

# Project aims to help call centres ring the changes

By David Turner  
and Jonathan Moules

Ministers have responded to patchy performance and high drop-out and sickness rates at call centres by funding a new project to help them raise their game.

The decision by Patricia Hewitt, trade and industry secretary, comes as fears rise of a mass export of call centre jobs from the poorer parts of Britain to India.

It also follows recent high-profile scandals in the wake of the liberalisation of the directory inquiries market, when many customers complained that call centres were giving out wrong numbers.

The project, which won about £120,000 in funding this week, will include a mix of call-centre employers such as Barclays, unions such as Amicus, and town councils.

It will look specifically at call centres in north-west England, which has become especially reliant on them for employment as manufacturing jobs have disappeared.

Godfrey Smith, head of the project, said the aim was "to improve health, safety and productivity".

Call centre experts say employee absence rates can be as high as 30 per cent, and employee turnover over the course of a year can be higher than 100 per cent.

Mr Smith suggested the introduction of recorded messages explaining all the legally required information

to save the worker from the monotony of constant repetition.

But experts doubt that call centres, long decried as the new dark satanic mills, can be utterly transformed.

Robert Myatt of Kaisen Consulting, the business psychologists, said employers had mistakenly been looking for "people who were extroverted, driven, ambitious and liked variety".

Instead they should look for people "who enjoy the certainty of procedures and a clear set of guidelines about what is right and wrong", as well as a sense of "caring" and "emotional intelligence".

Roger Lyons, joint general secretary of Amicus and a supporter of the project, will today tell an offshore outsourcing conference organised by the Foreign Policy Centre think-tank that British workers must compete on the quality of their service and not price.

■ Offshoring will probably have a small negative effect on the UK economy in the first year after work is sent abroad, a report from PwC, the professional services firm, showed yesterday.

About 80 to 87 per cent of the value of activity transferred offshore would be recouped after a year, resulting in an initial net cost of 13 to 20 per cent.

However, this cost could be offset by further gains in later years as other assets of the business were redeployed, the report said.