Abuse Is Not Part Of The Job For Call Centre Workers

If You Want to Sort It. Report It!

USDAW

Call Centre Workers and Their Rights at Work

Employers have a duty under health and safety law to protect workers from work-related violence.

The Health and Safety Executive has made it clear that violence includes verbal abuse and threats as well as physical attacks. So call centre employers need to manage the risk.

Verbal abuse (and the fear of abuse) can lead to distress, anxiety and longer-term ill health. But there is a lot that managers can do to prevent abuse and limit the damage caused by abusive calls.

Minimising Risks

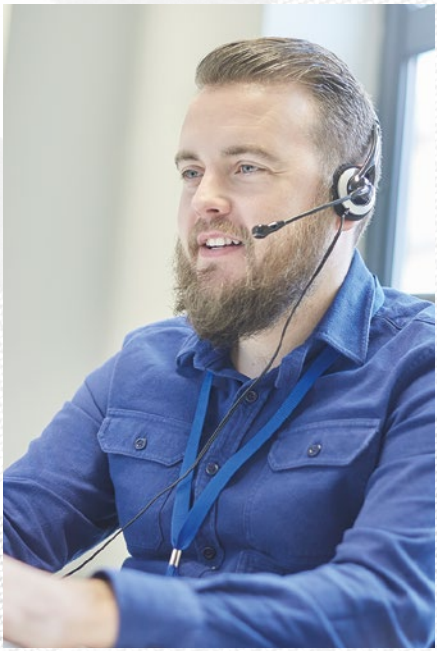
Allowing call handlers to provide a good quality service to callers will go a long way to reducing the risk of angry customers becoming abusive. This includes:

- Staffing levels to reduce queueing time.
- Designing software to help call handlers deal promptly with enquiries.
- Avoiding unreasonable performance targets.
- Ensuring the work environment is safe and healthy – lighting and heating, low noise levels, suitable workstations and equipment.
- Consulting with call handlers and their union reps on the performance of the system.

Dealing With Abusive Calls When They Do Occur

Even in the best-run call centre, there will be some calls which are abusive or upsetting. These could be:

- Prank or nuisance calls.
- Calls from customers who are upset with goods or services they have purchased.
- Threats against the organisation.
- Personal abuse directed at the call handler.



Be Prepared

It is important that employers work out how to deal with such calls in consultation with the call handlers themselves – so that they are prepared for them before they have to deal with them.

- Does your employer make it clear that you do not have to put up with abusive calls?
- Are call handlers allowed to terminate calls if they are abusive?
- Do team leaders provide support to call handlers when there is an abusive call?
- Are all call handlers trained on the procedure for dealing with abusive or threatening calls?
- Are call handlers given the opportunity to take a break after a difficult call?
- Are the procedures regularly reviewed at safety committee meetings?

In serious or persistent cases of abuse, there are laws which the police can use to bring criminal charges against the abuser.

Under the Communications Act 2003 and the Malicious Communications Act 1988, it is an offence to send a message through electronic communications which is grossly offensive, obscene or menacing.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 can also be used for repeat offenders. It gives powers to issue restraining orders against the harasser. So your employer's procedures should identify when it is appropriate to report offences to the police.

Usdaw Members in the Firing Line

"One customer phoned 12 times, after being declined an insurance policy, using sexual terms and abusive language to agents. Our employer did send him a letter to state his behaviour was unacceptable but it should have been a police matter."

"We do expect from time to time to have the odd customer that is less than happy and will show their frustration, but as employees we should have the peace of mind that if a call/customer is making us feel so scared, that we can end the call and ask a more senior member of staff to call them back."

"Then he shouted 'you f***ing P**i b***h!' I was shocked and said 'pardon?' I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Then he shouted it again. I said 'I could report you for that sort of language' but he carried on yelling and screaming so I ended the call. I was visibly upset."

How Joining Usdaw Can Help

- Where the Union is recognised, we can use the legal powers given to Usdaw Health and Safety Reps to make sure that the workplace is safe and healthy and to monitor the effectiveness of the policies for dealing with abusive callers.
- Individual members who feel they have not been given the support they need following an abusive call can raise any concerns with their Usdaw rep.
- Usdaw offers support through Usdaw Injury Assist for accidents and injuries sustained while at work.
- The Call Centre Survey helps Usdaw make a better case to employers and politicians to secure stronger protections. Share your experiences and suggestions here: **www.usdaw.org.uk/CCsurvey**

Legal Support

If you are a victim of violence and suffer an injury then under Usdaw Legal Plus, we help members to claim compensation from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA), which is a State-funded scheme.

In order to be eligible under the State-funded scheme, you must ensure that you personally report the matter to the police within 48 hours of the incident occurring and see a doctor straightaway to receive appropriate treatment. The claim must be brought within two years of the assault.

Register your claim through Usdaw Injury Assist at: **www.usdaw.org.uk/ia**

Subject to qualifying criteria, Usdaw also offers an Assault at Work Grant. Further information can be obtained from your local office.

Join Usdaw

Usdaw understands the issues that retail workers face in the workplace and the more members we have, the stronger our case is with companies for better policies and better protections.

Simply complete a membership form and return it to Usdaw's Head Office. Just write FREEPOST USDAW on the envelope and put it in the post.

You can also join online at: **www.usdaw.org.uk/JoinUs**

Scan to join today

For further information, call our Helpline on **0800 030 80 30** or visit: **www.usdaw.org.uk/fff**

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