” She went on to explain that it was her experience that with extremely irate customers, especially ones calling to complain about poor communication and failure to get things done, that going through the detailed authentication process, requiring the customer to answer a series of at least three security questions, often angered them further. She also noted that given the customer’s detailed knowledge of the account in question and description of the problem, it would be unlikely to have been anyone but the account-holder. “So, I use my judgment sometimes, even if I know it might get me into trouble. I’d rather satisfy the customer” (VB Notes, 39).

5.5.2.2 Discussion

The first scene discussed in this chapter made visible the quantitative aspects of the monitoring practices in this call centre setting, this scene highlights the qualitative monitoring of calls and the ways that this affects identity and accountability for workers. In both sites, staff knew that a certain number of calls within a certain time period would be listened to, and evaluated, by either a trained call monitor at the first site, or by their direct supervisor in the second. They were not informed when their calls would be monitored and the individual doing the monitoring conducted it remotely and undetectably; the particular call that was evaluated would only be identified when the evaluation was shared with the worker during what both sites called “coaching sessions.” The sites differed somewhat in their approaches to this qualitative form of evaluation, however.

At V-Bank, employees were told that calls were taped for two reasons: disputes with customers and performance measurement and coaching (VB Notes, p. 4). After a three month ‘grace period’ to allow workers to become comfortable on the phones and well-established in the bank, workers could expect that any of their calls might be listened to live at any time by a call
monitor; a few days after a call was evaluated, the staff member would receive an APMP\textsuperscript{19} report which detailed the strengths and weaknesses of their call using a set form. Call monitors were specially trained workers who performed their evaluative function full-time. The form they used for evaluations leaned heavily on adherence to scripts, so that, for example, the employee would receive points for using the correct opening greeting, and the mandated closing phrase. The scripts in question were developed in the marketing department of the bank and focused centrally on making sure legal warnings and disclaimers were conveyed and on inserting relational sales techniques into transactions. Staff were thoroughly trained in their use during their five-week training session, and it was stressed that the “Script teaches a process and that process is the best way to serve your customer” (VB Notes, p. 25). Role play exercises were used to have workers practice using these scripts, and on one occasion where the trainees were faltering, the facilitator warned succinctly: “Don’t wing it the first time, get used to it. Next Friday you’re on the floor live, you have plenty of time to prepare and it’s embarrassing not to know and there will be no one to blame but yourself” (VB Notes, p. 19). There were guidelines for conversations, including scripted openings and closings and scripted interjections designed to fit various situations (for example, staff were instructed to always respond to a complaint with “I understand” before beginning to attempt to resolve it).

Although students obediently worked with the scripts during training, they did return with questions after spending some time shadowing other portfolio managers while they worked on the phones. While some came back from their first experience with the phones to report that long-time workers “say lots of phrases word for word even if they say they don’t use the script” (VB Notes, p. 25), others found that the scripts were actively rejected. One person observed that “those who do it by the book aren’t the most successful,” (VB Notes, p. 14), while another trainee even came back to report that the person she worked with had told her to “forget” the script as quickly as possible (VB Notes, p. 25). These experiences concretely reflect worker’s ambivalent attitude towards scripts, and consequently the form of measurement which stressed them. As one worker explained it, “there is a real question how valuable APMP is, [they are] always really negative, [people] never read them. I see people throw them out, dismiss them,

\textsuperscript{19} APMP is the acronym for the Audible Performance Measurement Protocol, the standardized form filled out by call monitors and sent to workers via interoffice mail to document their ratings on monitored calls.
because they’re always so negative” (VB Notes, p. 32). Another described seeing one outbound calling group giving enthusiastic high fives to the member of their pod with lowest score. During the time I was in the field at the site, it was true that the average call score on the qualitative call evaluation forms was between three and four out of ten; for staff, this called into question the validity of the measurement. A mischievous rumour was circulating while I was at the site that one of the call monitors had been sent back to training in disgrace because he was “marking too high” (VB Notes, p. 32).

In the scene above, Susan does take the thought of a potential negative evaluation seriously, and she clearly knows the script she is supposed to follow. In other calls I hear her go through the mandated steps conscientiously. However, in a situation where the organisational script, and her accountability for adherence to it, conflicts with what she characterizes as her ability to “satisfy the customer”, she prioritizes the latter. This speaks clearly to the degree workers oriented to their professional identity; failing an evaluation would go on her record and be considered when it was time to review performance and assign merit pay increases, yet she knowingly risked this consequence and explained to me that she felt justified in doing so. Similarly to Rena in the first scene discussed in this chapter, Susan characterizes this customer orientation as “professional” behavior in later conversation and, in this situation, explicitly chooses to behave in a way that supports her professional identity rather than comply with an organisational accountability which conflicts. In terms of the activity model, it seems clear that the worker engaged in the call activity is able to recognize the factors underlying her action—the rules, the community expectations, and her expected role based on her position—but she may choose to prioritize one of those over the others to achieve her desired outcome which in this case was to save a customer for the bank.

In contrast, at my second site they had a much more flexible approach to call monitoring. The supervisor listened in to a few calls monthly for each worker and then would meet with them to talk about one of them. It was considered a coaching session, and staff in general felt that it was useful feedback. One staff member went so far as to say, “it’s a good thing to find out if you’re doing something wrong, and she [referring to the supervisor] is good about telling you when you’re getting better” (CU Notes, p. 5).
There was little concern reported about the fact that the supervisor might be listening to them at any time, as they trusted her to monitor ethically and choose valid points of evaluation. No one mentioned fear about personal calls being monitored, a concern that did arise at the first study site. Further, more than one staff member and all of the management level people I spoke with at the second site, CU, expressed a belief that the organisation was actively committed to privacy protection, and said further that they trusted that that commitment was genuine and implemented in practice. This trust seemed to be well-founded; in an interview with the director of Information Technology for the organisation, I was told, “privacy protection is a given, it just has to be in place for staff and customers” (CU Interview 4, p. 6). One person when asked about the kinds of monitoring that took place said that he’d heard some companies used monitoring as “kind of a big brother thing” (CU Notes, p. 12) but was sure his company wasn’t like that. While there, I observed people surfing the web, checking out non-work-related sites, and dealing with personal email, clearly with no expectation that their non-customer time was being tracked. In other words, they knew what was monitored, felt that it was fair, and had no concerns that monitoring would exceed those established boundaries.

Elsewhere in the literature, others have also found a degree of acceptance for call monitoring if it is perceived to be reasonable and limited. For example, Lankshear and colleagues (2001) found that many call centre workers accepted monitoring as an employer’s right. Particularly in a financial services setting, even workers who disliked the way in which monitoring was undertaken could also acknowledge that call recording could protect them against customer accusations if there was ever a dispute about transactions, and recognize that the legal and regulatory requirements of banking require clear traceable transaction records. Furthermore, at both sites, supervisors expressed awareness that workers needed more skills than the monitoring system could measure, and at both sites, they knew who was good at handling customers, who was always being asked questions by colleagues, and on other side of the equation, who had a good record of high volume and short call times but wasn’t so good about giving customers correct information. However, they expressed varying degrees of frustration in their ability to work that knowledge into the formulas they were expected to use for evaluation. At the C-Union site, where the supervisor had considerable autonomy and discretion in dealing with her staff, she felt confident that she could find constructive ways to address employee’s shortcomings and strengths in face-to-face meetings and her staff, in turn, were quite positive about the value of her
feedback. At V-Bank, the call evaluations were removed from the role of front-line supervisors, yet supervisors were put in the position of being in some ways responsible for the low marks received by their staff. This left supervisors feeling as though they needed to chastise staff based on poor performance, while staff in turn felt that their supervisors were failing to appreciate the fact that using the mandated scripts (on which they were marked) made the work of keeping customers satisfied on the phone more difficult. This, not surprisingly, caused some dissension between supervisors and staff. It is documented elsewhere that “to be economical and effective, performance measures must assess the right things from the users’ point of view and be understood by those whose behavior can affect the performance that is being measured, as well as by those who use the performance data to make business decisions” (Halachmi 2000, p. 89). As Halachmi points out, “opposition is likely to occur, in particular, when requests for data to comply with performance reporting needs seem to interfere with efforts to do what needs to be done from employees’ point of view” (Halachmi 2000, p. 97).

What employees valued came out quite clearly during their training. After doing a brief stint on the floor sitting with a more experienced staff member to observe the work process, the trainees were brought back and given the opportunity to discuss the things they had seen that impressed them as being professional and effective. Their list included:

- merged a customer file
- was so organized
- had so much fun and still opened 6 accounts by 9 pm
- made as many calls as he did (outbound)
- able to do so many things at once
- had such patience when dealing with an irate client
- got so many accounts in so little time (VB Notes, p. 18)

The one skill they all agreed was most impressive was the ability to handle difficult customers, or, as one person put it, “My person was very professional, good at calming down irritable customers” (VB Notes, p. 15). Significantly, in terms of the criteria covered in the qualitative measurement process, this was not a skill that was graded.
In general, at both sites, it seemed that the degree of acceptance workers express with qualitative call monitoring varies depending on the degree of trust they have in their supervisor and/or call monitors to use the results of monitoring appropriately, and the extent to which they trust the organisation to set reasonable goals and apply call criteria flexibly and to staffs’ advantage. As Westin (1992) predicted, reactions to monitoring in my sites did relate to organisational trust. Thus, at the C-Union site, where calls were monitored by a well-liked supervisor and the results discussed periodically in personal coaching sessions, workers expressed considerable trust that monitoring would be used to help and protect them. Conversely, at V-Bank, calls were assessed by call monitors who issued formal reports based on stringent criteria designed to evaluate workers’ adherence to set scripts and recommended actions. At this site, these reports were reviled and mocked by workers. This finding is not surprising, and is in fact supported by other empirical studies of electronic monitoring (for example, Ahrens & Chapman 2002; Alder & Tompkins 1997). Overall, quantitative measurement seems to cause workers more stress and discomfort than qualitative monitoring, but other research has also determined that the level of acceptance of qualitative monitoring is determined by local practices, and specifically by “the way data is used for evaluation [which] may also influence worker views on the legitimacy and fairness of any monitoring taking place” (Lankshear 1999, par. 5).

When we consider the identity and accountability framework, it is interesting that although the qualitative measurement process might, by definition, seem well positioned to capture the kind of performance data that would accurately correspond to workers’ ideas of professional accountability, that is, accountability to do a good job for customers regardless of the time it takes, it may or may not do so. In the C-Union site, where the qualitative measures are used both to advise workers on how to improve their quantitative numbers and to improve their conversational and selling skills during one-on-one coaching sessions, workers did describe the quantitative call monitoring as helpful, even if they found it intimidating to think that any of their calls might be listened to without their knowledge. At the V-Bank site, however, where the qualitative measures were codified into a measurement form that was based on adherence to scripts, graded by trained call monitors, rather than direct supervisors, and where feedback was provided in a standardized written format, workers expressed significant dissatisfaction with the process. If anything, the qualitative measurement process seemed to provoke more negative comments during interviews and conversations than did the quantitative measures when
discussing evaluation (as opposed to the effects on pace or call quality, which were primary concerns about quantitative measures). This may be linked to a sense of lost opportunity; workers who explicitly discussed their professional identities as effective providers of customer service expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that organisational accountability for script adherence took precedence over what they saw as professional accountability for providing a good customer experience during the call.

5.5.3 Scene Three: “We will investigate your complaint”

While the first two scenes were chosen to lead into discussions of forms of measurement and the effects these measures have on workers’ various identities and accountabilities, the third scene this chapter will discuss is a bit different. It is concerned with what I have termed ‘immeasurables’: the ways in which the different types of measures and the unique exigencies of call centre work combine to impact workers’ sense of their identities and accountabilities. A key factor in this is the emotional labour required of workers, a set of skills that are vital to the effective conduct of work, are taken for granted as necessary, and yet are not well captured in the formal evaluation processes in which organisational accountabilities are grounded.

5.5.3.1 Preamble

We turn now to the second site, C-Union. What follows is a narrative which describes one incident that occurred in this site, which provides some specific details which allow for a grounded discussion of the kinds of identity and accountability constructions that I observed at this site and some of the ways in which they emerged during the fieldwork. While there is no such thing as a ‘typical day’ in service work (Orr 1996, p. 14), some situations do arise more often than others and may thus serve to illustrate central issues at the sites. Conversely, those which occur but rarely may be equally revealing, showing up gaps in practices, systems, and responses, or provoking conversations that would not have occurred had work been flowing smoothly. The following scene, which occurred at the field site midway through the research, is of the latter variety—a departure from the norm that provides a window which reveals to some degree all three types of identity and accountability constructions that emerged from the
fieldwork, while at the same time providing a glimpse into the particular challenges of call centre work.

“**We will investigate your complaint**”

We’re sitting today with a call centre agent we’ll call Carla, whose desk is on the same interior wall as the supervisor, Zena, but at the opposite end of the row. It’s Friday afternoon and the phones have been ringing constantly. Zena is away today, and a senior member of the call centre, Brigitt, is acting as supervisor in her stead.

Carla’s desk contains a monitor and keyboard on the left end of her L-shaped cubicle desk which faces one of the gray dividers. The phone sits beside the computer, to the right. Beside the phone is a list of codes for transaction tracking, and the small standing mirror meant to remind her to ‘project a smile down the line’. Along the right arm, there are shelves on a hutch where binders and papers are stored. On the desk itself, she has a couple of pictures of her children, and a child’s drawing tacked to the divider along with some work-related papers. Each agent in this centre has his or her own dedicated cubicle which permits this personalization of the space.

I’m sitting to Carla’s right, away from the aisle. I’m not wearing headphones, as I don’t have permission to monitor calls in this site, only the work-side interactions. Still, I’ve spent enough time in financial services sites at this point to be able to generally know what’s being discussed from hearing one side of the conversation and watching the agents as they work on the computer. And of course, my specific interest is not in individual
transactions, but in more general patterns of interaction between workers and their systems, and in what they tell me about their work experience. In between calls, if she’s not filling in forms or catching up on data entry on the computer, we chat and I ask questions that I’ve jotted down as I listen or watch during times when she’s too busy to be bothered by me.

The phone rings yet again and she picks it up. She gives the call centre’s standard greeting, then listens. I can see on her face as she listens to the first few words the caller speaks that the tone is unpleasant; she frowns, which is an expression I have not seen before in the several hours I’ve been shadowing her. She is silent for several seconds, still listening, then attempts to speak. “May I...” is as far as she gets before the caller begins to speak again. The caller is a woman; she is speaking loudly enough that I can hear the occasional word from Carla’s headphones, which is highly unusual. Some of the words I hear are obscene, others derogatory. Carla is getting visibly more upset. Her hands on the keyboard are clenching, her expression is unhappy. She attempts to calm the caller, speaking quietly and politely, telling her she can tell that she is very upset but that they could work to address the problem. The caller continues to yell, sometimes audibly to me. At this point in the conversation, the acting supervisor comes down to aisle to Carla. It’s not clear at this point whether she was monitoring the call or sensed the tension or just happened to be making the rounds, but she immediately sees the look on Carla’s face and stops. Carla looks at her and mouths the customer’s name, and the supervisor nods sympathetically. Apparently, then, this customer is known to the staff, and it would seem this is not the first unpleasant encounter.
Brigitt steps up behind Carla and lays her hand on her shoulder, a position she holds for the remainder of the call. Carla at this point is fighting back tears—one slips down her cheek and she wipes it away with a fast swipe of her hand. Her voice, though, remains steady and calm, although the tone is increasingly clipped, rigidly professional as she closes the call by saying, “we will investigate your complaint and a member of our staff will call back to discuss it with you within 48 hours. Good bye”. As she presses the button to terminate the call, she also hits the ‘make busy’ button which prevents another call from being sent through to her phone. Then she slumps in her chair, face in her hands. The supervisor says, “take a break, sign off for ten minutes and recover.” Carla signs off but stays in her seat.

Her supervisor turns to me and says, “everyone needs to cool off after dealing with this particular woman.” She further notes, “we have no protection from this kind of abuse.” Carla says several times, “someone should tell her” but it is apparent there’s no one who can, and no process in place. Later, the supervisor will tell me that the unscheduled break will show up as an anomaly in the daily statistical report which details among other things call volumes, durations, wait times, and break times, broken down by agent. She notes that she will have to annotate the report to explain the additional break, but adds, ‘within reason, I have the flexibility to do that so long as the explanations are good. Management will notice it but not call me on it if it doesn’t happen too often.’ Carla gets up and goes out for a while, I sit there and scribble notes furiously. When she comes back, she says, “some days I wonder if it’s worth it” then signs into her phone and, as the phone instantly rings, launches into the next call. (CU Notes, p. 27)
5.5.3.2 Discussion

In this brief scene, it is possible to see all three kinds of identity and accountability constructs in evidence. Although all are interlinked and work on each other and in each other in nuanced ways in the data, it is useful to separate them for the purposes of discussion.

Let us consider organisational identity and accountability as evidenced in the preceding scene. In scene one, organisational accountability was made physical in the form of a big pixel board sign emphasizing the importance of the numbers. In this scene the ways in which the organisation mandates and manipulates employee identity are slightly more subtle. Consider the mirror on the desks, for example. It is a concrete, physical reminder of a very important rule in the organisation, and of the degree of control that the organisation wishes to maintain over the way staff project themselves to customers—it is necessary but insufficient to speak politely to customers, workers must also ‘smile over the phone’. Although both sites used this technique and all the participants regardless of location had a mirror on their desk, not all of the staff members were entirely convinced of its utility or remembered their training. At this same site, another staff member, when asked about his mirror (which was sitting prominently on his desk beside his phone), said he wasn’t totally sure why he had to keep it there, although he knew he was supposed to: “it’s something to do with facial expressions but it doesn’t help if you’re having a bad day, sometimes you just want to shake the phone” (CU Notes, p. 14).

This is a vivid example of the kind of emotional labour that call centre workers are required to perform. As mentioned in Chapter 2, emotional labour refers to the ways organisations expect workers to project emotions that they do not feel or even to attempt to internalise expectations around appropriate emotions they are supposed to feel in work situations (see, for example, Hochschild 1983; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002; Mirchandani 2008). Here, Carla, while being subjected to fairly severe verbal abuse, maintains a calm, if increasingly formal, tone throughout, betraying virtually none of the internal stress she’s clearly feeling based on the external evidence of her facial expressions, gestures, and tears. The identity the bank wishes its employees to maintain, calm and courteous to members at all times, is maintained, despite intense provocation and distress. So, Carla doesn’t say ‘go to hell’ or ‘quit yelling at me’, she says ‘we will investigate your complaint’—she sticks to her script as both professionally and organisationally she is expected to do.
The monitoring apparatus is both overtly and covertly a part of this scene. Overtly, the supervisor is visibly present and listening to the call; while her posture is one of support, her explicit role within the qualitative monitoring system is as the one who listens to and judges calls on behalf of the organisation. Her presence is expressive of peer solidarity, workers supporting one another to deal with customers, but it is also a reminder of organisational expectations.

Beneath the scene, Carla knows that all of the calls are taped, and that the tapes are particularly likely to be pulled and listened to in the event that a customer complaint is escalated beyond the call centre. In this monitored environment, there is always the possibility that lapses in phone protocol will be noted retroactively, even in situations without an overt supervisory presence.

Built into the system is an explicit means of enforcing the rules and assuring compliance with the organisational identity that workers are expected to project, a panoptic gaze that means lapses cannot be assumed to be covered up or slipped by even if no one seems to be listening at the time.

The second form of identity that emerged clearly from this scenario is professional identity. In the scene above, Carla’s determination to maintain control of her emotions on the phone is likely to stem partially from her own sense of appropriate professional behaviour as well as from her knowledge of organisational expectations. Her formal role is as the calm and helpful ‘voice of the bank’, but even beyond that role, agents in this centre talked about themselves as financial services officers first and foremost—the call centre was where they worked, but did not necessarily entirely define how workers themselves formally, informally and personally characterized the work. Rather, although the call centre standards for call volumes and duration were accepted as a feature of the job, and certainly affected the ways in which they managed their time, the standards that more deeply spoke to their self-identification as professionals were those of the financial service industry more generally. Many of these, particularly the expectation of a high level of customer service, were the same in branches and the call centre, even though the ways these levels were measured very differently in the electronically and quantitatively-monitored call centre and the predominantly qualitatively measured branch network. Since most of the call centre workers had previous branch experience, either in C-Union or another institution, it is hardly unexpected that this would be the case. Indeed, in studies with medical students it has been shown that early experiences in the professional environment have a formative influence on the development of professional identity (Adams et al. 2006, p. 61).
This identification with the role of banker over that of call centre agent is at the heart of professional identity construction at both of my study sites. As discussed in other places previously, those activities often cited as being professionally fulfilling generally related to making connections with customers, solving difficult problems, or providing investment advice that was appreciated and acted upon, and none of these activities coincide well with a fast call time. The fact that in C-Union the statistics—the projected and digital organisational identity—were assessed in conjunction with other targets and methods of evaluation, including a personal assessment by the supervisor, seemed to ameliorate the effects of this potential conflict however, particularly when compared to my V-Bank site where supervisors had less autonomy or discretion in evaluating performance.

Another revealing statement derived from the scene above is Carla’s repeated statement, “someone should tell her” (CU Notes, p. 27) referring to the fact that someone should tell the abusive caller that her behaviour is inappropriate. The fact that she herself did not tell the caller this during the call despite intense provocation seems like an indication that her sense of what is professionally appropriate behaviour is deeply internalised. Carla’s scene is an unusual one, both in the degree of abuse she was subjected to, the overt presence and empathy shown by her supervisor, and her own steely self-control. It was not the only situation in which I heard call centre agents get an earful from irate customers, however. One agent I sat with quietly disconnected the call when he felt a line had been crossed, noting “he’ll call back even madder but I’m not going to get him again and I shouldn’t have to deal with that” (VB Notes, p. 35) Others exerted themselves to soothe or reason with the customer; many, such as the case I describe in scene two, were successful. Other call centre workers often linked the concept of professionalism to being “good at calming down irritable customers” or “saving customers for the bank” (VB Notes, p. 15). Despite this customer-oriented perception of professional behaviour, however, there was a clear sense of frustration that there seemed to be no recourse for workers who experienced verbal abuse from a customer. This was expressed both by Carla and her acting supervisor. Implicit in the statement is a criticism of a system that holds workers organisationally and professionally accountable for a standard of behaviour but fails to be accountable to them in terms of providing protection from harassment or verbal abuse. Mirchandani points out that, for “customers calling in, there is little accountability; their responses remain largely anonymous and free from the normative requirements of public
interactions as they are often calling from the privacy of their homes” (2008, p. 91) while workers are “closely monitored and easily identified” (2008, p. 91). She suggests that the “work of maintaining dignity” is a big part of emotion work (p. 93).

Finally, the third type of identity construction that emerges in this scenario is peer identity. It was mentioned above, in the discussion of organisational identity, that Carla was likely influenced by the presence of her supervisor, but that influence was potentially bipartite, as the supervisor in this case was a colleague acting as supervisor in the primary supervisor’s temporary absence. Carla is likely to want to perform in a way in which supports the identity she wishes to project to her peers—someone who stays calm and professional under pressure, someone who does not let the team down under any circumstances. There is another element of peer identity and accountability present as well. Perhaps as an expression of her sense of what we might call community, in terms of the activity model, after the call, the acting supervisor places her fellow-feeling for Carla above the desire to keep the stats in good shape. This is an act made even more notable given her “acting” status which might make her actions both more visible and more likely to be questioned by senior management. She justifies giving Carla an unscheduled break, (and I should stress that in the months I spent in this and the other site during my study, this is the only time I saw this happen) by saying “everyone needs to cool off after dealing with this particular woman” (CU Notes, p. 27) which serves to both take the heat off Carla for breaking down (and in front of me, an outsider) and to rationalize her unusual action in terms of a commonality of shared experience amongst workers.

Just as there is a tension, a push and pull, between what the employer mandates as core accountabilities and how workers prefer to self-identify in their work roles (which affects the accountabilities they choose to accept as primary), so there is often tension between the accountabilities peers demand of one another while still identifying with one another as colleagues. While the scenario that leads this section is a strong example of a case where peer accountability led the acting supervisor to take a risk with her organisational accountability for keeping the numbers consistent, there are also, of course, times when peer accountabilities lead to additional pressure for workers. One small example comes from the same field site as the Carla scenario. In V-Bank, calls were pushed automatically to headsets, but at C-Union, the phones would ring and workers could control when they picked up (although the stated threshold was to allow no more than 3 rings). Workers took this target seriously, but also appreciated that
they had some small degree of control over initiating the call: “we’re supposed to pick up as quickly as possible when it [the phone] flashes, but sometimes I let it go once or twice and take a breath, just to get ready” (CU Notes, p. 21). The organisation set the three-ring threshold as part of their quality control efforts—customers should not wait on the line. From a worker perspective, however, this rule also worked for them. In their relatively small, enclosed workspace, constant ringing interrupted their own calls and trains of thought. Thus there was a great deal of unspoken pressure to pick up quickly, taking only as much time as needed between calls to take a quick breath. During one somewhat slow period while I was observing, one relatively new worker turned up her phone ringer volume to maximum while she left her desk to send some promised documents to a client by fax. By the second ring, two people were already calling out to her to “turn that down” (CU Notes, p. 14); this despite the fact that her absence from her desk was visibly work related and it had only happened once. It seemed as though, in that environment, standards of behaviour to accommodate peer preferences were strongly felt and defended.

As another example, again in my second site, staff members were responsible for updating branch schedules by hand and faxing them through every evening; anyone could write in any schedule, but one person had the responsibility to get it to the branch. If someone forgot to check the holiday schedule before making an appointment, everyone could figure out who had been careless via the handwriting in the binder. More than one person noted in conversation that they tried to be very careful with appointments, as it would cause problems for them with colleagues at the call centre, and with people at the branches, if there was a mistake. The concern about maintaining cordial relations with the branches was interesting in that call centre workers described their alignments as clearly towards their immediate call centre colleagues first, and their branch colleagues second. Although all but one of the call centre workers had come up to the call centre through the branch system (and that one had begun in a different financial institution), staff at this site chose to self-identify specifically as “C-Union call centre workers”. There was, in fact, a certain status to being a member of the call centre, where agents were given a higher grade classification in the organisational hierarchy, with the requisite increase in pay, when they worked in the call centre. This was done in recognition of the wider range of knowledge call centre agents required to provide the “one stop shopping” the call centre aspired to, in comparison to the stronger division of labour by role in the branches. This organisational
support in the form of providing some control over pace, allowing agents to pick up calls rather than pushing them to headsets, and also conferring status and financial remuneration provided a foundation for an organisational identity for the call centre workers that was, from both inside and outside the call centre, generally positive. The status conferred by the organisation onto the call centre and its staff, in turn, supported strong peer identification that was then fostered in the relatively small working environment of the call centre itself. Perhaps typically, although organisationally the emphasis was on all divisions working together as a team, in reality there was stronger peer identification amongst units than between them. Or, as one agent put it, “It’s colleagues that you spend the most time with, everyone here helps everyone, we really pull together here” (CU Notes, p. 26).

This contrasts very sharply to the attitudes of workers in the first study site, which differed in several important ways. First of all, rather than characterising the call centre as a site of expertise with the status that might carry for workers, the organisation itself, in its internal literature and training materials, resisted seeing itself as a call centre at all. Workers were referred to, and referred to themselves, as “Portfolio Managers” (PM) which was a variant of a title that was also used in the branch banking system of the same organisation despite a very deliberate functional separation between the “virtual” and “physical” divisions of the organisation. There was considerable conversation, both in training sessions that I attended, and casual chats over coffee or lunch, about whether or not the organisation was or was not actually a call centre. There was a fairly large degree of consensus that it would be helpful for training purposes, and facilitate better supporting practices for staff, if the organisation would acknowledge that it was operating on a model that was clearly based on call centre technologies and operational principles. Or, as one staff member put it, “[they] don’t admit what we’re doing is telemarketing and cold calling, so problems relating to those things don’t get addressed directly” (VB Notes, p. 45).

The disjunction between organisational rhetoric about the nature of the business, and the day to day reality of working on the phones while being subject to the monitoring practices facilitated by the linked call and computer technologies seemed to contribute to some of the conflicts that staff reported feeling about all three identity types, organisational, peer and professional. For staff who had come to V-Bank from its branch network, in response to job postings for “Portfolio Manager” positions, there was a reported sense that the organisational characterization of the positions and their expectations in accepting them based on their knowledge of what those
positions entailed in a branch environment were not matching well with the reality of the work they were required to do. External hires also spoke of experiencing a disconnection between what they thought they were being hired to do and where they ended up: one went so far in an interview as to state directly, that he “was brought into [V-Bank] on false pretenses,” expecting to be working in the area of “one on one portfolio management” but ending up doing outbound acquisition calls (VB Notes, p. 44). This of course complicated feelings of organisational identity, as predicted by other research (e.g. Wegge et al. 2006) but the fact that workers characterized themselves as either external or branch hires (and were trained separately, with slightly different training content to reflect the former branch workers’ greater knowledge of organisational practices and products) also complicated the peer identity relationships at this site, a complication exacerbated by the fact that “externals” tended to be young people freshly graduated from a university degree and “branch hires” were generally a bit older, having been in the workforce for at least a few years.

Nonetheless, there was a visible sense of peer identity at this site; I observed many more examples of occasions in V-Bank when peers would rely upon one another to deal with difficult situations, including disgruntled customers, than times when they would seek help from a team leader. Similarly, they turned to one another rather than supervisors when they needed advice or information about processes or products. For example, one of the PMs with whom I sat decided on her own initiative to make a collection of various disparate lists, memos, and guidelines that she saw people using when she first came onto the floor or that people referred her to when she asked for help in particular situations. These documents, which she kept in a yellow folder in her desk drawer, became one of her primary resources when she was unsure of a process or procedure when dealing with a customer—and this became the case not just for her, but for all of the members of her pod, and occasionally others in neighbouring pods as well who would come to ask her to take a look at the folder. She downplayed the contribution her initiative had made to the group, but did note that when she wasn’t sure what to do, “usually there’s someone around to ask, and I get asked a lot too” (VB Notes, p. 39).

Standard call centre monitoring and measurement practices, both quantitative and qualitative, are designed and encoded into the underlying technologies that both facilitate and shape the work. But there is a great deal that such measurement systems can never capture. This is not to suggest that they should try to do so; rather, it is a simple acknowledgement that front-line service work
is often complex and unpredictable, requiring organisational knowledge but also considerable social dexterity. How can the value of peer assistance be measured? What is it worth on a performance evaluation if the account is saved but the rules not followed? Which shows up on the call log, the amazingly professional call in the face of abuse, or the unscheduled break that followed it? There is a considerable body of work on performance measurement to support a contention that it does matter what the measurement system measures, how it does so, and how closely the choices made by those who design the system align with the way workers prioritize their tasks. Theoretically, when it is well done, workplace performance monitoring can benefit organisations and individual workers; practically, the benefits more often adhere to the organisation. However, when measures fail to reflect genuinely important job skills or attributes, it seems reasonable to ask if the information gained from the monitoring is capable of providing the kind of picture of the organisation on which strategic decisions should be based, never mind whether it is a reasonable or fair assessment of employees. At V-bank, many of the workers I spoke with felt the measurement system was unable to truly evaluate the important aspects of their work, and a small number were so disillusioned with it that certain aspects of it became a bitter joke. In contrast, as we see in my fieldwork at C-Union, it is possible for workers to believe they benefit from monitoring. There, the standard call centre measures are used in conjunction with other forms of evaluation, including personal review of calls and immediate coaching by the supervisor, which was positioned and perceived as constructive and fair evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, and spoke directly to those ‘soft’ skills of conversation that workers themselves value as important to their work.

5.6 Thoughts to close

My two field sites, represented by the three scenes above, each have similar monitoring technologies and policies, but vary significantly in their monitoring practice, and comparing and contrasting the two reveals a variety of factors that affect the degree of success workers’ have in finding a personally satisfactory balance. Primary among these factors was the organisations’ practices around the monitoring process, including such practices as providing supervisors with flexibility in using and interpreting monitoring statistics, perceived levels of respect and consideration for employees as human beings rather than just the sum of their numbers, and
perceived adherence to employee-friendly policies such as privacy protection and call control. I found that people were less concerned with levels of surveillance if they trusted their employer, if they felt that the consequences of the surveillance, which for them linked to performance measures, were fair and might in fact benefit them, and if they believed that they were told accurately what was monitored, when, and what was not. They were accepting of some level of surveillance if they could see some utility in the process for themselves, such as a call recording that might show they really had provided disputed information, or even if they could justify it in terms of the needs of the organisation to follow regulations. These call centre workers were far more concerned if they didn’t trust what their employers told them about the surveillance or its potential consequences; if they believed its purpose was primarily punitive, or if they felt it held them accountable in ways which clashed with how they felt they should behave as ‘professionals’.

This makes sense; as Allen and colleagues have written, “organisational members develop their understanding, use of, and responses to electronic surveillance through everyday interactions and conversations” (2007, p. 173). Everyday experiences with the monitoring technologies of course influence worker’s perceptions. As an example, consider the way monitoring is discussed amongst peers in the two study sites. In C-Union, where workers said “[supervisor] mostly uses the recordings to help us” (CU Notes, p. 26) the attitudes to monitoring were significantly more positive than in V-Bank, where monitoring was not seen as providing constructive guidance. It was in fact held in such disdain that workers were seen giving “high fives” to the group members with the lowest scores. It seems fair to say that while workplace surveillance is typically characterized as a tool to ensure accountability, its use also has fundamental implications for the ways people experience work identities.

So what do these findings mean in relation to call centre monitoring and performance measurement? In my two sites, we see a significant contrast. At V-Bank, a relatively new call centre that was still negotiating its own organisational identity internally, it often seemed that the capacities of the monitoring technology, rather than a strategic plan taking into account the well-being of workers and the needs of the organisation, was guiding the choice of data collected and the measurement methods. At C-Union, a smaller but more established centre, the same technologies with the same capacities were used in different ways that, while not completely unproblematic for workers, were acknowledged to be generally reflective of work realities due to
the balancing of quantitative and qualitative measures with supervisory judgment by a trusted manager. So, for example, when a reliance on statistical indicators of productivity in V-Bank caused workers who spent time “building relationships” with their customers on the phone to be ranked lower on published performance lists than those who dealt more rapidly with customers, those employees (who had been explicitly trained in relationship management) felt that their carefully-developed professional skills, on which they based their sense of professional identity, were not valued. In contrast, at C-Union, productivity-related statistics were used in aggregate to encourage the group to work as a team to meet targets, and individually in coaching sessions to help employees hone their skills, which included handling calls expeditiously but also focused on other facets of their call performance. In this setting, where organisational accountability was more clearly and closely aligned to professional responsibility, staff spoke much more positively about the use of statistical performance indicators.

This suggests that customizing the standard call centre performance measures in particular types of centres, something which the literature shows is rarely done, might be beneficial. Ideally this would occur at the design stage: as Zuboff warned when computers began to proliferate in workplaces, “choices that appear to be merely technical will redefine our lives together at work” (1988, p. 5). However, such systems are now firmly established and remarkably consistent across the multiple industries in which call centres play a part. Thus, this customisation need not be at the system level, necessarily. My data suggests that simple and relatively inexpensive management changes such as choosing which of the standard measures to use or emphasize can make a significant difference for staff.
6 Chapter 6: Conclusions: “It’s good, yes and no…."

This thesis provides a rich and detailed account of call centre work as it is experienced by persistently monitored front-line staff. I began with a broad research goal, to address the question: How is call centre performance monitoring, both quantitative and qualitative, experienced by front line call centre workers? Using a grounded theory approach, in which questions emerge through iterative data collection and analysis, my work become more precisely focused as the key categories of identity and accountability emerged during ongoing observation and interview data. The central questions developed around those concepts asked, how does the monitoring experience relate to workers’ professional, organisational, and peer identities? How does it relate to their professional, organisational, and peer accountabilities? How do identities and accountabilities interact, conflict, coincide or collide and what insights can we gain into the monitoring experience using these concepts?

A literature survey was conducted, looking at work related to call centres and electronic performance measurement (EPM), and of the concepts of identity and accountability in a variety of disciplines as they specifically relate to the ways in which workers position their own sense of identity and accountability in their workplace. This literature was drawn from a number of disciplines, including industrial relations, sociology, psychology, management studies, economics, and political science. There is relatively little crossReferencing across disciplinary boundaries (with some notable exceptions, such as Ball 2001; Ball & Margulies 2013). In particular, there are few connections drawn across topics within the literatures looking at call centres and EPM and those looking at identity and accountability (although there have been mentions of identity and/or accountability as topics worthy of further exploration within the call centre literature). One of my goals has been, where appropriate, to integrate some of this work in the course of my research as it applies to my field sites while addressing gaps remaining in these bodies of work.

For example, there is considerable research in the area of accountability that discusses the workplace conditions which facilitate or negate accountability, and some that links this to
traditional performance monitoring, or to electronic performance monitoring. However, the call centre literature seldom draws upon this body of work which nonetheless can provide a number of insights into ongoing issues linking accountability to monitoring in call centres. Relatively few studies within the accountability literatures are based on qualitative studies, although various authors (e.g. Lerner & Tetlock 1999; Thoms, Dose & Scott 2002; Sinclair 1995) have called for more qualitative research located within workplaces, in order to study the complex set of conditions and practices which are likely to affect feelings about, and practices of, workplace accountabilities. As Sinclair has noted when looking at clashes between personal and professional accountabilities, “what accountability counts for whom and why” (Sinclair 1995, p. 232) requires further attention within workplaces, and this is a part of what I have attempted in this study. I began by asking, to whom do workers believe themselves accountable? In what ways? How do they talk about it, if they do? And how is accountability to clients, colleagues, company and self reconciled within the structured demands of the monitored workplace? We know from previous research that “accountability is highly contingent on relationships and on mechanisms put in place to ensure it” (Ebrahim 2003, p. 203); in this thesis I have brought a qualitative lens to bear on the relationships and mechanisms that exist in my two financial service call centre research sites as a way to bring conceptual clarity and perhaps suggest potential practical solutions to well documented problems described but not solved in the call centre literature.

One of my key questions when I began this research asked “How do people identify themselves in their workplace?” Beginning from a conceptual position that identities are emergent, dynamic and part of a relational process (Musson & Marsh 2007), I wished to explore what I anticipated would be the multiple and potentially shifting identity constructions in these monitored workplaces through the stories workers would tell. Within my selective review of literature on identity, there is some work in the management literature that talks about identities in relation to managerial staff (see for example Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Musson & Duberley 2007; Thomas & Linstead 2002; and Watson 2008), but little that explicitly considers the front line workers’ identities, a gap I wished to rectify. It emerged during data analysis that professional identity, as participants defined it, was a key concept for these call centre workers. While it is becoming more common in the management and sociological literature to discuss professional identity as a broad concept rather than narrowly linking it to traditional “professionals” such as
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engineers, doctors or lawyers (Dent & Whitehead 2001), there is relatively little work examining the ways white collar workers in front line positions discuss their own sense of professional identity which could inform the questions I wished to ask about the ways in which the monitoring systems affect individuals behaviour and their relationships in the course of daily work. Additionally, although there are a number of recent studies about the ways in which identity performance is affected by digitally-mediated forms of communication, most of that research was conducted in relation to social media rather than workplace systems. This means that very little literature to date has focused on the experiential nature of workplace monitoring from an employee perspective, yet, as monitoring and other forms of surveillance increasingly expand into white collar workplaces (AMA 2008), this is an important area to explore. My work is grounded then in these multiple topics and diverse literatures, which I bring together while focusing on the central concepts of identity and accountability as described and enacted by participants in my two field sites.

My ethnographically-informed research was performed at two call centre sites that both use similar suites of technological tools capable of producing identical performance measures, but have different policies and practices for the use of this data, which results in very different kinds of stories from workers who experience monitoring in the two environments. I began my fieldwork by asking questions about the ways that the electronic monitoring/measurement systems in place in the field sites affected workers, and set out to learn about workers’ perceptions of the way measurement systems function in their workplace. From listening to these stories and examining them during data analysis, I identified two key concepts: identity and accountability. That accountabilities were often discussed is not surprising when one focus of the study is the ways in which work is monitored in these sites, but there was also recurring mention of various concepts of identity, particularly as it relates to perceptions of professionalism. Reflecting on this data, I developed a framework, based on an activity theory triangle, in which the three kinds of identity, organisational, professional, and peer, that I found in the data were linked with organisational, professional and peer accountabilities. These identities and accountabilities interact in a network that includes the information systems that constitute the conditions of work and means of its measurement, as well as the rules of the workplace and the community, and the required roles within the organisational hierarchy. This framework is then used to help structure the ensuing discussion and reveal the ways in which the different kinds of
identity and accountability present in the sites are reflected in how workers talk about, and interact with, customers, the systems, and each other. Using this framework, I also explore the ways in which the links and conflicts between identities and accountabilities help to explain the ways in which employees choose to describe and position themselves in relation to their work and the ways it is measured.

The settings in each of my two field sites, as I describe in detail in Chapter 4, are similar. Each site has comparable monitoring technologies and policies, but they vary significantly in their monitoring practice. Comparing and contrasting the two reveals a variety of factors that affect the degree of success workers’ have in finding a personally satisfactory balance, especially between their own sense of professional identity and accountability. Workers also seek to balance the organisational identity and accountabilities imposed upon them, while also managing the identities they project to peers and remaining accountable to them in ways that sustain collegial relationships.

The three scenes I use to frame my analysis in Chapter 5 were chosen to highlight the ways in which workers’ were monitored and measured in each site. The scenes each focus on a different type of measurement within the research sites. The first looks at the use of quantitative measures generated through real time collection of system transaction data and reported as individual call statistics. The second turns to an examination of the qualitative measures in use at these sites, such as call monitoring by supervisors or trained call monitors based on site-specific criteria. Finally, the third looks at what I’ve called the ‘immeasurables’ which include the ways in which the different types of measures and the unique exigencies of call centre work combine to impact workers’ sense of their identities and accountabilities. Each scene was chosen because it concretely illustrates key factors which emerged throughout the fieldwork as having particular significance for workers in relation to their organisational, professional and peer identities and accountabilities, and that came up again and again in different situations, with different participants, and in different ways. A number of findings emerged from the data analysis in each of the identity and accountability categories.
6.1 Key findings

The key findings related to each of the three identity categories and corresponding accountability categories, organisational, professional, and peer, as identified in this study are summarized below.

6.1.1 Organisational Identity and Accountability

I position organisational identity in this study from an explicitly front-line worker perspective, and discuss it in terms of the workers’ experiences of what and who the organisation expects them to be. This includes the workers’ descriptions of the ways that the organisation attempts to impose or define their identity in the workplace, and attempts to control those aspects of workers’ identity that are most relevant to the organisation. When participants described their own interpretations of ways in which the organisation attempts to control, manipulates, or mandates the ways that they are required to present themselves to others, or the ways they felt defined by the organisation, these statements helped to form a picture of the way they perceive organisational identity. While organisational identity may be projected as well as imposed, the ways workers spoke of it during my research focuses primarily on the imposed nature of organisational identity.

Organisational accountability as a category developed from participant statements describing their interpretations of ways in which the organisation holds them accountable for work performance. The organisations’ practices around the monitoring process were central to both organisational identity and accountability, including such factors as providing supervisors with flexibility in using and interpreting monitoring statistics, perceived levels of respect and consideration for employees as human beings rather than just the sum of their numbers, and perceived adherence to employee-friendly policies such as privacy protection. This is illustrated in scene one, when Rena criticizes her organisation’s reliance on quantitative performance measures such as ‘time to answer’ that do not take into account the daily changes in work conditions such as, in this scene, a high number of absent staff members during that particular shift.
There were clear effects on the worker-supervisor relationship in both sites that linked to the extent to which organisational accountability was measured by the system-generated statistics or monitoring practices outside the supervisor’s control. The effects were similar to those Houlihan (2001) found in her study of call centre supervisors, where she describes her participants as feeling trapped between organisational expectations and employee realities. So, for example, in V-Bank the qualitative call evaluations were removed from the role of front-line supervisors and given to a call monitoring team, yet the supervisors were put in the position of being accountable for the low marks received by their staff and expected to coach for improvements. The organisational accountability imposed on supervisors included their responsibility to assure that their subordinate group members were meeting quantitative and qualitative measurement targets. However, this clashed with what staff felt should be supervisor’s accountability to them, which, workers indicated to me, should include an acknowledgement of the nature of the work and the often poor fit between what the work entailed and how it was being measured. Both supervisor and staff at this site felt and expressed the disjunction between organisational accountabilities and identities and their professional accountability and identity orientations. In the C-Union site the supervisor had considerable autonomy and discretion in dealing with her staff, and was allowed to annotate statistical reports to reflect unusual circumstances. She felt confident that upper management would take exceptional circumstances into account when assessing the call centre’s performance, and that she could find constructive ways to address employees’ shortcomings and strengths in face-to-face meetings and her staff, in turn, were quite positive about the value of her feedback and expressed feelings of being supported by her and the organisation in their attempts to meet organisational goals.

Trust and general attitudes to the employer were also affected by the ways in which the monitoring system was designed with an aim to enforcing organisational accountabilities. In V-Bank not all staff trusted that the organisation was open about when and where they were monitored; at C-Union the organisation was seen as trustworthy; the second site had greater acceptance of their organisational accountabilities and characterized their organisational identities more positively than in site one. I found that people were less concerned with levels of surveillance if they trusted their employer, and that their feelings about the performance measures generated through the surveillance varied depending on whether they believed that those measures were used in ways that benefitted or harmed them. They also quite often
indicated that they recognized that a financial institution was required to adhere to a particular set of regulations and knew that a certain level of monitoring was required in order to provide audit trails and confirmation that they were consistently meeting legal requirements for particular kinds of transactions, and acknowledged that call recording could protect them from inaccurate customer complaints.

These findings are consistent with other studies of EPM. Westin’s (1992) early work with Federal Express, as well as Aiello and Svec’s study (1993) also found that employee perceptions about whether monitoring was “fair”—i.e. in Stanton’s terms, “reasonable and appropriate” (2000)—influenced their reactions to monitoring systems. Westin’s macroanalysis, however, does not explore the subjective interpretations or actions of front line workers in an electronically-monitored environment, a gap pointed out by Knights and McCabe in 1998 that has persisted into the 2000s in the literature. In contrast, my qualitative approach has allowed a detailed description of front line work in this type of environment at my study sites, and conversations and interviews have provided some insight into the ways these workers experience their monitored environment. By looking specifically how workers characterize and discuss their work in terms of role identities and accountabilities, my study provides rich description of individual-level reactions to monitoring systems from a perspective of lived experience, using a lens that provides unique insights. Work and identity are closely intertwined; listening to people talk about the ways their multiple identities link to accountabilities, and surfacing the tensions that arise when identities and accountabilities, this qualitative insight complements and extends previous studies in the EPM field.

6.1.2 Professional Identity and Accountability

Participants in the financial services workplaces I studied had a clearly articulated sense of themselves as ‘professional’ bankers, and held clear, and relatively uniform ideals about what constituted appropriate levels of conduct and service with customers. For the purposes of this study, professional identity is defined broadly as “possessing and acting based on a set of characteristics self-identified as central for the competent and professional fulfillment of a participant’s job.” Participants drew on this personal sense of themselves as professionals when describing the ways in which they felt accountable as bankers to their customers, and the ways in which they needed to adhere to both the standards of the banking industry generally and those of
their own employer specifically; statements around these topics populated the category of professional accountability.

Call centre workers often linked the concept of professionalism to being “good at calming down irritable customers” or “saving customers for the bank” (VB Notes, p. 15) and used a large repertoire of conversational skills in their work; these skills were seen as not being recognized well in either quantitative or qualitative measurement, although site two workers were, as discussed previously, more satisfied with their bank’s qualitative evaluation processes than site one. While professional identity was clearly linked by participants to the ability to exercise judgment in interacting with customers, the call scripts and the performance measures were primarily designed to streamline and standardize interactions rather than allowing autonomous decision-making or action during a call. As has been found in many other call centre studies (for example, Houlihan 2000, Bain 2001), I found that the quality/quantity dichotomy was present to a high degree at site one and to a lesser degree at site two. The perennial call centre tension between good service and fast call turnover has been extensively documented as a source of stress in call centres and was an expected finding. When participants in my study described their objections to the organisational focus on getting through the queue as running counter to their own feelings of professional identity and accountability, however, a new lens is provided through which to view the possible nature of the stress reported elsewhere. Loss of autonomy is known to be stressful (Wastell & Newman 1993); when combined with the conflict between fulfilling organisational and professional accountabilities, tension is inevitable.

There was also a great deal of product knowledge required at both sites, as well as knowledge of financial regulations and legal requirements around various types of products and the processes related to them. Again, while this knowledge was essential to serving customers well, some staff members felt it was ‘taken for granted’ rather than acknowledged as a key part of their performance as professionals.

Overall, to the extent that staff in V-Bank felt that quantitative measures were allowed to define them as workers—“the numbers matter more than anything else” (VB Notes, p. 34)—this led to tension between workers’ sense of professional identity and accountability to customers and their organisational accountability. In the C-Union site, workers saw statistics as one significant and sometimes stressful method of evaluation, but not the primary way they were perceived by the
organisation. There was less conversation there about the ways professional identity and organisational accountability conflicted, and more about simply the nature of the balancing a worker had to do as a professional in order to satisfy personal service standards and organisational ones as well.

6.1.3 Peer Identity and Accountability

Peer identity as it has been discussed in my thesis is constituted through the ways in which workers present and project themselves to one another, including, but not exclusively through the ways the information and monitoring systems present them to peers. The concept of peer accountability, in turn, was derived from participant statements describing their interpretations of ways in which their peers hold them accountable for work performance, or ways in which they expect peers to perform. Unsurprisingly, peer identity and accountability conflicted more often with organisational accountability at V-Bank, and was expressed in relation to the clash between professional and organisational accountabilities. Where workers sense of what they had to do as professionals and what the organisation wanted them to do were disparate, this disjunction was also reflected in their expectations of peers. Thus, those workers who focused “too much on stats” (VB Notes, p. 31) were described by others as unprofessional. This tendency was more prominent in V-Bank, where individual daily statistics were displayed publically with employees ranked by performance according to key productivity measures. Individuals with the best productivity statistics received organisational recognition, while those who responded to difficult calls, which took longer to resolve, inevitably had lower call volumes and thus were ranked low in the productivity ratings. Daily statistics were not displayed or distributed in the other site, although staff had access to the reports if they wished. Weekly aggregate reports were circulated. Observation suggests this did not diminish commitment to keeping up with call queues which was enforced through peer accountability in particular.

6.2 The process – my lessons

As I conclude this qualitative and ethnographically inspired research process, it is appropriate to acknowledge the learning process that is inherently part of any thesis, as a novice qualitative
researcher takes on a large-scale project independently and is faced with the challenges of striving to be both an “objective” or disinterested social scientist and an ethical scholar and human being while immersing in a new environment and learning how to generate useful, robust data.

The first three scenes in this thesis are Rena, Susan, and Carla’s stories, as I saw and interpreted them; the scene below is one of my stories, the story of a researcher, trying to see how life works in my site and delve into the thoughts of the people who work there, while at the same time, as a student, trying to navigate through the rules of research engagement and live up to ethical ideals. In the other scenes, I have written about events filtered through my ‘analytical, objective observer’ lens. In this scene, the gaze goes inward as well as out.

6.2.1 Scene 4: “No”

This scene began at my second site, the day after I sat with Carla. I had my first ever research-related rejection—one of the C-Union workers chose not to have me sit with her, and didn’t want to talk about why not, either. It was a blow. No one had ever refused me before, and since everything had been going so well at this site, it hadn’t really occurred to me that anyone ever would. Not that it wasn’t always a theoretical possibility, of course. I had thought about it a lot, but my thinking was all about how to make sure that people in my sites had an effective way to refuse participation without the refusal reflecting badly on them with their boss. I hadn’t really thought about how it would reflect on me, or affect me. Workplaces can be particularly tricky when it comes to voluntary consent, especially when the people the researcher wants to talk to and spend time with are front-line workers. After all, I had gained access to the workplace in a way typical for such research—I was granted permission from upper management. Generally speaking, once upper management provides permission, the project may well be seen to be officially sanctioned. And once that perception of sanction circulates, it may be challenging to make sure that
people really feel safe to refuse to participate in the project without workplace repercussions.

I tried to provide that sense of safety in a variety of ways, including a signed research protocol with the site management stressing the necessity of informed and truly voluntary participation, and confirming an agreement that I could choose not to work with any employee, or choose to stop working with someone, at any time in the project if it seemed the best thing for the purposes of the overall project. The information sheet that I gave everyone when I arrived at the site explained the project and also promised that participation was optional and strictly voluntary. Further, since interviews had to be pre-arranged with the floor supervisor, because I was removing people from the phones, I started each interview with the assurance that if the person really didn’t want to talk to me, but hadn’t wanted to tell her supervisor, that we could chat about the weather, or just sit around for the allotted time and no one would know the difference. No one ever took me up on that, but I did have one person tell me that she felt better about the interview knowing that she genuinely had the option of not talking to me.

So, this is all a long-winded way of saying that I really had thought about the fact that people might not want to talk to me, and tried to make sure that they didn’t have to if they didn’t want to. Yet it still came as a shock when someone actually asked me to go away. I always asked the person I wanted to sit with a day before if it would be all right—when (notice I didn’t think ‘if’) he or she said yes, then I would tell the supervisor who I would be with the next day, and arrange a supervisor-authorized interview time sometime during the day. Jenn was one of the people I had very little
contact with before she came up on my list as the next to observe. By that point, midway through my field time, I had chatted with most of the others in the call centre, whether I’d sat with them yet or not, just informal exchanges at lunch or while I was on the floor. In hindsight, I can see now that Jenn didn’t come to talk to or ask questions of the people I was sitting with while I was there, although in general there was a fair bit of conversation and regular work-related interchanges between staff. When I went to talk to Jenn to ask if I could spend time sitting beside her, she said “no.” Just no. I had to work at staying externally calm; afterwards, I realized that I should have planned a response for a “no”, perhaps a respectful question about why not, or an encouraging line about the value of her potential input to the project. At the time however, I was stunned and ended up just politely thanking her for considering my request and slinking away, feeling like I had my tail between my legs.

My internal reaction was neither calm nor collected. I wrote in my notebook “Why not? Haven’t I been professional? Haven’t I explained clearly what I’m doing? Isn’t it a good project? Doesn’t she like me? Feels like she kicked me in the gut.” In writing about this (much) later, it’s tempting to say that I thought things like “I’m so glad that all my precautions to make sure that consent could be really voluntary were so effective” but in fact, that only occurred to me well after the event. My immediate, and lasting reaction, was a sense of having done something wrong, but not knowing exactly what it was. When I talked to Andrew, my supervisor, later, he said, “did you ask her why?” But I hadn’t.

Later still, I began to think of this experience in terms of the ongoing themes of my research, identity and accountability. My participants often expressed problems they experienced when walking the line between meeting
organisational targets and serving customers in ways that felt satisfying, as clashes between their organisational and professional identities, often in terms that suggested the organisation wasn’t valuing their professional abilities. My instinctive response when faced with Jenn’s refusal to take part in my research was to see that refusal as reflecting on my ‘professional’ identity as a researcher, as suggesting my failure to adequately embody that role. It was a short jump from there to something I haven’t discussed in this thesis as it relates to workers due to lack of data: personal identity, my image of myself as a likeable, non-threatening, ethical person. I wrote “doesn’t she like me?” in my field notes, but beneath that plaintive little question lay a bigger one—why doesn’t she trust me? And trust leads to concepts of accountability. In my mind, I saw myself as accountable to the people I spent time with in the course of my research, and much of my work in thinking through issues of voluntary consent was a concrete manifestation of my vision of that aspect of my accountability. I’ve talked about accountability elsewhere as both the providing of reliable accounts—telling the story of the work in a recognizable way—and the acceptance of (or imposition of) responsibility for certain kinds of work tasks and goals. I think it was so hard to accept Jenn’s refusal because it implicitly called into question both my own sense of accountability to her, and my ability to be accountable to her story, and the larger story of the research. In the end of course, I sucked it up, went on to the next person who thankfully was willing to participate, and wrote the story without Jenn’s input. But just as breakdowns in a system open up space for questions about how and why it usually works, so her refusal opened a new space of questions for me as a researcher learning my craft. And so, she is still a part of this story.
6.2.1.1 Discussion

A thesis is first and foremost a lived learning experience. The result is, of course, supposed to be an original contribution to knowledge, but the process of researching and writing is seldom documented. A qualitative, ethnographically-informed thesis such as this, focusing as it does on the lived experience of participants as revealed (and sometimes obscured) by their words and actions during the course of observation and interviews, is one that requires a constant awareness of the researcher’s position in the story. For most of this document, I have positioned myself as narrator, but inevitably I am also a participant. An ethical participant, always, I believe and work towards. A reflective one. One sufficiently steeped in conventional theories of social science methods to attempt objectivity while familiar with the arguments which suggest that objectivity is difficult to achieve or even impossible, and strongly sympathetic to those who argue we need different criteria by which to judge qualitative data and analysis. My assumptions and biases are a part of the story, as are my mistakes, my learning curve in terms of becoming a good interviewer and a careful and directed observer. You do not often see, in theses, explanations for interviews not conducted, or observation opportunities denied, but perhaps there should be more of that, more admission that research is messy and serendipitous and sometimes, especially for a novice, difficult (Law 2004). In the end, the qualitative thesis should be a document that demonstrates the ability to conduct meaningful and original independent research, the ability to take the mistakes and the successes, the insights and the gaps, and weave them into a coherent plot that helps readers understand the focal social phenomena within appropriately chosen research frameworks and field sites.

In the somewhat auto ethnographic scene above, I reflect on a low point during the research, where I was unable to convince a potential participant to become a part of the project, and was unprepared for a refusal with no plan for what to say or do in that event. This struck at the heart of my personal feelings of professional identity and accountability, ironically, but it also subsequently provided me with a new insight into the importance of these concepts in the workplace. By looking at myself as a subject within the Identity/Accountability Activity Framework, the rules of my academic research community that provide the structure for my ‘organisational’ identity inform my sense of myself as a ‘professional’ practitioner of research; my feelings of failure in being adequately prepared for a refusal emerged when called to account by my supervisor, who asked whether or not I had taken the correct next step which would have
been, most likely, to probe gently the reason for the refusal, in order to learn more and improve my performance in the future. In this case there was no clash between the rules and roles, or organisational and professional expectations others had for me and that I had for myself. Rather, I have sufficiently internalized the rules of organisational identity and accountability that applied in this situation into part of my professional identity and sense of professional accountability, leaving me distressed at a perceived lapse to follow the rules to my own satisfaction. It could have gone another way, however. I have experienced other situations during fieldwork where I felt justified in prioritizing what I would now characterize as my professional accountability to my research participants, over my accountability as a member of a research team, and chose not to probe a topic that was clearly emotionally fraught and causing the participant great distress.

Professional identity and accountability, peer identity and accountability and organisational identity and accountability, as they have been discussed throughout this thesis, are not simply abstract constructs (although naming these constructs and shaping them by categorizing pieces of data as belonging to them is certainly a process of abstraction). Rather, as Gini succinctly states, and as I quoted at the opening of this thesis, “For good or ill, we are known and we know ourselves by the work we do” and even more explicitly, “where we work, how we work, what we do at work and the general ethos and culture of the workplace indelibly mark us for life” (1998, p. 708). Perhaps ironically, as I went through the process of examining my own work as a student researcher, the explanatory value that I found in applying the theoretical concepts and links between identities and accountabilities, as I had developed them during the course of my research, gave me confidence that they do in fact have a useful application in exploring worker experiences.

### 6.3 Contributions

Workplace monitoring in call centres is a widespread, mature organisational strategy using reasonably stable technologies, in a closed system. The dynamics of surveillance in a workplace are an extension of the managerial drive for control of work, an impetus that developed in workplaces before the development of the digitally-mediated technologies in current use, and which will, undoubtedly, survive whatever technological changes the future might bring (Thomson 2003). However, even in the relatively ‘simple’ environment of a contained worksite,
there is much we do not know about the implications of monitoring for those individuals subject to it. This is what I have explored in this thesis.

My research shows that the presence of monitoring, the sense of being always ‘in view’ within the organisation, affects the ways in which workers present themselves to customers, to supervisors, and to each other, and affects the way they do their work in order to visibly be seen and heard to conform with organisational standards and norms. In other words, I argue, it affects their workplace identities and accountabilities. Documenting and examining the link between identity and accountability is, I believe, one of the key contributions of this thesis. Although there are extensive literatures on both accountability and identity in a wide range of disciplines, the ways in which the two concepts are related and the interplay between them has not been well explored, either in workplaces or outside in the wider world.

That there is a linkage in the workplace, particularly between organisational and professional identities and accountabilities, is hardly surprising. By definition, an organisational identity, or how the organisation wishes employees to present themselves, is clearly something for which they are organisationally accountable (Gini 1998; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). As I have documented, this accountability is enforced in myriad ways within and without the monitoring structure through required adherence to call scripts, through training, and through the measurements collected via the monitoring systems, that are deemed to be organisationally relevant and are thus rewarded. My findings suggest, however, that in the call centre sites studied, looking at the interplay between the various identities and accountabilities present in the workplace provides a window into understanding some forms of employee discomfort or unhappiness with particular aspects of work practices and processes, and potentially provides an organisationally-appropriate way to address these issues. So, for example, when a reliance on statistical indicators of productivity in V-Bank caused workers who spent time “building relationships” with their customers on the phone to be ranked lower on published performance lists than those who dealt more rapidly with customers, those employees (who had been explicitly trained in relationship management) felt that their carefully-developed professional skills, on which they based their sense of professional identity, were not valued. In contrast, at C-Union, productivity-related statistics were used in aggregate to encourage the group to work as a team to meet targets, and individually in coaching sessions to help employees hone their skills, which included handling calls expeditiously but also focused on other facets of their call
performance. In this setting, where organisational accountability was more clearly and closely aligned to professional responsibility, staff spoke much more positively about the use of statistical performance indicators. It is an interesting finding that I saw my participants, in both sites, assert their professional and peer identities in the face of strong pressure to subordinate these to organisational accountabilities. This accords well with other studies that also document worker’s ability to exercise agency and resist subordination to the technologically-embedded forms of organisational control (for example, Callaghan & Thompson 2001; and Bain and Taylor in their various authorial combinations) but also provides not just the techniques they use for doing so, but also provides insight into the underlying reasons for their drive to resist. Identities, as Jenkins asserts, matter (2008).

Aligning performance measures and accountabilities is a basic tenet of performance management in theory (McIntyre, Rogers & Heier 2001), yet in practice, it is more complicated than it would seem. By breaking out the different, and sometimes conflicting, kinds of accountabilities in the studied workplaces, some of which were imposed by the organisation and some which originated with the employees themselves, it is made more evident why this is the case. As one might expect, organisational identity was most often imposed and peer accountabilities often originated with employees, but colleague’s expectations of one another were a complex mix of expecting others to perform as management required while at the same time acting in a way that showed solidarity to peers in situations where it was commonly agreed that organisational expectations were unreasonable. Professional identity was often invoked in conversations where such situations emerged and was in fact the most commonly referenced rationale for behaviour that might be seen as contrary to company policy and thus contrary to organisational accountability. Participants were consistently clear about the characteristics of a banking professional, and similarly clear that some of those responsibilities, primarily those involving connecting with, soothing, or advising customers, were difficult to fulfil in conjunction with meeting performance measures focusing on call duration and turnover. They also consistently made choices to prioritize their professional identities and accountabilities over organisational ones, with the clear understanding that there were potentially consequences for themselves when doing so. As we saw in scene two, when Susan risked failing a qualitative evaluation rather than ask her angry customer needless security questions, workers justified decisions to violate organisational strictures by characterising their actions as “professional.” This was more evident in V-Bank,
where participants strongly self-identified as bankers first and most preferred not to think of themselves as call centre agents, a mind-set that was encouraged by the way the organisation framed itself and encouraged workers to see themselves in their training and corporate publicity. It was still present to a lesser degree however in C-Union despite a strong and proud call centre orientation, which suggests that some of the conflict is perhaps inevitable in financial service call centres if the organisation places too much weight on standard call centre performance measures.

Workers with a fairly high degree of training and knowledge in their field, which includes in the case of many bankers provincial and national accreditation in lending and investment in addition to University degrees, may always experience a conflict between professional identity and organisational accountability when the two are not well aligned.

However, this also suggests that attempts to customize the standard call centre performance measures in particular types of centres, something which the literature suggests is rarely done, might be beneficial. This customisation need not be at the system level, necessarily, as such systems are difficult and expensive to change. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, my data suggests that simple and relatively inexpensive management changes such as choosing which of the standard measures to use or emphasize can make a significant difference for staff. Additionally, allowing statistical reports to be supplemented with operational information linking the figures to circumstances in the work environment can both ease the pressure on supervisors to push for “meeting the targets” over “satisfying the customer”, and help staff to feel more comfortable when they have to balance the two. Given the high rates of turnover typically experienced in V-Bank, and the expense of training, such efforts might well have been cost effective in addition to improving employee experiences; certainly, in C-Union where such options were in place, there was virtually no turnover unless staff were promoted out of the centre while V-Bank experienced about 32% turnover in the group of staff I observed during my study over just a few months.

Further study and testing of the links identified in this thesis between performance measurement and identity and accountability constructs, might well have practical application in the fields of management generally and performance measurement more specifically.

As I noted at the beginning of this thesis, while much of the call centre literature documents workers responses to monitoring, little of it asks why they respond as they do, taking it as a given that monitoring is just problematic. I have addressed a missing element in the call centre literature by identifying a viable explanation for worker’s reactions to monitoring. Identity is
fundamental to people; when deeply held internal identity characteristics and perceived accountabilities, and externally imposed identity models and accountabilities clash, tensions result. There are a plethora of studies documenting a quality/quantity dichotomy similar to that my participants describe, and that look at the various negative consequences, including stress, worker turnover, and lack of job satisfaction (for example, Knights, Odih & Calvey 1999; Bain, Watson, Mulvey & Taylor 2002). These authors and others have certainly suggested that the rigid standard approach to call centre performance measurement is flawed. However, no one else to the best of my knowledge has developed a framework to categorize call centre worker’s responses in a way that reflects their multiple accountabilities and identities and thus provides more detail about the source of conflict. In particular, for financial service call centres, and potentially others with highly trained and educated staff, my study supports the obvious, yet neglected, performance measurement principle, present in management and accounting literatures but conspicuously absent from call centre practice, that states that more closely aligning performance measures with actual work requirements results in better measurement, with the potential for both better management and happier workers.

Jenkins suggests that “individuals and groups will assert their own sense of who and what they are” (2008, p. 204); the workers who participated in my study have allowed me to document that sense as they told it to me, and showed it to me. While it is not appropriate or possible to make generalized claims from a highly situated and specific case study, by focusing as I have on the issues of identity and accountability that arise in these workplaces, and developing a framework that helps to explain the way these elements are linked in this setting, it is my hope that the framework that has been developed may have some explanatory power in other workplaces, and testing this is a potential avenue of future research. It seems reasonable to posit that the tensions identified in the call centre workplaces I studied might, to the degree that they exist in other workplaces, have similar effects on workers in other kinds of workplaces as too they negotiate their various work identities and accountabilities. In sites where the supervision dynamics are similarly based on rigidly defined organisational accountabilities, and/or where performance evaluation is conducted using system-generated quantitative performance indicators, the kinds of disjunction that I found in my call centre sites between organisational and professional identities and accountabilities, in particular, might well appear. In such cases, the framework that I have developed to examine the interactions between workplace identities and accountabilities might
well supply helpful insights into the dynamics of such sites, and potentially be used across settings to explore the variations in identity and accountability as they are enacted in different situations.

Finally, and more broadly, there are insights to be gained into the wider social terrain of individual monitoring and surveillance from this workplace study. It is, naturally, necessary to “be careful of assuming that what pertains to surveillance within the workplace necessarily transfers to the broader social terrain” (Thomson 2003, p. 148), but it is possible that some of the same factors that workers discuss as causing them discomfort or unhappiness with work monitoring would also affect members of the public in more general surveillance situations. My work suggests that to the extent that being surveilled is perceived as contrary to how citizens see or identify themselves, it will cause discomfort or resistance. Similarly, other kinds and sites of surveillance outside the workplace may make some accountabilities more visible and measurable than others, which may clash with individual’s sense of who they are or what matters about their personal identities. Certainly, based on other non-thesis related research in which I have been involved (see, for example, Borchorst et al. 2012; McPhail 2012) , the concepts of identity and accountability have emerged as often linked and clearly present in questions, for example, of surveillance linked to technologically-enhanced identification documents and infrastructures.

Post 9/11, issues of surveillance and monitoring have become the subject of significant debate. The rhetoric around the topic is often extreme from both supporters and detractors, but there is relatively little empirical research that explores the actual effects that monitoring has on individuals. There is also an assumption that new technology is the ultimate monitoring solution, and that to ensure greater visibility of and control over populations, be they workers, airport passengers, border crossers, children or any other identifiable group, one merely has to develop and implement the correct technological tool. This perspective, however, fails to take into account the need for social practices and policies around any technology, or to consider the potential effects on individuals that the use of these tools might cause. My work clearly demonstrates, in a particular situated context, the difference that policies and practices can make for individuals.
6.4 Future work

The potential explanatory power of looking at identity and accountability as, in some important ways, mutually constitutive, is something to be further explored in ongoing and future work. New ways to track workers in all kinds of white collar workplaces makes regular appearance in the news, as do occurrences where the use of such tracking processes causes workplace conflict. Front-line workers in other service sectors often work under similar kinds of organisational expectations as call centre workers, in the sense that rapid and thorough service might often seem to be goals that are difficult to reconcile and may be differentially prioritized by the organisation and by workers dealing with the messy reality of customer needs. It would be interesting to explore the degree to which aligning organisational and professional accountabilities affects, or does not affect, employees’ perceptions of their work, the way it is measured, and their feelings of professional satisfaction in a variety of settings. An initial setting I am interested in pursuing is that of government employees providing front-line customer service to citizens.

Another interest emerging from the work conducted in this thesis is a more general concern with the effects that surveillance infrastructures and processes have on individual’s identity performance. Barnard-Wills draws on David Lyon when he reminds us that “identity and identification are part of many contemporary surveillance practices” (2012, p. 28). In call centres, the conditions of work are essentially part of the monitoring or surveillance apparatus, but, increasingly, the infrastructure of identification systems, on- and off-line, including technologically-enhanced identification documents, is becoming a similar kind of surveillance-capable apparatus, built into the everyday transactions often required to proceed with daily life. As another call centre researcher has recently noted:

The relationships between the call centre as a socio-technical system and the professional skills, identities and traditions associated with occupations such as nursing is going to be an intriguing one. …The extension of call centres to these realms may be conducive to new templates for management that could see a general upgrading of call centre employment. Alternatively, the adoption of call centre work systems could pose considerable challenges to existing professional patterns of work and identity formation. (Russell 2008, p. 214)
Examining these emergent systems, the way they work, the way they are implemented, the policy processes and political rhetoric that accompanies these implementations, and most interestingly from my perspective, the perceived and actual effects they have on people in terms of the ways they perform their own multiple identities, is work that needs to be done. Identity work is not merely an expression of agency but also of power (Noble & Lupton 1998, p. 808, cited in Brown & Lewis 2011, p. 888). The ways that monitoring and surveillance systems affect identity work directly influence workers’ ability to exercise power over themselves, over others, and within organisations, all of which can have consequential effects for individuals, and potentially societally as well. As Phillips asks us to consider, “Whose definitions of situations, whose identity claims, whose strategies of performance count?” (2009, p. 306). More and more, “The computerized jobs and organisations we are creating are less and less constrained by particular technological forms. Increasingly they reflect social choices about workplace relations in an advanced information society” (Clement 1992, p. 41).

In this research, I have examined the conditions created by particular kinds of systems within call centres, but have done so with attention to the ways in which choices about how to use the systems makes a real difference to workers. In my two study sites, the technology was virtually identical in capacity, the performance measures generated by the systems were the same, but the choices made in the ways to use the data generated by the systems were different, and thus two very different stories emerged when listening to the voices of employees at the two sites. In the future, the kind of research that we need and that I would like to participate in needs to examine and explore the choices that are made about surveillance technologies, be they in a workplace, on our streets, or in our homes. These choices occur on a number of levels, during the design of surveillance technologies, during their implementation, and when we as a society decide how they should be regulated. My thesis shows that when better choices are made, it makes a difference.
7 References


