Workload, Burnout, and Job Satisfaction Among Call Center Employees

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ABSTRACT

As call centers create more employment opportunities within the service industry, understanding the effect of call center work on employees becomes crucial. Electronic performance measurement, high workload, low job control and constant human interaction make call center employees more prone to burnout and job dissatisfaction than any other sector employees. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of workload and burnout on job satisfaction of call center employees. 150 call center employees of a commercial bank answered the questionnaire. Regression analysis revealed that emotional burnout was the most important predictor of job satisfaction. Results were documented and further suggestions were made.

Keywords: *Job Satisfaction, Burnout, Call Center Employees.*

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ÖZET

Çağrı Merkezi Çalışanlarının İşyükü, Tükenmişlik ve İş Tatmini Düzeyleri

Çağrı merkezleri hizmet sektöründe istihdam açısından her geçen gün daha fazla fırsatlar sunarken, bu sektörü anlamak daha da önemli ve anlamlı hale gelmektedir. Elektronik performans ölçümü, aşırı işyükü, iş üzerinde düşük kontrol ve sürekli karşılıklı iletişim özellikleri çağrı merkezi çalışanlarını diğer sektör çalışanlarına oranla daha fazla tükenmeye ve iş tatminsizliğine açık hale getirmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı işyükü ve tükenmenin iş tatmini üzerindeki etkisini saptamaktır. Bu amaçla bir ticari bankanın 150 çalışanı üzerinde bir çalışma gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma sonucuna göre duygusal tükenme iş tatmininin en önemli öncülü olarak bulunmuştur. Çalışmada sonuç ve önerilere yer verilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İş Tatmini, Tükenmişlik, Çağrı Merkezi Çalışanları.*

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that customer-oriented operations are the main weapons of organizations in the competitive environment and the call centers are established for serving the customers efficiently. Call center is defined as 'a dedicated operation in which computer-utilizing employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed by an automatic call distribution (ACD) system, or perhaps by a predictive dialing system.' (Taylor & Bain, 1999:102).

As the affordability of advanced communications and computer technology (Holland, Hunt & Yamamoto, 1997) increases, more companies set up call centers for handling customers' complaints, answering questions, marketing products and providing information about services. As call centers turn into primary communication channel for companies and for customers, their role in gaining customers' satisfaction and commitment increases too (Zapf et al., 2003:312). In tough competition, Turkish companies also set up call centers and continue to set up new ones. As a result, call centers are a growing industry within the Turkey's service sector which should not be ignored.

However, this customer-oriented operation consists not only a technological side but also a human side (Koole & Mandelbaum, 2002) that has to be managed carefully. Generally, the key determinant of the success or the failure of call center is the human side because labor represents 75% of the operational expenditure for a call center (Echchakoui & Naji, 2013:576)

Although call centers attracted academic attention in other countries (Kinnie et al., 2000; Bain et al., 2002; Taylor & Bain, 2004; Rosenthal, 2004; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006), we lack empirical studies on call centers in Turkey. Given the growing number of call center employees, working conditions of call centers in Turkey present a fertile ground for studying call center work and employees' reactions towards it.

Stressors in call center work (Taylor & Bain, 1999; Wallace, Eagleson, & Waldersee, 2000) make employees more prone to burnout and dissatisfaction is also wide-spread among call center agents. This study is an attempt to reveal the influential factors on job satisfaction level of call center agents in Turkey by drawing findings from a field work in a commercial bank's call center.

2.CALL CENTERS AND THEIR EXPANSION IN TURKEY

Since the mid-1990's, call centers have provided the most dynamic area of growth in white-collar employment internationally (Data Monitor, 1989, 1990 cited in Bain et al., 2002:173). Call centers are growing at an astonishing 40% per year globally (Lewig & Dollard, 2003:367). Not only the number of call centers and call center employees increase, but also their call volumes increase in accelerating ratios. On average, call volumes of call centers are growing approximately 30-35% per annum (Bagnara, 2000).

Parallel to the global developments in the last two decades, the number of call centers in Turkey has increased dramatically and more employment opportunities have been provided by call centers, not only in big developed cities but also in less developed or developing remote cities like Diyarbakır, Erzurum, Erzincan, Malatya and Afyon.

Turkey's government extended the economic incentives given to call center until 2018 as they expect the number of employees exceeds 100.000 in five years (http://ekonomi.milliyet.com.tr/cagri-merkezlerine-2018-e kadar/ekonomi/detay/1748652/default.htm). This reality can be seen in the declarations of other governmental bodies too. The Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Investment Support and Promotion Agency promotes call center sector to foreign investors as an attractive area to invest with this sentence: "Call center sector in Turkey has great potential for development in the years ahead thanks to the availability of it's educated, qualified and young labor force, the high number of universities and schools providing vocational education…".

In 2010, call centers employed approximately 50,000 persons in Turkey. According to a recent survey conducted by Call Center Association in Turkey (2012), a number of call center employees by the end of 2013 predicted to exceed 80.000 with an annual increase of %20. Leading sectors are telecommunication (%31,5) and finance/insurance (%23,5) (http://cagrimerkezleridernegi.org/index.php/sektorumuz/raporlar/ cagri-merkezi-sektor-arastirma-sonuclari/).

As can be seen from the expansion of call centers and predictions regarding the figures, there is enough evidence to see call centers as a panacea for unemployment, especially for young unemployment. The figures regarding the age dispersion of call center employees approve this situation. According to the recent report of Call Center Association of Turkey, %43 of the call center agents are between 18 and 24 ages while the other %40 is between 25- 29 (2012, http://cagrimerkezleridernegi. org/index.php/sektorumuz/raporlar/cagri-merkezi-sektor-arastirma- sonuclari/).

However, the call center's expansion also brings other concerns to the center stage because of their labour intensive nature. As mentioned by Bagnara (2000): "Crucial point is not the number of people in call centers, but the fact that people are critical to their success."

Given this fact, there are growing concerns regarding the high turnover and widespread job dissatisfaction among call center employees. To understand the nature of call center work which creates stress and job dissatisfaction, first, the call center work features that create burnout

were reviewed and then the relationships between workload, burnout and job satisfaction will be addressed.

Nature of Call Center Work, Burnout and Job Satisfaction Among Call Center Employees

Call center employees can be depicted as the front-line employees who have direct contact with the customer. Thus they directly influence the quality of the service received by customers and the performance of the business (Frenkel et al., 1999: 7) Call center agents at the same time try to answer as many calls as possible with time pressure (Lewig & Dollard, 2003: 367). These time pressures generally accompanied by unreasonable and increasing performance targets. In a typical call center, service encounters monitored frequently with electronic performance measurement devices and taped. Repetitive, continuous human interaction accompanied with strict performance targets regarding call volume cause stress among employees (Wallace, Eagleson, & Waldersee, 2000) which will eventually lead to turnover (Bagnara & Marti,2001). Because of these features, Taylor and Bain (1999:115) mentioned call center as a new "development in the Taylorization of white-collar work".

Academic attention focused on the emotional and psychological demands of this type of work in order to optimize the effectiveness and well-being of these employees and decrease the costs of burnout and turnover (Lewig & Dollard, 2003: 367). In this context, burnout and job satisfaction were among the most studied variables in the literature (Visser & Rothman, 2008; Lewig & Dollard, 2003; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004).

Job satisfaction is particularly important in the service industry since it can affect the quality of service delivered to customers and may affect customer retention (Lawler, 2005 cited in Zeytinoğlu et al., 2013). If employees are satisfied with their jobs, this contributes to their quality of work and life and affects their organization's success (Zeytinoğlu et al., 2013: 125-126). Job satisfaction increases employee retention and reduces absenteeism.

Burnout can be seen as a chronic affective response syndrome, a type of stress that develops in response to stressful working conditions (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993 cited in Visser & Rothman, 2008:79). Burnout is

frequently seen among employees whose work includes constant and uncontrollable human interaction and leads to substantial direct and indirect business operating costs (Maslach, Jackson, 1986). Call center employees' job is highly relational so burnout is common among these employees.

Job characteristics that contribute to burnout can be listed as workload, time pressure, lack of social support, and lack of control and autonomy. Call center work includes all of these job characteristics in its nature in varying degrees. The impact of high work demand, lack of autonomy and repetitiveness result in burnout (Holman, 2002) and low satisfaction among the call center employees.

In addition to the job-related factors, personal factors like age can affect burnout levels. According to findings, level of burnout found to be higher among younger employees (Maslach& Leiter, 1997, Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001: 413). Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) revealed that workload and lack of control contribute to burnout.

The consequences of burnout are potentially dangerous for the employees. Burnout among employees not only effect the productivity of employees but deteriorates the quality of service (Singh, 2000). Burnout among call center agents, therefore, had to study. According to Maslach, there are three separate but often interrelated responses to workplace stress: "emotional exhaustion", "depersonalisation", and "reduced personal accomplishment" (Maslach, 1998: 69).

Very little research conducted on call centers operating in Turkey. Work overload, burnout is the stressors investigated in the context of this study and their effect on job satisfaction tried to be revealed. Maslach's typology provides a useful tool for understanding the experiences of call center agents (Barnes, 2004: 4).

The aim of our study was to investigate the effect of burnout and workload on job satisfaction of call agents in a call center. The following questions were posed: 1) Are there any difference between male and female call agents in their experience of burnout, job satisfaction and in workload? 2) Could the regressors (workload and burnout) explain a significant level of variability in job satisfaction?

3. METHOD

3.1.Survey sample

The study surveyed the call center employees of a commercial bank. Contact with the research site established with the researchers' personal contact. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 110 were returned which represented a response rate of 73,3%. However, among the returned questionnaires 101 questionnaires were usable. Call center agents of this bank were predominantly female (78%). Gender dispersion can be evaluated as an indicator of the feminization of call center work. All of the employees were employed on a full-time basis in this bank.

Table 1: Gender Dispersion

	Frequency	*%*
Male	79	78
Female	22	22
Total	**101**	**100**

3.2.Measures

Burnout: 22 items of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was used. MBI has three component: "emotional exhaustion", "personal accomplishment" and "depersonalization". Emotional exhaustion is feelings of being emotionally extended and depleted of one's resources. The emotional exhaustion subscale consisted of eight items. Sample items from this scale are ''I feel emotionally drained from my work'' and ''I feel frustrated by my job''. The Personal accomplishment subscale consists eight items, describing feelings of competence and success about one's achievements. Reduced personal accomplishment described as the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively. Employees may feel unhappy about themselves and dissatisfied with their accomplishments on the job (Maslach, Jackson,1986: 1). Personal accomplishment scale was reverse scored. Another aspect of the burnout syndrome is depersonalization. Five items on depersonalization subscale describe unfeeling and impersonal responses to co-workers or recipients of services. Items were rated from 1=never to 5=always. The higher mean scores of the Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishment, and Depersonalization subscales correspond to greater degrees of burnout. Cronbach a for the Burnout scale was 0,8517.

Job satisfaction: Job satisfaction of employees was measured using a 5 item scale from A.H.Brayfield and H.F.Rothe (1951). Respondents were asked to indicate how often each statement occurs. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1= "less than once per month or never" to 5= "several times per day".

Table 2: Scales Used In The Study

Scales	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items	Range
Emotional Exhaustion	0,90	8	1-5
Personal Accomplishment	0,67	8	1-5
Depersonalization	0,63	5	1-5
Workload	0,77	5	1-5
Job Satisfaction	0,90	5	1-5

3.3. Results

The mean scores for the scales were documented in the table below.

Table 3: Mean Scores of Scales

		n	Mean	SD
SCALES				
BURNOUT		101	1,80	0,50
	Emotional Exhaustion	101	2,30	0,80
	Personal Accomplishment	101	1,26	0,46
	Depersonalization	101	1,85	0,66
Workload		101	**3,52**	1,03
Job Satisfaction		101	2,84	0,81

When the mean score for the scales were investigated, it can be seen that workload among call center employees has the highest score (M=3,52). Job satisfaction level of call center employees is not high, and burnout has the lowest mean score.

For determining whether there is any gender difference in the experience of burnout, job satisfaction and in workload, an independent t test was done.

Table 4: Independent T-Test Results

	Workload		Job Satisfaction		Emotional Exhaustion		Personal Accomplishment		Depersonalization	
	t=0,32,p=,743		t=-2,32,p=,025*		t=2,15,p=,030*		t=0,893,p=,132		t=,895,p=,135	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Female	3,54	1,05	2,75	0,84	2,39	0,80	1,27	0,42	1,86	0,67
Male	3,46	0,99	3,15	0,60	1,98	0,73	1,25	0,60	1,83	0,63

*p<0,05

The reported emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction among female call center agents were significantly higher than male call center agents. It can be said that female call agents are more prone to emotional exhaustion. All effects were reported at a 0,05 level of significance.

To test the effect of workload and burnout on job satisfaction, data were analyzed by regression. Regressors used in the model are workload, three components of burnout (emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment, and depersonalization).

Table 5: Regression analysis

Model	R^2	Adj. R^2	F-value	Significance	Dependent variable	Standardized Beta	p-value
1	0,051	0,041	4,85	0,030	Constant		0,000
					Workload	0,226	0,030
2	0,56	0,54	28,05	0,000	Constant		0,000
					Workload	-0,048	0,518
					Emotional Exhaustion	-0,644	0,000
					Personal Accomplishment	-0,119	0,119
					Depersonalization	-0,076	0,388

Model 1 is significant at the 5% level and with a low adjusted R^2, indicating the regression is a very poor fit. So it appears that the model could be improved by adding the other independent variables used in the study. Model 2 is significant at the 1% level and could explain %54 of the variance

in job satisfaction. The inclusion of the three aspects of burnout 'Emotional Exhaustion', 'Personal Accomplishment' and 'Depersonalization improves the predicting power of the model. Among three aspects of burnout, only emotional exhaustion ($p<0,000$) have a strong predictive power on Job Satisfaction. The inclusion of the variables 'Personal Accomplishment' and 'Depersonalization' do not have predictive value.

4.CONCLUSION

Shedding light to influential factors on job satisfaction of call center employees was the objective of this study. According to results, emotional exhaustion explained more than %50 of job satisfaction. So we can conclude that burnout -especially emotional exhaustion- is important for satisfying call center employees which in turn effect the retention rate of these employees. The low turnover rate in the call center means lowering cost and satisfied call center agents equal to better services to customers.

Workload couldn't explain the variability of job satisfaction. The reason of this could be the social support provided by the company. This bank organizes regular events for call center agents. As a result, agents don't perceive workload as the main concern. We think that further studies take HRM practices into account and their effect on job satisfaction of call center agents. Perceived support of the company should be evaluated in call center context.

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