CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the present study was to measure and describe call centre agent’s perception of the organisational climate, characterised specifically by their experiences of high demand and low control within the call centre environment. Thus, the first research question asked whether the work experienced in call centres is characterised by experiences of high demand and low control.

It could be interpreted from analysis of the data obtained, that the work experienced in call centres is not characterised by experiences of high demand and low control. The mean rating for the construct ‘decision latitude’ recorded slightly higher, which indicates that the distribution is slightly skewed to the right, or that the organisational climate of the call centres investigated in the present study allows its call centre agents slightly more decision latitude. The mean rating for the construct ‘psychological job demand’ recorded slightly lower indicating that the distribution deviates slightly to the left, or that the call centre agent’s perceptions of the organisational climate in their call centres do not place an excessive amount of psychological demand on them.

The present study gathered information from the four call centres on the type of monitoring used. The information revealed similarly that agents did not find these monitoring systems excessively invasive, but viewed them rather purely as monitoring systems used for performance management purposes.
Past literature (Holman et al., 2002; Lee and Kleiner, 2003) has revealed that call centre agents subjected to electronic performance monitoring or being listened in on by supervisors while interacting with customers on the phone, were shown to suffer from negative outcomes, such as a lack of job satisfaction and stress. Additionally, electronic surveillance has been purported to infringe on employee’s right to privacy.

Past literature suggests that monitoring systems may be a significant factor in the high employee turnover experienced within call centres. However, this was not shown to be the case in the present study. Since 52.11% of the participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, one could speculate that they had been exposed to different forms of technology, and so, the monitoring equipment was not seen to be threatening. It is surmised that, as 55.25% of the call centre agents in the present study had been working for less than a year, the monitoring systems may not have caused a great deal of discomfort to the agents thus far, and monitoring may in fact be perceived as a training tool to improve their proficiency as call centre agents and enhance feedback. Thus, the present study may emulate a more ‘organic’ approach in their organisational climate. Where managers attempt to use the monitoring systems as a means to motivate job performance rather than demand it, by offering greater shared control and more opportunities for participation and growth (Follett, 1949; McGregor, 1960; Mayo, 1993).

Therefore, in answering the main aim and the first research question of the present study, one can infer that the call centres investigated can be characterised by experiences of relatively high control and moderately low psychological job demand.
The secondary aim was threefold; to ascertain whether or not the organisational climate influences call centre agent’s perceptions of their job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem. The third aim of the present study enquired what relationship exists between the organisational climate and the call centre agent’s job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem. Since these research questions posed are similar in nature, the corresponding research questions will be answered concurrently in the subsequent discussion.

Research question 2a asked whether organisational climate influenced call centre agent’s perceptions of their job satisfaction. Research question 3a asked what relationship existed between organisational climate and call centre agent’s job satisfaction.

The results showed that overall organisational climate does indeed influence call centre agent’s job satisfaction, and it was shown that the relationship between organisational climate and call centre agent’s job satisfaction was strong.

These findings are corroborated in the past literature. It has been well documented that organisational climate is an important antecedent to job satisfaction, as a negative work environment may have an impact on every facet of one’s job (Robbins et al., 2001). Thus, the findings of the present study echoes the sentiments of researchers (Denison, 1990; West et al., 1998; Burke and Litwin, 1992) who claim that there is a link between organisational climate and performance including job satisfaction, which is based on the perceptions of the individual and that organisational climate, leadership practices, employee outputs, customer responses and business productivity are strategically linked.
When examining the dimensions that represent the construct of organisational climate, one can see that decision latitude was shown to be an important contributing factor in a call centre agent’s satisfaction with their job. Skill discretion, a subscale of decision latitude, placed more weighting in this aspect, and overall social support was shown to have a moderate effect on the call centre agent’s feeling of satisfaction with their job. Social support within organisational climate is as the literature suggests, the organisational members’ perceptions about trust, support, innovation, recognition and fairness within the organisation that serves as a means of assessing and interpreting the organisation’s climate and thus, shaping the members’ behaviour (Moran and Volkwein, 1992 as cited in Kangis et al., 2000). Social support includes both supervisor and co-worker support, or the perception, of support.

Past research demonstrated the importance of a supportive leadership environment and the positive effect it has on the wellbeing of the employee (Holman, 2003). Additional studies have in fact revealed that supervisory style affects employee’s perceptions of autonomy and competence and those supervisors were listed as the most significant constraint to job satisfaction (O’Connor, Peters, Rudolf, and Pooyan, 1982 as cited in Spector, 1997). Thus, it has been implied that ‘leader behaviours’ can influence employees in a positive or negative way, and affect the organisational climate, productivity, employee perceptions and their feelings of well-being.

In line with this, the present study found that supervisor support emerged as a specific aspect within organisational climate that had an influence on a call centre agent’s
perception of job satisfaction. As 76.71% of the participants’ highest qualification was the twelfth grade, and that 52.11% were under twenty-six one may assume that this may have been their first job and as such, they may not have found their supervisor’s style to be restrictive.

Similarly, co-worker support appeared to be an additional aspect within organisational climate that slightly influenced the call centre agent’s perception of job satisfaction within the present study. One could postulate that the establishment of informal networks between co-workers may produce a more ‘flexible and decentralised’ organisational structure, allowing employees to feel empowered and thus, influencing their feelings of job satisfaction (Courtright et al., 1989).

Furthermore, Karasek and Theorell (1990) alluded to overall social support as a significant predictor of employee stress, asserting that a supportive leadership climate will have a positive effect on employee behaviour and wellbeing.

Consequently, the present study appears to agree with the past literature, and one can conclude that overall social support had a meaningful effect on call centre agent’s job satisfaction, that is, both supervisor and co-worker support do affect job satisfaction.

Research on call centres has indicated that various work aspects specific to a call centre environment, such as the use of performance monitoring and the degree to which the use of technology controls the way employees carry out their work (skill discretion and
decision latitude), may increase an agent’s psychological job demand and consequently decrease their job satisfaction.

Data collected in the present study indicated that psychological job demand showed a negative relationship to job satisfaction, indicating that when a call centre agent’s psychological demands increased their job satisfaction decreased, and vice versa.

Past research has indicated that an increase in psychological job demands influences one’s ability to perform job tasks (Passmore, 1988, as cited in Corea, 2000). Thus the results in the study conducted may be evidence to support these findings. Additionally, since the present study revealed that the call centres investigated were characterised by experiences of relatively high control and moderately low psychological job demand, one can infer that the organisational climate may not be excessively controlling and demanding within the organisations researched.

Finally, in response to research questions 2a, it is evident that organisational climate and the individual factors contributing to the overall construct do have an influence on a call centre agent’s job satisfaction. This is a confirmation of previous research and literature on the subject.

Research question 2b asked if organisational climate influenced call centre agents’ perceptions of their life satisfaction. The findings revealed that overall organisational climate did appear to influence life satisfaction; however, it showed only a weak
relationship.

Life satisfaction is concerned with how a person feels about his/her emotional and physical well-being. It is purported that, in order to have positive outcomes and experience life satisfaction one needs a balance between commitment to work and personal life. Work is a major factor in one’s life and there is a dynamic interplay between one’s work-life and non-work life. Events and situations outside of the workplace influence behaviour and feelings just as workplace issues may have an effect on home life. The ‘spill over’ hypothesis suggests that one’s level of satisfaction with his/her work life will extend to, or impact on that individual’s behaviour in other areas of their life (Judge and Watanabe, 1993).

Thus, when considering research question 2b, one can speculate that the findings of the present study support the ‘spill over’ hypothesis. Answers to the questionnaire indicated that to a measurable degree, organisational climate (work/job) indicated, a weak relationship with life satisfaction.

Muirhead (2005) suggested that an ‘optimal’ person-job fit exists when work is at the heart of one’s personal identity. Related to personal identity is the concept of life roles, which provide individuals with a framework on which to develop a sense of meaning, purpose and agency (Reitzes and Mutran, 1994).

Results obtained in this study revealed that the call centre agents appeared to be given
slightly greater control to perform their job tasks and their work roles were clearly defined. Thus, their self-relevant roles (i.e. roles that define our identity) were not perceived to be in danger thus, providing the call centre agents with meaning, self-worth and purpose (Carlson and Kacmar, 2000; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lazarus, 1991). This is an indication that there is little or no work/home role conflict and so the degree of the ‘spill over’ hypothesis may only be minimal and organisational climate (work roles) did not affect their life satisfaction (life roles) to a significant degree.

The findings of the present study, showed only a weak relationship between organisational climate and life satisfaction. The demographic information obtained show that the majority of the participants were very young and therefore, may not have had significant work or life experience, which may account for fact that the relationship was weak.

Additionally, individual characteristics seen in personality have been purported play a part in job and life satisfaction, where workers who show problem-focused coping attributes show better wellbeing. Thus, one may speculate that one’s locus of control may play a role in the correlation between call centre agents and their feelings of satisfaction with their job and their life.

When considering the scales that constitute overall organisational climate, life satisfaction was shown to be slightly affected by the perceived overall social support and with the co-worker support subscale carrying more weight.
A review of past literature considers various important leadership dimensions as influencing employee motivation and satisfaction. Leaders, who build trust within the workplace, encourage employees to perform, lead by example and coach employees (Harter, 2005) are seen to have a positive influence on their employees. Therefore, by providing a more facilitative and supportive role rather than a controlling style, managers may inspire and direct group performance between co-workers in a more positive manner (Hellriegel and Slocum, 1988). In this way, by means of allowing co-workers to set objectives and make more decisions among themselves, managers may actually increase their subordinate’s intrinsic motivation (Douthitt, 2002).

These findings are supported by Karasek and Theorell (1990), who allude to a supportive leadership climate having a positive effect on employee behaviour and overall wellbeing. This supports the findings in the present study that social support does have an impact on life satisfaction.

Results of the present study showed that the subscale skill discretion appeared to be the most significant aspect within the overall decision latitude scale, as influencing a call centre agent’s overall satisfaction with life. Therefore, a call centre agent’s perception of their satisfaction with life is to some degree related to their skill discretion.

Past research concurs with these findings, maintaining that heavy workload and high job demands have been linked to increased psychological strain (Karasek and Theorell, 1991), which can adversely affect ones’ life satisfaction due to negative outcomes such as
ill health. In addition, pressure tactics sometimes become part of the organisational strategy (Webster, 1966, as cited in Spector, 1997), and managers often exercise tight control over workers and impose unrelenting pressure on call centre operators at work, thus reducing skill discretion with resultant decrease in well-being and life satisfaction.

The electronic performance monitoring (EPM) of call centre agents has been considered an invasive and controversial practice within the past literature. It has been purported that the uses of the EPM is ambiguous, as employees may not know if the information will be used for punitive purposes, developmental purposes or for performance measures (Holman, 2003), which could result in increased feelings of stress and may lead to a decreased employee job satisfaction (Holman, 2003; Aiello, 1993 as cited in Aiello and Kolb, 1995).

These controlling measures and high job demand are important features in the organisational climate of call centres and have a significant effect on employee health, both emotionally and physically.

Conversely, research has revealed various positive aspects of performance monitoring. Performance monitoring may provide employees with feedback quickly and the transparency of the performance rating criteria is beneficial (Holman et al., 2002 as cited in Holman, 2003).

The present study revealed that the purpose of the monitoring equipment within the four
call centres investigated was clearly defined, thus the call centre agents reducing person-technology role ambiguity (Corea, 2000).

Therefore, one may postulate that while controlling measures were in place, their role within the four call centres was apparent to the call centre agents, which, contrary to much of the previous literature on the subject, may have had more of a positive than a negative effect on their perceptions of the organisational climate.

Research question 2c asked whether organisational climate influenced call centre agent’s perceptions of their self-esteem.

The relationship between overall organisational climate and self-esteem was not significant in the present study. Therefore, one can deduce that the organisational climate (input variable) does not influence the outcome variable (self-esteem), or a call centre agent’s feelings of self-worth.

From the findings of the present study it could be interpreted that call centre agents find fulfilment from other areas of their lives, and do not place excessive importance on their job for their feelings of self-worth. Thus, even though organisational climate was shown to influence call centre agent’s job satisfaction and minimally influence their life satisfaction, organisational climate was not shown to affect their self-esteem. These findings are supported by past research that has proposed a compensatory model, which claims that people compensate by enriching one area of life to make up for negative
experiences in other areas of life (Rain et al., 1991). Individual personality characteristics such as the ability to cope in stressful situations may also buffer organisational constraints to self-esteem.

Interestingly however, co-worker support appeared to be the only aspect within organisational climate that slightly influenced a call centre agent’s perception of their self-worth in the present study.

Past research has indicated that individuals who perceive themselves as having strong social support in the workplace are less likely to perceive work demands as stressors (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999 as cited in Valcour and Batt, 2003).

The Job Characteristics Model (JCM) focuses on the individual level of analysis (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). This model prescribes that work should be designed with optimal levels of five job characteristics, i.e., skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. The concept of autonomy has been extensively researched, with the amount of freedom an individual is given when deciding how to accomplish a task purported to affect their overall well-being (Averill, 1973; Miller, 1979).

The present study demonstrated that the four call centres investigated were characterised by relatively high levels of decision latitude, indicating optimal levels of job characteristics. Therefore, when co-workers are given more autonomy, their motivation and job satisfaction is increased thus, motivating the worker and allowing for their need
to ‘grow’. The opportunity for greater autonomy amongst call centre agents may provide an explanation for the slight influence it may have on agent’s perceived self-esteem.

**Limitations**

As with all research, some limitations are evident and may have influenced the findings of the present study. A non-probability, convenience sample of volunteers was used, which was limiting in that an element of bias may have been introduced into the present research, as volunteers are those who are most willing to participate. Furthermore, it was not possible to control for equal numbers of males and females and ethnic groups, which could be a potential problem in generalising across samples thus affecting the population validity.

Another possible limitation to the present research is the ecological validity; since industry profiles were not controlled for, generalising across contexts may not be appropriate. However, given that participants were from four South African organisations and came from various ethnic backgrounds and ages, this may not be a significant limitation in the present research. Additionally, it was not possible to control for equal sample sizes from the four organisations, limiting some of the statistical analyses that could have been performed.

A limitation of cross-sectional designs is that no causal interpretation can be considered (Neuman, 2000). Although the use of self-report questionnaires is an economical and convenient method of collecting data it is limiting in that responses are subjective
As team leaders distributed questionnaires to the call centre operators a limitation may be the possibility that participants were not entirely honest in answering the questionnaire. This may be because of their need to answer the questions in a more socially desirable way, since they completed the questionnaires within their working environment and possibly for fear that their team leader may be able to identify their questionnaire.