Economic restructuring has led to a dramatic growth in contingent work (such as part-time, on-call, casual, temporary, self-employment and contract jobs) in the new economy (Krahn, 1995; deWolff, 2000; Rogers, 2000, Vosko et al, 2003). According to a recent study, contingent work “has grown as a proportion of total employment to the point where it involves one-third of all paid workers, and more than 40 per cent of female paid workers” (Chaykowski, 2005). In Toronto, in particular, recent immigrants predominate amongst the contingent workforce (deWolff, 2000).

Amongst the sectors in which recent immigrants find employment is the call center sector. This paper focuses on the notions of "skill" in the call centre sector and our goal is to explore worker’s notions of “skills”. We begin with a discussion of the work organization within call centers. Although call center work is often promoted as "professional" work through the use of job labels such as "Customer Service Executive" and through the clean, office-like environment of work (which often resembles professional white collar jobs), jobs themselves are highly routinized, scripted and monitored. Over three quarters of the women we interviewed characterize call center work as "unskilled", even though many go on to mention numerous techniques and strategies they have had to learn to do their jobs effectively.

We argue that the links between theories on contingent work and learning need to be contextualized within understandings of the politics of “skill” definition which is fundamentally connected to racialization within the Canadian labour market. Theorists focusing on the politics of “skill” definition argue that we need to move beyond the definition of “skill” in purely technical terms as a capacity for work possessed by some people and learned by training. Rather, they focus on how definitions of “skill” often protect the interests of those in power. As Jackson argues, “skill” definition involves “the interweaving of the technical organization or work with hierarchies of power and privilege between women and men, whites and non-whites, old and young” (1991, p. 9). The politics of skill definition is closely related to access to work-related training. For example, Probert argues that “the gendering of work has significant implications for what counts as learning or “skill” as opposed to natural talent” (1999, p. 99). Because certain skills are regarded as “natural” for women, rather than as acquired they are excluded on this basis from opportunities for training. Wright argues that the discourse of skill is "a socially necessary technology for reproducing the diverse subjects necessary for filling out the many rungs within the capitalist division of labour" (2001b:2182). Not only is skill contested within specific organizational interactions, but involves a complex interaction between nationality and value production, particularly evident in transnational interactions whereby the definition of work as skilled is fundamentally related to the national origin of the worker.
Since 1995, Canada has received approximately 215,000 immigrants per year. The selection process for potential immigrants is very stringent; without family sponsorship, it is very difficult to immigrate to Canada without at least one university degree, fluency in both English and French and four years of work experience. The Point System is designed to attract the “best and brightest” from other countries to Canada (Thobani, 1999; Jakubowski, 1997). These immigrants include large numbers of people of colour, who are “highly skilled” professionals migrating from South and South East Asia. Although “highly skilled” immigrants are prioritized in the immigration selection process, research has shown that the labour market integration and earnings ratio of immigrants has worsened over time despite the fact that education levels have increased (Reitz, 2001). Canadian employers do not view the “skills” of immigrants the same way as the Canadian government does for the purposes of immigration. Immigrants are often viewed by employers as having questionable education credentials, lacking in “Canadian work experience” and deficient in “communication skills”. A study of 643 internationally-educated professionals showed that fewer than 25 per cent were working in their exact field, and that 46.8 per cent were doing something unrelated to their background (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). Research shows that within the Canadian labour market, there are gender and racial hierarchies; white Canadian born men are the most advantaged and recent racialized immigrant women are the most disadvantaged (Reitz, 2001; Li, 2001).

**Skilled In-Vulnerability Project**

This research project was undertaken by the Democratizing Workplace Learning (DWL) group. This group, part of the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at OISE/UT, was established in 1999 and comprises researchers, community and union activists and graduate students. This paper will draw on a segment of the data collected for this project – namely, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 women workers of outbound call centres (unsolicited telemarketing and telephone survey work) in the Toronto area. We contacted workers by placing advertisements close to the call centre locations, as well as by advertising in newspapers and community bulletins. Of the 21 women, 17 had immigrated to Canada from five countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jamaica and West Indies). The range of time they had been in Canada was from 3 months to 25 years; the average time in Canada was 6.8 years. Importantly, 14 of the immigrant women had completed post-secondary education (11 university, 3 college). The former professions of the women included teaching, medicine, architecture, engineering, management and computer programming. Of the four Canadian-born women only one had completed post-secondary education. Ten of the 21 women had an annual income of less than $10,000 and only three women reported an annual income of greater than $20,000.

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From “highly skilled” to highly scripted: Call centre work organization

The call centre industry is extensive and includes workers in a variety of positions and work arrangements. According to one report (Heath, 2001), the Ontario industry has the highest concentration of call centre activity in North America. The major employers in the industry are banks, trust and insurance companies, telecommunications companies, hardware and software companies and large manufacturers. There is little data on the racial profile of the call centre industry. But most advertisements for jobs make the explicit requirement that applicants must have excellent spoken English skills. Most of the workers are recruited to Call Centres by word-of-mouth contacts. The job interview includes some testing (reading a script, keyboard facility). The vast majority of jobs in call centres are part-time; a typical work week involves a minimum of 3 shifts (usually one on a weekend) of between 4 and 7 hours in duration. The work schedules are irregular and changeable. The starting rate of pay is, on average, $8 / hour.

A typical shift in the call centre involves the worker arriving to the office and finding out which cubicle they are assigned, the telephone survey they will be conducting and how many surveys they are expected to complete. The workers in a Call Centre sit in an office environment at individual cubicles in a room with 30 to 50 other people. The workers describe this environment as very noisy. They then spend their time phoning potential clients. Each worker wears a headset that is connected to an automatic dialing machine so that when one call is terminated, the next number is immediately dialed. In some Call Centres, the worker has to hold the telephone in their hand as well as manually dial the numbers. In this case, the number of calls dialed each hour is monitored and the worker is expected to dial between 70 and 80 numbers per hour. All workstations are electronically monitored (number of calls dialed, time logged onto computer, phone conversations) and it is the job of the “Monitor” to listen into their phone conversations to ensure that the workers follow the script to the letter. The workers are expected to follow the “script” of the survey exactly, without exception. If a worker deviates from the text of the survey script, they are given a written warning: two warnings and they are fired. They are expected to do a certain number of surveys per shift. Often, after three hours of work, if the worker has not been able to complete a survey, they are sent home. It is very common for workers to be sent home without pay for the rest of the shift. The worst offense in call centre was falsifying data on a survey. There are two levels of surveillance to detect fraudulent data: the “Monitors’ who listen to the phone conversations and the “Verifiers” who call people who have just completed surveys to check if they really completed the survey. When asked what a new worker in a call centre would need to know, one woman said:

Well, I really don’t know what to tell them because it’s just…you just have to do what they tell you to do, there is no leeway to say, ‘I can try this’ or ‘I can try that’. You can’t try anything on your own; you have to do what they tell you to do. It’s not like…you have a job, and you say ‘I’m going to do this this way today, tomorrow I’ll do it another way’. You can’t do that. Every day,
you go in, it’s the same thing you have to do, and you have to do it their way. It’s their way or no way.

Alongside this description of the workplace as highly scripted and monitored, it was also expressed that this work was better than traditional service sector jobs. Advertisements for Call Centre work promote the work as professional and indeed, the work in the call centre is office-based with workers having their own cubicle, computer and telephone. Workers were given training that ranged from two to four days and their job titles such as “Customer Service Executive” sound impressive. This work appealed to immigrants who had international education and professional work experience. One woman described her coworkers as such, “The employees here are very qualified, like you have electronic engineers, you have chartered accountants, you have a dentist, you have even a doctor”. For one worker, it was the professional veneer of the job that was important to her:

But I don’t want to do any job, like in a coffee shop, or in a, say McDonald’s, where everybody’s in a very poor condition, like, you know, people…I don’t like that. That’s why I like the job, because it’s like something for educated people. All the people working with me, all of them are educated, they can speak very good English, all of them are Indians or Pakistani, like this, and our supervisor is very good. That’s why I like the job.

Despite the middle-class appeal of this work, not one woman said that she was pursuing call centre work as a career. The women see their contingent jobs as temporary “stepping stones” enroute to more meaningful work.

**Notions of “skill”: “You have to be enthusiastic, you have to be just a happy person, basically.”**

When asked if they thought the work in the call centre was “skilled” work, three quarters (sixteen out of twenty-one) answered that the work was “unskilled”. The women described the work as “boring”, a “very simple job”, “not much of a skilled job…if you can read a bit of English, you can talk” and “anyone could do the job if only you can speak English”. One woman who was a former teacher remarked, “It’s nothing – it is killing your brain. There’s nothing to think about”. Many women also pointed out that not only did they not view the job as skilled but neither did their employer or the customers. One worker was told by an irate customer, “Woman, go look for a job”.

Yet when they were asked to describe the skills that they needed to do the job, they mentioned a long list of “skills” – customer service skills, patience, ability to take rejection, being able to deceive customers, people skills, communication skills, flexibility, telephone manners, being able to work with different people, listening skills, fluency in English, teamwork skills, keyboard skills, good voice, good pronunciation, a good accent, respect for the other person’s time, sincerity as well as the ability to handle frustration and deal with rude people.
Other skills that were mentioned related more to generic “skills” that are required in order to be a contingent worker. The first of these “skills” is time management under erratic circumstances. As their work schedules were irregular and subject to change based on their performance at the beginning of a shift, managing schedules of other jobs and coordinating with family members was very tricky. When asked how she handled her weekly schedule, one woman said:

Worker: I believe in time management. You have time for everything, you have time for talking to your children, you have time for making your food, you have time for television, you have time for your study, you have time for your social life, you have even time for your volunteer work. That’s it.

Interviewer: You are managing everything?

Worker: Yes. I can have another job too, you know. Because 3 days I don’t work. Saturdays the call centre is closed and on Sunday we work from 2-8. This is not a dependable job. Sometimes you get paid and sometimes the paycheque is so low, you can’t even buy your groceries.

Another necessary generic “skill” is emotion work which employers depend on but do not recognize. Emotion work in the context of the call centre includes learning to not take the rude behaviour of customers personally, managing their feelings about deceiving customers about such things as the time a survey will take and handing rejection. This toll of the emotion work often is too much for a worker to endure:

They (the customers) scream at you, and they slam the phone in your ear…those are things that I don’t like. But because I’ve been doing it for a while now, it’s not as bad to me. It’s still bad, but I don’t feel as badly; although they will tell you ‘Oh, don’t take it personally’, you have to take it personally, because the person was talking to you, the person was not talking to the company, they are talking to you, so you have to take it personally. Some people come and the first day they encounter things like that, they cry, and then they just pack up and go, because they can’t take that, some of them.

A third generic “skill” is the ability to view the job as a temporary stop enroute to work more closely related to their education and work experience. One worker commented, “if your field is different, then you should not take it (the call centre job) as permanent, you should just... go as a stepping stone.”

Finally, workers noted that one of the main requirements for call center work is "the ability to communicate effectively". This refers to fluency in English, speaking
“properly”, good pronunciation, nice tone of voice, good accent, patience, good telephone manners, respect for the other person and being understood by the person on the other end of the phone. This characterization of the importance of communication skills within the call center sector points to the racialized nature of the definition of skill. First, the focus on respect and patience despite any customer response (which can include racism) forces immigrants to situate themselves within Canadian society in particular ways. According to one worker, “you can’t say anything harsh to the respondent, or anything like that. NO matter what they say to you, you have to be polite”. The women are being taught to “know their place” in Canadian society. “Communication skills” here seem to point to a way of talking about assimilation in Canadian society as a racialized immigrant.

Second, the workers viewed the work in the call centre as an opportunity to improve their “communication skills” which they thought of as transferable across contexts/jobs: “it (call centre work) improves your people skills, communication skills, and these skills are transferable anywhere”. The “communication skills” that are learned in the call centre are based on obedience, surveillance and repetition; the women were not allowed to use any discretion in the course of conducting a survey. These practices of “communication skills” do not correspond to the norms of communication that would be found in a professional setting and as such the call centre can never be a “stepping stone” to a professional job. Of the immigrant women, 82 per cent had post-secondary education and had been practicing professionals before they immigrated to Canada. They had encountered barriers, including racism, in their earlier attempts to find work in their field. In Canada, the most accessible employment that they could secure was low-paying, contingent work in a call centre.

This article has focused on call centre worker’s notions of “skill”. The workers, most of whom were racialized immigrant women with post-secondary education and related work experience, characterized their work as “unskilled”. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the women did identify several “skills” required to succeed in the call centre and in the contingent workforce. Workers defined success on the job not as a function of “skill” but rather as a combination of having the right personality traits as well as being lucky. Our future analysis will focus on why women are reluctant to name the work they do as "skilled". Our prediction is that for these women the highly scripted, repetitive and monitored work in the call centre represents an unacceptable immigration outcome and they resisted broadening the notion of “skill” to include the call centre activities. This discussion raises questions about what is means to talk about “skill” in the context of racialization within the Canadian labour market.

References


