

# Research Paper -

Acas telephone helpline: Findings from the 2005 customer survey

Ref: 02/05

2005  
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ISBN 0 9552187 2 1

ISBN 978 0 9552187 2 9

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## **Acknowledgements**

This research was carried out by IFF Research (IFF) on behalf of Acas. We are grateful to the Acas helpline operators for their assistance in gathering details of callers for the survey; and to the callers for giving their time to complete the questionnaire. The research project was managed and the report drafted by Nicola Power from Acas' Research and Evaluation Section.

## 1. Introduction

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) runs a national telephone helpline service dealing with approximately three quarter of a million calls annually. However, there has been a considerable rise in the volume of calls from 796,649 in the 2003/04 operational year to 880,787 calls answered in 2004/05. The helpline service is used by employers, employees and their representatives and provides up-to-date information on employment law, employment rights and best practice at work.

Acas regularly carries out surveys in order to monitor customer usage of and attitudes towards all its services. In 2005, the independent research agency IFF was commissioned to collect feedback from customers who had used the Acas helpline. A total of 931 callers completed their questionnaires, providing a response rate of 51 per cent. Full details of the sample design and response rates are contained in the appendix. This research report sets out the key findings from the survey.

## 2. Profile of the Callers

Employers and employees call the helpline in similar proportions, each comprising 35 per cent of all callers. However if we group together employees with former employees, they would form the largest group of callers using the Acas helpline service (41 per cent).

Just over one in five (22 per cent) telephoned the service on behalf of someone else with a slightly higher proportion of callers representing employers (13 per cent) than employees (9 per cent).

<b>Base: All callers (931)</b>	Frequency	Percent
As an employer	330	35.4
As an employee	329	35.3
As a former employee	59	6.3
On behalf of an employer	118	12.7
On behalf of an employee	84	9.0
Not stated	11	1.2

In terms of gender characteristics of the callers, nearly seven in ten (68 per cent) were female while men comprise around 55 per cent and women 45 per cent of the UK workforce as a whole<sup>1</sup>. Callers to the helpline broadly reflect the working population in terms of their ethnicity with 94 per cent of callers classifying themselves as 'white' (matching the UK working population).

Four in ten callers (40 per cent) to the helpline were aged 35-49, just over a quarter (26 per cent) were aged 50-59, 21 per cent were 25-34, those in the categories 18-24 and 60-64 both made up 5 per cent of callers and just 2 per cent were aged over 65. The figures suggest a slight under representation of calls from younger workers. Just over one in ten (11 per cent) callers declared that they had a long-term illness, health problem or disability, a lower proportion than among employees generally (21 per cent).

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the general population are drawn from findings from the Labour Force Survey 2004

Callers to the Acas helpline ring from across all industries, although a significant proportion of calls were from people in the construction industry (8 per cent), the retail trade (8 per cent) and hotels and restaurants (6 per cent). The highest proportion of calls came from people in the Health and Social Work category (16 per cent), however the NHS and private healthcare organisations employ a large proportion of the UK working population and we would expect a reasonably high proportion of calls from this sector.

The majority of callers were located in small workplaces. Sixty seven per cent of all helpline callers were from workplaces with less than 50 employees (compared with 57 per cent in 2004), 18 per cent were from workplaces with 50-250 employees; 5 per cent from workplaces with 251-500 employees and 6 per cent from workplaces with more than 500 employees.

A higher proportion of calls to the helpline came from employees in small workplaces when compared with the broader distribution of employees by workplace size in the UK. While 30 per cent of employees work in workplaces with less than 50 people, a substantial majority (70 per cent) of calls from employees were from this category. In total, 85 per cent of employees who called the helpline worked in small and medium sized workplaces (less than 250 employees) while 40 per cent of employees in the UK work in this sector.

Data on other characteristics of callers to the helpline was also collected:

- Seven in ten callers (73 per cent) worked for an organisation that had been operating for over five years while just 3 per cent of callers worked for an organisation that had been set up in the last twelve months.
- Around 54 per cent of callers worked in the private sector, a quarter in the public sector and 8 per cent said they worked in the voluntary sector.
- About a third of callers to the helpline (34 per cent) had a personnel or HR specialist at their workplace. Not surprisingly, this was more likely, the bigger the workplace.

Many callers had used the service before: 33 per cent of callers had already used the helpline on at least one occasion in the previous year and a further 60 per cent had used the helpline more than once in the previous year. Repeat users call the helpline on average three times a year with employers being more likely than employees to have called more than three times in the last year (55% cf. 10% employees).

<b>Table 2: Number of times used the helpline in the last year</b>	
<b>Base: All callers (931)</b>	Total %
None	7
Once	33
Two – three times	29
Four – six times	16
Seven – nine times	2
Over ten times	7
Don't know	6
Mean times	3

Most callers (84 per cent) have internet access with three in five having access at work (58 per cent). However, access at work is far more widely available to employers (83% cf. 30% employees).

Two in five (39 per cent) callers with access to the internet had tried to find the answer to their enquiry on the Acas website before calling the helpline, with little difference between employers and employees.

### **3. Awareness of Acas**

Callers were most likely to mention that they became aware of the Acas helpline through a recommendation from a colleague or a friend (36 per cent). Over two in five (43 per cent) employees/former employees became aware of the helpline in this way.

A further one in six (17 per cent) stated they became aware of the helpline through their company/organisation, this being more common among employers (24 per cent).

The Acas website was also a popular source, with one in five (22 per cent) stating that they found out about the helpline via this medium. Almost double the proportion of employers to employees found out about the helpline in this way. (Employers 29% cf. Employees 15%). A further one in twelve (8 per cent) said they found out about the helpline from an Acas publication.

Almost one in ten (9 per cent) became aware of the helpline from a Citizens Advice Bureau (more popular among employees, 15 per cent), while smaller proportions became aware through a Job Centre Plus (6 per cent) or the Inland Revenue (5 per cent). There were few mentions for the remainder of possible sources with 4 per cent citing Acas staff and a similar number citing The Phone book or Yellow pages.

### **4. Reasons for Calling Helpline**

The Acas helpline deals with a wide range of subjects from specific concerns regarding treatment and rights at work through to more general issues concerning best practice and handling of workplace procedures.

Callers were asked to identify which particular issues they sought information or advice on by indicating what subject was covered by their query. Callers were provided with a list of 30 subjects and asked to tick all that applied.

Pay related issues were in the top three subjects cited by both employers and employees whether they called the helpline themselves or used a representative; employees were more likely to call regarding redundancy or holiday pay, compared to employers, who tended to call about notice period and sickness pay.

Redundancy/pay was the subject most frequently cited by both employers and employees at workplaces where there was a human resources function, while at workplaces with no human resource role, holiday entitlement/pay was cited most frequently by employees (30 per cent) while sick pay/absence was most frequently cited by employers (32 per cent).

<b>Table 3: All subjects covered (multiple responses)</b>			
All Employees (472)		All Employers (448)	
Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	26%	Sick pay/ Absence	30%
Holiday entitlement/pay	25%	Notice period/ pay	30%
Notice period/ pay	22%	Holiday entitlement/pay	28%
Grievance procedures	20%	Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	28%
Dismissal	16%	Dismissal	27%
Employees with HR (190)		Employers with HR (127)	
Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	27%	Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	33%
Grievance procedures	23%	Discipline procedures	30%
Notice period/ pay	17%	Dismissal	29%
Terms and conditions	16%	Notice period/ pay	28%
Holiday entitlement/pay	14%	Sick pay/ Absence	28%
Employees with no HR (227)		Employers with no HR (306)	
Holiday entitlement/pay	30%	Sick pay/ Absence	32%
Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	28%	Notice period/ pay	32%
Notice period/ pay	26%	Holiday entitlement/pay	30%
Dismissal	18%	Dismissal	26%
Grievance procedures	18%	Redundancy/ Redundancy pay	26%
Wages issues	18%		

If callers were seeking advice on more than one subject, they were also asked to indicate the main subject of their enquiry. Redundancy/redundancy pay was the most frequently cited topic for both employers and employees. Again pay related queries were prevalent, however the third highest *main* subject covered for employers was discipline procedures (10 per cent) and the fifth highest subject of enquiry for both employers and employees was regarding dismissal (Employers 9% cf. Employees 7%).

At the time that the helpline offices were sampling callers for this study, the Department for Trade and Industry made an announcement on maternity rights which was followed by an increase in the volume of calls of about 25 per cent on the first two days of the sample collection.

This increase in calls does mean that some callers would have encountered delays when trying to contact Acas on these two days, and one would also anticipate a higher than average number of calls on maternity rights. Calls on this subject were made by one in eight (12 per cent) callers, more commonly by women (15% cf. 6% males), and employers (18% cf. 8% employees).

## **5. Findings from the Survey**

The 2005 survey measured customer experiences of a number of aspects of the service including the waiting times for calls to be dealt with; the behaviour of Acas staff; the usefulness of the information provided and the overall satisfaction with the service.

The survey also sought to measure callers' awareness of the new discipline and grievance procedures which have been in operation since October 2004. The following sections address these issues in turn.



## **5.1 Getting through to the Acas helpline**

More than four in five callers (84 per cent) said they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the length of time it took for their call to be answered (49 per cent said they were 'very satisfied').

The majority of callers (90 per cent) said that they were able to speak to somebody on their first call. Three in five (57 per cent) callers managed to get through immediately, while a further third (33 per cent) got through after being held in a queue. One in twelve (8 per cent) received the busy message asking them to call back at another time while less than one per cent hung up after waiting too long.

Of the 9 per cent that had to call back another time, two-thirds had to call between two and four times to get through. A small number (6 per cent) had to call five times before getting through to someone and 7 per cent got through on their second attempt.

## **5.2 Quality of service from the Acas helpline**

The staff operating the Acas helpline received overwhelmingly positive feedback from callers. Nearly all callers to the helpline agreed that staff were courteous (95 per cent) and behaved in a professional manner (94 per cent).

Around nine in ten callers agreed or agreed strongly with the six statements about the ability of the helpline staff member to help them with their enquiry.

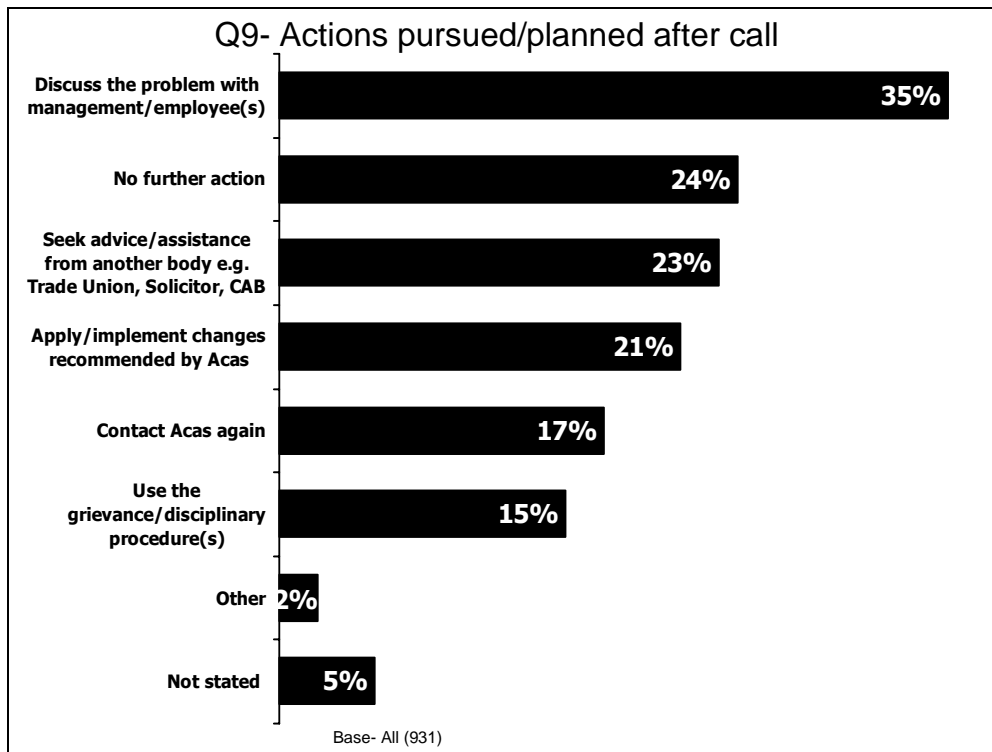
These statements asked whether callers felt that the member of staff:

- Was knowledgeable (91 per cent),
- Presented information in an impartial way (88 per cent),
- Understood the query (90 per cent),
- Gave the caller enough time to discuss their query (89 per cent),
- Presented information in a way the caller easily understood (89 per cent).

Most importantly, the callers were asked whether they found the quality of information satisfactory, and whether it gave them a clear understanding of how to deal with their particular query or problem. Again the results were very positive:

- Eight in ten callers (79 per cent) agreed that the information was valuable to them.
- Eight in ten callers (81 per cent) agreed that the information answered their enquiry in full.

It is of particular concern that the information enables callers to deal effectively with their problem or query following the call. Again eight in ten callers (79 per cent) reported that the information provided helped them to decide what to do next.



Callers were also asked what further actions they took following their call<sup>2</sup>. Around a third (35 per cent) stated that they went to discuss the problem further with their management (or their employees if the call was from an employer), with no significant difference between employers and employees.

This did not include the further fifteen per cent who planned to use the grievance/discipline procedures at their workplace following the call.

A smaller proportion (23 per cent) had sought or planned to seek assistance from other bodies, a course of action significantly higher among those dissatisfied with the Acas helpline service (67% cf. 21% of those satisfied)<sup>3</sup>.

Seventeen per cent made a further call to Acas, either to the helpline or another part of the organisation. One in five (21 per cent) reported that they turned their attention to applying or implementing changes as recommended by Acas, which rises to a third of employers (33 per cent) and those calling for employers (30 per cent).

Over half (53 per cent) of those who called as an employer said that the information they received motivated them to improve or update existing policies at their workplace. This was slightly more likely among those with ten or less staff (59% cf. 50% more than ten staff).

Moreover, two in five (41 per cent) also claimed that they were motivated to implement a new policy/policies at their workplace as a result of the information given to them. Again, this was more likely to be in smaller workplaces (46 per cent of those with less than ten staff, compared with 41 per cent of those with 10-99 staff and 34 per cent of those with 100+ staff).

<sup>2</sup> Callers were given a choice of actions – and asked to tick all that applied.

<sup>3</sup> Overall satisfaction levels are discussed in the following section.

Those who called the helpline as employees were asked to indicate if they had been considering making a claim to an Employment Tribunal before their call to Acas, and what their action was after their call. The proportion considering making a claim prior to the call dropped significantly following their call. A quarter (26 per cent) of those calling as an employee had considered making a claim before their call to the Acas helpline, three in five had not and one in eight (12 per cent) stated it was not applicable in their case.

Following the call, over a quarter (27 per cent) of those that had previously considered making a claim actually went on to make a claim, while over a third (35 per cent) decided against it and almost two-fifths (38 per cent) hadn't decided.

**Table 4: Whether employees considered making a claim to the Employment Tribunal by action following the call.**

Action following call	Whether considered making claim to employment tribunal before call to Acas (%)				
	Yes	No	N/A	Not stated	Total
<i>Base</i>	101	234	47	6	388
Made claim to ET	26	2	-	7	8
Decide against making claim to ET	33	6	-	19	12
Neither of these	36	90	100	16	76
Not stated	6	3	-	58	4

**5.3 Overall Satisfaction with the helpline**

Almost all callers to the helpline (94 per cent) said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service (66 per cent were 'very satisfied'). In 2003, 92 per cent reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied', rising to 93 per cent in 2004. Although these are not significant increases, it shows a consistent level of satisfaction experienced by users of the helpline.

Those very satisfied tend to be those that got through to the Acas helpline immediately (73% cf. 55% of those that waited and 57% of those that were asked to call back). Only two per cent of callers expressed any degree of dissatisfaction with the service – the same proportion as in the 2003 survey.

A further indication of the high levels of satisfaction was demonstrated by the fact that almost all callers (96 per cent) said they would use the helpline again if they had other enquiries relating to employment issues.

**5.4 Awareness of Discipline and Grievance procedures**

Overall, three-quarters (73 per cent) of callers claimed that their workplace had formal discipline and grievance procedures in place, the proportion being higher for employers than employees (employers 85% cf. employees 63%); while one in seven (15 per cent) stated that they did not. One in ten (10 per cent) did not know if these procedures were in place.

<b>Table 5: Are there formal discipline and grievance procedures in your workplace? (Employees/former employees only)</b>						
Discipline and grievance procedures at workplace	Size of workplace %			Part of larger organisation %		
	<10	10-99	100+	Yes	No	Total
<i>Base</i>	110	174	86	195	183	388
Yes	40	61	89	73	49	61
No	34	18	4	12	28	19
Don't know	25	20	7	13	22	18
Not stated	1	1	-	1	1	1

As seen in table 6 above, two-thirds (61 per cent) of all employees and former employees combined claimed that formal discipline and grievance procedures were in place where they worked, while one in five (19 per cent) claimed they were not in place, with a similar proportion (18 per cent) reporting that they did not know.

Analysis also indicated that the larger the company the more likely it is that they will report that formal discipline and grievance procedures are in place. Two in five (40 per cent) of those who work/used to work for companies with less than 10 staff claimed these procedures were in place, compared with three in five (61 per cent) of those working for companies with 10-99 staff and nine out of ten (89 per cent) of those with 100 or more employees.

The larger the company the more likely it is that staff will know whether or not their employer has formal discipline and grievance procedures. Only one in fifteen (7 per cent) of those who worked for companies with 100 or more staff did not know whether formal procedures were in place, which rises to one in four (25 per cent) among those who work in smaller establishments with 10 or less staff.

Employees who work(ed) for organisations with more than one site were also more likely to claim that their employer has formal discipline and grievance procedures in place (73% cf. 49% single site organisations).

**6. Conclusions**

Acas' telephone helpline continues to be a valued service for employers and employees alike. This is witnessed by the growing volume of calls, the expansion of the subjects that the helpline advisors respond to and the high level of repeat users.

**6.1 The Service**

The helpline staff received very positive feedback regarding their handling of the public; 95 per cent agreed that the staff were courteous and 94 per cent agreed the staff behaved in a professional manner. They also received positive feedback about the quality of information they provided, with 79 per cent of callers agreeing the information was valuable to them and 81 per cent agreeing that the information supplied had answered their enquiry in full.

Findings from the survey also suggested that callers value the impartiality of the service as well as the clear guidance they receive in how to deal with their problems and queries.

## **Customer satisfaction**

The Acas helpline continues to generate overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction in its customers, with 94 per cent of callers saying they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service. Another strong indicator of satisfaction is shown by the 96 per cent of callers who said they would use the helpline again if they had other enquiries relating to employment issues.

### **6.3 Impact of the helpline**

As well as being a valuable source of advice for employers and employees, findings from the survey showed that the helpline can also have an impact on behaviour in the workplace.

Employers were motivated to improve or update existing policies at their workplace (53 per cent) following their call to the helpline or even to implement new policies (41 per cent).

Furthermore, a third of those calling as employees, who had previously considered making a claim to the employment tribunal, decided against making a claim following their call to the helpline.

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## **Annex: The Survey Method**

### **Sample collection**

No sampling frame of helpline callers exists given that helpline calls are confidential and the caller is not normally asked for their name or any other personal details. Therefore, as in previous years, it was necessary for the helpline staff to ask callers whether they would take part in the survey and if the caller agreed to collect their details in order to build a sampling frame by office.

IFF along with the Acas Project Manager met all the helpline managers to discuss how the sampling process could be made as simple as possible in terms of administration, yet improve on the levels of inclusion from previous years (from phone records it had been recorded that only 61 per cent of all calls were actually recorded irrespective of whether callers agreed to take part or not).

IFF in turn, agreed to make the log sheet more user-friendly and agreed to more flexibility in the way the helpline operator asked for the details of the caller. For example, in some cases callers are quite distressed at the start of the call and it was felt that this was not the most appropriate time to ask for their personal details. Instead it was more prudent to wait until further on into the call.

It should be acknowledged that there were some cases when it was felt it was inappropriate to ask the caller for their personal details at all (in 7 per cent of calls). In addition, while all helpline staff had a suggested script, it was felt there should be more flexibility in the way staff asked the caller for their details.

The meeting and subsequent changes to the log sheet, combined with the increased flexibility, seemed to contribute to a higher number of leads than the previous year being generated over the two days the information was collected.

It was decided to sample proportionately by each office based on the daily rate of calls handled. The only exception to this was the Bury office where the significantly smaller number of calls handled on a daily basis meant it was better to post the questionnaire to all those who agreed to take part in Bury and then weight accordingly after the fieldwork.

### **Weighting**

The data were weighted back to the proportion of calls each office receives on an average basis, as shown in the following table.

<b>Region</b>	<b>% of calls on average</b>
Birmingham	10%
Bristol	7%
Bury	1%
Cardiff	6%
Fleet	8%
Glasgow	11%
Leeds	9%
Liverpool	13%
London	11%
Manchester	10%
Newcastle	5%
Nottingham	9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Response Rates

In total 5,981 calls were recorded by all 12 helpline offices in the two days each collected the sample leads. Of these 696 (12 per cent) refused to give details while 436 (7 per cent) were already in the sample as they were a repeat caller during the sampling period.

A further 484 (8 per cent) of callers did not give the helpline member of staff an opportunity to ask for details or hung up before they did so, and in 413 cases the helpline staff did not ask the caller for details. In a small number of cases (125) there was another reason why they were not included in the sample.

Therefore 3,827 (64 per cent of the total number of calls) agreed in principle to participate. Of these callers IFF sampled around one in two and mailed out 1815 questionnaires. A total of 931 questionnaires were returned within the deadline (after two reminders), a 51 per cent response rate from the valid sampling frame.

**Table 7: Sampling Outcomes**

	Number	%
Total Number of sample taken	5981	100%
Refused	696	12%
Already in sample	436	7%
No opportunity to ask/ Hung up	484	8%
Didn't ask	413	7%
Other reason (Specified	125	2%
Agreed to take part	3827	64%
Agreed to take part	3827	100%
Total number sent out	1815	47%
Total number of returns	931	24%
Total number sent out	1815	100%
Total number of returns	931	51%





