



Working Conditions and Disengagement in Tunisian Call Centers: An Approach Based on Motivation Theories

Faten Methammem*

The faculty of economic sciences and management of Nabeul, Nabeul-8000, Tunisia

Email: methammem.faten03@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the impact of working conditions on the motivation of teleoperators in a call center in Nabeul, Tunisia. Faced with the perception of difficult working conditions, often compared to neo-Taylorism, the research aims to analyze how these factors affect employee well-being and engagement. A qualitative methodology was used, based on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten teleoperators. The results show that factors such as excessive workload, strict performance monitoring, tense interpersonal relationships, an unfavorable physical environment, and a feeling of salary inequity have a negative impact on their motivation and health. These difficult working conditions lead to disengagement, high absenteeism, and a high employee turnover rate.

Keywords: Working conditions; motivation; call centers; teleoperators; qualitative research.

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* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

The emergence of New Information and Communication Technologies since the 1990s has radically transformed the global economic landscape. These technological advances have not only facilitated outsourcing but have also given birth to new business structures, including call centers. These entities, which have become strategic tools for customer relationship management, have experienced exponential growth and play a crucial role in strengthening loyalty and reducing operational costs for companies [1]. Their rapid expansion has made them a pillar of the service economy, particularly in developing countries where they represent a major source of employment [2].

Despite their economic importance, call centers face persistent criticism regarding the demanding nature of their working conditions. The dominant organizational model is often perceived as a modern form of neo-Taylorism, characterized by repetitive tasks, strong pressure on productivity, and strict control over employee performance [3]. These conditions are associated with significant risks to the psychological health of teleoperators, including chronic stress, emotional dissonance, and burnout [4]. These factors not only alter the well-being of employees but also have a direct impact on the quality of customer service and the overall performance of the company.

While compensation is often considered the main lever of motivation in this sector, it is not enough to compensate for the demotivating effects of these working conditions. Numerous studies have shown that, far beyond the financial aspect, factors such as recognition, autonomy, and a healthy work environment are essential to maintaining employee engagement and satisfaction [5]. Research has amply highlighted the direct impact of unfavorable working conditions on employee motivation, a factor that is nevertheless essential for performance and staff retention [6]. The high turnover rate, often characteristic of this sector, is a clear illustration of this.

Faced with these challenges, there is a crucial need to examine in depth the influence of working conditions on the motivation of teleoperators, a problem that deserves increased attention. This study aims to answer the following research question: What is the impact of working conditions on the motivation of teleoperators in call centers? To do this, we will rely on a qualitative methodology and set the following objectives: analyze the specific working conditions of call centers and evaluate their influence on employee motivation. Our analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the drivers of motivation in this sector and will provide practical recommendations for improving employee well-being and performance.

This article is structured in several parts. First, we will present a literature review on the key concepts, namely motivation and well-being at work, together with the organizational specificities of call centers. Then, we will describe the methodology of our study, justifying the choice of a qualitative approach and detailing the protocol for data collection and analysis. The third part will be dedicated to the presentation and discussion of our results, highlighting the stress and motivation factors identified among teleoperators. Finally, we will conclude by summarizing the main contributions of our research, highlighting its limitations and suggesting avenues for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Context and Characteristics of Call Centers

Call centers have become an essential component of communication between companies and their customers, playing a central role in managing customer relationships and optimizing costs [7]. These platforms rely on a combination of human, material, and technological resources to manage customer relationships remotely [8]. Several typologies have been identified, particularly based on the direction of calls (inbound or outbound), which determine distinct work dynamics. Inbound calls, initiated by customers, require high organizational flexibility and the ability to manage unpredictable volumes [9]. In contrast, outbound calls, initiated by agents, are more predictable but are often associated with more difficult working conditions due to time constraints and the need to manage customer aggression [3]. Call centers also differ in their form (internal or external) and their organizational specifics, particularly the use of sophisticated electronic evaluation systems that measure performance quantitatively and continuously (e.g., talk time, resolution rate) [8]. These strict control practices, often perceived as a form of surveillance, can lead to strong demotivation among employees and a feeling of work depersonalization [10].

2.2. Working Conditions: A Persistence of Taylorism

Working conditions in call centers are a major concern and are often described as a contemporary form of "post-Taylorism" or neo-Taylorism, where the rationalization and standardization of tasks are pushed to the extreme [11]. The work is characterized by the rationalization and standardization of tasks, strict performance control, and a heavy workload [4]. This control, whether exercised by a supervisor or by sophisticated technological tools like speech analysis software, can lead to anxiety, depression, and a feeling of depersonalization among employees [8].

Other factors contribute to the difficult nature of the work, exacerbating psychosocial risks:

- **Relationship with Customers:** Interactions with demanding, unpleasant, or hostile customers are a major source of stress and professional burnout, a phenomenon well-documented as "emotional dissonance" [12].
- **Nature of Tasks:** The monotony and repetitive nature of the tasks are recurring problems that can lead to emotional exhaustion, a lack of meaning in the work, and a loss of motivation [6].
- **Material Conditions:** Although basic equipment is provided, the open-plan office layout and lack of ergonomics pose problems with concentration, noise, and physical well-being, which can cause musculoskeletal disorders and fatigue [9].
- **Relationship with the Supervisor:** Authoritarian behavior from supervisors, a perceived lack of support, and management practices focused on strict control rather than autonomy are sources of tension that can negatively impact employee motivation and well-being [1].

2.3. The Impact on Employee Motivation

Motivation is a determining factor for a company's success and directly influences the performance and

behavior of individuals [13]. Lack of motivation and burnout are direct consequences of difficult working conditions, particularly in service environments like call centers [9]. Emotional dissonance, defined as the conflict between the emotions an employee feels and those required by the job, is a major psychological factor contributing to burnout in this sector [12]. Agents are often required to display a positive and empathetic attitude, even when faced with aggressive customers or monotonous tasks, which creates intense psychological tension [10].

The impact of these working conditions is seen in high turnover rates and increased absenteeism, key indicators of professional distress [14]. Recent research confirms that employees in an unfavorable environment are more likely to feel dissatisfaction and demotivation, which harms not only their well-being but also productivity and service quality [1]. The quality of the environment, both physical and psychological, is therefore crucial for employee well-being and productivity [15].

Consequently, the responsibility for staff motivation largely falls on management. They must urgently improve working conditions to foster the engagement, loyalty, and well-being of their teams. This requires a holistic approach that includes managerial support, career development opportunities, and a healthy work-life balance [16].

3. Empirical Section

3.1. Research Methodology

To explore the impact of working conditions on the motivation of call center agents, we present the methodological approach adopted. We will describe in detail the data collection methods and the characteristics of the sample used for our study.

3.1.1. Methodological Choice

Our study adopts a qualitative and exploratory empirical approach to delve deep into the influence of working conditions on the motivation of call center agents. This methodology is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social realities and understanding individuals' lived experiences [17]. We chose the semi-structured interview as our main data collection technique. This method not only allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon but also encourages participants to express themselves spontaneously and with nuance, which is essential for grasping the complexity of work dynamics in this sector [18].

The research focuses specifically on working conditions in Tunisian call centers in the Nabeul region and their impact on employee motivation. The exploratory approach is relevant for this study as it allows us to break free from rigid theoretical frameworks and dive directly into the field reality, thus fostering direct contact with the target audience [19]. The validity of this method relies on building a relationship of trust between the researcher and the participants, a crucial element for collecting rich data that accurately reflects their experiences [20]. The primary goal of this qualitative approach is to provide a detailed description and new insights into working conditions in Tunisian call centers, an area that is still under-documented in local literature [21].

3.1.2. Data Collection Technique

In our research, we will use the interview technique to gather the necessary data.

3.1.2.1. The Semi-Structured Interview

The interview is a fundamental research method in social sciences, defined as a structured, time-limited verbal interaction aimed at collecting information from a participant [17]. There are several types of interviews, ranging from the most structured (directive) to the most open (non-directive). For our study, we chose the semi-structured interview method.

This approach is particularly relevant because it combines the advantages of a predefined structure with the flexibility needed to explore emerging Figures [20]. Semi-structured interviews are based on the use of an interview guide, which is a list of key Figures or questions to be addressed. Although the researcher follows this guide, they have considerable leeway to adapt the order of questions, rephrase probes, and encourage the participant to speak freely on relevant points [19]. This flexibility allows for the collection of data that is both targeted and rich in contextual details, which is crucial for understanding the complexity of the lived experiences of call center operators.

3.1.2.2. The Interview Guide

The interview guide (see Appendix 1) was developed from a review of existing literature on working conditions and motivation in call centers. It serves as a roadmap for the semi-structured interviews, maintaining data collection consistency while offering the necessary flexibility to thoroughly explore each participant's unique perspectives [22]. Unlike a rigid questionnaire, the guide is a thematic list rather than a fixed series of questions. The order and wording of the questions can be adjusted based on the flow of the interview and the operator's responses, providing the researcher with essential flexibility [20]. This approach allowed us to adapt to the Tunisian research environment and build a trusting relationship with participants, who were free to express their opinions and experiences without constraint.

The interview guide is structured around the following key Figures, based on issues identified in the scientific literature [19] :

- **Workload:** This Figure addresses weekly and daily work hours, breaks, and potential night shifts. It focuses on employees' perception of their work intensity and volume, a key factor in professional burnout [23]. The goal is to measure time pressure and its impact on tiredness.
- **Performance Control:** Questions cover types of supervision, including statistical call monitoring (e.g., average handling time), and the consequences of perceived insufficient performance (sanctions, job loss). This continuous control is a source of anxiety and demotivation for employees [8].
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** This section assesses the quality of communication and interactions among colleagues and with supervisors. A lack of social support and authoritarian management can negatively impact employee motivation and well-being [1].

- **Premises and Equipment:** The interview delves into the perception of the premises and equipment (workstation, sound environment, air quality). A noisy or uncomfortable work environment can cause tiredness and musculoskeletal disorders, affecting concentration and effectiveness [9].
- **Legal income and Bonus:** This Figure examines the perception of salaries and bonuses compared to other call centers and the effect of these comparisons on motivation, job satisfaction, and the feeling of fairness [6].
- **Working Conditions:** The final questions synthesize the previous Figures, asking participants for their general perception of working conditions and inviting them to propose solutions to improve their motivation and well-being within the company [3].

3.1.2.3. Interview Techniques

Our data collection approach favored face-to-face interviews because this method helps build a relationship of trust with the participant [20]. This direct interaction allows us to capture non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, which enrich our understanding of the teleoperators' responses and experiences [17]. To record the data, we used two complementary techniques.

The first was manual note-taking in a notebook, which allowed us to jot down key points from the responses in real time. These notes were then transcribed and organized into an analysis grid. The second technique, considered more effective, was voice recording. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, we used an audio recorder. This technique ensures a comprehensive and accurate capture of the interviews, allowing for a faithful transcription and a more nuanced analysis of the discourse, unlike simple note-taking, which might miss important details [19].

3.1.2.4. The Qualities of the Interviewer

In qualitative interviews, the interviewer must maintain a neutral stance, refraining from intervening or expressing personal judgment to avoid influencing participants' responses [20]. Their main role is to guide the conversation to keep it focused on the research Figures while allowing the interviewee the freedom to express themselves fully [19]. The interviewer's objectivity is therefore considered an essential element to guarantee the validity and reliability of the data collected.

Furthermore, active listening is a crucial skill for conducting a quality interview. It requires sustained concentration and a significant cognitive effort from the researcher to understand not only the verbal content but also the nuances, tone, and non-verbal cues of the interviewee [17]. This careful listening is essential for grasping the subtleties of the participants' experiences and for conducting an in-depth analysis of the richness of the information gathered.

3.1.3. Sample Presentation

Our sample consists of ten teleoperators from a single call center located in Nabeul. The selection of these participants was conducted using purposive sampling, a strategic choice in qualitative research that involves

selecting individuals who can provide rich and relevant information concerning the research question [20]. This type of sampling allowed us to target operators with a specific profile: individuals of both sexes, aged 23 to 29, with two to four years of professional experience. Their diverse academic backgrounds (Bachelor's degrees in French, English, Economics, and Finance) provide varied perspectives and enrich the depth of the data collected.

Although our sample is small, this is consistent with a qualitative approach [17]. The goal is not to generalize the results to all call centers but to provide an in-depth understanding of working conditions and motivation in this specific context.

By conducting these interviews, we reached theoretical saturation [24,19] an essential criterion in qualitative research that indicates data collection can be stopped. Saturation was reached when subsequent interviews no longer revealed new Figures or significant new information regarding working conditions and their impact on motivation. The participants' accounts and experiences began to repeat, assuring us that we had captured the full range of relevant perceptions for our study. This point of saturation justifies the size of our sample and validates the robustness of our data [25].

4. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we analyze and discuss the information gathered using the data collection techniques presented earlier.

4.1. The Steps of Content Analysis

To ensure the objectivity and reliability of our analysis, we chose to use the content analysis technique. This qualitative research method allows for a systematic and objective description of communication content, going beyond simple description to interpret deeper meanings [26]. As Creswell & Creswell [17] argue, content analysis is one of the most widely used and reliable approaches for studying and analyzing interview data. It provides a rigorous framework for processing the qualitative information from our interviews with teleoperators.

The analysis process is based on three fundamental steps [27, 19]:

1. **Data Transcription:** The first step consists of converting the audio recordings of the interviews into full text. Word-for-word transcription is essential to ensure no information is lost and to guarantee an accurate analysis of the discourse.
2. **Information Coding:** Coding is at the heart of content analysis. It involves dividing the text into meaningful units and then classifying them into relevant categories or Figures [19]. This process allowed us to group participants' responses on topics like workload, supervision, and compensation.
3. **Data Processing and Analysis:** This final step aims to interpret the coded data to extract the research findings. We analyzed the Figures and categories to identify the relationships between working conditions and the motivation of teleoperators, justifying our conclusions with concrete excerpts from the interviews [20].

4.1.1. Data Transcription

Transcription is the crucial first step of content analysis, which involves converting audio recordings of interviews into a written text, or "verbatim" [19]. This written format is essential because it systematizes the data, making it easy to analyze and verify. The richness of qualitative data comes in various forms, such as words, phrases, or expressions, captured from interviews or field observation notes [20].

In our study, we manually transcribed the interviews, then carefully listened to the audio recordings to ensure a complete transcription. We chose to exclude out-of-context speech to focus on information directly relevant to the research question. Furthermore, aware of the importance of non-verbal communication, we noted gestures, facial expressions, or any other signs of approval or rejection when the verbal discourse was not very expressive. This consideration of non-verbal cues enriches our understanding of the participants' experiences, as the message is not limited to the words alone [17].

4.1.2. Information Coding

Coding is the second crucial step of content analysis. It's a systematic process that transforms raw qualitative data from interviews into an organized, interpretable structure [28]. This process, often done line by line, allows researchers to identify, label, and group relevant text segments based on key Figures or concepts [17].

There are two primary coding approaches, depending on whether the analysis framework is built before or during the study:

- **Open (or Inductive) Coding:** This method is preferred when the goal is to explore a phenomenon without preconceived ideas. The analysis framework isn't established at the beginning but is built as the data is examined. The analyst identifies Figures and categories that emerge directly from the interviews [20]. In this case, open coding allowed us to discover the teleoperators' concerns inductively, using the interview guide questions to identify the key Figures that emerged from their testimonies.
- **Closed (or Deductive) Coding:** Unlike open coding, this approach relies on a pre-existing analysis framework, often built from theories or hypotheses established before the research began. The data is then coded to validate or invalidate these theories. This is an inverse process, where pre-existing ideas are used to test the validity of the observed data [19]. Although we primarily used an open approach, familiarity with closed coding is essential for the qualitative researcher.

4.1.3. Data Processing and Analysis

4.1.3.1. Results of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The analysis and interpretation of the results from the semi-structured interviews will be conducted using a thematic approach, following the sequential structure of the interview guide.

This Figure aims to assess the workload within the call center, focusing on working hours and the time between

calls. The teleoperators interviewed found this workload to be very intense, particularly because of their daily and weekly working hours. Since this workload is a known factor influencing employee motivation, it could directly impact performance.

Verbatim

“ [...]It's either 42 hours per week spread over 5 days, with four 9-hour days and one 6-hour day, or 40 hours per week spread over 5 days, which is 8 hours per day. For breaks, the 9-hour and 8-hour days include a one-hour lunch break, and in addition to that hour, we are entitled to four 10-minute breaks throughout the day. For part-time advisors (with a medical or academic justification), it's 28 hours per week, which is two 10-hour days and one 8-hour day, also with a one-hour lunch break for each day and the four 10-minute breaks.

There are indeed teams that work at night (from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m.), which is only 4 workdays with the lunch break and the 10-minute breaks, knowing that the hours from midnight onward are paid at a 150% premium. These teams are exclusively male.

Overall, the workload for a full-time advisor is tiring, especially for the 42-hour week, considering that the 40-hour schedule has only recently become available. Spending 9 hours at work, with a one-hour lunch break, plus the time it takes to commute, means being away from home for practically 12 hours. It's exhausting, and in the long run, our motivation suffers the consequences. [...].”

“[...]There are no specific laws that control the number of hours, since each center certainly obeys Tunisian labor laws, except that for offshore centers, there are separate laws. So, each call center can really manage the number of hours. The number of hours varies between 40 and 48 hours. Call centers that allow part-time work (a 28 or 20-hour schedule) are very rare. According to call center teleoperators, the workload on a 42-hour schedule is certainly much heavier, as it's spread over 5 days a week with 9 hours of work. For four days, we work 9 hours, and one day we work 6 hours. With transportation, the lunch break, etc., that comes out to a minimum of 12 hours spent away from home that are tied to work. You end up not having a normal social and personal life.[...]”

Figure 1: Workload in the Call Center

The participants interviewed are divided into three work schedules based on their situation. Students have a 28-hour-per-week schedule, which allows them to choose their workdays. Only one person interviewed had this status, and only during their university studies. During vacations, this same teleoperator can switch to the 40-hour-per-week schedule, a plan now available.

The nine other people interviewed chose the 40-hour-per-week schedule, a plan recently implemented at the call center in Nabeul, which they consider more advantageous than the 42-hour one.

These interviews allow us to better understand the intense workload experienced by teleoperators, especially when they exceed 9 hours of presence. This overload directly impacts their motivation.

The goal of this Figure is to examine the call center's supervision system and the types of control used. It aims to understand the interviewees' point of view on this system. According to their testimonies, the supervision is considered very strict and severe, which they see as a problem.

Verbatim

"[...] The supervision system is strict and as solid as an iron glove. In our center, there are two types of control: control by a supervisor and computerized control via software. If you answer a client's call, they know it. If you put them on hold, they also know, and they know for how many minutes and seconds. Breaks are counted by the second. In short, nothing escapes the system, as software is programmed and put in place to monitor everything with daily reports and a summary afterward.

In our call center, the software provides statistics on our work performance. If the software shows numbers below average, we face sanctions. These start with a "framing interview" with the team leader, followed by a "reframing interview" if the software still shows low numbers. There's also the risk of receiving a warning notice and even a suspension, which can last between one and three months. After three warning notices, the sanction can be dismissal [...] ”.

Figure 2: "Performance Control"

According to the teleoperators, the strict control system has direct consequences on their work. This control is computerized, with software that measures and monitors the productivity of each employee.

The process for managing issues begins with a "framing interview" with the team leader. This interview is a chance for the teleoperators to explain their situation. If the problems persist, a "reframing interview" is held to provide them with further training.

The next step is an awareness interview, which may include a verbal warning. If the teleoperator accumulates three negative reviews, they risk a suspension of one to three days. The process can then escalate, leading to a disciplinary review with the Human Resources council. This council can impose harsher penalties, such as a suspension of one to three months, or even dismissal.

This Figure shows that the control system is a major problem for teleoperators. While moderate supervision could motivate them, the strict control system at this call center is perceived as a constraint. It therefore has a negative effect on employee well-being and motivation.

In this section, we analyze the relationships and the level of interaction and communication among colleagues. According to the people interviewed, there are conflicts and a lack of communication among teleoperators.

Verbatim

“[...] The relationship between advisors and their superiors is generally tense, as it's rare to find managers who defend the well-being of the advisor. On the other hand, relationships between advisors themselves are conducted with respect despite conflicts. The degree of interaction is very low; it's an "everyone for themselves" mentality. But when the atmosphere among us turns sour, it impacts motivation and involvement in work tasks. A good atmosphere on the floor always helps us stay more productive and manage our stress better, obviously.” [...]

Figure 3: Interpersonal Relationships

This Figure reveals that interpersonal relationships within the call center are tense, and even conflictual. The work style, which restricts interaction between colleagues, is identified as a source of problems by the employees interviewed.

In their own words, this lack of interaction has a direct impact on team cohesion and individual performance. It hinders the transfer of knowledge between experienced teleoperators and newcomers, which can slow down skills development. Furthermore, the low energy and absence of a positive work atmosphere have negative repercussions on motivation and task involvement. Finally, the employees emphasize that a good work atmosphere is crucial for feeling more comfortable and better managing daily stress. The objective of this Figure is to discover the work environment in call centers, specifically the material conditions.

Verbatim

“[...]The premises are suitable at first glance, but during renovations, we struggle with noise and bad smells. The work areas are also sometimes too crowded and saturated, especially in the summer, which makes things difficult, especially if the air conditioning breaks down in the middle of summer and no one fixes it. As for the equipment, most of the wires are broken and many headsets are defective. [...]

“[...] The conditions of the work environment affect our work's efficiency. The noise causes a lack of concentration, and in our job, we need to concentrate to solve clients' technical problems. Our stress increases with defective headsets, we start work late, and then we're forced to do our best because of the time constraint.. The work influences our health, with problems such as eye strain after visual effort, herniated discs from sitting on chairs for too long, nervous breakdowns, and serious hearing problems.” [...]

Figure 4: Premises and Equipment

The work environment directly influences employees' effectiveness, health, and motivation. Noise and unpleasant smells prevent teleoperators from concentrating, which has a negative impact on their productivity. Noise can also be a source of stress and mental fatigue.

Furthermore, defective equipment causes work delays, resulting in lost time and affecting performance. Finally, these working conditions can have serious repercussions on the health of teleoperators, including herniated discs, nervous breakdowns, and hearing problems.

The responses from the teleoperators demonstrate that the work environment has a negative impact on their health, psychological well-being, effectiveness, and, most importantly, their motivation.

Poor material conditions detract from the pleasure of working. The noise and lack of concentration inherent in open-space work environments are factors that demotivate employees. The premises and equipment are therefore a key element that directly influences the motivation of teleoperators.

This Figure focuses on comparing the income (salaries and bonuses) of teleoperators to those in other call centers. The objective is to analyze the impact of perceived salary inequity on employee motivation.

Verbatim

"[...] Yes, we do compare. The bonuses in our call center compared to other call centers... We are technical support advisors, and our bonuses are harder to achieve than those in the sales department, which are sales bonuses. Given that a sales task is easier than a troubleshooting task, we end up with mediocre bonuses compared to others, which is very demotivating. The only bonuses that exist in our call center are for attendance and punctuality.

Regarding income, the salaries in our call center are not comparable to other centers. Compared to small call centers, the base salary in our call center is 600 DT, and with bonuses, we can reach 900 DT. The base salary of a teleoperator in other call centers is between 450 DT and 500 DT. The difference is in the bonuses. With bonuses, a tele-advisor in other centers can reach a salary of 1100 DT, even though we work under the same conditions."[...]

Figure 5: Legal Income and Bonuses

According to the testimonies, teleoperators at inbound call centers (reception) have a higher base salary than those at outbound call centers (outbound calls). However, the latter benefit from larger sales bonuses.

This situation creates a feeling of inequity. Employees feel that their tasks are more complex than those at other call centers and that, as a result, their compensation is insufficient and unsatisfactory.

In this Figure, we will demonstrate the effect of working conditions, such as the physical and psychosocial aspects, on employees' involvement and motivation at work.

Verbatim

“[...] Taking into consideration the country's economic conditions and comparing work at an inbound call center to an outbound one, the workload becomes manageable. However, the bonuses for an inbound advisor are rather poor compared to those at outbound centers, especially given the workload, hours, etc.

Between the base salary of 500 or 600 DT and the salary with bonuses, all with tax and contribution deductions, the pay is not as exceptional as people who haven't worked at this center might think. A veteran advisor's salary (the hourly rate increases with seniority), with all these bonuses, can't exceed 900 DT, and I'm talking about the absolute top earners, so it's really nothing exceptional. But we don't really have a choice.

An advisor's involvement gets lost over time. In the beginning, you're enthusiastic, but later you find yourself doing the same robotic work a minimum of 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, with harmful consequences for your health. Your eyes, ears, and back are the first to suffer, as is your motivation at work.

They need to get rid of the 42-hour-per-week schedules and make it easier to switch to part-time. They also need to take into consideration the life we have outside of work. Sometimes you end up with an irregular schedule, starting each day at a different time, whether it's 7 a.m., 9 a.m., or 11 a.m. In short, you can no longer find a balance between your professional and personal life, especially for people who have families to support.

They also need to replace the broken equipment and consider the long-term health effects of this work on an advisor. When you're already developing a herniated disc, it's hard to work 4 hours in a chair that's making things even worse, and with a stress bonus...

...it's not so bad, if managers who come and go whenever they want get a stress bonus, then why not the advisors? [...]”

Figure 6: Working Conditions

The analysis of this Figure reveals that working conditions have a negative impact on teleoperators, who describe their tasks as repetitive and robotic.

Furthermore, they feel that their bonuses are inequitable compared to those of teleoperators at outbound call

centers. What is notable is that employees are not content with just complaining; they have a strong desire to actively participate in improving their working conditions, in the hope that this will have a positive effect on their motivation and, consequently, on their performance.

4.1.3.2. Analysis of Motivation Approaches Based on the Interviews

The interviews and analysis reveal that high turnover and absenteeism in call centers are not isolated phenomena but rather deliberate withdrawal strategies adopted by employees facing adverse working conditions. These reactions stem from rigid managerial practices and a highly standardized work organization that limits employee autonomy. Numerous studies corroborate this interpretation, highlighting that low decision latitude and insufficient organizational support are key predictors of professional burnout [29]. Furthermore, the intensification of work—characterized by constant monitoring and performance pressure—exacerbates psychological strain, as evidenced by research linking surveillance and standardization to deteriorating mental health outcomes among employees [30]. These findings suggest that structural factors within the organization play a central role in shaping employee disengagement and well-being.

The strictly top-down nature of hierarchical relationships in call centers—characterized by unidirectional communication and continuous monitoring—emerges as a central driver of employee demotivation. This relational rigidity undermines autonomy and erodes intrinsic motivation, as employees perceive a lack of recognition and support in their daily tasks [31]. Rather than fostering engagement, this managerial model prioritizes control mechanisms that diminish trust and psychological safety. Numerous studies have demonstrated that such supervisory practices negatively affect both individual performance and collective well-being, weakening organizational commitment and increasing turnover intentions [32]. These findings underscore the need for a shift toward more participative and supportive management styles that enhance employee empowerment and resilience.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provides a relevant framework for understanding employee demotivation in call centers, particularly through the absence of "satisfaction factors." The repetitive and monotonous nature of teleoperators' tasks inhibits any sense of accomplishment or perceived usefulness, which significantly undermines motivation [33]. The lack of responsibility, limited career progression, and cognitively unstimulating work environment further obstruct the development of intrinsic motivation. These findings align with contemporary research linking the loss of meaning at work to increased burnout and disengagement [34].

In practice, teleoperators are rarely entrusted with responsibilities beyond task execution, due to the rigid segmentation of duties and centralized decision-making. This concentration of authority at the supervisory level creates a managerial imbalance that negatively impacts employee well-being. The combination of low autonomy and absence of recognition fosters a sense of deskilling and invisibility, which are key contributors to chronic stress and disengagement [29]. Such a model stands in stark contrast to modern motivational theories that advocate for employee empowerment, trust, and participative management as levers for commitment and performance [35].

Career advancement opportunities in call centers are notably scarce, as illustrated by the extended delay—often between four to six years—before a teleoperator can be considered for a trainer position. This stagnation fosters a sense of frustration and professional devaluation, which directly undermines motivation and organizational commitment. Motivation theories consistently emphasize the role of career progression and skill development in sustaining long-term engagement. When such prospects are perceived as distant or unattainable, employees are less likely to invest in their current roles and more inclined to seek external opportunities [36].

Moreover, the repetitive nature of call center tasks discourages initiative and intellectual engagement. This rigid work design, which excludes any form of job enrichment, stands in direct contradiction to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. The absence of key motivators—such as recognition, a sense of achievement, and career development—emerges as a primary source of demotivation. Even when hygiene factors (e.g., physical working conditions) are adequately addressed, their improvement alone cannot generate satisfaction or commitment [33]. This structural imbalance contributes to the widespread malaise and disengagement observed among teleoperators [29], reinforcing the need for a rethinking of task design and career pathways.

The strictly top-down hierarchical structure in call centers—marked by one-way communication and limited employee participation—emerges as a significant source of dissatisfaction. This vertical model contradicts the principles of participative management, which emphasize autonomy, dialogue, and shared decision-making. Empirical studies have shown that the absence of managerial feedback and discretion in task execution fosters a sense of disempowerment and psychological stress, ultimately undermining work engagement and job satisfaction [32].

Moreover, the lack of upward communication channels prevents the organization from capturing operational challenges experienced by teleoperators, thereby perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and inefficiency. Compounding this issue is the near-total absence of peer interaction. The individualized nature of tasks, combined with constant supervision, restricts opportunities for collegial exchange and mutual support. This isolation erodes social cohesion and deprives employees of informal coping mechanisms, which are essential for maintaining morale and resilience in demanding work environments.

Scientific literature consistently highlights the importance of peer support as a protective factor for employee well-being and resilience in the face of occupational stress. It serves to buffer the negative impact of professional constraints and fosters team cohesion, which is essential in high-pressure environments like call centers [37]. Conversely, an unfavorable social climate—marked by isolation and lack of collegial interaction—can lead to feelings of devaluation and exclusion, undermining long-term motivation and organizational commitment.

The interviews confirm that employee motivation in call centers is severely compromised by working conditions perceived as arduous, particularly due to the repetitive and monotonous nature of the tasks. This perception is reinforced by the absence of opportunities for personal growth or meaningful accomplishment. Herzberg's framework helps interpret these findings: motivation factors such as recognition and career advancement are notably absent, while hygiene factors remain insufficient to offset dissatisfaction. This imbalance contributes to

a pervasive sense of distress and disengagement, echoing recent studies that associate low autonomy and loss of meaning at work with elevated risks of burnout and turnover [29,30].

The interview analysis highlights a critical gap between the nature of call center work and employees' psychological need for achievement, as conceptualized by David McClelland. Teleoperators operate within a rigid framework that offers little room for initiative or goal-setting, depriving them of meaningful challenges and personal growth opportunities. This lack of autonomy constitutes a major motivational barrier. Recent studies confirm that when the need for achievement is chronically unmet, employees experience heightened risks of burnout and disengagement, often feeling underutilized and professionally stagnant [36].

This dynamic is further exacerbated by the unilateral nature of managerial directives, which exclude employees from decision-making processes. The absence of participative mechanisms not only limits individual agency but also reinforces a sense of powerlessness. Such conditions are consistently identified in the literature as key demotivating factors, undermining both performance and long-term organizational commitment.

While call center jobs may fulfill employees' financial needs, they fail to satisfy deeper psychological needs—particularly the need for achievement. This aligns with Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes autonomy and competence as essential drivers of intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being [31]. In the absence of these conditions, employees tend to view their work as purely instrumental, devoid of personal meaning or satisfaction.

The repetitive and mechanistic nature of tasks further compounds this issue. According to Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model, such routine undermines task significance and skill variety, leading to demotivation. Vroom's Expectancy Theory reinforces this interpretation: when employees perceive no clear link between effort and reward (instrumentality), motivation declines. This is exacerbated by perceived salary inequities, which—per Adams' Equity Theory—generate a sense of injustice and disengagement [30].

Moreover, strict hierarchical control eliminates opportunities for self-regulation and autonomy, directly contradicting the principles of SDT. Employees are unable to develop a sense of competence or ownership over their work, as their behavior is entirely shaped by external directives [31]. The lack of peer interaction further deteriorates the social climate, depriving employees of essential support systems that contribute to resilience and well-being in demanding environments.

5. Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates that working conditions in Tunisian call centers exert a direct and detrimental impact on the motivation, well-being, and health of teleoperators. The qualitative data reveal several critical issues: excessive workload, rigid hierarchical control that limits autonomy, strained interpersonal relationships, inadequate equipment, and a perceived lack of salary equity and recognition. These factors collectively foster a climate of stress and demotivation, contributing to high turnover and absenteeism, which ultimately undermine organizational performance.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings empirically validate several established motivation models. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory is reflected in the absence of satisfaction factors; Alderfer's ERG Theory is confirmed through unmet relatedness and growth needs; and Vroom's Expectancy Theory is illustrated by the lack of instrumentality. Moreover, the negative impact of strict managerial control on intrinsic motivation aligns closely with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. Practically, these insights underscore the urgent need for Tunisian call centers to adopt more human-centered and participative management approaches. Enhancing working conditions, promoting autonomy and recognition, and offering clear career development pathways are essential to fostering employee engagement and long-term productivity.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, its qualitative nature—based on semi-structured interviews—limits the ability to generalize findings across the broader call center sector. Second, the research was conducted in a single call center located in the Nabeul region, which may not fully represent the diversity of organizational practices and employee experiences across Tunisia. Third, the sample size, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, remains small and context-specific.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt a mixed-methods or quantitative approach involving a larger and more diverse sample of call centers across different regions. This would allow for statistical validation and broader generalization of the findings. Additionally, comparative studies examining the impact of different managerial styles on employee motivation—both within Tunisia and in neighboring countries such as Morocco—could provide valuable cross-cultural insights and inform best practices for improving employee well-being in the call center industry.

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Appendix: The Interview Guide

Opening sentences:

- Can you tell me about the call center where you work, its mission, the language spoken, and the nationalities of the clients?

Figure 1: Workload in the Call Center

How many hours do they work per day? What is the weekly workload? Are there any breaks? Are there night shifts?"

- **Questions:** What do you think about the workload at your call center? What is the legal number of hours in a call center? What is the generally practiced number of hours in call centers? Is the workload perceived as heavier by those at 40h, 42h, or 48h? What is your work Schedule?

Figure 2: Performance Control

- **Questions:** "What types of control exist in a call center? Is there a statistical control of calls? What can you say about the supervision system within the call center? If the control system is strict, what are the

consequences in case of below-average or slightly below-average statistics? (Risks of job loss, salary deduction, reprimand, reduced breaks).

Figure 3: Interpersonal Relationships

- **Questions:** Is there communication or interaction among colleagues? What can you say about interpersonal relationships at your job? If you have little interaction with your colleagues at the call center, could this affect the work dynamic, the exchange of experience with other teleoperators, and the possibility of receiving support at work?

Figure 4: Premises and Equipment

- **Questions:** Do the premises seem suitable for work? What are the consequences of noise, odors, pain, and defective equipment on work and work efficiency? And on health, such as the back, eyes, and ears?

Figure 5: Legal Income and Bonuses

- **Questions:** Do you compare the bonuses and legal income you receive at your call center with those at other call centers? Does this influence your work motivation?

Figure 6: Working Conditions

- **Questions:** What is your perception of the working conditions, such as the workload, the environment, and also your salary compared to the effort you put in?
- What is the influence of your workload, your work schedule, and the work atmosphere on your involvement at work?
- Given the working conditions at the call center where you work, how can these conditions be improved to better motivate employees?