

Acas Telephone Helpline: Findings from the 2004 Customer Survey

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Prepared by:
**Acas Research and Evaluation
Section and
BMRB Social Research
Part of BMRB International Limited**

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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. In recent years, there has been a steady rise in the volume of calls from 714,700 in 2000 to 796,649 calls in 2003/04. 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 carries out regular surveys of customers' attitudes to all its services, including the Acas Helpline. In 2004, the independent research agency, BMRB Social Research was commissioned to collect feedback from customers who had used the Acas Helpline. Nearly 900 callers completed questionnaires setting out their views on the service. This research report sets out the key findings from the 2004 Survey.

2. Profile of the Callers

The largest group of callers using the Acas Helpline service is employers (36 per cent). Just over a third (35 per cent) of those calling are employees and 7 per cent were former employees while one in five (20 per cent) telephone the service on behalf of someone else.

Women are more likely to use the service than men. Nearly seven in ten respondents (69 per cent) were female whilst men and women are found in equal proportions in the workforce as a whole ¹. The callers to the Helpline broadly reflect the working population when in terms of their ethnicity - 94 per cent of callers classified themselves as 'white' (and 94 per cent of the working population is white). Half of callers (51 per cent) to the Helpline were aged 41-60, two fifths (41 per cent) were aged 22-40, 5 per cent were aged over 60 and just 1 per cent were aged 21 or under. The figures suggest a slight under representation of calls from younger workers. One in eight (13 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).

Callers to the Acas Helpline ring from across all industries though calls are most frequent from those in real estate, renting and business activity, wholesale & retail, manufacturing and public services. Fifty seven per cent were calling from organisations with less than 50

¹ All references to the general population are drawn from findings from the Labour Force Survey 2003

employees, 17 per cent were calling from organisations with 50-250 employees, 5 per cent were calling from organisations with 251-500 employees and 10 per cent were calling from organisations with more than 500 employees. Comparing the findings with the distribution of employees in the UK, the results suggest that calls were more likely to come from employers and employees in the smaller organizations. Whilst 30% of employees work in organizations with less than 50 people, 57% of calls were from this category. Overall 74% of helpline calls are from small and medium sized enterprises while 40% of employees work at these organizations.

- Seven in ten callers work for an organisation that had been operating for over five years while just 2 per cent of callers worked for an organisation that had been set up in the last twelve months.
- Three fifths callers (59 per cent) (figure excludes people calling on behalf of others) work for a small business.
- Around 60 per cent work in the private sector, a fifth in the public sector and 5 per cent declared that they work in the voluntary sector.
- About a third of callers to the Helpline (34 per cent) have a personnel or HR specialist.

Many callers had used the service before: in the previous year, 22 per cent of callers had already used the Helpline on one occasion and a further 57 per cent had used the Helpline more than once.

Table 1: Number of times used the Helpline in the last year	
Base: All callers (871)	Total %
0	21
Once	22
Twice	17
Three times	10
Four times	8
Five times	6
Between 6 – 10 times	11
Over ten times	5

Over a third were recommended to call the Helpline by a friend or colleague, and 19 per cent through some contact at work. Others become aware of the service through the Acas web site (18 per cent) and of those who had access to the internet at home or work (82 per cent reported having access to this facility), a third (31 per cent) had looked at

the Acas site to try and deal with their enquiry, before calling the Helpline. Seven per cent had seen the Helpline advertised in an Acas publication while some callers are referred by other agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureau (8 per cent), Jobcentre Plus (7 per cent), Inland Revenue (6 per cent) or the National Minimum Wage Helpline (2 per cent). The remainder had heard about the Helpline through the press, newspaper, or by using the 'yellow pages'.

3. Subject of Calls

The Acas Helpline deals with a wide range of subjects stemming from specific concerns regarding treatment and rights through to more general issues concerning best practice and handling of workplace procedures. Respondents to the 2004 Survey were asked to identify which particular issues they sought information or advice on. The top 4 subjects covered by calls to the Helpline were holiday entitlement/pay, dismissal, sick pay/absence and redundancy/redundancy pay. When broken down by type of caller, the top 4 subjects were as follows:

Table 2: Subjects raised by employees	% of calls
Holiday entitlement /pay	24
Redundancy /redundancy pay	22
Notice period /pay	20
Terms and conditions	19
Base: 302	

Table 3: Subjects raised by employers	% of calls
Sick pay /absence	37
Dismissal	33
Holiday entitlement /pay	30
Redundancy / redundancy pay	23
Base: 314	

Calls relating to pay entitlements were common across the board with employees more likely to call regarding holiday or redundancy pay compared to calls from employers which more commonly concerned sickness pay.

4. Findings from the Survey

The 2004 Survey was designed to measure 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; and the overall effectiveness of the service. The following sections address these issues in turn.

4.1 Getting through to the Acas Helpline

Four in five respondents (83 per cent) said they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the length of time it took for their call to be answered (51 per cent said they were 'very satisfied'). This is an encouraging increase from the 2003 Survey when 75 per cent were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'.

The introduction of a single national telephone number eighteen months ago was one way of addressing the growing volume of calls and the preponderance of callers having to ring several times before getting through to the Helpline. In the 2004 survey, the majority of respondents (92 per cent) said that they were able to speak to somebody on their first call. This comprised of 56 per cent of callers who said they managed to get through to somebody straight away and 36 per cent of callers who said they got through to somebody after being held in a queue. (In the previous year's survey, about the same number of callers were able to speak to somebody on their first call (94 per cent)). Five per cent of callers (N=40 people) did not manage to speak to someone on the first call. Of these, 26 callers got through having made up to three unsuccessful calls and three respondents had to call five or more times before getting through to someone.

Nearly seven in ten of all respondents (66 per cent) said they waited for less than a minute before their call was answered, including 24 per cent who waited no time/a few seconds. Three per cent of callers said they had to wait for longer than five minutes for their call to be answered.

4.2 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 with the six statements about the ability of the Helpline staff member to help them with their enquiry. The member of staff:

- Was knowledgeable (90 per cent),
- Presented information in an impartial way (87 per cent),
- Understood the query (90 per cent),

- Gave the caller enough time to discuss their query (91 per cent),
- Presented information in a way the caller easily understood (90 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.

- Nearly nine in ten callers (86 per cent) agreed that the information was valuable to them (over two fifths agreed strongly: 44 per cent)
- Nearly nine in ten callers (86 per cent) agreed that the information answered their enquiry in full (nearly two fifths agreed strongly: 38 per cent).

Calls to the Acas Helpline average around five to six minutes in length but it is of particular concern that the service provides clear information enabling callers to deal effectively with their problem or query. A majority of callers (82 per cent) reported that the information provided helped them to decide what to do next (a third strongly agreed: 34 per cent). Callers were also asked what further actions they took following their call 2. A third of employers (33 per cent) reported that they turned their attention to applying or implementing changes as recommended by Acas. A significant proportion of callers (41%) reported having discussed the matter further with their manager/or the employee; while 24% had sought further advice from another body. Twenty one per cent made a further call to Acas, either the Helpline or another part of the organisation.

4.3 Overall Satisfaction with the Helpline

Over nine in ten callers to the Helpline (93 per cent) said they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the service (63 per cent were 'very satisfied'). In 2003, 92% reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'. Only two per cent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the service – the same proportion in the previous survey. A further indication of the high levels of satisfaction was demonstrated by nine out of ten callers (93 per cent) who said they would use the Helpline again if they had any employment related issues.

5. Access to the Acas Helpline

² Respondents were given a choice of actions – and asked to tick all that applied.

Acas has recently reviewed its opening hours extending availability to earlier in the morning and later in the afternoon. Current opening hours are Monday – Friday, 8.00 – 18.00. Respondents to the survey were asked which time of the day they would find it most convenient to call. Clearly, the results can only portray the views of those actually accessing the system, excluding those with no experience of using the Helpline. Nonetheless, the results provide an indication of caller preferences in terms of opening hours. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 4: Most convenient time to call	
Base: All callers (871)	Total %
8 – 9am	6
9am – noon	16
Noon – 2pm	2
2pm – 4.30pm	5
4.30pm – 6pm	6
6pm – 8pm	16
Saturday/Sunday	3
No preference	44

A significant minority (44 per cent) stated ‘no preference’ with regards preferred calling times, and of the remainder, the vast majority stated a calling time which falls within the current opening hours. However 16 per reported that they would welcome a service which run into the early evening (6pm to 8 pm); and three per cent would ideally like to be able to call the service at the weekend.

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 across the years, the expansion of subjects covered and the steady loyalty of customers who use the service on a regular basis. Most importantly, it is demonstrated through the overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction reported by customers.

Helpline staff maintain very positive feedback both in terms of their handling of the public and the quality of information they provide. Findings from the 2004 Survey suggest that callers especially value the impartiality of the service as well as the clear guidance they receive in how to deal with their problems and queries.

For any further information on this study, or other aspects of the Acas Research and Evaluation programme, please telephone 020 7210 3926 or email research@acas.org.uk.

Acas research publications can be found at
<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=405>

Annex: The Survey Method

1. Sample collection

The Acas Helpline is run on a confidential basis. Callers are not asked to report their personal details or information about their workplace. In order to prepare a sample for the 2004 Survey, a procedure was put in place which enabled helpline operators to collect details of callers specifically for the purposes of the research exercise. The method used is one developed in previous Acas helpline surveys.

In 2004, helpline staff from all 12 regional offices were instructed to collect contact information (names, addresses and phone numbers) for all callers to the helpline over a two-day period in the week commencing 13th April. Offices were allocated particular days in order to avoid a reduction in service which may have resulted if all sites had turned their attention to recording contact information on the same two days.

The aim was to select a sample proportionate to the amount of calls logged by each office so that, as far as possible, the sample profile reflected the actual proportion of calls handled by each office. The exercise was successful in generating a large enough sample to allow the survey to go into the field approximately one week after the sampling exercise took place.

The greatest challenge for staff is in handling the calls whilst recording information required for the survey. In some instances, there was evidence of calls being received (logged on the British Telecommunication system) but not recorded for the purposes of the survey. This gives rise to some concerns about selection bias in the sample and future surveys will seek to address this area by revising mechanisms for call recording. Overall however, the sample was felt to be representative of the distribution of calls received throughout the regional network.

2. Methodology and Response Rates

There are two points at which callers may refuse to take part in the survey: the first is at the point of the call; the second is where a caller may fail to return a completed questionnaire.

Records show that of all calls recorded for the purposes of the survey during the sampling period, 56% agreed to take part while 25% declined. A further 7% of callers had already

been sampled for the research during an earlier call and 12% were not included in the sample for 'other reasons' for example because the caller had the wrong number, or they were seeking a service elsewhere in Acas.

A self-completion questionnaire was sent to 1600 customers. Following calls from recipients, a further 25 people were taken out of the survey (e.g. where the named contact had moved or the individual was not known at the address supplied). Excluding these invalid questionnaires, the final distributed sample size was 1575. A total of 871 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 55 per cent.