

Jobseekers 'pay the price' for latest govt tech bungle

By [Joseph Brookes](https://www.innovationaus.com/authors/joseph-brookes/) Senior Reporter



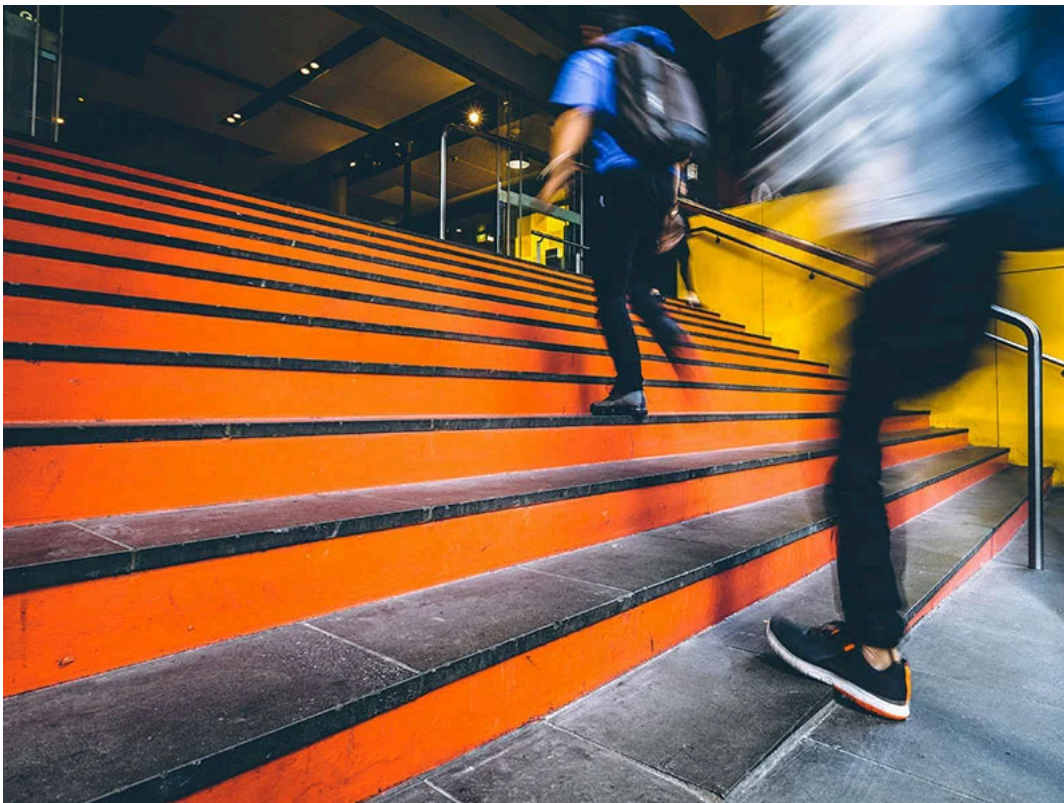
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Jobseekers are being asked to adjust their reporting to employment service providers to avoid a government tech glitch or risk losing their payments, shifting more burden onto vulnerable people.

Advocates say the current tech glitch is the latest in a series that have forced jobseekers to jump through even more administrative hoops and that any automated payments suspensions would "repeat the failures of robodebt".

The department in charge says it is taking its own steps to ensure payments aren't wrongly cut off but declined to explain the underlying cause or how many people are impacted.



Mutual obligations mean jobseekers are forced to complete tasks like apply for a certain number of jobs to receive jobseeker payments. Recipients are required to log their efforts with Workforce Australia, the government-funded network of employment service providers, and can use a variety of channels to do so.

For at least a month, one of the avenues, an electronic mailbox, has been "processing applications slower than usual", according to an automated email sent to jobseekers that rely on the reporting channel.

"If job applications aren't processed by the end of a participants reporting period their payments could be put on hold, reduced, or cancelled," the email, which has been shared on social media, says.

"Participants need to check their job applications have been processed and report using a different method."

Australian Unemployed Workers' Union's Jeremy Poxon said it is "beyond a joke" that the government is threatening to withhold payments over an issue users have no control over.

"When something goes wrong in their IT systems, it's always participants who have to pay the price," he told InnovationAus.com.

"We constantly hear from people who have to jump through extra administrative hoops, or spend hours on hold to their job provider or Centrelink, to try to avoid a penalty because Workforce Australia's tech system has glitched, stalled, or temporarily broken.

"This is an egregious amount of stress and burden to put on some of the most disadvantaged people in the country."

A spokesperson for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations confirmed the slowdown in processing applications lodged through the mailbox has been occurring since at least early October, but other channels are unaffected.

"Job search reports received by the department continue to be processed unabated by this issue," the spokesperson told InnovationAus.com.

"To ensure people did not have their income support payment affected by this processing delay, the department immediately began undertaking daily assurance activity to prevent any payment suspensions from occurring."

According to the spokesperson, the activities have so far ensured participants who are reporting through the mailbox "will not have their payment impacted if they do not report via other means", despite the email's warning.

The department did not answer questions on the reason for the slowdown, the number of impacted users, or why it had transferred a workaround onto participants.

Australian Council of Social Service chief executive Dr Cassandra Goldie said if the issue led to automated suspensions it would "repeat the failures of Robodebt" and place vulnerable people at greater risk.

"People struggling to survive on \$56 a day should not be threatened with payment suspension, nor forced to bear the burden of any system error," Dr Goldie told InnovationAus.com.

"Automated payment suspensions should be immediately abolished and every decision affecting a person's income support payment should be made by a government official with knowledge of the person affected, not by a computer or private company."

The employment services system was fully privatised by the Howard government in the late 1990s and been delivered through several iterations, all with mutual obligations.

The Howard-era change has been a failure for jobseekers (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/30/australias-broken-employment-services-system-needs-public-provider-parliamentary-review-finds>), according to a parliamentary review ordered by the Albanese government last year that called for wholesale changes.

The Albanese government responded by committing to trial public sector-led employment services and cede less control to private providers.

But the reforms stop short of ending mutual obligations or bringing employment services back into full public control.

"They force us into a barrage of humiliating mutual obligation activities, but they can't even perform their one basic function to keep our payments secure," said Mr Poxon. "It's obscene."

DEWR did not respond to questions on the underlying technology and which suppliers are providing it.

DXC Technology was reportedly contracted (<https://www.itnews.com.au/news/dxc-to-deliver-australias-new-job-seeker-platform-560013>) to design and deliver the technology behind the New Employment Services Model that digitally connects jobseekers and service providers through SAS and Microsoft software.

Do you know more? Contact James Riley via [Email \(mailto:james@innovationaus.com\)](mailto:james@innovationaus.com).

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