

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

TREASURY

Australian Taxation Office

(Supplementary Budget Estimates 1-2 November 2006)

Question **SBT 100**
Topic: **12% INCREASE IN COMPLAINTS ABOUT PHONE SERVICES**
Hansard Page: **E83**

Senator Sherry asked:

I note that the ATO recorded a 12 per cent increase in complaints and problems with phone services. What were those problems relating to?

Mr D'Ascenzo—*What I understand to be the case is that it was not necessarily a single matter but a range of issues including our platform and some power outages.*

Ms Crawford—*Generally I think that the call centre services throughout the year were performing fairly well. Towards the end of the year we did suffer some difficulties, both with our systems and our level of staffing, as the number of calls started to increase. I think that is probably what generated some of the complaints.*

Senator SHERRY—*What were the major factors contributing to the 12 per cent increase in complaints?*

Ms Crawford—*I do not have that breakdown with me today. I would have to take that on notice.*

Mr D'Ascenzo—*We have recently done three things in our client contact centre approach. We have amalgamated the different call centres within our internal divisions to allow a much more purpose-built management of our client contact centres. We have recently engaged a new person to head our client contact centres and we have had a review done by an external consultant about ways in which we can improve. While we perform very well—in fact, two of our client contact centres won state awards in their category for best call centres, competing both in the public and private sector, and one of our coaches won coach of the year—there is no complacency and we think that there is more work that can be done to improve our operations in that regard.*

Senator SHERRY—*To sum up, do you believe that the problems that led to the 12 per cent increase in complaints have been resolved?*

Mr D'Ascenzo—*Ms Crawford could not give you the details but my memory does suggest that we did suffer some power outages.*

Senator SHERRY—*Power outages?*

Mr D'Ascenzo—*The electricity did not work.*

Senator SHERRY—*I understand that.*

Mr D'Ascenzo—*What I am saying is that some of these were outside of our control. That is the short answer. But, having said that, our client contact centres performed very well this year and their level of resourcing, given the amount of information that they were asked to provide to taxpayers, it has been remarkable. We underestimated the amount of calls that we would get and so they have been asked to really perform over and above what could otherwise be expected. I think they have done a fantastic job. Part of my role as a CEO of the organisation is to see whether or not we can better estimate call usage and find some efficiencies along the way.*

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Answer:

Number of complaints:

The 12 per cent figure referred to in the 2005-06 Annual Report refers to all complaints received by the ATO, not only complaints about telephony services.

In 2005-06 there were a total of 10,704 complaints received by the ATO including 2,034 complaints about accessing telephony services. This represents less than 2 per cent of calls received in 2005-06. By comparison, in 2004-05 there were a total of 9,573 complaints. Of these, 1,418 related to complaints about access to ATO services. No further breakdown is available to identify how many relate to telephony services due to a different way of categorising data.

The ATO received almost 11 million calls in 2005-06. Of these, 83.4 per cent of general calls were answered within five minutes and 86.7 per cent of tax practitioner calls were answered within two minutes.

Nature of complaints about telephony services:

Complaints relating to access included call wait times, complexity in the Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) service, phone messages, busy signals and issues with Telstra connections to the ATO.

Other complaints related to the provision of incomplete or incorrect advice, overall customer service and calls that required further escalation to another ATO officer to obtain assistance.

Causes of complaint:

Clients have been unable to access our services due to a range of factors including:

- power outages;
- faults with telephony carrier technology (external to the ATO);
- faults with internal ATO systems; and
- faults with applications such as the Portal or eTax.

During 2005-06 there were also times of unexpected spikes in demand, where call volumes exceeded capacity.

Business Improvements:

Technology improvements are continually being implemented, including:

- notification of wait time messages – so the client can choose whether or not to stay on hold;
- simplification of phone messages and IVR options;
- close management of contracts with external technology providers; and
- new call delivery technology that moves calls to suitable officers in the quickest time possible.

The ATO is also implementing other strategies including:

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- increased focus on the collection and analysis of intelligence;
- improved automated self-help applications;
- promotion of alternative channels eg web, publications; and
- multi-skilling to enable officers to answer more calls and increase first point resolution.