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Call centre employees deserve some empathy, study suggests

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Spare a thought for the people at the other end of the conversation during dinner-hour telemarketing calls: they probably earn about $31,000 annually, and there's almost a one in three chance they'll quit or be fired within a year.

Those numbers come from a study by Ann Frost, an associate professor at the University of Western Ontario's Ivey business school, along with about 40 other scholars worldwide.

They studied 2,500 call centres in 17 countries, and found unsurprisingly that the employees face monotonous tasks, low pay, low job discretion, high performance monitoring, and high stress. This leads to high turnover -- 31 per cent annually in Canadian call centres, according to the study.

It found that contact centres in Canada with at least 30 per cent of the workforce in problem-solving groups cut their quit rate by almost half.

Of the 400 Canadian call centres surveyed, the majority were in-house, not unionized, handled inbound calls, and were staffed predominantly by women.

Only 19.9 per cent of the Canadian centres are unionized, half the global rate, and unionization is associated with 36 per cent higher pay, along with a turnover rate half that at non-union sites -- 16.9 per cent versus 34.6 per cent.

The average tenure is 5.7 years.

Workers handle, on average, 99.5 customers per day, with an average call handling time of 5.5 minutes and average annual pay of $31,468.

Despite a perception that call centre jobs are low-skilled or clerical in nature, many require considerable knowledge and ability.

And despite an overwhelmingly female workforce, only 5.9 per cent of centres offer child care as a benefit.

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