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Title: A job in a call center: trajectories and traps in the Southern Italian labour market

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Abstract

The paper analyses the southern Italian labour market, by looking at the employment trajectories of young people working in a call center. It aims to provide an understanding of labour market dynamics and their implications on young people's employment.

Even if the question is still highly debated, the dominant image of call centres emerging from the literature is that of 'electronic sweatshops' or 'white collar factories'. Call centers are seen in terms of the continuing Taylorisation of work, mainly through the prevailing technological device (ACDS). In addition, it is argued that emotional labour is essentially a deskilled type of work. According to others, call centers epitomise the operation of Foucault's panoptic power and surveillance. Also empirical research, focusing on workplaces, found that there exists a number of critical issues concerning call centers' employment and its organization (for example, low employment satisfaction, mental and physical stress, bad working conditions, etc.) generally leading to a high turn over.

The originality of our research lies in the link we draw between call centers' employment and the external labour market. Such a link is usually overlooked both in empirical and theoretical research. Based on the evidence from a structured questionnaire, the paper offers a complex reading of job opportunities in the Southern Italian labour market. It contends that young people's evaluation of their present job in the call center, their professional and personal aspirations and values are crucially influenced by the experience developed in the labour market. The more they have experienced instable and temporary jobs in the secondary labour market or even in the informal economy, often working without formal contracts and social security rights, the more they appreciate call centers' employment. This dimension prevails, regardless of young people sex, level of education, family status and age.

The evidence suggests that, in contrast to much rhetoric which overlooks the role of context, in southern Italy, job experiences end up favouring a downward adjustment of professional expectations. Here, the provision of full time contracts and of secure wage conditions turns call centers into appealing workplaces.

These findings pose great challenges to the future of work and to the quality of employment. Two main implications arise. First, it would seem that a number of young people decide to consider their employment in low quality workplaces as definitive: they simply give up looking for other jobs. Second, even the more qualified workers barter the quality of their employment and their career progression with wage security.