



m. 0403903822

Lack of voice training sees one in four call centre workers suffer..

One in four call centre agents suffer voice problems because managers are failing to properly protect their health, a leading health and safety body said in a UK Study earlier this year (16 April 2012).

A new study, commissioned by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) and released on World Voice Day 2012, found that call handlers had suffered one or more of a range of ill-effects because of their work, including voice loss, sore throats and breathlessness.

Around one in 10 were diagnosed with a voice problem, while a tenth said their work was now suffering because of the stress placed on their vocal cords.

Of the call agents surveyed, 60 per cent reported having difficulty making themselves heard against background noise and 41 per cent said they had failed to be heard by the customer on the other end of the line. More than one in three call agents said that their voice was hoarse often or very often.

And researchers identified new starters, particularly female workers, as a high-risk group of call agents who are more likely to develop voice problems.

Experts at Ulster University surveyed nearly 600 call handlers from 14 call centres across the UK and Ireland, as part of this unique study. These included outbound customer services and sales services to the retail, finance, marketing, government, information technology and leisure sectors.

Dr Luise Vassie, executive director of policy at IOSH, said: "The results from the research are eye-opening.

"People who depend on their voices within their day-to-day role, such as actors and singers, often have training on how to control and protect their voice - call agents should be no different.

"Call centre managers and employees would be wise to heed the advice of this research and consider what benefits vocal training and a raised awareness of environmental issues would bring to their organisation."

The research was led by Dr Diane Hazlett, of Ulster University. She said: "This industry incurs high vocal demands which can affect vocal flexibility and capacity over time. Altered voice quality or vocal strength may impact on the call-handler's confidence or ability to fully engage the customer. For these professional voice users, a strong reliable voice is needed to ensure consistent and effective work performance."

As part of the 18 month-long project, telephone interviews with senior managers indicated that call agents receive regular, comprehensive job training - both at induction and throughout their time in the role. However, it appears that most of these training programmes fail to cover voice care and effectiveness, and IOSH and the University of Ulster agree something needs to be done to combat this.

Dr Hazlett added: "Policies on voice care should exist in all call centre environments, and should be reviewed regularly. Going forward, there needs to be an emphasis on the prevention of voice problems within the industry - to maintain optimal vocal health. Employers in this sector need to show they better recognise just how important the voice is, to having a healthy, well supported workforce and a thriving business."

IOSH's Dr Vassie said investing in voice training and raising awareness of the issues could benefit business. She added: "In the current economic climate purse strings are tight and businesses are wary of spending



m. 0403 903 822

Voice Use in Call Centres:

What good practice should my employer follow?

Dysphonia or voice disorder can be related to overuse – and as such it is an occupational health and safety issue. The 'Workhorse' article in the magazine *Hazards* (*) contains a number of recommendations for how employers can help reduce the risk of occupational voice loss

- Provide a working environment that has a comfortable **temperature and humidity**, and control dust and chemicals, as both can inflame the membranes of the vocal tract.
- Carry out a **risk assessment** that looks at the jobs most at risk of voice loss and stress, and look at ways of changing the way people work to minimise any risk.
- Ensure staff take **regular rest breaks** and drink plenty of fresh water, and don't put pressure on staff to come into work when they are not well enough to do so.

- Change work routines and **introduce work variety** and changes to the pace of work.
- Provide **better quality headsets** if equipment is faulty.
- Provide **voice care training**.
- Allow regular work **breaks away from the phones**.
- Monitor reasons for sickness absence, to spot cases of sore throats and coughs which are caused by work, and encourage staff to **swap to other duties** until they recover.
- Offer suitable alternative employment for employees suffering permanent voice problems

(*) http://www.worksmart.org.uk/health/what_should_my_employer_do_about_voice

Contacting Optimal SP

1. m. 0403 903 822
2. www.optimalsp.com.au
3. info@optimalsp.com.au
4. Look for "Optimal Speech Pathology" on facebook

Call us today to book workplace risk assessment, voice care education or an individual voice consultation.