

THE HIDDEN CLASSROOM

What digitally monitored call centre work teaches South African workers, and what it stops them learning

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Call centre work is among the most closely watched jobs on earth. Every call is timed, scored and recorded. South Africa now sells this sector as a leading answer to **youth unemployment**, and for many young people a headset job is their **first formal job**. More and more, that job is hybrid, moving each week between the office floor and the worker's own home. We ask a great deal about what this watching controls. We rarely ask what it teaches.

The call centre as a panopticon
Decades of research mapped the watching on the office floor, and showed it is never total. Workers always find breathing space.

The workplace as a teacher
Newer work shows monitored work carries a hidden curriculum. Workers learn to survive the system, while the skills that matter go unnamed.

THE GAP

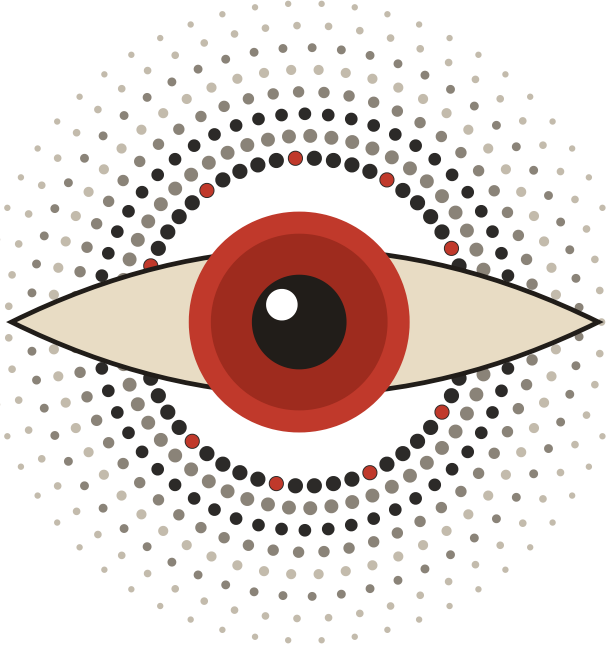
All of this studies the office floor, or well paid workers in rich countries who could leave. Nobody has asked what monitored work teaches a young, first job worker in the Global South, and what changes when the same watching follows her home.

THE QUESTIONS

MAIN QUESTION
How do the digital and physical layers of the workplace shape what call centre workers learn, and what they are stopped from learning, as they move between the office and the home.

- 1 What does the watching teach.
- 2 What does it stop from ever forming.
- 3 What changes when the room falls away and only the software remains.

THE WORKPLACE AS A HIDDEN CLASSROOM



THE TEACHER NOBODY HIRED

The monitoring software sets the lesson every day, and it is always in the room. It rewards what can be **seen and scored**. So it grows one kind of worker and quietly starves another.

WHAT THE WATCHING TEACHES

- Reading the dashboard and the metrics
- Pleasing the system that scores the call
- Staying visible and staying compliant
- Surviving the watching

Real learning. Bodwell calls it algorithmic survival.

WHAT IT MAY STARVE

- Judgement about what the customer needs
- Confidence to decide without a script
- Problem solving no metric can see
- The making of a thinking worker

For a first job worker, these may never form at all.

Monitoring rewards being **visible**, not being **good**. So it may teach survival and starve judgement.

Braverman LABOUR PROCESS

Control is designed into a job. Management splits the thinking from the doing, and the worker keeps only the doing.

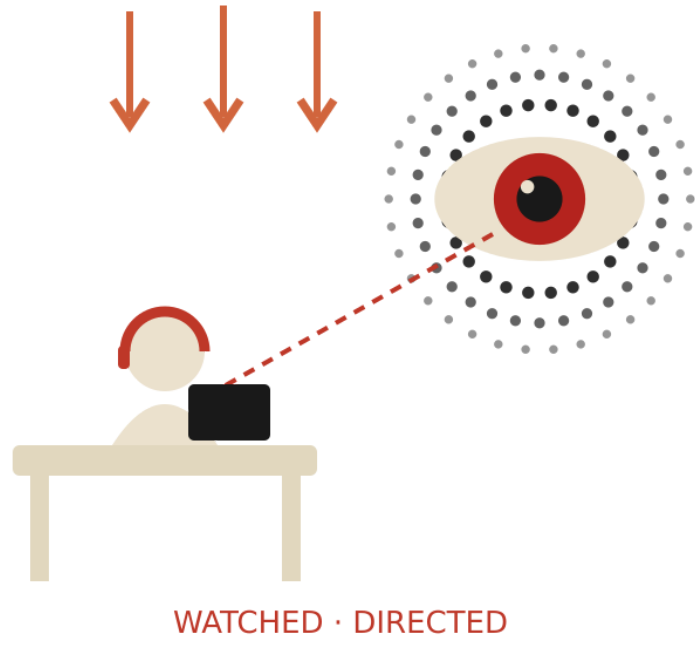
Foucault PANOPTICISM

Space can be built to control through visibility. The office floor is built to be seen. The home never was.

Bodwell HIDDEN CURRICULUM

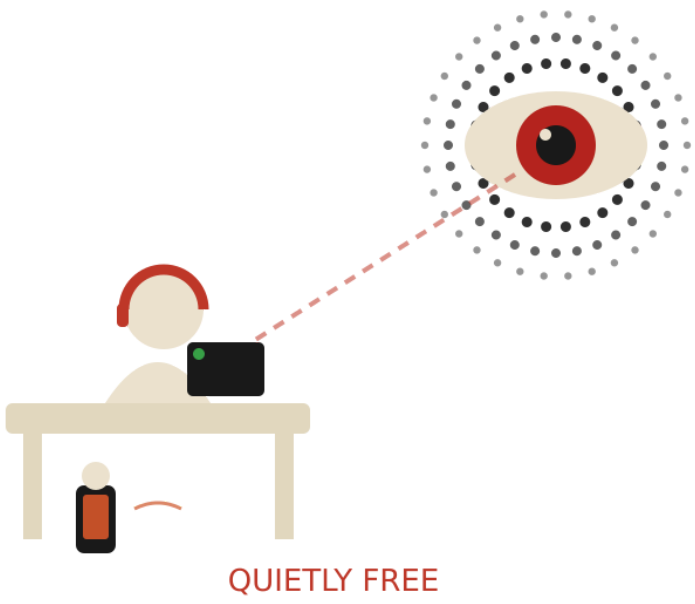
Monitored work teaches its own lessons off the record. It rewards being visible and scored, not being thoughtful.

HOW I STUDY IT



WATCHED · DIRECTED
OFFICE
The software and the room both watch.

The **move** is the method. At the office the software and the room watch together. At home the software stays and the room falls away.
So the move lets me hold one layer still and watch the other change. A lens, not a laboratory.



QUIETLY FREE
HOME
The software follows. The room is gone.

1



Recruit directly

Hybrid agents who split the week between office and home. Never through their managers.

2



Interview one

Their working life and the watching, told in both the office and the home.

3



Sketch and talk

Workers draw their own office and home workstations, then talk me through them.

4



Read the software

A close reading of the monitoring tools and what they are built to see.

5



Analyse

Reflexive thematic analysis. One pass led by theory, one led by the workers.

WHY IT MATTERS

For many young South Africans this headset job is where working judgement should be born. If the watching teaches visibility over thinking, a sector promoted to build **capacity** may be building **compliance** instead. That is a question about learning, and it belongs in education.

THIS STUDY SPEAKS TO

- learning mechanisms
- epistemologies
- learning systems
- assessment
- inclusiveness

ETHICS

Studying surveillance must not repeat it. Clearance before contact under POPIA. False names chosen by workers. Never recruited through employers. No addresses on the sketches. The researcher never enters a home.

TIMELINE

Proposal and **ethics**, late 2026 · Fieldwork, early 2027 · Analysis and writing, Q1 2027 · Submission, 9 March 2027

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