

Hanging on the telephone

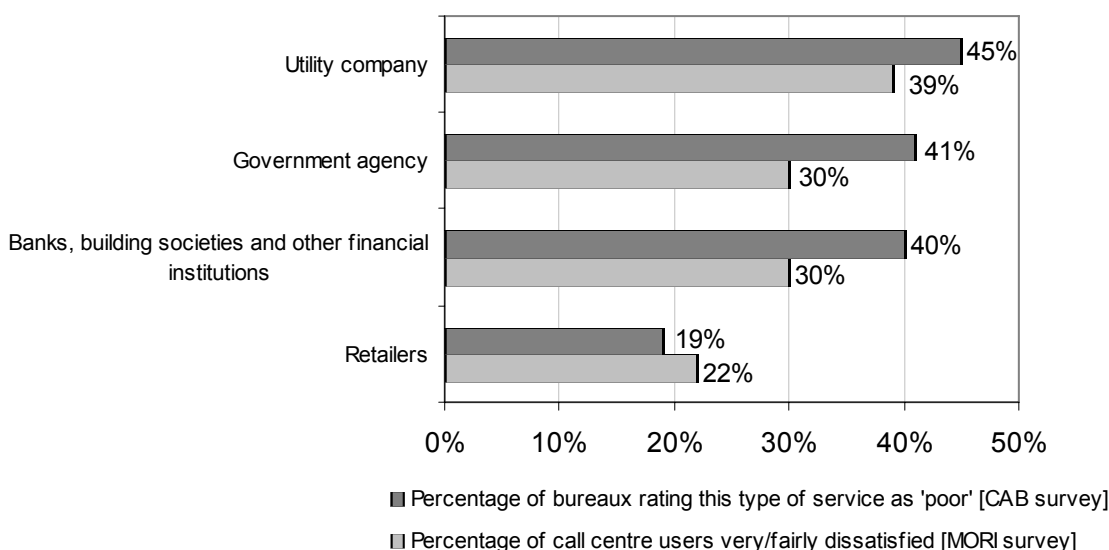
CAB evidence on the effectiveness of call centres

Throughout Europe today most large businesses and many public sector agencies use telephone call centres as the primary gateway for communications with customers. Consumers who need to deal with banking and financial issues, utility bills, goods and services and increasingly welfare benefits and tax credits, need to initiate contact via a call centre. Use of call centres in Great Britain is pervasive: four in five people have used a call centre in the last 12 months.¹ Call centres can offer significant benefits to consumers if they can deal with matters on the phone at times that suit them. But almost all call centre users (97 per cent), when prompted, have some criticisms of their experiences. Whilst 58 per cent of users are satisfied with government call centres, a significant proportion, 30 per cent, are not. Dissatisfaction is as high as 39 per cent amongst users of utility companies call centres.¹

This report examines CAB evidence on both private and public sector call centres. Call centres do not work well for people trying to resolve complex problems, or those who do not have a telephone, have learning disabilities or do not speak English. Critical problems about money, debts and benefits, often affecting people on very low incomes, just do not get resolved as quickly or effectively as they should. Citizens Advice urges all service providers to fully user proof their call centre operations, undertaking regular audits of accessibility, useability and performance from the perspectives of users and intermediaries such as Citizens Advice Bureaux.

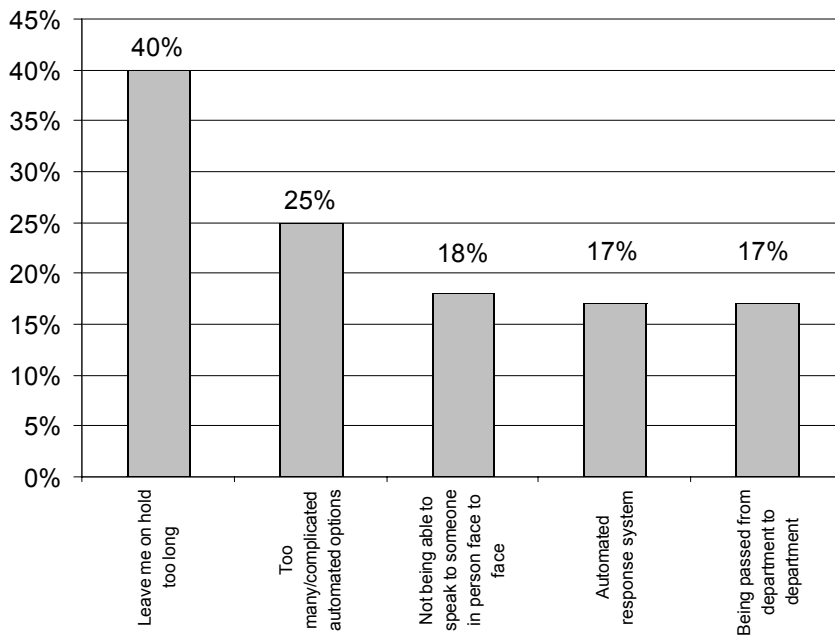
This report is based on analysis of 1,900 reports submitted by bureaux throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland between June 2003 and June 2004 and a survey of 114 Citizens Advice Bureaux in England and Wales in June 2004, which asked advisers about their experiences of call centre-related problems. Citizens Advice also commissioned research from Mori in June 2004, which asked 2,253 adults across Great Britain about their experiences of call centres.¹

Dissatisfaction with the performance of call centres



¹ Attitudes towards Call Centres, July 2004. A nationally representative sample of 2,253 adults (aged 15 and over) was interviewed face to face throughout Great Britain by MORI between 8-13 July 2004.

Most annoying aspects of call centres



Source: Attitudes towards call centres MORI July 2004. Percentage of consumers who have contacted a call centre in the past 12 months naming this aspect as most annoying. A nationally representative sample of 2,253 adults (aged 15 and over) was interviewed face to face throughout Great Britain by MORI between 8-13 July 2004.

The upsides

For consumers there are lots of benefits from well run call centre services:

- most people today have access to a telephone and many are willing and prefer to access services using the phone
- the phone can be a speedy and convenient method of contact
- the public perceive there to be less rigidity in using the telephone, as they can contact the service provider at a time that suits them.

For service providers the case for call centre type services is irresistible. Call centres offer the potential to:

- handle a considerable volume of calls at the same time
- make the most efficient use of staff resources, getting the best fit between capacity and demand
- secure consistency of standards in delivery, which may be more challenging if work is divided between different business units.

Access

The client of a Lincolnshire CAB had problems getting his winter fuel payment, as he did not have a phone. When he called his local benefits office from a phone box he was transferred to a line which was always on voice mail. The central help line just referred him to the local office. Without a home phone, he found it very difficult to resolve his problem.

A CAB in Greater Manchester reported that deaf client who had tried communicating with a debt collection agency regarding a debt. Her e-mails and letters were ignored and when she tried contacting the company by phone she was unable to do so as the fully automated call handling system made no allowance for her deafness.

Costs

A CAB in Mid-Wales reported that a man with a pre-payment meter spent £17 simply trying to get through to the fuel company to obtain a refund for overpayments on his fuel account. He got trapped in the automated system and was repeatedly cut off.

A woman from Hertfordshire came to a CAB for help after making more than 25 calls to her life/pensions company, trying to resolve a problem. The cost, using her mobile, was 25 pence a minute. During one call she spent £20 in an abortive effort to get through. The bureau waited 20 minutes on the line before being connected.

The downsides

CAB evidence is that consumers experience a number of problems using call centres. These include:

- a range of problems making contact, due to the design and delivery of answering systems, especially automated systems, and delays in simply getting through
- accessibility barriers, including language and costs to the consumer in terms of time and money waiting on the line or calling again and again
- the ability and attitude of staff in call centres
- barriers to alternative methods of contact, such as face to face, when these are preferred or essential
- problems achieving contact with someone who can and does resolve a problem.

Citizens Advice Bureaux find they face significant obstacles when trying to deal with call centres on behalf of a client.

Accessible for all?

For people with mobility or sight problems, or who live in remote and rural areas dealing with services by telephone can be a real advantage. However there is a sizeable minority of the population who are either not able to use a telephone in this way, have problems with the cost or prefer not to enter into transactions involving personal information by telephone.

- Only 60 per cent of the public are willing to receive advice and services from public sector departments and agencies by telephone.²
- Nine million people, considered to be deaf or hard of hearing in the UK, have difficulty using conventional telephones for obvious reasons.³
- Call centres can easily become a barrier to access if someone does not have English as a first language.
- Consumers with cognitive impairments face barriers if the automated telephone options or operators script are not clear and appropriate.
- Many of the seven percent of the population who do not have a landline telephone service⁴ are on low incomes or living in areas of high deprivation and rely on high cost mobile phones.

² Using call centers to deliver public services, National Audit Office, 2002.

³ RNID

⁴ Consumers use of fixed telephony, OFTEL, October 2003.

No resolution

An adviser acting on behalf of a client who visited a CAB in Nottinghamshire spent an hour and a half on the phone to the Child Support Agency trying to resolve the problem. The adviser made six phone calls and spoke to eight different people, and was repeatedly passed between offices in Sheffield and Belfast.

The overseas call centre of a major high street bank refused to speak to a CAB in Dorset. This was despite the fact that the CAB had already sent the clients signed authorisation to the bank. The CAB commented that the call centre overseas seemed unfamiliar with the OFT collection guidelines, which state that collectors should deal with third parties like Citizens Advice Bureaux.

A Lancashire CAB had to listen to 20 minutes of recorded messages when they tried to contact a water company to discuss their arrears scheme for a client on income support and incapacity benefit. The call centre agent had not heard of the scheme and gave the bureau another number to ring. The bureau adviser had to sit through another 20 minutes of the same recorded messages to get through to the right person.

Key recommendations

Citizens Advice recognises the benefits that efficient and good call centres can offer consumers. We also welcome the Governments commitment to modern, responsive and efficient public services. There is a long way to go to achieve the right balance between high volume, resource efficient and consistent standards of service on the one hand and accessible, responsive and personalised services for all on the other. Call centres should be an effective gateway to services and problem resolution not a barrier. The main challenge for call centre providers is to make their services work well for all consumers - especially for those who have complex problems and face barriers to access. These five key principles should be at the heart of an agenda for developing or improving delivery by call centres.

Principle 1 - A focus on delivering for all users

- Apply comprehensive user proofing of call centre operations, through design to delivery stage. Undertake regular audits of accessibility, useability and performance from the perspectives of all consumers, and intermediaries such as Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Principle 2 - Services accessible for all

- Recorded messages and menus should be short, relevant and accessible with an option to speak to a representative very early in the menu
- Queueing systems should advise consumers of the expected waiting time.

Principle 3 - Resolving problems - not just logging them

- Consumers raising problems and questions that cannot be resolved during one call should be given a reference number and the contact name and direct line for a more senior person to contact

Principle 4 - Invest in and empower staff

- Call centre staff need to be properly trained, knowledgeable about the range of services and products and given the right environment and tools to do the job.

Principle 5 - Low cost to the consumer

- Consider providing free phone services for consumers and advice agencies to use. Offer to call back any customer calling from a payphone, mobile or CAB.

The full **Hanging on the telephone** report is available for £6.00 (including postage). To order your copy, please send your name and address, and a cheque made payable to Citizens Advice, to Social Policy Department, Citizens Advice, Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LZ.

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