


CAPTEL
DISCONNECT

Issue 3 July 2017

ADHERENCE AND LUNCH:

A CALL TO ACTION

Adherence is an extremely finite resource. In the name of not violating this policy we squeeze a shift's worth of human needs into 5 percent of our work day. Our bosses rave about this number. 5 percent is a radically liberal allowance according to them. Setting aside why this number is conceptually fucked, many of us know that this "liberal" amount of free time isn't nearly enough. We scramble to and from the bathrooms or hold our bladders/bowels to bursting point or underhydrate to the point of physical discomfort in order to remain compliant. We forego emotional self-care following challenging calls in order to remain compliant. We punch in before our shifts begin in order to remain compliant. But even the perfect CapTel worker bee would never score 100 percent on their adherence. Even if they exiled every human emotion and need to their allotted breaks they would still be forced to go out of adherence before and after lunch.

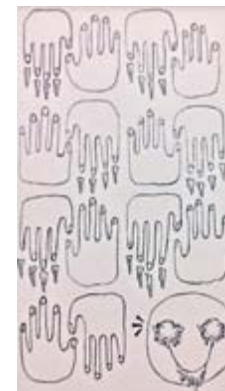
While the system of adherence is troubling from a human perspective, if we look from our bosses' point of view it makes sense that workers be required to minimize their personal needs in order to maximize workplace efficiency. It makes sense that they monitor us for any activity not related to production when we aren't on break/lunch. Taking a much needed piss or stepping out to cry after handling a call full of provocative hate speech is not specifically what we're paid to do, so they want us doing as little of that as possible. This way of doing things is mentally and physically harmful to workers, but it seems to have solid internal logic, with one glaring exception: before and after lunch.

As mentioned above, workers are given seven minutes before their shift begins to punch in, reserve a station, and get logged in. These tasks are directly related to our job duties, and as such it makes sense that we wouldn't be required to use adherence time to perform them. What's confusing is that the time between logging out and punching out for lunch and the time between punching in and accepting calls after lunch is considered time out of adherence. These tasks aren't silly non-work things like using the bathroom or getting stuck waiting for an elevator, without them we wouldn't be able to accept calls at all, but this time is still considered out of adherence because we are not actively at our desks making CapTel money. For workers the amount of time devoted to doing these work-specific but still somehow non-adherent things can be the difference between being able to step out for a few minutes for any

number of valid reasons and having to behave like you don't have physical or emotional needs until the next break the company is legally required to give you. Speaking of which, those of us who don't want to be fired for not being on calls as much as CapTel wants often choose to punch out before we clean our station or punch in after we've signed up and logged in so we don't use any adherence time. Most sups will let you get away with this, but I've been scolded by at least one for doing it, because it's illegal to perform unpaid work (unless you're incarcerated :D) in order to preserve workers' rights. Workers are left to choose between using valuable adherence time to do work CapTel requires of them, and illegally cutting short their lunches to preserve personal time for later. Both options suck.

The union is committed to changing this situation. In the interest of lightening our adherence burden just a bit we're pushing for an additional seven minutes of aux time daily to be used for the work between logging out and punching out and punching in and accepting calls before/after lunch. We see this as a reasonable demand that doesn't require a lot of work on admin's part to handle. On July 22nd, 2017 we're planning to flood the HR mailbox with as many slips as possible asking for this change. Anyone who is interested in helping with this effort can fill out an "Ask HR" slip and anonymously submit it to one of the HR mail files on or around the 22nd. You can also reach out to union reps via our email address or in person if you know one of us. We can't do this without you, and with your help this action can be the first step in a pro-worker overhaul of the adherence system. Take a stand to help give your bosses a little less control over how often you pee!

HAVING A VOICE AT CAPTEL



Our voices are an intimate part of who we are. As human beings, we are defined by our ability to communicate with each other and express ourselves. "Having a voice" is often used as a metaphor for social, political, and artistic expression of our beliefs and desires.

This is something that makes working at CapTel disconcerting at times, even eerie. Usually when we hear the voices of our fellow human beings we are hearing a relatively unvarnished manifestation of who they are, or at least what they're thinking. So much

personality comes out in someone's voice that whether we love the person or hate them it's undeniably something that's unique to them.

Standing in stark contrast to this are the human voices we hear at CapTel. Rolling in waves over the call floor, the voices of our coworkers sound odd when first encountered, more like a prayer, chant, or dirge-like moaning than normal, expressive speech. As anyone who has gone through training to work here can tell you, one of the first things they do is set about stripping your voice of personality, emotion, and individual quirks.

At first it can be difficult to break your habits and train your voice to be as emotionless and lacking in inflection as possible, but longtime employees at CapTel have mastered this dubious skill. From an unruly expression of inner thoughts and feelings the human voice is transformed into an disciplined, predictable, quantifiable labor input in the production process. But are there any consequences to using your voice in this way?

The answer is yes, both in terms of individual psychology and the social dynamics that follow from this. When we inhabit the psyches of docs, when we lend them our voices, we can't help but be effected by the content of what we are re-voicing. Whether positive or negative, we are forced into intimate connection with many docs and experience their love, hate, happiness and sadness in a quite direct and intense way. It is one thing to read words on a page or hear them spoken; it is even more powerful to be forced to repeat them. Every day at CapTel we perform not only our skilled technical labor in producing high quality captions, but also a form of emotional labor which can be highly taxing.

While we all try to leave work at work and not let it effect our lives generally, it's harder to compartmentalize our experiences than we might wish. One's occupation can have a huge impact on physical health, emotional wellbeing, and overall outlook, and working at CapTel is no different. It seems unlikely that a worker spending all day giving their voice to the docs and the company wouldn't have any kind of mental or emotional impact. Just as a carpenter or a barista might spend all day on their feet and go home bone tired, barely able to move, we often finish a shift at CapTel mentally drained, unable to think properly or express oneself.

Even worse, we begin to get used to losing our voices-- or rather, to selling them. We get used to not having to think, to emptying our

memory and mindlessly repeating what others tell us. Few of us have much to say on breaks or after our shift. The voice, much like any other human ability, can be trained but also atrophies when not used properly.

Still, human beings are not machines. The voice cannot be completely subjected to the needs of capital accumulation. There will always be resistance. The voice carries the personality of the individual no matter how robotic CapTel tries to make us. Even if this only manifests itself in grunts of frustration, moans of sadness, or half-stifled laughter.

There are no easy solutions. The nature of the work we do in some ways does require this subjugation of individual voice to the needs of the company. But that doesn't mean we should grow complacent or forget that our voices are not just tools in a production process but unique expressions of who we are. CapTel workers need to find and reclaim our real voices, both as individuals and a collective, in order for CapTel to be a tolerable place to work.

UNTITLED

Captioning unpleasant call content is part of working at CapTel. We were all told this when we started, but many of us likely didn't understand just how often we would be receiving upsetting calls - let alone the emotional damage it would do to us. Most of our calls are mundane. Some of them are even quite happy. Multiple times a day, though, we take part in the grief, anger, and hatred of people we will never meet, many of whom don't even know we are listening.

We caption men verbally assaulting their wives, viciously tearing down their self-esteem. We caption people who have just been told a close relative died in a car accident. We caption racists who mock us for using speaker unclear instead of a racial slur. We caption women sobbing because their husbands don't remember who they are anymore. We caption children being disowned by their parents for being gay. We caption people whose spouses have just unexpectedly filed for divorce. We caption people who are sitting in the parking lot of their former workplace, shocked that they were fired after 20 years.

CapTel cannot control call content. CapTel is not responsible for the emotional wringer we are put through every single time we

punch in. To suggest otherwise would be disingenuous. What CapTel is responsible for, though, are their unnecessarily strict policies that increase the emotional burden on CAs.

Requiring that CAs remain on “challenging” calls for 30 minutes or “normal” calls for 60 is completely unnecessary. The FCC has determined that CAs can swap out after ten minutes with only a minor interruption in captions, so why does CapTel force us to spend three or even six times longer than that on calls? This policy has little effect on caption quality and is not required for CapTel to receive TRS funding, but it’s quite harmful to CAs who can be forced to stay on a call that is emotionally exhausting because the sup on calls doesn’t think the call is “challenging” enough to warrant a CTO after 30 minutes.

CapTel is also responsible for the total lack of time between calls during busy periods. Although this is happening less frequently now than it did during the holidays, there are still many times we stay on calls for 60+ minutes looking forward to having a few minutes to catch our breath only to immediately be placed on another call. This is both physically and emotionally exhausting and no other call center puts agents back in queue immediately – most have average wait times of 15-40 seconds. CapTel could easily adjust Host so that CAs have at least a few seconds of peace after each call without sending calls into queue.

CapTel could also implement a policy where CAs on difficult calls are given a few minutes of aux time to collect themselves after the call ends. This could be done very easily just by going up to the sup desk, explaining that you had a difficult call, and handing them your aux slip. CapTel could limit these “rest” periods to five or six minutes per day, allowing CAs time to emotionally recover from upsetting calls. This policy would likely improve caption quality, as well, since CAs would be less stressed out and more able to perform our jobs.

It’s important to remember that existing CapTel policies, barring ones they are legally obligated to follow, could easily be changed. The government doesn’t require that CapTel employees have adherence above 95%. The government doesn’t require that we be paid \$0.18 per minute while CapTel brings in \$1.82. The government doesn’t require that CAs remain on calls for more than ten minutes before asking for a CTO.

These damaging policies exist at CapTel because CAs are

too isolated from each other and often feel unable to ask for something better because of the job’s high turnover rate and admin’s utter lack of compassion.

The members of the CapTel Workers Union are tired of these bullshit policies that serve only to make top executives rich and to make CAs so exhausted, they quit in only a few months. We want CapTel to be a place where our skills are valued by members of admin, where we are compensated adequately for the emotionally taxing work we do, and where we are treated like actual human beings instead of outdated pieces of equipment. The current state of affairs at CapTel means that we have none of these basic rights – and changing the institution is absolutely a cause worth fighting for.

5-POINT PLATFORM

First: We need living wages.

Labor creates wealth. In our case, CapTel makes \$1.82 for every minute a CA is on a call (<http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/670005.pdf>) and pays those CAs a mere \$0.18 per minute while offering us fixed annual raises of under 2%. This is unacceptable. The base pay rate for a CA should be \$15 an hour, with a \$4 raise given to all current employees. This would mean each CA made \$0.25 a minute out of that \$1.82.

Second: We need the tools to do our jobs.

So much of the equipment we use every day is either ancient or broken. The older CRT monitors have been known to trigger migraines in CAs, some touchscreens are so worn out you can’t even use certain macros, QD cords are constantly needing to be replaced, and some computers take a full five minutes to boot. We believe every cube should have working equipment – this would mean less stress for CAs and better caption quality for clients.

Third: We need the time to do our jobs.

So many CAs struggle to maintain 95% adherence. This is partially because lunch breaks necessitate using our aux time. We should not be penalized for taking the breaks we are required to take, nor should we be penalized for auxing out three minutes before the end of our shift. Asking for a CTO for a break requires signing up for a new cube, cutting into either break or aux time. The current adherence system doesn’t allow enough time for bathroom use, breaks/lunches, or end of shift, resulting in stressed out CAs, poor caption quality, and even working while off the clock to avoid using adherence.

Fourth: We need affordable transportation and parking.

The cheapest parking structure at the Milwaukee location will cost a full-time employee \$60 a month, while the cheapest monthly rate for taking the bus is \$70. This means many full-time employees, the backbone of the company, are spending at minimum 5% of their monthly income exclusively on transportation. We feel that CapTel should subsidize parking and bus fare costs while also providing better incentives for people who choose to bike to work. This could be as simple as giving each employee an extra \$10 a week – which is covered by a single 6-minute call.

Fifth: We need to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity, and have a voice on the job.

We are not robots, despite what our clients may think. CapTel has no excuse for treating us like machines or children – we are adults and some of us have worked here for quite some time. We have the right to be protected from dehumanizing company policies and from capricious abuse of authority. We should not be forced to carry out irrational orders from the admins on high, nor should we be subject to arbitrary policies or disciplinary actions. We need transparency from the company and the ability to voice grievances without fear of backlash.

SURVEY

In addition to the mailbox flood action, we've also created a 5-question survey we'd like as many people as possible to fill out, which can be found at <https://s.surveypplanet.com/r1LsWLeBZ>. All data collected will be completely anonymous. No IP addresses are logged by Survey Planet and the data you provide will only be used by the union with any identifying information changed or removed. The survey asks if you have experienced discrimination at CapTel, which CapTel policies you would most like to see change, and if there are any small amenities you think CapTel should provide its workers that the Union could provide instead.

If you would like to provide details of a specific incident that you felt was discriminatory, we may discuss the incident as a group to come up with ideas for how that situation could be avoided in the future, but don't worry, we're not going to tell a particular sup that someone has a problem with them. You might not feel like you should trust us, but remember that we would all be fired if they knew who we are. We value your privacy just as much as we value our own.

UNTITLED

**Double double toil and trouble,
Headsets chime and captions mumble.**

**Sup 1) Round about the call floor go, PVs to write in every row,
tones, lasting under minute 59, screeching venom beeping lot,
focus, CA, til I turn them naught**

Double, etc.

**Sup 2) Wait until your second break, in the cubicle squirm and
shake, talk from docs and out of aux, southern drawl is tongue
of dog, grandma yaks and says nothing, you need to pee, but sup
is coming, for a charm of powerful trouble, run like hell to the
toilet on the double**

Double etc.

**Sup 3) Fail of Dragon, VR uncouth, cannot hear them on
Bluetooth, here declared 'Drama Free Zone,' you don't like it,
then just go home, blabber of ignorant shills, get your goat,
cause you chills, wrong place to insert ellipse, go to work with
numbest lips, all the CAs are spoiled brats, they deserve no
break betwixt, nor to have equipment fixed, we will gladly use
the scalpel if you bemoan conditions at CapTel**

Double, etc.

The Captel Disconnect is the publication of the

**Captel Workers Union
Milwaukee Industrial Workers of the World.**



We encourage participation from all workers, and if you would like to organize or submit writing, please email us at

CAPTELWORKER@GMAIL.COM

If you don't see yourself at CapTel much longer we ask that you take the exit survey and reiterate our demands in it.

PASS IT ALONG!
