

Crossed wires

Elizabeth and Caroline Shove

My name is Kevin and I work in a call centre on the outskirts of Wolverhampton. I have been here for over six months, which is way longer than most of my colleagues. I have comfortable earphones, a nice red chair and two foot pedals. I use the left one to initiate the 'waiting music' and the right one to cut callers off whenever I want. We get free tea and coffee on tap.

I usually deal with hospital appointments. Someone from the centre pieces information together from the consultants who do hip and knee replacements and from the anaesthetists who work with them. The centre manages the waiting list and can slide people up and down at will. When they've finished playing with the sequence it is my job to email an agreed time and date and tell patients they can just give me a call me if the appointment is in the least bit inconvenient. It's all about putting the customer first.

If someone wants to change their allotted date they have to wait for option 5, which is usually last on the list. Sometimes the call comes to me, but if I'm busy, pressing '5' takes callers back to option 1: a dead-end loop from which there is no escape. When someone does get through, I am sweet as pie. 'Of course, of course, no problem, there are always cancellations, just hold on a moment, I'll see if I can slot you in'. I play a bit of waiting music and promise that I'll send an email right away. I am expert in managing these situations. One strategy is to send appointment details to GPs who retired a long time ago, or to email addresses in the sky. Just one wrong digit makes all the difference. After days and sometimes weeks with no news, the caller eventually phones again. I am effusive with my apologies. 'I'm so sorry, I'm afraid you are too late, that slot has gone.' And that's it: they have to go back to the hospital and start all over again.

I sit next to my colleague, Nehil. Some days she works for the probate service. Some days it is HMRC. Sometimes we play games to alleviate the pressure of our job. If we didn't laugh, we'd cry.

One of our games is called 'crossed wires'. It works like this. Nehil passes me the details of someone who is applying for probate and I write back about their hip operation. In exchange, Nehil picks someone from my data base and sends them one of her standard letters. We use our official addresses - all communications are monitored for training and security purposes - but nobody seems to notice or to care. In any case, Kevin and Nehil are not our real names. No one, but no one, would be so silly as to identify themselves correctly. And never with an actual surname.

We make careful notes on the logs, and these are handed over to colleagues who take over when we are off. Once we have crossed a few wires, we wait a while before checking to see what muddles have ensued.

I got a call the other day from someone who was suspicious: were they really phoning the NHS or was it some kind of scam? We get these more and more – and AI doesn't help at all. Sometimes I get calls for Nehil and she gets some for me. Whichever way it goes, we have to run through our security checks and when the wires are crossed, this never works. Date of birth. Mother's maiden name. Name of first school or favourite pet. We just shrug and add a note to the file: 'security failed.'

Our training manual explains how to apologise in ten different languages – we are always super polite. The long introductory message reminds callers to treat us with respect. Abuse will not be tolerated – and it is true: if we have any bother, the foot pedal comes into use right away.

The best part of the 'crossed wires' game is when we unscramble the confusion that we have unleashed. The sound of receding panic is audible. Our callers are *so grateful* when we help them out and patiently work through what must have happened. We promise, faithfully, to escalate their case, and we pretend we have the authority to do so. We can spend ten minutes or more on this kind of calm and comforting talk. That's ten minutes less on someone who has a problem about a date.

I know this is not a very nice game to play. Some people might say it is downright immoral. But think about it. Think about us and our job. How else are we going to get through the day. Come to that, how does anyone get through the day?