

Listening for the problem

Marcus R Quilter of the Call Centre Management Association, argues that Acoustic Shock contributes to a UK £2.5bn annual loss for call centres...

There has been a serious and damaging problem in the call centre sector for many years, according to research by the Health & Safety Laboratory and Institute Of Acoustics research, which is supported by case studies from the Communication Workers Union. To date, there has been very little public acknowledgement of the widespread existence of Acoustic Shock and noise interference at work.

The indicated damage to the UK's telephone operatives (approximately 3% of the working population), with the millions in compensation employers have paid out to date, and the contribution Acoustic Shock is making to the estimated annual £2.5bn cost of absenteeism and staff attrition, is a frightening prospect.

The UK's Government has been positive and proactive by bringing the problem of Acoustic Shock to the fore in its statement, and support for the industry, as follows: "The UK Government, through the Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, has recognised the importance of the CCMA's Acoustic Safety Programme to call centres in this rapidly expanding sector of the UK economy. The DTI recognises the move to encourage the call centre industry to put in place measures to control Acoustic Shock but acknowledges the ongoing considerations of the HSE of the impact on call centre staff", said Stephen Rhodes, Department of Business Relations at the DTI.

What is Acoustic Shock and why does it affect you?

To grasp the true nature of Acoustic Shock and its symptoms, as well as the effects on the workforce and bottom line profit of an organisation, one should consider the following statements of fact: In a Health & Safety Executive & RNID study of 15 call centres, telephone operatives were tested for the symptoms of Acoustic Shock. 30% were showed to suffer from Tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and 39% 'believed their hearing had been damaged during their employ in the call centre'.

Case studies and research have witnessed staff/operators with:

- Headaches
- Dizziness

- Nausea
- Lack of energy

These are often 'hidden' symptoms of low volume (ie. 30 to 80dB) continuous or repetitive Acoustic Shocks or 'interference'. In such cases, one cannot always hear the shock or interference above the level of the conversation or ambient noise; however, it can nevertheless penetrate through and cause damaging stimulation within the hearing mechanisms and the auditory part of the brain.

When subjected to this for more than a few days, telephone operators can start to show the symptoms outlined above. These 'annoyances' may not put someone off work initially, but will undoubtedly affect their performance and, consequently, company results.

The more obvious symptoms of Acoustic Shocks or noise interference are:

- Ringing in the ear (Tinnitus)
- Severe anxiety
- Stress
- Depression
- Phobia of working on phones
- A fear of working at all
- Inability to maintain any normal social existence

There have been over 400 UK legally represented compensation claims, resulting in payouts of approximately £2m in the UK so far, and £10m-plus worldwide to date, with more cases mounting every month. The companies who have paid compensation range from well-known household names to smaller localised businesses – Acoustic Shock does not play any favourites! These cases have been brought using existing legislation (Health And Safety At Work Act, Provision Of Equipment Regulations, Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations, etc.), highlighting another common misconception; that because Acoustic Shock is not specifically legislated for, organisations do not have to take any action. This is wrong!

Ask yourself: how many staff does your call centre have off work at any one time, short- or long-term, with symptoms

matching those described above? As a manager with a call centre career of more than 14 years, I already know the answer – there is always someone off sick, or handing in their notice, where reasons stated will include some of the above.

How can this be?

Since the beginning of the CCMA's Acoustic Safety Programme project, when the team began to consult with industry and some of the world's leading specialists, it quickly became obvious that the biggest problem was a lack of knowledge and awareness. This state, combined with some cases of corporate denial, has meant that the UK's call centre workforce continues to be subjected to serious work and life changing risks, and industry to a crippling cost:

- Acoustic Trauma is a matter of physical damage to the hearing mechanism caused by exposure to loud noise;
- Acoustic Shock is not a volume related problem;
- Current and future 2006 UK and EU noise regulations DO NOT have sufficient bearing on Acoustic Shock due to the fact they set a single incident maximum noise exposure to operators of 118dB and a weekly average of 80dB over an eight hour/day period, which, if reached, requires action;
- Technical solutions to date have not sufficiently prevented Acoustic Shock incidences from occurring below 118dB;
- The psychological effects of Acoustic Shock have not been widely known or accepted;
- Telephone operatives have little or no knowledge of how to recognise Acoustic Shock and its symptoms.

The Health & Safety Executive states that, although it has not yet carried out further investigation, 'operators should be trained to recognise such incidents and how to report them' and 'organisations that operate call centres are further advised that they should keep up-to-date with developments in this field through their professional associations.'

Misinformation that exists in the marketplace continues to put operatives in the UK at risk. All industry representative organisations and telephony equipment and device manufacturers need to work together to ensure clarity, accuracy, and the enhancement of health and safety in the workplace.

For our part, the 'CCMA Acoustic Safety Programme' wishes to categorically state the abundant truth in an accurate and impartial manner, supported by world leading experts along with government, union and industry leaders, as follows:

"Acoustic Shock is fast becoming a major problem in the call centre industry. This has been recognised in the Health and Safety Executive's latest statement on their website. They are attaching much to the fact that the industry must keep in touch with recent developments through learning. The Acoustic Safety programme fulfils this requirement by bringing managers the current facts of the problem and the latest solutions available. The team of experts have been brought together offering information never before released in the UK, giving all managers in the industry the opportunity to take part in this

learning so importantly recognised by the HSE", said Keith Broughton, Former HM Principal Specialist Inspector Noise and Vibration HSE, Chairman Acoustic Safety Programme.

"Whilst volume is clearly a contributory factor, it is only one of a number of factors that make up the issue as a whole. It is the lack of knowledge and awareness of all these factors and their interaction with each other that the Acoustic Safety Programme will address", said Dr Andrew Graham-Cumming MBBS, MFOM, BMI Health Services.

"The CWU fully supports the Acoustic Safety Programme and its objectives in providing a good method of sharing experiences and creating awareness to reduce this hazard in the call centre workplace", said Dave Joyce, National Health & Safety Officer, Commercial Workers Union.

"The TUC is committed to the health, safety and protection of the estimated one million call centre operatives in the UK providing an important service to the UK economy. The Acoustic Safety Programme goes some way towards providing a solution to the continuing proven risks associated with Acoustic Shock and its cost to industry, and the TUC fully supports these aims and their application in the workplace", said Hugh Robertson, Senior Policy Officer, Trades Union Congress, Commissioner HSC and Industrial Injuries Advisory Committee.

What to do next?

Our invitation goes out to all conscientious employers to protect our businesses, our operators and this growing sector by eliminating the problem and treating existing cases effectively through the Acoustic Safety Programme.

The workshop and conference event delivers industry leading keynotes, knowledge, training, legislative guidance, policy compliance, case studies, new technical solutions, specialist occupational health solutions and presentations from the world's telephony manufacturers.

Delegates will be the first in the world to see brand new and world class technologies enabling Acoustic Shock Elimination, Noise Interference limiting, remote monitoring, echo cancelling, voice enhancement and background noise suppression under one roof, and consult with the manufacturers themselves.

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