

The Nomadtrack Guide to Headset Management

*How to manage your headsets professionally,
meet Health and Safety commitments and save money*



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WHY HAVE WE WRITTEN THE HEADSET GUIDE?

The simple answer is because we have identified a growing need to provide definitive guidance to an increasingly complex issue. The increasing emphasis on health and safety compliance in the call centre environment coupled with the increasing costs of headset ownership and an increasing risk of litigation are all providing a huge incentive for call centre supervisors and managers be informed.

This guide is designed to provide information and guidance in all aspects of headset management i.e. this is pain relief!

The Nomadtrack team worked with a number of large and medium sized call centre operators over 2 years to find out what was actually needed from a headset asset management system. It became obvious very quickly that managing headset inventories would significantly improve H&S practice, reduce the need for paperwork, result in more efficient use of headset resources and reduce expenditure.

We also discovered that knowledge of health and safety best practice associated with headsets was at best mediocre.. The growth in the call centre industry has attracted the attention of lawmakers in the UK and Europe, as well as the trade unions, who have suggested that the call centre industry has become one of the new 'noisy industries', placing call handlers' hearing at risk. In addition, a growing claims history has prompted calls for tighter legislation on hearing protection for call handlers and the new European directive on noise at work will introduce more stringent guidelines for assessing and limiting noise exposure in the workplace when it comes into affect in February 2006.

Employers are faced with an increasing responsibility to demonstrate that they protect the health and safety of headset users. This guide will help them to achieve this in a practical and pragmatic way. It provides a useful summary of the latest guidelines from the Health & Safety Executive – and, equally importantly, how you can comply with them.

Nomadtrack has decided it is time to uncover the real business issues associated with headset ownership for call centres. In the following pages we aim to answer all the questions you were afraid to ask!

- Why do so many headsets disappear or get damaged?
- What are the costs associated with owning a headset inventory?
- How can I get more value from my headset inventory ?
- What health and safety legislation applies to my business?
- How can I protect my employees from acoustic shock?
- What is a headset hygiene programme?
- How can I keep track of my headset repairs?
- How can I better manage the cost of my headset stock?

The Nomadtrack Headset Management Guide answers these questions and more. It also explains how Nomadtrack, the web-based headset tracking and management solution, can help you maintain control of your headset assets, save you money and achieve health and safety compliance in a highly pragmatic way.



**Dale Huxford, Director,
1st October 2005**



Employers are faced with an increasing responsibility to protect the health and safety of headset users

THE HIDDEN COST OF HEADSET OWNERSHIP

This chapter reveals some hard-hitting facts about the hidden costs of headset ownership.

Headset use and abuse

Every day in call centres across the UK, thousands of headsets are thrown into drawers, dropped in bags, pulled out of pockets, left loose in lockers, sat on, dropped, dipped in coffee, soaked in water and fiddled with continually.

Even when they are being looked after carefully by the most conscientious employee, headsets can stop working because of everyday wear and tear.

But the truth is that some agents like to personalise their headsets. We have seen shredded plastic insulation on the cord, wavy headbands, and even several cases where agents have cut off the cable to turn their headset into a cool clubber's accessory!

Unfortunately, headsets have traditionally always been viewed as a consumable item by the accountants (more on this in Chapter Two). If an agent had a headset problem, the easiest solution for their supervisor was to give them a new one immediately.

Today, the call centre industry is becoming very aware of the costs. Headset expense review is becoming a key item in any budget meeting.

The cost of abused headsets

Our benchmarking experience shows that an average call centre can spend 30% of its headset purchase price per year on repairs and replacements. It is not uncommon for the figure to be as high as 50%. In a large call centre with 1,000 agents, headset replacement costs could be in the region of £50,000 per year.

In the smaller call centre, just 10 broken headsets can represent £1,000 of wasted assets.

Where do they go?

Headsets also have a habit of mysteriously disappearing like the missing sock in the wash. So where do they all go? A headset is a relatively small and mobile piece of equipment and therefore it can easily be mislaid, lost or forgotten.

For example, a recent check of drawers and lockers in a 200-seat call centre revealed £4,000 worth of spare headsets. Agents stored the headsets either absent-mindedly or 'just in case' they ever needed a spare.

It is also not uncommon for headsets to disappear from one call centre and reappear in another in the same local area with an employee change of job!

Experience shows that on average 30% of headset purchase price is spent on repairs and replacements each year

The problem is that most call centre managers have no way of counting the cost of 'lost' headsets. When you don't know how many headsets your call centre owns, it is very difficult to know when they go missing, or to calculate the cost of replenishment.

Repairs and Maintenance

Although EC legislation ensures that headsets are provided with a two-year warranty, headset repairs can also provide the contact centre with an unpredictable and unnecessarily costly expense. One 200-seat call centre we visited had spent its entire annual headset maintenance budget of £9,000 in just a few months.

The truth is that it is very difficult for the call centre manager to find out whether a headset is under warranty or not! Most call centre managers just don't have the time to track down the necessary paperwork, particularly when headsets are usually sent off for repairs in batches.

As a result, a consignment of headsets sent off for repair will generally include a considerable number of headsets that are no longer under warranty – resulting in a surprising – and often hefty – bill when the headsets are returned.

It doesn't have to be this way!

Are headsets doomed to remain stuck in an endless cycle of being replaced, broken, repaired and replaced, creating an unpredictable operational cost?

The answer is a resounding NO

A robust management system allows the call centre management and their headset supplier to work together on this issue to achieve mutual gain and avoid disputes.

Most call centre managers have no way of counting the cost of lost headsets

WHY PERSONAL HEADSET ALLOCATION WORKS

This chapter explains how personal headset allocation can add significant value and provide the foundation for your headset asset management policy. It further identifies how personal headset allocation can achieve even more savings.

Organisational Culture

So why is it that call centre headsets are so often used and abused? One reason is that an organisational culture exists which encourages employees to view headsets as a consumable, or to put it bluntly, throwaway item.

This attitude has its roots in the rapid growth of the call centre industry, fuelled by massive investment in the 1990s. The main priority for organisations was to develop the business processes necessary to handle escalating call volumes, not to track the costs of hundreds of relatively low-cost items.

Fixed Asset Policies

Accountants consider it a large task, counting equipment that is expensive enough to be rightly classified as fixed assets. They just don't have the systems or the motivation to track those items less than the fixed asset threshold, like headsets.

Today, shrinking budgets and growing accountability for health and safety issues mean that Call Centre Managers are looking for a more effective solution. Many have indicated that a headset asset management system is the answer.

But, before you rush to invest in a headset asset management

system remember that the first step to successful implementation involves a change in the culture of your call centre...

Challenging Existing Beliefs

Leading organisational psychologists, Furnham and Gunter (1993) define organisational culture as 'commonly held beliefs, attitudes and values regarding organisational goals, functions and procedures'. Based on this definition the following analysis of headset use and call centre culture can be made.

Belief	Attitude	Value
Headsets are always going wrong, disappearing or to blame for a poor call experience	Throw away the headset and get a new one	Headsets are an unimportant call centre asset

If organisations are to make headsets a more valued and important asset in the call centre it is important to challenge existing beliefs and attitudes towards headset use and abuse.

Reducing Headset Abuse

Personal headset allocation is an incredibly effective solution to reducing headset abuse and introducing a more positive culture within your call centre. It is also recommended by the Health & Safety Executive as an essential element of a Headset Hygiene programme (HELA 94/1 - this subject is explored in Chapter 4).

We have witnessed spectacular results created when an

Today, shrinking budgets and growing accountability for health and safety issues mean that Call Centre Managers are looking for a more effective solution.

Agent Headset Agreement has been implemented in several call centres. The agreement is signed by the agent when they are allocated a new headset. It outlines the agent's responsibilities for taking care of the company asset in their possession, as well as the ramifications of not doing so.

In each case there has been an incredibly fast transformation, creating a culture where headsets are valued as a vital tool of the trade. The life expectancy of a headset has changed dramatically, creating significant savings for the call centres involved. For examples of Agent Headset Agreements see the further information section at the end.

Significant results have also been produced when call centres have used an intelligent asset management solution like Nomadtrack. For personal allocation to work, agents must be advised that their headsets have a serial numbers or bar codes and that the status (in use or waiting for repair, for example) can be determined at any time. That is why a specialist asset management system is an essential requirement for many call centres. Instantly you can identify how much equipment you have, where it is and its status. You can benchmark performance between departments and locations and there are other benefits too.

Tracking Headset Repairs

In addition to ensuring you know exactly how many headsets are in your call centre's possession and where they are, an

asset management system enables you to forward plan by determining accurate failure and repair rates. Such a system enables you to make sensible decisions about repair or replacement alternatives and to track batches of repairs out to the repairer and back again, keeping you in control. If appropriate it can also allow you to work with your headset supplier to avoid repair costs through better management instead, channelling money in to new replacement units with warranty cover rather than repair out of date units.

It's not just about money...

Headset asset management is not just about saving costs on equipment and repairs. The following chapters in this guide look at the health and safety issues surrounding the use of headsets in call centres. With an increasing claims culture, the consequences of overlooking these H&S issues could be significant

With personal allocation, headsets become a valued tool of the trade

ESSENTIAL HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES

This chapter provides essential reading for any one with a legal responsibility for employee welfare in the call centre. It includes a simple guide to advice from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) for headset use in call centres.

Health & Safety Legislation in the Call Centre

Based on the assumption that the basic elements of a call handler's job are the same as a typical computer-based office job, the following legislation applies to the management and inspection of health and safety in call centres.

- The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977
- The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992
- The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992
- The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996
- The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
- The EC Directive on physical agents at work. Feb 2006 (includes noise)

in addition, there is another piece of legislation that is critical to all employers in the call centre industry:

- Noise at Work Regulations 1989 (this is dealt with comprehensively in Chapter 8)

However, in spite of increasing worries about health risks such as acoustic shock, there is no call centre specific legislation

that recognises the intensity and unique elements of a call handler's job.

This will change.

Help is at hand from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), which has produced some guidelines for employers, known as HELA*. See the more information section at the end for where to find the complete text of the HELA document.

New Guidelines for Call Centres

In March 1999 the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and the Trades Unions Congress (TUC) conducted a study, 'Indecent Exposure', which raised awareness of the risk of hearing damage in call centres. The HSE responded by commissioning a study to assess the risks for call centre employers.

Their original report (LAC) 94/1 was updated in December 2004 and our guide refers to the recommendations contained in this later report, which includes new advice on 'good practice' within the call centre industry. It further references the experience coming from the Australian call centre industry. While the recommendations are not yet compulsory, if your organisation follows the HSE guidelines below you will have a strong case for meeting your employer's 'duty of care'.

Noise-cancelling microphones

New legislation in Feb 2006 means that in Feb 2006 assessments of noise exposure will need to be made.

If background noise levels increase to 65-70dB(A), noise-cancelling microphones are recommended.

Microphone positioning

There is an optimal position for a microphone in front of a call handler's mouth to avoid excess vocal feedback for both caller and the call handler. Call handlers should be trained to position microphones correctly to avoid voice strain.

Noise Absorbers

The background noise level in a call centre should not exceed 85dB(A), as defined in the Noise at Work Regulations 1989. Special noise absorbing material, often in ceilings, can help to reduce noise levels.

Volume control

Headsets, amplifiers and/or turrets should be fitted with volume control to limit call handlers' daily noise exposure. The HSE's good practice guidelines recommend that call handlers be prompted to adjust their headset volume at the beginning of each call.

Acoustic Shock

The HSE recommends that employers encourage agents to report immediately exposure to any acoustic incident that re-

sults in physical damage. Management should implement a policy so that the details of these incidents are recorded, and employees are examined by an appropriate expert to investigate the extent of any physical damage (this may include a hearing check). (Chapters 5 and 6 deal with acoustic shock in more detail.)

Information and consultation

Call handlers should be provided with information about the potential risks to hearing and the measures being taken by their employer to control these risks.

Hearing Checks

It is considered good practice for employers to carry out regular hearing checks on all employees whose daily personal noise exposures in the workplace equal or exceed 90dB(A). In call centres it could be argued that such hearing test should be compulsory for all new staff as a way of establishing a baseline in the event that hearing problems develop later on.

Headset limiters

It is compulsory for headsets in the UK to include noise limiters to prevent very loud noises, exceeding 118 dB, being transmitted through the headset. All CE approved headsets are fitted with noise limiters.

CE Approved Headsets

All equipment provided for agents should be CE compliant

and, ideally, offer the latest advances in technological protection against acoustic shock. **It is an offence to use headsets that do not carry a CE mark. Employers and purchasers should be aware of cheap headset deals and ensure that what is being purchased is CE marked. For example a branded headset sold in the US is not CE approved for sales in the UK. Why?. Very simple, the legislation is different.**

Headset type

There is no difference in the impact on hearing between headsets with two earpieces or only one. The HSE suggests it is good practice to give call handlers the choice of either binaural or monaural models.

Headset hygiene

To reduce the risk of ear irritation and infection staff should be trained in headset hygiene. Personal allocation of headsets is also strongly recommended. This is also a very important issue for call centres and so we are devoting a whole chapter to headset hygiene in Chapter 4.

Headset Comfort

Call handlers wear a headset all day everyday, so it is important that it is fully adjustable to ensure a comfortable fit. This is particularly important if the earpieces sit at the entrance to

the ear canal rather than resting on the outside. The HSE recommends that call handlers be prompted to adjust their headset to make it comfortable at the start of their shift.

Headset Tracking

Employers should have a clear procedure for tracking headset repairs and exchanging broken headsets. Headsets should be checked regularly and repaired or replaced immediately if necessary.

Voice Health

Voice health is not covered in this guide, but our further reading section provides sources for employers who wish to know more about this important aspect of call centre health.

Employers should have a clear procedure for tracking headset repairs and exchanging broken headsets.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT A HEADSET HYGIENE PROGRAMME

Why a Headset Hygiene Programme can ensure compliance with HSE guidelines and how your organisation can create such a programme.

Reducing Risk

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the HSE guidelines make it clear that individual users should be allocated their own personal headset to avoid the risk of infection. Most employers face the risk of employees falling ill with a cold, viral infection or the flu, but the effect can be far more damaging to a call centre especially during call peaks.

When you are trying to manage sickness absence and maintain call response rates – think more about headset hygiene.

To recap, the HSE recommends that the following steps should be taken to ensure headset hygiene:

- Personal allocation of headsets to reduce the risk of ear irritation or infection, together with the ability to identify a headset to its user
- Headsets should be checked regularly and repaired or replaced immediately if necessary
- When sharing is unavoidable, users should be supplied with personal accessories such as ear pads, speaker covers or voice tubes
- A sufficient stock of new or sterile headset ear pads, voice tubes and speaker pads should always be

available

- Staff should be trained in headset hygiene and given the time and materials to complete a hygiene programme
- Headsets should be cleaned thoroughly at the start or end of every shift.

So how does the harassed Call Centre Manager meet all these requirements? As we have seen in Chapter Two, if a user is responsible for their own headset then a hygiene programme will be so much easier to implement. A full headset tracking system can help you to manage your entire headset hygiene programme.

Hygiene Servicing

The HSE recommends that headsets should be checked regularly. A hygiene service requires the replacement of ear and microphone pads or voice tubes, and the cleaning of the headset. Although not stipulated by the HSE guidelines, industry experts recommend that this is carried out every six months for continuous users and each time an existing headset is allocated to a new user.

Rolling Program of Hygiene

Currently most call centres operate at best an ad hoc hygiene programme. By using an intelligent headset asset management system it is possible to track every headset at regular

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time intervals. Weekly or monthly checks can be initiated, depending upon the size and business processes in your call centre. The system keeps track of the dates and times required for replacement of microphone foam or voice tubes, so that you can operate a 'rolling' hygiene programme. This approach minimises the impact on the call centre.

Personal allocation and clean headsets promote a culture of responsibility and show consideration for agents. The role of the headset as an important part of the job, rather than an encumbrance, is highlighted and reinforced.

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WHAT IS ACOUSTIC SHOCK SYNDROME

The issue of acoustic shock has attracted media attention since 1998, but does it present a real risk for employees?

This chapter explores the history of acoustic shock and assesses the legal risks for employers.

What is Acoustic Shock?

The definition of acoustic shock according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is as follows: “An acoustic shock incident is defined as a sudden increase in high frequency noise transmitted through a headset.” **It is worth emphasising that acoustic shock is both frequency and volume dependant.**

The Effects of Acoustic Shock

Acoustic shock is most likely to effect employees in call centres as they wear headsets continuously during every shift. In most cases call handlers are shocked or startled by the noise but thankfully no injury is caused. Others may experience only momentary discomfort or a dullness of hearing after an intense burst of noise, which can be distressing, but does not cause injury.

However, new evidence has given cause for alarm. According to the HSE, “emerging evidence suggests that exposure to these acoustic incidents, at levels much lower than is traditionally associated with hearing damage, is giving rise to other symptoms”. The term ‘Acoustic Shock Syndrome’ is now widely used to refer to these symptoms.

Acoustic Shock Syndrome

Acoustic shock syndrome has been reported to include discomfort and pain to the eardrums, eardrum perforation, headaches, disorientation, balance difficulties, tenseness, nausea and possibly tinnitus. In worse cases sensory-neural (irreversible) hearing loss, phobic reactions resulting in nausea and panic attacks and depression can occur.

The History of Acoustic Shock

The earliest cases of acoustic shock in the UK were recorded in the 1980s at GCHQ. Subsequent cases were recorded by the Merseyside Fire Service, the BBC and the Police.

However, it wasn’t until 1998, when BT admitted liability on seven test cases brought by the Communications Workers Union’s lawyers, that ‘acoustic shock’ hit the headlines and became an important issue for call centres.

In 1999 a report by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) claimed that call centres were one of the ‘new noisy industries’. The report made some potentially alarming statements, claiming that ‘call centre workers are being exposed to loud, sometimes painful, noise levels leaving them with dulled hearing, tinnitus and the risk of long term hearing damage’.

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In 2001, there was a flurry of newspaper and television news stories again when trade unions announced they were preparing hundreds of legal claims over what they describe as the "industrial injury of the 21st century".

Compensation Claims

In February 2001, The Communications Workers Union (CWU) announced it had taken up almost 100 legal cases of 'acoustic shock' injury for its members. By 2001, BT had paid out approximately £150,000 in damages and the Union was presenting another 83 cases for BT employees. The lawyer dealing with many of the CWU cases said he was convinced that we have only seen the tip of the iceberg.

The Risk of Acoustic Shock

While the incidence of acoustic shock syndrome, where hearing loss occurs, is low, responsible employers will want to take the issue seriously. According to the RNID, sensory-neural deafness – where the hair cells on the cochlea in the inner ear are damaged – is irreversible. In the event that just one of your employees experiences acoustic shock injury, a lawsuit could be very damaging and costly for your company.

Even if your business is not taken to court over an alleged incidence of acoustic shock, call centre productivity and performance may deteriorate following an incident. Agents may

become apprehensive about the likelihood of another incident. In some cases call handlers feel hypersensitive to loud sounds and the fear that it might reoccur lowers their threshold even further. This is even likely to affect co-workers and can have a ripple effect across the call centre.

Director Responsibilities

Board Directors also need to take heed. Ignorance is no defense and the changes in legislation make corporate negligence actions against board directors a very real possibility. There is clear precedent that negligence can be found even though a matter may not be legislated against under current legislation.

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ACOUSTIC SHOCK PREVENTION

This chapter presents the possible causes of acoustic shock and explains how employers can protect employees against injury and their business against legislation.

Causes of Acoustic Shock

The exact cause of acoustic shock is unknown because high volume noises, which last for one second or more, may arise from a variety of sources. For example, high pitched tones or 'shriek' signals may be caused by fixed line or cordless telephone faults, incorrectly dialled fax machines, alarm signals, signalling tones or maliciously generated sounds such as whistling or screaming in the mouthpiece.

It has also been noted that incidents can occur in spates, which suggest that it may be caused by glitches in technology or by the introduction of new equipment or cabling.

Prevention of Acoustic Shock

As a call centre manager part of your responsibility to prevent acoustic shock is to ensure that the equipment in use complies with all existing legislation and is appropriate to the task.

Headset manufacturers are responsible for providing products that offer **a minimum level of protection**. In addition, call centre IT departments, which oversee the every day running of call centre infrastructures, installation companies and telecoms providers should all ensure the appropriate transient noise suppression devices are in place on their networks.

Technical Standards for Prevention

Since 1991, major headset manufacturers have incorporated an acoustic (shock) limiter in the electronics of their headsets to meet the requirements of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), specification 85/013. In the UK, this limiter ensures that any type of noise (e.g. conversation or short duration impulses) above 118dB(A) is not transmitted through the headset.

All CE approved headsets are fitted with noise limiters and all reputable manufacturers are happy to make a 'declaration of conformity', which provides an assurance of the highest possible standards of design, manufacture and safety.

However, the Communications Workers Union (CWU) considers the current standard of 118dB(A) to be too high for telephone headsets and it is campaigning to have this limit reduced. To give you an idea of what 118dB(A) means, it is nearly equivalent to an aeroplane on take-off 100 metres away, which is 130dB(A).

A group of telecommunications engineers and audiologists from Australia agree that this level is too high and is based on an inappropriate standard that was set many years ago for telephone handsets. When using a headset, as opposed to a handset, if the worker is exposed to a sudden loud noise the

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problem is exacerbated because headsets cannot be removed quickly.

Legislation on Acoustic Shock

As we have already seen in previous chapters, there is currently no specific legislation covering acoustic shock. However, the impending EC directive dealing with noise at work is to be implemented in early 2006 and makes further demands on call centres to help acoustic shock becomes a thing of the past. Like other EC Directives, when implemented it will require a proactive and preventative approach. In the next chapter we look at the whole issue of headset testing.

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HEADSET TESTING

This chapter explains the current procedure for headset testing, looks at new technologies that are being introduced to automate the headset testing process and recommends that compulsory headset testing should become common practice in every call centre to protect organisations against litigation.

Headset Testing

As part of headset warranty work or repairs, manufacturers (or their appointed repair agents) carry out a simple test to check that acoustic shock diodes or noise limiters are still functional.

This test provides reassurance to employees and employers alike for the prevention of acoustic shock. However, surprisingly, there are no technical standards or guidelines for testing headsets, even for this most basic test.

Headset Testing Standards

There is a real need in the industry for technical standards for headset testing, not only for acoustic shock prevention but also to identify headphone damage and ensure optimum speaker sound quality. During the manufacturing process of headsets there is a high technical standard used for measuring microphone and speaker frequency response that could also be applied to testing in the call centre environment.

The need for headset testing standards is ever more urgent because of the recent spate of lawsuits on acoustic shock, which has identified the requirement for tighter legislation on

this issue.

The lack of technical standards and guidelines for headset testing is a cause for concern for employers, when it is their responsibility to protect employees from any health risks associated with headset use. In order to prove that organisations are meeting 'duty of care' towards employees they have to be able to produce evidence. If there are no standards, how can organisations testify in court that they took all reasonable steps to ensure employees were not at risk?

In simple terms, regular headset testing (which is recorded) should be common practice in every call centre to help protect organisations against litigation. In fact, many large call centre employers believe it won't be long before headset testing is compulsory as part of the HSE guidelines.

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WORKPLACE COMPLIANCE WITH NOISE LEVEL REGULATIONS

This chapter provides a simple guide to conducting a risk assessment within your call centre to assess whether noise levels in your call centre meet current legal requirements.

An Employer's Legal Obligations

What are an employer's legal obligations? The Noise at Work Regulations 1989, require employers to reduce the risk of hearing loss where employees are exposed to loud noise at work. It defines three action levels: 85dB(A), 90dB(A) and 140dB(A). This will be superseded by the EC Directive on Noise due to be implemented in February 2006. The new legislation introduces a further action level at 87dB(A).

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have now published a number of useful documents that provide the necessary guidance on implementing the requirements of the new legislation:

- o Covering letter
- o Regulatory impact assessment
- Comparison with main provisions of the 1986 noise directive.

These are all available on the HSE web site at

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/>

The key difference to focus on is the new action level of 87 dB (A). If persons are exposed to noise levels at or above this level then the new regulations require that that person be in-

cluded in an audiometric monitoring programme as part of an on-going strategy of monitoring and control.

The requirements around information provision, education and training and provision of hearing protection are basically unchanged and still apply to all persons who may be exposed to noise levels at or above 85dB(A).

The various documents published by the HSE have taken a pragmatic view of how the new regulations should be interpreted and applied to your organisation. Whilst these are new however they do not deal with noise exposure that can give rise to acoustic shock injury. This is where the law relating specifically to noise and the law relating to the health and safety of employees will differ for a while at least.

Under The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992, employers are required to make an assessment of risks to health and safety in the workplace. An initial risk assessment can be carried out relatively easily using the objective methods described below, to determine whether the noise level is likely to be a hazard.

Until further research is undertaken to establish the nature of the risk of noise exposure within call centres, employers may wish to take some precautions to ensure compliance with legislation and to prevent any risk of litigation. Conducting a risk assessment is the first step and enables employers to obtain objective evidence to determine whether the call centre envi-

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ronment presents a real risk to its workforce.

How to Measure Noise Exposure

There are several objective measurements, which can be carried out in any call centre, which will allow employers to determine the levels of noise exposure. It is necessary to measure the general background noise level in the overall work environment. This will be an important influence on the volume setting of the headset.

When measuring noise levels, it is important to remember that it is the individual's total exposure to noise that matters. The effect of noise levels can vary a lot from one person to another. Factors such as age, previous noise exposure and genetic susceptibility are all relevant. While hearing tends to deteriorate with age, certain lifestyle factors, such as exposure to loud music in clubs, are more likely to affect the young.

Since the effect is cumulative, we need to look at the length of exposure as well as the actual 'loudness' of the work environment. In the call centre industry, where many employees work part-time, the length of the shift will be an important factor.

The overall noise exposure can be measured very reliably with a personal noise dosimeter, which can be clipped to an individual's clothing and worn throughout a normal working day.

How to Conduct Hearing Tests

Prevention is better than a cure so it is advisable to carry out

an investigation of the work environment to see whether it constitutes a risk first. Should an employee report a hearing problem, this investigation is required by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992. An audiometric test is also required for that employee. Audiometry is the technique for testing the acuity level of a person's hearing ability and is achieved by using an audiometer, which is calibrated to produce a wide range of sounds.

Remember, it is important to perform these tests in a repeatable way, under the British Standard 6655 1986, to ensure the results will be accepted by a court of law.

Other Factors

It is also important to consider other factors in the work environment, such as temperature and humidity, which can have a significant impact upon the well being of employees. The benefits of addressing these issues will include well-motivated employees, increased job satisfaction and measurable improvements in efficiency.

The information in this chapter was sourced from Dr Wendy Doig, a Senior Occupational Physician at Aon Health Solutions, which provides valuable specialist health services, outside the scope of the UK's National Health Service, to businesses both within the UK and across the globe.

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HEADSET ASSET MANAGEMENT

Chapters 1 to 8 explained the issues of headset ownership faced by every call centre manager. They also provide you with all the reasons why you need an intelligent headset asset management system. Intelligent headset asset management is a lot more than just keeping a record of how many headsets a call centre owns. The benefits of such a system will affect many aspects of your business.

This chapter explains how easy it is to set up a headset asset management system and provides you with all the reasons why you need one.

Setting up an Intelligent headset asset management system

Step 1: Headset audit

Make a list of all the headsets in your contact centre and record the following data:

- Headset serial number
- Headset make and type
- Barcode number
- Name of current user
- Date of allocation to that user
- Date purchased
- Warranty expiry date
- Replaceable parts (e.g. Foam microphone covers or leatherette earpads)

You may want to include more specific fields such as 'date of last test' and more historical information on the headsets' previous allocation if the information is available.

Step 2: Input data to an Intelligent headset management system

For larger operations typing this information in is a huge headache. Fortunately, it is possible to import relevant employee information from a personnel database into an asset management system and use a scanner to input the barcodes. Once it's done every headset can be tracked on its life through the call centre.

Step 3: Updating the system

The secret to any successful asset management system is to keep it up-to-date. Nomadtrack is browser-based so it can be accessed from anywhere on a company network by authorised personnel. It also has a very simple graphical interface, which means that updating it is easy and convenient.

Personal allocation

Once headsets are allocated and the data has been entered, it's easy to perform the following functions with your Nomadtrack system:

- **Headset hygiene checks**

You can track headsets that require a hygiene ser-

With personal allocation, headsets become a valued tool of the trade

HEADSET ASSET MANAGEMENT

The Nomadtrack Guide to Headset Management

vice. The system can keep track of the dates and times required for replacement of leatherette or foam earpiece covers or microphone foam and voice tubes. It allows you to use a 'rolling' programme of hygiene, where a headset is called for a service only when it needs one.

- **Repair and warranty control**

You can view shipping notes, track serial numbers and track headsets to and from the repairer. It also reminds you when headsets are coming to the end of warranty periods. It enables you to monitor warranty and repair work and failure rates so you can make accurate forecasts.

- **Stocktaking**

- It's easy to run real-time or historical reports by site, on corporate total, age, distribution, headsets in stock (spares), repair history, quantity and value of headset assets. **Testing**

The Nomad system can provide a report on the status of headset testing in minutes, providing evidence that your company has a testing schedule and that tests have taken place. You can record when a headset was last tested for safety so you always know the status of acoustic shock protection in headsets. The information recorded can be used to produce a variety of reports including one to show which headsets require testing this week or month. **Duty of care**

If you want to stand up in court and say: "We took all reasonable steps to ensure our staff are safe" then you need evidence to back it up. The Nomad headset management system holds vital records that help you provide proof of compliance with Health and Safety Legislation and that you are meeting the employers' 'duty of care'.

A Nomadtrack Headset Asset Management will help you to:

- Reduce repair and replacement costs
- Benchmark consumption and use of headsets across the company.
- Implement a personal allocation model
- Provide a minimum duty of care to headset wearers.
- Meet health and safety guidelines
- Use a rolling program of hygiene checks
- Monitor warranty and repair work and failure rates
- Accurately forecast failure and repair rates
- Conduct regular headset testing
- Record headset and headset user history in the call centre
- Help provide proof of an employer's 'Duty of Care'
- Keep an audit trail of agent and headset transactions
- Improve stock control
- Ensure a higher return on investment

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Further Reading**Headset Resources**

Asp Web site details

A growing list of information surrounding the whole subject of headset management and health and safety is available on the Nomad web site.

See <http://www.nomadtrack.com/library> for the latest information

HELA Circular

* In December 2001, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Local Authorities Enforcement Liaison Committee (HELA) produced a revised Local Authorities Circular (94/1 rev) providing advice on working practices in call centres. Scheduled to be reviewed in December 2005, it can be found on the web at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-1.htm>. This circular is based on a large-scale study undertaken by the Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL) on working practices in UK call centres.

Dysphonia Information

Call centre employees should be provided with information on the risk of dysphonia, the various sym p-

toms of the condition and how this risk can be reduced. Further information on dysphonia can be obtained from the Research Department of the Banking, Finance and Insurance Union (BIFU) and The Voice Care Network.

Voice Health

The HSE has also published guidelines on best practice for voice health for call centres, which also be found in the HELA document on the web at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-1.htm>.

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