

NEW WORK ORDER OR MORE OF THE SAME?: CALL CENTRES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Within debates about the new capitalism, claims have been made about the emergence of a new work order which has the potential to create more humane and intellectually satisfying experiences of work. Information and communication technologies, managerial strategies and new forms of work organisation are seen as combining to create an enabling and empowering environment, in which horizontal networks replace bureaucratic hierarchies and coercion is replaced by co-operation and trust.

In South Africa, these debates resonate with a general focus on strategies to dismantle the 'apartheid workplace regime' (Von Holdt, 2003). National strategies aim to create a new labour regime designed to extend basic rights and protection to all workers, particularly those who were excluded under apartheid. A raft of new policies and legislation has been designed to provide increased opportunities for skills development and career paths, and to change the authoritarian, racialised power relations in South African workplaces.

This paper explores the debates about the nature of work in call centres by analysing the actual experience and reality of the labour process in call centres in the telecommunications industry in South Africa. Through this case study, we will consider the applicability in the South African context of contrasting perspectives which characterise call centre workers either as newly empowered/autonomous or as regimented and trapped in an electronic panopticon.