

PACP - Call Centres, Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada

Background

In the 2019 Spring Report of the Auditor General of Canada, it was observed that when Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) reported on its performance against its service standard (answer 80% of calls within 10 minutes) it did not include calls during which the caller hung up while they were waiting for an agent in a call centre queue.

Requested Information

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts (PACP) is requesting a follow up from the 42nd Parliament, 1st Session. Specifically, the Committee is requesting the following information:

- ESDC's June 2021 response on Recommendation 3 of the original report does not address the issue raised in the report of the Auditor General of Canada (that ESDC had not accounted for calls where the caller had hung up after being put on hold to speak to an agent, overestimating call centre performance). The Committee would like to know whether this practice is still in effect and if so, whether it impacts its performance metrics.

Response

Service Level is a measure of how many calls are answered within a target threshold.

Prior to April 2019, the calculation of Service Level was:

Calls answered by an agent within 10 minutes / Total calls answered by an agent

From April 2014 to March 2019, abandoned calls (i.e. caller hangs up before call is answered) were not included in the Service Level calculation as the majority of callers who chose to hang up did so before the Service Level threshold target of 10 minutes was reached.

As of April 2019, in response to the Office of the Auditor General recommendation, ESDC has included all calls that hang up after the service standard timeframe has elapsed, with the new service level calculation being:

Calls answered by an agent within 10 mins /
(Total calls answered by an agent + Calls hanging up after waiting more than 10 mins)

ESDC arrived at this decision by consulting clients through multiple surveys to obtain client feedback, where Canadians confirmed that our service standards are relevant and meet their expectations. The Client Experience Survey from December 2017 indicated

that more than half of clients find a wait time of under 10 minutes to be reasonable. The EI Call Centre Survey of November 2017 indicated that 92.5% of clients found that a wait time of under 10 minutes would be reasonable.

Given these findings, ESDC decided to include calls that abandoned after the service standard timeframe, as those clients opted to abandon due to the service standard not being met and because the perception of clients was that the call was not answered in a reasonable timeframe.

Additionally, as part of its commitment to increasing access to its call centres and improving service to Canadians, ESDC migrated its Pensions and Employment Insurance Call Centres to a new, modernized telephone system in May 2019 and March 2020 respectively. This new technology allows more callers to wait to speak to agent instead of having their call disconnected during high call volume periods, increasing accessibility to ESDC call centres.

This change has ensured that clients, who wish to speak to an agent, have the choice to wait and have their call answered. This is aligned to OAG recommendations and the documented client feedback, further supporting ESDC's approach to include callers who hung up after 10 minutes as part of their publicly reported service standard.

It is important to note that because of this change, more callers are now able to wait in queue and wait times may be longer, in particular during peak periods.

Conclusion

ESDC agreed with Recommendation 3 of the original audit report and implemented the change by amending their Service Level calculations effective April 2019. This amendment added calls where the caller hung up after waiting for more than the published service standard target of 10 minutes in a call centre queue. ESDC is committed to reporting service standards that are relevant to clients, and publishing these call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner.