GERMAN CALL CENTERS IN ISTANBUL:

BEYOND THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the modern competitive business environment driven by the ever greater need for cost efficiency, it has become common for companies to subcontract parts of their operations to other companies and even to other countries. One instance of this development has been the growth in recent years of call centers located in Istanbul, but serving the German market for German companies. While a similar instance of economic globalization, namely the development of an Indian call center industry serving the English-speaking and particularly the American market, has been the subject of a considerable number of academic studies, there is practically no research available on the German call center industry in Istanbul.

This thesis seeks to fill this gap in the scientific literature by investigating the German call center industry in Turkey, and especially in Istanbul. It is going to provide an overview of the development and impact of call centers in general and offer some comparisons to the Indian call center sector in order to provide the context for the German call centers in Istanbul. This relatively new industry will be investigated from different perspectives: On the one hand, the sector will be examined for its context and significance in global capitalism from a political economy perspective, while on the other hand the people working in these call centers, most of them Turks who grew up in Germany, whose presence was the prerequisite enabling the development of this industry, will be investigated in relation to theories of return migration from a perspective of sociology and anthropology.

The thesis seeks to answer questions relating to the origins and the extent of the German call center industry in Turkey, the reasons for its growth, and the organization of the work process in these companies. It also aims to offer answers to questions regarding the employees in these call centers, who they are and where they come from, what their motivations were for coming to Turkey and for working in a call center there, how they experience their work, and whether the presence of these call centers, i.e. of employment opportunities for German speakers in Turkey, played a role in the migration decision of those who moved to Turkey in recent years. The return migration of Turks from Germany to their country of origin has so far received limited academic attention, and there is a particular lack of research on migration movements by second-generation Turks who were born and/or raised in Germany.

In order to answer these questions, the second chapter of this thesis, the literature review, is going to first provide an overview of the existing academic literature on call centers in general and their origins and development. This will be followed by a short account of the Indian call center industry that constitutes a point of comparison for the Turkish offshore call center sector, and some background information regarding German call centers in Turkey. The literature review will be completed by an overview of previous studies on return migration.

To gain insights into the German call center industry in Istanbul, the thesis is going to rely mainly on the experiences and observations obtained through participant observation in one such call center, as explained in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is going to detail the experiences and observations gained in this way and relate them to the issues covered in the literature discussed before. Finally, the results and insights gained, as well as suggestions for further research, will be summarized in the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Call Center: Definitions

Call centers are companies or organizational units that handle contacts with

customers exclusively over the phone. Typically, the main tools used by employees,

usually referred to as agents, are a telephone and a computer. Computers are mainly

used to access databases, for example a directory of customers' addresses, and to

process customers' requests, depending on the nature of the hotline involved in any

particular case.

The call center is a relatively new form of organizing work. Although there

have been jobs whose description included working over the telephone for a long

time, these were usually not limited to working exclusively on the phone, but rather,

the phone was one element beside others used on the job. More importantly, these

kinds of jobs did not feature the high degree of organization and control that

characterizes the modern call center. The rapid growth of dedicated call centers

dealing with 'mass communication' began in the 1990s and very quickly became a

widespread phenomenon that fundamentally changed the nature of work in a

number of fields.

Today, call centers are a major source of employment in many countries and

still constitute a growing industry. In 1998, the call center sector had already

reached a global market value of almost thirty billion dollars and employed more

than 2.5 million agents worldwide. By 2003, the global market value had grown to

more than forty billion dollars, and the sector employed approximately five million

agents. However, growth rates, while still substantial, had been steadily declining

from 12.7 percent in 1999 to 7.1 percent in 2003. A 2004 forecast predicted a global market value of fifty-two billion dollars in 2008, at a 4.4 percent growth rate and with six million agent positions worldwide[1].

The call center sector is currently experiencing a change in terminology, as call centers are increasingly being referred to as contact centers. In general, a contact center is defined more broadly than a pure call center. Besides typical call center functions, it encompasses contact with customers on all levels, not only via the phone but also by email, fax or letter. However, many pure call centers have also started calling themselves contact centers, leading to the suspicion that the adoption of the new term might be related to the generally bad publicity and negative connotations associated with the term *call center*. At the same time, agents are increasingly referred to as customer service representatives, which, along the same lines, can be either a broader job description not limited exclusively to calling work, or, especially when used in reference to employees doing traditional call center work, might be regarded as an attempt to move away from the negative images associated with the term *agent* towards a more positive image suggesting greater responsibility and discretion on the part of the employee. In Germany, the occupation of call center agent or customer service representative recently gained new appreciation, when two new job titles requiring formal training were officially recognized in August 2006 as vocational training courses leading to a recognized profession, to be completed by an exam to be held by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce after two and three years respectively[2].

Within the call center sector, a general distinction is made between inbound and outbound operations. An inbound call center receives calls from customers and

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[1] All figures taken from Datamonitor 2003 and 2004.
[2] For further information, see http://www.bibb.de/de/20720.htm and http://www.bibb.de/de/20751.htm.

deals with their requests. Examples would be order processing, telephone banking, customer service, a computer help desk or directory inquiries. In outbound operations, by contrast, the agents call customers. This is most commonly used in telemarketing and direct sales. Of course, combinations of the two are possible, but most call centers specialize in either inbound or outbound operations.

A further distinction is made between in-house and outsourced services. In-house operations are part of the company requiring the service, for example in the case of a customer service department staffed by agents employed directly by the company. Outsourcing, on the other hand, refers to the subcontracting of a service to a different company, such as in the case of company A commissioning company B to run a call center, staffed with employees of company B, to deal with customer services on behalf of company A. The decision to opt for this model is usually motivated on the part of the outsourcing company by the expectation that it is going to save costs and spare the company the need to deal with issues such as call center infrastructure and organization, call allocation, hiring and training of personnel, etc.

Within the scope of outsourced services, a distinction is made between onshore and offshore operations. In the context of this thesis, the term *onshore* refers to operations that are subcontracted to another company but remain within the same country, whereas the term *offshore* designates outsourced business units abroad. Sometimes a narrower definition of *offshore* is used to refer only to operations subcontracted to a country very far away, usually on a different continent, in contrast to neighboring countries, which would then be referred to as *nearshore*. For the purposes of this thesis, however, offshore outsourcing denotes the subcontracting of call center services to other companies residing in a different country.

Two key concepts in call center technology, which are referred to in this thesis, are ACD (Automatic Call Distribution) and IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems. The ACD is responsible for allocating and routing incoming calls to agents within a call center and between several call centers, in the case of one hotline being served from several locations. Most commonly, calls are routed according to the principle of first in – first out to the agents who have been waiting for a new call the longest. There are, however, increasing efforts to modify this principle, for example to give priority to 'premium' customers, to connect a customer who is calling for the second time to the same agent that he dealt with before, or to connect a customer to an agent possessing a special qualification required by the customer, for example foreign language skills. For such purposes, the ACD depends on the IVR.

Today it is standard procedure at most hotlines that a caller is not put through to an agent directly but is first connected to an IVR system. Here, the caller is greeted by a computer voice and can, for example, identify himself by giving his customer number, or specify the reason for his call, or the language in which he would like to be served, depending on the context. Highly standardized routines can thus in some cases even be completed without the input of a human agent, but in most cases the caller is put through to an agent after answering a few questions, or if his answers cannot be interpreted by the computer. In many call centers, the IVR system forwards the information given by the customer to the software installed on the agent's computer, so that even before answering the call, or at the moment of answering, the agent can see key data for the customer, such as their name and address, and an indication of the reason for the call.

The following pages are going to give an overview of the history of call centers and the background to the case study that will be detailed later in this thesis.

The following part is going to explore the origins and development of the call center sector, while the next section is going to examine a famous example of offshore outsourcing, namely the English-speaking call center industry in India, in some detail. The last section in this chapter, finally, is going to provide some background information about German call centers in Turkey.

Origins and Development

The rise of call centers as a major form of business and source of employment began in the 1990s, and they have experienced dramatic growth since. Consequently, the first academic publications on the subject of call centers began to appear in the late 1990s, and their number has steadily grown since then. Recent years have seen a very large number of academic articles appearing in various journals, investigating the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Technological advances in the field of communication technology, together with the increasing integration of telephone and computer functions, paved the way for the arrival of the dedicated call center in the 1990s. In this context, the first decisive revolution in communication technology was the digitalization of communication, which meant that more information could be transmitted in shorter time and with greater reliability, and for the telephone in particular it meant that a greater number of calls could be transmitted along a single line. However, as Miozzo and Ramirez point out, for call centers to develop as a mass industry, the "key technological development has been automatic call distribution switches (ACDs) that allows for the re-directing of call routes between call centres," as well

as within one call center, which in turn "allowed management to deepen the division of labour by creating specialist call centres" (69). This had the effect of "collapsing the geographical dimension," enabling companies to "distribute [the call centers] to sites around the country where the cost of land and labour is relatively low" (Miozzo and Ramirez, 69), and a skilled workforce is available. This also meant that operations that had previously been spread out to several locations in order to be close to customers could now be centralized and concentrated in a few places. These centralized locations would then be large enough to profit from economies of scale. Call center agents typically work not only with a telephone but simultaneously with a computer, using databases and processing data, so advances in computer-based information technology and electronic data processing, together with the increasing linking together of computers in networks both within the office and over large geographic distances, also played a major role in forming the conditions for the development of call centers.

However, despite the undeniable impact and significance of technological developments and innovations for the rise of call centers, Ellis and Taylor contend that their rise cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the social, political and economic context in which it occurred: "Growth is inexplicable without reference to the broader political and economic environments of neo-liberalism, deregulation, restructuring and financialisation of markets" (Ellis and Taylor, 110). This political and economic environment was characterized by "the impact of deregulation and privatisation, restructuring at industry and/or firm level, the intensification of economy-wide and sectoral competition, the growth of the 'new economy' and, underpinning everything, the system-wide compulsion to maximise profits and reduce costs" (Ellis and Taylor, 108). Heightened competition led to increased pressure on companies, including former state monopolists, to cut

costs and maximize profits. The new technology and organizational form of the call center evidently offered great opportunities for just that.

The technological developments that facilitated the rapid growth of call centers not only provided for mass communication over the phone, they also allowed for unprecedented levels of organization, surveillance and control over the labor process. According to Ellis and Taylor, there is compelling evidence that "the introduction of call centre operations signified a qualitative break with pre-existing forms of work organisation" (109). The technology made it possible to organize and structure work very strictly, to set precise targets for speed and amount of work to be done, and to measure and monitor output, productivity and performance quality very accurately and in real-time, even down to highly minute details.

The typical layout of a call center consists of a large open-plan office with workstations separated from each other placed either in rows or in groups, with the desks manned by managers and supervisors usually at the end of one of the rows or on one side of the room, providing a good view over the whole office space. Most call centers employ an organizational system whereby agents are divided into teams, with each team headed by team leader or team manager who is in return responsible to a head team manager, or in the case of very large companies there may be another level in between, with a group of team leaders responsible to one of several higher-ranking team managers, who is directly responsible to the head team manager.

The technological configuration of the call center makes it possible to measure both output and performance very precisely, by the number and duration of calls handled and by real-time monitoring and evaluation of calls based on both quantitative and qualitative criteria. This enables the management of a call center to set very precise targets in various areas, such as number of calls handled, duration of calls, successful sales, quality score, etc., and to sanction any employee who fails to

meet these targets, usually with losses in pay and bonuses, and, if the employee still fails to meet the targets after receiving a warning and possibly undergoing extra training, by firing the employee in question. The aim of the extensive use of monitoring and targets is to increase productivity.

In order to ensure a certain standard in the calls handled, and to both increase productivity and introduce a set of benchmarks against which performance quality can be measured and judged, practically all call centers make use of scripting to some extent. This implies that agents are given specific phrases that they have to use in certain situations, for example specifying which greeting should be used at what time of the day or how a question should be phrased to ask for certain information from the customer. These phrases may even be displayed on the agent's computer screen and he/she may have to follow them one by one. But scripting covers not only language. It may also extend to the order and the way in which the agent has to perform certain tasks. For example, it is also common that, depending on the nature of the call, the agent sees a computer screen telling him what he should do now and what to tell the customer, then proceeding to the next screen and again being told what to do and how to say it. The system may not allow the agent to proceed without performing the action, for example if he is required to enter certain information to be obtained from the customer. Supervisors who monitor calls can usually also see agents' computer screens, so they know whether an agent correctly followed all the steps he was supposed to follow. Any deviation from the script will lead to points being taken off and possible sanctioning, if the call is being monitored.

Scripting leads to a deskilling and even dehumanization of work, taking responsibility and discretion away from the worker. Although scripting can be helpful to agents, especially for those who are new to the job, most senior agents

experience it as imposing and suffocating and complain that they are being turned into 'slaves of the system', infuriated that they cannot make use of their own experience and knowledge because the system does not allow them to bypass the standard routines. Obviously, scripting becomes problematic as soon as a customer concern deviates from the standard, and is therefore employed to a gradually lesser extent the more complex the work becomes. While very simple and routine, and target-driven, operations such as directory inquiries or order processing are typically very tightly scripted, more complex and customer-oriented operations such as a computer help desk will still employ scripts to some extent, but will allow workers more discretion in the way they handle the request and find a solution for the customer.

The technology also enables management and supervisors to precisely monitor the times when an agent is not in call, i.e. is not productive. With the exception of after-call work, which is generally kept to a minimum, with agents being penalized if they spend too much time on it, this usually means break times, which are thus also highly regulated. In call centers that apply a very strict measure of control, even short break times may be precisely defined by supervisors (e.g. break allocated from 11:37 to 11:42 a.m.), and agents are expected to adjust even very private issues such as going to the toilet to these break times. Overstaying the allocated break time may result in sanctions. There are other examples of call centers where breaks are not allocated in advance but ad hoc, and agents, even more humiliating, have to raise appropriately colored cards in order to attract the attention of a supervisor to ask for a toilet or cigarette break (Taylor and Bain, United, 147).

The impact of this highly controlled and organized environment on workers is exacerbated by the strain of emotional labor:

> Emotional labour can be defined as, firstly, feeling management which is performed as part of paid work, serving the interests of an employer in maximising surplus value; secondly,

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being predominantly undertaken during social interaction within the workplace – the product of emotional labour is often the state of mind or feeling within another person (usually a customer or client) […] thirdly, there must be some managerial attempt to prescribe and / or supervise and measure employee performance of emotional labour. (Taylor, 85)

This kind of emotional labor is central to the call center, where agents always have to 'smile down the phone', no matter how they are being treated by customers, and it creates additional stress, especially considering the fact that the successful performance of emotional labor by the agent is measured by means of the assessment of call quality in monitored calls, based on criteria such as tone of voice, choice of words, being responsive to the customer's emotional state, etc.

Call center workers perceive this highly controlled, always target-oriented, emotionally challenging and sometimes humiliating work environment as highly pressurized and extremely stressful. The high degree of organization and control, in particular, have led to call centers being described as "the new sweatshops" (Fernie and Metcalf), "white collar factories" (Ellis and Taylor, 110), or "an assembly line in the head" (Taylor and Bain, Assembly Line), all expressions likening the call center to a modern form of the mass-production factory. The most striking image associated with the call center, however, was introduced by Fernie and Metcalf, who argued that the "electronic panopticon", a more modern version of the ideal prison design originally put forward by Jeremy Bentham in 1785 and later applied to modern society and the modern workplace by Michel Foucault in his 1977 work *Discipline and Punish*, "truly [was] the vision of the future" for call centers, and that "these organizations are the very epitome of what Foucault had in mind" (Fernie and Metcalf, 2). This argument is, however, contested by Bain and Taylor, who, while agreeing that the modern call center is characterized by a high degree of surveillance and control, maintain that the panopticon is in fact imperfect and that there are

indeed ways of resistance and escape open to call center workers (Bain and Taylor, 12).

In sum, most scientific literature on the phenomenon of the rise of call centers from the 1990s onward agrees that the form of work organization in call centers, which is characterized by a high degree of surveillance and control and tight target measurements, is embedded in the constant strive for cost reduction and profit maximization that characterizes modern capitalism and the economic climate of heightened competition both between and within sectors. The call center defined a break in the organization of white-collar work due to its "novel forms of labour utilization and control, where developments in the Taylorist tradition meshed with the performance of emotional labour" (Ellis and Taylor, 110).

All call centers suffer from an internal contradiction between the striving for quantity on the one hand and quality on the other. Each call center has to find a compromise that best suits its own needs in an attempt to resolve the perpetual tension between the need to be cost-efficient and productive on the one hand, and the "requirement to be customer-oriented" (Taylor and Bain, India, 263) on the other, between the need for standardization to increase productivity on the one hand and the requirement to satisfy the individual needs and demands of customers on the other, between the money-making interest of the company on the one hand and the service interest of the customer on the other. Even the most performance-oriented, i.e. quantitative, call centers still also measure the quality of their agents' conversations, expecting them to deliver good quality even in a mass-production environment. While this tension can never be completely resolved, since every call center needs to simultaneously be both efficient and productive and customer-friendly and quality-oriented, and since the Taylorization of processes after the fashion of mass-communication factories practically by definition leads to a decline

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in quality and customer orientation, call centers can be positioned along a spectrum between the extremes of standardized, precisely measured and controlled mass communication on one end and personal customer communication with a high degree of discretion on the part of the agent on the other. The position of a call center along this quantitative-qualitative scale has far-reaching implications for the way it treats its employees and organizes work processes.

However, in general it has to be maintained that "[u]ltimately, the interests of customers were, and remain, subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation and profit maximization" (Taylor and Bain, India, 264), since "[u]ltimately, the call centre's raison d'etre lies in its promise to cut costs, reduce overheads and maximize profits" (Taylor and Bain, United, 137), while "improved customer satisfaction was always a post hoc justification" (Taylor and Bain, India, 264). From the point of view of the agent trying to negotiate his own position between the contradictory demands of the company and the customer, having to use the company-defined performance targets as guidelines, this can be expressed as follows: "[T]he targets measuring worker performance have the company's goals in mind, rather than that of the customers" (Deb). Being caught up in this contradiction often leads to a sense of frustration on the part of the agent.

Given the constant push for ever greater cost reduction, increased productivity and profit maximization that lay at the heart of the concept of the call center from the very beginning, and given that technological advances had "collapsed the geographical dimension", the move of call centers to overseas destinations where labor, land and other cost factors were cheaper than at home was only a logical extension of the process. The technological advances, and in this case especially the new ability to transmit telephony digitally via the IP protocol, or via satellite, collapsed not only geographies, but once the ability to relay

communication over long distances without loss of quality was established, the technology also quickly collapsed the cost of long-distance telecommunication across national borders, thus paving the way for offshore call center operations.

As Taylor and Bain explain, it has been demonstrated that "proximity to (cheaper) skilled labour supplies, advanced telecommunications connectivity, low cost property availability, and regional development policy and incentives, were key factors producing regional clusters" (India, 264) in countries like the UK, which was one of the first countries to experience the explosive growth of call centers. The same logic then took the phenomenon to a higher level, when, by means of offshore outsourcing, the call center became "a genuinely globalized phenomenon, located in the developing world but serving customers in the developed world" (Taylor and Bain, India, 264-265). Not all offshore operations involve the outsourcing of call center operations to a different company abroad. In some cases large, especially multinational companies also open a branch in the offshore destination country, or form a joint venture in cooperation with a local company.

The main motivation for companies deciding to move call center operations offshore is of course cost reduction, since especially labor costs are generally much lower in destination countries, usually located in the Global South, than at home, in the developed North. The idea that companies and capital are relatively free to move to where cheap labor is available, while on the other hand workers in low-wage countries are not free to move to where there are high wages, is based on theories of globalization that also posit the substitutability of labor in developed countries with workers in developing countries. Following this point of view leads to the threat of a 'race to the bottom' in terms of workers' pay, conditions and rights, an all too real danger that is unfortunately frequently abused by nationalist groups to foment racist

and xenophobic sentiments against foreign workers, and by corporate managers attempting to pit workers in the Global South against those in the North[3].

There are, however, limits to labor substitutability, and in the call center sector one major restriction is the requirement that workers in the destination country must have a good command of the language spoken by customers in the developed world, and be familiar with their culture. Thus, the offshoring of call center operations is contingent upon the availability in the destination country of a large and well-educated workforce willing to work at low wages, and speaking the language and knowing the culture of the sending country.

In some cases, companies that employ offshoring even argue that the decision was motivated not only by financial concerns but by the higher quality and better qualifications of workers in the destination country, as the CEO of HSBC stated when unfavorably comparing its UK staff with their Indian counterparts:

> They're quicker at answering the phones, highly numerate and keen to come to work every day […] Staff are hugely enthusiastic […] A lot have degrees […] the performance of the UK is inferior. The quality of the work overseas is exceptionally high. (Financial Times 10 August 2002, as quoted by Taylor and Bain, United, 133)

This statement, however, stands in stark contrast to the perception of the population in the sending countries, who usually assume that services rendered from abroad and 'on the cheap' by foreigners are by definition inferior to similar work done by natives in the home country. This perception, which easily lends itself to nationalist or racist tendencies, is the main reason why a large proportion of companies that use offshoring require that agents working in the call centers abroad assume a different identity while working on the phone in order to pretend to customers that they are indeed located in the same country.

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[3]Trade union responses to offshore outsourcing in the UK and possible courses of action, including successful examples of resistance, are detailed in Taylor and Bain 2008.

In general, most offshoring operations do not entail the wholesale relocation of all call center services from one country to another, but rather involve "companies restructuring [operational] processes, and then segmenting, or 'slicing off', the most standardized workflows for migration" (Taylor and Bain, India, 270), while the more 'valuable' work, including both less standardized and more prestigious services, and also the same services but to be delivered to 'premium' customers, tend to remain at home. Thus, those call center operations that are outsourced to offshore destinations usually are the most routine, most repetitive, most tightly scripted, and most quantifiable tasks, leading to many offshore call centers being positioned near the extreme quantitative end of the spectrum and thus being characterized by more Taylorized, mass-production type work organization, including especially high degrees of surveillance and control and target pressures.

The best-known example of offshoring in the call center sector is the location in India of call centers serving the English-speaking market particularly in the US and the UK. The history, development, and special conditions of the Indian call center industry will be discussed in the following subchapter.

Call Center Offshoring: The Case of India

There is a substantial amount of academic literature on the Indian call center phenomenon, including many case studies (Mirchandani, Practices; Poster; Taylor and Bain, India; Taylor and Bain, United, among others). The Indian call center industry can thus be considered well-researched and well-documented.

The main prerequisite that allowed India to become the major offshore destination for call centers serving the markets of the developed English-speaking countries is the presence of a large, well-educated, comparatively cheap, English-speaking workforce, which is of course due to the legacy of the country's long history as a British colony. This adds a strong postcolonial twist to this instance of workers in the Global South carrying out service work for customers in the Global North.

Another important factor in attracting call centers to India was the encouragement of the development by the Indian state. Software technology parks were set up in several regions around the county, including Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad, where many call centers are located in what have become almost self-contained cities on the outskirts of these population centers, such as Noida and Gurgaon, the names of which have come to symbolize the Indian call center boom. However, labor market pressures, i.e. the scarcity of candidates with sufficiently good English language skills, are increasingly forcing call centers to move to other, somewhat smaller cities to recruit fresh personnel. The state also offered tax incentives, and labor legislation was eased in some states after lobbying by industry associations, for example to allow women to work at night (Taylor and Bain, India, 268-269; Poster, 274). Figures by NASSCOM, the Indian National Association of Software and Services Companies, estimate that, in 2006, there were roughly five hundred call centers in India, employing at least 350,000 agents (NASSCOM, as quoted by Poster, 274). The majority are serving customers in the US, but there are also many centers catering to the markets in Canada, the UK or Australia.

Call centers in India are a two-sided phenomenon for Indians: On the one hand, they are a popular career choice among young university graduates due to the

wages, which are quite high by Indian standards, although still low compared to standards in the UK or the US, where most customers are located. It is not easy to be accepted for a call center position. In fact, some estimates say that out of every one hundred applicants, a mere three to five are hired (Taylor and Bain, United, 138). Most of those who are not accepted fail because of their strong Indian accents. The profession has considerable prestige, as most employees are young, urban, well-educated, middle-class university graduates, who "see themselves as professionals in a high-status occupation" (Taylor and Bain, United, 145). They are attracted by the "stimulating, prestigious career" (Taylor and Bain, United, 145) and the opportunities for rapid advancement promised by managers, by the chance to work for a prestigious multinational corporation, the benefits offered besides the pay, the training in English language and culture that they perceive as useful for future careers, and the chance of possibly traveling to the US to receive training there (Poster, 293). However, they soon realize the contradiction between the stimulating job and environment promised by employers and the reality of the monotonous routine of taking or making one call after the other, exacerbated by the typical pressurized call center working conditions and additional strain specific to call centers in India.

Call center operations outsourced to India usually involve the most standardized and scripted routines, typically of short duration, with the tightest quantitative target measures. For this reason, most Indian call centers are to be found at the extreme quantitative, mass-production type end of the call center spectrum. Although Taylor and Bain note that most Indian call centers hope to "move up the value chain" by first proving their quality in very standardized operations and then applying for more advanced, more prestigious, less scripted work, most fail to achieve this aspiration (India, 269).

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The basic organization of work in Indian call centers is the same as in most call centers all over the world: A large open-plan office where agents sit at their workstations, equipped with a computer, a telephone and a headset, and either wait for calls allocated to them by the ACD system or, in the case of outbound operations, wait to be connected to the number dialed by the automatic dialing system (instances of agents choosing specific customers and manually dialing the number are rare). However, since operations are usually high-paced and there is little need for after-call processing in highly standardized procedures, there will rarely be any waiting time. Instead, a new voice is likely to appear in the agent's headset as soon as one call is finished.

In most cases, there is an extremely high degree of surveillance and monitoring of agents' performance. Since the majority of call centers in India are subcontractors, Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between the client company and the subcontractor specify quantitative and qualitative targets that agents must adhere to. The performance in calls is tightly measured on quantity and quality criteria, although due to the nature of the kind of calls handled in India quantitative criteria usually dominate. Most calls are tightly scripted, so in the majority of cases agents have very little discretion regarding their work. Break times are also strictly prescribed, with extreme cases including the above example of agents having to raise an appropriately colored card to ask for a toilet break. Communication within the company is usually characterized by a strong hierarchy and top-down methods.

All of these issues are rendered even more stressful for agents by the fact that they generally have to work at night much of the time in order to synchronize their shifts to business hours in the US or wherever their customers are located. Shifts are often very long, with nine hours being something of a standard, but especially night shifts are often extended by several more hours. Added to this are

long distances to cover between the home and the workplace, and long traveling times owing not only to the distance but also to heavy traffic. Most call centers provide transportation for their employees, although these services often take a long time to bring workers to their homes. As Deb describes his own short-lived call center experience, it "was a self-contained world of 13-hour days, taking into account the travelling time of up to two hours each way, with space for little else to penetrate one's existence".

Call center offices are usually situated in the 'software cities' of modern buildings on the outskirts of major Indian towns, in sealed office buildings where employees have no control over centrally managed temperature, air conditioning and humidity, and are not even able to open the windows (cf. Taylor and Bain, India, 272; Baldry, Bain and Taylor). Inside, the offices are often decorated with items typical of the customer region or the company being served, and every effort is made to effectively shut out India from the workplace.

The combined effect of all of these factors is that the work is experienced as demanding, pressurized and stressful, and is actually damaging to agents' health. There are many complaints related to ill health, and in particular many agents report sleeping problems and fatigue-related diseases. Working nights and sleeping during the day not only upsets the biorhythm, leading to health problems, but as a side-effect it also disrupts family and social life, possibly leading to psychological difficulties, and it may pose problems especially for women in a society that may not easily accept women being out of the house at night. As a result of all these problems, turnover is generally very high in these call centers. Most agents do not see the job as a long-term career prospect but rather as an opportunity to make good money before moving on to something else that may pay less, at least in the

beginning, but is better suited to their talents and offers more opportunities of advancement.

While all of these issues are also experienced to some extent in call centers anywhere in the world, there is an additional factor that makes life even more difficult for Indian agents, and that is the fact that in many cases they have to pretend to be not themselves but someone else, an American or British or Canadian, or whatever nationality of customers they are dealing with at that point. The extent to which this posturing is enforced varies greatly over different call centers. There are instances where agents are allowed to use their own names and even admit that they are based in India, and others were they are required to adopt a natural-sounding English pseudonym and invent a whole life story to share with customers if conversation develops in that direction, and again others where agents even have to switch accents several times within one shift as they are dealing with customers from different parts of the US and ought to appear as local to all of them. In this they are often helped by screens on the walls or windows popping up on their monitors displaying local times, weather information, local news and the local sports results, so that agents can easily engage in small talk with customers without giving away that they are actually nowhere near the customer's location.

This act of "national identity management" (Poster) requires extensive training efforts. Substantial efforts are undertaken by companies to either 'neutralize' agents' accents or teach them to adopt the specific accent(s) of the customers they will be dealing with. In addition to this, agents receive cultural training, although this often centers on watching popular American or British movies or TV series. Agents are also often encouraged to use only the English language and their English names when speaking to each other. Ideally, they should leave their Indian-ness behind on the doorstep when they enter the office and

become American (or whatever nationality their customers are). This forced adoption of another character, combined with the need to conceal one's location and origins, not only adds a cultural dimension to the strain of emotional labor, it also leads to frustration, role confusion and psychological tension. There have been reports of agents having difficulty readjusting to their Indian identity after having been a foreigner for eight hours or more when they return home after work: They might speak in English to their families, find fault with them and attribute it to their 'Indian-ness', etc. (cf. Poster; Shome). However, as Poster points put, the version of American-ness that agents in her case study attempted to portray had no match in reality, since it was a fallacious and standardized one based on the actors in popular TV series and ignoring, possibly even denying, America's great diversity (295).

Adopting a fictional personality may also be a positive strategy for agents to help them cope with some of the strains of call center work, specifically with abusive customers, as Deb explains, using an example he observed of one agent giving advice on how to comfort others: "I'd tell them that it's not you they're shouting at, but at your alias, Samantha. Why get upset about someone abusing Samantha? She doesn't exist." In this case, the fictional person of 'Samantha' becomes a shield for the real person to protect herself. However, the same principle also means that agents remain distanced from the things they achieve and cannot take pride in their successful performance, as one agent states in recalling an occasion when he was congratulated by a satisfied customer:

> 'Well done! You really helped me', and he asks you your name. So if I tell 'Nick' [pause]. I'm not Nick. I don't know who Nick is… what's the use of giving my alias, when *I'm* the one working, *I'm* solving the problem, *I'm* from India… [But] no, we cannot give my name (Mirchandani, Resistance, 189).

In some cases, especially in outbound telemarketing, where agents have to attempt to build a sense of trust between themselves and the customer, identity management may evolve into outright lying aimed at selling a product to the

customer in a deal that may not be beneficial for him or her. Agents are thus also placed in an ethically difficult situation that they must attempt to resolve in accordance with their own conscience and the requirements of the company.

Apart from the emotional strain put on workers by forcing them to lie and to deny their own identity, origins and location, this practice has also been strongly criticized for its racist and imperialist implications. These practices force Indian workers to adapt their behavior to standards defined by the Global North. Local behavior and qualities, such as the Indian accent, are rated 'defective' or 'incorrect' and reduced to an 'interference' with the supposedly correct way of speaking and behaving. Although many call center educators emphasize that they are not attempting to impose a specific accent but rather to 'neutralize' agents' accents, this 'neutral' accent to be achieved certainly has more in common with the American than the Indian one and is perceived by many workers as an 'Americanization' of their way of speaking. As Mirchandani explains, the "'neutral' in this sense contains a significant regional bias, reinforcing the 'racist hierarchization' implicit in identifying American English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate" (Practices, 360). Mirchandani also notes that the importance placed by these profit-driven companies on the use of an American accent "suggests that there is often a confluence between capitalist and nationalist goals" (Practices, 361).

Shome points out how racism, which is usually based on the visual perception of the 'other' body, is carried to an aural dimension in the call center in the context of the "de-Indianization" of workers (109). The goal is to erase the issue of race both from the transaction between customer and agent and from the relationship between the client company and its customers who may object to being served from abroad.

The very possibility of operating call centers for English-speaking customers is rooted in India's colonial past, and modern imperialism takes many forms in Indian call center practices that have been termed both postcolonial (Shome) and neocolonialist (Taylor and Bain, India). Linguistic and cultural imperialism can be observed in the accent and culture training agents have to undergo and apply in their calls, while the especially stressful night shifts Indian agents have to work in order to synchronize their working hours with western customer servicing hours, something that is "symbolic of the subordination of Indian workers to the interests of western capital" (Taylor and Bain, India, 277), constitute a prime example of "colonization with time" (Adam).

If the practice of making workers in a call center adopt a fictitious personality of the customer's nationality has such detrimental effects on workers' psychological well-being and is tainted by such strong elements of imperialism, neocolonialism and ethnocentrism, and in addition carries the major risk of infuriating customers should they realize they are being lied to, then there must be some very strong reasons for companies to nevertheless insist on the practice. The main reason clearly lies with the consumers, or rather the companies' assumptions about their customers' beliefs and attitudes. Companies strongly believe that consumers would react very negatively if they found out that services were provided from India, and that customers believe services from Indian call centers are inferior and take away local jobs. The often racist aggression many agents have experienced from customers who saw through their pretense appears to confirm this assumption. There are reports of companies who moved their services from India back to the US after consumer protests over "accent interference" (Shome, 111).

Poster identifies four agents of national identity management in her case study of three call centers in India serving customers in the US: the US corporations,

customers in the US, the Indian managers of the call centers, and the Indian workers themselves. The US corporations are the primary source of the pressure to mask the agents' location, although the degree to which they require it varies from company to company and possibly even from project to project. The corporations participate in identity management both through the training sessions, for which many send representatives to India, and by remote monitoring of agents' calls based on the criteria laid down in the SLA.

Customers in the US are strongly involved in the process of national identity management – "through their hostility" (Poster, 282). Agents adopt an American identity in order to avoid being abused by customers, including racial harassment. But customers can voice their hostility not only on the phone to the agent, but also by pushing the outsourcing company to abandon this practice, most explicitly by threatening to boycott the company in the future if the jobs are not brought 'back home'. Although by no means all customers are hostile to Indian agents, there are nevertheless many instances of customers refusing to be served by Indians, demanding to speak to an American instead, believing that service by foreigners must by definition be inferior. In the words expressed by several agents, "people only like to be helped or served by their own kind" (Poster, 283). Poster identifies several reasons for the aggressive behavior of some American customers, including attempts to protest against corporate practices of outsourcing in general, with an "underlying resentment of U.S. jobs going overseas", and against declining attention to service quality, combined with an "increasing evasion of accountability to consumers" (283). Certain "elements of the U.S. media, political rhetoric, and popular culture" may also contribute to customers' aggressiveness by highlighting nationalist sentiments in framing the call centers as a case of "Indians stealing American jobs" (Poster, 283). Agents even reported that people sometimes ask

them, "Are you a terrorist?" or say things like, "You're calling from South Asia, that's the place with Bin Laden. You are calling from South Asia so you must be some terrorist", revealing an underlying assumption, as fostered by the media in its widespread support for the 'war on terror', that everybody from South Asia is a terrorist (Poster, 284). Customer protests indeed have the potential to lead companies to bring their call centers back to the US after extensive complaints about the service, as has happened in more than one case. For this reason, there is substantial pressure on both agents and managers in India to appear as American as possible on the phone in order to avoid threats of closure.

Indian managers also play an important role in national identity management, because they are the ones who specify the training, decide on the Americanized decoration of the workplace and the availability of news and weather reports from the US, and, perhaps most importantly, they set the 'quality' standards, and both decide and impose penalties for failure to be sufficiently 'American' on the phone – which may be characterized as "defective" talk (Poster, 286). The agents themselves usually have little choice but to conform to the rules. However, some go beyond what is necessary, for example to facilitate sales, while others have ethical issues, for example with pretending to be something they are not in order to sell a product. Poster makes the point that "employees have independent agency that contributes to the American identity policy" (286), as is also visible in their resistance to some of the requirements.

Resistance to national identity management occurs to some extent in each of the agency groups. Some US corporations reject the practice, at least in their rhetoric. Some customers express "transnational solidarities with the Indian agents" (Poster, 287). Some Indian managers "use symbolic practices that disrupt the Americanization and assert Indian-ness in the work environment" (Poster, 288),

such as displaying Indian flags or Hindu decorations. The most important locus of resistance, however, are the Indian workers themselves. They resist through both individual and collective strategies, by refusing to pretend to be American in principle or when they feel they would be taking advantage of customers, by developing strategies to find out when they are being monitored and consciously breaking the rules when they are not 'on record', or by starting to form unions (as discussed by Taylor and Bain, United).

The practice of national identity management has different consequences for the different groups. US corporations clearly gain the most, most obviously in terms of increased profits, but also because the practice "'smoothes' relations between customers and agents" (Poster, 291) and presumably improves customer satisfaction. Possibly even more important, however, are what Poster calls the "discrete advantages" and "hegemonic benefits" of US companies (291). Masking the true identity of the call center workers allows the companies to

> hide how their products are actually produced, by whom, under what conditions, where, etc. […] it enables them to conceal the neo-liberal project of exploiting workers in the Global South, [and] helps them form a compliant consumer base in the United States, and one that acquiesces to the broader process of outsourcing (Poster, 291).

Any potential public backlash against outsourcing, or anti-globalization protests, are thus prevented. Poster points out that the practice of national identity management thus, in a Foucauldian sense, "allows these firms to hide the exercise of the power on the consuming public. Ultimately, they are managing the consumers' reality as much as that of the workers" (291). Indeed, it seems obvious that the practice is directed at relations between the company and its customers at least to a similar, if not greater, extent than at relations between agents and consumers, even if improved communication between agent and consumer may be the professed aim.

From the perspective of customers in the US, they may benefit from national identity management through 'smoother' communication with agents. However, this

comes at the price of deception. This price is all the higher if accepting that US corporations are indeed using the practice "*deliberately* to mislead their own consuming public" (Poster, 296). Call center managers in India, on the other hand, obviously profit from the call centers, since they provide their livelihood and offer many business opportunities for entrepreneurs even with relatively small amounts of capital. However, Indian managers lose control over their own companies, since they have to conform to the demands of their foreign client companies, especially when it comes to national identity management.

The Indian workers, finally, on the one hand benefit from well-paying and prestigious job opportunities, working for well-known international corporations, and many also find that they gain from pretending to be American for their future lives by learning about American language and culture, which may help them when applying for jobs or studies in the US. For them, it is "a strategic move these workers make in the context of a global hierarchy" (Poster, 294). On the other hand, however, they have to pay a very high price in terms of tolerating heavy surveillance and control, doing highly routinized work, working nights with all the drawbacks in terms of family and social life, very limited opportunities for career advancement, serious health issues, and forced participation in the systematic deception of customers. Also, the negative effects of "los[ing] control over their own sense of citizenship and identity" (Poster, 295), which can even lead to multiple personality disorder and other serious psychological problems, must not be underestimated.

Poster also emphasizes that the globalization of the service industry is changing the structure of the relations between the different actors. In the case of the Indian call centers, what was traditionally a triangular relationship between employers, employees and customers has become a quadrilateral one with Indian managers, acting as a subcontracted intermediary between the client companies and

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the workers, as the fourth group (Poster, 275, 296). In the course of this transformation, these relations have become transnational, and discourses of nation and citizenship, as well as the issue of race, have become an integral part of the globalized service industry. The call center industry brings these issues to the fore, as well as broader questions of globalization and relations between the Global North and the Global South, because it is "putting U.S. citizens in direct voice contact with workers in the Global South, on a mass scale, and perhaps for the first time" (Poster, 297). The Indian call centers constitute a forum in which new race relations in the postcolonial era are expressed, not through direct violence but in more subtle ways:

> [T]he rhetoric of empire is apparent in Indian call centers – not through an explicit language of racial superiority – but through the mediating language of 'terror,' and the denigration of South Asian, Eastern, and Muslim identities. Globalized interactive service work is providing a new forum for everyday citizens to articulate this kind of nationalized rhetoric (Poster, 297).

Mirchandani, meanwhile, discusses the active role of Indian call center workers in constructing their position in a globalized and postcolonial economy, and particularly emphasizes the agency of the workers, who are constructed as 'the Other' by the colonizer, but who at the same time actively construct the colonizer (Practices, 361). Mirchandani observed how agents constructed their American customers as "rich but stupid" in their discourses and through a process of "mimicry, [which] in producing a false copy of the original, makes a mockery of the colonial enterprise" (Practices, 361). This allowed workers to "pity rather than revere their American customers, thus subverting the ideology of the 'West' as being superior to the rest of the world" (Mirchandani, Practices, 361). The construction of Americans as stupid and uneducated already begins in the training period, when future agents are taught how to handle requests from customers that act seriously stupid, and is reinforced by agents telling each other stories they experienced themselves or heard from others about stupid customers. Workers also

frequently emphasize the lower value placed on higher education in the US as compared to India, and deplore the fact that "highly educated Indian workers employed in middle class, white collar occupation are serving often lower class, poorly educated American callers" (Mirchandani, Practices, 362), and they have to treat these customers with deference. In the words of one agent cited by Mirchandani:

> Some Americans, they call [and] say, I want to talk to an American. Oh man, go on! You got an Indian and you are telling an Indian that you want to talk to an American! […] We can't say that you are an American, we can't talk to you. Like they have the freedom to say anything but we can't say anything (Practices, 362).

Workers thus note that "nationality overrides class borders" (Mirchandani, Practices, 362), and realize "the uneven development (which privileges national origin rather than education or intelligence) fostered by global capitalism" (Mirchandani, Practices, 363). They experience at first hand how "geographical location [is] the prime determinant of the value of labour in the global economy" (Mirchandani, Practices, 369). In the context of the Indian call centers, the needs and perceptions of American (or other western) customers, including racist beliefs, are clearly privileged over those of the Indian workers, but one of the ways in which agents cope with this situation is by the construction of their American customers as rich and privileged, but ultimately stupid.

Despite the enormous efforts undertaken to 'turn Indians into Americans' (or any other nationality), there are "limitations on these neo-colonialist practices to succeed" (Taylor and Bain, India, 276), and as long as customers in the US and other English-speaking countries are unwilling to accept services from India, these limitations restrict the expansion of call centers in India and especially inhibit the outsourcing of more complex services, not because Indians would not be capable of doing these jobs but because in more complex interactions of longer duration it would be more difficult to conceal the agents' location. Moreover, both Indian

agents and their overseas customers occasionally complain about difficulties in understanding each other due to linguistic and cultural difficulties, despite the extensive training, and such difficulties would be exacerbated in more complex services, while at the same time precise understanding would be even more crucial in these interactions. Also, such services would presumably be more valuable for the client company and creating more revenue, so that it would be even more important to companies to conceal the fact that they practice offshoring to India in order not to offend customers.

In sum, the conditions in Indian offshore call centers are in principle very similar to those in other countries serving domestic customers. However, due to the nature of services that are typically moved to India, which are generally comprised of the most routinized mass-production type, most Indian call centers are found at the extreme quantitative end of the call center spectrum and are characterized by immense pressure to adhere to mainly quantitative but also qualitative targets while being subjected to very high levels of surveillance and control. The emotional labor agents have to perform is greatly exacerbated by most of them having to mask their location even to the point of entirely denying their own identity, culture and origin by adopting a fictional, usually American, name and life story. Additional strain is placed on Indian workers by having to work at night in order to conform to western customer service hours, another evidence of the neo-colonialist thinking underlying the Indian offshore call center industry. Taylor and Bain express the contradiction faced by Indian call centers even more starkly than by their onshore counterparts: "The cost-reduction logic drives companies to offshore voice services, but they are then confronted with a series of problems deriving from the customer-oriented logic" (India, 278) inherent in call center work. This tension has been brought to a largely unsatisfactory resolution by, for the most part, restricting the services to be

offshored to India to those that are most tightly scripted and require the least interaction with customers.

German Call Centers in Turkey

While the case of call center offshoring to India is generally well known in the public and well documented and researched in the academic literature, another case of offshore call centers, that of German companies establishing call centers to serve the German market in Turkey, especially in Istanbul, is less well known. In fact, there is no academic literature on this phenomenon at all, not in English- nor German- nor Turkish-language journals. The issue is not well known in the German or Turkish public either, nor discussed in the German or the Turkish media. The only group that appears to be aware of the phenomenon is the German-Turkish community both in Germany and in Turkey, and the only literature on the subject is found in the call center industry's trade journals and occasional articles in the popular media. Even the scholarly articles discussed on the previous pages, which in their discussion of call centers in India make occasional references to other call center offshoring markets (e.g. Poster; Taylor and Bain, United), do not contain any reference to Turkey as an offshore market for German call centers. This thesis seeks to fill the gap in the scientific literature by investigating the German call center industry in Turkey, and especially in Istanbul.

There may be various reasons for the absence of any academic discussion of the phenomenon. One reason may be that it is a relatively recent development. The scholarly literature on call centers in India started to appear some years after the phenomenon first occurred, and the offshoring to Turkey is a much more recent development that started approximately in the year 2002, several years after India's

call center explosion. Another reason may be that most scientific publications are published in the US or the UK, in the English language, so they are more likely to focus on developments that concern the English-speaking world. However, the main reason most likely is that the phenomenon is relatively small in scale. The German call center market in itself is much smaller than the English-speaking one, even if other German-speaking countries such as Austria and parts of Switzerland are included, and the volume and potential of its outsourcing to Turkey is in no way comparable to that of India. While the number of German call centers may be impressive in Istanbul, it is not a phenomenon on a global scale.

Precise numbers regarding German call centers in Turkey are difficult to obtain. One source from 2004 states that Turkey has around 150 call centers employing twelve thousand agents (Fojut, 17), but this claim is not attributed to any source and it is not clarified whether these figures refer to all call centers in Turkey or only to those serving the German market. The only other source to give figures is an October 2007 article in the German business daily *Handelsblatt*, which cites three thousand workstations in call centers serving the German market from Istanbul and attributes the claim to "estimates by experts" (Hoyer, 24). This number is also cited in the December 2007 issue of the magazine published by the Turkish-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (TD-IHK), with reference to *Handelsblatt* (TD-IHK). This would be a very small number compared to the estimated 400,000 workstations in Germany, according to *Handelsblatt* (Hoyer, 24), or the 350,000 agents in India cited above.

Turkey is one of several outsourcing destinations for Germany, and its German call centers are concentrated in Istanbul, with some also existing in cities such as Izmir and Antalya. One of the main characteristics that set this instance of offshore outsourcing apart from others, such as the example of India, is that rather

than relying on a native population that speaks the customers' language due to historical reasons, usually as a consequence of colonialism, the German call centers in Turkey instead largely recruit their workforce from among a population that lived in Germany for many years, in many cases was born there, but then, for various reasons, moved, or 'returned', to Turkey and found work in the call centers there, allowing them to make use of their German language skills. Some may even have moved to Turkey precisely because they knew they would be able to find work in the call centers there.

As explained in the previous sections, a major precondition for the offshore outsourcing of call centers is the presence in the destination country of a workforce that is sufficiently educated, speaks the language and knows the culture of the country to be serviced, and is willing to work at wages that are considerably lower than what would be the standard in the home country. Due to a large number of people in the richer countries being critical of the outsourcing of jobs to low-wage countries, call center operators have an interest in preventing their customers from noticing that they are being served from abroad, thus putting great pressure on agents to appear like 'natives' on the phone and limiting the employment prospects of anyone speaking with a foreign accent.

The language barrier is a significant problem for German-language call center operators, because German is not widely spoken outside Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Companies serving English- or French-speaking customers have a number of former colonies at their disposal as possible offshore destinations, countries in which the former colonizers' language has become a national language. So the options for call centers serving customers in the US, Canada, the UK and Australia include "India, the Philippines, South Africa, Nigeria, Barbados and Jamaica", with India being the most obvious choice and the most famous example of

call center offshoring, while French-speaking customers can be served from "Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia", and speakers of Spanish may be found in "Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico and northern Morocco" (Read, 18).

For the German-speaking market, the number of available options is much lower. While there are some German speakers in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, as well as Argentina and South Africa, their numbers are relatively low and their German is often marked by a foreign accent. However, studies show that German customers are only ready to tolerate agents with an accent as long as they are based in Germany. The general reaction of German customers to being served from abroad is a negative one (cf. Grävemeyer, Polen). Many would even be willing to switch to a different provider if they learnt that a company is using call centers in foreign countries (Pause, Offshoring). For this reason, German speakers abroad who have a discernible foreign accent are not acceptable in the offshoring business.

However, among the German companies operating call centers in Istanbul there is one notable exception to the rule of masking agents' true location, and that is Lufthansa, Germany's major airline company. Lufthansa advertises the fact that the company's call centers are located in different countries on various continents as a positive asset, because this allows for service availability 24 hours a day (cf. Lufthansa, 8)[4]. An article portraying the Lufthansa call center in Istanbul and showing it in a very positive light was even published in *Stern,* a popular magazine in Germany (Liedtke). Employees in Lufthansa's Istanbul call center use their real names, even if they are Turkish, and they do not lie to their customers but openly

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[4] In contrast to the organizational principles governing Indian call centers and forcing agents to work at night, Lufthansa's service slogan is that "the call follows the sun", and according to this principle any one Lufthansa call center does not need to be operated 24 hours, because calls will be routed to one of the several call centers around the globe in a place where it is daytime at that moment (Lufthansa 2003: 8).

state that they are based in Istanbul, if a customer asks about their location. Customer responses vary, according to the *Stern* article, from surprise and fear of high telephone charges (which is of course immediately assuaged by the agent) to friendly questions about the weather in Istanbul or more negative responses alleging that someone in Istanbul probably is not as well-informed as their colleagues based in Germany (cf. Liedtke).

The limitations on German offshoring outlined above leave Istanbul as the most suitable locations for German companies looking to establish offshore call centers, because this city offers an "attractive reservoir" of "remigrants", composed largely of young people who grew up in Germany, speak perfect German and are familiar with the German culture (cf. Pause, Offshoring). This group of people is also renowned for being well-educated and expressing a high level of service orientation (Jünger). In addition, Turkey offers low personnel costs, low staff turnover, a dynamic and positive approach to work with a 'can do' attitude, flexible labor laws allowing for the extensive monitoring of calls as well as for extended working hours including weekends and public holidays, low set-up and operation costs, a strong and stable telecommunications infrastructure, and a positive attitude towards call center work (cf. Jünger; CMC, Why Turkey?). A further major advantage for Turkey is its geographical proximity to Europe and the presence of persons who are not only fluent in the German language but also know the culture and mentality very well (cf. Jünger; CMC, Why Turkey?). Last but not least, it should not be forgotten that there are approximately 2.5 million Turks living in Germany, whose needs may be better served by people who know both the German and the Turkish languages and mentalities (cf. Jünger).

Unlike in most other offshore destinations, the German speakers in Istanbul are not formed by a native population that adopted the language of its former

colonizers, and German is not a national or widely spoken language in Turkey. Rather, these people are for the most part the descendants of guest workers who migrated to Germany in the 1960s and 70s. Many of them were born and raised in Germany, but at some point a decision was made to 'return' to Turkey. The issue of return migration will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Based on the arguments above, and with expectations of saving up to 30 or 40 percent in cost, the beginning of the 21st century saw a veritable "gold rush" to establish call centers abroad (cf. Fojut; Henn). For the German market, this mainly meant Turkey, which offered better conditions, and particularly a larger supply of German-speaking personnel, than its competitors in Eastern Europe. The main phase of the call center boom in Turkey began approximately in the year 2002 and lasted until early 2006. Most Turkish call centers were established in Istanbul, but some are also located in cities such as Izmir and Antalya. The concentration of most German call centers in Istanbul also suggests that this city attracted a large proportion of the return migrants from Germany.

While the subject was hardly mentioned in media and journals in previous times, the years 2003 and 2004 saw all major trade journals related to the call center industry in Germany publishing articles on the new development of offshore outsourcing, especially to Turkey, with the story making it to the front page of many issues, although this media attention remained limited to trade journals and the issue did not become a subject of discussion in the popular media. The general tone was similar in all of these journals: Offshore outsourcing was one of the most important contemporary trends in the call center industry, great profits were waiting to be made, and Turkey in particular was a potential gold mine for German call centers that was only just beginning to be exploited. The recurrent use of the "gold rush" analogy is striking in headlines such as *Goldgrube Offshore-Call Center*? (Fojut,

"Gold Mine Offshore Call Center?") or *Lockruf des Goldes* (Henn, "Call of the Gold"[5]).

However, the mood soon began to change. While the first quarter of the year 2006 was still marked by enthusiasm for offshoring in general and for the attractiveness of Turkey as an almost ideal location for German call centers in particular, critical voices started to come to the forefront later in the year. A series of articles that appeared in the trade journal *TeleTalk* serving the German call center industry over the course of the year 2006 serves well to illustrate this development.

In early February 2006, the journal devoted a number of articles to the subject of offshore call centers. One article analyses the respective advantages and disadvantages of IVR systems (computer-based Interactive Voice Response) as opposed to offshore call centers. Both are employed as a means to save costs in call center operations, but while a customer who is served by the IVR system is aware that he is dealing with a self-service machine, the customer who is connected to an agent in an offshore call center generally does not realize that the person he is talking to is based abroad. Since customers are likely to respond negatively to what they may perceive as a cheap self-service solution, the article comes to the conclusion that, since the costs of offshore call centers are low, such an investment may be more worthwhile than investing in an IVR system. Thus, the author at least indirectly advocates offshoring (cf. Pause, Sprachportale).

Other articles in the same issue of the journal deal more specifically with the opportunities and difficulties facing German call centers abroad. One reports the difficulty of finding German-speaking agents abroad, mentioning South Africa, Russia and Argentina as potential offshore candidates outside the EU with limited

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[5]"Lockruf des Goldes" is the German translation of the title of Jack London's novel *Burning Daylight,* which deals with the Alaska gold rush of the 1890s. It is also the title of a four-part TV series based on Jack London's books that was filmed in 1975 and was very popular in Germany. It is thus a very powerful title that calls up many strong images.

numbers of German speakers. However, the article goes on to locate the "only truly large reservoir" of German speakers abroad in Istanbul. While it is cautioned that due to the lack of speakers of excellent German the possibilities of outsourcing complex and demanding tasks to call centers abroad are limited, the author concludes that the options to shift call center tasks abroad are not yet exhausted today (cf. Pause, Deutschsprachige).

Another article again refers to the language limitations for German call centers, citing Eastern Europe, Ireland, Scotland, South Africa and Turkey as potential offshore locations for serving the German market. This text also draws attention to the fact that call centers abroad may be used not only to serve German customers but also to specifically target members of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Germany. Furthermore, the article points out that a potential offshoring location must also offer telecommunication and transportation infrastructure, as well as a stable political and economic situation. The location must be easily accessible from Germany in order to allow company representatives from Germany to visit the call center and to facilitate quality control, thus ensuring that service and quality standards are the same as in call centers in Germany. The article points out the additional costs involved in moving call center services abroad, such as the transfer of know-how, traveling expenses and additional training, which, according to a management consultant cited in the article, reduce the savings in cost to "approximately 15 to 20 percent" (Pause, Chancen).

The article closes with an example of successful offshoring: The German *Defacto* call center company opened a branch in Istanbul in cooperation with a Turkish call center, serving not only customers in Germany but also those within Turkey, such as the German consulate general in Istanbul. In order to alleviate fears of client companies that quality standards might be lower in Turkey, the company

always spreads campaigns between its locations in Germany and in Istanbul, and ensures that its employees in Turkey receive the same training and the same certificates as those in Germany (cf. Pause, Chancen).

Finally, the same issue of the journal devotes one article specifically to German call centers in Turkey, describing in more detail the Istanbul-based *Defacto* call center mentioned in the previous article. The agents in this example, working in outbound sales, pretend to be calling from Germany, using fake German names instead of their real Turkish ones. Most of them are Turks who grew up in Germany, so they speak German fluently and know the German culture very well. Business visitors from Germany praise the agents' attitude towards their job: "the enthusiasm for selling, as known from the bazaar, translates into the phone calls" (cf. Pause, Türkischer). However, the company always has part of a campaign being called from Germany, and agent monitoring and evaluation also take place in the German headquarters. A trainer is sent to Turkey from Germany at regular intervals to make sure that quality standards are equally high in both locations. Even interviews with job applicants are carried out over the phone from Germany. All of these measures are meant to ensure that "no end customer in Germany notices that he is being called from Turkey" (cf. Pause, Türkischer). To this end, *Defacto* even provides its employees in Istanbul with the opportunity to get certificates from the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK), aiming to introduce and maintain German standards in Turkey (TeleTalk).

Even though the call center in Istanbul is praised for the quality of its services here, it is still assumed that German customers will regard services rendered from Turkey as cheap and inferior, and for this reason the agents have to do their best to deceive their customers into believing that they are being called from Germany. Ethical issues concerning the systematic deception of customers by

adopting German names and pretending to be in Germany, in order to better sell a product, are not considered here at all, but this is not entirely surprising in a dedicated trade journal.

In late March 2006, another article in the same journal devotes itself to the importance of language skills in the call center, arguing that German customers will not accept agents speaking with an accent. The managing executive of a German call center company with a subsidiary in Budapest, Hungary, is quoted as saying that about half of German customers are unwilling to accept services rendered from abroad, and that many of them would even be willing to switch to a different provider if they found out that a company was using call centers abroad. The CEO of another major German call center company, which also operates a large call center in Istanbul, has the following advice for those who consider moving their call center operations abroad: "Do it, but don't tell anyone about it"[6]. The article then refers again to the difficulty of finding German-speaking agents abroad who are willing to work at considerably lower wages than in Germany. The text ends with a recommendation of Istanbul as a suitable offshore location, because here the large number of young people who grew up in Germany and speak excellent German constitutes an "attractive reservoir" of employees (cf. Pause, Offshoring).

This March 2006 article is, however, the last major article devoted to offshoring in this journal. From this point onwards, offshoring is only mentioned on the sidelines of articles dealing with other topics, in most cases interviews with CEOs analyzing their companies' strategies for the future. Offshoring is now seen in a more critical light, indicating that the 'golden age' of great profit and cost-saving expectations may already have come to an end. One such interview published in May 2006 advocates a strategy of setting up new call centers in East Germany,

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[6] Jörg Schmidt, CEO of Quelle Contact: „Tun Sie es, aber erzählen Sie niemandem davon." (Pause, Offshoring).

where wages are still considerably lower than in the western part of the country, while unemployment is considerably higher, facilitating the search for suitable employees and raising expectations that employee fluctuation will be lower than in the West, while substantial support from the local employment office and possibly financial incentives can be gained. When asked about offshore solutions, the interviewee, director of a large German call center company, explains that the cost of living has risen significantly in Istanbul over the past three years, so that this city will presumably not be a cost-effective alternative to Germany, especially East Germany, for much longer. Other potential offshore locations in Eastern Europe are dismissed immediately due to their lack of German speakers (cf. Grävemeyer, Start).

An interview with the CEO of a major American call center service provider aiming to increase its share on the German market is published in June of the same year. The interviewee relates that her company also operates several call centers in Eastern Europe and that part of the capacities there is used to serve the German market. Nevertheless, she is quick to dismiss Istanbul as a potential offshore location, claiming that the city is already overcrowded with German call centers and that cost structures are no longer competitive (cf. Grävemeyer, Smart).

The same issue of the journal contains an article describing the call center sector as a growing industry always in search of more employees. Nevertheless, when it comes to the option of offshoring, the article reports that only slightly more than one third of call center companies still view offshore outsourcing as an important issue, while approximately the same number deny its significance. Due to shortcomings in quality standards and the lack of German speakers abroad, companies are already moving outsourced activities back to Germany, claims one of the CEOs interviewed for this article. While there is still a discernible trend towards offshoring, this applies mainly to so-called 'stupid calls', i.e. highly standardized

and quantifiable routines, while more complex services demanding high quality standards are kept in Germany. Furthermore, the article predicts that cost advantages abroad will soon be a thing of the past, claiming that wage costs in Turkey are currently rising by one third each year (cf. Pause, Suchen).

So, the image of offshore outsourcing in general and of Turkey, or more specifically Istanbul, as an offshore location that is presented in this article is very different from that painted by the same author in the same journal less than five months previously. The claim that wage costs in Istanbul are rising by one third each year is particularly interesting, since, despite rising inflation and higher cost of living, there has in fact been no indication of rapidly rising wages in Istanbul's call centers. The company investigated in the case study of Chapter 4 certainly did not raise wages in the time period the article refers to, and even at a later stage only conceded 25 percent raises exclusively to those employees who had been with the company for a minimum of eighteen months. There was no indication of considerable wage increases in other call centers in Istanbul, as such news would certainly have traveled quickly through the networks of Istanbul's call center community and would have encouraged many disgruntled employees to move on to a different company. Since the article does not cite any figures or give any sources for the claim, it is impossible to determine on what information the claim is based.

The decline of Istanbul as an attractive offshore location, at least in the mirror of the *TeleTalk* journal, is exemplified in two interviews with the CEO of *Snt*, another major operator of call centers in Germany. The first interview, published in March 2006, introduces the new CEO who has recently taken office. One of his first actions was to change the company strategy towards expansion and more specifically to consider expanding to offshore locations. The most serious contender at this point clearly is Istanbul with its significant numbers of native speakers of

German. The CEO even praises Istanbul as a vibrant and fascinating city and says that he can imagine that in the future, Germans might well be attracted to Istanbul for work, preferring an interesting job in Istanbul to unemployment in Germany (cf. Grävemeyer, Snt). However, by the second interview, published in December 2006, the CEO has rejected all proposals for offshore expansion. He explains that he has closely examined several potential offshore locations, particularly Istanbul, but came to the conclusion that wages and other costs there have by now reached such a high level that offshoring would no longer offer cost advantages. He sees East Germany and Istanbul at the same level when it comes to total costs (cf. Pause, Branche). So there is no reason anymore in the eyes of this CEO to bother with the additional hassle of going abroad to establish a new call center.

Even though the call center 'gold rush' to Istanbul may have come to an end by the end of the year 2006, this does not mean that the German call center industry in Istanbul is disappearing. Many call centers have established themselves here and are flourishing and even actively expanding. Articles advocating Istanbul's potential for expansion in offshore outsourcing occasionally appear in the media (e.g. Hoyer). What has come to an end, however, is the idea that large amounts of money can be made very quickly and very easily by opening a call center in Istanbul. It should be safe to assume that the rate of new call centers being established has declined significantly. There have also been changes in the kind of call center jobs now being moved to Istanbul: The largest part of Istanbul's German call center business has always been outbound sales, and this share is likely to increase, at least in the immediate future. However, there are plans in Germany to introduce stricter laws against unsolicited telephone advertising that would make such calls subject to heavy fines. If the law, which may come into effect in 2009, has the intended effect

and prosecutors are able to reach even to Istanbul, this will be a major blow to outbound call centers, which often operate on the borders of legality.

With regard to inbound operations, it is likely that so-called 'stupid calls', the highly standardized routines that are supposed to be easy to handle and require little sophistication, are going to expand at the cost of more complex inbound operations. During the boom period, many German call centers in Istanbul were handling more complex, less standardized calls such as computer help desks and general customer service. This is one of the major differences between India and Istanbul as offshore locations: While India was mainly a destination for 'mass communication' calls, Istanbul also attracted more complex quality services. However, there has already been a shift away from these to more quantifiable operations such as fault reporting lines and simple order processing. Studies published during the boom years already marked Istanbul as a location especially suited for outbound telemarketing and order processing, while less appropriate for more complex operations or those that require a high level of coordination with Germany (cf. Henn, 25). Turkish agents are generally praised for their selling skills (cf. Henn, 25), while their attention to complex details is seen somewhat less favorably, and Turkish management is criticized for not being very efficient (cf. Fojut, 16).

There are many reasons for the decline of the German call center sector in Istanbul. The main reason certainly is that profits are no longer as large as they used to be, due on the one hand to rising costs in Istanbul, including not only wage costs but rent, infrastructure and general costs of living, and on the other hand to the availability of low-cost labor in high-unemployment regions particularly of East Germany, where the government also provides incentives for investment, making offshoring less attractive. In addition, German consumers in general have recently

moved away from the mentality of prioritizing low cost above everything else, and the emphasis on quality has been strengthened both in consumers' buying decisions and in companies' advertising of their products.

Translated to the call center sector, this means that many companies are now placing greater emphasis on quality and customer satisfaction. Especially in the telecommunications sector, 'customer satisfaction' appears to be the new buzzword. In this context, call centers are now being regarded as an important tool in improving customer satisfaction and strengthening consumers' ties to the company and the product. Priorities are moving away from purely quantitative considerations, i.e. taking as many calls as possible in the shortest possible time at the lowest possible cost, towards a greater focus on quality, at least in management rhetoric. This puts Turkish call centers at a major disadvantage, because they are still associated with inferior quality in the public mind, and the strategy of offshoring in general, a typical representation of the 'cut-costs-at-any-price' mentality, is now seen in even less favorable light than previously. Since Turkish call centers are generally unpopular with German customers, whose satisfaction has become a main focus of management considerations, companies may well be discouraged from offshore ventures for fear of negative customer reactions, especially considering that there are low-cost alternatives available in Germany. It may also be speculated that there might be a certain amount of exhaustion on the part of German companies over sometimes unreliable business practices in Turkey, from which major companies in particular, that have a reputation to lose, want to disassociate themselves. Some companies may also have underestimated the additional risks and costs involved in offshore outsourcing when they saw the 'glittering gold' of the low wages, and entered the offshoring business with insufficient preparation, leading to insufficient profits and eventual business failure. The less stable economic and

political situation in Turkey, and in particular inflation, which has recently been on the rise again, may also discourage some companies from opening a call center in Turkey, or encourage them to bring their call center operations back to Germany.

Still, a number of both large and small companies are still operating in Istanbul and appear to be flourishing, including call centers for large and internationally renowned companies such as *Siemens Business Systems*, *Lufthansa*, *Quelle* and *Arvato*. So it seems that while the 'gold rush' is over and the explosive expansion has come to an end, the German call center industry in Istanbul has consolidated itself and is here to stay as a part of this city's multi-faceted economy.

Since this overview of call center offshoring from Germany to Turkey is largely based on trade journals published by and for the call center sector, it is not surprising that critical questions regarding ethical issues, especially in the context of agents lying to customers by adopting pseudonyms and pretending to be Germans working in Germany, are not asked by these sources. Only one text makes a fleeting reference to the "psychological strain on agents, who have to pretend, to play-act in a way" (Grasemann, 18), but this is quickly dismissed as something that can be remedied by training and with the help of scripts. In general, these articles displaying the point of view of call center management, portray those elements of call center work organization that agents generally experience as oppressive, such as scripting and performance measurement, as something positive. The effects of these measures on agents are not discussed, while articles center on the potential benefits of offshoring. Although companies are cautioned against the risks of offshoring, these risks refer only to financial and performance risks for the company, not to the effects on employees, whether abroad or in Germany. Companies considering offshoring are also advised not to interfere with employment methods abroad and not to insist on an adherence to German standards. In fact, the less rigid labor

regulations in Turkey and the longer working hours are even mentioned as positive incentives for offshoring.

The case study that forms the main part of this thesis is going to illustrate the development of the German call center industry in Istanbul, its origins, rapid expansion and eventual decline. One of the main elements that make this instance of offshore outsourcing special and differentiate it from other cases such as that of India is the fact that the majority of the employees in Istanbul's German call centers are in fact Turks who were born and/or raised in Germany and at some point 'returned' to Turkey. For this reason, the following section is going to discuss the issue of return migration.

Return Migration

The workforce in Istanbul's German call centers is composed to a large extent of ethnic Turks who were born and raised in Germany or at least spent a significant part of their childhood there. Most of them can thus be considered-second generation Turkish migrants in Germany, who at some point 'returned' to Turkey. The term *return* is not entirely suitable in this context, because most of these people did not consciously emigrate from Turkey to Germany and back. Rather, they were either born in Germany or brought there by their parents as small children, so they know Turkey mainly as a holiday destination and as their parents' home country, and possibly from some childhood memories, rendering the notion of 'return' not entirely applicable here. In fact, for some even the 'return' to Turkey was not a

conscious decision on their part, but rather a decision taken by their parents when they were still children.

Hundreds of thousands of Turks came to Germany as 'guest workers' between 1961, when a bilateral recruitment agreement was signed between Germany and Turkey, and 1973, when the recruitment of foreign workers ended in the wake of general economic recession induced by the oil crisis. However, contrary to the expectations, the number of Turks in Germany continued to grow after the end of recruitment, as those who had originally been seen as temporary 'guests' stayed and even brought their families to Germany. While labor migration based on recruitment largely ended in 1973, migration based on family reunification increased, and children were born to Turkish migrants already living in Germany. It must also be kept in mind that, even though the majority of Turks came to Germany in order to find work, their motivations for migration were in many cases not purely economic and it "was not only the poor, the working class or the unemployed that applied for becoming a guestworker" (Akan and Berteaux, 4), but people from a much wider variety of backgrounds with diverse motivations for migration.

By the end of the year 2005, there were more than 1.7 million Turks living in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, Jahrbuch 2006, 48), including almost 600,000 born in Germany (Federal Statistical Office, 47). These numbers do not include the almost 700,000 Turks who acquired German citizenship between the years of 1980 to 2005 (cf. Statistisches Bundesamt, Strukturdaten, Jahrbuch 2005, Jahrbuch 2006). Nevertheless, large numbers of Turkish labor migrants returned to Turkey, encouraged by the German state most notably by a 1983 law that for a limited time period offered premiums to migrant workers returning to their countries of origin after becoming unemployed in Germany and enabled them to receive a refund of their contributions to the German pension insurance in return for renouncing all

entitlements to residence and social benefits in Germany. In the years 1983 and 1984 alone, into which the months of this special arrangement fall, more than 300,000 Turks left Germany to return to Turkey (Statistisches Bundesamt). During the 2000s, the number of returnees was between thirty thousand and forty thousand each year, with numbers somewhat declining each year, while at the same time the number of Germans emigrating to Turkey, including ethnic Turks who had acquired German citizenship, constantly rose to reach almost 3,500 in 2006 (Statistisches Bundesamt). In Turkey, both the Turks living in Germany and those who returned after spending some time there are known as *almancilar*, a term that is sometimes associated with negative prejudices.

At this point, there is very little research available on the subject of 'return' migration by second generation migrants. In the context of migration, the second generation can be defined as those who were either born in the host country or were very young at the time of migration. Most literature on return migration deals with first generation migrants who at one point made a conscious decision to emigrate from one country to another, usually to find work in the host country, and later made another conscious decision to return to their home country. This model applies only to a very small proportion of the call center workers in Istanbul. Nevertheless, the theoretical approaches used to understand the return movement of these migrants and the motivations behind it can to some extent also be applied to second generation Turks 'returning' from Germany.

Cassarino identifies five different theoretical approaches to return migration, namely neoclassical economics, the new economics of labor migration, structuralism, transnationalism and social network theory. The neoclassical economics and new economics of labor migration approaches are based on fundamentally different propositions. According to the former position, migrants

move to another country in order to maximize their earnings, and with the intention to stay abroad permanently. On the basis of this assumption, return migration can only signify the failure to achieve the expected results. It is the end point of a failed migration experience. The new economics of labor migration, by contrast, assume that people move abroad temporarily in order to earn enough money to overcome a difficult economic situation at home. In this context, return migration signifies that the migration experience was successful, the intended goals were achieved, and the migrant can now return home, as had been the intention from the beginning.

While both of the approaches above view return migration as an individual or family/household issue, the structural perspective emphasizes the social and economic context in the country of origin, but it treats the sending and receiving countries as two separate worlds, at opposite ends in the core-periphery dichotomy of the world economy. Its main focus of attention is on the sending country and on the impact returnees may or may not have on their societies of origin. Within the structuralist approach, Cerase, as quoted by Cassarino, differentiates between four different types of return: the return of failure, referring to those who were unable to adapt to life in the new society, corresponding most closely to the neoclassical economics model; the return of conservatism that is akin to the new economics of labor migration approach, with the migrant, who "evaluates his success and achievement [in the host country] by the criteria of his society of origin" (Cerase, 250), returning to the home country once he has earned enough money to buy some land there, a form of return that from a structuralist perspective is characterized by a disinterest in changing the social context in the country of origin, even perpetuating it instead; the return of retirement to buy some land in the home country to spend the remaining years; and the return of innovation of those who have acquired new skills and attitudes abroad and aim to use these to change and improve the prevailing

situation in the country of origin, seeing their return as "the beginning of a new stage of their life" (Cerase, 257). However, the essentially pessimist structuralist perspective assumes that they will in most cases be doomed to fail, because they are unable to challenge vested interests and established local power relations at home.

The transnationalist approach then highlights the cross-border linkages and contacts between host and origin countries. According to this approach, return migration "does not constitute the end of a migration cycle", but rather is "part and parcel of a circular system of social and economic relationships and exchanges facilitating the reintegration of migrants while conveying knowledge, information and membership" (Cassarino, 262). This approach takes into account the relationship between migrants and families in the country of origin and the transnational 'double' identities migrants may form, as well as the linkages among migrant communities abroad, which are based on common ethnic origins. Return decisions are based both on the resources gathered in the host country and on the conditions in the home country. Return migration is studied with reference to "the ways in which returnees are successful in adapting themselves to their home environment" (Cassarino, 264).

The social network theory, finally, is similar to the transnationalist approach in taking into account cross-border linkages and basing return decisions both on resources gathered in the host country and conditions in the country of origin, and in seeing the return as just another step in the migration trajectory. However, the social networks here are based on common interests and not necessarily on common origin.

After presenting these five theoretical approaches with their strengths and weaknesses, Cassarino moves on to introduce a new conceptual framework for the study of return migration, which conceptualizes return migration in terms of both

resource mobilization and preparedness (encompassing both willingness and readiness to return) on the part of the returnee. Circumstances in both host and home country play a role in the migrant's return.

Each of these approaches contributes something to the study of return migration, but no one model is able to answer all questions. Each of the approaches is applicable to some scenarios but not all. The most comprehensive model is Cassarino's own approach, but the other approaches' emphasis on particular factors can also provide interesting insights into return migration and the motivations behind it.

Among the academic literature on return migration, which forms only a relatively small part of the migration literature, there are a number of studies on Turkish return migration from Germany, though they are mainly concerned with first generation migrants. Razum et al. conducted focus group research with Turkish men who had returned from Germany (although the study appears to treat all respondents as first generation migrants, it is not quite clear whether some of the younger participants, who often still commute between Germany and Turkey and in some cases feel "slightly out of place in Turkey" (732), might possibly belong to the second generation) and identified a number of themes motivating the decision to return. However, almost all themes were ambiguous in that they could support the decision either to return or to stay, depending on the interplay with other factors. The themes include economic achievement, which could be a reason for return either in the case of economic failure, such as unemployment (in line with the neoclassical economics approach), or in the case of economic success when a migrant has earned enough money to live comfortably or start a business in Turkey (in accordance with the new economics of labor migration approach). Some perceived the economic situation in Germany as offering better opportunities and

therefore a reason to stay, or to commute, while others believed that, despite experiencing problems they characterized as "typical for Turks in Germany", "those who stayed on were simply too worried about the economic situation in Turkey to return" (Razum et al., 731).

Another major theme identified by Razum et al. is health, which could again motivate both a decision to stay or to return, depending on interrelations with other factors. Some, especially more traditionally-minded, usually older respondents who were dissatisfied with the way of life in Germany in general, claimed that they would return in case of critical illness, in order to die 'at home'. They also argued that general living conditions, including the weather and the lifestyle, were healthier in Turkey than in Germany. On the other hand, it was generally maintained that quality and access to health services was superior in Germany, and this motivated many, especially of the younger generation, to argue that they would remain in or move back to Germany in case of serious illness.

Cultural issues and questions of integration also played a role in migrants' decisions to return. Older respondents especially frequently viewed Turkish traditions and culture as superior to the German lifestyle, and some claimed to have returned "because they did not approve of the moral climate in Germany, perceiving this to be a risk for the 'moral degradation' of their children" (Razum et al., 724). As indicated by this concern for the children, the location of the family played a major role in most return decisions, and is interrelated with most other themes, for example when respondents claim that they would return in case of critical illness if their family is living in Turkey, while others argued that they would rather stay in Germany with their families if seriously ill instead of returning to the homeland alone. The education of the children also played a major but ambiguous role in the decision to return, with some respondents wanting their children to be educated in

Turkey, while others would stay in Germany in order not to interrupt their children's schooling.

Based on their findings, Razum et al. construct three ideal types of return migrants, the nostalgic returnees, the cultural traditionalist, and the 'player of two systems'. The nostalgic returnee "retrospectively perceives some aspects of life in Germany as more comfortable and trouble-free than his current life in Turkey" (Razum et al., 734) and feels that the *almancilar* are being discriminated against in Turkey. He would possibly like to return to Germany again, but does not have the opportunity. He often attained economic success neither during his stay in Germany nor after his return to Turkey. The cultural traditionalist, on the other hand, often experienced an economically successful migration period that enabled him to earn enough money to return comfortably. However, he did not agree with the lifestyle in Germany, regards Turkish culture as superior, and is therefore happy to have returned to his home country, where he also wants his children to grow up. The 'player of two systems', meanwhile, regularly travels between both countries and feels at home in both cultures. He has a realistic perception of life in both systems and is able to use this understanding to his advantage, in order to 'have the best of both worlds'. It may, however, be disputable whether this group actually constitutes returnees or rather should be regarded as an entirely different category.

The main finding of the study is that returnees were not motivated primarily by economic aspects but that, for many, values, traditions and emotions, and especially the location of the family, played an equal or even more important role in their decision to return. It would be interesting to contrast the findings of this study with the results of a similar study conducted on those who decided to stay in Germany rather than return to Turkey.

In a different study, Constant and Massey examined statistical data on return migration from Germany to other EU countries, the former Yugoslavia and Turkey, aiming to investigate to what extent the neoclassical economics and new economics of labor migration approaches can be applied to these movements. They find that return migrants are heterogeneous in terms of their motivations, but their results show a strong majority acting in accordance with the neoclassical economics model, while a significant minority displays a behavior that can be better explained by the new economics of labor migration approach. Their results indicate that a longer duration of stay in Germany decreases the likelihood of return migration; that unemployment leads to higher rates of return migration; that, unlike employment stability, occupational earnings and prestige do not significantly influence the return decision; that human capital characteristics do not play a major role in return migration; and that the likelihood of return migration is "strongly determined by the range and nature of social attachments to Germany and origin countries" (Constant and Massey, 22), with close relatives and especially children in the home country increasing the likelihood of return and their presence in Germany decreasing it. The major determinants behind return migration according to this study thus were the stability of employment on the one hand and social and family ties on the other. The study tested only the two theories of return migration that posit primarily economic motivations and did not take into account many of the factors cited by Razum et al., such as personal health and the weather, and it ignored broader circumstances such as the political and economic situation in the country of origin and the host country.

Meanwhile, Carling draws attention to the fact that, despite possible aspirations to migrate, not everybody is able to do so, due to what he terms "involuntary immobility". Contrary to what the term globalization may suggest on the surface, Carling argues that "involuntary immobility is a concomitant of

globalisation, and a symptom of its contradictory nature. More specifically, the problem of involuntary immobility reflects the different *hierarchies* of globalisation", i.e. the "hierarchy of ease of movement" that may prevent aspiring migrants from moving even despite their possible superior position in the "hierarchy of enmeshment in global networks" (Carling, 37-38).

The notion of "involuntary immobility" is relevant in the context of return migration particularly in so far as the decision to return may be irreversible and there may not be another opportunity to re-emigrate. For Turks in Germany who did not acquire German citizenship, an extended absence from Germany would in most cases result in the loss of their right to residence, and any future stays in Germany, even for short visits, would require obtaining a visa. The concept is also applicable both to Indian call center agents, who are working in a seemingly American environment while in most cases not having any opportunity to actually get to the US, and to Turkish call center workers, who, if they did not acquire German citizenship before leaving or travel to Germany regularly, may not be able to return to Germany, in many cases the country of their birth, even if they wanted to. This may sometimes be a cause of frustration, especially for those who had no influence on a return decision taken by their parents since they had been too young at the time.

Although most Turks came to Germany as labor migrants, the motivations for emigration in many cases were not purely economic. In the context of return migration, it soon becomes clear that return decisions were in most cases not based on purely economic motives but resulted from a multitude of factors including family and health concerns as well as issues of tradition and emotional attachment. These factors are all interdependent, with the location of the family often having a major effect on the way other factors are interpreted. Return migrants thus form a highly heterogeneous group.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Research Method

Most academic studies of call centers rely mainly on interviews, and among the interviewees management personnel tend to be disproportionately represented. Those researchers who made an effort to speak to the agents themselves often had to conduct their interviews outside the workplace, and tended to focus on specific groups, such as union representatives. Management often would not allow researchers to enter the workplace, observe things at first hand, and speak directly to the workers (cf. Bain and Taylor). Other researchers were granted access to the workplace (cf. Poster had access to Indian call centers) and were thus able to engage in non-participant observation.

However, there has not yet been any scientific study of call center work by someone who experienced it himself or herself. There are some accounts of personal experience in call center work in popular publications, but these do not relate to the academic literature on the subject. My own study is based on participant observation carried out over a period of nineteen months as an agent working in a call center in Istanbul. I am aware that the fact that I was a worker in the call center, in the same position as the other agents, and was affected by the issues that form the subject of this study in the same way as the other workers, may occasionally have caused difficulty in maintaining the objectivity and detachment necessary in an academic study. I have, however, made every effort to maintain the necessary distance and not to allow my own experience to cloud my judgment and prevent a disinterested representation of issues and events. I do believe that my experience as a call center

agent has gained me valuable insights that put me in a position to better understand the issues at hand and their effects on workers.

Much of what is related in the main part of this thesis is based on my own experience and informal conversations with colleagues that usually took place at the workplace, mainly during short breaks between calls or over lunch. Although I did not make a secret of the fact that I was writing a thesis on this subject, I also did not especially emphasize it or put it to the forefront in my conversations with co-workers. To my colleagues, I was just a co-worker, an agent just like everybody else, and they related to me on that basis. What did differentiate me from many of my colleagues to some extent was the fact that I was only working part-time and was involved in a very different environment at university on the days I was not working, although I was not the only student working at the company, and, possibly more importantly, the fact that I was one of the few Germans without any Turkish background, which did exclude me from some conversations that were conducted in Turkish. Although I was clearly not an *almanci*, which made my experience of life in Turkey very different from that of most of my colleagues, I did feel that I was to some extent accepted as 'one of them', as sharing the experience of living in a country that is not the one I grew up in and sharing the knowledge about certain elements of culture and life in Germany that are different or non-existent in Turkey.

Although I did tell my team leader about the general subject of my thesis when asked about it, I did not discuss it with other management personnel. Thus I experienced neither support nor interference from management with regard to my research. The people I spoke to were mainly agents, but also occasionally coaches and technical supporters who had been promoted after gaining experience as agents themselves. With the exception of my team leader, who was positioned in between

management and the workers, I did not hold any informal conversations with management personnel.

The Subject of the Case Study

The German call center in Istanbul that I worked for was a medium-sized company. The number of agents employed varied between approximately eighty and one hundred for most of the time of my employment, reaching a peak of approximately 110 agents in summer 2007 before declining drastically. I was employed at the company for nineteen months, from 1 August 2006 until 29 February 2008. I was employed full-time for the first two months, one month of training and one month of calling, before switching to part-time, usually working twenty to twenty-five hours per week spread over three days. I was working as a standard agent, without any special responsibilities, except for the last two months, when I increasingly took on technical support and coaching duties. During the time I was employed there, work organization in the company experienced two paradigm shifts that had considerable effects on the way agents experienced their work. The first shift, from a more quantitative orientation towards a more qualitative one, occurred at the beginning of 2007; the second shift, which was even more radical and completely transformed work organization, relations and experience by moving the call center very far towards the quantitative end of the spectrum, took place with the beginning of the year 2008.

The company was founded in November 2003, at the height of the German call center boom in Istanbul. It started out as a joint venture by a German company

and a Turkish bank, but the Turkish company left the project after some time and a German call center provider became the second partner. There may have been some more changes in ownership, but since employees were generally not informed about what was happening at the level of company ownership, the modalities of ownership at the time of the company's demise are not quite clear, but apparently the German company that had originally initiated the project was the sole owner at that time. The existence of the company ended at the beginning of March 2008 after an extended period of financial difficulties and delayed or never-paid-out wages and benefits. On Sunday, 2 March, many employees received a phone call from management informing them that they would not need to come to work anymore the following day and advising them to look for a new job – although some employees were not even informed by management but had to wait for their colleagues to pass on the news. Details regarding the company's trajectory and its effects on employees will be provided and explained in the course of the following chapter that forms the main part of this thesis. The history of this company corresponds closely to the general history of German call centers in Istanbul, rendering this call center a highly suitable candidate for a case study.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE STUDY

Application and Recruitment

In the summer of 2006, I decided that I needed to find a job for myself in Istanbul.

At first I thought that this would prove very difficult due to my lack of Turkish

language skills. However, I quickly realized that it is very easy for a German

speaker to find work in Istanbul. Even a cursory examination of websites dedicated

to job offers in Turkey reveals a multitude of available positions in German-

language call centers. In addition, vacancies can occasionally be seen advertised on

the streets of Istanbul. Advertisements can even be found on German web pages, for

example through the job search on the website of the Federal Employment Office,

which features several job offers by German call centers in Turkey. The text of the

advertisements is written sometimes in German, sometimes in Turkish, and often in

both languages. The skills required from job candidates are usually limited to a good

command of the German language and basic computer skills.

The following figures illustrate the abundance of job offers for positions in

German call centers in Istanbul. Figure 1 is a screenshot taken from the Turkish job

advertisement site yenibiris.com showing the first few results of a search for call

center positions in Istanbul. The first result is written in Turkish, but a selection of

the ad would reveal that the position being advertised is indeed that of a German-

speaking call center agent, while the fourth result even gives the name of the

position in German and the fifth one explains that a native speaker of German is

required for the job. Even though this is the result of a general search for call center

positions on a Turkish job site, there are in fact more advertisements for German

speakers than Turkish ones. Figure 2 shows the results of the same search for call center positions in Istanbul, this time carried out on kariyer.net, another Turkish job advertisement website. All the positions captured on this screenshot are for German call centers.

Figure 3 indicates that German call centers in Istanbul rely not only on the Internet for recruiting purposes, but also use more traditional forms of advertisement, such as this sign pasted to a wall of the pedestrian overpass in Beşiktaş, Istanbul, which calls for applications for call center positions by male and female candidates with a good knowledge of German[7]. Figure 4, finally, shows the results of a search for positions in Turkey carried out on the website of the German Federal Employment Office. This shows that applicants are also recruited directly from Germany, with the help of the Federal Employment Office. This screenshot, which includes two adverts for Antalya, also shows that Istanbul is not the only address for German call centers in Turkey, although the vast majority of these call centers is indeed located in Istanbul.

	POZİSYON ADI	ŞİRKET	ŞEHİR / ÜLKE	YAYIN TARİHİ
	CALL CENTER MÜŞTERİ TEMSİLCİSİ	B & M CALL CENTER	İstanbul	07.05.2007
	Çağrı Merkezi Koordinatörü	DOS Bilgisayar Sistemleri ve Ticaret A.Ş.	İstanbul	07.05.2007
	Tecnichal Support Engineer	METİS BİLGİSAYAR	İstanbul	07.05.2007
	Kundenberater	Rota İnsan Kaynakları ve Danışmanlık Hizmetleri Ltd. Şti.	İstanbul	07.05.2007
	Native Almanca Bilen Çağrı Merkezi MHY	Şirket Bilgileri Gizlidir	İstanbul	07.05.2007

Fig. 1. Job openings for call center agents, often requiring German language skills, on the Turkish job advertisement website yenibiris.com. http://www.yenibiris.com/. 08.05.2007.

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[7] Originally, there were two signs, one in Turkish and one in German, with the same advertisement. However, when I returned with my camera to take a picture, the German sign had disappeared.

26.01.2008	Call Center Agent (Deutsch-German), İstanbul	Select KRM
26.01.2008	ALMANCA BİLEN TELEFONDA SATIŞ YAPACAK MT, İstanbul	ADK İnsan Kaynakları
26.01.2008	ANA DİL DÜZEYİNDE ALMANCA BİLEN ÇAĞRI MERKEZİ MHY, İstanbul	ADK İnsan Kaynakları
23.01.2008	ÇAĞRI MERKEZİ (CALL CENTER) PERSONELİ, İstanbul	M.I.C Group İletişim Ve Reklam Sanayi Tic Ltd Şti
18.01.2008	ALMANCA BİLEN ÇAĞRI MERKEZİ MÜŞTERİ TEMSİLCİSİ, İstanbul	ADECCO ERENKÖY

Fig. 2. Job openings for call center agents, all requiring German language skills, on the Turkish job advertisement website kariyer.net. http://web5.kariyer.net/. 27.01.2008.

Fig. 3. Advertisement seen on a wall of the pedestrian overpass in Beşiktaş, Istanbul. 22.07.2007.

PASSENDE ANGEBOTE

Überein-stimmung	Bezeichnung / Detailansicht	Postleitzahl / Ort Arbeitgeber	Eintritts-termin	Daten-herkunft
▮▮▮▮▮	Call-Center-Agent/in	34398 Maslak-Istanbul arvato Telekomünikasyon Hizmetleri A.S.	01.02.2008	arbeitsagentur.de
▮▮▮▮▮	Call-Center-Agent/in	07040 Antalya Pro-Lines	ab sofort	arbeitsagentur.de
▮▮▮▮▮	Call-Center-Agent/in	34387 Istanbul pmciletisim A.S	ab sofort	arbeitsagentur.de
▮▮▮▮▮	Call-Center-Agent/in	07000 Antalya/Türkei Deutsche Werbeagentur Antalya Cinar Reklam	01.02.2008	arbeitsagentur.de
▮▮▮▮▮	Call-Center-Agent/in	34714 Kadiköy Istanbul STM-Telemarketing	ab sofort	arbeitsagentur.de

Fig. 4. Job openings for German-speaking call center agents in Turkey on the website of the German Federal Employment Office. http://www.arbeitsagentur.de. 20.01.2008.

The services offered by German call centers in Istanbul range from general customer service and technical support for respectable German companies of various fields to telemarketing services at varying degrees of disreputability[8]. This leads to significant differences between the call center companies with regard to pay, working conditions and type of work. In terms of the type of work, the most significant distinction is between inbound and outbound operations. In general it can be assumed that inbound call centers are usually more reputable than outbound ones, while pay is often higher in outbound work. However, inbound call centers generally pay a fixed monthly income, plus possible bonuses, whereas outbound centers usually offer a low basic salary but high premiums for successful sales.

One point which may offer some orientation regarding the reputability of a call center is the way in which they deal with the issue of work permits for foreigners. Foreigners, including German citizens, are generally not allowed to take up paid work in Turkey unless they hold a special permit which is issued specifically for one particular job position. The only exception to this rule are foreign citizens of Turkish origin who may hold a so-called blue card, which entitles them to the same rights as Turkish citizens in most areas of public life. A work permit can only be applied for by the company offering work to the foreigner, and this is both a lengthy and costly process. For this reason, work permits are rarely applied for in the call center industry, where few employees work in the same company for a long period of time.

Although native Germans form only a very small percentage of the workforce, call centers in Istanbul have devised different methods of dealing with the work permit issue. Less reputable companies may advise employees to marry a

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[8] The products sold by outbound call centers in Istanbul cover a wide range from lottery tickets and other competitions to newspapers and magazines, Internet and telephone lines, and even, ironically, a subscription to prevent further sales calls.

Turkish person on paper in order to facilitate the process of obtaining permission to work (although even marriage to a Turk does not automatically gain a foreigner the right to work in Turkey), while others opt for a contract via a third party, a personnel agency that employs the foreigner and sends him or her to work for the call center company as a consultant. This use of a loophole in the Turkish law is the most common procedure in more reputable call centers. Yet it means that the foreigner concerned does not have a contract with the company he or she is actually working for, does not pay social security contributions, and is not entitled to any social security benefits. Foreigners employed under this kind of scheme do, however, pay taxes to the Turkish state.

Although being employed through a consultant contract entails the short-term advantage of not having to pay social security contributions, thus taking more money home at the end of the month, the major disadvantage is that it precludes all access to the state's social security system. The times spent working are not registered anywhere with a view to later retirement benefits, neither in Germany nor in Turkey, and there is no insurance of any kind. Some companies provide private health insurance for their employees, but this not something to be relied upon. In my own case, the company I was working for occasionally failed to pay the premiums for its employees' private health insurance, leaving German employees without any Turkish health insurance coverage.

From the advertisements that I saw when looking for a job, I selected three companies to apply to. My main criteria for selection was that I wanted to work in inbound operations rather than outbound. I was invited for an interview by all three companies. The first one was a call center of highly reputable appearance, located in Maslak, handling general customer services inquiries for a major German Internet provider on a purely inbound basis. Although the interview and the assessment tests

went very well, my application was eventually rejected because I did not have a

work permit and the company did not want to go to the trouble of applying for a

work permit or offering a consultant contract for a student who would only work

part-time and could not promise to stay on the job for an extended period of time. In

fact, the company soon after adopted a policy of not even inviting persons without a

work permit for interviews anymore, and added this piece information to its

advertisements.

My next application took me to a company based on the Asian side of

Istanbul. Although they had advertised for both inbound and outbound agents, it

turned out that the company only engaged in outbound sales. The office was very

small, and I quickly realized that I had found one of the less reputable call centers

here. When I mentioned that I did not have a work permit, they offered to find me a

Turkish man I could marry on paper and tried to persuade me that this was an

entirely normal and common procedure. The work involved calling people who had

taken part in a competition and persuading them to pay for taking out a subscription

that would allow them to automatically take part in a number of other competitions.

Pay for the agents consisted of a relatively low base amount that could be increased

by premiums paid out for each subscription won. I was invited to an unpaid training

course lasting one week, but I rejected the offer.

The third interview finally led to a job contract. The company was very

similar to the first one I had applied to. Conditions, working hours, pay and extra

benefits were almost exactly the same, and the company even served the same

client, the major German Internet provider. However, rather than general customer

services, this company provided technical support for customers who had trouble

with their Internet access, their email, or other Internet-related PC problems. Again,

I had to go through an interview and several assessment tests in order to check my

knowledge of German and general understanding about computers. All the tests went very well, and eventually I was offered a consultant contract, which, the company assured me, was an entirely normal and common and perfectly legal way of dealing with my situation of not having a work permit. I would have to work full-time for the first two months (one month of training and the first month of calling) and would then be able to switch to part-time, to be paid on an hourly basis, in the third month.

The outbound sales call center did not appear to demand any requirements from candidates except for a good command of the German language and a willingness to sell. The two more reputable inbound centers, on the other hand, invited several candidates for assessment sessions, which played out in a very similar way in both places. There were written tests in German language skills, in grammar, spelling and vocabulary, and an interview with the personnel executive. In addition, the call center for technical support required both a written and a practical test on computer skills. But in effect, despite all the tests, my impression was that anyone who spoke German fluently was offered a contract, even if there were weaknesses in grammar and spelling and the person did not understand much about computers. The argument went that any gaps in knowledge would be filled during the training course. Specific qualifications or even a high school diploma were not required.

The training period was again treated in a very similar way by the two inbound call centers, but very differently in the outbound place. There, they offered participation in a weeklong training course on selling techniques, without pay and without any obligation to establish a contract on either side. The inbound centers, on the other hand, first signed the contract with future employees and then gave them four weeks of training at full pay. Both companies, however, established that if an

employee left the company after less than nine months, he or she would have to pay back the money they received during those four weeks of initial training.

In the company I joined, training was provided by in-house coaches. The company employed one, later two, persons whose job consisted of training new employees as well as monitoring calls and providing specific training for agents when necessary. In addition, the more technical aspects covered during the training session were taught by senior employees who otherwise worked as technical supporters, i.e. they were not taking calls themselves but helped out when an agent encountered a technical problem that he could not solve by himself. Training groups were relatively small, usually between five and ten people, depending on the number of persons who had signed up with the company that month. The training covered both communication techniques and computer skills, including background knowledge about the operation of computer networks. Of course, working with the database and other systems to be used by the agents was also practiced. The final week of the training course gave new employees the chance to sit next to senior colleagues, listening in to their calls and observing the way they worked with the database and other systems and how they communicated with customers. It also meant taking the first calls, although while sitting in pairs and with the help of one of the technical supporters. In the following week, the new employees were integrated into the usual operations as calling agents.

From my own experience, I can say that for me, the training was instructive, but also very tiring. I gained a lot from it, not only information I would require in daily work, but also more general understanding about computers and networks that would help me in solving my own PC problems. I did get the impression that the company took the training of its employees quite seriously and invested in it accordingly. Although at the time I started calling, I felt that the training had not

been entirely sufficient, that there should have been more practical exercises and more chances to listen to experienced callers etc., in retrospect I have to say that it was a good and comprehensive training course that I completed with adequate preparation for the job I was supposed to carry out. However, as in most jobs, the 'real training' took place on the job, and it was only after some weeks of calling that I felt confident about what I was doing. Especially the communicative aspect is not something that can be learned in a few training sessions, but must be experienced and internalized by actually talking to customers on the phone. However, the training course also achieved a certain selection process. In my training group of seven persons, two dropped out shortly before or just after completing the training month. According to company policy, this meant that they did not receive any pay at all.

During the first few weeks of taking calls, despite being part of the usual operations, new employees received special attention. Each new agent had several sessions of side-by-side coaching, where a senior colleague with part-time coaching duties would sit next to the agent to listen in to a few calls and then offer advice on what could be done better or explain problematic issues. Also, during the first few weeks new employees were not included in the regular call monitoring and evaluation schemes carried out both internally by the call center company and externally by the company being serviced by the call center. In addition, new agents could rely on the technical supporters to help them whenever necessary.

The Call Center

A normal working week at the call center consists of five days at nine hours a day, totaling forty-five hours of work per week. The workforce is divided into different shifts, with the earliest shift starting at 8:00 in the morning and finishing at 17:00 and the latest shift starting at 14:00 and finishing at 23:00. Usually, shifts are allocated according to where you live, because a service bus provided by the company picks employees up at their home in the morning and takes them back in the evening. So each bus group is allocated a certain shift, and shifts change every month. There are however exceptions for those who prefer not to use the service bus but arrive by their own means, or are only able to attend at certain times because of other obligations outside the call center. They have to make their way to work and back on their own and there is no compensation for the traveling expenses they might incur.

On each nine-hour working day, an employee is entitled to one hour of break time. The 30-minute lunch break is scheduled to make sure that there are never too many people at lunch at the same time and to coordinate the food supply in the in-house canteen. The food in the canteen, which is shared with another company residing in the same building, is provided by an outside catering company. Lunch is included in the salary, so employees do not need to pay for their meals. The remaining 30 minutes of break time is generally organized by the employee himself or herself, although team managers sometimes put a temporary stop on breaks at times of especially high volumes of incoming calls or unusually low numbers of agents present. Break rooms are provided, both for smokers and non-smokers, although the non-smokers' rooms are usually smaller, less comfortable and, most of

the time, empty. Drinking water, tea and coffee are available for free in the break rooms.

According to company policy, the language of communication between employees both at their workstation and during breaks is supposed to be German. However, in effect people communicate in a mixture of German and Turkish, with Turkish dominating when none of the German colleagues are present. Apart from the few native German employees, who usually speak only very little Turkish, people are fluent in both German and Turkish and switch effortlessly between the two. However, many claim that their German is better than their Turkish, because they only used Turkish in the family, so they know conversational Turkish but are not very good at grammar and spelling or technical vocabulary. If they happen to have a Turkish customer on the phone who does not speak much German and they try to help in Turkish, they often have difficulty with this level of the Turkish language and use the German expressions for technical terms. On the other hand, there are also a few employees who have some difficulty with the German language, particularly in the areas of grammar and spelling. But since they can speak fluently and without any strong accent, albeit with minor grammatical errors, this is regarded as sufficient for this job of giving technical support over the phone. Difficulties with German grammar are clearly deemed more acceptable to German customers than a foreign accent.

The call center itself was spread over three floors in a large office building close to the Bosphorus on Istanbul's European side. While one floor was devoted to administrative issues, housing the accountant's office, a conference room, the classroom used for training sessions, etc., the remaining two floors were occupied by the workstations equipped with computers and telephones used by the calling agents. However, not everybody had access to the administrative floor. Only the

access cards of team managers, technical supporters and administrative personnel would open the doors to this floor.

Each of the other two floors consisted of one large room dedicated to calling operations and several small rooms housing executive offices and smokers' and non-smokers' break rooms. The actual work of taking calls took place in one of these very large rooms. Distributed around the room were several so-called 'islands', circular tables equipped with computers and telephones. Each island had room for five agents. The work stations were separated from each other by barriers that were high enough to block the view of the neighbors while sitting down, but low enough to look over when standing up. Each workplace was equipped with a telephone and a computer with a conventional monitor – there were no flat screens, except for some executive personnel.

The only further equipment necessary were the headsets. Each person was given their own headset, which was numbered and registered, and each employee had to sign a form saying that if he or she lost or damaged the headset, they would have to cover the cost of acquiring a new one, which was quite expensive. So each person was responsible for their own headset and was advised to lock it up in their personal locker every evening when they went home from work. The use of other material, such as pencil and paper to make notes or information sheets, was left to each agent.

There were no fixed seating arrangements, everybody could choose where they wanted to sit. However, most people acquired a preference for a certain work station or at least a specific island. Often, friends would sit together at one island. Still, nobody had any right to a specific seat or computer, so if upon coming to work one found that 'one's own' computer was occupied by someone else, one had to find oneself another place to work.

The center of the large room was occupied by the island housing the Technical Support Specialists, called TSSs for short. These were more experienced agents who knew the technical matter very well and had been promoted to this position after a long period of experience as agents in the call center. Depending on the time of day, there would be between one and four TSSs sitting around this island, who rarely accepted calls themselves but rather spent most of their time supporting the other agents. In call-center-jargon, they constituted an internal second level. Any agent who was faced with a problem he/she could not solve by themselves turned to a TSS to ask for help. In many cases, the customer's problem could be solved with advice from the TSS. In exceptional cases, the TSS would take over a call from an agent whose customer was unhappy with the support he was receiving and demanded to speak to a superior. Cases in which even the TSS was unable to find a solution to the customer's problem or which required access to more advanced administrative functions on the part of the company whose products were supported were forwarded to a specialized second-level call center based in Germany. Other calls that related to issues outside the specified boundaries of support could either be directly forwarded or referred to other hotlines, either within the same company (such as questions relating to administrative aspects of general customer service) or to other providers (such as Microsoft if the problem could be ascertained to originate from the customer PC's operating system).

Lined up along the back wall of the room, from where the whole calling area could be seen, were the four desks occupied by the team managers, who also acted as shift coordinators. This is where performance, targets and forecasts were constantly being monitored. From time to time, team managers would send messages appearing as pop-ups on all agents' computer screens, containing information relevant to all employees, data regarding the level of forecast

completion or the general performance, or organizational instructions such as a temporary stop on breaks or the requirements that breaks must be coordinated with a team manager (this usually happened in the evenings, when less agents were present while the volume of incoming calls was still high).

Each employee had their own private locker, located along the wall of one of the two main rooms. For each locker there were two keys, one of which was given to the employee while the second one was kept by the facilities manager as a spare. The lockers were used for storing personal items while at work, and for keeping the headset in a safe place while not at work.

Only one of the two main rooms was used to full capacity. The other one always remained more than half empty, although it was structured in the same way as the one described above. It was assumed that if the company continued to grow and the number of employees rose, the room on the other floor would be equipped with additional computers and telephones to allow more agents to work there.

Both floors had a relatively low ceiling for a call center, which led to several disadvantages. Air circulation was not very good, especially in the summer the air sometimes got very stuffy. The air conditioner was usually turned off on summer evenings when less people were present in the building, and on some evenings the conditions became almost unbearable. On such evenings, team managers occasionally attempted to improve the mood among agents by buying ice cream for everyone. Another disadvantage of the building structure, which had apparently not been designed with call centers in mind, as indicated by the low ceilings, was the level of noise. Since there were no separate cubicles, but rather everyone was sitting in the same room quite closely together, it was impossible to shield oneself from the sounds coming from the people around. Paradoxically, the noise level became even higher when the incoming call volume was low, because then people would engage

in private conversation while waiting for their phone to ring with the next call. The noisy environment certainly had a detrimental effect on the work and on stress levels, because it made it harder to concentrate on dealing with a customer without being distracted by what was going on in the room. For this reason, many agents preferred to work in the relative quiet of the not-fully-developed floor, but the number of seats there was limited and the desirable quiet was offset by the disadvantage of having less access to support by TSSs and team managers.

Although the offices did have windows, the blinds were shut most of the time. With all windows closed and under constant exposure to artificial light, it sometimes became difficult to remember the time of day and the weather. Occasionally it happened that a surprised customer was greeted with a friendly "Good Morning" even though it was already evening time, but such accidents were usually passed over lightly, with slight embarrassment on the part of the agent, although they would certainly lead to points being taken off if the call happened to be monitored.

An ordinary working day begins with the employee being picked up near his house by a service bus. The bus takes the agent to the workplace, usually arriving there some time before the beginning of the shift. Now, the first thing to do is to get everything ready to start working. So the agent takes the headset from the locker and puts away any stuff not needed during the day. Then he finds a seat, starts up the computer and logs on to the various programs that may be needed to handle a call. If there is still some time until the official beginning of his shift, he may use this time to have tea or smoke a cigarette in the break room, chatting to other agents. Otherwise, he will now log in on his phone.

The moment he is logged in on the phone and appears on the performance monitors is when his working hours begin to be counted. The time spent starting the

computer and the software programs etc. is not part of the paid working hours. The agent now sets his phone to 'Ready' status and waits for the first call. After the call, he has a few seconds to spend on 'After Call Work' before setting his phone to 'Ready' again to accept the next call. If he is lucky, he will have to wait a few seconds or at times of very low call volume even a few minutes before the next call arrives. This waiting time offers a very welcome chance to take a deep breath and relax a bit, talk to the people around him if they happen to be waiting for a call as well, or just to look at some pages on the Internet. If he wants to take a break, he has to set his phone to 'Break' before leaving the workstation, and the clock immediately starts running to measure the time he spends on his break.

Team managers can see the current status of each agent's telephone at any time, as well as the total time it has been set to that status both at that instance and accumulated over the day or even at longer intervals. If a team manager becomes suspicious, for example because an agent is spending a lot of time on 'After Call Work', he may approach him to ask for an explanation. Agents who exceed their break times must also expect to be approached by their team managers.

When an agent encounters a problem he cannot solve on his own while working with a customer, he goes to the central island to ask a TSS for help. If he has bad luck, he might have to wait in a queue before one of the TSSs is available to help him, and he will then have to explain the long wait to an impatient customer. When the shift ends, usually after nine hours, the agent logs out of his phone (the count of working hours ending at this moment), shuts down his computer, locks away his headset and leaves the building to wait for the service bus outside.

One thing that was especially notable in this call center was the very friendly interaction among employees. Everyone was greeted in a very friendly way when entering, and there were many conversations between calls or during breaks. Also, it

was always possible to ask colleagues for help when there were any problems, provided they were not in call at that moment. Many friendships were established at the workplace, and it was not uncommon to meet friends from work outside the office. The yearly summer barbecue held on the roof terrace of the building was meant to demonstrate and enhance this sense of friendship and togetherness at the company. Especially among those who had worked with the company for several years, in itself an unusual phenomenon in the call center business, there really appeared to be a sense of 'team spirit'.

This even extended to relations with superiors. In general, everybody working at the company addressed each other using first names and the informal 'du' form of address in German. Conversations with superiors such as team managers were often just as informal and trivial as those among agents. There did not appear to be much difference in the way people related to each other when superiors (except top management) were involved – they were also part of the group. With the exception of top management and administrative personnel, there was no strong hierarchy noticeable in relations among people within the company, and instructions were usually delivered not as orders from above but were communicated in a friendly way, often directly by the team manager to the agent. Team managers and TSSs usually knew at least the first name of every single agent working in the company.

In the call center in Istanbul, the highest-ranking employee was the Head of Operations who was responsible for managing the call center in general. He was, however, accountable to the executives of the German company that had established the firm in Turkey, who signed the project contracts and received the money, which was then paid out to Istanbul. Administrative personnel in Istanbul included an accountant and her assistant, a secretary, an IT expert, a facilities manager and two

caretakers. The head of operations was assisted by three to four team managers (the number varied somewhat as some people left and others were promoted to team manager), including the head team manager. In addition, there were around four technical supporters (TSS) – again there was some variation in the number as some people left and others were promoted – and two coaches.

The job of the team managers was to function as a connection between the agents and the management, to communicate instructions from the management, to serve as agony aunts for the agents on their team and to take care of organizational matters such as the shift schedule and coordination. Each new employee was assigned to one of the team managers, but apart from clarifying which person to speak to if there were any questions or problems relating to administrative matters, team membership did not have any further consequences.

The coaches were in charge of the initial training for all new employees, in which they were supported by the TSSs, and organized training sessions according to demand, for example when the client company being supported introduced new software or hardware, or when the range of support was extended to cover additional products. In addition, they carried out side-by-side coaching measures, in the course of which a coach would sit next to one of the agents, listen to the calls, and identify areas which were problematic for that person and give specific advice on how to improve call quality. Such side-by-side coaching sessions were carried out with each new employee to help them become familiar with the quality standards and solve any difficulties they might have. Additional side-by-side coachings were scheduled when it appeared that an agent needed extra help because he or she was receiving bad results in the monitorings. In addition to the two full-time coaches, some senior agents also were assigned to do side-by-side coaching for a limited percentage of their working hours.

A further important function performed by the coaches was the monitoring of calls. Calls were monitored both externally, from Germany, by the company whose products were supported, and internally by the call center itself, and this was done by the coaches. Customers calling the hotline were automatically asked in the IVR menu whether they agreed to the recording of the conversation. The agent taking the call had no way of knowing whether the customer had given his consent or not. Calls were recorded automatically by the system, on a basis of random selection, provided the customer had given his consent and the duration of the call did not exceed a certain limit.

From the recorded conversations, one of the coaches again randomly selected approximately two each month for each agent and evaluated them. The agent received a printout of the evaluation result, a standard form showing all relevant criteria, as prescribed by the client company, and the agent's performance on them. The standard procedure was that the coach would also give personal feedback directly to the agent, but this was not always done. Especially in the case of very good monitoring results it was considered unnecessary to waste time on personal feedback. As for the external monitoring, the client company would occasionally send feedback sheets containing usually quite harsh criticism regarding the quality of calls, which the call center company also took into account when reviewing an agent's performance, but which were generally more important in evaluating the call center's position with regard to the client company and in comparison to other call centers serving the same hotline.

The result of this monitoring system was that all agents felt like they were under constant observation. Their behavior was controlled and it was ensured that they would not use their calls for private purposes or other unsuitable endeavors. While the monitoring of calls is standard procedure in call centers, and although the

calls being monitored were of course purely business calls, it did feel like an infringement of the agents' privacy. However, Turkish call center companies even advertise the fact that Turkish labor laws are flexible enough to ensure that there is no legal limit to the monitoring of calls (cf. CMC, Why Turkey?). This is clearly regarded as a strategic advantage over German call centers where the law might put some limit on the monitoring of calls and the control over employees.

The total number of calling agents varied significantly over time. In summer 2006 there were around eighty, and until the summer of 2007 this number rose slowly but constantly, eventually reaching approximately 110. Each month, a new training group of around ten persons started working with the company, while approximately five people left the company over the same time period, so there was a constant fluctuation of employees, but at the same time there was a significant number of long-term employees who stayed with the company for several years. However, the full workforce was never present at the call center at the same time. Some people were always absent due to holidays or sickness, and there were a few part-time employees who only came in usually three days a week, and the system of shifts ensured that employees' presence was spread out over the day. With the first shift lasting from 8:00 to 17:00 and the last one from 14:00 to 13:00, it was only between the hours of 14:00 and 17:00 that all shifts overlapped and the vast majority of employees were present.

Among the agents, male and female employees were more or less equal in number. Despite the largely technical content of the work, which put many women off at first, there was no indication of a male majority. The ratio changed, however, when the higher ranks were considered: Among the TSSs, the technical experts, there was ever only one woman who held that job for several months before leaving for a different company. As for the team managers, there was always one woman

among their number. The head of operations and the head team manager were, as might have been expected, male. However, this kind of male/female distribution with roughly equal numbers at the bottom level but less women at the top is presumably typical of companies all over the world, whether in Germany, Turkey or in any other country.

Possibly more meaningful is the ratio of German and Turkish nationals among the higher ranks. Although there were very few German nationals without any Turkish family background working in the call center, their representation among executive personnel was disproportionately high. At the time of the highest number of agents, approximately 110, only five of them were native Germans without Turkish background, amounting to less than 5 percent of the workforce. However, out of these five, one held the position of a coach, one was a team manager and one worked as a side-by-side coach for part of her working hours. The woman who held the team manager position replaced another German woman who had previously held that position but had returned to Germany.

This constellation was made even more noteworthy by the fact that the two Germans who held the positions of coach and team manager were promoted to these positions after having been with the company for only two months. They went through the regular one-month training period and then worked as calling agents for one month before being promoted. This contradicted one of the company's fundamental principles, which was not to recruit executive personnel from the outside but to fill such vacancies with people who had proven themselves as calling agents within the company. The principle was that everybody who newly joined the company would start off equally as a simple agent, but would be able to rise to a higher position once he had proven his worth on the phone. Only those who knew the subject matter of the company's everyday business very well and had learned

about the internal processes were supposed to be occupying the higher positions. Executive staff members such as team managers were supposed to know the situation of their team members well and to be able to relate to the difficulties they might be experiencing, and at the same time it was expected that agents would have more respect for instructions coming from someone who had previously performed the same work as they were doing now, and been successful at it. Team managers and others also ought to be able to take calls themselves in times of necessity.

Nevertheless, in this case it became clear that candidates had indeed been recruited from the outside specifically for these positions, and had applied to the company not as agents but as coach and team manager. Their promotion after just one month of calling disappointed the hopes of long-time, deserving employees who had harbored justified expectations of promotion, leading to a sense of frustration and severely damaging the mood among employees as well as the willingness to identify with the company. People also began to question whether it really was a coincidence that both of these early promotions affected native Germans, and some voiced concerns that even in this company on Turkish soil, which nevertheless was in some way a German company, being owned by Germans and serving customers in Germany, Turks were rated inferior to Germans.

A further incongruity with regard to company employees is evident in the ratio of calling agents to non-calling staff. At any given time, there were around eighteen people working at the company who were not taking calls but performing administrative functions. This figure appears quite high when considering that only the calling agents were 'earning money' for the company, and although they numbered 110 at the time of the largest workforce, their number was lower than that for most of the time. Especially towards the end of the company, this incongruity most likely was one of the factors contributing to the company's financial

difficulties, since a rapidly declining number of calling agents had to support a more or less stagnant number of non-calling employees.

The monthly gross wage of a calling agent amounted to 1200 YTL, so after the deduction of taxes and social security contributions agents were left with approximately 800 to 850 YTL a month. Part-time employees were paid on an hourly basis, at an hourly gross rate of 5.33 YTL. This hourly rate was lower than that of full-time employees, since it was calculated on the basis of the monthly wage, assuming thirty working days of nine hours a day. It was, however, possible to raise this base wage through bonuses. Two kinds of bonuses were available, the first to encourage better performance in calling, the other in sales.

The performance-related bonus was based on quantitative criteria such as the number of calls taken and the average handling time, as well as the quality of the calls as measured by the rate for the same person to call the hotline again within a specific time period and the results of the call evaluations. However, during my first months with the company the quantitative criteria clearly took precedence over the qualitative ones. But the beginning of the year 2007 brought a major shift in this field. In the course of a general change of focus from quantity to more quality-oriented service, the client company not only vastly extended the range of support to be covered by the hotline, they also changed their performance expectations and the way they calculated payment for the call center, in order to encourage more emphasis on quality rather than quantity. While the call center had previously been paid a fixed rate for each call regardless of its duration, thus encouraging attempts to accept as many calls as possible with less regard to quality, payment would now be calculated on the basis of the minutes spent "in call", up to a certain upper limit per call, and while presuming a specified minimum number of calls to be handled, thus reducing the pressure to take as many calls as possible. For the call center, this

meant not only that work became somewhat less stressful for the agents, it also exacted a change of priorities in the internal evaluation criteria in order to encourage agents to pay more attention to quality and less to the number of calls taken. So the evaluation criteria for bonuses also changed, now prioritizing quality factors such as the internal evaluation results, the number of customers having to call the hotline for a second time, and the evaluation by the customers (with the introduction of the new system, automatic emails would be sent to customers after the call asking them to evaluate the agent) over purely quantitative criteria such as the number and handling time of calls taken. This shift in priority from quantity to quality was in line with the client company's general shift towards greater service orientation – in order to retain customers in the company rather than having to try to win them back after they switched to a different provider – as announced by the new CEO.

However, despite all this ado about evaluation criteria for bonus eligibility, the bonus usually did not amount to much money in the end. The maximum bonus for top performance was set at YTL 180. The evaluation took place every six months, so that an agent would receive the bonus corresponding to his performance results over the past six month for the following six months, after which it would be newly calculated based on his performance over the past six months.

For those who had the talent for it, there was much more money to be made through the second kind of bonus, which was awarded for sales. Despite being a purely inbound service hotline, agents were encouraged to sell additional packages to customers, such as a security suite or enhanced email features. For each successful sale that was not cancelled by the customer within two weeks, the agent received a premium. Some agents, who were very good at sales and sometimes had previous outbound experience, were able to almost double their wage through such premiums, while others, regarding their job as customer service and not a sales

hotline, only rarely sold a package. While selling was encouraged, there were no negative effects for those who did not make any sales, and there was no pressure on agents to talk customers into buying stuff they did not need.

However, at some point the premiums started to be paid out with delay, and eventually were abandoned in the summer of 2007. It is not clear whether the client company stopped awarding premiums to call centers, or whether the call center company continued to receive the premiums but refused to pay them out to those employees who had secured the sales. Also, in the course of the client company's change of policy new product packages were introduced and high premiums were promised to those who sold them to customers, but those premiums were never paid out, even though some agents collected several thousand YTL worth of sold packages.

The base wage also included several additional benefits. A free bus service was available to most employees to pick them up near their homes and take them back after work, free lunch was provided in the building, and the company provided private health insurance for all employees. However, all of these services disintegrated over time. The service buses occasionally refused to drive to the homes of those who lived a bit further off the standard route, and in late 2007 the services for several areas ceased altogether. The affected employees, who now had to use public transport or their own cars to get to work, were promised compensation payments, but those were never paid out. In January 2008, the provision of in-house meals also stopped. Instead, employees now had to get their lunch, still paid for by the company, from a small kiosk across the road, which offered only standard, low-quality fast food. Many employees complained that this food was making them physically sick, but no action was taken on the part of the company. The private health insurance, meanwhile, had always been problematic.

New employees only were included in the coverage after several months' time, and even those who were included periodically lost their coverage when the company failed to pay the necessary premiums to the insurance company, or paid them late. This meant that people who had to see a doctor for whatever reason sometimes had to fight to get their medical costs covered because, without their knowledge, the company had not paid the insurance premiums and thus left them without insurance cover. At some point in autumn 2007, the company stopped paying for the private health insurance altogether.

In return for the gross base wage of 1200 YTL a month, employees were expected to work forty-five hours per week. They could always work additional hours, and these overtime hours could be accumulated and, in theory, they could either be exchanged for free time or they would be paid out at the standard hourly rate. In practice, however, from mid-2007 onwards the company frequently refused to pay out the overtime hours at the end of the month. As a result, many were left after the demise of the company with, in some cases, more than one hundred overtime hours that were never paid. While the accumulation of extra hours usually was voluntary, in the summer of 2007, when the company was surprised by an extremely high volume of calls being allocated to the center, working overtime was made compulsory for several weeks. The head of operations simply declared one day that the service buses would leave one hour later from now on, so that each person could work one hour longer each day. Although there were angry protests against this measure, and several agents simply refused to work during that additional hour, most complied and worked ten hours a day instead of the usual nine for a few weeks.

Extra pay was awarded for work on Sundays and holidays. Working on Sundays meant 25 percent more pay for that day, while holidays, including Turkish

national and religious holidays but not German ones, were paid at double the usual rate. Alternatively, an employee working on a Turkish holiday could receive an extra day of paid holiday on a different date. There was, however, no extra pay for working until late at night, including the last shift, which ended at 23:00.

The gross wage of 1200 YTL per month may have been good pay at the time the company was established, in 2003, but a few years later this was no longer the case. Inflation, traditionally high in Turkey, caused prices to rise and the value of the Turkish Lira to decrease, but the company never adjusted the wages it paid. By mid-2007, 1200 YTL gross wage was not a competitive salary in Istanbul. However, the only concession offered by the company in reply to more and more frequent demands for better pay was to raise the gross monthly pay to 1500 YTL for those who had been working in the company for a minimum of eighteen months, or had alternatively worked in a different call center for thirty-six months, or had worked in this company for twelve months and in another call center for twenty-four months. Those agents who met these conditions were 'promoted' to 'senior customer service representative', signifying that they were still doing the same work, but receiving somewhat more pay. However, very few agents were affected by this rule.

The company always valued and emphasized its respectability and reliability. One thing that many employees remember was emphasized at the time of their interviews was the appreciation of punctuality. While the company promised to always pay out wages on time and deliver the additional benefits specified in the contract, employees were expected not to be late for work, complete their full obligation of forty-five working hours per week, and generally perform their work in a reliable and respectable fashion.

However, the company soon failed to live up to its promise. The private health insurance was unreliable because the company did not pay the required

premiums regularly and on time, and in the second half of 2006, wages were not always paid out on time. This was, however, made up for by a conciliatory one-off bonus payment to all employees, paid out in early 2007, the amount depending on the duration of each person's employment with the company.

But the autumn of 2007 saw a severe turn for the worse. The insurance payments were abandoned in October, without even a pretence that they were being kept up, several service bus routes were discontinued, and October also saw the last reasonably punctual and complete payment of wages. From November onwards, wages were paid out in installments, with the first installment possibly arriving within the first week of the month, but never on the first day. The last payment occurred on 19 February, 2008, covering amounts outstanding from the previous months. The wages for the month of February still remain outstanding and there is little hope that they will ever be paid out.

One striking example of the way the company treated its employees and the respect it accorded them can be seen in the way in which weekend work was introduced. Until Spring 2007, one of the advantages of this call center over others had been the fact that the company was closed on weekends. This was a major bonus for many, since, as the irregular working shifts in a call center impose difficulties on social life, it was especially important to have weekends off to have time for family and friends, etc. However, as of 1 March, 2007, weekend shifts were introduced. Because of the way this step was handled, many saw it as the beginning of the downfall of the company.

Employees were informed about the introduction of weekend shifts at very short notice –approximately one week in advance. However, a small number of employees had been informed much earlier, since the head team manager had asked a few people if they would be willing to work on weekends on a voluntary basis,

with slightly higher pay on Sundays, while asking them at the same time not to mention this to anyone else. But apparently not enough agents were willing to work on weekends, so the company decided to introduce mandatory weekend shifts, promising employees that they would get days off during the week instead. Any protest by employees was countered with the argument that, at the time of their job interview, all those who had applied during the past year or so had been informed that the company was looking into the possibility of introducing weekend work. But this possibility was never mentioned again in daily operations until approximately one week before the start of the scheme, leading to understandable resentment among employees, who would have preferred to be informed in advance and be involved in the planning process.

The introduction of weekend shifts signified the end of any kind of regularity in the working hours of full-time employees. The biggest problem was that those in charge of scheduling the shifts, particularly the head team manager, failed to organize shifts in such a way that employees would still have two days off in a row. Instead, they would often have one day off during the weekend and one day in the middle of the week. In some cases, people were even expected to work six days a week, with correspondingly fewer hours per day, instead of the usual five. On top of that, shifts were changing more frequently than before. While previously the shift schedule had been prepared once a month and each group would be working the same shift for the whole month, shifts would now change almost every week, including instances of having people work the late shift one day and the early shift the next, or vice versa, and working one weekend but not the next, then suddenly working several weekends in a row, or working ten days or more without a day off in between. Under these circumstances, it became very difficult to lead any kind of regular life outside work, and these hardships were not sufficiently balanced by the

25 percent extra pay on Sundays. The company was treating its employees as though they did not have any life outside work. This was a very unsatisfactory situation for many, and, combined with the newly risen culture of secrecy and imposition from above, and the lack of respect shown towards employees as demonstrated by the imposition of weekend work, this drove a significant number of employees to leave the company.

My own employment situation differed slightly from that of the company's other German employees. Since none of the German employees had a work permit, they all had 'consultant contracts' not directly with the call center but via a personnel recruitment company. None of them paid social security contributions or enjoyed any kind of social security. They were paid in cash rather than receiving their wages into their account, as the Turkish employees did.

My situation was however even more insecure, because the contract I received at the beginning of my stay with the company only covered full-time work. When I switched to part-time after the first two months, I was supposed to receive a new part-time contract. This contract was signed by me, but it was never countersigned by anyone, even though I continued to work with the company for almost one-and-a-half years. In addition, not only did I not have a work permit, but my residence permit, issued specifically for study purposes, contained a stamp saying that I was not allowed to work, thus prohibiting me from even applying for a work permit. Nevertheless, I was issued a tax number by the relevant authorities without any difficulties, and the Turkish state never seemed to be bothered by receiving taxes from me. Even when I went to a bank to open an account (for the first two months that I was working in the call center I did receive my pay directly into my account, but afterwards always in cash), bringing along my employment contract, my tax number and my residence permit containing the provision that I

was not allowed to work, no questions were asked and I could immediately open an account.

In late Spring/early Summer 2007, I was told by my superiors that I would have to quit the job because my legal situation was too precarious. When I asked why this issue had become acute at this point, after I had already worked for the company for nine months or so, I was alternately told either that it was because of a change in the ownership of the company, with the new owners being very keen on everything being entirely legal, without any gray areas, or that the company had received a visit from the Turkish authorities and was afraid of getting into trouble if they continued to employ me under these half-legal conditions, claiming that the Turkish authorities had begun to subject foreign companies to closer scrutiny.

However, this occurred at the time when the call center on the one hand employed a large number of agents, and on the other hand was receiving relatively few calls, resulting in agents being idle for several minutes between calls and presumably losing money for the company. Supported by my team manager, I was able to persuade company management to let me work there for a few more weeks. Then, at one point in the summer of 2007, the call center suddenly started receiving so many calls that it became impossible to handle them all. Later it turned out that one of the call centers in Germany serving the same hotline had been closed down, and that Istanbul therefore had to handle their calls as well. Under these changed circumstances, which even led to the imposition of mandatory overtime for all agents, the precarious legal situation of my being employed without a work permit did not appear to be of much concern to anyone anymore. This episode once again illustrates that agents were not valued very highly when it came to protecting the financial interests of the company.

Identity Management and Customer Interactions

Working in a German call center in Istanbul means living in two realities at the same time. Inside the call center rooms is Germany, outside is Turkey. Inside, everything from the posters on the wall to the computer programs, and of course the customers to be served, is German, while outside Turkish life is bustling. But agents are not only living in two different environments; inside the call center they also have to assume a new identity to some extent. While in outbound operations it is common to assume a completely different identity on the phone, using a false German-sounding name and making up a whole life-story to go with it, this is generally not practiced in inbound centers. In the company presented here, agents were not only allowed to use their real names, they were even told to do so – using a false name was not permitted.

Despite keeping their real names, agents were not allowed to let customers know that they were in Istanbul. If customers asked about their location, they were told to give the name of Görlitz, a small town in Eastern Germany, close to the Polish border, where a large call center was indeed serving the same hotline. Although the company did not encourage agents to make up fake life stories, many were nevertheless occasionally forced to invent an explanation for their location, especially those whose regional German accents did not at all fit the East German location. In addition, most agents had never been to that town or even that part of Germany. Thus the company effectively forced and required its employees to lie to customers, and agents had no way to refuse this requirement, even though it is contrary to moral and legal standards. This does give some indication of the

appreciation accorded to agents and of their bargaining position, which was very weak.

The reason why agents were not allowed to reveal their true location to customers presumably lies in the fact that, among German consumers, Turkey still has a reputation of offering products at cheap prices but low quality. Of course the client company did not want to appear to its customers to be trying to handle customer services on the cheap, nor to be delivering service of inferior quality. Thus, the factually international business operation of providing customer service to consumers in Germany is made to appear to these consumers as a purely national business. The insistence on locational masking also indicates an underlying nationalism on more than one level, in customers' reluctance to accept services rendered from abroad and from Turkey in particular, and in the company's desire to portray itself as having all its operations based in Germany.

The company's demand for locational masking often led to embarrassing situations for agents. In conversations that lasted somewhat longer, especially if it was necessary to reboot the customer's computer, customers would often try to initiate small talk by asking about the agent's location. A common cause for embarrassment was the question of what the weather was like in that part of Germany. Agents devised different ways of dealing with such issues: Some looked at a weather report for Eastern Germany before starting to take calls, others gave very general answers or explained that they didn't really know what the weather was like, since they spent all day locked in an air-conditioned call center with the blinds drawn on all windows.

Another common question by customers that caused embarrassment for agents was an inquiry about the address or precise location of the call center in this town. Again, different strategies were deployed, ranging from a very general

description that would fit practically any city (such as "near the post office") to claims that one had only very recently moved here and did not know the place so well yet. Customers also frequently commented that being so close to Poland – Görlitz is divided into two parts by a river, and the part of town on the river's Eastern shore is Polish, so crossing the bridge in this town means entering another country – must have advantages, such as being able to buy cheap cigarettes across the border, to which I usually replied that I do not smoke, but yes, some things are cheaper in Poland and it is convenient to be so close to the border.

Other typical questions from customers related to the historical town center, which is famous in Germany for its beauty and its restoration in recent years, famously financed by an anonymous donor who for more than ten years has been donating one million German Mark, or 511,000 Euro, per year to the Görlitz town administration for the restoration of old buildings in the historical center. Of course, for a call center agent in Istanbul, who has never seen that town, questions relating to these matters are difficult to answer and easily lead to embarrassment. My own strategy in such cases usually was to say that I had only recently moved here and had not yet had the time to see the sights, and that I originally came from the Rhineland – hoping that further questions would focus on my real hometown rather than the fake one.

Once I was speaking to an elderly gentleman living in Berlin, who was delighted upon hearing that I was based in Görlitz, and told me that he used to work as a doctor in a hospital in Görlitz. So he asked me if I knew the hospital and whether I had been to the part of town where he used to live, and finally wanted to know from me whether that hospital had truly been taken over by a certain company – of course I could not answer any of his questions, but had a very hard time trying

to bring this embarrassing conversation to an end, because the elderly gentlemen was obviously very happy to share memories of the town where he used to live.

Since the town of Görlitz lies on Germany's Eastern border, this is not an area in which many Turks have settled. Some customers have therefore been surprised to hear a Turkish name in connection with this location, forcing the agent concerned to make up a story to explain how he or she came to live in Görlitz.

However, the conversations with customers described here were exceptions to the everyday call center operations. Calls rarely extended to such lengths that customer and agent became involved in a private conversation. Most calls were handled very quickly, and most customers were not interested in the location of the person they were speaking to, nor in their life story. In fact, agents most of the time were facing pressure to keep call duration as short as possible. But when a situation occurred in which a customer asked such questions to an agent, this always led to a very unpleasant situation for the employee, in which he had no choice but to lie in accordance with the rules determined by the company.

There also were cases in which agents really had to bite their tongues in order not to reveal to customers that they were in fact based in Istanbul. On one occasion, a customer asked me if he could use the Internet access software supported by our hotline to access the Internet while he was in Istanbul, with the cost being charged to his regular bill. This was indeed possible, and I was itching to tell the customer that if there were any problems he could just knock on our door. In a different case, a customer asked if it was possible to block calls to his phone number from numbers starting with 0090, and I explained to him that this was not possible, saying that he would, in that way, lock out all of Turkey. To this, he replied that it would be sufficient for him to block the prefix 212, i.e. the European

side of Istanbul – I was greatly tempted to tell him that by doing so he would also shut out the service hotline of his German Internet provider.

While this call center served the technical hotline of a major German Internet provider, there was also another hotline dedicated to general administrative issues of customer service for the same provider, and this hotline also had a call center in Istanbul. When it turned out that the difficulty reported by a customer stemmed from an issue that fell into the realm of the other hotline, it was common to turn the customer over to a colleague on the other hotline, giving a short explanation of the situation to the agent at the other end of the line. Occasionally, both agents recognized each other's Turkish names and realized that they were both sitting in Istanbul, discussing a customer in Germany who did not know that he was speaking to people in a different country.

In the early weeks of 2008, when the call center was serving a different hotline for another German Internet provider, this provider allowed agents to tell customers that they were based in Istanbul. However, when one customer was talking to an agent with a Turkish name, but who spoke perfect German, and this agent told him that he was based in Istanbul, and replied to the question about the weather in Istanbul that it was currently snowing – this occurred in January – the customer refused to believe it and thought that the agent was making a joke.

The environment within the call center was entirely German, so, shut off from the city by closed windows and closed blinds, it was sometimes easy to forget that one was actually in Istanbul and not somewhere in Germany, only to be surprised by the sight of a mosque and the sound of the muezzin's call to prayer when leaving the workplace. Presumably, one of the reasons for keeping the windows closed most of the time was precisely the concern that a suspicious customer might be intrigued by hearing the call of the muezzin or the sound of a

ship's horn drifting over from the Bosphorus in the background as he talked with an agent. An artificial German space was thus created in the middle of the Turkish city of Istanbul.

Agents had no choice other than to be German at work (although, unlike in most outbound call centers, they did not have to deny their Turkish name and origins) and become Turkish again as soon as they stepped out of the building and entered the Turkish environment of the city they lived in and the company of their friends and family. For most, this meant living in two languages: Speaking German at work (except during occasional private conversations among agents), but Turkish outside the workplace.

Although the language used for giving support over the phone was German by definition, there were occasional cases in which a different language would be used. This was not a requirement, but if the agent realized that a customer did not know much German, but spoke a different language that he or one of his colleagues also spoke, it was permitted and appreciated to help the customer in a language that would be easier for him to understand. For this reason, Turkish customers who spoke Turkish better than German were often served in Turkish, although in these cases agents often had difficulty with the technical terms to be used in Turkish and thus included many German expressions in their instructions to customers, or spoke in a mixture of German and Turkish. Other languages spoken by individual agents but rarely used in support included French, Russian, Kurdish, Arabic and even Korean.

Those who had gone to school in Germany usually also spoke English, so English-speaking customers were also served by the call center. Since most agents knew that I spoke good English, I was often asked to take over calls with English-speaking customers from colleagues who did not speak much English. Many of

these English-speaking customers were American soldiers stationed in Germany, who usually did not know any German at all. They often replied to any question I asked with "Yes, Ma'am" or "No, Ma'am," sometimes even confirming any sentence of mine with a snappy "Yes, Ma'am," which seemed somewhat funny to a German not familiar with US military etiquette.

On one occasion, I was speaking to a woman from the US living in southern Germany, and after solving the problem relating to her computer, she asked me where I was based, and I explained that I was in Görlitz, on Germany's eastern border. For a moment, she was surprised that I was "so far away", but then said that if she had called a service number like this from the US, she would most likely have ended up in India. I would have liked to inform her that this was not all that different in Germany, if exchanging India for Istanbul, but of course the rules prohibited that. On another occasion, I was speaking to a man, presumably from India, who was quite unfriendly to me at first, but later, as I was able to solve his Internet problem, the conversation turned more pleasant. Eventually, he asked me whether I was really German. He claimed that he had never met a German who was so friendly, especially towards foreigners who did not speak German, and could hardly believe that I really was German, despite my name not being typically German. "You are too friendly to be German," he said at the end of our conversation.

In general, most English-speaking customers were delighted and grateful to be able to speak with an agent who spoke English, setting the tone for what often turned out to be a quite pleasant conversation (keeping in mind that a large percentage of callers were rather impatient, demanded an immediate solution to their problem, and were in many cases angry that they had to call a hotline in the first place). On several occasions, English-speaking customers were so grateful to me that they said they would like to send me flowers or invite me for a coffee, if only I

wasn't so far away, and claimed that it was not to be taken for granted that a foreigner calling a service hotline in Germany while not speaking much German was treated so friendly. Although German customers also occasionally wanted to send me flowers or invite me for a coffee, or said that it was unusual to speak to someone this friendly at a service hotline, this kind of reaction was more typical of interactions with non-German speakers.

Of course, all female agents also experienced occasions in which male customers attempted to establish private contact. Sometimes they asked about the agent's location, saying that if it was not too far away, they would come by for a visit or buy the agent a coffee. Of course they did not know that their counterpart on the phone was really sitting in Istanbul. Others suggested that since the agent saw his telephone number in the customer data, she could call him back in the evening after work to talk more in private. In one case, I had a seemingly middle-aged man on the phone who insisted on meeting me for coffee and absolutely refused to be put off by my insistence that it was too far away etc. – eventually he hung up the phone with an exasperated "I suppose you are already married then."

However, not all interactions with customers were this friendly. Apart from frequent complaints about the company in general, there were also many occasions in which agents were personally insulted or even threatened by customers. Occasionally, a customer would ask for the call center's address, so that if his Internet was still not working the next day, he would be able to come by and strangle someone or set off a bomb. Even though this kind of threat was usually not to be taken seriously, they nevertheless constituted a very unpleasant experience for the agent involved.

The fact that the hotline delivered technical support sometimes led to difficulties for female agents. On the one hand, some female customers were happy

to speak to a woman and explained that they felt very insecure about technical issues and would have been embarrassed to show their lack of technical knowledge to a man, afraid that he would be impatient with them. One woman even suggested introducing an option in the IVR menu to choose whether one would like to speak to a male or a female agent. But on the other hand, it was not unusual for male customers to assume that a female agent would not be able to help them on technical issues. Some men had difficulty accepting technical advice from a woman and instead continued to complain rather than attempt the solutions suggested by the agent.

In one case, one of my customers, apparently Italian, judging from the name, complained to me that this was the third time he was calling the hotline, and the third time that a woman answered, even though he knew very well that women did not understand anything about technical issues. So he would give me one last chance, otherwise he would give up on the hotline and ask male friends or men working in a computer shop. He refused to state his problem clearly to me, and when I suggested a procedure that I hoped would solve the problem, as I had understood it, he hung up, claiming that this was rubbish and that he knew from the beginning that a woman would not be able to help him. On other occasions, however, male customers were willing to give me a chance, treated me politely throughout our conversation, and in the end, after I had been able to solve their problem, admitted that they had always thought that women did not have any understanding of technical issues, but that I had proved them wrong. Some even conceded that they had spoken to several men about this issue, in some cases even on the same hotline, but that none of them had been able to help, while the first woman to hear the case was able to solve it.

One of the aspects that make call center work very tiring and often frustrating is the imperative to always keep 'smiling down the phone' and be friendly to callers, no matter how one is feeling that day, and no matter how one is treated by customers. Remaining friendly and smiling down the phone even when not feeling like it at all, or when being treated rudely by customers, is emotionally and mentally tiring. It is not always easy to listen to complaints and even insults and never be allowed to respond in kind, instead always attempting to calm down and pacify customers, agree with their position as far as possible, show understanding for their anger, and never suggest to a customer that he may on occasion actually be wrong.

The Telekom Strike

The call center in Istanbul was serving the technical support hotline of Germany's largest telecommunication and Internet provider, the former state monopolist Deutsche *Telekom*. This company had lost millions of customers in recent years, since the opening of the German telecommunications market to private companies, especially in the landline sector. In November 2006, a new CEO, René Obermann, was appointed to lead the company. He was quick to proclaim a new strategy to stop the rapid loss of customers by improving customer service in all areas, while at the same time cutting costs on a large scale. This focus on improved customer service tied in with the general shift in attitudes in Germany among consumers as well as producers away from pure cost calculations and towards greater emphasis on quality.

Obermann eventually announced his plan for the reorganization of the company publicly in February 2007. Apart from an internal restructuring of the company's separate sectors, the plan involved outsourcing more than fifty thousand employees, especially in the landline sector's customer services departments, to a subsidiary company, where they would work longer hours per week while receiving considerably less pay. In return, employees would be guaranteed that their jobs would remain secure until 2011. Not surprisingly, this proposal met with protest from employees and the trade union. After failed negotiations, the company's final offer of four additional hours of work per week at 9 percent less monthly pay was rejected, and unionized employees laid down their work and went on strike on 14 May 2007.

The strike ended on 20 June, 2007, after a compromise was negotiated between company management and the trade union. According to this agreement, more than fifty thousand employees were indeed transferred to a subsidiary company, where they would have to work four hours more per week while receiving 6.5 percent less pay per month. However, their jobs were guaranteed until 2012 and a special fund was to be set up to alleviate the loss of income and spread the cuts over the next few years. Keeping in mind that the pay cuts coincided with an extension of the working hours, it becomes clear that hourly wages dropped by significantly more than 6.5 percent.

Although many employees felt betrayed by the trade union and denounced the compromise as a sell-out, the agreement nevertheless signified the end of the strike that had lasted for almost six weeks. Practically all observers agreed that the company had been the clear winner in these negotiations, at the expense of its employees, many of whom were disappointed and frustrated with their union due to such meager results after several weeks of strike.

The strike occurred in the context of the *Telekom* concern's reform strategy, which was mainly based on two seemingly contradictory pillars: The first pillar was the improvement of customer service, while the second pillar was the reduction of personnel costs by both reducing the number of employees and obliging those remaining to work longer hours at less pay. Naturally, the enforcement of the second pillar seriously harmed the first pillar's prospects of success. The first pillar's effects on the call center in Istanbul have been described above as leading to a shift in focus from quantity to quality and an increase in the range of support. The second pillar, however, to which the strikes were a direct reaction, also had its effects on call centers in Istanbul.

The majority of the employees participating in the strikes were working in the company's customer service sector; many were working in the company's call centers in Germany or as technicians who went out to repair any faults in the phone and Internet lines or to activate new connections. Since so many of these employees were on strike, this led to extended waiting times at the service hotlines, and some hotlines were even temporarily not available at all. At the same time, line faults frequently were registered but nothing was done to repair them, causing people to call again and again for the same reason. Even though the hotline served by my call center was not directly affected by the strike and did not have anything to do with the phone and Internet lines themselves, these factors nevertheless had an effect. The hotline was frequently called by customers who had not been able to reach one of the other hotlines and were hoping that they might find help under this number or that at least they could be put through to the line they needed from this one. However, in effect there was nothing anyone working in the call center in Istanbul could do to help these customers: While it was possible to put the customer through to the other hotline, they would still end up in the same waiting loop there. In fact, it

became almost impossible to connect to one of the other lines or consult with agents from the other lines during the time of the strike due to the overload of practically all *Telekom* hotlines.

Many customers commented on the strike, which was somewhat strange and uncomfortable for the agents in Istanbul, since they were not directly concerned with it. Once again, it was required that agents lied to customers, pretending that they were actually in Germany, working in one of the company-owned call centers rather than in a sub-contracted one in a different country. Some customers even attempted to engage agents in extended discussions over the reasons behind the strike, as well as its merits and drawbacks. In the beginning, the majority of reactions from customers were positive and supportive of the strike, displaying understanding for the employees' concerns and explaining that they feared that if *Telekom* employees did not take a stand at this point, then the practice of having employees work longer hours at less pay would spread to other companies. However, as the strike wore on and lines remained unfixed and new connections unconnected, reactions became more and more negative as people were losing their patience. The hotline started receiving numerous complaints from customers over being stuck in waiting loops for very long times, not being able to reach the other hotlines, or their lines not being repaired, but there was nothing the agents of the technical service hotline in Istanbul could do about any of these issues. They were again stuck in a very uncomfortable position, having to take the heat from customers for something that they did not have any influence on at all. On the other hand, there also was a sense among agents in Istanbul that by doing their job and keeping at least one of the service hotlines running, they were in a way undermining the strike of their colleagues in Germany, even though the results of the dispute in Germany were unlikely to have any effect on working conditions in Istanbul.

During and in the aftermath of the conflict, it was revealed that the *Telekom* company was in some instances not entirely honest in its argumentation. In particular, one of the main justifications presented by the company for increasing working hours while at the same time lowering the pay was the comparison to customer service employees in other companies, who, according to *Telekom* allegations, were paid far less than those at *Telekom*. However, an investigative TV magazine in early June 2007 revealed that the numbers presented by *Telekom* were simply not true[9]. But this revelation failed to make headlines in Germany and came at a time when much of the population had started to believe what was constantly being repeated by the media, namely that *Telekom* employees were working very short hours at unusually high rates, and had already stopped showing sympathy for the Telekom employees' strike.

In addition, the new *Telekom* CEO frequently threatened that the company would face asset stripping or foreign takeover, if personnel costs were not drastically lowered. Although no evidence for the potential realization of this threat was ever presented, the claims were widely publicized by the media. In fact, the so-called "restructuring" of the company occurred in spite of the company's realization of considerable profits. In November 2007, less than six months after the end of the strike, the *Telekom* CEO announced the need for further cuts in personnel costs in the face of increased profits, citing "inefficiencies" and a "need for adjustment" in personnel structures as reasons for the new and continuing cuts[10].

In the course of the reforms, and presumably in order to make efficient use of the additional working hours imposed on employees, the company also announced that it was taking back tasks previously contracted out to other

[9] Sieber, Ursel. "Telekom – Löhne drücken mit falschen Zahlen." *Kontraste*. ARD 07 June 2007. 17 April 2008. http://www.rbb-online.de/_/kontraste/beitrag_jsp/key=rbb_beitrag_5983342.html.
[10]"Sanierung: Telekom-Chef Obermann kündigt weitere Entlassungen an." *Der Spiegel* 08 November 2007. 17 April 2008. http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/0,1518,516130,00.html.

companies[11]. This is precisely what happened at the end of 2007, when *Telekom* did not extend its contracts with several of the call center companies it had been working with in Istanbul. The fact that Turkey in particular has a low prestige among German customers, as well as the underlying perception that services rendered from Turkey will be not only cheaper but also inferior to those rendered from Germany, may have been another factor contributing to this decision, especially in the context of the enhanced emphasis on customer satisfaction.

At the time of the dispute surrounding *Telekom*, there were numerous discussions in the German media on the quality of customer services and call centers in general, but also more specifically on the topic of outsourcing call centers to foreign countries. Interestingly, although these discussions rightly referred to Eastern European countries as possible destinations of German call centers, Istanbul as a location was entirely absent from the discussion, another indication that most of the German population is not aware that so many German call centers are in fact located in Istanbul.

The New Project

In October/November 2007, things began to change for the worse in the call center in Istanbul. September wages had been the last to be paid out on time, but while wages for October and November were paid with delay and in installments, they were at least still paid out in full. Of course, agents did not have any insight into what was going on behind closed doors in the company's management in Istanbul

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[11] "Telekom-Einigung: 4 Stunden mehr, 6,5 Prozent weniger. " *Der Spiegel* 20 June 2007. 17 April 2008. http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/0,1518,489659,00.html.

and Germany, and the only explanation offered by the management in Istanbul was that the client company, *Telekom*'s Internet provider, had not paid its bills to the call center. While this is a highly unlikely explanation in itself – why should a large, internationally operating company like *Telekom*, intent on improving its image in customers' eyes, risk the bad press that would be generated if it was revealed that the company not only employed call centers in Istanbul but even refused to pay them, especially since the amounts involved here were presumably 'peanuts' for a company of such proportions? – it does not explain why employees in Istanbul had to bear the brunt of these cash shortages. Many in the company suggested that if it was true that *Telekom* was not paying its bills on time, then the owner company in Germany should have taken out a loan to pay the wages, and charged all interest fees to *Telekom*.

The contract between *Telekom* and the call center expired at the end of December 2007. From what could be gathered from comments made by management personnel in Istanbul, no attempts to initiate negotiations to extend the contract were made by either side. Employees in Istanbul were told that on the part of *Telekom*, this was most likely due to their strategy to "take back tasks previously contracted out to other companies" (see above), while the call center did not intend to continue its cooperation with a partner that was not paying its bills on time – although, ironically, the company itself was of course also "not paying its bills on time" by delaying wage payouts.

When wage payouts were repeatedly delayed over the course of November and December and even the promised late payout dates were postponed again, the payouts that eventually arrived consisted of only part of the expected payment, and it was revealed that the company had stopped paying the premiums for employees' private health insurance, employees began to grow restless. On one or two

occasions, the calling room witnessed scenes approaching mutiny, with large numbers of agents refusing to accept any more calls as long as they were not being paid. However, these rebellions were put down by the head team manager, who was very good at rhetoric, with promises that wages would soon be paid out, that things would get better, and appeals to the team spirit, claiming that everyone now had to stick together to make it through these hard times. Since there was no trade union or any kind of organized employees' association, this kind of spontaneous protest, a kind of 'mini-strike', was the only form of protest available to agents, apart from repeatedly complaining to their team managers and other managing personnel.

During these weeks, the head team manager's job came to resemble that of a 'fireman', having to put down outbreaks of discontent whenever they occurred, especially when the payout date was postponed again or the head of operations, apparently unaware of the strain on employees caused by the lack of money, repeatedly incited anger with his insensitive remarks. Even though team managers did their best to calm down employees, promised a better future for the company, fomented hope for compensatory pay-offs in the future, and generally tried to keep spirits up, the mood darkened with agents tiring of being led on, and resignations started to pour in, while at the same time the number of new employees joining the company was close to zero.

Then, eventually, it was announced that new contracts would be established with two other client companies, both of them German Internet and telephone providers. However, when one of these two German companies withdrew for unknown reasons, only one client was left. For this new client, the call center was to offer a service somewhat similar to the previous one, although with considerably less emphasis on technical aspects and settings on the customer's computer, instead dealing mainly with complaints about faulty or disconnected lines. The main job

now was not so much to help customers get online, but rather to receive the customer's complaint, enter it into the system, perform some preliminary tests, and eventually to generate a so-called 'ticket' to be forwarded to technicians to repair or connect the line. In practice, however, this often meant performing the duty of a punching bag absorbing customers' anger over dysfunctional lines that had still not been repaired or connected even after several calls to the hotline – because the tickets issued by agents on the line were often not correctly processed by the technicians or others involved in the process. The call center thus moved from providing fairly complex quality services to the highly routinized handling of mass calls.

The new project began in the middle of December 2007 with training sessions for a so-called 'core team' of fifteen agents who would be the first to go online for the new hotline at the beginning of January. The trainings were badly organized, given for the most part by people who themselves only had limited command of the computer programs they were supposed to teach. They left agents entirely unprepared for fulfilling the tasks they were expected to carry out for the new hotline, since they did not have sufficient knowledge of the programs they were supposed to use, and in many cases did not even have the necessary logins for these programs. Naturally, this situation led to many angry customers, who had to spend long times waiting in the loop, and to great frustration on the part of the agents, since they were not only unable to help customers much of the time, but had to even allow themselves to be yelled at by angry customers for difficulties that were not really their fault.

Even in the preparatory stage of this project, things were already not running smoothly. Before deciding whether to launch the project, the client company requested that six calling agents should take a computerized test and take part in a

conference call, in the course of which the client company's representatives in Germany would ask them a few questions to determine their German language skills, their ability to explain technical matters on the phone, and their technical knowledge in the field of Internet and telephone communications.

When the tests and the conference call went well and the project was confirmed, the participating agents received a thank-you letter from the call center company's management in Germany – the letter was sent by email to the Istanbul head of operation and then shown to the agents concerned on his computer. It was addressed very generally to all agents involved and not even printed or sent to the individuals, who did not feel that this was a very convincing way by the company to show their appreciation for individual employees and the extra efforts they had put in even outside their working hours to support this project.

This was followed by attempts to send a delegation from the call center to Germany to meet with officials from the future client company and learn about the way this hotline was serviced by call centers in Germany. However, this attempt was faced with difficulties in obtaining visas for Turkish citizens at very short notice, and was eventually abandoned, not without having previously informed individual employees that they would be flying to Germany at the company's cost in one week's time, only to tell them the next day that they would not be flying after all.

This kind of lack of efficient organization also characterized the training period for the new client company. The first trainer who arrived from Germany knew a lot about the company's image, its advertising and the way it aimed to present itself to customers, but unfortunately was not very firm on the technical side and with the software systems the company used in its call centers. So while she was able to give a lot of insight into the company's self-projection and the way the call

centers were expected to deliver this image to customers, based on the company's principles of customer service that valued customer satisfaction above everything else, she could only give very limited and theoretical explanations regarding the computer programs and their use. Although the second trainer from Germany who joined her for the second week had a better command of the systems, his training sessions were again largely limited to theoretical explanation and demonstrations, which was most likely at least partly due to the fact that the new agents in Istanbul were not issued with logins for the systems in time, or received logins that did not work. By the end of the two-week training period, the agents had only been able to familiarize themselves to some extent with one or two of the approximately ten to fifteen systems they were supposed to use during their calls.

The training for new agents in the company's call centers in Germany usually lasts six weeks, so it can only be guessed that the company assumed that, since the agents in Istanbul already had experience serving a hotline for an Internet service provider, they would adapt to the new systems quickly and easily and would not require much training. Although this assumption was quickly proved wrong, the training period was not extended to fully prepare agents for their new task.

It quickly became clear that despite the new client company's emphasis on customer satisfaction, which included an allusion to employee appreciation, respect and appreciation for employees were not on the agenda, neither for the client company in Germany nor for the call center operator in Istanbul and its German management. Despite their insufficient preparation for the job, the agents of the 'core team' had to start accepting calls at the beginning of January. They were to a large extent left alone with their difficulties and had to learn how to use the systems 'on the job', while dissatisfied customers were waiting on the line, a highly unpleasant and unsatisfactory situation for both agents and customers. It is also

indicative that agents were expected to change loyalty from one provider to another in a matter of a few days without experiencing any conflict, as though they were machinery moved from one task to another. Loyalty to the product they were supporting was clearly not expected from the agents.

The remaining agents, who had not been part of the 'core team', continued to accept calls for the former client company until the end of December 2007, and then received approximately ten days of training for the new client company, taught largely by people who had only received a very limited education in and had very little experience with the company's systems and way of working, before having to accept calls for the new hotline. The members of the 'core team', who had already been accepting calls for approximately two weeks, were now mainly helping out as supporters in the background, answering agents' questions and showing them how to use the systems (which they had largely had to teach themselves). Again, many people only had access to a limited part of the systems due to missing or faulty logins, and for some systems the call center as a whole had not received any login data, so that customers whose concern necessitated the use of these systems had to be asked to call again, since it was not possible to put them through to another call center that might have access to the systems.

Agents were completely dependent on the computer systems, since the routines they were supposed to perform with customers were strictly scripted and could only be performed through the system. It was almost impossible to deviate from the script or carry out any meaningful action on behalf of the customer without using the prescribed system. Scripting had been employed only to a minimal extent in the previous project, so agents unfamiliar with working in this way were frequently complaining that they were being turned into "slaves of the system" and

all independent agency or opportunity to make use of their own knowledge and experience was taken away from them.

With regard to the working procedures in the call center described above, they changed completely with the new client company. There was no 'period of grace', but from the start all calls were immediately monitored and evaluated in Germany. Team managers in Istanbul and supervisors in Germany had much greater access to what agents were doing and how they were doing it, and how they were being evaluated both by customers and by company supervisors. The control was a lot more direct and immediate, giving agents the unpleasant feeling that they were constantly being watched. The tools for monitoring and controlling agents were so sophisticated that one could not help but feeling that the company had invested more in, and cared more about, the software for controlling its employees rather than the systems used by the agents to help customers. There was also no longer any chance to catch a few deep breaths before taking the next call, since the next customer would be in line immediately as soon as the agent pressed the button setting his phone to ready, and any 'excessive' time spent in after-call work would immediately be registered by supervisors and counted against the agent. What mattered at the end of the day was the number of calls handled, while despite all the rhetoric about customer satisfaction, success in helping the customer was of little importance. Quality in this context meant treating the customer friendly and kindly, listening to all his complaints, and leaving him satisfied with a sense that he had just spoken to a friendly and reliable customer service representative – whether there was any prospect of solving the problem that had been the reason for his call was not a major concern.

The call center now experienced a veritable paradigm shift, changing from a quality-oriented service provider with relatively little monitoring and control of

agents' activities to a handler of mass communication in a constantly monitored, highly controlled, and tightly scripted environment. In short, it moved from a position relatively far on the qualitative side of the call center spectrum to the extreme quantitative end.

As for the customers to be dealt with, they presented a very different make-up from the previous company. They included many foreigners, predominantly Turks, probably due to the fact that this company had been the first in Germany to offer flat rates for calls abroad, and some Turkish agents occasionally spent half the day speaking to customers in Turkish. Agents were permitted to say that they were in Istanbul, although this was a temporary measure while waiting for the final decision on this matter from above. However, there rarely was an opportunity to mention Istanbul, since conversations with customers in general were a lot less pleasant than previously. Cases of angry and ranting customers were frequent, either because they did not feel that they were being adequately served – which could be due either to the agent's lack of familiarity with the systems or simply to the fact that the customer's concern was not provided for by the system and the agent had no chance to forward the matter to another institution, and even enquiries to the 'back office' in Germany did not lead to any solution – or because they had already called the hotline several times and their problem, usually relating to faulty or disconnected lines, had still not been solved, in which case the agent could do nothing but listen to the customer, try to calm them down, promise to do his best to fast-track the solution, possibly let the customer speak to one of his supervisors, and finally enter the customer's complaint into the system and hope for the 'back office' to take care of it quickly. Many agents felt that their hands were tied, that they could not actually do much to help customers, but rather were used as a kind of punching

bag for customers to vent their anger on, and that their main job was to calm customers down and ask for their patience.

Working days were now only from Monday to Friday, but agents were often expected to attend additional training sessions on the weekend. Presumably due to the company's financial difficulties, some of the service bus routes were cancelled and agents had to make their own way to work, and they never received the compensation they were promised. Lunch at the in-house cafeteria was also cancelled, replaced with fast food from the small kiosk across the road, which made many people feel sick, especially since they had to eat it every day. In addition, the chaos that had overshadowed the cooperation with the new client company from the beginning continued: The extra trainings that were scheduled received irregular attendance, and trainers often saw themselves faced with questions they could not answer because the client company did not offer any answers. The schedules for the tests agents had to pass for the client company were rescheduled, and participants were not always informed on time about opportunities to take a mock test. The Istanbul head of operations, who appeared completely removed from the 'mundane' difficulties troubling his agents, got into arguments with various agents over various matters, there was talk about the company moving to a new location (the move was supposed to take place some time in February 2008 and was announced to the workforce, in what the management apparently perceived as good time, on January 25, 2008 – the exact date was to be announced "later"), and in general there was confusion and contradictory statements regarding just about anything. And, of course, wages were still not paid out on time, but only in installments and only after extensive protests by agents. The management claimed that the new client company, again, was not paying its bills on time.

In sum, the working atmosphere had turned extremely unpleasant. All previous positive statements regarding the importance of proper training, appreciation for employees, and the overriding importance of customer satisfaction were quickly refuted in practice, in favor of accepting a maximum number of calls. And while many employees were resigning of their own accord, even more were fired by the company for allegedly not meeting the new company's standards or not attending trainings regularly. Others who wanted to leave were, however, talked into staying with the company and appeased with hopes for a better future once the probation period with the new company was over and the contract was secured, and with appeals to the team spirit at the call center.

However, the probation period was never completed. Two weeks prior to its anticipated end – and one week after the client company had given the call center four days' time off the phones for additional training sessions to prepare for a computerized test that each agent had to pass, and that most agents subsequently indeed passed – the company's German owner sent an email to inform management personnel in Istanbul that the client company had cancelled the contract and that therefore the call center ceased to exist. Management personnel was expected to call all employees to inform them that they would not need to come to work the following day but should look for a new job. However, some were not even called by management personnel but heard the news from their colleagues. The email was written in a very accusatory tone and laid all the blame for the company's failure on the agents who were even accused of sabotage. There was no mention or appreciation of the fact that agents had still been coming to work regularly even though they had not been paid properly for several months, and several of the benefits promised in their contracts had been cancelled, and they were working under very unpleasant conditions for a company that had failed to provide them with

sufficient training to do their job properly. The company had a long time ago stopped fulfilling its obligations under the contract, but still expected employees to not only fulfill their contractual obligations, but to do even more than that by attending additional training sessions in the weekend after a five-day working week, without pay.

Even though there was indeed a strong sense of team spirit at the call center, employees did grow more and more restless and angry when wages were repeatedly not or only partly paid out. But despite the anger and the occasional scenes approaching conditions of strike or mutiny, many were still loyal enough to stay with the company and continue working in the hope that the situation would eventually improve. But instead the situation went form bad to worse, with the Istanbul head of operations becoming more and more authoritarian and more and more removed from the constantly shrinking workforce. By the end of February, approximately fifty employees were left in a company that had only a few months before employed 110, and those fifty were largely the ones who felt most loyal to the company, trusted their colleagues and superiors, felt emotionally tied to their workplace, and believed in the company's team spirit. But these fifty people were left unemployed and without money from one day to the next, by an email written from a different country on a Sunday. The respect for employees did not even extend far enough to inform them in person, on the spot, and explain the true reasons to them. Although the email promised that the remaining wages would be paid out – as soon as the client company paid its bill – none of the employees ever received any money from the company again.

There are a number of suspicious factors surrounding the alleged cancellation of the contract by the client company and the closing down of the call center, apart from the fact that it does not seem very reasonable for the client

company to terminate the contract two weeks before the end of the probation period, and one week after granting the call center extra time for additional training sessions to prepare for the test and improve general performance. Employees, who met at the call center on Monday morning, the day after the date of the email, found that the PCs of all management personnel had already been formatted. It also turned out that the PCs did not even belong to the call center but had apparently been rented and were already being collected by the owners, leading to the presumption that most likely the call center company did not have any assets that might pay for the outstanding wages. All documents related to the company, including the employees' contracts, had disappeared and security guards explained that they had seen people carrying boxes from the offices of the management and administrative personnel, which were on a different floor than the rooms in which the agents worked. Some of the executive personnel more or less disappeared, and some apparently tried to open a new call center, but the venture failed. It did, however, help to give rise to suspicion that some of the management personnel knew what was coming in advance, but nevertheless lied to agents to keep them working, even though superiors possibly already knew that the remaining money would not be paid out. As for the company in Germany that owned the call center company in Istanbul, no-one can be reached there "at the moment" – except for the secretary who is always ready to take a message, although no response to such a message was ever received.

Nobody knows what happened to the money that was never paid out in wages. The official explanation by the call center company, that the client companies did not pay their bills, is not very convincing: It does not make much sense for large, internationally operating German telecommunications companies with a reputation to lose to simply not pay their bills to their offshore call centers. In fact, representatives of the second client company, which started cooperating with

another call center in Istanbul a short time after the failure of this project, even assured agents they met at the other call center that the company had indeed paid all its bills.

This bitter end was especially hard on those who had trusted the assertions of the company leadership, who had stayed with the company despite the difficult times, who had in some cases spent many years at the company, who had invested a lot of themselves into this company that had been more than just a workplace for them. Many were shocked that a German company would act like this. They had thought that with German owners and a German company in the background, this call center would be more reliable than others. After all, some had even been put into contact with this company by the German Federal Employment Office, thinking they were dealing with a respectable company of good reputation that would not engage in shady, dubious and possibly even illegal actions. They had thought that a German company would be more trustworthy than a Turkish one.

The company's actions, which appear like a model exercise in global capitalism, clearly show, as earlier signs had indicated, that there was no sense at all of social responsibility for the employees. The way the company was brought to an end clearly showed that there was no respect for the individual, for the employees as persons. People had been treated as though they had no life outside the company, as though the company had the right to rule their lives, but then they were left without pay, and many were not even officially informed about the company's closure. The culture of secrecy evident in the way the company was run, at least in the months prior to the closure, as well as the fact that the company had bestowed upon itself the authority to force people to lie to customers, and the way employees were expected to put up with not being paid, or repeated and significant delays in payment, including the way the contractually agreed health insurance was at more

than one time suspended by the employer without even informing the employed, all are evidence to the fact that respect for, appreciation of, or social responsibility for the individuals employed was clearly not on the agenda for the management of this company engaged in capitalist pursuit of profit.

The Decline of Istanbul's German Call Center Industry

The demise of this particular call center fits in precisely with the general pattern of decline of Istanbul's German call center industry. While there had been a multitude of German call centers all advertising for additional employees one year previously, at the time of the company's final closure at the beginning of March 2008, several other call centers had already closed down and those remaining were no longer recruiting new personnel as actively as before. For this reason, it was very difficult for those who became unemployed in early 2008 to find a new job. The limited number of companies that were still operating inbound call centers for German customers were unable to accept a large number of new employees, and they now had the luxury to select only the very best from a large pool of well-educated, experienced call center agents desperate for a new job. The situation was very different with regard to outbound call centers: There were still a large number of German outbound call centers in operation and they were keen to accept new employees. But few former inbound agents wanted to enter the shady business of outbound sales, even despite the higher salaries that can be earned in that sector.

Several former agents were still unemployed even after three months. Some complained that it was difficult for those who had grown up in Germany to find

work in Turkish companies, because many Turks hold prejudices against the *almancilar*. Many believe that, because they grew up in Germany rather than Turkey, their Turkish language skills are not as good as those of Turks who grew up in Turkey, and they do not fully understand "how things work" in Turkey. They went to school in Germany, so Turkish employers cannot rely on them to have the same knowledge and skills that they would expect from Turkish school graduates. There are also many prejudices related to the belief that the Turks who emigrated to Germany in the 1960s and 70s were mainly uneducated and very traditional, some might even say backward, laborers, mainly from small villages in Eastern Anatolia, and that those who grew up in Germany as the second generation did not move on from this low social, cultural and educational status. Some do not even regard those who grew up in Germany as "proper Turks."

Paradoxically, these are largely the same difficulties and prejudices that second-generation Turks in Germany are faced with and that unfortunately often make it difficult for them to find appropriate jobs in Germany: German employers often believe that these "German Turks" do not know German well enough, that they are and remain at a low social, cultural and educational level, and that they are not "proper Germans." They are caught between two worlds, being regarded as "Turks" in Germany and as "Germans" or *almanci* in Turkey.

Meanwhile, a number of German call centers appear to have moved on to Ireland, interestingly the same country that had been the prime destination for German call centers before the "gold rush" to Istanbul. Europe-wide job advertisement websites are full of recruitment adverts for German call centers in Ireland, offering much higher wages than Istanbul. Since the number of German speakers in Ireland is limited, some companies even offer to pay prospective call center agents the flight to Ireland and provide support for moving to the country.

Several of the agents who lost their job in early 2008 have received employment offers from call centers in Ireland. Especially in the computers and telecommunication sectors, many multinational companies have moved their European headquarters, including call centers for the major European markets, to Ireland. Even more surprisingly, call centers in Ireland are even recruiting Turkish speakers for telephone support operations, again offering not only higher wages than in Turkey but also financial support for the move to Ireland. The reasons for this move of call centers to Ireland, which is neither a low-wage country in Europe anymore, nor offers a substantial number of German native speakers, have not been explored yet. Germany itself is also experiencing a new boom in call centers, especially in the generally poorer eastern part of the country.

Possible reasons for abandoning Istanbul as a call center location include the rising cost of living in Istanbul, a general move away from the prioritizing of low cost over quality (with Turkey still being regarded as a low-quality location), and possibly an exhaustion on the part of German companies over sometimes unreliable and insecure business practices in Turkey, from which major companies in particular, that have a reputation to lose, want to disassociate themselves. The experience of some call center 'veterans' in Istanbul certainly suggests that the story of the call center described here is not an isolated case in terms of treatment of employees and the failure to pay out wages. The reports introduced above (cf. p. 46) indicate that Turkey is especially suitable as a location for outbound call centers, less so for inbound ones. This coincides with the recent developments in Istanbul's call center sector, with inbound call centers being closed down while outbound ones continue to thrive, but it remains to be seen whether outbound call centers will diminish as well if the new legislation against unwanted telephone advertising and sales comes into effect in Germany in 2009.

The fact that many German companies have or used to have their call centers operating from Istanbul is a typical example of the globalized economy, with a company based in a 'rich, expensive and western' country outsourcing operations not tied to a certain location to a 'poor, cheap and south-eastern' country. However, while it might have been hoped that the establishing of new companies in the poorer country, constituting an influx of capital and employment opportunities, would have positive effects on working conditions in the poorer country, leading to a gradual assimilation to western standards, what happened was precisely the opposite: Standards in the western country fell to imitate the lower standards in the south-eastern country.

There are several examples of standards originating from Turkey that have by now been implemented in German call centers as well. The labor dispute surrounding the *Telekom* call centers in Germany proved that even strike action was unable to stop the decline in wages and the increase in working hours in the German call center sector. Measures such as starting to count working hours only from the moment the agent is sitting at his computer, has logged on to all the system, and is ready to take the first call were common in Turkey and have now become standard in Germany as well. Another example for Turkish standards invading German call centers is the control mechanisms: While agents in Turkey have generally been subject to close controls and monitoring, both internally and externally, this level of employee control used to be unthinkable in Germany. However, as a recent article in the magazine *Der Spiegel* indicates, the constant monitoring of calls, including by external partners, has now become standard operating procedure in German call

centers as well, and those protesting this kind of surveillance even risk losing their job[12].

In the competition between call centers in Germany and in Turkey, standards have come to be assimilated on the basis of lowering standards to a kind of lowest common denominator, at the expense of employees in both countries. As can be observed in other fields as well, the economic globalization the world has been experiencing in recent years, appears to be leading to an assimilation of classes across borders, rather than of nations. Conditions for call center agents in Germany are approximating those of their colleagues in Turkey as the drive for competitiveness forces standards to converge at the lower end of the spectrum.

The history of the call center described in this thesis corresponds quite closely to the general history of German call centers in Istanbul, making it a very suitable case study. The call center was founded in 2003, in the early days of the German call center boom in Istanbul, as the subsidiary of a German company, in cooperation with a Turkish finance partner who later quit the project – the cooperation with a Turkish partner was necessary for the company to be established as a Turkish company. Nevertheless the company's owners, who had the final say on all decisions regarding the company, were Germans based in Germany who only occasionally visited their company in Istanbul. The company quickly expanded in terms of employee numbers and moved to a new location after approximately two years. Even though employee turnover was high, as is typical in the call center industry, the company successfully tied a significant number of employees to the call center in the long term. Just as so with many other call centers in Istanbul, the company was actively expanding and constantly looking for new employees, competing with other call centers for German-speaking agents.

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[12]"Protest gegen Überwachung: Aldi-Zulieferer feuert renitente Mitarbeiter." *Spiegel* 21 April 2008. 7 May 2008. http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/0,1518,548308,00.html.

In its early days, the company offered an attractive salary by Turkish standards, further enhanced by appealing benefits, but as wages remained stagnant in the face of inflation, the rate of pay gradually decreased in attractiveness and eventually, towards the end of the company, was rendered rather unattractive. For the first two years, the company prospered, and employees who had been with the company since the early days would later describe this period, coincidentally also the heyday period of the call center boom in Istanbul, as a kind of golden age of the company with high levels of employee satisfaction. Wages were always paid out in time, sometimes even early, there were additional bonuses to be earned and the benefits detailed in the contract, including the private health insurance, were delivered reliably.

After the move to the new location, conditions were not quite as rosy anymore, but the company continued to prosper and expand. In autumn 2006, the company experienced difficulties in paying out wages on time for the first time, but these were only temporary, and all employees later received an extra compensation payment. In the summer of 2007, the company reached its peak in terms of the number of employees at approximately 110, although at this time employee satisfaction was already no longer as high as it had used to be. In autumn 2007, things began to deteriorate very quickly. Wages were no longer paid out on time, and only in installments, mandatory overtime was imposed on agents, bonuses largely ceased to exist, and the other benefits detailed in the contract, such as private health insurance, were gradually phased out. At the same time, more and more agents decided to quit the company, and the number of employees quickly fell to approximately seventy-five by the end of 2007, and to about fifty two months later, when the end of the company was declared.

The difficulties had become impossible to overlook in the last two months of 2007, but the termination of the contract with the former client company at the end of the year and the simultaneous start of the cooperation with a new client company led to hopes that the company would be able to recover. But the new project turned out to be a disaster in almost all respects, the payment situation did not improve, agents continued to leave the company, and the call center eventually ceased to exist in the beginning of March 2008.

In summary, the company was founded during the early days of the call center boom in Istanbul, as part of the 'gold rush' to establish German call centers in Istanbul, it thrived and prospered during the boom years, struggled on for some time after the end of the 'golden age', and eventually came to an end at a time when Istanbul had ceased to be an especially attractive location for German call centers. The employees, who had to some extent been courted by several competing call centers only a few years ago, now found themselves having great difficulty finding a new job in the German call center sector, and a significant number either quit the German call center business altogether and found a job in a different field, took up a job in an outbound call center, started working in a Turkish call center, received offers to work in a call center in Ireland, or remained unemployed for several months. Some also turned to outbound operations when unable to find work in a German inbound call center.

Return Migration and the Call Center Employees

Most call center employees were not happy with their job, with many even saying that they "hated" it. There were complaints about almost everything, from the way small details were handled at the company to the food, the service buses, the computers, the pay, the delays in pay, and of course the work itself, particularly when having to deal with especially unfriendly customers. Another frequent cause of complaint was the lack of opportunities for advancement, contrary to what had been promised by the company. Complaints increased dramatically in the last few months of the company's existence, with complaints about the treatment of agents by the company management now coming to the forefront much more than before. More and more, there was sense that the management was being arrogant and too far removed from the needs of the ordinary agents to understand their difficulties and concerns, and that the agents themselves, the ones who did the actual 'work on the ground' and kept the call center operating were being regarded as nothing but expendable and replaceable cost factors.

Nevertheless, despite the frequent voicing of discontent among agents, relatively few quit the job prior to autumn 2007, when things turned sharply downhill and wage payouts became a chronic problem. Employee turnover is generally high in call centers, and this one was no exception to this rule, but up until autumn 2007, there was slow but constant growth in the number of employees, with an average of perhaps five agents quitting the job while around ten new people started each month. Many of those who were coming and going went from one call center to another, always in the hope that conditions would be better in the new place, but usually being disappointed in this hope, after a short time.

There was, however, also a significant number of employees who stayed with the company in the long run, over several years, and in one case even from the very beginning of the company until its very end. If job satisfaction was so low and the work itself so unattractive, one must wonder why so many employees still stayed with the company over such a long time, even in difficult times. One reason certainly was the good atmosphere among employees in the company, the 'team spirit', and the fact that some had been with the company for so long, had found friends there, that it had become somewhat like a family for them. Others were grateful to the company for having offered them a job at a very difficult time and having given them the opportunity to learn about a whole new world by introducing them to computers and the Internet. Some agents indeed had very little previous knowledge about computers or the Internet before they started working with the company, but computers then became a part of their lives, and they were grateful that the company gave them the opportunity to learn about these developments, and that the company hired them and thereby invested a considerable amount of trust in them, even though they had so little previous knowledge, and they felt obliged to be loyal to the company for this reason.

Those who had been there during the early days of the company also remembered the good times of the first years and hoped that things would get better and become like in those days again. Another argument for staying with the company was that many saw their knowledge of German as their only asset on the labor market, and did not see any alternative opportunities for themselves outside the call center field, and other call centers could be expected to be not all that different from this one. The general consensus was that it is difficult to find a 'good job' in Turkey, one that truly corresponds to a person's talents and level of education. For those who did not have much education and had had previous jobs

working in warehouses and similar places, the call center job was also attractive due to the fact that it did not require any physical labor. In addition, up until autumn 2007, the call center offered a secure job: As long as an employee kept to the rules (including the occasional lies to customers), there was no need to worry about being fired or losing the job. Also, the wages were quite attractive and competitive when the company first started out, but the failure to grant pay rises or even adjust pay to inflation resulted in the wages becoming unattractive and uncompetitive by the time the company was coming to its end.

Finally, people who had been working in the call center for a long time were to some extent living in a kind of 'call center cosmos', with the majority of their social environment consisting of fellow call center agents, in this call center and possibly also in others, including friends who had moved on from one call center to another, and with most of these friends also being Turks who had grown up in Germany. The varying shifts, including weekend work, made it difficult to have a social life outside the workplace environment, and some also complained that it was difficult to make friends with Turks who had not had the German experience, either because of 'cultural differences' or because of the prejudices of many Turks in Turkey against the *almancilar*. These people to some extent lost the perspective for a life outside the call center world.

The German call center sector in Turkey is distinguished from other offshore call center operations by its reliance on personnel who grew up in Germany and then moved to Turkey to work there, in contradiction to the usual direction of work migration. The vast majority of employees in Istanbul's German call centers are Turks who were born and/or raised in Germany. Since they, despite their Turkish origin, face many problems when coming to Turkey, with many Turks regarding them as "Germans" or *almanci*, while in Germany they were regarded as "Turks",

and in many cases they themselves feel neither completely "Turkish" nor "German", there are also a number of measures in place to help them find work and adjust to life in Turkey.

Persons of Turkish origin who acquired German citizenship but want to live and work in Turkey can obtain a so-called 'blue card' (previously 'pink card'), which entitles them to all the rights of Turkish citizens, including the right to work, with the exception of the right to vote. The German Federal Employment Office also offers an information brochure, in Turkish and German, containing information about the Turkish labor market and the country's social security system, as well as advice on how to organize the move to Turkey and find a job there. However, this brochure addresses only Turkish "returnees", not German citizens who might be interested in working in Turkey. Although information brochures for Germans wanting to work abroad are offered for almost all European and several non-European countries, Turkey is apparently not considered a sufficiently interesting destination for Germans without Turkish origins. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for unemployed persons of Turkish origin in Germany to be advised by the Federal Employment Office to 'return' to Turkey and find a job there, for example in one of the German call centers who are even advertising on the employment office's website. In any case, migration from Germany to Turkey in search of employment, whether it concerns Germans or Turks, is a very recent development that constitutes a complete reversal of the flow of migration from Turkey to Germany in the 1960s and 70s, although on a much smaller scale.

The call center employees in Istanbul certainly constitute a very heterogeneous group of people coming from diverse backgrounds. Apart from the distinction between those of German and those of Turkish origin, there also is a great variety of backgrounds and histories among the Turkish employees. Although

the majority grew up in Germany and moved to Turkey at some later date, there are also those who grew up in Turkey and spent only limited time in Germany, for example to attend university there for some years.

The vast majority of employees was born in Germany or moved there with their parents when they were still very young. They grew up speaking both languages, German and Turkish, went to school and sometimes university in Germany, in some cases worked in Germany for some time and eventually 'returned' to Turkey for various reasons and with different motivations. Most of them kept their Turkish citizenship, but there are also some who acquired German citizenship and lived and worked in Turkey with a 'blue card'.

Their families originate from various parts of Turkey, from Istanbul to the Southeast of the country, from the Black Sea and the Aegean Region to Central Anatolia. Some define themselves as Kurdish and grew up with three languages (Turkish, Kurdish, German), others come from Alevi families. Some are practicing Muslims who take their religion seriously, others do not want to get involved with religion at all. Some are very young, starting from 17, others are in their late 40s or 50s. Some come from very large families and grew up with many brothers and sisters, others come from small families with only one or two children. Some grew up in big cities, others in small villages. Some are married and in some cases have children, others are single, some live with their spouse in their own house, others are sharing a rented apartment with friends or living alone, while yet others live with their parents. Some are very short of money and constantly struggling to make ends meet at the end of the month, while others are quite well-off and in a few cases even say that they do not need to work for the money, but they prefer the job to sitting at home doing nothing. There is also a great variation in the level of education, with some not having any diplomas at all, while others hold university degrees in various

subjects ranging from German Literature and Translation to Engineering, Computer Sciences, Politics and Business Administration, and even subjects as unusual as the Korean Language and Literature, with some people even holding a Master's degree. It is a pity that so many intelligent and well-educated people do not appear to be able to find a better job that would be more suitable to their abilities than the call center, neither in Turkey nor in Germany.

In short, there is no 'typical call center employee' in terms of social and family background, education, age etc. Just about the only thing that all have in common is that they lived in Germany (or, in some cases, Austria or Switzerland) for some time in their lives and speak German fluently. This, however, excludes one group that is very visible in Germany, which consists of Turkish people, often living in Germany in the second or even third generation, who do not speak German properly and therefore in many cases leave school without a diploma, have great difficulty finding employment in Germany outside the Turkish community, have very little interaction with the German population, and generally remain at the margins of society, restricted to the Turkish community due to their lack of language skills. However, none of this applies to the call center population who came from Germany to Istanbul. They all speak both languages, and in some cases their German language skills are even better than their Turkish ones. Most of them completed school in Germany (or left the country before completing school and did so in Turkey), and they were involved with the German community in which they were living, had German friends and did not limit themselves to living in a closed Turkish community. So from the perspectives of education and integration, practically all employees in Istanbul's German call centers can look back upon a successful 'migration experience'.

There are huge differences to be observed in people's motivation for coming to Istanbul. Nevertheless, two groups can be loosely distinguished among those of Turkish origin, namely those who 'returned' to Turkey some time ago, meaning more than three years ago, and who are mainly located in the upper age range among the call center employees, i.e. from mid-30s upwards, and those who 'returned' more recently, within the past three years, and who are for the most part younger than the other group, i.e. ranging in age from 17 to mid-30s. This distinction also correlates to differences in how they learned about the German call centers in Istanbul and decided to apply for a job in one of them.

The first group consists mainly of the children of the first generation of guest workers who came to Germany from Turkey. They grew up in Germany and attended school there. Once the children had grown up and finished school, and the parents had reached retirement age, the parents often decided to return to Turkey. The children in many cases stayed in Germany for some time longer, but did not fully settle down there. Some were not successful in professional life, others were not happy in their private life in Germany and eventually found a Turkish spouse living in Turkey. Most of them decided to 'return' to Turkey for personal reasons, although the word *return* is not entirely suitable here, since most of them had lived in Germany for most of their lives and knew Turkey primarily from their parents' accounts and holiday stays. But they wanted to live closer to their families and especially their parents who were now growing old, so they decided to leave Germany and move to Turkey. Once they had arrived in Turkey, they started looking for a job that would allow them to use their German language skills and eventually learned about the German call centers in Istanbul. So they applied for a job at one of them.

However, this group also includes several who 'returned' to Turkey as children, at their parents decision rather than their own. The parents' motivation for returning to Turkey often was that they were nearing retirement age, or felt that they had earned enough money to start a new life in Turkey, or were tired of living in Germany, away from their home country, for various reasons. Some made use of the offer by the German state to refund all contributions paid into the German social security system to workers returning to Turkey and thus came back to Turkey as comparatively rich people who were able to buy a house or make other investments in Turkey. However, it must be remembered that this provision also entailed the loss of all claims and entitlements from the German state, including not only benefits such as retirement pay, but also the right of residence. Even those who were born in Germany and grew up there, but returned with their parents under this provision, would from that point on be treated as foreigners by the German authorities and would require a visa to even enter the country of their birth. Some of those whose parents made the decision to return under these conditions were later angry with their parents for having renounced any right for them to live and work in Germany once they grew up.

When those who returned under this provision had children still at school age, these children had to continue their schooling in Turkey. After graduating from school, and, in some cases, university – they often studied German Literature, Translation, or Teaching German as a Foreign Language at a university in Turkey – these people were looking for a job and hoped to be able to make use of their German language skills acquired as children. Some moved to Istanbul and started working in one of the German call centers here.

As a broad generalization, it can be said that the members of this group tend to be among those who worked for the company for several years and felt a strong

sense of loyalty to the company, leading them in many cases to stay on until the bitter end. They were among those who were grateful to the company for offering them a secure job in difficult times, for giving them the opportunity to learn about computers and the Internet, and for trusting them that they could make it even though they did not have any previous experience in the field. However, they also were the ones who frequently pointed out that payment and working conditions in the company used to be so much better, that they used to receive attractive and competitive wages, and receive them reliably and on time, at the time they started with the company, but that wages had not increased in the face of rising inflation, so that in effect they were earning less and less while at the same time the work was becoming harder and more demanding and conditions were growing more unpleasant. Probably a certain nostalgia for the early days of the company combined with the hope that things would one day be like that again, as well as the fact that they had found friends, and people with a similar background and similar experiences (Turks who had grown up in Germany), and a kind of 'family', at the call center contributed to their staying on until the very end.

The second group, on the other hand, comprises of those who came to Turkey from Germany more recently, during the past three years, and the narrative of their motivation is very different from that of the first group. They are generally younger, aged from17 to mid-30s, and their motivations for coming to Istanbul are much more varied. Family concerns and the parents and their decision to return to Turkey still play a role, as does the fact that some have a Turkish spouse or boyfriend/girlfriend living in Turkey, but economic and other reasons are of increasing importance. Many were either unemployed in Germany or had jobs they were unhappy with and saw little hope of finding better work in Germany, so they came to Istanbul for the employment opportunities. They usually knew about the

German call centers in Istanbul before coming to Turkey, either through friends or family in Istanbul, who were possibly working in one of the call centers themselves, or through the Turkish community in Germany, who, unlike the German population, appear to be very much aware of the fact that many German call centers are in fact located in Istanbul. Many in this group had applied for a job in the call center from Germany, before coming to Turkey.

Some also learned abut employment opportunities in Istanbul's German call centers from the German Employment Office: The office carries advertisements from call centers in Istanbul in its database, and unemployed young Turks were actively encouraged to apply for a job in Istanbul. This adds a new dimension to the phenomenon of the German call centers in Istanbul, because it proves that the German authorities were in fact aware of the development and even supporting it, even though the German population generally did not know about it. It also indicates that some in the German Employment Office may have seen the call centers in Istanbul as a welcome opportunity to encourage unemployed Turks in Germany to 'return' to Turkey. In any case, it is a very paradoxical situation to have German authorities sending people from Germany to Turkey to provide services for Germany by working in a call center in Istanbul.

Another factor that played a role in the decision of many young people to come to Turkey is the changing image and reputation of Istanbul. Today, Istanbul has a positive image of being a vibrant city, a 'cool' place to live, especially for young people, it offers job opportunities and better weather than in Germany, and one can party all the time, especially around Taksim, not just on Friday and Saturday night as in most German cities. Some young people also see their stay in Istanbul as a kind of adventure, and a chance to experience living in their parents' home country for a while, see how it goes, and then decide whether they want to

stay or not. They are not necessarily coming to Istanbul with the intention of staying in Turkey in the long run.

In general, the relation between these more recent arrivals to Turkey and generally younger people and their employer, the call center, was very different compared to the previous group. They tended not to see their work at the call center as a long-term engagement and generally did not feel any sense of loyalty towards their employer. They were frequently found on the forefront when it came to criticizing and complaining about the company, and many of them left after a few months with the company. Few stayed on until the end, and few felt the kind of attachment to the workplace that extended beyond a pure work relationship that many in the other group experienced.

Obviously, this distinction between two groups does not apply to the German citizens without Turkish background who came to Istanbul and started working in one of the call centers there. In general, they tend to have more in common with the second group, being relatively recent arrivals to Istanbul. In most cases, their main motivation for coming to Turkey lay in their marriage to or relationship with a Turkish man or woman. However, the ability for them to find work in the call centers in Istanbul of course facilitated their stay in Turkey. There are, however, also cases of Germans who were unemployed in Germany, for example because in Germany it is very difficult to find employment for people who are not so young anymore, then learned about the opportunities in Istanbul's call centers, and moved to Turkey to work there, so their motivation was primarily economic. These are however rare cases, they do not constitute a general development.

This classification is only a very general indication of what motivated people to move from Germany to Turkey and take up work in one of the call centers in Istanbul. There are many individuals who do not precisely fit into either of the two

groups. In general, it may be observed that for the majority of those who 'returned' to Turkey to work in the call centers here – in contrast to those who return after retirement, which constitutes a very different group of people – the main motivation was personal reasons, either because they wanted to be close to their family, especially parents who were growing old, or because they married someone in Turkey, or a combination of the two.

However, the more recent arrivals are increasingly made up of young people who cite economic concerns as reasons for their decision. For an increasing number of young arrivals, the wish to live in 'cool' Istanbul for a while also played a role in their decision. The knowledge that they would be able to find work in one of the call centers in Istanbul was a contributing factor especially in the more recent arrivals of young people coming at least in part for economic reasons. Also for those who came to Turkey in order to live with their spouse or boyfriend/girlfriend, the ability to find work in Istanbul probably contributed to their decision, but was most likely not the major determining factor. Finally, for those who moved to Turkey many years ago, the call centers obviously did not play a role in their decision, because they did not yet exist at that time, but they may have played a role in attracting these people to Istanbul even when their families may be living in a different part of Turkey.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has studied the German call center industry in Istanbul by means of participant observation carried out in one such call center over a period of nineteen months. The development of German call centers in Istanbul is a manifestation of the same logic of global capitalism that led to the large-scale establishment of call centers in India serving customers in the English-speaking world, primarily the US. The need for greater competitiveness and cost efficiency led companies to outsource their call center operations, and technological advancements that resulted in 'collapsing geographies', together with a political economic climate that allowed for the establishing of subsidiary companies abroad, enabled these outsourced call center operations to move offshore. In the case of Germany, Istanbul was the prime location for serving the German-speaking market due to the presence of large numbers of native or near-native speakers of Germans combined with wage levels that were considerably lower than in Germany.

The call center is a highly organized and structured work environment characterized by high degrees of surveillance and control, combined with strict performance targets and measurements. Call centers anywhere in the world are positioned along a spectrum ranging from target-driven mass communication measured primarily by quantitative performance indicators to more quality-oriented operations. While call centers in India are almost exclusively located near the extreme quantitative end of the spectrum, this is not necessarily true of Turkish call centers. Observations and experiences obtained through the participant observation have shown that changing the work processes in a call center from a more

qualitative orientation towards primarily quantitative targets has considerable, largely negative, effects on employees and on the way they relate to their work.

The German call center industry in Istanbul experienced a major boom in the years 2003 to 2005, but has been in decline since the second half of 2007. Nevertheless, although a number of companies were closed down, it seems that others have consolidated themselves and are here to stay, providing employment mainly to Turks who 'returned' from Germany to live in Istanbul.

A second focus of the thesis was placed not on the call centers themselves, but on the people working in these companies. Most of them are second-generation Turks who were born and/or raised in Germany, but came to live in Turkey at some point. Some moved to Turkey years ago, sometimes brought back by their parents while they were still children, others came to Turkey recently, in some cases after encouragement from the German Employment Office to apply for a job in a call center in Istanbul in the case of unemployment in Germany. However, the motivation to 'return' to Turkey, a term that for those who were born in Germany or arrived there as small children is not entirely suitable, appears to have been based primarily on family concerns rather than economic reasons in most cases, even though economic considerations, such as the availability of work in a call center, certainly did play a role in facilitating the 'return' decision in many cases. But the main factor for most was that close family members, usually parents or spouses, were living in Turkey. In many cases, the parents had been the first to return, while their children stayed in Germany for some time before following. In more recent and younger arrivals, there is a trend to emphasize economic motivations rather than family concerns, but the location of the family still plays a major role in most decisions.

This study was limited in scope to only one call center active in inbound operations, so no further insights could be gained into the particularities of outbound operations. Nevertheless it is to be expected that most findings regarding both the call center industry and its work organization, as well as the migration movements of those employed in these companies, would be confirmed by similar studies carried out in other call centers. The personal involvement of the researcher, who was working as an agent in the call center and was therefore directly affected by the issues discussed in this thesis to a similar extent as the agents that constituted the subject of observation may in some cases have made it difficult to maintain the necessary distance, although efforts were undertaken to diminish this effect.

It would be desirable for further research in the area of offshore call centers to look into the effect that state policies and incentives in both sending and receiving countries have on the establishment of such operations. The legal constitution of these companies and their ties and ownership in both countries, and possibly third countries, would also merit deeper research, especially considering indications that at least some of these companies appear to be set up in such a way that they cannot easily be held legally accountable in either country. It would also be interesting to survey customers in Germany (or other offshoring countries) to learn about their perspective on how they feel about offshoring in general, about receiving call center services from Turkey (or another offshoring destination), and about the way that companies attempt to conceal their offshoring activities from customers. On the subject of return migration, in-depth interviews with returnees from different walks of life would be useful to provide further insights. It would also be very interesting to hold interviews both with individuals who decided to return and others who decided to stay, and to compare and contrast their perspectives and motivations.

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