



Minimum Standards for Working Conditions in Federal Government Contact Centres

BACKGROUND

More than 6,000 federal employees work in contact centres or client service centres where they interact with citizens by phone, the internet and social media. Most of these employees are PSAC members.

Examples of these centres range from Service Canada contact centres, CRA contact centres like those in Ottawa, client service centres like those in Calgary, new client service centres like the pension centre in Shediac and the new pay centre in Miramichi. Conditions vary depending in which department, agency or organization the work is being carried out. Representatives from contact centres have advised the union that it should clearly articulate the minimum standards that the union expects departments, agencies and organizations to meet. The union will work to ensure that departments, agencies and organizations meet or surpass these minimum standards in contact and client service centres through collective bargaining, health and safety committees and any other venues where improvements can be achieved.

This document lays down a set of broad principles and demands to improve working conditions for PSAC members working in contact centers. Its aim is to improve quality services to clients and provide decent working environments for workers.

The key principles for decent contact or client service centre working environments include:

- respect for collective agreement provisions including rest breaks, working time, shift time and overtime provisions
- meaningful consultation with workers and unions for all workplace changes,
- staffing levels that are sufficient to effectively handle client requirements
- attendance for workplace and career transition training, and the ability to balance work and family life
- work that is organized to allow workers the flexibility to provide quality services and client follow-up
- the provision of regular workplace and career transition training
- an environment where worker's insights into workplace operation are valued
- an environment where workers' have as much control over their work and its pace as possible
- rigorous application of health and safety legislation and regulations by all parties
- measures that facilitate stress relief
- appropriate call volume performance measures and targets
- appropriate ergonomic work station and equipment design, noise volume reduction design and strategies

WORK ORGANIZATION PRINCIPLES

Rest Breaks

- Workers should be empowered to log out of the phone system when they need to.
- Work should be organized so that contact centre workers will not have to operate phones for at least five (5) minutes of each hour.
- Sufficient time between calls must be allotted in order to update client files when appropriate.
- Strategies and procedures must be put in place to enable longer downtime between calls for particularly emotional and stressful calls.

Performance Standards – Targets

- Performance standards should be based on the provision of quality, informed service. Quantity based performance standards based on the number of calls answered or an arbitrary fixed time allocation should not compromise quality of service.
- Quantity based performance standards and targets should be responsive to individual client needs, taking full consideration of age, language, literacy and other accommodation considerations.

Call Monitoring

- Workers must be given reasonable notice about when their calls are going to be monitored, the purpose of the monitoring, and the period of time the monitoring will take place.
- Coaching and development feedback resulting from call monitoring must be provided in a meaningful and timely fashion.
- Call monitoring must not be used for disciplinary purposes but only for performance measurement after full consultation with the union.
- Calls may only be recorded if the worker and the worker's union agree.
- Where possible, call monitoring should be replaced with other tools available to the employer, such as customer satisfaction surveys.

Part-time Employment

- Employers should minimize the use of part-time employment.
- Employers shall provide for a fair and consistent approach when increasing the working hours of part-time employees.
- Employers shall provide for a fair and transparent process when converting part-time employees to full-time employees.
- Employers should put in place administrative procedures to ensure all hours worked by part-time employees are pensionable.

Scheduling Hours of Work

- When different working hours and or shifts are required by employers, the assignment of these work schedules should be offered on the basis of seniority, that is the years of service of the employees who normally perform those duties.
- When the employer requires a change in an employee's hours of work, proper notification as required in the collective agreement must be followed.

CLIENT ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

- Workers should never be directly or indirectly forced or encouraged to lie or misrepresent the truth to clients in order to meet artificial targets or conceal systemic organizational deficiencies.
- Workers should be allowed to exercise flexibility in their greetings or in their dialogue with clients.
- Workers should be tutored to provide a quality service experience for the client.

Abusive, Aggressive or Emotional Calls

- Employers must take steps to address problems that contribute to stressful calls including:
 - Addressing systemic reasons behind client dissatisfaction such as long wait times, inaccurate or misleading contact information, or lack of training and support.
 - Developing clear abusive/aggressive/emotional-call procedures and guidelines, which include call reporting and the right to terminate or extend the call.
 - Providing post call support and debriefing time to the worker.
 - Providing a rest period following an abusive, aggressive or emotional call.
 - Providing alternate duties on a temporary basis where required.
 - Providing clients and citizens with clear guidelines against verbal abuse.

CONTACT CENTRE ENVIRONMENT PRINCIPLES

- Workplace design must address all factors that have negative effects on workers.
- Workplaces must facilitate comfortable temperature and air circulation standards.
- Workstations (including keyboards, telephones, desks and chairs) must be kept hygienic especially when multiple shifts access the same workstations.
- Other workplace elements like carpets, rest and eating areas, washrooms and photocopy areas must also be kept clean and hygienic.
- Workers should have access to notice boards, email and web based communication in the workplace.

Background Noise

- Background noise in contact centre environments must be minimized.
- Workers shouldn't have to raise their voices or turn up the volume on their head sets to talk to clients.

- Workplace design should incorporate adequate sound partitioning in the workplace.
- Workers should be allowed to request that callers call back if they cannot properly hear the caller because of bad phone lines, cell phone reception or background noise because of where the caller is calling from.

Workstation Design

- Workstations must be designed in ways that prevent work related musculoskeletal disorders, including injuries and or pain in the neck and shoulders, the hands and wrists, the back and the legs.
- Workstations should be as adjustable and flexible as possible. The very best contact centre workstations now allow service agents to stand at their workstation and stretch and move around.
- Every worker should be entitled to an ergonomic assessment when first introduced to a new work station or on demand when a potential health and safety problem is reported.
- All workers should be trained and advised about safe working techniques and practices as a precautionary measure to reduce the potential of short term and long term health and safety injuries.
- Workers should have sufficient time at the beginning of their shift to be able to make adjustments to their workstation.
- Hot desking, the practice where workers are forced to regularly change workstations, is a recipe for a broad menu of health problems and should be avoided.

Workplace Posture

- Contact centre work (i.e. keyboard entry) can be repetitive and harmful. It reduces the body's rest and recovery time causing increased wear and tear on body tissues increasing muscle fatigue. Appropriate steps must be taken to mediate the negative impacts.
- Work cycles of less than 30 seconds performed for 30 minutes or more or when a fundamental activity is repeated more than 50% of the work cycle time are considered repetitive and should be avoided or broken by rest periods.

Visual fatigue

- Intensive and prolonged focus on computer screens is a common problem with contact centre employment, often causing sore eyes, blurred vision, tired eyes and headaches.
- Surrounding lighting should not cause glare.
- Workers should be reminded to look away from the screen and focus on distant objects from time to time to help reduce eye strain.

Voice Strain

- Voice strain is common despite the emergence of other non-telephony communication media. Positive steps should be in place to avoid instances of voice strain.
- Workplaces should have easy access to drinking water.
- Where possible repetitive introductory remarks should be pre-recorded.
- In addition to reasonable call volume targets, telephony systems should allow sufficient pauses before calls, and scripts should be designed to allow for pauses where possible.
- Background noise should be eliminated to minimize occasions when workers have to raise their voices

Hearing, Acoustic Shock & Headsets

- Incidences of acoustic shock must be recorded. Acoustic shock is caused by sudden loud noises emanating from telephone handsets and headsets. This can cause hearing damage which is accentuated when combined with stress.
- Workers should be supplied with acoustic shock prevention devices in contact centres which are known to experience incidents of acoustic shock.
- Each worker should be provided with her or his own headset, and be trained in the regular cleaning and maintenance of headsets.

Stress

- Stress is the most reported occupational hazard that characterizes work in contact centres. It must be rigorously monitored and addressed.
- Employers have an obligation to do everything in their power to provide a work environment that is as free of stress as possible.
- Organization of contact centre work must provide opportunities for task variation, autonomy and control to help minimize stress.
- Workers have a right to expect authentic consultation as a method of avoiding stressful, unrealistic, subjective and unachievable performance objectives and targets.
- Employers should be providing supportive leadership, opportunities for workers to grow and develop, clear expectations, opportunities for staff interaction, opportunities for participation in decision making, reasonable work demands and opportunities for workers to have control over their work to help minimize stress in the contact centre workplace.

HEALTH AND SAFETY PRINCIPLES

- Contact centre workplaces must implement contact centre specific joint workplace health and safety committees.
- Health and safety representatives must be provided training at the employer's expense, including training on issues and problems inherent in contact centre work environments.
- Joint health and safety committees must monitor and enforce workplace safety issues.

- Federal contact centre workplaces must implement the requirements of Part 20 of the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, dealing with violence prevention in the workplace which clearly determines that the concept of violence is not limited to physical acts of violence, but also includes harassment, including psychological harassment, discrimination and bullying.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EMPLOYMENT EQUITY PRINCIPLES

- All levels of positions at contact centre workplaces should be representative and reflect the diversity of their communities. Workers have a right to expect the employer to adhere to human rights and employment equity obligations such as having discrimination and harassment-free workplaces.
- All workers must have access to information about their human rights.
- All managers must understand and be trained about their obligations to address harassment, discrimination and duty to accommodate issues in the workplace in a timely, respectful, confidential and effective manner.