



Ipsos MORI
Social Research Institute

April 2017

Customer Experience of Intelligent Telephony Automation

HMRC Report: 458

Lucy Joyce and Kelly Finnerty

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Published by HM Revenue and Customs, July 2017

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs/about/research>

Contents

Introduction	4
Background and objectives.....	4
Methododology and sample.....	4
Customer context	6
Reasons for calling.....	6
Customer mind-set.....	6
Customer expectations.....	7
Experience of ITA	9
Before the call.....	9
During the call.....	10
Actions taken after the call.....	14
Satisfaction with ITA	16
Conclusions	18
Appendix	19

Executive Summary

Background

This research aimed to explore customer perceptions of Intelligent Telephony Automation (ITA) used on HMRC customer helplines, including customer experiences, views and behavioural responses to ITA messages. Ipsos MORI conducted 45 telephone depth interviews with customers who called HMRC's helplines in November 2016, with interviews conducted between the 9th and the 27th January 2017. The sample was designed to include a range of customer helplines, ITA message types, call outcomes and demographic characteristics. The study was qualitative in nature, allowing for an in depth exploration of the issues. It does not provide any statistical or numeric data, rather it seeks to understand what, how and why issues occur.

Customer context

Customers gave a range of reasons for calling the helplines, but calls often related to payments, a change in circumstance or advice completing an obligation, such as an online form. On calling the helpline, they expected to be routed via an automated system to speak to an adviser (from whom they expected to receive a good service). Customers came to the helpline with different mind-sets (driven by the nature of their query and how far they had previously attempted to self-serve) which affected how open they were to ITA and how they interacted with the system.

Experience of ITA

Customer journeys during the call tended not to be linear and/or straightforward, rather routes taken were more complex with customers disconnecting at various points across the journey. Where queries were still unresolved after the initial call, customers took a range of actions including: calling the helpline again; trying another method to resolve their query, such as going online or speaking to an employer; or taking no further action.

The ITA system worked well overall although there were some issues noted, particularly regarding the voice recognition system. Customers' had mixed reactions to ITA messages. Messages encouraging customers to resolve their query through a different method (by directing them online or to their employer for example) had limited success. This was usually because customers had already attempted to do so prior to the call and did not feel the message offered sufficient additional information to support this.

Overall satisfaction with ITA

Satisfaction with the service was driven by how far it met customer expectations, how successfully the query was resolved and the length and complexity of the journey experienced, such as the number of calls made, time taken and disconnection. Customers were more positive about ITA where they were open to using an automated system and where they perceived their query as non-urgent and simple enough to be managed in this way. By contrast, where queries were seen as complex and urgent, the ITA system could be perceived to present a barrier to a quick resolution and was viewed less favourably.

Importantly, HMRC cannot consider all customers who disconnect during the call to have had their query resolved, with many of those who disconnect calling back to speak to an adviser. In most cases, customers believe their query requires a tailored response and are satisfied only once the service has met their expectations and they have spoken to an adviser. The ITA messages also appear to have limited success in encouraging customers to self-serve and where this did occur, customers often called back having been unable to resolve their query in this way.

Introduction

Background and objectives

Intelligent Telephony Automation (ITA) is a voice recognition technology programmed to respond to the caller and is in use on various HMRC helplines. This is the first thing customers hear when calling the HMRC helplines. Based on the replies from the customer, ITA can route customers to another message, to an adviser or disconnect the call.

Two types of ITA messages are currently in use across HMRC's customer helplines: *broadcast* messages and *deflection* messages. *Broadcast* messages play at the very start of a call to provide information and are used for short periods such as to cover a peak, unexpected high service demand, or to promote a service. They can include, for example, messages that certain tasks can be carried out online, and directions to the HMRC website. *Deflection* messages are played later in the call, after the customer has gone through a series of automated messages asking about the reason for the call. Deflection messages provide information on other services to help resolve the customer query, for example, directing customers to GOV.UK URLs or webinars. Following this, customers might be disconnected if their query can be resolved online or if they called the wrong helpline, alternatively they are routed to an adviser.

HMRC wanted to understand how customers respond to ITA messages and commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake an exploratory qualitative study to understand customers' perceptions of the service, including their experiences, views and behavioural response to ITA messages and calling the helpline. Specifically, the research explored:

- How well ITA messages meet customer need and how satisfied customers are with the information received;
- How far HMRC can consider customers who hang up following an ITA message to have had their call handled; and
- The effectiveness of ITA messages in encouraging customers to use other methods to resolve their query.

Methodology and sample

We used a qualitative approach for this study, in order to gain in depth customer insight. A total of 45 telephone depth interviews were undertaken with a selection of customers who called one of four HMRC helplines in November 2016. Interviews lasted for up to 45 minutes and were conducted between the 9th and 27th January 2017. The sample was designed to include the following characteristics:

- **Customer helpline** - customers who called four of the HMRC helplines: Income tax (PAYE), National Insurance (NI), Tax Credits (TC) and Self-Assessment (SA);
- **Message type** – customers who heard different message types: messages that referred them to online services, messages that deflected (such as by referring them to online services) and disconnected their call, and messages that instructed on what action to take and provided further information;
- **Call outcome** – a mix of call outcomes (based on the first call made to HMRC for the query), including customers who spoke to an adviser on their first call, those who disconnected themselves, and those who were disconnected by HMRC; and
- **Demographics** – age, gender and ethnicity.

HMRC provided a sample of customers who called the four helplines in November 2016. Customers were selected using a 'purposive' sampling approach¹, whereby respondents are selected to reflect the key characteristics (quotas) using a screening questionnaire. A table showing the achieved quotas and customer profile is in the appendix.

Discussions were guided by a topic guide along with supporting stimulus materials provided by HMRC². The interviews were structured to understand the customer journey, exploring: background and context; what lead up to the ITA contact; experience during the ITA call; what happened after the call and overall satisfaction and views of ITA messages. Ultimately discussions were a vehicle to understand customers' experiences, views and behavioural responses to ITA messages, including their suggestions on how to improve the service.

It is important to note that qualitative research seeks to provide in depth descriptive and explanatory accounts of what, how and why issues occur. As such, it cannot provide any meaningful statistical or numeric data or offer an indication of prevalence. Findings are reflective of the experiences of a specific subset of customers and not of the views and experiences of all HMRC's customers.

Further, it is worth noting that recall of the overall process and the ITA system itself varied and could be fairly limited regarding the exact ITA messages they heard and the information they gave.

¹ Purposive sampling is an approach used to select respondents for qualitative research. Purposive sampling involves respondents being deliberately selected according to their characteristics to reflect the needs and quotas set for the study. Eligibility is ascertained using a screening document (questionnaire) designed for the purposes of recruitment.

² Which included definitions and examples of ITA messages and an example customer journey.

Customer context

When reporting on customers' experiences of calling the helpline and ITA messages, it is important to consider the context in which this occurs, as this affects how customers interact with the service and their response to it.

Reasons for calling

Customers contacted the helplines for a range of reasons, including to query payments, to seek advice or information, or to gain reassurance that an issue had been resolved (especially when it was initially managed online). There were notable differences regarding reasons for calling by type of helpline, with queries on the PAYE, TC and SA helplines often linked to payments, including queries regarding money owed to HMRC, TC overpayments or tax codes. Customers also called the TC and SA helplines for advice on completing forms and to report a change of circumstance. Reassurance calls were most commonly made by TC and SA customers. Reasons for calling the NI helpline were quite distinct and simple, with customers usually calling to query/confirm when they (or a relative) would receive their NI number, to request their NI number, or request information such as a breakdown of their annual NI contributions.

Generally, customers called for themselves, though there were instances of customers calling on behalf of someone else, such as a spouse or child (and this was particularly the case for those calling the NI helpline).

Customer mind-set

The 'mind-set' of customers at the point of making the call to the helpline is important, as it affects both expectations of the service and how customers interact with it across their journey. The customer mind-set is primarily driven by the reason for calling and how complex, specific, or urgent the customer perceives the query to be. Customers contacting HMRC with queries relating to payments (both from HMRC and from the customer), were most likely to see their query as urgent and want to speak to an adviser.

Customers' mind-sets fell in to four distinct categories, as outlined below:

1. **Panicked/worried:** These customers viewed their call as important and urgent and were often calling regarding debt or payments. They wanted to resolve the issue as quickly as possible and believed speaking to an adviser was the most effective way to do this. These were most likely to be customers calling the PAYE or Tax Credits helplines.
2. **Confused:** These customers believed their issue to be complex and specific, for example, problems with tax codes and filling out forms. They perceived their query as too complex to be resolved by an automated system or online and customers wanted a 'tailored' and 'expert' response and were not open to resolving this by ITA.
3. **Frustrated:** These customers had usually attempted to resolve their query previously either online or via another channel, but got stuck and called the helpline for advice. Examples included not being able to find the information required and experiencing technical glitches, such as being unable to submit forms or set up digital accounts. These customers wanted a quick resolution to their query and did not believe it could be resolved through ITA without receiving tailored guidance. This was most commonly SA customers.
4. **Passive:** These customers perceived their query to be relatively simple and quick to resolve. They were generally not too worried about it and did not see the query as being particularly urgent or important. These customers were most likely to be NI customers and were usually happy for their query to be resolved by ITA where possible.

We will refer back to the customer mind-sets where applicable throughout this report.

Customer expectations

Crucially, once customers had made the decision to call HMRC, their expectation and intention was to speak to an adviser, although they usually anticipated encountering an automated system beforehand. Customers were particularly keen to speak to an adviser if they fell into the 'panicked/worried', 'frustrated' or 'confused' mind-set. That is, where the query was seen as urgent, complex or they had previously attempted to resolve the query online ahead of making the call (but been unsuccessful in doing so).

"I was expecting an automated service. I wasn't expecting to go straight through to speak to somebody on the phone. I was expecting options and then to be able to speak to someone, which is what I got. I thought I'd need to speak to someone because mine wasn't a normal query."

(NI, spoke to an adviser³)

In general, customers wanted to have their query resolved in one phone call. Where this was not possible, customers wanted confirmation of when it would be resolved to manage expectations. They did not anticipate having to call the helpline multiple times, but were prepared to do so where they were determined to speak to an adviser.

Expectations of customer service were high (based on previous experience of calling a HMRC helpline); particularly in relation to the service they would receive from helpline advisers. Even where customers perceived their queries to be relatively complex and specific to their personal circumstances, they believed advisers would be able to answer their query easily and would tell them what they needed to do next, if anything.

Customers' expectation of the length of the call depended on the nature of their query, but customers generally did not expect the call overall or the ITA system itself to take very long. However, those with prior experience of calling HMRC helplines expected to wait a long time in the queue to speak to an adviser.

³ NB Quotation attributes are based on outcome of customer's first call to HMRC regarding the query.

Case Study: wants to speak to an adviser

Actions taken before calling: In November 2016 Sarah received several letters and calls from a debt collections agency stating that she owed money to HMRC via SA. Sarah was told to speak to HMRC directly so called the SA helpline without going online first with the intention of speaking to an adviser. Sarah found the number to ring from the SA forms HMRC had sent.

Actions taken during the call: Sarah first heard a broadcast message and then different options. She was also asked to give a brief reason for the call. Sarah felt that the options were not very clear and she had to listen to them twice to decide which to select. Sarah followed one option, but did not get through to an adviser and was subsequently disconnected.

Actions taken after the call: After being disconnected Sarah rang again immediately and did not choose any of the options selected the first time to try to reach an adviser. Sarah explained that *"all I wanted was to speak to a person"* so she kept trying until she reached one.

"I would have just kept trying, ringing, until I got through. I would have used probably the different routes; I'd have just pressed anything until I got through to a human."

(SA, disconnected)

Experience of ITA

This study explored the journeys customers undertook when calling the helpline and their experiences and views of this. In this section, we provide details of the journeys, including the routes and activities taken by customers leading up to the call, during the call and after the call.

Before the call

Customers often went online to self-serve, for example by searching for the required information on Google or on GOV.UK. Others attempted to self-serve by other methods, such as speaking to their employer before calling one of the helplines. Generally, customers made at least a cursory attempt to go online beforehand, ranging from those who tried to resolve their query online, to those who went online to find the correct helpline number to call. Several customers described making a concerted effort to try and solve their query online, such as reporting a change of circumstances or making a payment, but encountered difficulties doing so, such as not knowing what information to fill in on the forms, experiencing technical problems, or being locked out of online portals. Others had previously tried to resolve their query by other means, such as talking to an employer or friend or watching webinars. Ultimately, when customers' attempts to self-serve proved unsuccessful they called the helpline to resolve their query.

"If I could deal with it on the website I would have done it...because sometimes you can do it online if it's just a case of filling in boxes, but if you need to ask a question and online it doesn't answer it, I tend to go straight for the phone."

(Tax Credits, disconnected)

Case Study: went online beforehand

Actions taken before calling: Helen had just paid tax for an SA return and realised that some of that money was a payment in advance for the following year. As Helen was going on maternity leave and not working, she wanted to find out whether she could get the advance payment element of that money back as a refund. Helen tried to look into this online, but was unsure of the repayment figure she was owed, so called to clarify the situation. She specifically wanted to know the figure to enter online. Helen was not sure what to expect, because she was in a panic at the time and unclear whether or not she was owed a rebate and how to go about claiming it. She did not expect it to take that long to resolve but thought it was quite complicated to talk about.

Actions taken during the call: She called on a mobile on a weekday evening. She found the number to ring online from the HMRC website, where she had gone to try and fill in a form online to apply for the refund. Helen remembers having to use voice recognition to say what the call was about. She found the process of getting through to an adviser quite clear but found it difficult to know how specific to be to get where she wanted to. She remembered being frustrated that advisers were not able to help when she got through and was passed to several advisers before the query was resolved.

Actions taken after the call: Helen was satisfied overall as the query was resolved and she received the refund. Helen took no further action.

In general, the digital medium was not identified as a barrier and customers expressed high confidence in using online services although this did vary from customer to customer. The exception tended to be older or less computer literate customers who preferred to call the helpline first rather than go online. Other reasons given by customers for not going

online either before the call or at any point during their journey included: a lack of skill or confidence, no or limited access to the Internet, or the perceived complexity of the query which meant customers wanted to speak to an adviser to resolve their issue. In addition, customers who had previously experienced difficulties locating information on the GOV.UK website had lost confidence in it as a channel.

Customers who reported high confidence in using online services and who were competent IT users, often tried to resolve their query online before calling. However, in certain circumstances customers called the helpline first rather than attempting to self-serve. In some cases, this was simply due to a preference for speaking to an adviser on the phone. However, more often it was a response to receiving a letter from HMRC or another agency regarding a payment, which resulted in a panicked/worried mind-set and a desire to resolve the query quickly. In these cases, customers (usually TC or PAYE customers) viewed their query as urgent and important and therefore called the helpline first, using the number cited on the letter, rather than going online beforehand.

Case Study: preference for helpline over online service

Actions taken before the call: Jack was made redundant and had not worked for a year. He is capable of using online services but prefers to discuss issues with an adviser either in person or on the telephone. He also does not personally own a smartphone or laptop and does not have access to the Internet so cannot easily access online services; to do this he would have to borrow a relative's laptop. Jack was also concerned about the cost of calling from a mobile. He was calling the PAYE helpline after receiving a letter from HMRC regarding tax he owed and wanted to speak to an adviser to set up a monthly repayment schedule.

Actions taken during the call: Jack was not able to speak to an adviser. He hung up in the queue as felt he was waiting too long and was concerned about costs.

Actions taken after the call: Jack did not believe his query could be resolved online and therefore did not attempt to do so. At the time of the interview the query was unresolved, but he planned to call HMRC again in the future.

"It wasn't something I felt I could do online because there were questions and answers, so I needed to talk to somebody."

(PAYE, disconnected)

During the call

Routes through which customers progressed during their helpline journey tended not to be linear and/or straightforward. Customers' journeys were more complex with customers disconnecting at various points across the journey and often making multiple calls on one issue in order to speak to an adviser. It is also important to note that recall of the overall process and the ITA system itself varied and could be fairly limited. This was most pronounced where customers had made multiple calls and they were unsure of what happened specifically on each of the calls.

Broadcast message

Customers generally recalled hearing an initial automated broadcast message (such as that certain tasks can be done online, and directions to the website) followed by what they described as 'several options'. They also remembered hearing ITA messages asking them to have any relevant information to hand (such as their Unique Taxpayer Reference or Tax Credits

Reference Number) and messages encouraging them to try different methods to resolve their query, (such as referring them online, to the Personal Tax Account (PTA) or to their employer). Customers disconnected at this point if they wanted to check they had all the required information, if they felt that they were being routed to the wrong part of HMRC, if they were unsure whether they were able to call on behalf of somebody else, or if they decided not to continue with the call.

ITA messages

As discussed, customers who took part in the research were generally able to remember why they called the helpline and their overall experience of the call/s, but exact recall of the ITA messages they heard was more limited. Customers described being asked to provide information verbally during the ITA process, including their reason for calling, after which they heard several options to choose from, including 'speak to an adviser' in some cases. They also recalled being asked for their name, NI number and the type of tax customer they were (such as PAYE or SA customer) and their personal identifier information (e.g. Unique Taxpayer Reference, Tax Credits Reference Number).

Customers' perceptions of ITA messages were mixed. Messages encouraging customers to resolve their query using other methods (for example by going online, setting up a PTA or contacting their employer) had limited success in prompting customers to self-serve. Those who did self-serve were receptive to it, had the capability to do so and either had not tried this method beforehand or were given new information allowing them to progress their query.

There was a general frustration when instructed to try things they had already done prior to calling, for example, going online or listening to online webinars. Customers particularly disliked being referred online when they had previously visited the website and been unsuccessful ('frustrated' mind-set); when they felt their query was too complex and specific and required a tailored response ('confused' mind-set); and when they faced practical barriers, such as lower levels of computer literacy or no access to the Internet. Customers also noted hearing 'refer to online' messages multiple times during the call and were negative towards being told the same thing repeatedly.

"I don't understand why they direct you to the website, a lot of people must get quite frustrated with it, especially the elderly. It was frustrating, you're itching to talk to someone and get rid of your problem, but you're still left with your problem and the fact that you're talking to a machine that's not really listening to you...it didn't help me, no."

(PAYE, disconnected)

ITA system

Overall, customers were able to use the ITA system effectively and it was seen as well suited to specific/easily answered queries.

However, there were some issues highlighted by customers.

- **Automated routing:** Customers liked the idea of the ITA system routing them to the correct part of HMRC to answer their query. However, they did not always feel it was that easy to quickly and directly route to where they wanted to be (with the end goal usually being to speak to an adviser).
- **Menu options:** Linked to the above, customers perceived there to be too many menu options and they experienced difficulties knowing how to respond (with questions not always seen as relevant or the ITA system asking for information the customer was unable to provide). This was particularly the case where they lacked knowledge of the tax system, did not have a well-defined query, had multiple queries or where they felt their query was very

specific and the system too general. The questions or information in the messages were perceived to be spoken too quickly – meaning customers could struggle to keep up.

- **Technical:** Customers usually reported being able to use the voice recognition system effectively with no issues. They expressed some preference for verbally stating the information rather than typing it into the handset manually, as this was the easier and quicker option. However, some customers did experience issues with the voice recognition system not understanding answers, causing customers to have to repeat information. This was particularly the case for those with strong or foreign accents and customers could find this frustrating.
- **Information:** Customers often found the information given during the ITA system helpful in enabling them to answer their query. However, customers expressed frustration that they had to repeat information already provided during ITA when they got through to an adviser, and expected a more joined up service. Customers recognised that calling HMRC would involve giving out some personal information; however, there were some security concerns around calling the helpline whilst in a public setting and having to state personal details such as their NI number in public.

Overall, the length of the ITA system was seen as 'reasonable' – although customers wanted the ITA system to be as quick as possible, as they usually wanted to speak to an adviser and it was seen as a gateway to do this. There were instances of customers trying to speed up the ITA process by deliberately choosing options they knew would route them to an adviser. Given the desire to speak to an adviser, customers felt it could be frustrating to listen to long messages providing general information that were not seen as relevant. The length of the ITA system was more frustrating for those who had called more than once, those who had gone online beforehand or those who wanted to be in the queue to speak to an adviser as quickly as possible. It was also felt to be too long for customers who experienced issues with the voice recognition technology as they had to repeat information several times which prolonged the process.

"I was hoping it [the call] would only take five minutes but it ended up taking half an hour. Probably about a quarter to a third was on the automated system...it didn't understand what I was saying."

(SA, spoke to an adviser)

Notwithstanding, the main frustration regarding the length of the call was the waiting time in the queue to speak to an adviser. The length of the whole call described varied from customer to customer - responses ranged from a few minutes (usually where queries were resolved by ITA) to up to an hour in total where customers held on to speak to an adviser.

Disconnection

The study explored the experiences of customers who disconnected themselves during the call and those who were disconnected by HMRC following an ITA 'deflection' message. It is important to note, that while the research sample only included a small number of customers who were disconnected by HMRC, all respondents were asked their views on the principle of disconnection⁴.

Customers disconnected themselves at various points on the call, including after hearing an ITA broadcast message or refer to online message, but usually in the queue to speak to an adviser. Customers tended to disconnect for three main reasons:

⁴ The circumstances in which customers could be disconnected from a call was outlined and ITA message script extracts used to help ground discussions on disconnection by HMRC.

1. **To circumvent the system and get through to an adviser:** There were examples of customers feeling they were not being routed to an adviser quickly enough via the automated system as a result of the questions asked and the information or messages they heard. As such, they disconnected and called back in order to try and route themselves more effectively.

"I had to listen to the options twice to find out which one I wanted. I went through one of the scenarios first (but didn't get through to an adviser) so I had to ring them again. [The first time] it didn't give an option to speak to an operator, to a person, so I had to go back and try again.... all I wanted basically was the option to say I needed to speak to a person."

(SA, disconnected)

2. **Following guidance from ITA:** Following an ITA message encouraging customers to use a different method, they disconnected and attempted to self-serve by following the advice in the message. For example, they checked with their employer or went online to resolve a query. This type of response is discussed further in the following section – actions taken after the call.
3. **Waiting too long in a queue to speak to an adviser/concerned about costs:** Customers either made a conscious decision to 'hang-up' as they felt they had been waiting too long to speak to an adviser, they ran out of time or were interrupted. It is important to note that many customers had a finite amount of time to wait on the phone, for example, calling during their lunch breaks or while they were working. Customer perceptions of 'waiting too long' varied between customers and depended on their personal preference, circumstances and the nature of their query. Perceptions of what was 'too long' to wait in the queue ranged from 15 minutes to an hour depending on the customer.

There are points in the system where customers described being disconnected by HMRC, for example after hearing a 'deflection' message⁵ and whilst in the queue to speak to an adviser. After hearing a 'refer to online' message customers did understand that HMRC wanted them to go online to solve their query and that this is why they had been disconnected. However, not all customers were clear why they had been disconnected, especially if this occurred in the queue to speak to an adviser and for no discernible reason.

"You'll be on hold and all of a sudden it will just cut off and you'll think - I've just wasted all that time and I have to go through all that process again. It makes me angry. I don't have time to sit on the phone and just wait when I've got little ones and school runs and things like that. I do ring back, but I do feel a bit stressed."

(Tax Credits, disconnected)

Customers did not always self-serve if they were disconnected after hearing a message encouraging them to do so, particularly if they had already been online or thought their query could not be resolved via this channel. Where customers experienced disconnection in the queue to speak to an adviser, they were usually unclear why this occurred and were unhappy with this given their desire to speak to an adviser - this was the case even if they managed to self-serve following the disconnection. For example, one customer called up to query why an online NI banking payment was not working and wanted to speak to an adviser, but was disconnected by HMRC after hearing an ITA message. Although the customer

⁵ Deflection messages either provide information to help customers resolve their query directly or they encourage customers to resolve their query using another method, such as online.

successfully self-served and was satisfied overall, they were frustrated at being cut off while waiting in the queue to speak to an adviser.

"You ring to speak to somebody don't you? I wouldn't ring because I wanted something automated, I'd only ring because I needed to speak to somebody, otherwise I'd have done it online."

(NI, disconnected)

In most cases where customers were disconnected by HMRC (either after hearing an ITA message or in the queue), they tended to call the helpline again, either immediately or after a few hours/days and tried to navigate to an adviser to resolve their issue. Overall, customers did not feel their call had been handled when disconnected by HMRC.

In cases where customers had not been disconnected but were asked how they would react if this happened, the usual reaction was to say they would be *"frustrated and annoyed"* at being disconnected, due to the time already spent calling and not being any further along in achieving their desired outcome. However, where the query was deemed less urgent or important ('passive' mind-set), customers were more open to this providing they had been given information to help them resolve their query.

Case Study: channel shift from phone

Actions taken before calling: Mary called the NI helpline on behalf of her sister who had recently turned 16 but had not yet received her NI number. Mary was hoping to either receive the NI number during the call or get confirmation of when she would receive this. Mary expected the call to take a long time – especially the wait to get through to an adviser – but she thought the query would be simple to resolve.

Actions taken during the call: Mary found the number to call easily online and called the helpline on a Wednesday between 10:30-11am. When Mary called up she went through the ITA system and heard a 'refer to online' message and did not speak to an adviser. The call took 20-30 minutes in total. Mary had some issues with the automated system, particularly the accent recognition so she had to repeat herself several times. Mary had to give her reason for calling, her sister's name and her date of birth. The ITA system kept asking for her NI number but she was unable to provide this information as that was the reason for the call. Mary repeatedly said "don't know" and then the system answered her query via ITA and directed her online. Mary was disconnected by HMRC.

Actions taken after the call: Mary was quite angry that she had been cut off as she expected to speak to an adviser. She felt that she had wasted her time as she could have gone online in the first place. Following the call Mary went online straightaway to answer her query as directed by the ITA message. Ultimately Mary felt her query had been answered very successfully and so was satisfied with the call outcome, but not the service received by ITA.

"I wasn't happy...even though the website did answer my query I called up to speak to somebody."

(NI, disconnected)

Actions taken after the call

This section outlines customers' actions following the first call (in what could be a series of calls) to the HMRC helpline, exploring what follow up actions were undertaken if any and the reasons for doing so.

Customers whose queries were resolved by ITA or another method following the initial call and who were satisfied with the response they received during the call took no further action. Where queries were unresolved a range of actions were taken, as outlined below:

- **Took no further action** - Although queries were usually ultimately resolved, there were examples of unresolved queries where customers gave up and took no further action following the call. These tended to be younger people and those who thought their query was not very important or urgent. However, some customers were inclined to give up due to their low level of satisfaction with the service they received. For example, one customer said they called multiple times regarding their tax code but disconnected each time due to the waiting time in the queue, and ultimately decided to give up trying.
- **Self-served by going online or speaking to an employer** - There were instances of customers self-serving following the ITA messages or after disconnecting at other points in the call. This included: going online and carrying out instructions, speaking to their employer or setting up a PTA.

Customers who successfully self-served online included those who requested their NI number online, filled out forms, documented a change of circumstance and made payments. However, other customers were less successful in resolving their query by self-serving despite trying to, and this usually led to them calling the helpline again. For example, one customer heard a message instructing them to set up a PTA, which they attempted to do, but were unable to as they could not find their gateway log in details or follow the instructions successfully.

- **Called back, either immediately or after a few hours/days** – As noted, customers often called back where they were unable to resolve their query during their first call, either straightway or after a short gap. This included those (as noted above) who attempted to self-serve but were unable to. As discussed previously, customers who made multiple calls may go through this process several times to resolve their query and it was usual for customers in our sample to make multiple calls.
- **Tried another method to resolve query** – Some customers tried other methods to resolve their query such as speaking to their employer about their tax codes or seeking advice from friends or colleagues. However, if this proved unsuccessful they were likely to call back again.

Satisfaction with ITA

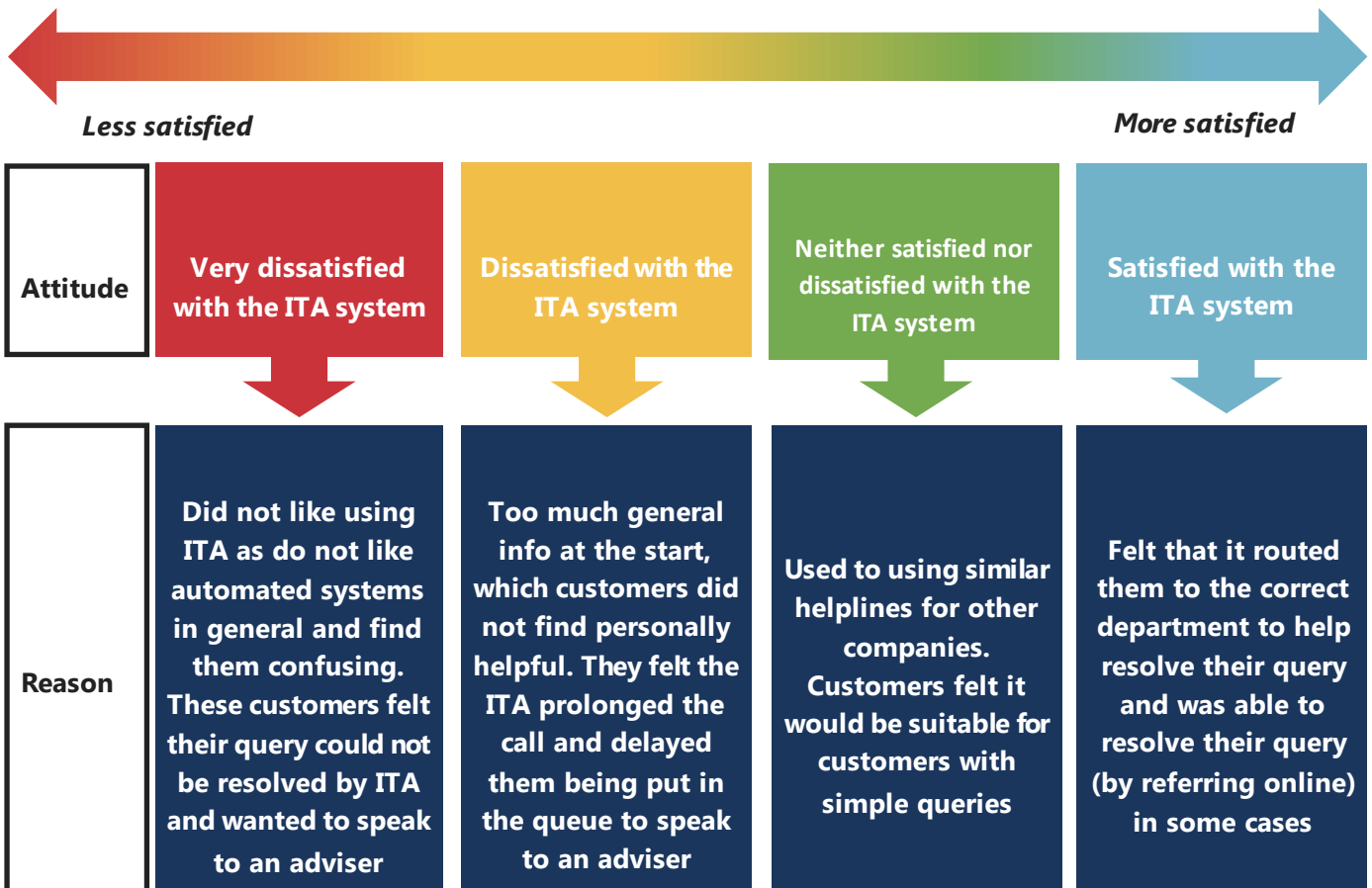
When customers were asked about satisfaction with ITA, they tended to reflect on the entire journey experienced (all aspects of the service) not just on ITA. There were no clear patterns in satisfaction identified by type of helplines, but a number of factors were found to underpin satisfaction including: how far and effectively their query was ultimately resolved; how far the process met their initial expectations; and the length and complexity of journey experienced prior to resolution, such as the number of calls made, time taken and disconnection.

Satisfaction with the ITA system itself varied. Customers broadly fell into four groups, as shown in Figure 1.1 below, with customers situated along a continuum, ranging from those who were very dissatisfied to those who were satisfied with the ITA system.

Customers who were more dissatisfied with the system did not like using automated systems in general, finding them time consuming and were more likely to think their query was unsuited to ITA. These customers also felt there was too much general information at the start of the call, which was not seen as relevant or helpful to their query and was thought to delay them in reaching the queue to speak to an adviser, which was their ultimate goal. Customers who experienced problems with the voice recognition technology whilst using the ITA system were frustrated by this and were more likely to be dissatisfied with ITA as a result – but this was not widespread as previously noted.

Customers who were satisfied with the ITA system tended to be more familiar with automated systems on other helplines and understood the value of these in helping to answer customer queries, particularly for customers who were ringing with simple queries which could be easily answered by the ITA system. These customers also felt the ITA system helped route them to the correct department if they wanted to speak to an adviser.

Figure 1.1: Satisfaction with ITA



Comparison to other helplines

Some customers had used other ITA systems, for example, banks, internet or TV and utility companies. In general, the HMRC automated system compared relatively favourably with other organisations' ITA systems, although there was a range of opinion. Customers felt the HMRC ITA system worked well with customers generally able to get through to an adviser at some point in the call and the automated system was broadly in line with customer expectations. There was also some preference expressed by customers in using voice recognition systems, rather than entering information manually.

HMRC ITA compared less well in terms of the time taken, specifically the wait to speak to an adviser, customers having to repeat information during both the ITA stage and when speaking to an adviser and for not checking customers were satisfied prior to disconnection by HMRC. Some customers also felt the ITA system itself was difficult to navigate.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the objectives of this study, the key findings are:

1. **Some simple queries can be resolved by ITA but satisfaction depends on the nature of the query.** In most cases, customers believe their query requires a tailored response and only feel satisfied once their expectations are met and they have spoken with an adviser.
2. **HMRC cannot assume all customers who disconnect during ITA have had their query resolved.** Generally, customers who disconnect themselves following an ITA message call again immediately - although there is evidence of customers attempting to self-serve and resolving their query without calling. It is clear that customers often attempt to circumvent the system and get through to an adviser, by disconnecting during ITA and calling back in order to try and route themselves more effectively.
3. **Customers often go online prior to making a call to the helpline.** The ITA messages have limited success in encouraging customers to self-serve by another channel; customers go online or carry out instructions as a result of the ITA messages, but many call back again having been unable to resolve their query in this way.

What an ideal service might look like

Below is a summary of what an 'ideal' ITA system might look like based on customers' suggestions:

- **Targeted or simple queries:** The suitability of ITA depends on the nature of their query – customers who consider their queries to be simple or unimportant or those seeking reassurance are more open to ITA, whereas customers who are 'panicked' or 'frustrated' and see their query as urgent are less open.
- **Short and easy to use:** The ITA will be quick (no longer than 5 minutes ideally) and will be easy to use - with voice technology suitable for all and the option to input information if issues occur.
- **Clear options including 'other' option:** The ITA information options should be very clear and route customers towards a tailored response. It needs to be able to support those who are unsure or unclear how to answer to prevent disconnection and multiple calls.
- **More specific instructions when directed online:** The ITA messages should offer sufficient information to enable customers to self-serve effectively where applicable, for example by providing specific instructions on where to go online, how to set up a PTA, guidance on what to ask their employer and potentially offer options for support on how to carry out the instructions given. This is especially important for those who have already attempted to self serve, but have been unable to do so.
- **No unexpected disconnection:** Customers would ideally be warned before a disconnection occurred and have the chance to confirm their query had been resolved satisfactorily beforehand.
- **No repetition of information:** Where customers need to be referred to an adviser, any information provided during ITA would be passed on. Messages referring customers to self-serve, should only be played to each customer once during the call.

Appendix

Appendix A

Table 1.1: Customer profile

Sample profile		Achieved
Customer helpline	Income tax (PAYE) customers	12
	NI customers	11
	Tax Credit customers	10
	Self-Assessment (SA) customers	12
Message Type	Refer to online services	20
	Deflect and disconnect	3
	Instruction to act	17
	Information giving	5
Call outcome on first call	Spoke to an adviser	26
	Disconnected themselves	13
	Disconnected by HMRC	6

Lucy Joyce

Research Director

Lucy.Joyce@ipsos.com

Kelly Finnerty

Senior Research Executive

Kelly.Finnerty@ipsos.com

For more information

3 Thomas More Square

London

E1W 1YW

t: +44 (0)20 3059 5000

www.ipsos-mori.com

<http://twitter.com/IpsosMORI>

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