

CALL CENTERS:

How to reduce burnout, increase efficiency

- 1 With an estimated 3% of the U.S. workforce employed in call centers, the emotional labor of dealing with customers can lead to employee burnout and high turnover rates, according to Steffanie Wilk, a Wharton management professor who has done extensive research on call centers. It's important, she said, to figure out ways to counter stressful situations so that employees "are not feeling overwhelmed by their work, so they are not building up more steam".
- 2 Nancy Rothbard, professor of management at Wharton, presented the results of research on workers' mood, performance, and burnout conducted by her and Wilk at a large property and casualty insurer. "When we think about call-center workers, one of the biggest challenges is remaining resilient to the anger and hostility that can come their way. That's the negative side," said Rothbard. "But what about the positive side? If a client is pleasant and cheerful, does that infuse you with energy in the way I found it does when a positive mood from home spills over?"
- 3 Earlier work, she added, shows an emotional spillover between home and work for employees. She suggested that problems at home do not necessarily lead to problems at work. "I found there was more evidence of enrichment – where positive emotions from home spilled over and caused people to be more engaged with work. Negative emotions also spilled over and caused people to be more engaged with their work. Employers fear spillover from home will cause workers to be disengaged, but people try to escape from a negative experience by throwing themselves into another role."
- 4 Preliminary results of the insurance-company call-center research show that workers' moods coming into the job surface throughout the day, Rothbard said. If workers arrived in a positive mood, they were likely to stay that way, and the same held true if they arrived in a bad mood. As for the contagion effect of customers, Rothbard said there is spillover, but more for positive interactions than for negative ones. "My guess is employees are skilled and able to segment that away from themselves, but they let in the positive if the customer is cheerful and happy ... Perhaps it's a coping mechanism."
- 5 In focus groups, according to Wilk, call-center workers routinely say the hardest part of their job is that they know how to help the customer, but do not have the authority to take action, such as waiving a late fee. This forces the customer to get angry enough that he or she asks to speak to a person who has authority. "It's incredibly frustrating" for the initial call-center representative.
- 6 Malcolm McCulloch, senior research consultant at LIMRA International, suggested companies make a better effort to hire employees who will fit into the culture of their organization. McCulloch defined what he calls "person-organization fit" as the match between an individual's values and preferences and the characteristics of the work organization. He used the example of a claim center where accuracy and attention to detail are important. An individual who avoids risk and accepts supervision is likely to feel satisfied and comfortable in the job and develop a commitment to the organization. "On the other hand, a misfit at the claim center may have an entrepreneurial spirit. They're not going to be happy campers. They won't commit to the organization and they will soon leave."