

Graduates look for a career at the call centre

By **NIC PATON**

SKILLED workers and graduates who might once have dismissed the idea of working in a call centre are being forced to think again because of the desperately tough jobs market.

Recruitment firm Hays has seen the number of applicants for jobs in call centres treble in the past year and there is evidence that some centres are starting to offer better training and career progression in an effort to shake off their 'low skill, low wage' sweatshop image.

Liane James, a media production graduate, has been working at vacuum cleaner firm Dyson's call centre in Malmesbury, Wiltshire, since November last year.

'I did have some preconceptions about working in a call centre, but I also thought of Dyson as quite an innovative company,' says Liane, 24, who started off as a phone adviser but has progressed to being a customer service administrator on its website.

The company employs about 110 staff at the call centre, of whom 85 work as advisers. Customer contact manager James Petherbridge says all staff are offered a personal development plan and the

company runs a formal performance management process.

'We have people with MAs working for us in supervisory roles and graduates working on the advice line and on web support,' he says. 'We are aware we are attracting more graduates.'

For Liane, who lives in Chippenham, the reality of working in a call centre was very different from what she expected. 'It was more relaxed and less target-driven,' she says.

'I'm now helping to create online help content, using some of the digital media skills I learnt in my

degree and getting to interact with the digital media team. For me it is a very viable, credible career.'

Ian Brinkley, director at The Work Foundation think-tank, says the growing complexity of the products many centres deal with and the sorts of services offered, such as web support, has increased the need for higher levels of skills. But he questions whether the new popularity of call centres signals a permanent shift in perception.

'Call centres are unlikely ever to be a first choice, but they may come to be seen as a better career choice in the future,' he says.



Picture: DARREN JACK

ANSWER: Liane James is using skills from her degree