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When Non-Standard Work Becomes *Precarious*: Insights from the New Zealand Call Centre Industry**

The issue of precarious employment has gained increasing currency over recent years, as OECD countries have shifted away from traditional standard employment models. Nevertheless, there has been little empirical research on the experiences of non-standard workers and the links that can be established with precarious work. This article attempts to address this gap by introducing precarious employment as a sub-set of non-standard work and highlighting its distinguishing features. The Tucker model is introduced as a useful bridge between non-standard work and precariousness, and is used as a framework for examining employment experiences within two New Zealand call centres. Initial observations indicate evidence of precariousness in both workplaces, although more severe in the case of the small, outsourced call centre. In-depth analysis suggests precariousness varies depending on the nature of the employment arrangement and questions are put forth about the applicability of the 'Tucker' model to the call centre context.

Key words: Non-standard, Precarious, Call centres, New Zealand

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Introduction

The growing incidence and distribution of precarious work has caused significant concern amongst researchers, particularly in terms of the social costs associated with these working arrangements. The unregulated use of employment contracts and weak bargaining power mean that these workers often find themselves working in unsatisfactory conditions. Those in precarious employment often earn significantly less, work less desirable hours, face greater job insecurity and have access to fewer entitlements than their counterparts in more secure positions (Brosnan 1995; Alan 2000; Quinlan/Mayhew/Bohle 2000; Markey/Hodgkinson/Kowalczyk 2002; Tucker 2002).

Although there is no necessary causal link between non-standard work and precarious employment, research indicates a strong association between the two concepts (Tucker 2002; Cranford/Vosko/Zukewich 2003). Recent studies indicate an increase in non-standard employment arrangements, including part-time work, self-employment, temporary work and casual work (Carroll 1999; Felstead/Jewson 1999; Horwitz/Allan/Brosnan 2000; Campbell/Burgess 2001; Tucker 2002). Moreover, there is a variety of demand and supply side factors that can be identified in terms of contributing to the growth of non-standard employment forms. However, the question is: "What are the linkages between non-standard work and precarious employment?" And more fundamentally, "What constitutes precariousness?"

The article endeavours to address these questions by examining the concept of 'precarious employment' as a sub-set of non-standard work as well as highlighting its distinguishing features within the context of two New Zealand call centre case studies. More specifically, a model developed by Tucker is introduced as a way of identifying key components of precarious employment (Tucker 2002). While there are a number of emergent models of precarious employment, it is argued that Tucker's model provides an antipodean viewpoint and useful bridge between non-standard work and precariousness. Based on an extensive literature review, Tucker identifies a number of indicators of precariousness and argues that it is the interaction of the nature of jobs and worker preferences that determines what constitutes precarious employment, but cautions it is an area where data is very limited, particularly in New Zealand and that there is a need for further research.

Taking up Tucker's challenge, the article reports on a study of employment experiences within two New Zealand call centres – *TELI*, a large, inbound, in-house call centre; and *MESO*, a small, outbound outsourcer – in which Tucker's model is used as a framework. The rationale for focusing on New Zealand is that it provides an interesting national example of non-standard work that has relevance for other countries. The call centre sector also has been selected because of the phenomenal expansion of the industry both within New Zealand and overseas and the parallel concern with the poor working conditions that exist within many call centres (Frenkel et al. 1998; Union Research Centre for Organisation and Technology [URCOT] 2000; Paul/Huws 2002; Australian Communications Association [ACA] 2002; also see Taylor/Bain 1999; Bain et al. 2000; Gilmore/Moreland 2000; Richardson/Belt/Marshall 2000; URCOT 2000; Batt/Moynihan 2002; Deery/Kinnie 2002). There is also evidence that non-standard employment arrangements have become an increasingly visible aspect of

employment in this sector (see Richardson/Marshall 1999; Hutchinson/Purcell/Kinnie 2000; URCOT 2000; ACA 2002; Deery/Kinnie 2002; Paul/Huws 2002).

We begin by reviewing the literature on non-standard and precarious employment, drawing attention to the central debates underpinning each of the concepts. This is followed by a justification for investigating the use of non-standard employment arrangements in call centre workplaces in a New Zealand setting. The qualitative, exploratory, case study research design is then outlined, and the two case sites are described in terms of their unique organisational features and employment practices. Findings derived through observations and in-depth interviews with case study participants are presented according to the ‘Tucker’ framework. The final section involves a discussion of the key implications of the findings and the applicability of this framework to the call centre context.

Non-Standard Employment

There is a growing recognition that the concept of precarious employment is linked closely to the growth of non-standard work. Although the extant literature emphasises the two concepts as being distinct, there is acknowledgement that non-standard forms are more likely to be characterised as precarious and thus operate as a sub-set of non-standard work (Campbell/Burgess 1998; Tucker 2002). There exists no official or universally accepted definition of what constitutes ‘non-standard employment’. Mangan (2000: 172) however states, “... the disparate collection of alternative working arrangements that make up non-standard employment are united, principally by the fact that they all represent a departure from traditional employment.” Non-standard forms, thus, incorporate all employment arrangements that are not fulltime, regular, or permanent and includes work classed as part-time, casual, temporary, fixed term, seasonal, on-call, or contractual as well as work such as shift work, telework, multiple job holding and self employment (Brosnan/Walsh 1996; Barker/Christensen 1998; Carroll 1999; Horwitz et al. 2000; Mangan 2000; Markey et al. 2002; Tucker 2002; Cranford et al. 2003). In this article, the term ‘non-standard’ will be used to replace the various terms operationalised by the various discourses.

The standard model of employment began to deteriorate between the 1970s and 1990s as an increasing number of women, youth and older workers started to enter the labour market. Increasing globalisation, growing competitive pressures and the growth of the service industries also created the need for greater labour flexibility, further threatening the standard employment form. Non-standard work arrangements increased globally, bringing about significant changes to the employment relationship (Allan et al. 1998; Barker/Christensen 1998; Felstead/Jewson 1999; Alan 2000; Horwitz et al. 2000; FOW 2002; Markey et al. 2002).

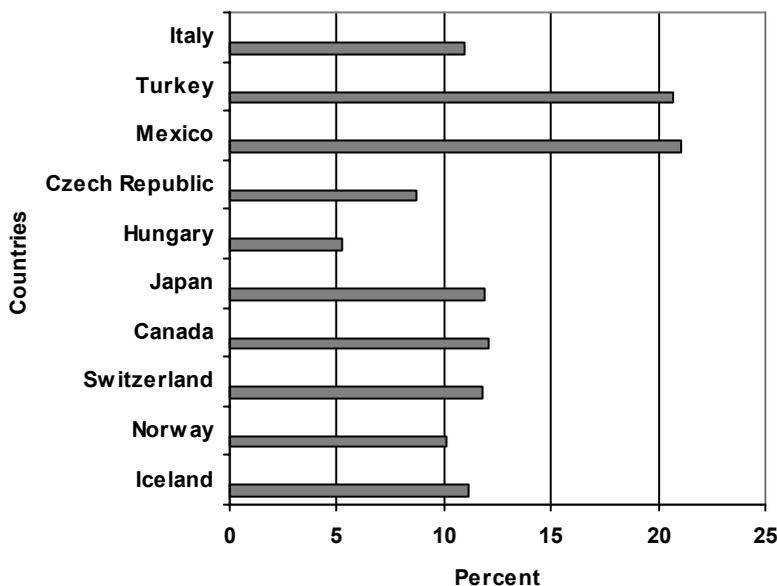
For instance, Quinlan (2003) reports that over a 16 year period, the average proportion of the workforce in non-standard employment across Australia and 14 European Union countries grew by 43.7 percent, from 9.6 percent in 1983 to 13.8 percent in 1999. Between 1997 and 2002, Belgium and Finland were reported to have had the most significant levels of growth with Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Canada and Japan documenting figures in the region of the reported European Union average – be-

tween 10 and 12 percent – see Figure 1 below (OECD 2002; Quinlan 2003). Yeandle (1999) in examining the extent and incidence of non-standard work in five European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and the UK) between 1985 and 1995 also reports a high incidence of non-standard employment. Although figures for Italy and the UK were modest at 4-6 percent, the number of non-standard workers in Denmark and Germany was equivalent to the 2001 OECD average (10-12 percent). Of the five countries examined, France exhibited the most significant growth in non-standard employment, from 3 percent in 1983 to 11 percent in 1994 (*ibid*).

Interestingly, researchers suggest the trends toward the increasing use of non-standard workers have persisted, despite this employment form becoming increasingly regulated (Tregaskis 1997; Yeandle 1999; Quinlan 2003). Spain, in particular, has experienced tremendous growth in its non-standard workforce over the last decade, placing it ahead of all the OECD countries in terms of its share of non-standard workers (Tregaskis 1997; Cousins 1999). A comparative study carried out by Cousins (1999), revealed that one out of every three workers in Spain is employed on a non-standard basis, figures that surpass every other OECD nation.

Figure 1. Non-permanent Employment in Nine Countries

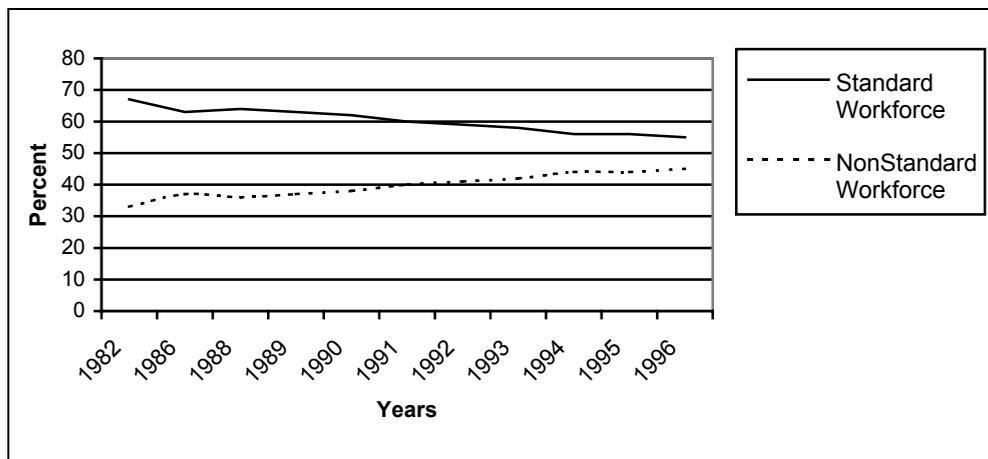
(Source: OECD 2002; Quinlan 2002).



In Australia, the growth in the proportion of the workforce in non-standard work has been identified as one of the most significant changes to have occurred in the labour market in the last few decades (OECD 1996; Burgess 1997; Burgess/Strachan 1999; OECD 2002). Australia's share of non-standard employees is also making a mark internationally, with OECD (1996, 2002) data confirming Australia ranks second only behind Spain for its use of non-standard work (Burgess 1997). Kramar (1998) and Burgess and Strachan (1999) suggest the number of Australian workers hired on a

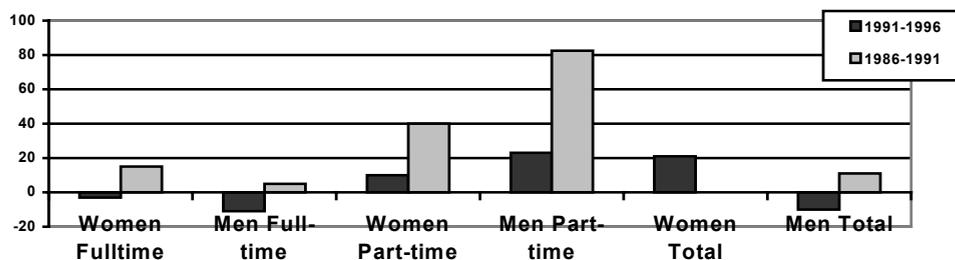
non-standard basis increased significantly between the 1980's and 1990's, with growth figures placed at over 40 percent. Drawing on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Burgess and Strachan (1999) suggest non-standard employment increased by more than a third over the 1982-96 period, from 33 percent to 45 percent (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. The Standard and Non-Standard Workforce in Australia, 1982-1996
(% of Total Workforce) (Source: Burgess/Strachan 1999)



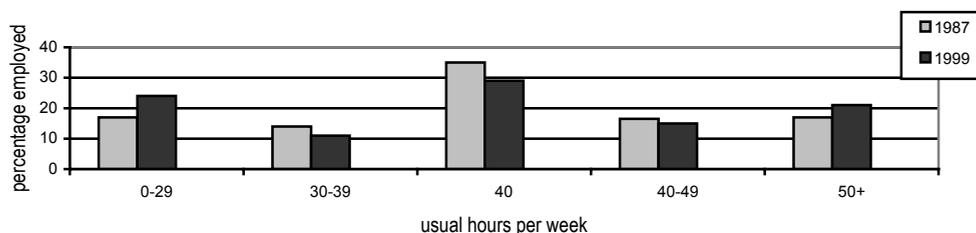
New Zealand's place in relation to these changes is vague, given the absence of longitudinal quantitative research on the incidence and distribution of non-standard work. The only official data available is that of part-time and self-employment, collected by Statistics NZ through the Household Labour Force Survey and Census. An analysis of trends in part-time employment between 1986 and 1996 (see Figure 3 below) indicates an increasing incidence of part-time work for both males and females and a corresponding slowing-down in full-time work. The decade between 1991 and 2001 saw part-time employment increase by a tremendous 60.2 percent, representing a significant shift away from full-time employment, which increased by a moderate 15.4 percent.

Figure 3. Changes in Patterns of Full and Part-Time Employment, 1986-1991 and 1991-1996 (Source: Statistics NZ, Household Labour Force Survey, 1986-1996)



Carroll (1999), Carroll and Conway (2000) and Brosnan and Walsh (1996) have offered the most extensive data relating to other non-standard forms of employment. Carroll (1999) suggests non-standard workers comprised the majority of the workforce in 1998. Combining data from the 1996 Brosnan and Walsh study and Household Labour Force Survey, Carroll estimates that approximately 57 percent of workers were employed on a non-standard basis, whilst 43 percent were employed on standard agreements. The shift towards non-standard employment is also apparent in the distribution of weekly hours (see Figure 4 below). Carroll and Conway (2000) note a shift away from the standard 40-hour week, towards both ends of the working-hour spectrum during the 1987 to 1999 period. The number of workers working 40-hours a week was recorded at 496,000 leaving 1,230,000 people working either more than or less than 40-hours a week.

Figure 4: Distribution of Weekly Hours by Percentage of Workers (1987/1999)
(Source: Carroll/Conway 2000)



Brosnan and Walsh's empirical study of non-standard work in New Zealand indicated that the proportion of workers in casual, fixed term and temporary employment was approximately 11 percent in both years, although there was a higher percentage for women, at 14 percent. Fixed term employment trebled between 1991 and 1995, from 1.1 percent to 3 percent, and temporary employment grew from 1.7 percent of the workforce in 1991 to 2.6 percent in 1995. Casual employment however fell during this period, from 8 percent to 5 percent, possibly because the 1991 Employment Contracts Act made it less costly to employ standard employees (Brosnan and Walsh 1996). Although Brosnan and Walsh (1996) state that the results suggest an *emergent* rather than *pronounced* trend towards non-standard employment, employers involved in the survey indicated they expected an increase in the employment of non-standard workers, particularly casuals, in the years to come.

Although New Zealand research on non-standard employment is often descriptive and gives little indication why there has been an increase or slight decline in the level of non-standard employment over the past 20 years, there is general agreement that the employment environment *vis a vis* the economy, the regulatory environment, the level of power of either the employers and trade unions, has a direct influence. There was no doubt that as a result of labour market reforms of the late 1980s and 1990s and the with the introduction of the Employment Contracts Act 1991, New Zealanders witnessed a reversal in conditions and wages, for example the withdrawal of penal rates, the dismantling of industry-specific safety provisions and the erosion of limits on hours of work, etc (Harbridge and Street 1994; Rasmussen and Lamm 2002).

Defining and Measuring Precarious Employment

The decline of standard employment and the shift towards non-standard employment forms is being increasingly linked to the concept of ‘precarious’ employment and the growing precariousness of the labour market and employment arrangements. (Kramar,1998; Burgess and Strachan 1999; FOW 2002). Although the extant literature suggests that non-standard work may not necessitate precariousness, it does indicate that non-standard work is more likely to be precarious.

Despite precarious employment becoming an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary labour markets, there exists no commonly accepted definition of the term in current literature. The literature can, however, be divided into three distinct camps, in which ‘precarious employment’ is viewed as either:

- A term that is universally interchangeable with “non-standard” employment (Markey et al. 2002);
- A label that can be attached to certain categories of non-standard employment e.g. casual, temporary (International Labour Organisation 1993; Brosnan 1995; Future of Work Review 2002);
- A complex term that is multidimensional in its measurement, and thus can affect any employment form, standard or non-standard (Rodgers/Rodgers 1989; Campbell/Burgess 1998, 2001; Cranford et al. 2003; Tucker 2002).

Campbell and Burgess (2001) have voiced their concern about the use of the concept ‘precariousness’ as a label that can merely be attached to specific selected forms of employment. Based on the assumption that non-standard employment arrangements vary and subsequently have different implications for different employees, they argue that precariousness should be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept that can be analysed from a number of perspectives, incorporating both objective and subjective aspects of the job. Hence, rather than simply categorising certain employment forms as ‘precarious’, they propose that the task for researchers is a more tentative process of examining ‘precariousness’ in all employment forms and determining the *extent* to which work is ‘precarious’. Burgess and Campbell (1998) suggest that at the most fundamental level ‘precariousness’ can be defined in terms of the level of income, the level of job insecurity and the general employment processes and working conditions experienced by workers. This definition can be seen to incorporate a few of the criteria that can be used in order to determine the precariousness of certain jobs. As Burgess and Campbell add, “... *the concept of ‘precariousness’ in employment is a catch-all term that attempts to encompass the full range of attributes associated with employment quality*” (1998: 6). Hence, the concept of precariousness is concerned with all elements and factors that impinge on the quality of employment offered whatever the employment form.

Vosko (2000; 2000a, 2000b) and Cranford et al. (2003) have also attempted to extend the conceptual framework of Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and Campbell and Burgess (1998; 2001) to include the gender of precariousness. Viewed from a feminist political economy perspective, they investigate the relationship between gender and other social relations of inequality, changing employment relationships and insecurity in labour markets and in doing have produced a conceptual guide to the precarious

employment. Their conceptual guide to precarious employment focuses on five core dimensions – namely: firm size; union coverage; hourly wages; benefits; work arrangements (also refer to Rodgers 1989; Fudge 1997; Vosko 2000, 2002a; Cranford et al. 2003).

The common feature underpinning this strand of research is the emphasis on job insecurity in relation to precarious employment. Burgess and Campbell (1998) introduce labour insecurity as a broad and multi-dimensional concept, encompassing eight key factors derived from Standing (1993; 1997), including employment insecurity, job insecurity, income insecurity, and benefit insecurity – each affecting a different aspect of employment. More importantly, the framework as a whole indicates that the concept of precarious employment goes beyond the general notion of non-standard employment by relating directly to the degree of insecurity experienced by workers.

In spite of the increased research activity in the area of precarious employment, there was still a need to bring the numerous conceptual strands together and to provide a much needed over-arching framework that could be utilized in developing New Zealand employment policies. To this end, a review of the literature pertaining to the linkages between the ‘lower-end’ non-standard employment forms and ‘precariousness’ and the implications for labour market outcomes was undertaken by Tucker (2002; 2003). One of the aims of the review was to provide a definition of ‘precariousness’ that would be appropriate and relevant for a variety of locations, including New Zealand. The review examined the demand/supply/institutional explanations for the prevalence of non-standard work and the motivations for employers and workers for offering and engaging in non-standard employment.

Based on the review, Tucker developed an integrated model that incorporates all the key aspects of precarious employment as discussed by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and Standing (1993, 1997, cited in Campbell/Burgess 1998) and Cranford et al. (2003). In addition, by measuring the extent to which a job is precarious, the nature of the working conditions can be analysed in relation to worker characteristics and preferences, and thus allowing a more comprehensive judgment on what constitutes precariousness in employment.

It is also possible to link the fundamental characteristics of the employment relationship with Tucker’s specific indicators, which taken in combination, can be used as a means to assess precariousness in any employment arrangement (see Figure 5 below). For example, certainty (or the lack of it) of ongoing employment is linked with the corresponding indicators of precariousness – that is: earnings are uncertain or irregular; there is a high risk of job loss; little or no career prospects and the likelihood of the job being terminated with little or no expectation of further work. It also operates as a continuum with workers in less precarious employment arrangements occupying the lower margins of the scale and those in highly precarious positions (indicated by precariousness on all measures of the framework) occupying the higher confines. The framework also draws attention to determining the *extent* to which employment is precarious. As this framework was developed specifically for the *New Zealand* context, several of the indicators relate directly to the legal entitlements of non-standard workers as ‘employees’ in New Zealand (Tucker 2002). Nevertheless, there is still a large degree of overlap between the elements of this framework and the previ-

ous ones developed by her predecessors, signifying consensus on the key dimensions of precariousness.

Tucker (2002) also suggests that an assessment of precariousness should extend beyond these dimensions to also encompass worker characteristics and preferences. Merely examining conditions of employment cannot accurately determine how precarious a job is because the concept indicates a situation where employment conditions are unfavourable or undesirable. Therefore in order to decipher what is and is not desirable, the experiences and preferences of employees must also be taken into account.

For the purposes of this article, 'precarious employment' will be conceptualised as a multi-dimensional concept that can affect standard or non-standard forms of employment. The 'Tucker' framework, therefore, will be used to examine non-standard employment forms in the call centre context, in order to determine the extent to which these arrangements are precarious. Furthermore, consideration will be given to the individual perspectives of employees.

Table 1: Tucker's Indicators of Precariousness

| | |
|---|--|
| Certainty of ongoing employment | There are no short-term or long-term career prospects There is a high risk of job loss The job can be terminated with little or no prior notice by the employer There is no explicit or implicit contract for ongoing employment. The earnings are uncertain or irregular |
| Degree of employee control | Employees have low level of control/ bargaining power over employment processes and working arrangements (wages, pace of work, working conditions). Hours of work are uncertain or can be changed at will by the employer. Functions of the job can be changed at will by the employer. The task performed or the health and safety practices at the workplace make the job dangerous or unhealthy. |
| Level of income | The job is low income – at or below the minimum wage The level of income is insufficient to maintain the wellbeing of workers and their dependents |
| Level of Benefits | There is little or no access to 'standard' non-wage employment benefits such as sick leave, domestic leave, bereavement leave or parental leave. There is limited or no opportunity to gain and retain skills through access to education and training. |
| Degree of regulatory & union protection | There is, in practice, no protection against unjustifiable dismissal, discrimination, sexual harassment, unacceptable working practices, including hazardous conditions. Union representation is nonexistent or low and discouraged by the employer |

Why the call centre context?

The call centre sector has become more noticeable because of its rapid global expansion over the past decade (Richardson et al. 2000; Quinlan et al. 2000; URCOT 2000; Paul/Huws 2002). The considerable growth of this sector has also occurred in New Zealand, with the latest figures indicating 350 call centres that operate across the country and approximately 11,000 call centre seats (ACA 2002). The total value of the

call centre market was estimated to be \$760 million in 2002 (ACA 2002). Furthermore, call centres now play a critical role within New Zealand organisations, with 2002 figures showing that call centres are now handling an estimated 68 percent of all customer contacts (ACA 2002). Despite following overseas trends, New Zealand call centres have emerged as being quite distinct given that they are comparatively much smaller (62 percent have less than 25 seats) and are concentrated in the Government sector. Moreover, it has been estimated that 70 percent of the call centre workforce in New Zealand are female (ACA Research Pty Ltd. 2003; Larner 2002).

New Zealand call centres both in the public and private sectors operate within an employment legislation framework. The central employment statute in New Zealand is the Employment Relations Act 2000, which is designed to support collective bargaining and encourage conflict resolution through good faith and mediation. The Employment Relations Act is supported by a host of other laws, such as the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, the Privacy Act 1993, the Minimum Wages Act, 1983 and Holidays Act 2003. As noted above, the Employment Relations Act replaced the Employment Contract Act 1991 and in so doing reversed a decade of employment relations that promoted individual bargaining and where trade unions were omitted from the Act and replaced by “bargaining agents”. Research indicates that the Employment Contracts Act delivered a body blow to the already fragile trade union movement (Lamm and Tipples 2005). The lack of trade union representation and individual bargaining, particularly in small call centre businesses is now the norm and is likely to continue (Hunt 2005; Lamm and Tipples 2005). The other legacies of the Employment Contracts Act have been a decline in conditions and stagnating wages for many lower paid workers, particularly those in the service sector (Deeks/Rasmussen 2002).

The decision, therefore, to investigate precarious employment in the call centre context was driven by two key themes that arose through the call centre literature. Firstly, there is an absence of empirical research (New Zealand or overseas based) on the implications of non-standard employment forms in call centre workplaces. Most of the call centre literature focuses on the Taylorist-influenced labour processes (Taylor/Bain 1999; Bain et al. 2000; Gilmore/Moreland 2000; Richardson et al. 2000; Batt/Moynihan 2002; Deery/Kinnie 2002); the location of call centres (‘greenfield’ sites and offshore) (Richardson 1998; Saber/Holland/Teicher 2004; Taylor/Bain 2004); managerial strategies (URCOT 2000; Wallace/Eagleson/Waldersee 2000) and employee resistance and coping (Barnes 2004; Townsend 2004). The literature, however, fails to examine the use of non-standard employment forms in this context, particularly in relation to *precariousness*. Secondly, within the call centre literature there is increasing concern about the employment conditions experienced by call centre workers; deteriorating conditions that can be associated with the use of non-standard employment forms in this industry (Felstead/Jewson 1999; URCOT 2002; Hunt 2004). In short, the need to investigate the use of non-standard employment arrangements in call centres is highlighted by the fact that these workplaces essentially represent new forms of work organisation, where non-standard employment forms are increasingly being utilised. When taken in combination with global industry growth projections (40

percent over the next decade (URCOT 2002), the need for research in this area is clearly warranted.

Research Design

Researchers have drawn attention to the importance of the individual perspective in studies of non-standard employment. For example, Barker and Christensen state: “*there remains much to be learnt about the workers who constitute the contingent workforce, what kinds of jobs they engage in, and how they experience work on a contingent basis*” (1998: 9). These aims are best achieved when subjective experiences and individual dialogue are acknowledged as valuable means of attaining data. A qualitative paradigm therefore, formed the basis of this study and was combined with an exploratory approach to allow research gaps in the extant literature to be addressed (Marshall and Rossman 1995). A case study methodology was also applied in order to allow the complexities surrounding the phenomenon of *precarious employment* to be illuminated.

Two very different call centres (*MESO* and *TELI* [pseudonyms]) were selected in order to reflect the amount of diversity that exists in the call centre industry. Furthermore, data and method triangulation was applied to investigate issues from multiple perspectives and to “overcome the intrinsic bias” associated with single method studies (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981: 137). As outlined in Table 2, a total of 56 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-standard call centre employees, supervisors, managers and stakeholders (representatives from three trade unions, the government agency Occupational Safety and Health Service (OSH) and an industry training association – ETTTO). Based on both methodological and ethical concerns, the sampling strategy used to interview call centre workers was one that relied in the first instance on volunteers and then every third volunteer was interviewed. Direct observations, document reviews and archival analyses also took place.

Table 2: Matrix of Method and Data Triangulation

| | No. | Semi-Structurec Interviews | Email | Document Analysis | Archival Analysis | Observations |
|--------------|-----|----------------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| CC Workers | 40 | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Supervisors | 5 | √ | | | | √ |
| Managers | 2 | √ | | √ | √ | √ |
| Stakeholders | 9 | √ | √ | √ | √ | |

The interview schedule not only had questions pertaining to biographical and demographic details, but also consisted largely of open-ended interview questions that directly addressed Tucker’s indicators of precariousness. That is, there was a series of initial and follow-up questions around the following key headings:

- Certainty of ongoing employment
- Degree of employee control
- Level of income
- Level of benefits
- Degree of regulatory and union protection.

Although Tucker's framework added a degree of structure to the interviews, (useful given the comparative component of this research), participants were still given significant control over how their responses were framed and structured. This allowed their individual experiences and perceptions to emerge, unconstrained by the stringent application of this or any other predetermined framework (Ackroyd/Hughes 1981; Rossman/Rallis 1998).

The questions designed for key stakeholders were more general in nature and related to the call centre industry rather than any particular organisation. Questions focussed on the size and growth of the New Zealand call centre industry; the incidence of non-standard employment in this sector and the most pertinent issues facing the call centres, both in the present and in the future. These more specific questions were designed in order to capitalise on each of the stakeholders' particular expertise. For example, questions relating to training in call centres were directed at an adviser from an industry training association, whilst questions relating to health and safety were directed at an advisor from the Occupation Health and Safety Service.

The data was analysed using Marshall and Rossman's (1989) analytical strategies. The interview data was first organised through coding and transcription and structured in accordance to the research questions and the interview schedule. Categorisation processes were then used to identify recurring regularities in the data and to evaluate the plausibility of those developing categories. In order to rule out alternative explanations of the data, pattern-matching technique (Yin 1994) was applied by constantly comparing the emerging categories against the collected data for credibility and centrality.

The Case Studies

As stated above, the two call centres involved in this study differed significantly from one another as seen in Table 3. In summary, *TELI* is the larger, more established of the two case studies. This organisation is the customer service division of a large company with multiple independent branches throughout NZ and Australia. The second case study, *MESO*, has been operating in Australia and NZ as a division of a large multinational market research organisation for the past 14 years.

Table 3: Profile of *TELI* and *MESO* Case Studies

| | Organisation 1 ' <i>TELI</i> ' | Organisation 2 ' <i>MESO</i> ' |
|----------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Size/Age | Large, 160 seats 38 years old | Small, 34 seats 14 years old |
| Work Design | Inbound/Customer Service | Outbound/Market Research |
| Structure | In-house | Outsourcing |
| Industry | Sports | Market Research |
| Employment | Part-time (core) 32%, Casual (non-core) 68% | Casuals 100% |
| Union Presence | Strong (SFWU) | None |

MESO, the small outsourcer, has a pool of 132 workers feeding 34 call centre seats. As a division of a large multinational market research organisation, *MESO* services the New Zealand and Australian markets and has intentions of expanding into the US and

UK markets in the near future. Belonging to the market research sector, this call centre faces a highly erratic market and a great deal of competitive pressure. Casual workers make up 100 percent of the workforce as staffing needs are entirely dependant on the organisations ability to secure contracts with prospective clients. Depending on the particular campaign, hours of work can range from 9am to 2am, seven days a week.

The majority of workers in *MESO* are female high school or tertiary students (63 percent) and length of employment ranges from 3 weeks to 4 years. There can be gaps of anywhere between 2 days and 3 weeks between campaigns. Sometimes the call centre can go weeks without any campaigns and then be forced to run up to 4 campaigns simultaneously. Extended hours are often demanded during these times, sometimes requiring shifts to run back to back from 5.00pm until 2.00am. Furthermore, these gaps in the work lead to staff turnover rates in the vicinity of 60-70 percent per annum, which also created staff shortages, thus necessitating several recruitment intakes throughout the year. There is no union presence on the worksite.

The work in *MESO* is wholly outbound, requiring workers to manually place calls to either a random or specifically targeted population group. A combination of computer assisted telephone interviewing and paper questionnaires are used as methods of collecting data. Because this call centre functions as an outsourcer, campaigns change regularly, along with the particular surveys and interviews that the employees are expected to conduct. The core functions of the job, however, remain unchanged.

TELI, a large in-house call centre, has a pool of 177 workers servicing 160 call centre seats. The call centre is a customer service division of a large monopoly with multiple independent branches throughout New Zealand and Australia. The branch investigated was the largest of the call centre divisions. The workforce in this call centre is made up of a combination of part-timers and casuals; who represent 32 percent and 68 percent of the workforce respectively. The hourly wage of part-timers is \$1.19 higher than the wage casuals receive. Part-time employees are guaranteed a minimum of 4 shifts per week, although they have their hours capped at 38 hours in order to maintain their part-time status. The operating hours of *TELI* have gradually increased over the past five years. At the time of the study, the call centre operated from 9am to 11pm seven days a week and all employees were required to work a Saturday.

The workforce is largely made up of three distinct demographic groups: tertiary students; middle-aged women seeking to supplement household incomes; and older aged workers (over 50 years of age). There is a higher concentration of females (78 percent) in this call centre, than there are males (22 percent), and approximately 90 percent of part-time workers are over 35 years of age and 90 percent of casuals are between the ages of 19 and 30. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) have a relatively strong presence on the work site, representing 59 percent of all workers. Proportionately 55 percent of casual workers and 68 percent of part-timers are unionised. Length of employment varies significantly between part-timers and casuals, ranging from 5 years to 38 years and from 3 weeks to 7.5 years respectively. Turnover is minimal because of the stable nature of the market and the workforce, particularly amongst the middle-aged women employees and the employees in the 50 years of age group.

Within *TELI*, the work is wholly inbound and customer service focussed. Staff receive calls from existing customers (from either New Zealand or Australia) through an automated queuing system and directly modify account information using an organisation specific PC and keyboard. The number of incoming calls varies depending on the time of day, the day of the week and the particular season which can affect the staffing requirements. Furthermore, new products are developed and released occasionally by the parent company which has a minor impact on the customer service functions of these employees.

Results

The findings presented below are organised according to the Tucker framework outlined in Table 1.

Uncertainty of ongoing employment

Employees in both case studies experienced varying degrees of precarious employment in terms of having little or no career prospects or expectations for ongoing employment. Employees also have a high probability of losing their job without been given prior notice by the employer. However, the findings show that the prospect of employment termination affects the different groups of non-standard workers in these organisations disproportionately. Core employees from *TELI* are least likely to have their agreements terminated; followed by non-core employees and finally, the casuals from *MESO*; a fact that is clearly reflected in the average tenure of these groups of workers.

Within *MESO* terminations did not occur as stated in the employment agreement, (i.e. with at least two weeks notice). Instead, supervisors would simply stop offering employees casual work if their performance was considered to be lacking, as illustrated by the first quote below. Those casuals who had been employed by the call centre for more *than a year* felt their employment was secure (despite irregularities in the working hours), although management stated there was little to protect them from losing their jobs. In spite of the apparent confidence of continued work by some of the longer serving casual employees at *MESO*, many of the junior employees felt a certain degree of insecurity, as noted in the second quote.

“They could do something really small, and we just won’t call them back anymore, we can’t tell them they’re not employed with us anymore, we just stop calling and say “no” even if there is work there.” (MESO: Supervisor)

“I have no idea if they’ll call me after this campaign, some people have been here for ages but they can drop you anytime, they don’t owe us anything so we can’t expect it.” (MESO: Employee)

The employment agreement in *TELI* requires that employees be given seven days notice prior to the termination date. Although this amount of notice would leave employees little time to seek alternative arrangements, they still felt secure in their jobs given that terminations were very infrequent. The main issue of concern was long-term job security and in particular, the fear that the employer would introduce self-service technologies thus making their customer service functions redundant in the future.

With regard to part-time employees at *TELI*, there is a guarantee of minimum weekly shifts and an implied assumption of ongoing employment in the employment agreement. However, the prospect of ongoing employment is less apparent in the case of the casual employees as there is no such mention of continued employment in their employment agreements. Nevertheless, findings revealed that there is an informal understanding between the two parties that employment will be ongoing.

MESO's agreements are devoid of any mention of providing their casual employees with ongoing employment. Employees from *MESO* also experience a greater degree of irregularly and uncertainty in terms of their wages compared to *TELI* mainly because of the highly erratic working hours, as noted by one interviewee in the quote below. There are, however, a small number of workers (11 percent of the workforce) who appear to have strong, personal relationships with their supervisors, which is reflected in the shorter work gaps (no more than 2 weeks) that they experience and their relatively long tenures (1-4 years). These so-called 'casual' employees are offered work on a more ongoing basis than the other casual workers. Although they are still subject to the same employment agreement as the regular casual workers, these employees are also offered work that exceed the normal working hours of 8 hours per day.

"Our earnings are definitely uncertain and irregular, one week you'll work and maybe for a month you won't." (*MESO*: Employee)

Interestingly, the majority of the employees interviewed *MESO* were not concerned about the irregularity and uncertainty of their earnings because they lived at home and/or received money regularly from other sources (e.g. parents, other part-time work, government benefits, trust funds, etc.). Nevertheless, all the younger employees interviewed (with the exception of one) stated they would prefer regular part-time call centre work if it meant more regular and predictable income. Because of the difficulties they experienced in finding employment and their dependence on the call centre income, older workers expressed the greatest concern about the uncertainty and irregularity of the income. These workers also expressed a strong desire for regular part-time hours in order to have access to more secure earnings and a wider range of employment benefits.

Part-time employees from *TELI* indicated the irregularity and uncertainty in the income they earned to be only minor given the guaranteed hours they were able to secure weekly. A few women with dependants however indicated that on the weeks they were unable to secure more than the minimum four shifts, they faced a little more financial hardship, although this was not considered significant enough to cause any ongoing financial concerns. The earnings of casual employees were less certain and regular. As was the case within *MESO*, this did not create any great concern given that few of these workers relied on the job as a core income. Nevertheless, 4 of the 17 casuals interviewed stated they would prefer part-time status in order to get access to more regular and certain earnings.

Degree of employee control

The literature notes that indications of precariousness not only manifest itself in terms of uncertainty of ongoing employment but also in the level of employee control. Employees in precarious employment have a low level of control and bargaining power

over employment processes and working arrangements, with the hours of work and the functions of the job able to be changed at the behest of the employer. The lack of control frequently exposes the employee to health and safety hazards, particularly fatigue as a result of working long hours (see Quinlan, Mayhew and Bohle 2000).

Working hours within *MESO* are very uncertain and highly susceptible to change. The number of workers required depends heavily on the number of campaigns the call centre is running at any given time. Management interviewees stated that they are restricted in their ability to guarantee hours, given the highly unpredictable and uneven workloads. Most workers, (particularly new-comers), are therefore, only called on as and when they are required. As stated above, the situation differs for those longer serving employees in which they appear to have shorter periods without work and experience greater certainty of on-going work, knowing they will be given first priority when a shift become available compared to the other newer recruits.

Compared to *MESO*, the workloads are more stable at *TELI* and the hours of work are more regular and more certain. Daily, weekly and seasonal peaks occur at predictable times, allowing management to approximate staffing requirements and create a roster system up to three weeks in advance. Given that these are only estimates, shift lengths and the number of days each employee works can be modified, creating a small degree of irregularity and uncertainty. Part-timers are affected less in these respects, because of a guarantee of four shifts a week stipulated in their employment agreement. Casuals are not guaranteed any minimum number of shifts and therefore experience greater degrees of uncertainty and irregularity; sometimes finding they are not called in for shifts for one or two weeks at a time and at other times finding themselves working shifts equivalent to the part-timers, as one employee stated:

“They can call on Monday and give me shifts, but then again I won’t get anything for a while.” (TELI: Casual Employee)

Interviews and observations from both *MESO* and *TELI* suggest that although call centre workers have minimum control over how they carry out their tasks and that the functions of the job can potentially be changed at will by employers, *this seldom occurs in practice*. On the rare occasion that variations do occur, these are offered to employees as *a reward* rather than imposed on workers as a means of control. Furthermore, given the repetitiveness and monotony typically associated with call centre work, there was a general preference by all the employees interviewed for greater variety in the functional tasks, as noted in the below quote. These findings highlight the importance of examining the particular requirements and characteristics of the job itself when attempting to measure the *precariousness* of any employment arrangement. These findings also undermine Tucker’s assertion that precariousness is a matter of employers having ultimate control and a workforce which is completely acquiescent, even in the call centre sector.

“Its very monotonous, boring and repetitive, you’re dialling and saying the same things over and over again to the same people who don’t want to talk to you.” (MESO: Employee)

The lack of control and the monotonous tasks performed within both call centres are also associated with negative health and safety outcomes. *MESO* employees drew a

strong association between the unconventional working hours and long shifts and tiredness and fatigue. Emotional stress as a result of dealing with disgruntled and abusive customers was reported by employees from both organisations. *TELI* employees appeared to be more seriously affected by these encounters, in terms of their morale, with the affects of stress causing problems outside of their working hours. Muscular strain and fatigue was also widely experienced by employees from the two call centres as a result of using the keyboard for data entry for extended periods of time and the long periods of sedentary work. *MESO* employees attributed the strain and discomfort to the absence of ergonomically designed workstations and the use of ‘one-size-fits-all’ equipment which the manager claimed were sufficient given the casual nature of the work.

Level of income

Researchers (e.g Rogers/Rogers, 1989; Campbell/Burgess 1998; Cranford et al. 2003; Watson et al. 2003) have noted that the level of income is a key indicator of precarious employment, particularly where it is at or below the minimum wage and prevents employees from maintaining a satisfactory standard of living. According to Brosnan (1995: 3), insufficient income can lead to social deprivation where households or individuals are no longer able “to enjoy the level of consumption or leisure which a member of that society can legitimately expect”.

Management at both *TELI* and *MESO* stated the rate of pay offered was adequate for the nature of the work and fit in well with the industry average. Supervisory staff at *MESO*, however, disagreed and argued that their wage rates were insufficient because of the monotonous nature of the work. *MESO* employees were also dissatisfied with their pay and felt they were being paid less than what was offered in similar call centres.

Part-time employees in *TELI* also stated they felt the wage rate was too low, particularly as they were required to work unsocial hours and that there were no penal rates. Casual workers complained that the \$1.19 cent pay differential between their hourly wages and the wages of part-timers as being unjustified because they performed the same tasks and in some instances, felt they out performed the part-timer workers.

None of the employees interviewed in these two call centres could depend solely on their call centre income to maintain their wellbeing or the wellbeing of their dependants, as seen in Table 4. Those individuals who did not have family members to support them were forced to either hold multiple jobs or to depend partly on Government welfare payments in order to obtain a sufficient income. Other interviewees stated that they frequently had to forgo purchases or activities in order to pay for the basics, such as rent, food, electricity and transport.

Table 4: Hourly Wage Rates in *MESO* and *TELI*

| MESO | | TELI | |
|--------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
| Length of Service | Per Hour | Type of Worker | Per Hour |
| Inexperienced | \$10.00 | Non-core worker | \$12.23 |
| Less than 6 months | \$11.00 | Core worker | \$13.42 |
| More than 6 months | \$12.00 | | |

Level of benefits

Another indicator of precariousness is if employees are given few or no benefits, such as sick leave, domestic leave, bereavement leave, parental leave, holiday pay, health insurance or extra remuneration for unconventional hours of work (see Burgess and Campbell 1998; Tucker 2002). Not having access to other benefits, such as training and development can also be considered an indicator of precariousness as employees are unable to up-skill themselves in order to participate in the higher skilled and better paid segments of the labour market (Brosnan 1995).

The only benefit made available to *MESO* employees in the employment agreement is that of holiday pay (which they have to by law). All of the *MESO* employees interviewed indicated they were aware of this entitlement and most felt that their status as 'casual' employees justified their exclusion from other standard non-wage benefits.

Within *TELI*, all employees are given access to sick leave, bereavement leave, and parental leave. Entitlements are, however, more extensive for part-timers. All the casuals were satisfied with the benefits they were entitled to, with the exception of two older workers who preferred part-time status in order to get access to a wider range of benefits. Part-time employees expressed considerable dissatisfaction with organisational benefits, particularly with the absence of a superannuation scheme, health benefits and the recent abolition of penal rates for overtime. These workers felt that as they were half-time equivalent to full-time employees, they should have access to the wide range of benefits available to the full-time employees.

Both *TELI* and *MESO* companies offer employees one week of training for each product or campaign during the initial recruitment process. Thereafter, very brief training sessions (up to 30 minutes) are conducted when new products are released or when new campaigns commence. One employee from *MESO* stated they had assisted with recruiting in the past and two *TELI* part-timers stated they had received some supervisory training. However, these opportunities were not ongoing and not available to the majority of employees. Although most of the employees from these call centres indicated that they felt training was unnecessary because of the limited skills required to carry out the work, five employees from *TELI* (three part-timers and two casuals) and three from *MESO* stated they would like further training in customer services skills as well as access to education and development programs as a way of facilitating their progression within the organisation.

Degree of regulatory and union protection

Although New Zealand call centres operate within an employment legislation framework, precarious work remains largely unregulated. Thus, indications of precariousness can be measured against the amount of protection for discrimination, sexual harassment, and unacceptable working practices as well as the level of union protection available to workers.

MESO has no official policies or practices to protect employees from unacceptable working practices, such as discrimination and sexual harassment.

There were also differing views between the supervisors and managers as to why this was the case. The supervisors stated that employees would be expected to deal with any problems themselves and to use their 'common-sense'. The manager stated that because the company had a high turnover of casual staff, complaints regarding unacceptable working practices would rarely be pursued by an employee and thus lessening the chance of a case being brought against the company. Employees interviewed were unaware of how to seek assistance or redress if faced with unacceptable working practices.

Within *MESO*, occupational health and safety issues are dealt with briefly and only as part of the induction process. The induction training gives employees an overview of how to identify hazards in the workplace and how to prevent or minimise muscular strain and fatigue through stretching exercises and frequent breaks. However, few employees could remember how to apply the instructions given in the induction training. The manager repeated that the high level of casualised staff and the lack of regular shift work meant that health and safety concerns would be minimal.

There was no union presence within *MESO* and employees (particularly those under 25 years of age) were largely uninformed about the role unions play in protecting workers rights. *MESO* managers considered union presence unnecessary in their call centre because workers were only employed on a casual basis.

Protective policies for discrimination and harassment were comprehensive in *TELI*. Visual aids outlining what constitutes harassment and procedures for dealing with these issues were present throughout the workplace. The organisation is also involved in an Employee Assistance Program and provides referrals to counsellors as necessary. Most of the employees interviewed in this call centre had a good understanding of these policies and procedures. However, casuals and non-unionised part-timers were relatively less informed of their rights than unionised part-timers. Union members were confident that their union would protect their rights if any breaches occurred. Both managers and union representatives stated there was an amicable relationship between the union and *TELI* management.

TELI management also has a number of proactive health and safety measures. In addition to six monthly requests for discomfort forms, the organisation has six staff representatives who carry out six monthly hazard checks. Provisions are also made for employees and union representatives to play an active role in the development and implementation of health and safety policies. In addition, the workplace features numerous visual aids that outline hazard identification protocols and organisational procedures. Workstations are ergonomically designed and specialists are consulted when necessary. The occupational health and safety policies, however, only focus on the physical aspects of the work; the emotional and psychological implications of the job are overlooked. Furthermore, based on their past experiences, employees were doubtful about health and safety issues being dealt with appropriately by the organisation.

Discussion

The summary of the findings, outlined in Table 5, highlight a number of important points that require further exploration. First, cross-case and within case analyses based

on the Tucker framework indicate that those in the more *non-standard employment arrangements are subject to more precarious working conditions*. For instance, while part-timers from *TELI* could generally rely on having regular hours and pay, casuals from *TELI* and *MESO* could not. It is important to note, however, that 76 percent of casuals from both *TELI* and *MESO* were under the age of 25 years, and over 80 percent had little intention of pursuing a career in the organisation. The majority of workers had, therefore, sought casual employment as a means of supporting their studies and/or supplementing other sources of income or financial support. Furthermore, links can be drawn between these results and Smithson and Lewis' (2000) study on the impact of job insecurity on the psychological contract. The 18-30 year olds involved in the British study indicated that although they sought job security in the labour market, they did not expect it. The study suggests this is because younger workers are becoming increasingly aware of the use of non-standard working arrangements by organisations in the contemporary labour market. Short term job insecurity is increasingly being accepted and considered a valuable means of gaining experience and building a career portfolio. In addition, the study revealed that young workers have a lower expectation of receiving non-wage work benefits and are consequently less inclined to express dissatisfaction when access is denied compared to more mature workers (Smithson/Lewis 2000).

Second, there are not only links between precariousness and non-standard employment but there are also significant differences in terms of certainty of employment, wages and conditions, degree of employee control, etc. *within* non-standard employment. For example, the larger organisation *TELI* explicitly divides employees into two groups – part-time and casual, defined by two different employment agreements each varying in terms of stability and benefits. Although less explicit and clearly part of the 'informal' culture of the organisation, divisions can also be seen within *MESO*. While all the employees in this organisation are employed on a casual basis (in accordance with the Employment Relations Act 2000), there are a group of employees who have a personal strong relationship with the management and are therefore treated more like semi-permanent staff. Despite the directness or indirectness of these divisions, the process of separating the workforce into two groups can be linked to the traditional organisational practice of balancing a more secure workforce with a more intermittent and on-call group of employees (see Christensen 1998; Tucker 2002). These practices are illustrated in Atkinson's (1984) model of the 'flexible firm', which emphasises the role of labour market dualism in maximising organisational flexibility. The model attempts to graphically portray segmented labour market theory, with the inherent inequalities between core and peripheral workers. However, while the Atkinson model distinguishes between core and peripheral workers, (by highlighting that the core workforce is typically permanent and well paid), all the interviewees in the case studies appear to fall under the peripheral category. The problem, therefore, is how does one determine which group of these non-standard call centre workers are more or less disadvantaged?

Table 5: Summary of the Findings

| 1. Certainty of ongoing employment | MESO | TELI |
|--|--|---|
| • There are no short-term or long-term career prospects | True | True for the majority |
| • There is a high risk of job loss | True – highly erratic workloads | False – generally stable workloads + terminations rare |
| • The job can be terminated with little or no prior notice by the employer | True – employment agreement states 2 weeks notice required but little adherence, particularly in the case of newcomers | True: Only 7 days notice given to workers, but terminations rare. |
| • There is no explicit or implicit contract for ongoing employment. | True for the majority | False |
| • The earnings are uncertain or irregular | True | Part-timers: True but minor Casuals: True – significant. |
| 2. Degree of employee control | | |
| • Employees have low level of control/ bargaining power over employment processes & working arrangements (wages, pace of work, working conditions). | True | |
| • Hours of work are uncertain or can be changed at will by the employer. | True: significant. | Part-timers: True, but little impact Casuals: True - significant. |
| • Functions of the job can be changed at will by the employer. | False – but employees desire change | False – but employees desire change. |
| • The task performed or the health and safety practices at the workplace make the job dangerous or unhealthy. | True | True |
| 3. Level of income | | |
| • The job is low income – at or below the minimum wage ¹ | Above NZ minimum wage but considered inadequate | Above NZ minimum wage but considered inadequate |
| • The level of income is insufficient to maintain the wellbeing of workers and their dependents | True – multiple job holding necessary. | True – income meets bare necessities of the majority. Multiple job holding necessary. |
| 4. Level of benefits | | |
| • There is little or no access to 'standard' non-wage employment benefits such as sick leave, domestic leave, bereavement leave or parental leave. | True | Access to all those stated; employees unhappy with exclusion from health benefits and overtime. |
| • There is limited or no opportunity to gain and retain skills through access to education and training. | True | True |
| 5. Degree of regulatory & union protection | | |
| • There is, in practice, no protection against unjustifiable dismissal, discrimination, sexual harassment, unacceptable working practices, including hazardous conditions. | False – but employees desire change. | False – but employees desire change. |
| • Union representation is nonexistent or low and discouraged by the employer. | True – no union presence on site | False - 59 percent of all workers unionised. 68 percent of part-timers 55 percent of casuals. |

¹ At the time of the study – Adult min wage: \$9.00 p/hr Youth min wage: \$7.20 per hour.

Moreover, reflecting on the individual experiences and preferences of part-time workers, it also becomes clear that *part-time employment status does not necessarily translate to better employment conditions*. On the contrary, the case study evidence from TELI suggests these workers have a stronger reliance on the work, thus, conditions have a more significant impact on the quality of their working lives. In addition, although these employees are classified as part-timers, their employment agreement and their working habits are more akin to regular, full-time work. Most part-timers worked hours almost equivalent to full-time work, (their hours are capped at 38 hours a week in order to maintain their part-time status) and had been in the organisation for between five and 38 years, and had strong intentions of remaining in the organisation indefinitely or until retirement. Casual workers are called in to bridge the gap despite part-timers expressing their willingness to work more hours. Furthermore, most of these workers relied on the job as a main source of income, despite the relatively low wage rates, suggesting levels of commitment that are comparable to those on permanent full-time agreements (Horwitz et al. 2000; Smithson/Lewis 2000).

These practices not only contravene the principles of the 2000 Employment Relations Act, but also preserve the precariousness of working conditions for this group of employees in TELI. In addition, these practices confirm that labour flexibility is used as a *means of extending employer control* over labour processes (Burgess and Strachan 1999). Within this workplace, this can be seen through the abolition of overtime and penalty rates, and an increase in the span of ordinary working hours over the past five years – practices that have prevailed despite union presence in this call centre. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the lack of employment opportunities elsewhere may have a significant impact on the wages and working conditions of employees in this organisation. Another likely possibility is that unsocial hours are increasingly being accepted as the ‘norm’ in call centre workplaces and may be considered an essential part of the call centre ‘terrain’ (Richardson/Marshall 1999; URCOT 2000; Paul/Huws 2002).

Third, there are also a number of key issues concerning the *level of control* employees have over their job and the flow-on effects this has on their well-being that *did not necessarily concur with the Tucker framework*. It was obvious that, although workers had minimum control over their particular work functions, these were rarely subject to any changes. It was also apparent that any changes or modifications to work functions were *offered* to employees as a reward, rather than *imposed* on workers as a means of control. Rather than view these changes negatively, there was a general preference amongst employees for greater variety in the functional tasks, particularly given the narrowly defined set of tasks they are typically required to perform. As noted in the findings above, employees in these case studies did not experience or react to the Tucker indicator of *precariousness* whereby the conditions of employment are *unfavourable* or *undesirable*. To the contrary, employees viewed changes to their job functions in a most positive light, which puts functional variation as indication of precariousness in doubt.

Fourth, although the findings indicate evidence of precariousness in both organisations, there are differences in terms *protective mechanisms* between MESO and TELI. In MESO there was an absence of protective mechanisms and reluctance by manage-

ment to provide a duty of care because of the casual nature of work. Paul and Huws (2002) assert that workers in organisations such as *MESO*, are considered highly disposable and there is little investment to improving their working conditions. Given the low profit margins in these types of organisations, protective mechanisms are not considered important.

There is also evidence to indicate that the absence of protective mechanisms and poor working conditions (eg working long, anti-social hours) as well as the lack of autonomy and worker participation are indicative of a low to non-existent trade union presence in the call centre industry (Weil 1991; Burgess/Strachan 1999; URCOT 2000; Tucker 2002; Paul/Huws 2002). Trade union coverage also needs to be taken into account when measuring precariousness in call centre workplaces. Burgess and Campbell (1998) include unionisation in their framework for measuring precariousness, under *representation insecurity*, referring to the vulnerability of workers to changes in labour process without adequate protection from unions or other collective organisations. Tucker's framework, however, *overlooks unionisation* as an indicator – which is problematic given that this was a feature of the case study data. It is argued that it is important to include unionisation as an indicator of precariousness given the critical role collective representation can play in the preservation of even the most basic employment rights (Burgess/Strachan 1999; URCOT 2000; Tucker 2002). Yet, merely determining whether there is a trade union presence is not sufficient. As the situation in *TELI* demonstrates, there needs to be evidence of *effective representation* across the various demographic groups. This is particularly so amongst the non-standard work force, who are less likely to be unionised and more likely to have the terms of employment determined solely by the employer. Women, younger and unskilled non-standard workers are particularly vulnerable in these respects, as they not only lack basic knowledge of collective bargaining and trade unions, but are also rendered powerless in the bargaining arena given their disadvantaged status in the labour market (Zeytinoglu/Muteshi 2000; Tucker 2002).

There is not only a strong argument for union representation to be included as a measure of precariousness in the call centre context, but it is also important to recognise the problems associated with organising workers in the call centre industry. The findings from the study reveal that trade union organisers experience considerable barriers when trying to gain access to call centres and talk to the workers, most of whom are not available for meetings because of the casual and intermittent nature of their work. These barriers not only restrict the level of unionism amongst casual call centre workers but they also increase the likelihood of these workers continuing to experience poor wages and conditions (see Quinlan et al. 2000).

The long and unsociable hours that many call centre employees work not only impact on their access to trade union representation but also have an enormous detrimental impact on their *work/life balance*. While there has been little research on work/life balance in the call centre context, researchers have drawn attention to the unsocial hours associated with call centre work. Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell (2000) suggest shift systems operate in a number of call centres, particularly those known to have extended operational hours. In fact, there is also a growing trend amongst call centres to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Richardson et al. 2000; URCOT 2000; Paul/Huws 2002). This has a harmful effect on employees'

work/life balance, in terms of the extensive and unsocial timing of working hours, the lack of compensatory remuneration and the difficulties faced in organising leave arrangements (URCOT 2000; Paul/Huws 2002). Women are most affected by unsocial hours given that domestic responsibilities often restrict their availability for more standard working times (Richardson et al. 2000; URCOT 2000). At the same time, they face the greatest difficulties in balancing work with their personal life, particularly working under rigid shift systems (Paul/Huws 2002). The issue of work/life balance is therefore significant when examining employment conditions in the call centre context, and there is justification for its inclusion as a measure of precariousness when examining work conditions in this sector.

Finally, the findings of the study show that the competitiveness within the industry, the slim operating margins and the implementation cost-cutting measures *have accelerated and normalised the use of non-standard workers and precarious work practise* in call centre industry (also see Hipple/Stewart 1996; Houseman 1999; Zeytinoglu/Muteshi 2000). For example, it is unlikely that *MESO* will reverse its employment practices by taking on full-time or even part-time workers but will instead continue to rely on a pool of casual workers. Likewise, it is unlikely that the management of *TELI* will allow the bulk of their casual workers to become part-time workers and their part-time workers to become full-time. Moreover, the effects of non-standard, precarious work on the majority of the employees in both organisation are not only the obvious ones – such as the degree of uncertainty, lack of control, etc – but also the lack of other benefits, for example training, superannuation schemes, difficulties in securing mortgages, etc, that are normally afforded to permanent, full-time workers. This means that there are marginalised groups of workers that will have difficulties in advancing their career prospects which is particularly worrying given that the number of workers in non-standard/precarious employment is growing.

Conclusion

The article has endeavoured to identify linkages between non-standard work and precarious employment and what constitutes precariousness. In doing so the Tucker model was used in a study of two case studies for two reasons. First, because it was developed specifically for the New Zealand employment context, and second, because it encompassed the key indicators of precariousness discussed by leading researchers in this area (including Rodgers/Rodgers, 1989; Standing 1993, 1997; Burgess/Campbell 1998).

The question is how useful is the Tucker model? Because the model was developed to measure the precariousness of any employment form, it can be applied to virtually any employment arrangement. It can also provide linkages as well as highlight distinctions between non-standard work and precarious employment. However, its wholesale application must be treated with caution. As this is the first time the model has been applied to an empirical study, it is still unclear as to how successful it has been at identifying the different nuances between various indicators within the context of the call centre industry. In addition, there is some reservation regarding whether or not measuring 'precariousness' can be limited to a predetermined, list of indicators and that there should be a more complex matrix of inter-related factors. Nonetheless,

it has provided a framework in which to highlight a number of critical points. Namely that those employees in non-standard employment arrangements are subject to more precarious working conditions but that there are differences in terms of certainty of employment, wages and conditions, degree of employee control, etc. within non-standard employment. In addition, the lack of a trade union presence will exacerbate poor working wages and conditions and decrease the level of employee protection. Labour flexibility in the form of precariousness can also be used as a means of extending employer control over labour processes. Finally, the findings show that non-standard and precarious work has long-term implications for employees in terms of their well-being and their livelihoods.

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