In spite of everything:
Professionalism as mass customised bureaucratic production in a Danish government call centre

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a study of the consequences of the transformation of part of the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (TAX) from a traditional white-collar public administration into a call centre. TAX participated in the study using ‘Amica’ testing methods aimed at improving the psychosocial working environment in call centres. The results showed a surprising and rapid development from a situation where employees reported a stressful and unsatisfying work environment to one where the organisation had taken a giant stride towards improving the work environment, involving a major shift in leadership and employee identity. The paper discusses this change from a traditional white-collar model to a ‘mass customised bureaucratic’ production one in a New Public Management setting that focuses on cost reduction, customer orientation, performance monitoring and documentation.

Introduction
Call centres have acted as a pivotal point in the international economic development of the last decade, forming part of a trend towards increasing globalisation and embodying the digital revolution that has contributed to a transformation in worldwide economic conditions (Rainnie et al., 2008). Technological innovation has reframed the terms of doing business by increasingly making geographical distance something negotiable. (Ellis & Taylor, 2006; Rainnie, Barrett, Burgess, & Connell, 2008). Globally speaking, the supply of labour keeps increasing while the costs of labour keeps decreasing (Bristow, Munday, & Griapos, 2009; Glucksmann, 2004; Taylor & Bain, 2007) and the call centre aims to utilise the existing supply of diversely skilled labour to maximum advantage. These changes are creating new conditions and forms for work, organisation and productivity (Ellis & Taylor, 2006; Rainnie, Barrett, Burgess, & Connell, 2008; Taylor & Bain, 2007), where the organisation has to deliver the highest possible output at minimum costs whilst also coping with change, ambivalence and immateriality in the pursuit of innovation. The concept of New Public Management (NPM) adapts commercial management techniques found in the private sector for use in the public sector. NPM reforms the public sector by using the market as a dynamic,
governing principle. It gives prominence to market-based forms of organisation: privatisation, customer relations, outsourcing, downsizing and industrial production techniques such as lean production.

In order to obtain a grasp of how the customer is constituted in public services, Frenkel et al (1998) introduced the concept of ‘mass customised bureaucracy’ to denote a hybrid form of organisation while pinpointing the specific problems of call centres. A ‘mass customised bureaucracy’ balances ‘standardisation of processes and products’, aimed at lowering unit costs through scale and transaction economies, and ‘customisation’, aimed at generating revenue by focusing on individual customer requirements’ (Frenkel et al., 1998:958). Frenkel et al consider mass customised bureaucracy as a form of work organisation that is both bureaucratic and organised along the lines of a knowledge-intensive organisation. The distinguishing feature of mass bureaucracy is that the combined effects of cost and customer orientation impact all job relations, creating a job function that is essentially based on the ability of each employee to connect with the customer and a dependency on micro-management through coaching, aimed at perfecting productivity in this individualised mass-production model. The ‘core’ of the mass bureaucratic organisation is the customer relationship. In contrast, the ‘core’ of a traditional bureaucracy is the rule.

When the customer and the customer relationship are placed at the core of the work arrangement, this has consequences for work organisation and changes skill demands. Research shows that the implementation and use of call centres in customer services often affects job quality negatively (Bain et al., 2002; Batt, Hunter, & Wilk, 2002; Holman, 2003; Sprigg & Jackson, 2006). Typical consequences are deskilling and increased control and monitoring. However, the trend is not unambiguous (Ellis & Taylor, 2006; Schönauer, 2008). Some ambiguities are pinpointed by Schönauer in a recent study of restructured public sector call centres. Fragmentation of employment and more heterogeneous employment conditions (status, contracts, wages, intensity, work time flexibility and job security) are the most distinct results of restructuring. Even though working conditions have worsened generally, public sector units have had more stable working hours and secure job tenure, compared with those in private, outsourced call centres (Schönauer, 2008:141). On the down side, compliance with quality standards and demands for ‘commercial’ and personal communications have necessitated the development of new skills (Schönauer:143).

A modern sociological interpretation of Schönauer’s results is that the professional identity of the employees is a merging of economic and human developmental processes in the life project of the individual (Andersen & Born, 2001; Bason, Agi Csonka, Nicolaj Ejler, 2003; Florida, 2005; Miller & Rose, 1997; Rose, 1999; Sennett, 2006). Work in modern life is a central element on the road to subjective self-fulfilment (Rose, 1999) and constitutes the locus where personal and professional identity is created in a mutual, internal, indefinable relation between the individual and the organisation (Florida, 2005; Lazzarato, 1996; Lazzarato, 2004; Raastrup Kristensen, 2007). A restructuring process from white-collar work to call-centre work changes the organisation of work and the demand for skills, thus actualising and changing the experiences, knowledge and emotion of the employee (Bauman, 1999; Lazzarato, 1996;
Therefore, we would expect that a transition from white-collar work to call-centre work that involves restructuring of the work organisation and changes the demand for skills will transform the professional identity of the agents.

This paper presents a case-study-based account of the transformation of part of the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (TAX) from white-collar casework into mass customised bureaucratic production as a call centre (TAX-CC). Some of the most important constituents of call-centre work we identified are: the customer-citizen construct, leadership and management systems, and the professional identity of the employees.

**The ‘AMICA’ study**

The case study presented in this formed part of a Danish research and development project: ‘Improving working conditions in call centres through benchmarking and networking’ (in Danish abbreviated as ‘AMICA’). The aim of the project was to explore the possibilities for improving the psychological working environment for employees in call centres through the use of benchmarking activities in networks. The project is a three-year intervention project (2007-2010) financed by the Danish Working Environment Research Foundation. The project was implemented in cooperation with DTU (Technical University of Denmark), NRCWE (National Research Centre for the Working Environment) and TeamArbejdsliv (Team Work Life).

The AMICA project involved eight different call centres, representing different sectors: five in-house and three outsourced, seven inbound and one outbound, covering between 40 and 300 employees. The overall intention of the research project was to improve the working environment and job quality in call centres through benchmarking and networking activities. The working environment benchmarks draw on a psychosocial working environment questionnaire developed by The National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark, supplemented by a number of questions developed specifically for call centres. These questions had been developed by the research team in a previous research project (Mathiesen et al, 2006; Mathiesen & Wiegman, 2004).

The intervention approach emphasises the learning dimension rather than the control dimension of benchmarking methodology (Christensen & Bukh, 2007). In addition to benchmarks, the networking activities offered the call centres a context in which to discuss their work practices and benchmarking results. The intention was that through these network activities they could be inspired by other call centres. The network was conceived as an incitement and motivation for the participating call centres to implement specific changes by mimicking or learning from practices in other call centres with better benchmarking results. The establishment of the network as a specific ‘agent of change’ should be considered in light of the fact that many organisations regard their in-house call centres as a marginal appendix to the core of the organisation. Physically, call centres are often situated in remote locations, and organisationally and culturally there is

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1 The project was funded by a grant from the Danish Working Environment Research Foundation.
2 The ‘Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire’ can be downloaded from: http://www.arbejdsmiljoforskning.dk/upload/english_copsoq_2_ed_2003-pdf.pdf
a tendency to consider their services and employees as secondary (Batt, Hunter, & Wilk, 2003; Richardson & Gillespie, 2003). This research project offered support to the call centres to develop internal change projects to improve working conditions.

**Methodology**

The planned activities of the project fell into several phases. A preliminary survey of all employees produced results which were discussed first in a series of workshops internal to each organisation and then in a benchmarking seminar where representatives from the different centres were brought together to share experiences and discuss solutions. These solutions were further developed in internal workshops at each call centre prior to the implementation of projects at each call centre. A second survey made it possible to assess progress, and these results too were discussed both in internal workshops and in benchmarking seminars involving all the call centres. Finally, follow-up assessments were carried out to evaluate the impact of the changes.

The participating call centres were chosen based on their expressed interests in improving their working environments. Eight call centres were selected (from a total of 14 that expressed an interest) based on ‘maximum variation’ criteria in terms of tasks, ownership, size, and geographic location (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In the light of the results of the preliminary questionnaire, the company project group, consisting of both employees and leaders, were instructed to point out at least three areas where they considered that they were successful and could have something to offer other companies. They were also asked to identify three areas in which they believed they could learn from other companies. The researchers did not focus on comparisons between companies, but on how to further a learning process in each company by trying to find areas of possible inspiration. Call centres could take part only if they allowed both employees and leaders to participate in the internal project groups, because involvement was thought to be a very important part of the psychosocial working environment (Holman, Chissick, &TOTTERDILL, 2002).

The qualitative case study material for the case of TAX-CC consisted of five personal interviews, of the key informant style (Andersen, 1995; Spradley, 1979), five focus group interviews with managers and employees (Halkier, 2002). Different kinds of focus groups were used - two groups consisting only of employees, one group consisting only of leaders and two mixed groups. This design took into account possible issues of bias and power. The focus group interviews were conducted after a period during which the employees had been asked to take pictures that captured their perceptions of their working environment and ‘blog’ about the pictures – a method we dubbed ‘snap-logs’ (Warren, 2002). In addition, a researcher visited TAX-CC on several occasions, observing work practices and conducting six informal ‘walk-and-talk’ interviews. This researcher was in continuous contact with the project group in TAX-CC, and had access to internal group communications such as notes taken by the project group while visiting other call centres in the network. The researcher also participated in three workshops and two benchmark seminars, where the group of call centres exchanged experiences and formed networks. An extensive body of data was collected to enable the research team to contextualise and follow the transformations as they were occuring. The drive towards an improved
work environment in TAX-CC is seen as a processual translation (Callon, 1986) between
the intervention and the existing practice. It was assumed from the beginning that the
selected interventions would not necessarily have the desired effect, but would inevitably
be modified through a process of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol & Law, 1994).

**TAX-CC: from white-collar work to individualised mass production**

...and then she said “Thank you, darling”, and you know that kind of gratitude from a
citizen makes you happy. I mean... you can actually help, by doing such a little
thing. (Contextual interview, employee, 2007)

Vibeke works at the switchboard in TAX-CC in the small town of Ribe in Western
Jutland. In Danish, the tax authority is called ‘SKAT’, which also means ‘treasure’ and is
a generally used term of endearment meaning ‘dear’ or ‘darling’. And, as Vibeke relates,
citizens calling TAX-CC sometimes in gratitude or sometimes for the fun of it address her
as ‘darling’.

TAX-CC is the result of a large-scale public centralisation process. In spring, 2005,
the Danish Parliament passed a law to reform the municipal system. A single body called
TAX was created, uniting what were formerly a large number of separate tax and customs
authorities. The former organisation consisted of several hundred formal authorities but
the new tax authority system was organised as a so-called ‘one stop shop’, where citizens
could approach the authorities over the phone, by mail or by digital self-service. The
intended outcomes of the restructuring process were: economies of scale, more flexible
resource utilisation, standardised and equal rulings, enhanced productivity and a more
efficient work flow.¹ The TAX authority was divided into 30 local tax centres, a ‘payment’
centre in Ringkøbing and four customer centres at different geographical locations:
Hjørring, Odense, Ribe and Roskilde.

Today, TAX-CC handles all inbound calls and emails from citizens, companies and
advisers. The majority of its work consists of answering tax-related enquiries. On a yearly
basis TAX-CC answers 3.9 million calls in person (83%). A further 1.4 million calls are
either handled through automated telephone responses (with recorded answers) or are
abandoned (17%). The initial target was to answer 70% of the incoming calls. TAX also
receives 350,000 emails per annum.

The workload in TAX-CC is estimated to require 400 full time employees per year.
But only the equivalent of 321 full time employees were employed at the time of our
research. During peak periods, the excess workload is handled by drawing in support
from the 30 TAX centres. Around two-thirds of the employees of today’s TAX-CC were
formerly employees of municipal tax authorities, with around a third drawn from
national tax authorities. We attempted to estimate the seniority of the staff based on an
approximation between the known seniority of the formerly national employees and the
unknown, but probable⁴, seniority of the formerly municipal employees and concluded
that 13% were between 40 and 50; 31% between 30 and 40; and 15% between, 20 and 30
years of age. We also concluded that 10% had between 10 and 20 years experience in the

¹ http://www.skm.dk/publikationer/skat/skatau-januar2006/fusionen/. Speech by Minister of
⁴ This approximation is based on the HR-consultants practical knowledge of the case.
same employment, 15% between five and 10 years experience and that 13% were taken on in 2007. A non-replacement policy has been operating in the intervening periods so there were no employees with between two and four years experience. The average seniority among employees was thus high, with more than 60% of the employees aged 40 years or older and 30% 60 years or more. The great majority had few formal qualifications. They were trained as clerks in the municipal or national systems with supplementary tax courses. A small group had been trained as tax accountants and one was a tax lawyer. The employees as a whole represented a huge mass of experience, with some having had their basic training as clerks whilst others had a background in various services. The leaders were a diverse group as well. For some the job in TAX-CC was their first leadership experience, whereas others had also been team leaders under the old system.

When the merger was announced, each employee was offered the chance to express a ‘wish’ for the new placement that he or she would prefer. However, to retain their job, many had to accept whatever position they were offered. This in effect created two categories of workers: those who ‘volunteered’ and those who were ‘transferred’. The trade unions negotiated the right for transferred workers to return to their former place of work (though not necessarily the same job) after one year. Volunteers, on the other hand, were contracted to their new positions for two years, after which they had the right to seek another post in the parent organisation if they were dissatisfied. The inconsistencies in the treatment of these two categories of workers became the subject of a great deal of interest in the national media, and this anomaly kept the trade unions of the TAX employees busy and resulted in a great deal of resentment and frustration. Danish union density is high, at about 80% on average (Due & Madsen, 2008). We believe that the level of unionisation in TAX-CC reflects the degree of perceived trouble related to the restructuring and the rather heavy-handed relocation procedures. However the union aspect will not be discussed further in this paper.

**Change in work organisation and work constitution**

*...But we still have all these people, who were forced to be here...And we know, that by the end of this year, they have 'served their sentence' and they will be gone. (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)*

This quotation from one of our interviews captures the feelings of dissatisfaction which were prevalent when the study commenced, in 2007. In that year, the the greatest dissatisfaction expressed by the employees was an intense feeling of lack of influence over their job conditions and a feeling that the rigid control system was leading to poorer service for the citizens. They said that they felt they were being treated disrespectfully and that their opportunities for acting professionally in customer interactions had decreased. There was also widespread disrespect for the quality of leadership and management systems.

In 2008, the negative development seemed to turn around. The responses to the questionnaire showed improvements in the employees’ perception both of working conditions and of their leaders. The yoke of control seemed to have lifted considerably. Social support from leaders had had its impact and the role and status of the call centre within the TAX organisation had become more clear and positive.
To gain an insight into the background of this positive development in TAX-CC we discuss below three themes: change in the constitution of the customer-citizen construct, change in the leadership and management system, and change in professional identity.

**Change in the customer-citizen construct**

Well, I have been happy to be here from the beginning. I have to admit. But again, I sought the job voluntarily, and you cannot compare the situation of those who are here by free choice with those who are here by force ... I like [the fact that] that your job does not pile up in big stacks of cases you should have done [any more]. When you are off, you are free. You cannot bring your phone home, so you do not have to speculate before Monday morning ...

After 100-500 calls I sometimes have difficulties concentrating, but I like to talk to all these people. And I think there are a lot of nice people calling and you have a lot of nice conversations. I like to have this contact with people on the phone. And I am very satisfied when I am able to help the person calling. They are so thankful ‘Oh, could you really help me like that’. It is nice that they are thankful and that you could help them without passing on the call – that you completed it yourself. (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)

TAX-CC illustrates how new customer strategies gain a foothold in the public sector through changes in work organisation and management. In the traditional tax organisation, the focal point was the taxation of citizens in general and not the individual citizen. In TAX-CC, servicing individual citizens is the major precept. Consequently, perceptions of the citizen and citizen relations are central to how the working environment is perceived. Earlier, the citizen was an abstraction rarely met in person. Today, the employees and leaders use the terms ‘customer’ and ‘citizen’ interchangeably. Because of this, we do not stick to a single term either, but in this paper use the term ‘customer-citizen’ when writing in ‘the researcher’s voice’ but in interview excerpts we remain faithful to the original term used.

…how are you handling the customers? That is an important part of our work. That they should be treated differently, right? We know the difference between the upset and mad one, who blames us for his own mess, and the one who just wants to talk and tell you the story of his life, right? (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)

Employees now seem to ‘invest’ themselves in their relationship with the customer-citizen. The changes in the job constitution have created a demand for an emotionally-involved employee. This gives employees a feeling of job satisfaction, but also, because the interactions are continuously evaluated, personal interaction with the customer-citizen also contributes to goal-directed service. Employees have to handle the customer-citizen as a person met in conversation as opposed to an abstract number on a case. When TAX-CC was newly established in, 2007, the employees were in the process of figuring out how to invest their emotional and personal life in the job. This process was ambiguous because it both involved a more impersonal attachment to the job and a closer and more personal relation. In the next section, we will expand on this
defining characteristic of the job, which is part of the problematic of individualised mass production in a bureaucracy; the employees must deliver a tailored service every time whilst also meeting requirements for a high degree of standardisation and efficiency.

**Change in leadership and management system constitution**

*It is difficult to get into contact with the employee ... {they} are on the phone all the time. When there is something I would like to discuss with an agent, it can be difficult to find the time. And it works the other way around, for that matter. If an employee wishes to speak to the head of department, it is not always possible. I believe that the days where you feel you have have “contact” are the good days – the days with ‘interaction’ ... We get a lot of stuff from above [the management] but I believe that the conditions are negotiable. We live in a politically-managed system where we cannot always decide for ourselves ... It makes me angry and irritated sometimes, but that will not help me. I cannot change it.* (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)

The situation described in this quotation made established forms of leadership practices difficult. In the transformation, the leaders were as much ‘under reconstruction’ as the employees and had to reinvent themselves as leaders. This was not only because the employees in their teams were on the phone all day, but also because the new minute-by-minute management and monitoring systems were setting new conditions for the leaders.

*I believe our heads of department are having a hard time because they are given a lot of work from headquarters. I feel they have difficulties in finishing what they started and – well, excuse me for saying so – are under a lot of stress.* (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)

The changes in work organisation and the primacy of the customer-citizen left the leaders in a tight spot in 2007. The leadership tools they had used in the old organisation (mainly day-to-day discussions of decisions and yearly employee performance and development interviews) were of no help in the new system, where employees answered hundreds of calls every day.

The new work system made employees responsible for the way they used their individual personalities and the personality was identified as a potential source of efficiency and productivity (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002; Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007). Under these conditions, the leadership relation became much more complex and channelled into short time bursts while the monitoring system became the most visible way in which the employees experienced management. The professional and social interaction, where norms for decisions had been enacted previously, were contested and almost gone. In 2007, the employees were especially dissatisfied with the lack of common breaks with co-workers that had emerged under the new system. Lunch was planned in such a way that an individual’s lunch break could start at 11.30 one day and at 13.30 the next. Consequently, employees were unable to form ‘lunch-groups’ with their favourite co-workers. In, 2007, the ‘common’ daily coffee break was also contested after it was officially forbidden ‘from above’.
A social atmosphere existed in the beginning – we had a 15-minute break every morning. That was the only time we had any social activity in our department. It is shameful how they treat us – like children instead of grown-ups. (Group interview, employees, 2007)

And if we gather more than five at a time, we are told we cannot have a common coffee break (laughter). It is like World War 2. ‘We will not tolerate gatherings on the street corners’ (laughter). Well it is actually terrible …(Group interview, employees, 2007)

In, 2008, the coffee break issue was resolved. What seemed to be an insurmountable problem had been solved by shifting the opening hours by half an hour, thereby allowing for common social activities. In addition, ‘daily morning gymnastics’ were arranged from 8.15 to 8.30 every morning. The morning gymnastics and the morning meetings created frameworks for social and professional networking. The leaders gained a ‘moment’ every day in which they could pass on information and get in touch with the employees.

By rescheduling our opening hours – or more correctly the hours where the citizens can reach us by phone – we have acquired the possibility for professional meetings. It is so unbelievably important to stay updated, right? (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2008)

However, the rescheduled opening hours reduced the possibility for social and professional meetings later in the day, because the changed opening hours meant that ‘blue hours’ (administrative time) later in the day had to be reduced. This resulted in an intensification of the phone work in the afternoon, even though the ‘blue hours’ weren’t meant for socialising but for catching up on administration.

By 2008, there was an improvement in the employees’ general conception of their leaders, who had been relatively insecure and inexperienced the previous year, when the situation was as new for them as it was for everyone else. Employees showed respect for a leader who they thought was good at ‘tampering with stuff’ enabling them to feel less restricted by the rules and regulations. The leaders had had to learn how to manage the very stiff monitoring system and the digitally generated rosters and to adjust to a situation where the employees had to be very personal and empathetic in their interaction with citizens, and hence could be sensitive to impersonal and un-empathetic leaders and systems.

It has to do with mistrust – they believe we do not want to put in an effort. They may even think we are just sitting there picking our noses, when we are busy on the phones. It is so frustrating. And why? Because it shows a lack of trust from above. (Group Interview, Employees, 2007)

In, 2007, we identified a tendency of low trust in the leadership system (understood as a combination of the rules, the planning system and the quality of decisions) mixed with a relatively high degree of trust in the leaders as individual people. In, 2008, this had changed into a situation where the employees had higher trust in the planning systems and their leaders’ capability of handling the system. The organisation had gained experience and the leaders had demonstrated that they wanted to improve working conditions and support the employees. The leaders seemed to have succeeded
in developing a more personal and direct relationship with their employees. In 2008, the leaders re-introduced ‘listening in’ on employees when they answered calls – a technique that, in 2007, had led to a lot of resentment. We can observe that the perception of the practice of listening in had changed over the intervening period from one of resentment to one that saw it as providing opportunities for learning. It seems that this change has come about as a direct result of enhanced trust in the leaders and their motives for using the techniques. This supports the conclusions of Holman et al (2002) who argue that the perception of control (e.g. listening in) is more positive when employees believe that its purpose is to improve learning.

....you have to see it [listening in] is as an opportunity to develop yourself, right?
I like the fact that you can have a dialogue [with the leader] afterwards. It gives you a chance to talk about the concerns and contents of the specific call. ‘This one you did well, but you could have gone a bit further by entering these systems…’ It is just learning … and I have had calls, where I said to him [the leader ‘It was too bad you were not listening in here, because it was just like this’… (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2008)

The relation between leaders, systems and employees had softened and become more flexible, suggesting that the otherwise alienating control systems and the lack of ‘trust signals’ in the system had been re-interpreted. Employees interpreted their leaders’ behaviour in more positive ways, and the leaders were more willing to subordinate the systems to the employees’ needs and not the other way around. It seems that the leaders had implemented mass customised bureaucratic production by linking into the employees’ sense of enhancing their actual work performance and by delegating control.

**Change in professional identity**

*I think it is interesting, and the reason why it was so difficult in the beginning could be that we had colleagues, who just did not fit the tasks we [have to] solve. It is important that we get the right people for the job. You cannot have the kind of people engaged here, who like to become deeply absorbed in something. That kind of person does not fit a call-centre job. We have to have people who like action, and quick response – who are able to zoom in on the key problem more or less instantly, ask the right questions and give correct answers. I think a lot about that. When we have employees saying: ‘this is me’ then we have the right mix. And of course we do not have that yet, because we started the way we did. (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2007)*

The changes in work and job constitution have had a serious impact on workers’ identities and the relationship between the job and the person. The managers see it as a matter of the right ‘fit’ – it seems to them to be a question of identifying the person who believes the work ‘is’ me (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). As previously noted, the new job relationships and forms of work organisation are defined by the way the agent engages with the customer–citizen, mediated by the organisation of work and the technological monitoring and performance systems. The restructuring of work has resulted in an emotionally-charged process in TAX-CC. Before the restructuring, the professional identity of the white-collar bureaucratic case worker was tied to a
professionalism defined by correctness and deep knowledge of the subject matter. The organisational restructuring and the new ‘customer based’ strategy have created completely different conditions for developing a professional identity.

After the restructuring, new types of employees were recruited with no prior knowledge of the tax field. The ‘old’, experienced employees had to spend a great deal of time training these new colleagues. Peer training was perceived as a positive element both by old and new employees. However, in 2007, the old employees were concerned about the professional quality of the work and the possibilities for sustaining their existing competences.

I have not read a single resolution since I came here and new resolutions (court judgements) are coming up all the time. You just feel that you sort of just sit there and tell people something, on a matter of high importance to their personal finances, without really having the newest resolutions from the courts and without having time to read up on the rules – just once in a while. You are using knowledge that is one and a half years old. (Group interview, employees, 2007)

The new form of organisation made peer conversations difficult in 2007, with no common breaks and only scant possibilities for meeting and discussions. The experienced employees prided themselves on knowing their stuff by heart and giving correct answers to customers. In the new call-centre organisation, employees, on the one hand, have to answer an enormous number of routine questions which do not demand any deep knowledge but, on the other hand, must always be prepared to answer the occasional difficult question. The employees complained that the monitoring system measured only the length of the call without taking complexity into account. Management met these complaints with understanding but emphasised that the employees also needed to understand the service goals of the call centres – that customer-citizens expect a ‘suitable service’, which means that they should not feel dissatisfied if they are passed on to a more knowledgeable co-worker or even to an employee in one of the tax centres. The employees, however, felt that was unsatisfactory, professionally speaking, not to be able to answer the question themselves. Actually, they saw avoiding the need for a transfer as an extra service to the customer.

It is unsatisfying having to transfer a call. Especially if you have been talking for a while and feel sure that you would be able to finish it. Then another aspect turns up and you are left with no choice but to say: either call back or try someone who really knows what this is about. And that is really annoying both for you and the customer. You can choose to call back, and I do that once in a while. but sometimes you have too many post-it notes [to deal with] and then you have to pass it on, right?’ (Group interview, employees, 2008)

The new employees felt that their possibilities for development had become frozen, to some degree. They had an exponential learning curve during the first period of employment and had to learn a lot of different things in a relatively short time. Subsequently, the challenge was to get ‘to the next level’ and they felt that the balance between learning and using what they had learned was unsatisfactory. The experienced employees felt that they used a more narrow scope of knowledge, but since they already
had the basic knowledge - also about the non-routine ‘stuff’ - their frustrations differed from those of the new employees. However, both groups felt that there were dangers of monotony.

All the employees were challenged, professionally speaking, not because they did not want to talk to the customer-citizens, but because they did not feel they were properly equipped professionally, which made them afraid of not being able to continue delivering a quality service. ‘It is difficult to sustain deep competences when there is also concurrent pressure towards keeping up the daily operations’ (Employee AB, 2007).

The policies of TAX-CC dictate that difficult questions should be passed on to an employee in one of the tax centres. When an employee either answers or passes on the call the call is ‘closed’, so having long conversations turns up a smaller number of closed calls. This was perceived as unsatisfactory by anxious employees who felt they had the capability to solve a problem.

The question is whether I want to sit here in ten years time if it is like this. If I am constantly told that it is quantity rather than quality that matters, if I cannot finish my cases and take them all the way and if I am not given the time to do that - because it has to do with time as well - then I do not want to be here. Then I will use my ‘job-return-right’, because I have been in TAX for 30 years and I am not going to sit around acting as a switchboard. I really am not. (Group interview, employees, 2007)

The problem described was a perceived lack of control over essential features of the job, a feeling that the employees’ knowledge and abilities were depreciated, and a fear that this was not a momentary but a permanent condition.

The situation has clearly changed since then. Judging from the reactions of the employees in 2007, we expected a high degree of turnover and disillusioned employees. But, instead, a shift in both relationship management and in the conception of what a professional call-centre employee had taken place.

Interviewer: ‘Last year you were quite anxious that you might lose your deep competences?’

Employee 1: ‘Something has been done about that. That has been taken care of and now we can attend courses.’

Employee 2: ‘Yes, well, it is never going to be a call centre where the telephone service gives you time to go deeply into many things. You have to get used to that, which is the way in which we work. But we are allowed to attend good courses even if we want to learn something in a different area. That is extremely positive – it is just super, that you are allowed … it is not difficult at all.’ (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2008)

A new professional call-centre identity seems to have emerged. The adjusted ICT system has played an important part in achieving a better balance. It was debugged (or ‘deloused’, in the term used at TAX-CC). The telephone system was adjusted to provide a better fit, and the employees’ demand for more flexibility was partially met. After the merger, all known symbols of competence, trust and case work were torn apart. The social system was left in a situation where the management system kept sending ambiguous signals that were often interpreted as expressions of distrust and
degradation. But communications between the central and decentralised parts of the organisation now seemed smoother and marked by a higher degree of trust:

*Today we experience that the planning department or other central departments say: ‘let us try it, and not make a fuss about it. Let us just try it out and see if it works. If heads of department and employees believe it could make things easier, by all means let us try it!’* (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2008)

The organisation seems to have been able to handle a substantial shift in professional orientation. The management systems have found a softer and more flexible form. The employees have obviously come to terms with the fact that a professional in a call centre must perform in terms of ‘good figures’. They also need to balance the need for knowledge with speed and deliver a service which, on the one hand, is custom-tailored to the specific customer-citizen and, on the other hand, makes it a virtue to get each call closed in the shortest possible time. The employee has to assess the balance of routine calls and when to get involved in the difficult (and hence interesting) calls: ‘to deliver the right service against the amount of calls.’ In conclusion, we can say that the meaning of ‘good figures’ has been (re)negotiated, and monitoring and feedback now reflect this new compromise.

**Concluding discussion**

*You could say that we are all in the same boat. We are working under equal conditions. That was different before. Maybe it is different depending on where you originally came from ... I am from the old municipal part of TAX, and some places you could say that people doing tax returns and people doing ‘back-office’ stuff were perceived differently. There was some kind of hierarchical difference. You do not get that feeling here, and that is great.* (Group interview, leaders/employees, 2008)

From a change management point of view, one could claim that this is a conventional story about a management-initiated change process that was met with employee resistance. After a while, when the most resistant employees had been pruned, the changes and the new organisational structure were accepted. This may be true, but to us the interesting aspect of the story is how the work, the employees’ professional identity, leadership and the citizen construct became constituted in new ways during and after the transition from traditional bureaucracy to mass individualised bureaucracy. A new constitution allowed employees to construct new meanings in work and to experience job satisfaction again – yet, in new ways whereby professional pride had been shifted from bureaucratic values to encompass the ability to solve citizens’ problems as they arise and achieve ‘good figures’. This new professionalism demanded that the employees gain knowledge of the ‘anatomy of a call’ and improve their perception how to handle people directly. Having gone through such a transformative process, the employees have had to cope with crisis and frustration, which some would say were a prerequisite for learning. But as frustration is easily accomplished without leading to learning it should not be a learning goal in itself (Cope, 2003; Deleuze, 2002). Without a clear goal, transformation could become frustration and nothing else. In the case of TAX-CC the goal was obviously the work in itself.
From a call-centre researchers’ point of view, the case is interesting because it challenges the notion that the introduction of the call-centre model inevitably creates a detrimental working environment characterised by high levels of monitoring and low job discretion, as described in the introduction. Previous research has documented that it is possible to create work organisation in call centres characterised by high involvement and high job quality (Batt, 2000). The present study provides insight into how a call centre can embark on such a positive trajectory. The intervention project, AMICA, seemed to offer possibilities for learning that TAX-CC was able to use to remedy some of the problems originally created through the change process. The original organisational changes were perceived as unfair and disrespectful by the employees. In particular, they disliked the ways that the physical location was moved, discretion was severely reduced, monitoring was increased and the perceived possibility to perform professionally was considerably reduced.

During the intervention, the leaders became able to balance the hard data against a very personal leader-employee relationship that became centred on the concept of the citizen as a customer-citizen. This involved a major change in opening hours. It is rather unusual for call centres to reduce their valuable opening hours to create more time for co-worker interaction and direct management. This, and the reduced focus on monitoring, seemed to be perceived as important signals of trust and respect by the employees. In this process, the employees also changed their perception of professionalism and found a new source of job satisfaction in working with the customer-citizen relationship. Professionalism had come to encompass form as well as content.

Some contextual factors might help to explain why it was possible to deviate from (some) of the negative patterns normally found in call-centre research. One of the explanations is that the TAX-CC is a public administration without competition. Reports from TAX-CC conclude that citizens did not complain when opening hours were reduced. Another explanation is the general Danish industrial relations context. Tension between employees and employers is low in Denmark (Eurofound, 2003), and Danish employees are generally able to use their influence at work (Andersen, 2004). The tradition is to seek cooperation to find mutually-beneficial solutions to issues such as training, HRM and work design (Bicknell & Knudsen, 2006). In TAX-CC, the new leaders regarded the employees’ critique as legitimate and acted to remedy some of the problems.

However, there is also a critical edge to this seemingly successful story. Even though the employees regained feelings of respect and trust, the assessment and monitoring systems still exist. The major part of the day is spent talking on the phone in a situation where discretion is low. The traditional pride in bureaucratic values is almost gone and it is possible that the employees who opted out could not live with this loss of professional identity. The remaining employees valued the fact that they had gained the possibility to detach themselves from work. Even though mass individualised bureaucracy focuses on the citizen relationship and customer satisfaction, this relationship only lasts until the conversation is over. So it is possible to value good interactions, dispatch the occasional bad ones and then move on, and there are no piles of unfinished work remaining at the end of the day. In the old case-based bureaucratic organisation, involvement was greater, for better or for worse.
One year might not be enough to determine whether substantial deskilling will occur. The new professional identity is still under construction. In the first year, most employees experienced a steep learning curve related to social and interactional skills. However, the experienced employees feel that more case work is needed to retain and develop their topic-specific knowledge. New employees cannot see how they can acquire the skills of their co-workers who have, 20-40 years of experience given the high workload and the large number of routine calls that have to be dealt with. If the dilemma between the need to produce ‘good figures’ and to learn by solving complex problems and participating in other learning activities is not solved, in a worst case scenario the new professional identity could simply be reduced only to that of a simple service worker. In that case, substantial deskilling and work segregation would be the result in the long run.

Consequently, it is hard to judge whether the AMICA intervention project was successful or not. Judged by the measurements of job satisfaction and other measurements of the psychosocial working environment, improvements were clear. But because both the fundamental constitution of work and the professional identity of the workers changed during the intervention, it is questionable whether the figures are comparable even though the measuring instrument was the same. Seen from the outside, it can be hard to understand how the employees shifted from a deep resentment over their lack of influence to a high appreciation of one hour off-time with colleagues, when the rest of their working day is still so tightly controlled.

Postscript: the story goes on

In March, 2009 a new organisational change was announced for the Danish Tax and Customs Administration. The call centre will now be subjected to substantial organisational restructuring. The four existing locations handling both business and citizen calls will be transformed into three centres, one of which, in Hjørring in the north of Denmark, will handle only business calls while the other two, in Ribe and Odense, will handle only calls from individual citizens. The location in Roskilde will be closed. This means that employees with citizen competences and business competencies will either be relocated or will have to develop new competences, respectively.

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REFERENCES