Chapter XVI

Human Issues and Computer Interaction: A Study of a U.K. Police Call Centre

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Abstract

The Barfordshire Police Call Centre project began as an attempt to find a more efficient way of dealing with the public. Arguably, what this study has demonstrated is that often, in the quest for technical efficiency, effectiveness, which requires attention to both technical and human issues, is compromised. By taking a more human centred approach, focusing on the whole information system rather than just the information technology, those factors left unsolved by the new technology have been addressed, and a way has been found to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of this project.
Introduction

The subject of this study is the implementation of a new call centre in Barfordshire (a pseudonym). Our involvement began after this centre had already been in operation for a year, and was experiencing serious problems indicated by negative client reaction. The approach taken to dealing with the outstanding issues, and the results of the intervention, are reported below. First, we have outlined the issues and problems that preceded the call centre implementation. Following this, the background to the intervention is outlined, and the consultancy itself detailed in the form of an action research project. Finally, the learning from the work undertaken is reported in the form of findings and conclusions.

Barfordshire Police: Issues and Problems

There are 43 police forces in England and Wales, all of which operate as independent organisations under National Government control and report to the Home Office. Within each force, smaller groups known as divisions may contain up to 250 officers. Each division manages a few police stations, each of which has up to 50 officers working in it. Although all police forces are governed by the same statutory regulations, each has a great deal of autonomy as to policing operations and internal management. One such police force, Barfordshire (a pseudonym), is medium-sized, with around 1,200 police officers.

A key issue for police forces is the management of information as it is received from the public and acted upon. In the United Kingdom, such information is divided into emergency (999, or 911 in US terms) and non-emergency.

Prior to April 2000, Barfordshire Police operated a Force Information Room (FIR), which received and allocated all emergency (999) calls, managed the radio channels for all divisions in Barfordshire, and dispatched resources to incidents. The FIR did not deal with non-emergency calls. In April 2000, a new state-of-the-art Information and Call Centre was opened at the Headquarters building. The key change as a result of this was the routing of almost all
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