

A Sound Working Environment in Call and Contact Centres



- Advice and Guidelines -



A sound and healthy working environment is not just something that the law demands, it is also profitable. It enhances employees' well-being, satisfaction and performance. It results in lower costs for sick-leave and less employee churn.



This document contains advice and guidelines to help create a sound working environment. It has been developed in Sweden primarily for the Swedish market and reference to what is allowed by law implies, unless otherwise stated, Swedish law, which is harmonised with the directives of the European Union. Much of the intention of the document is, however, more universally applicable than merely for Sweden. It is intended for those responsible for call centre operations and others with an interest in them. The document has been produced by the employers' federation ALMEGA-forum for service companies, the Swedish National Institute for Working Life, the Swedish Work Environment Authority, the CallCenter Institute (CCI), the Salaried Employees' Union (HTF) and the Swedish Call Centre Federation (SCCF). The guidelines are based on current knowledge, international standards, EU directives and Swedish law.

A more detailed version, containing descriptions, explanations and references can be found at www.arbetslivsinstitutet.se/pdf/callcentre-guidelines.pdf

Ensuring quality in the working environment

Companies and organisations normally consider it a priority to achieve good quality in their business operations. Work environment and other working conditions are an integral part of any successful quality programme. This is conducive to good work performance. The following elements can form part of a good quality programme:

- design and layout of the workplace
- indoor climate and air quality
- noise and light conditions
- furniture and other equipment
- awareness of environmental risks and application of good work techniques
- organisation and management of work and development opportunities
- the length of shifts, and breaks from routine work
- work management, including information, the opportunity to influence one's situation and quality control

Support from supervisors and colleagues is important for satisfaction, good health and good quality

RESPONSIBILITY

It is important for everyone to make a positive working environment their priority. The main responsibility for this lies with the employer. But the employee too is responsible for taking part in work environment activities and carrying out measures decided on.

START HERE

The Work Environment Act says the employer is responsible for implementing systematic work environment measures as an integral part of the daily work. Employees must also have the opportunity to participate in work environment activities. For successful systematic work environment management everyone needs to help and contribute with their knowledge and experience.

Examine physical, psychological and social working conditions and decide:

- What are the risks?
- What measures should be carried out?
- What must be prioritised?
- When should they be implemented?
- Who should do what?
- Did the measures produce the desired results?

A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT GIVES ADDED PROFIT

The cost of having one person off sick for a week can amount to 1000 Euro or more. This includes sick pay, overtime payments for other employees, the cost of finding relief staff, production losses, impaired customer service and a consequent drop in customer satisfaction. Poor working environment really does cost money!

Premises, furniture and equipment

Open-plan office layouts, booths or separate rooms – they each have their pros and cons. Whichever solution is chosen, it is important that the design and furnishing of the office space has room for the work to be done and the breaks that are needed. This publication provides some ergonomic guidelines which may be helpful when making changes to the office or investing in new work furniture and equipment.



FURNITURE AND COMPUTER EQUIPMENT

Chairs and desks should be easily adjustable to suit the person using them. This is particularly important if the workstation is used by different people. Good furniture allows users to vary their posture. Alternating between sitting and standing to work is good for the body. Preferably, the desk should be easy to elevate to a level suitable for standing.

If the workstation is used by several people, each should adjust the settings at the beginning of their shift.

The colour of the Visual Display Unit (VDU), the computer mouse and the desktop should not be too light, dark or shiny – they should have a light, but not quite white, and matt surface. This will help to eliminate reflection or strong contrasts that can strain the eyes.



THE DESK is easily adjustable in height and sufficiently large – at least 100 cm deep for conventional VDU and 80 cm for flat display screens.

THE CHAIR is easily adjustable in height, has an adjustable back support (height and angle) and a rocking function. Where there are arm rests they should be adjustable both in height and width, and such that the chair can be moved right up to the desk.

CABLES for the computer should be gathered together and hung up to reduce the risk of tripping, prevent the gathering of dust and make cleaning easier.



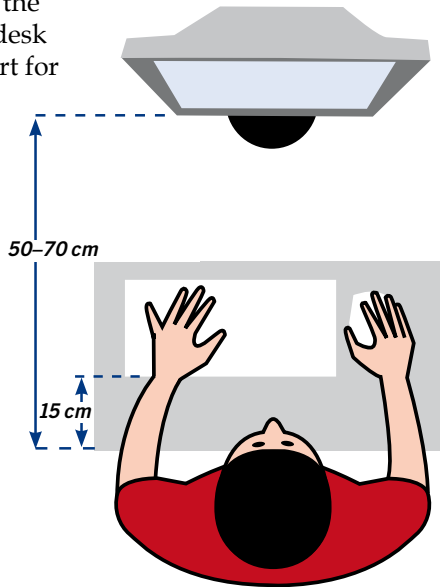
THE VDU should be TCO-labelled (not older than TCO99), and its height and angle should be adjustable. A flat VDU is preferable to the conventional CRT monitors.

THE KEYBOARD should be short and as flat as possible. Standard keyboards with a number pad to the right are unnecessarily long, putting the mouse too far right. This results in an unsuitable position for the right arm.

THE COMPUTER MOUSE should be as flat as possible and its design should allow for both right- and left-handed use. A flat keyboard and mouse allow the wrists to be kept in a suitably flat, straight work posture.

POSITIONING OF THE EQUIPMENT

There should be 50–70 cm between the VDU and the edge of the desk to allow a suitable distance between the eyes and the screen. Position the keyboard so that there are about 15 cm between the keyboard and desk edge for support for the wrists and forearms.



The top of the VDU should be slightly below eye level, so that the gaze is directed slightly downwards. A screen that is too high can cause eye strain and neck ache. Reduce the risk of glare and reflections by positioning the screen so that light from any window comes from the side of the VDU.

Information and Knowledge

It is not just enough having the right furniture and equipment to ensure good work performance. If the equipment is not properly positioned, adjusted or used, the work postures and movements may be strained, causing aches and pains. Consequently, everyone should know how the equipment can be adjusted and used, and why.

Employees should receive training in suitable work techniques. Employers are responsible for

ensuring that all employees know and understand about how to work properly and efficiently. Employees are responsible for following any instructions they are given. Because it is easy to forget, there should be regular information and reminders about the importance of having breaks from work, alternating between sitting and standing while working, and about correctly adjusting desks, chairs and computer screens.

Light, sound and air

Good light, sound and air quality enhance working conditions, thereby reducing the risk of tiredness and creating the right environment for good work performance.

LIGHT AND LIGHTING

Daylight is important to maintain daily rhythm and alertness. Strong sunlight can dazzle, and needs to be screened with measures such as Venetian blinds or window film.

If the room lighting is too bright or is poorly shaded, this can cause problems of glare and eye strain, as the luminance of computer screens is fairly low. If the lighting is too dim, it will be difficult to read documents and other material. Light-fittings that allow light to be directed upward

and downward often provide suitable light distribution and are easier to position in the workplace. A desk lamp should be available for those who need more light than is provided by the general room lighting.

SOUND

Telephone calls make up a large part of the working day. To enable operators to concentrate on their work tasks, the noise level in the office should not be too high. Other people's voices can have a disturbing effect even at low sound levels. Disturbing noise can result in tiredness and a drop in performance.

Sound-absorbent measures such as textiles and screening can reduce noise. It is also helpful to have suitable phone equipment with good sound quality and devices to cut out disturbing noise. There are headsets with ear-pieces for one or both ears – it is worthwhile trying out both sorts.

Where employees who regularly deal with phone calls may have a hearing



impairment, a hearing test should be carried out. Check whether the problem is work-related and see what can be done to remedy it and make life easier for the person affected.



AIR

A pleasant indoor climate and good air quality contribute to good work performance. The ventilation system should be adjusted and maintained bearing in mind the type of work being carried out. In a call centre, for example, the working hours should be taken into account. It is often worthwhile that the quality of ventilation well exceeds the minimum hygienic standards.

In Scandinavia, indoor air is often very dry in the winter when cold outside air is inducted and heated up. Warm, dry air can be troublesome to the eyes and the air passages, particularly when working with a VDU and talking a lot.

And do not forget office cleaning! Good cleaning routines keep down the dust, which reduces the risk of employees' eye and throat problems.



Eyesight tests

Employees who normally work with a VDU more than one hour a day should undergo an eyesight test. The test needs to be repeated at regular intervals and if there are eye or vision problems. Every three to five years is an appropriate frequency. If employees need special glasses for computer work, the costs are to be borne by the employer. The costs can vary, as different employees have different needs.

Work variation and rotation

We need variation and time to recover at work, physically and mentally, both for our health and to give us the opportunity to perform well.

There are a number of ways in which call centres can increase variation, reduce pressure, enhance the content of the work and make it more stimulating.

Some examples – employees:

- *can switch between different sorts of projects,*
- *can alternate phone calls with different tasks, such as administration, planning, training and practical service work,*
- *can be logged on for less time per day,*
- *can participate in planning/scheduling, and*
- *can alternate between sitting and standing while working.*





TIPS FOR VARIATION AND RECOVERY AT WORK

- Divide the time between calls and dealing with e-mail/post.
- Provide training and coaching sessions.
- If the desks cannot be raised and lowered, next time you buy new desks invest in some that are easily adjustable and allow employees to take turns using them.
- Take a stretch between calls.
- Take calls in a standing position for 10 minutes per hour.
- Arrange exercise breaks – encourage those who rarely participate to join in.
- Encourage employees to take lunchtime walks.
- Allow employees to take 15-minute walks during paid working time.
- Allow employees responsibility for cleaning, making up fruit baskets, organising staff activities etc.
- Apply for health accreditation from a sports association or likewise.
- You can surely add suggestions of your own.



Sweden has no legal limits as to how long a shift can last, other than the provisions of the Working Hours Act. The Act specifies that employees must not work more than five hours without a proper break. A proper break is defined as a scheduled break during which an employee may leave the workplace.

It is important to introduce breaks and interruptions to do something else before tiredness sets in and performance suffers. Several short ones are usually more beneficially refreshing than fewer long breaks. It is the employer's responsibility to manage the length of work shifts and job content, so that employees do not suffer physical or mental ill-health.

The Work Environment Authority's provisions also demand that work may not normally be closely controlled, physically or mentally restricted or monotonously repetitive. If work at a call centre is of this nature, a change must take place. This can be achieved by introducing a wider range of tasks and activities or arranging more work-breaks. A combination of measures is often needed to prevent problems with ill-health.

CLOSELY CONTROLLED work means that employees perform tasks with little or no opportunity to influence:

- the tempo of the work
- the order in which jobs are carried out
- the way in which tasks are performed
- the timing of breaks and pauses from work.

RESTRICTED work means that the employees have to remain at their work-station so work is not disrupted – it is difficult for them to leave their work-station when they want or need to.

MONOTONOUSLY REPETITIVE work means operators carry out their work with similar physical movements which are repeated over and over again.



How employees get paid is also a work environment factor

How employees get paid is a work environment factor, and the employer is responsible for ensuring that the remuneration system does not increase pressure and stress in the work. No-one gains if the wage / salary system leads to an individual's becoming unwell or stressed.

Developing business as well as the employees

To provide high quality, both employees and business must develop to meet new expectations and challenges. Encouraging employees to participate in development of the company's business increases their understanding of the business and motivates them to give of their best.



Most people want to do a good job that they can take a pride in. Everybody has different talents and preferences about what they want to do at work. People are likely to do a better job if what they are asked to do corresponds to their own ability. Some people are more comfortable providing customer service, while others prefer selling, for example. Try to give people work that can gradually become more demanding as the individuals develop in their professional role. Supervisors and employees should discuss this regularly – during a performance appraisal, for example.

Being able to work on one's own and take responsibility for one's work plays an important role in job satisfaction. It is also important for employees to see the connection between individual phases of work and to understand how their own work contributes towards the company's results.

MONITORING – both live monitoring and recording calls – is an important tool used to coach and develop employees, to increase motivation and to improve call quality. It can also be used to support and help employees

who are harassed or threatened by customers, or who have to handle particularly difficult customers.

CALL MEASUREMENT and other types of statistics are additional tools that can be used for personal development and the efficient management of business operations. They can be used to achieve an even spread of work, ensure correct staffing levels or identify points that need to be strengthened.

Call monitoring is permitted under Swedish law if one of the parties to the call is aware that it is taking place. With all monitoring and metrics attention should be paid to the requirements of data protection legislation. Other countries may have different legislation on this point.

To avoid misunderstandings arising from the use of monitoring and metrics, it is a good idea to have a written agreement between employer and employee about why they are being used. Monitoring and metrics should be designed for, and perceived by employees as a tool for, support rather than for control. Dialogue and a clear company policy on the matter will increase understanding among all those involved.

Help in managing work environment issues

Work environment is the employers' responsibility – but there is expertise available if needed, such as occupational health services, who can be engaged to look into reasons for ill-health, to perform risk assessment and to provide suggestions for how to remedy the situation.

Legal requirements

Central, relevant legal texts and provisions of the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

- Systematic Work Environment Management, AFS 2001:1
- Ergonomics for the Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders, AFS 1998:1
- Work with Display Screen Equipment, AFS 1998:5
- Workplace Design, AFS 2000:42 (in Swedish only)
- Noise, AFS 2005:16 (in Swedish only)

The organisations which have produced this publication can be contacted for any further information needed.



The Swedish Employers' Federation –
ALMEGA-forum for service companies
www.almega.se



www.av.se/inenglish



The Swedish Call Centre Federation
www.sccf.se



The Swedish National Institute
for Working Life
www.arbetslivsinstitutet.se



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