

## CALL AND SUPPORT CENTRE FOR EDUCATION: OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION FACULTY

Ekrem DEMİR\*

### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of call and support centre in open and distance education. Data was collected from structured interviews with call centre managers in Istanbul University (IU) Open and Distance Education Faculty (ODEF) as well as scanned texts on the websites and articles. It was conducted in the spring term of 2013-2014 academic year, and the directors such as process assistant and the call centre team leader of ODEF were engaged in the questionnaire to define the key duties and key performance indicators they had in managing their call centres, along with how a call centre was structured and functioned. The evaluation of answers of the directors of ODEF and the scanned text and the reports were used as data collection tool. According to results, likewise student affairs, a call centre in education serves as a solution centre which drives to resolve all sorts of matters of the learners. It is considered as a bridge between learners and teachers as well as learners and faculty. It was proved that without a call and support centre, the distant education process will fail.*

**Key Words:** Call Centres in the World, Open and Distance Education, History of Call Centre

### EĞİTİM-ÖĞRETİMDE ÇAĞRI VE DESTEK MERKEZİ: AÇIK VE UZAKTAN EĞİTİM FAKÜLTESİ

#### ÖZ

*Bu makalenin amacı, çağrı ve destek merkezinin açık ve uzaktan eğitimdeki rolünü araştırmaktır. İstanbul Üniversitesi (İÜ) Açık ve Uzaktan Eğitim Fakültesi'ndeki (AUZEF) çağrı merkezi yöneticileri ile gerçekleştirilen yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin yanı sıra web siteleri ile dergilerdeki metinler taranarak veri toplanmıştır. Çalışma, 2013-2014 akademik yılının bahar döneminde gerçekleştirilmiştir; çağrı merkezinin nasıl oluşturulduğu ve nasıl işlediğinin yanı sıra çağrı merkezini yönetirken göz önünde bulundurulmuş temel görevler ve temel performans belirteçlerini tanımlamak amacıyla süreç asistanı ve çağrı merkezi takım lideri gibi yöneticiler de ankete dâhil edilmiştir. Veri toplama aracı olarak da AUZEF yöneticilerinin verdiği yanıtların değerlendirmeleri, taranan makale ve raporlar kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar göstermiştir ki eğitim alanındaki bir çağrı merkezi, tıpkı öğrenci işleri gibi, öğrenenlerin yaşadığı her türlü probleme çözüm bulan bir çözüm merkezi görevini üstlenmektedir. Öğrenciler ile fakülte arasında olduğu kadar öğrenciler ile öğretmenler arasında da köprü vazifesi olarak görülmektedir. Çağrı ve destek merkezi olmaksızın uzaktan eğitim sürecinin başarısızlığa uğrayacağı görülmüştür.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dünyada Çağrı Merkezi, Açık ve Uzaktan Öğrenme, Çağrı Merkezi Tarihi

\* Yrd. Doç. Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi, Açık ve Uzaktan Eğitim Fakültesi, İstanbul-Türkiye, e-posta: ekremdemir100@gmail.com

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nearly the whole remote businesses are worried to deliver statistics, facts, figures as well as backing for their possible and prevailing clients. With the information technology, it is cost-effective to associate with such information supply services. To deliver information, a managed group of people spend most of their time giving services by telephone, which is a physical or virtual action inside an organization. It is generally called call centre which has substituted the need for face to face communication, facilitated information remotely over the phone or computer assisted technologies.

The progress of the call centre was essential for a corporation, which provided businesses to be run entirely by means of the telephone. Customers had interacted with their companies with face to face discussions before telephone was invented. After the use of telephone, it spread, companies financed the departments dedicated to answering and receiving customer inquiries. Therefore, the first structure of the modern call centre began to form and over the years its significance increased. The efficiency through call centre and delivery utensils for call centre workers gained emphasis towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The call centre segment is a relatively new occurrence in the world, which is more in use in developed countries. The majority of call centres in almost all countries are in-house centres with 67 %. Additionally, 75% of call centres work for the general or mass marketplace. The call centres in the world with 49 % focuses only on service. However, a considerable minority with 30 % focuses on sales and service. 81 % of the centres are part of a larger organization.

Moreover, 69 % frontline employees are mainly female in the world and the average duration of a call centre has a regular call handling time of 190 seconds. Most of the centres hire the people with at least a secondary education degree and 22 % of call centres depend on chiefly on a university-educated employees. Initial training for newly-hired employees usually takes 15- 21 days. In addition, mostly an on-going training provided for the employees to stay proficient and dynamic at work.

To bring solutions to the problems of the massive number of learners, it stands indispensable to have a call centre division which would ease the student-faculty relation more quickly, similar to the other call centres those work for the big private companies in the world. Call centre in education serves as solution centre like student affairs which aims to resolve all types of problems of the students. Call centre is more important for distance education which is an education model that facilitates students' learning process irrespective of the space and time (Turker, 2014, p. 77). The learners who has not interacted with teachers face to face, take the all varieties of succour through call centre division. Therefore, it turns as mediator between learners and teachers as well as learners and faculty.

In this study such questions as how call centres evolved; how call centres were structured and provided services in the world; why it became an vital division for the maintenance of distance education, with the case of IU ODEF, and how it functioned in ODEF will be answered.

In open and distance education, in a day without a call centre; the learners wouldn't contact with faculty instantaneously. The learners whose connection were cut would attempt to get in touch with the faculty throughout different channels, but would not find instant responses. Reliable source of information would be shut, particularly for those who study out of city or abroad. There would be a great tribulation in the flow of information with-

out call centre in ODEF. The distant learners would obtain the information from different and untrusted sources which would cause an internal chaos. The students' dissatisfaction would start to be reflected in social media and other web channels. These probabilities are the indicative the significance of a call centre for a distant education model. It would be impossible maintain education without a call centre which is "outer face of open and distance education faculty".

Data in this study was collected from scanned texts on the websites and articles as well as structured interviews with call centre managers. The questionnaire was directed at managers of Call Centre of ODEF to determine what they see as the key responsibilities and key performance indicators they had in managing their call centres, as well as how call centre was structured and functioned.

Moreover, a report on the international study of call centre management titled as "*The Global Call Center Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*" by Holman, Bat & Holtgrewe (2007), which included a research encompassed 2,500 call centres in 17 countries was used in this study to display how call centres in the world were organised. This report involved nearly all parts of the world such as Asia, Africa, South America, North America, and Europe, which supplied a comprehensive study on the operations of the call centres. The study encompassed such countries as Austria, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, UK, and the US with a total of 475,000 call centre employees.

With the evolution of technology, obtaining information and learning became easier regardless of space and time. Therefore, call centres play important roles within open and distance education methods for substantiation of its undertakings, that is to say, to offer materials for students and instruct and coach them without taking them to any physical atmosphere.

## 1.2. What is Call Centre?

Almost all private industries are concerned to provide information and support for their potential and existing customers. The evolution of information technology in the recent years, as well as the decreased costs of telecommunications have made it more and more economical to consolidate such information delivery utilities, which led to the emergence of groups that specialize in handling customer phone calls (Aksin, Armony, & Mehrotra, 2007, p. 665). Main of purpose these groups is to receive telephone calls by telephone. This group is operated by an establishment to manage inward product support or information requests from consumers. The place where this group operates is called call centre. A call centre is defined as "*a physical or virtual operation within an organization in which a managed group of people spend most of their time doing business by telephone, usually working in a computer-automated environment*" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 153). It replaced the need for face to face interaction with customers, enabled information remotely over the phone (Richardson et al., 2000, p. 358).

Call centres represent the 'space shrinking' feature of information and communications technologies (ICT) those leads new openings for a service "*in geographically remote areas to overcome the 'friction of distance', and to move relatively closer to central areas, thereby participating in new ways in trade*" (Richardson et al.,2000, p. 358).

### 1.3. History of Call Centres

After the invention of telephone, companies dealt with the newest technologies to upkeep their customers' prerequisites. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, customers interacted with their companies with face to face conversations. If customers had a question about any service, they had to go the company, which would take days and weeks. However this handicap was removed when the telephone was invented in 1876. The first telephones were sold in 1894, those were in pairs and only worked between each other. Once the use of telephone spread, switchboards were prepared to arrange multiple phone calls across the country (Maleshefski, 2011). Hence, if a customer owned a telephone, he had the chance to communicate with the company directly, and try to resolve the problems on the phone. In 1960s companies invested money in departments dedicated to answering and receiving customer inquiries (Maleshefski, 2011). For that reason, the basic structure of the modern call centre can be recognised in the mid-1960s. During those times the Private Automated Business Exchanges (PABX) were used to deal with large numbers of customers, which was defined as an automatic telephone switching system within a private enterprise (Rouse, 2005). With the discovery of Automatic call distributor (ACD) technology, the idea of a call centre became possible (Callcentrehelper, 2011), a system that hand out incoming calls to a specific group of terminals used by agents (Janssen, n.d).

In 1962, the America Bell Telephone system introduced a computer that could dial numbers with just tones rather than rotary dialling. This led the way for a computer to be able to recognise and respond to sounds (IVRS, n.d.). In 1972, Rockwell International planned and established the world's first customer designed ACD - the Rockwell Galaxy – for Eastern Airlines in USA.

In 1979 the Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) was familiarized to the world. It was defined as a technology in which one *“uses a touch-tone telephone to interact with a database to gather information from or enter data into the database”* (IVRS, n.d.). Late in the 1970s, IVRS technologies were limited to small vocabularies, and it was costly. However, in 1980s, via IVRS, new technologies such as the complex and difficult phone trees expanded. In the late '80s and the early '90s outsourcing became one of customer service strategy (Maleshefski, 2011).

The progress of the call centre was momentous piece of a company that was designed to construct technology to enable the call/communication process, to support businesses to be run entirely by means of the telephone. The United Kingdom (UK) technology industry prospered during this time since UK enterprises sustained to expand upon the early call centre technologies. The call centre extended from an 'inbound' customer service focus to integrate proactive technologies during the 1990s. The productivity through call centre blending and support tools for call centre agents gained emphasis towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rostrvm, n.d).

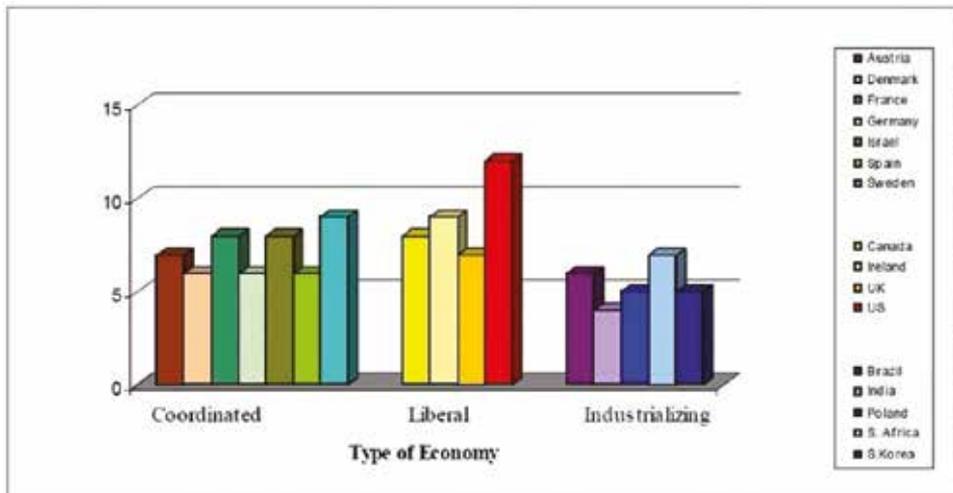
### 1.4. General Preferences in Call Centre Industry

There are a lot of call centre trends depending on the vision of the sectors and companies as well as their technological structures. (1) Direct face-to-face interaction with customers, clients, service users (and even patients) was increasingly being replaced with remote contact via a call centre or contact centre. (2) Contact based on voice is gradually being combined with other forms of communication, particularly with internet or email-based

communication (3) Besides, governments are gradually looking at call centres as a means of delivering public services as well as providing access to public information (4) Call centre services are increasingly being repositioned to distinct offices or facilities, “which may be adjacent to the head office of the organisation but may equally be in another region, another country or even another continent.” (5) Call centres are increasingly being outsourced to service providers “specialising in call centre services who may operate a range of services for different customers and clients under the same roof”. (6) There are also some a growth of homeworkers as virtual call centre operators though this remains a minority practice (Hedge, 2012, p. 57).

**1.5. Call Centres on the Globe**

The call centre sector is a rather new phenomenon in the world as it is seen in Figure 1 (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p.4). This sector is more in use in developed countries considering the fact of the call centre technologies as well as advanced information systems. However, countries around the world are heading to use new regulatory and technological changes.



**Figure 1: Age of Typical Call Center (Years)**

The majority of call centres in just about all states are in-house centres, with India providing the exception to the rule. 67 % of call centres are in-house centres, while 33 % are subcontractors (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p.5). Moreover, generally, 75% of centres work for the general or mass market. About 25% of call centres serve for business customers, for instance, business to business centres (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p.7). The largest percentage of call centres in the study with 49 % only focuses on service. On the other hand, a considerable minority with 30 % focuses on sales and service, while a minority of 21 % concentrate only on the sales. Thus, many call centres appear to have embraced a profit centre approach to management (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007,

pp.7-8), they are aimed to make service transfer more effectual. Most of the call centres are part of larger corporations as well, rather than small individually owned firms. 81 % of the centres are part of a larger organization, with a range of 66% to 98% among countries (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 9).

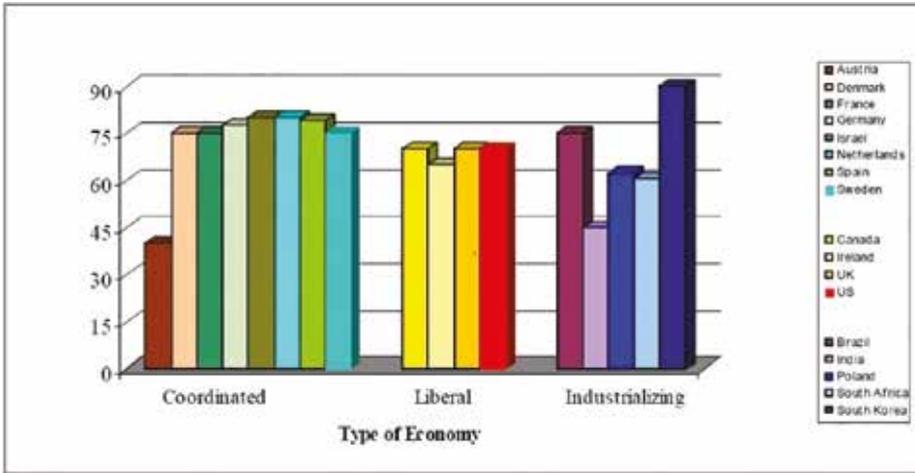


Figure 2: Percent of the Workforce that is Female

One of the other common feature across all of the countries in the study is that with 69 % the frontline employees for the most part is female (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 9). This is because women are thought to be trusted more than man as well as they have a nonthreatening customer service demeanour and voice.

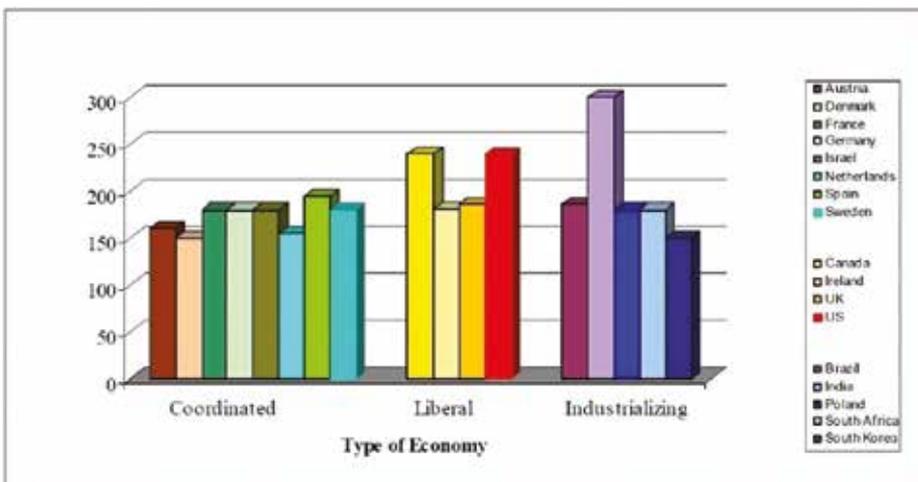
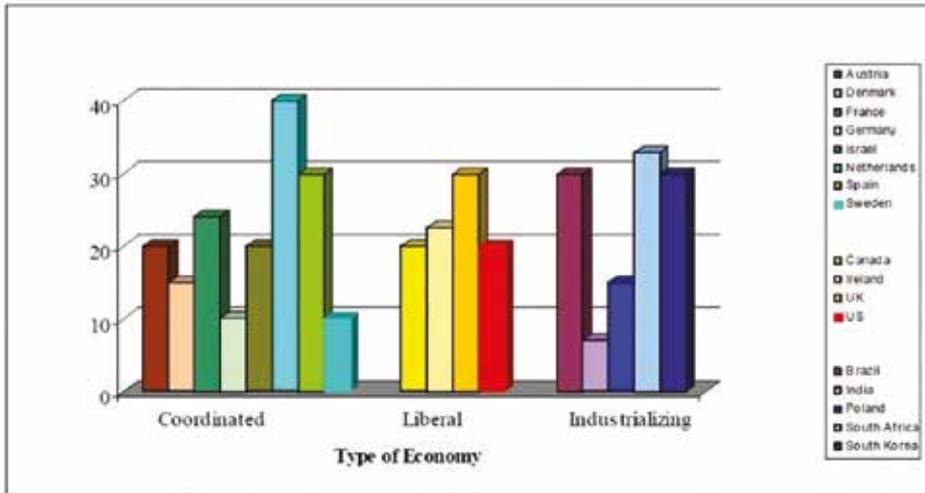


Figure 3: Call Handling Time (Seconds) of Typical Call Center

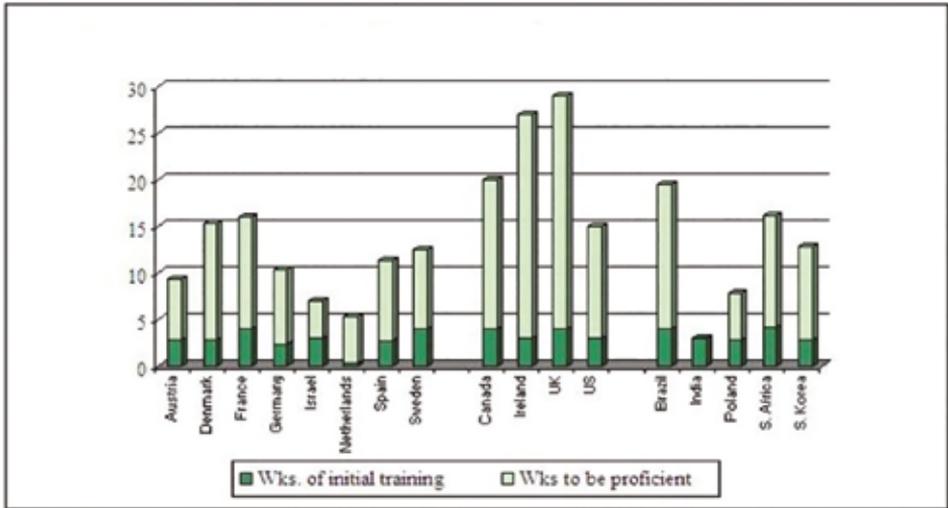
The average duration of a call centre in the globe has a regular call handling time of 190 seconds. Unexpectedly, there is little variation in this number across the variety of countries in the study (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 10).



**Figure 4:** Selection Rate of Typical Call Center (Percent of Applicant Hired)

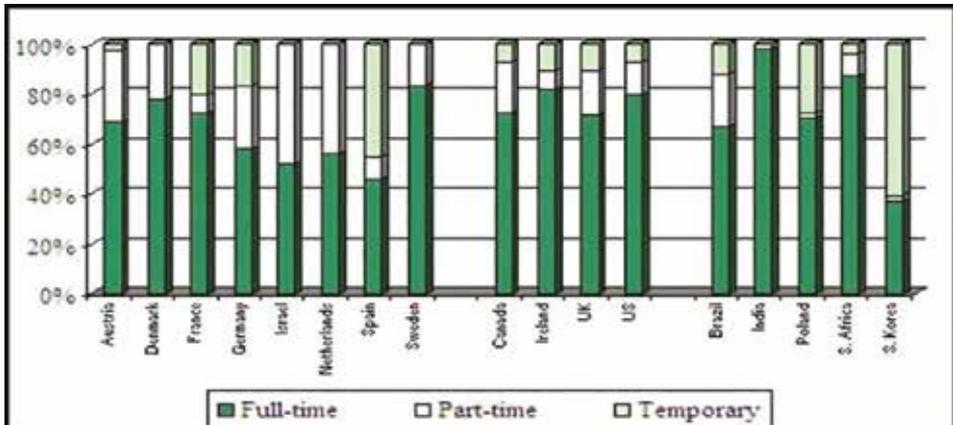
According to the report, while call centre employment has the image of being low-skilled clerical work, most of the centres hire people with at least a secondary education degree. 22 % of call centres rely chiefly on a university-educated employees. However, countries differ considerably in this regard due to the differences in national education systems. In India, for example, over 70% of centres rely mainly on college graduates, because the college education is a three-year process. France relies on personnel with 2 years of schooling at university level with over 60% of centres. The other countries such as Spain, Sweden, Ireland, and the UK have between 28% and 39% of centres that largely use university educated staffs with three-year degrees. In the United States (US), 20 % of call centres mostly use employees with a 4-year university degree, and 12 % at least two years of college. Other countries employ less university-educated individuals (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 12).

Newly-hired personnel usually take 15- 21 days of initial training. Away from initial training, it takes an average of three months for new employees to be proficient at their jobs. Managers conveyed that agents take 8 weeks to become proficient in coordinated economies, 16 weeks in liberal market economies, and 12 weeks in industrializing economies. This dissimilarity stems from several factors such as differences in the formal educational level of newly hired personnel;



**Figure 5:** Initial Training and Time to Become Proficient (Weeks)

differences in the facilities or technical system as well as in management strategies regarding service quality etc. (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 13). The employees also in need of on-going training in order to stay proficient and entirely dynamic at work. Experienced agents take an average of 6 days of training per year in a typical call centre (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 14).



**Figure 6:** Distribution of Full-time, Part-time and Temporary Employees

71% of employees are full-time, 17% are part-time, and 12% are temporary personnel in the average call centre. Indian call centre has the highest percentage of full-time agents

with the average of 97%, followed by South Africa with the average of 88%. Coordinated economies employ temporary or part-time workers with the average of 33%, thereby make the greatest use of non-standard work arrangements. Large users of part-time workers include call centers in Israel with the average of 48% and the Netherlands with the average of 46%, while the Spanish call centre has with the average of 44% (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, p. 14). In most of the countries, labour laws necessitate that part-time personnel get the same salary as full-time personnel (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007, pp. 14-15).

### **1.6. How Does ODEF Call Centre function?**

In order to bring a solutions to the questions of the massive number of students ODEF resolved to found a call centre on 15 July 2013 which would ease the student-faculty relation. It was defined by process assistant of ODEF as *“a solution centre which aims to resolve all kinds of problems of the students. Open and distance education is method that facilitates students’ learning process irrespective of the space and time. ODEF call centre aimed to resolve student’s problems distantly, without bringing them to ODEF’s physical environment, which is parallel to our mission and vision.”* (Ömer Ocak, Personal communication, July 20, 2014). ODEF call centre team leader defined that *“ODEF, with its staff, is call centre that pays attention to its students’ as well as potential student’s problems, information requests, suggestions and complaints, and transmits them to the required units”* (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

Listening to student’s problems or protests, ODEF inclined to give guidance or solutions merely by a call.

ODEF students, no matter where they are, can take all kinds of services on week days during the hours between 08:30 - 22:30 (Ömer Ocak, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

The learners had occasion to get answers from ODEF on anywhere in the world on week-days. Thus, this initiative made the faculty more eligible for learners.

ODEF has aimed to give the best services for students. Therefore, it arranged the best shifts for employees to get maximum gain, and satisfaction.

ODEF call centre staffs are full time workers who work three-shift between the hours 8.30 - 17.30, 9.00- 18.00 and 13.30-22.30 (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

With tree-shift working plan, the needs of employees were taken into consideration, and also the availability of the services were extended. Moreover, with this way the call centre managers was able to deliver students’ needs “no matter where they are...”

To evaluate the best services are provided for the students, ODEF has determined some methods. Mr. Ocak says that *“the success of call centre performance is determined by the rate of solutions of the problems and demands of students”* (Ömer Ocak, Personal communication, July 20, 2014). In addition to that, according to the team captain of the ODEF, call centre makes daily, weekly and monthly reports. The staff work time and break time are monitored periodically to prepare staff productivity reports. According to these reports, the deficiencies and weaknesses are identified, and required improvements are provided (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

ODEF Call Centre serves as “the outer face of the faculty”. Therefore it has an imperative function within open and distance education practises.

Because we render service as an open education, many of our students reside outside of the province. Therefore they prefer to receive services by telephone rather than face to face.

That's why ODEF call centre is significant for student satisfaction (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).



**Figure 7:** Management Scheme

In Figure 7, it is displayed that the all process of ODEF call centre are under the responsibility of the process coordinator. The team leader operates and when necessary he leads the personnel. ODEF call management system resolved to operate within the framework of ODEF Stakeholder Satisfaction and Notification Management Standards as well as work analyses.

In addition, professional working and time scheme are applied to the call centre employees who are constantly in contact with the students. The call centre employees are subjected to a constant motivation and theoretical training on problem-solving improvement capacities (Ömer Ocak, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

Like the most of the other call centre in the world ODEF, call centre personnel have minimum a high school degree.

When we recruited labour, we required him/her a one-year experience, that is to say, the candidate should have been at least one year experienced in any call centre in the past (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

Besides, when ODEF has recruited a labour, it looks for a neat diction, as well as patience. 60 % of the employees in ODEF are female. The number of female workers are more than male workers.

In a distant meeting with a student, impatient students calm down with female voices. In a calm meeting more satisfactory results would be provided for a specific issue (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

The average age in ODEF call centre is between 22-24 years. Because, being young in a dynamic labour is an imperative element. *“The staff talk with students remotely, not face to face, only by phone call. Therefore we need a dynamic team for a dynamic work, for the best results”* (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).

In addition to one year experience in another call centre, the newly accepted workers take initial training for 2 weeks. *“The first week composed of orientation program and the*

*second week is consisted of practical tutorials with a skilled old personnel” (M.A. Akbaş, Personal communication, July 20, 2014).*

Total Number of Incoming Calls	12574
Number of Incoming Calls Answered	7706
Number of missed calls	4868
Call Coverage Ratio / Service Level (%)	61,28%
Number of Incoming Calls (hold)	876
Outgoing Total Number of Calls	210
Outgoing Number of Calls Answered	109
Total Inbound Call Duration (Hold + Talk) minutes.	13.05:35:15
Inbound Call Total (Hold) minutes.	07:57:44
Inbound Call Total Talk minutes.	12.21:37:31
Total Incoming Calls on users (Ring) minutes.	12:59:38
Total Inbound Call Time (Talk+Ring+ACW+Hold) minutes.	29.01:52:33
Average Incoming Call Duration (Hold + Talk) minutes.	00:01:05.5000000
Average Talk Time Inbound Call (Talk) minutes.	00:01:03.5000000
Incoming Calls Average Standby minutes	00:00:02
Average Outgoing Call Duration minutes	00:00:51

**Figure 8:** ODEF August Call Report

The content of the calls changes according to academic calendar. Therefore, the number, frequency and duration of the calls changes accordingly.

In August the number of calls are not as much as in September. Because during this time, students ask questions about general, as well as technical issues. However, in September, the number, the frequency, and the duration of the calls increases.

Total Number of Incoming Calls	40477
Number of Incoming Calls Answered	19617
Number of missed calls	20860
Call Coverage Ratio / Service Level (%)	48,46%
Number of Incoming Calls (hold)	1683
Outgoing Total Number of Calls	818
Outgoing Number of Calls Answered	269
Total Inbound Call Duration (Hold + Talk) minutes.	77.03:53:28
Inbound Call Total (Hold) minutes.	1.12:47:58
Inbound Call Total Talk minutes.	75.15:05:30
Total Incoming Calls on users (Ring) minutes.	2.10:53:49
Total Inbound Call Time (Talk+Ring+ACW+Hold) minutes.	79.15:49:27
Average Incoming Call Duration (Hold + Talk) minutes.	00:02:15
Average Talk Time Inbound Call (Talk) minutes.	00:02:12.5000000
Incoming Calls Average Standby minutes	00:00:03
Average Outgoing Call Duration minutes	00:00:53

**Figure 9:** ODEF September Call Report

It can be seen that total number of incoming calls, the number of incoming calls answered, the number of missed calls, call coverage ratio / service level (%), the number of incoming calls (hold), outgoing total number of calls, outgoing number of calls answered are all changed. During this period, new students enrolled to the faculty, therefore the call centre was more active.

The Total Number of Incoming Calls	203894
The Number of Incoming Call Answered	145330
The Number of Missed Calls	58564
Call Coverage Ratio / Service Level (%)	71,27%

**Figure 10:** ODEF Annual Call Report

In the light of ODEF Stakeholder Satisfaction and Notification Management Standards as well as work analyses, ODEF call centre has a very significant input for educational course of the faculty, within the framework of its mission and vision. Despite, it has only 30.000 students, it has taken 203.894 appeals by call, dealt with 145.330 issues during 2013-2014 academic calendar. Once we witness ODEF call centre's conduction, organization, and mission, we realise how vital it is for distance education, and its maintenance. ODEF call centre were adopted only to increase service level of the ODEF, which is in the long run aimed to provide the best e-learning and its processes of the students.

## 2. CONCLUSION

It came to be easier and efficacious to supply information to customers for a company after the progress information technology. Therefore, in an association, an accomplished set of people were arranged and trained to give services on the phone which has replaced the necessity for face to face interaction, and provided information distantly over the phone or computer assisted technologies. At first it evolved aftermath telephone was invented. After the use of telephone blowout, corporations funded the subdivisions those devoted to answering and receiving customer demands. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the call centre in companies increased its importance.

The call centre sector is a fairly new happening in the world. It is more habituated in developed countries. Most of frontline employees are largely female in the world because they are thought to be more trustful and kind. Most of the call centres employ the people with at least a secondary education degree. Newly-hired employees ordinarily takes initial training for 15- 21 days. In addition, mostly an on-going training provided for the employees to stay proficient and dynamic at work.

It is requisite to have a call centre division which enables the student-faculty contact. Therefore, similar to student affairs, call centre in education serves as solution centre which purposes to resolve all sorts of matters of the learners. Call centre is more significant for distance education model as educate students regardless of the space and time. The learners who has not interacted with teachers face to face, take the all assistances and services through call centre segment. Hence, it is a bridge between learners and teachers as well as learners and faculty. The learners wouldn't contact with faculty instantly without call centre. The learners, once lost the link with the faculty would not find reliable source of information. Therefore, there would be a countless trouble in the flow of information without call centre. It would be unbearable instruct learners without a call centre. These all are indicative of the importance of the growth in technology, which provides different modes for call centres, those play important role within open and distance education method for verification of its deeds, to instruct and coach them without taking them to any physical atmosphere

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