



Centrelink

Centrelink staff claim toilet breaks are being timed by management in crackdown

Call centre workers say systems are monitoring their performance minute-by-minute in bid to improve wait times

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Centrelink call centre staff claim they are being monitored minute by minute, including the length of their bathroom breaks, as part of a management-led crackdown to improve average call wait times that have blown out to nearly double in the past year.

Staff spoke to Guardian Australia on the condition of anonymity, for fear of losing their jobs, claiming management systems, which help team leaders in capturing call time figures and monitoring staff activities, acted more like a surveillance system, describing them as “intrusive and stressful”.

The latest [call time statistics](#), revealed in Senate estimates in October, showed the average time it took for Centrelink staff to answer calls had jumped to 32 minutes over July and August 2023, compared with 18 minutes during the same period in 2022.

Congestion messages, where the call is answered by an automated voice which informs callers of the available online services and then hangs up, also rose to 2.8m across July and August 2023, from 1.7m during those two months the previous year.

In response, staff working in Centrelink smart centres are facing pressure by management to push customers to online services, resolve queries quickly and strictly adhere to the five-minute stretch and bathroom breaks, two sources claimed.

The daily activities of call centre staff are managed through a system centred on “auxiliary codes”. When staff need to stop taking calls, whether it is for a meeting or a break, they can manually change their work status by changing the code, which is centrally monitored in real time by a team leader.

For example, if staff take a five-minute screen-based break, or a 15-minute tea break, they are supposed to switch to the corresponding code and change it back before their allocated break time is up.

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Those who fail to change the code within that time limit are flagged in the system as being “non-adherent”. The seconds and minutes while a staff member is flagged as being “non-adherent” are referred to internally as customer lost time.

Staff claim those who rack up customer lost time minutes, as little as 30 minutes over a one-month period, or an average of 90 seconds a working day, are warned and performance managed.

The Community and Public Service Union said it was concerned about reports that leaderboards detailing the “worst” performers on customer lost time were being internally distributed.

The union’s national secretary, Melissa Donnelly, said Centrelink’s leaders should prioritise staff wellbeing to prevent the “unacceptably high” turnover.


“There is a deeply entrenched cultural problem in Services Australia and this customer lost time issue is just another manifestation of it,” she said.

“Rather than treat staff and clients as human beings with distinct and different needs, senior management’s default setting is to monitor and micromanage. It’s a continuation of the culture that led to the robodebt catastrophe.

“Staff turnover at Services Australia is unacceptably high and, with offensive and counterproductive workplace practices like this, it’s not hard to see why.”

The Greens senator Janet Rice, who asked the agency about how it manages staff breaks at an estimates hearing in November, described the tactics as “despicable and unacceptable”.

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“This is the worst way imaginable to try to fix the call wait times that are harming so many Australians; it’s likely not working and only making staff more miserable,” Rice said.

A spokesperson for Services Australia, the agency that administers the Centrelink program, said the agency was “committed to a safe and healthy working environment for all our employees”.

“Smart centres operate in a scheduled working environment to provide accessible, quality and timely service to our customers,” the spokesperson said. “We plan work to provide the best possible customer experience while managing staff availability, breaks and learning opportunities.”



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A spokesperson for the government services minister, [Bill Shorten](#), said although ministers could not make “line decisions”, his experience as a union official had led him to believe “that excessive line management is counterproductive”.

Services Australia [revealed in November](#) it was losing between 140 and 180 workers every month but the deputy chief executive, Jarrod Howard, said it was “broadly comparable to the rate of attrition across the Australian jobs market at this point in time”.

Of the nearly 27,000 workers who responded to the census, 53% believed the agency cared about their health and wellbeing while 33% indicated they wanted to leave their role as soon as possible or within the next 12 months.

In October last year, Shorten **announced 3,000 new staff** would be hired, the majority of allocated Centrelink call centres, to address the sharp rise in call wait times.

Shorten confirmed the last of those staff had now been hired and were undertaking training this week.

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