

IsCentrelinkDown.com
Personal details available upon request
letsfixit@centrelinkisbroken.com
Twitter: @CentrelinkDown

19 March 2017

Senators, parliamentarians, and those brave souls who click PDFs online,

I write to you as I have approaching a decades worth of professional experience in call centres spanning both the private and public sector. I have worked on various levels—from frontline staff, specialist escalation teams, as well as frontline management. This experience makes me empathetic to the needs of all in managing large numbers of phone calls, the interaction with complex systems, and the difficulties that this presents at all levels.

With this in mind, I write to you in my role as a private citizen with a professional opinion.

I am pleased that this senate inquiry exists. You may all remember an email I sent you all on 6 February 2017, around 7.30 a.m. (AEST) with the text “Don’t ignore them” in the subject, requesting you to act now.

As I see it, I can primarily respond to point c) of the Terms of Reference (with a dash of d, e, j & k):

“the capacity of the Department of Human Services and Centrelink services, including online, IT, telephone services and service centres to cope with levels of demand related to the implementation of the program;”

What inspired me to act was when I found out that Jeremy Di Sessa called the DHS Families number (136 150) a total of eighty-six times over three days, and was unable to connect to wait in queue. The concept of this happening at any place I have previously worked at was unimaginable. Waiting on hold is standard—but not able to even get through to be on hold for 3 days? Almost unheard of.

In a commercial environment, sustained periods of (what the public would view as) complete unavailability would likely be a breach of a call centre provider’s service level agreements. These breaches typically result in large and expensive contractual penalties, not to mention a public relations disaster.

I hadn’t engaged with Centrelink services in a long time (I hope [Centrelink didn’t get a Public Interest Certificate to verify that](#)) so I thought I should test it myself. Over two days I tried calling, and both attempts resulted in a “call busy” tone. I then read some more of the reporting surrounding #notmydebt.

I expect better of our “social safety net”. To hold those in power to account, I devised ways to make this unavailability visible to the Australian public—and IsCentrelinkDown.com was born. When it’s finished, the public will be able to see how long the service has been down, and judge whether they need to attend in person. In future it will perhaps even notify people when things are NOT busy, while the “Place In Queue” system is not operational.

It’s still a work in progress. We can’t afford to monitor every number. The process of capturing data about some Centrelink services (including Customer Compliance and Debt recovery numbers) has

begun. I share this with you in the hope to illustrate exactly how things are at this point perceived from the public's point of view for what I believe is a government department in crisis.

Media discussion has focused on things that the public would normally expect to be of paramount importance: call wait times and abandoned calls. The media also revealed that [the department does something I view as a disingenuous trick](#): they do not record “[Average Handling Time](#)” at an [organisation wide level](#). Instead, they focus on a ‘per operator’ level only—resetting the clock when a call is transferred—when they were asked about wait times in senate estimates. This type of number-fudging is at the fringes of what is actually important though.

Things that I believe Centrelink callers would view as important, in order of priority:

1. Being able to dial and connect to the phone system to wait in a queue to be answered and the associated monetary cost of that call. The statistic for those attempting connection, but failing, is the [Number of Blocked Calls](#).
2. How long it takes, after connecting to the queue and being placed on hold, to get through and talk to a person—this is represented by the [Average Speed of Answer](#) statistic.
3. The total length of time taken on the phone call to get a positive resolution, or at least understanding—this is normally represented by the [Average Call Duration](#) statistic for each phone service.

I figured out that Average Call Duration would be near-impossible for me to test, and too dangerous from a privacy standpoint. Testing the Average Speed of Answer would be extraordinarily expensive due to reported wait times, and could possibly impact service too much (unless, when the test got through, it connected the phone to a waiting customer). This proved beyond my budget and technical means, and still questionable on a privacy standpoint.

Determining the Number of Blocked Calls is well within my meagre budget, of primary importance, and has no privacy implications I can foresee. The test is literally a computer calling another computer. In internet terms this is similar to a [ping test](#). Automation is not a one way street.

The automated tests I run check whether the phone is answered and whether it's busy for a point in time, that's all. Centrelink does have this, and all other mentioned statistics, as they have been [asked for and quoted in senate estimates prior](#), but they are not in any annual reports that I can see.

The end goal of my project would be for it to not need to exist, as the government would embrace transparency like [other organisations that provide critical services for the nation who also have busy call centres](#) and include such statistics in their annual report.

Making sure that I was not re-inventing the wheel, I looked to Centrelink's annual reports. I could not find any statistics relating to Number of Blocked Calls.

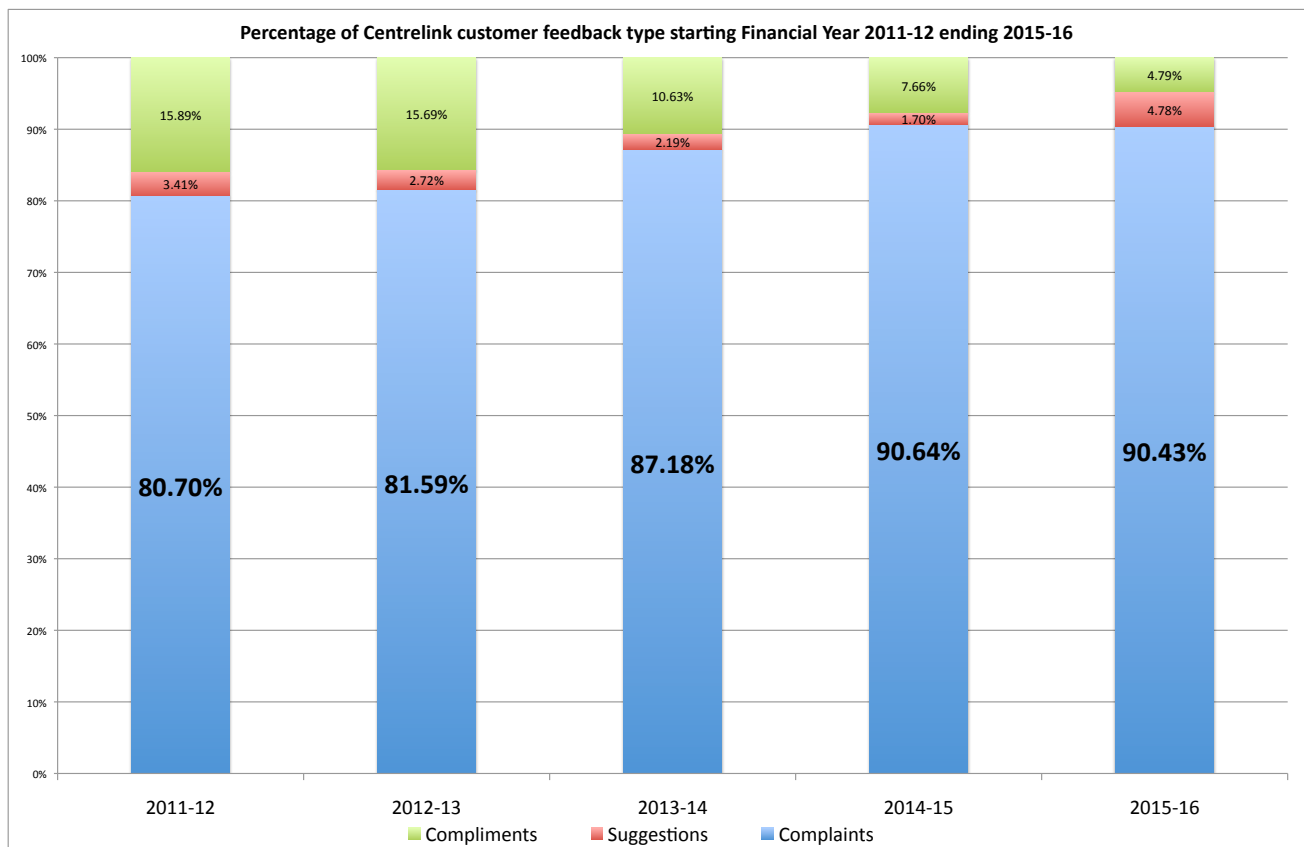
The closest meaningful metric that I could find in the annual reports was relating to customer feedback. Centrelink recognise that its number one complaint in all 125,786 customer feedback contact is: “*difficulties with phone services, including complaints about hold wait times, engaged signals and call disconnections (15.8 per cent)*” - seen on Page 154 of the [2015-2016 report](#). However, all focus I have seen has been on attempts to automate away the problem of having to deal with people with real, difficult, and complex issues by redirecting them to “self-service terminals”.

While self-service is an important part of a strategy, an adequately staffed and supported public service will also help support the same outcome until such time a fully functional, comprehensive, self-service system exists.

Looking further into the feedback data, I stumbled on the fact that Centrelink did not even get its own figures right between years for financial year 2014–2015. [1427 customer complaints went missing between annual reports](#). I have asked the Department of Human Services multiple times to comment on this and other issues, to be met with only silence. I hope this submission will yield responses.

The reason I asked that question is because I want the right figures, to accurately answer the question “Are Centrelink’s services getting worse year on year, or has it always been this bad?” (In addition to [the recent ANAO audit](#)).

Without this information, I made do, assuming that Centrelink’s complaint figures were at least correct for the year that they were reporting on, and produced the following chart - Figure A:



Full source [data can be seen here](#)—it’s taken from Centrelink’s annual reports from the corresponding year.

As you can see, there has been a steady rise of total complaints in regards to all feedback in comparison to previous years. Since posting this graph on the @CentrelinkDown account, anonymous individuals, in fear for their livelihood, have contacted me to tell me that even the categorisation of what marks a complaint may be suspect. A complainant needs to specifically mention that it is a complaint, such as “I wish to register a complaint”, otherwise it may be counted as a suggestion.

The odd spike in the percentage of “suggestions” in 2015–2016 seems to indicate this as a possibility and the real number may be higher. I doubt that suddenly in 2015–16 there was a jump in people suddenly having ideas to improve Centrelink’s service, and the will to communicate that directly to Centrelink’s feedback line.

Independent Statistics on Blocked Calls in addition to Centrelink’s

My tests are designed to have the least amount of load impact on Centrelink’s live phone system as possible, balanced against providing a representative figure of what a reasonable person would expect to call Centrelink and expect a response. An automated call is performed approximately somewhere between every 10 and 30 minutes per service depending on a previous success or failure. If the system detects success, the system waits longer, if there failure, the period between tests is shorter. All times listed are in Australian Central Standard Time and try to cover all open timezones where there is a sufficient dataset.

These statistics come at no small cost to the author: due to an error on my part. When reading the Critical Information Summary for our telephony service, I overlooked that the service I chose had a 44 cent flag-fall for all 13 and 1300 numbers. This caused a bill for \$793.32. I was lucky that this was not a mobile service, which also would have had per-minute rates on top of the flag-fall.

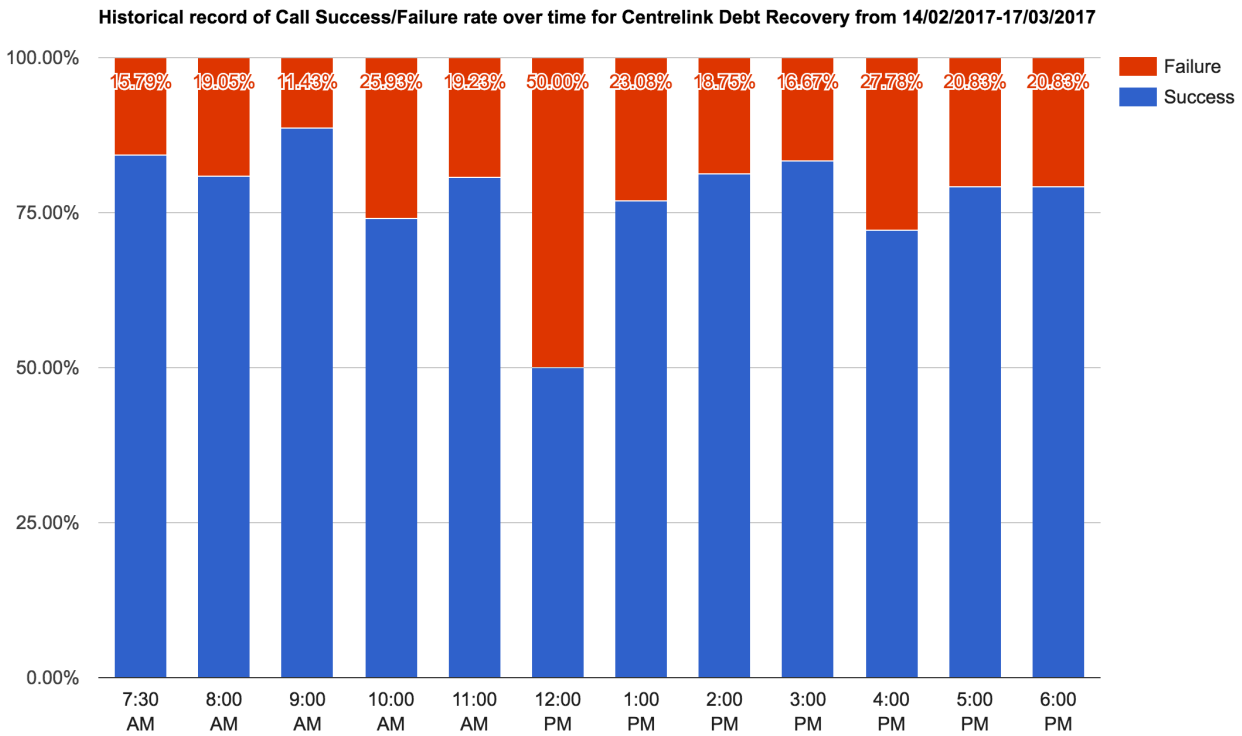
These types of errors are not uncommon: one person reported on notmydebt.com.au that [appealing a debt cost approximately \\$400 in mobile phone charges](#) - which are arguably the primary form of contact today. People on low incomes may be forced to choose between a landline or mobile phone service. In most cases, the mobile service is more useful, making calls to Centrelink more expensive. Mobile calls to 13/1300 services are always charged with a flag-fall and a per-minute rate, making long hold times expensive.

This makes no sense that we are lumping those with the least ability to pay for phone calls with 13/1300 numbers including crisis services. Meanwhile the [DHS “purchasing helpdesk” for the Dunn & Bradstreet contract is a 1800 number](#). This displays poor priorities.

Source data can be made available to trusted journalists—I cannot risk Centrelink blocking my project outright as estimates has [stated in the past that they block automated call attempts](#) (despite there being no way to determine if a call is started by a computer or a person). I asked Human Services and Alan Tudge MP [what the department categorises as a Denial of Service attack on their system when their own clients manually call 255 times before 2.00 p.m.](#) and are unable to get on hold.

In the debt recovery process, you’re [presented with two different numbers to call](#) on the “initial letter”. The first states “if you cannot pay by the due date please call 1800 076 072”, which is the “Debt Recovery” number. Those with good English skills may notice the inference that by calling this number you accept the debt. However, somebody who is distressed may call it anyway, as it’s the first number listed. Figure B below shows the Blocked Call numbers in red and the likelihood of getting through depending on the hour of day you call.

Figure B

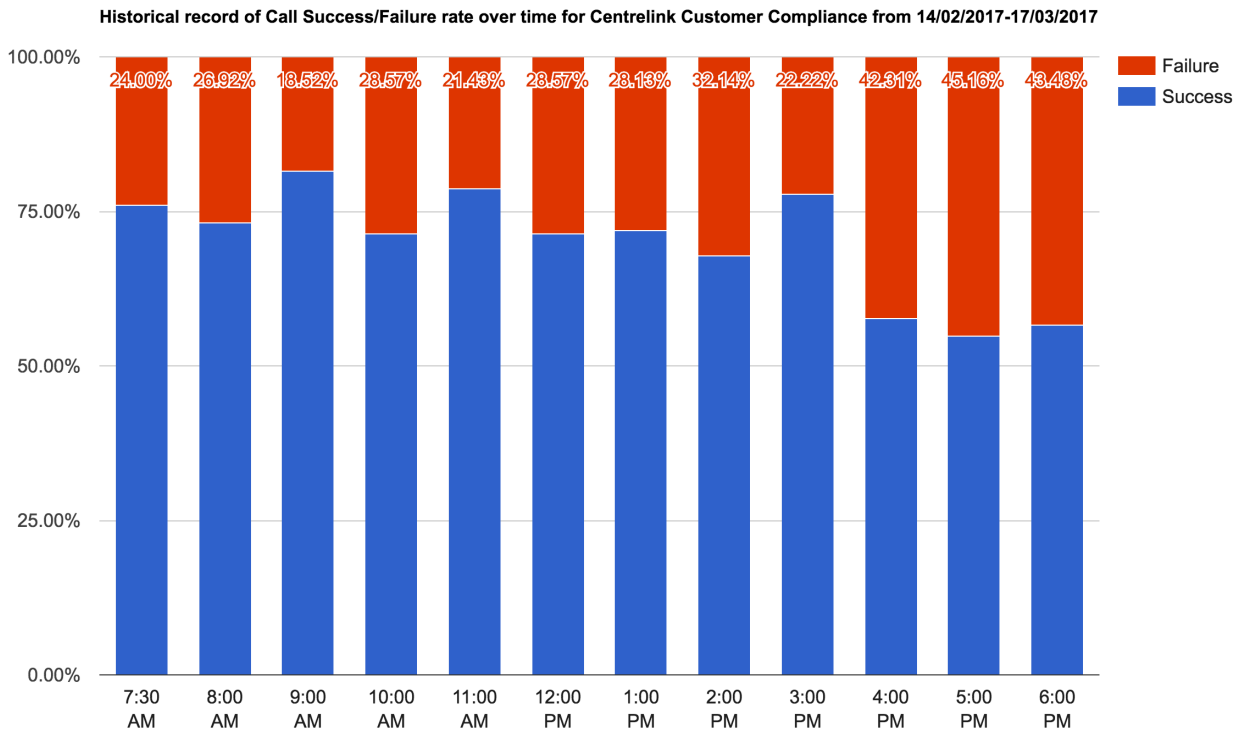


Analysis of Figure B

Interestingly, the least likely time to get through to hold is around lunchtime. This is the earliest available time that most workers would use to dispute a debt. The second largest dip is calling at or after 4.00 p.m., where those people who start work at 8–8.30 a.m. (depending on state) typically start knocking off work (heaven help Western Australia).

The second option is to “talk about the details of this account” (an unnecessarily worded way to say “dispute this debt”). This goes to the “Customer Compliance” team on the number 1800 086 400. The likelihood of those “Clients”, deemed “non-compliant”, getting through is below in the same format.

Figure C



Analysis of Figure C

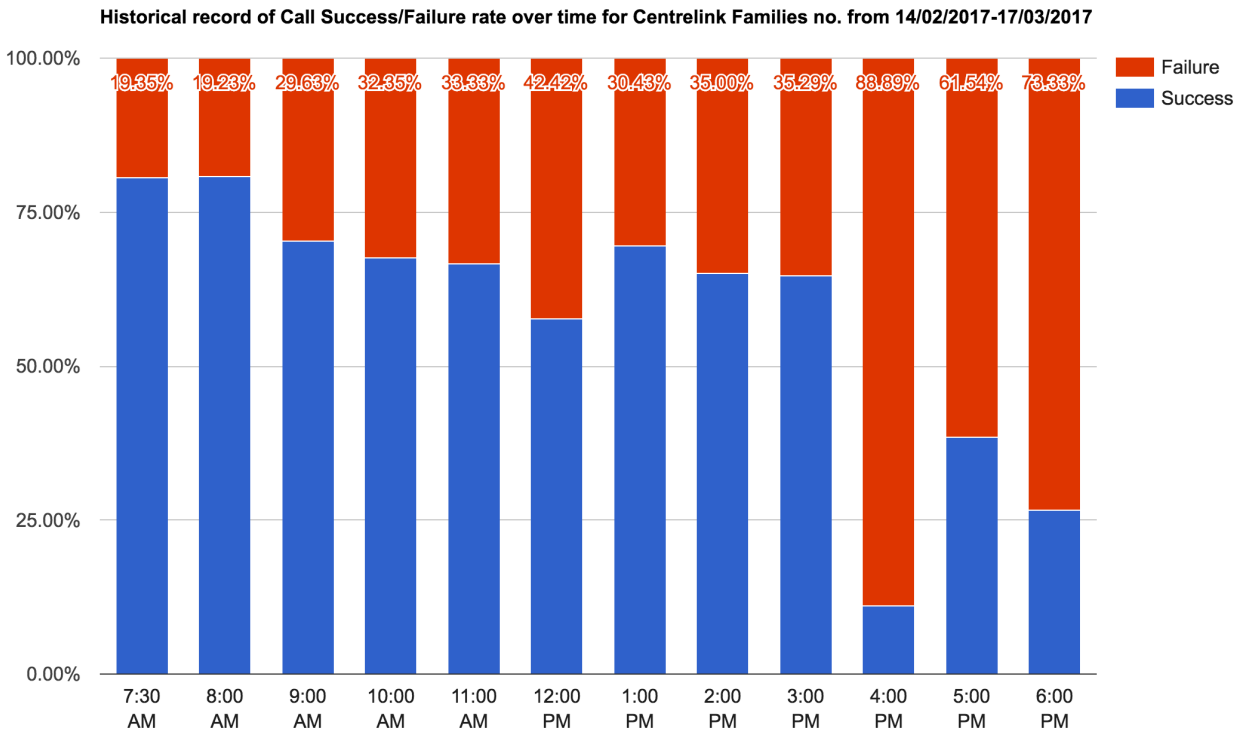
Overall, up until the clock ticks 4.00 p.m. you had an average 25.61% chance of getting a busy signal, then you had an average 43.65% chance of a busy signal. Once again, workers miss out.

Has Centrelink’s Robodebt taken away resources from servicing other areas?

Yes, I believe so. If it has not, the family number has been woefully understaffed for some time, and I would recommend that this inquiry compare the impact from internal Centrelink numbers.

This is what it looks like from the outside. Note that I am aware that the Families number is open until 8.00 p.m., unfortunately this was not included in the automated schedule I recorded for this. This has been fixed for later tests. We all make mistakes, but learning from them is key here.

Figure D



Analysis of Figure D

It is almost completely hopeless to try and get in contact directly after most parents get home from picking up schoolchildren—an 88.89% failure rate is abysmal. Notably, these services are behind 13/1300 services (in this case, 13 61 50) which to me looks like Centrelink is hiding it’s failure behind a virtual ‘paywall’ be it intentionally or not. I plan to test other services to prove my hypothesis.

I do already have some data on the Newstart line but not enough time to process it—if requested I can generate it, but this submission is long enough as it is.

Conclusion

Centrelink’s phone service is an absolute dog’s breakfast in need of urgent repair & complaints are getting worse.

Recommendations

In order of priority:

1. Revert back to manual assessment of automated flagging instead of [churning out debt letters that are causing you more work than is necessary to check them.](#)
2. Hire more staff - [use this/any Erlang formula](#) to figure out how many before further automating. If this was already done previously (I trust it was) - DHS need to do an update.
3. Turn back on Place in Queue that [Human Services promised the Commonwealth Ombudsman.](#)
4. Change all Centrelink phone services to be 1800 freecall numbers (especially crisis services!!!) to reduce the strain on literally the poorest in Australian society (a. in the ToR).