

# Service Canada Call Centre Report Card

CFIB EVALUATES SERVICE CANADA'S SERVICE TO SMALL BUSINESS

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**CFIB**

CANADIAN FEDERATION  
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# **Service Canada Call Centre Report Card**

CFIB Evaluates Service Canada's Service to Small Business

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## Executive summary

Service Canada provides a wide range of programs and services that many small business owners use on a day-to-day basis. The Service Canada call centres (1 800 O-Canada and the Employer Contact Centre) act as a single point of access to information on government services and benefits. It is therefore important that the call centres provide a high level of customer service to help small business owners use the programs and services correctly. This report provides a glimpse into the level of service many small business owners experience when calling the Service Canada call centres. Overall, CFIB assigns the Service Canada call centres **a grade of B-**. Although the call centres' agents demonstrated a high level of professionalism, the accuracy of information and agent accountability were found to be areas in need of improvement.

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## Introduction

The Service Canada call centres are some of the most accessible methods in which small- and medium-sized business owners can receive answers to their questions in regards to programs such as Employment Insurance (EI), Records of Employment (ROEs) and Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA's). Business owners must be able to rely on receiving the correct information from Service Canada in order to make important decisions. If business owners are not provided with the proper information, it can result in a loss of productivity and money. Therefore, it is imperative that small business owners are able to speak to Service Canada agents in a timely manner and that they are able to get the correct information without having to call multiple times and to multiple departments. CFIB research has repeatedly found that good customer service can help alleviate some of the red tape burden on small business owners.

The purpose of this report is to gauge the level of service that Service Canada provides to business owners through its call centres, 1 800 O-Canada and the Employer Contact Centre. While we acknowledge that there exist specialty lines that Canadians can call if they have detailed questions, including the line designated for employers, 1 800 O-Canada is the most widely known line and the first place small business owners will contact for general information and guidance on how to access the different programs and services. Therefore, it is important to measure the ability of Service Canada agents to properly respond to small business inquiries.

This is the first edition of the Service Canada Report Card. This report card follows the same methodology and process of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) Call Centre Report Cards written by CFIB in 2010, 2012 and 2016.

Overall, CFIB finds that the Service Canada Call Centre agents exhibit a high level of professionalism but there are several areas in need of improvement, such as the accuracy of information provided by agents as well as agent accountability.

## The Report Card

From May to July of 2018, CFIB made 205 calls to the Service Canada Call Centre (1 800 O-Canada) and Employer Contact Centre (1-800-367-5693) to determine the level of service and the accuracy of responses provided by Service Canada agents.

Issue	Test Results	Grade
<b><i>Connecting to an Agent</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>97% of calls to both lines made were able to connect to an agent</li> <li>98% of calls made to the 1 800 O-Canada line were able to connect to an agent</li> <li>92% of calls made the Employer Contact Centre were able to connect to an agent</li> </ul>	<b>B+</b>
<b><i>Wait Time</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The overall average hold for both lines was 2 minutes</li> <li>The average hold for the 1 800 O-Canada line was less than 1 minute, and the longest was 15 minutes</li> <li>The longest wait for the Employer Contact Centre was 24 minutes, and the average wait was 5 minutes</li> </ul>	<b>B+</b>
<b><i>Accuracy of Information</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Of the calls made to both lines, 34% were complete, 17% were incomplete, 7% were incorrect and 41% were referred elsewhere, of which 7% were referred incorrectly</li> <li>31% of calls made to the 1 800 O-Canada line were either incomplete (18%), incorrect (4%) or referred to the wrong department (9%)</li> <li>32% of calls made to the Employer Contact Centre were either incorrect (17%) or incomplete (15%)</li> </ul>	<b>C-</b>
<b><i>Accountability</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agents only provided their first names</li> <li>14% of agents did not say their name or spoke too fast</li> </ul>	<b>C</b>
<b><i>Agent Professionalism</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>76% of all calls were rated as "good"</li> <li>17% were rated as "acceptable"</li> <li>6% were rated as "poor"</li> </ul>	<b>B+</b>
<b>OVERALL GRADE</b>		<b>B-</b>

## Detailed Results

Overall, CFIB has assigned Service Canada's call centres a **grade of B-**. The call centres' agents exhibit a high level of professionalism but the call centres have several areas in need of improvement, such as the accuracy of information provided as well as accountability.

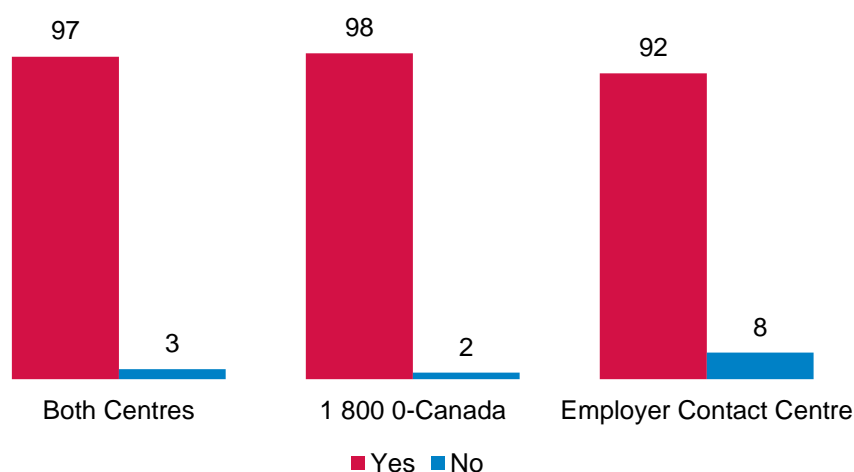
### Connecting to an Agent

Out of 205 attempts to reach 1 800 O-Canada and the Employer Contact Centre, three per cent of the calls were unable to connect to an agent.

When broken-down between both lines, 98% of the calls made to 1 800 O-Canada were able to connect through to the call centre, but 8% of calls made to the Employer Contact Centre were not able to get through and had to be abandoned (Figure 1). Therefore, it is easier for callers to connect to an agent at 1 800 O-Canada than the Employer Contact Centre.

Figure 1

**Ability to enter the call centre prompt system (% of calls)**

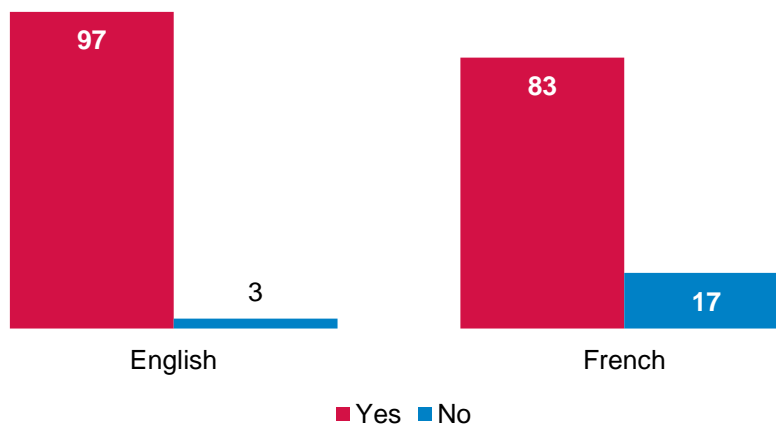


Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=205

The general line has one queue for French and English callers, as all agents are bilingual. However, the Employer Contact Centre has separate queues for each language. When a breakdown of the Employer line was done by language, results show that a caller is more likely to reach an agent on the English line than the French line; 97% of calls to the English line were successful compared to 83% of calls made to the French line (Figure 2).

“Easier access to information and assistance. It shouldn't be necessary for an employer to phone for days on end and spend hours on hold (if they get through at all) before they can speak to a person.”  
**Manufacturing Business Owner, B.C**

Figure 2

**Ability to enter the call centre prompt system by language (% of calls to the Employer Contact Centre)**

Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=52 (calls made to the Employer Contact Centre)

**Wait Time**

The Service Canada delivery standard for 1 800 O-Canada is to answer calls within 18 seconds (or within three rings), 80% of the time, and almost all calls met this standard. However, there were cases where some callers waited as long as 15 minutes to connect to an agent on the 1 800 O-Canada line.

**"I've called the [call centre] office many times and have not been often successful in getting to speak with anyone. I'd revamp the call line."**

**Retail Business Owner, Yukon**

The Employer Contact Centre delivery standard is to answer 80% of calls within ten minutes. The average wait time for the call centre was five minutes and the longest was 24 minutes. While the Employer Contact Centre does meet the delivery standard, the standard itself should be higher. Small business owners are busy running their business and do not often have the time to wait on hold for an extended period of time to have their questions answered.

**Accuracy of Information**

Callers were asked to categorize the answers given by agents into five categories: complete, incomplete (only a portion of the question was answered), incorrect, referred to the correct department (given the contact information for a call centre within Employment and Social Development Canada) or referred to an incorrect department.

Out of 198 calls that made it through to the call centres, only 34% of the answers were marked as complete, 17% of calls were incomplete, 7% were incorrect and 41% of the calls were referred to another department (Figure 3). Further to this, 1% of callers did not receive any answer to

their inquiry or their call was disconnected once they entered the call prompt system (due to a busy signal or the call dropping).

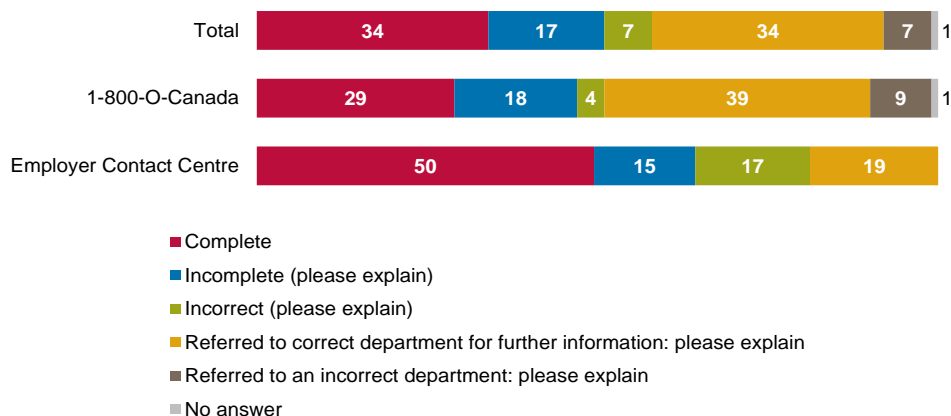
A total of 32% of calls to the 1 800 O-Canada line were either incomplete, incorrect, referred to an incorrect department, or callers were unable to get through to an agent. When calling 1-800-O-Canada, it is more likely that the caller would be provided the contact information to another department than to have their question answered. Of the calls made, 39% of inquiries to 1 800 O-Canada were provided with the contact information to the right department for further information (Figure 3).

All scenarios used were related to programs and services provided by Service Canada. As such, when calling 1 800 O-Canada, if a caller is referred elsewhere it should be towards one of the other lines that fall within Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) such as the Employer Contact Centre. However, 9% of inquiries were incorrectly referred; the callers in these circumstances were told to contact other departments such as Statistics Canada, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Commissioner for Employers and the Commissioner for Workers.

For the Employer Contact Centre, 50% of calls resulted in complete answers (Figure 3). While the percentage of complete answers is much higher for the Employer Contact Centre, the number of incorrect calls was also higher at 17%. This is especially concerning as the Employer Contact Centre is set up to provide more in-depth information for business owners.

Figure 3

**Was the answer provided complete, incomplete, correct, referred to the right department for further information or referred to an incorrect department? (% of calls)**



Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=198

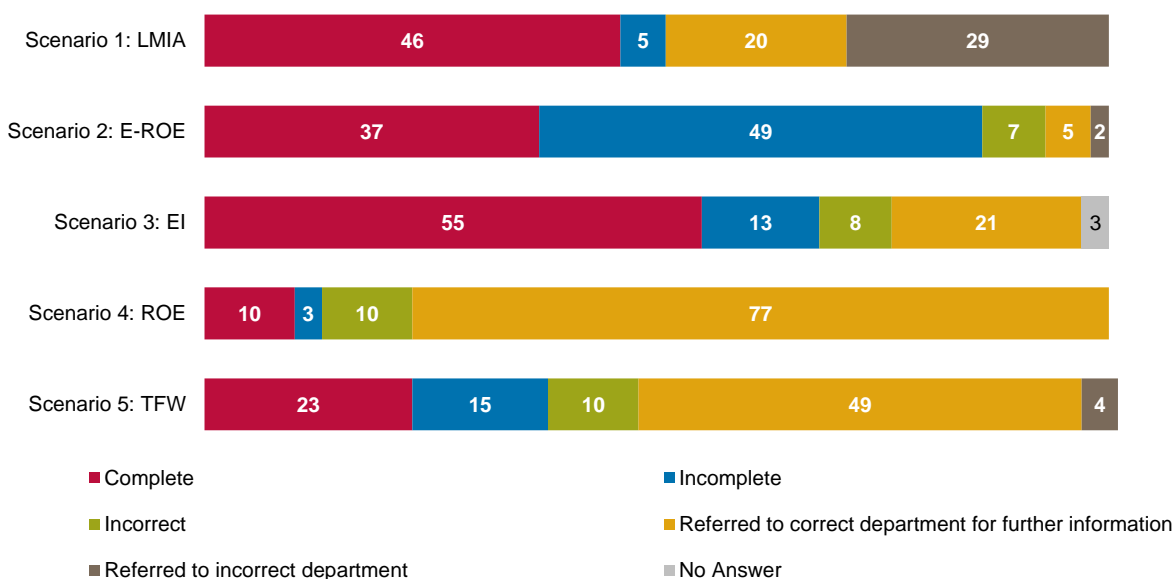
Notes: No answer refers to calls which were abandoned

In figure 4, the answers provided are broken down by scenario. Almost all scenarios have a high referral rate, which could be lowered given the right training. Agents should be trained to have the capacity to answer questions as long as the questions do not require detailed answers or to be guided through a process step-by-step.



Figure 4

**Was the answer provided complete, incomplete, correct, referred to the right department for further information or referred to an incorrect department? By scenario (% of all calls)**



Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=198

Notes: No answer refers to calls which were abandoned

In figure 5, the answer provided is broken down by the line and then by scenario. The Employer Contact Centre surpasses 1 800 O-Canada in every scenario except scenario 3, which is about Employment Insurance (EI). Agents at the Employer Contact Centre are not trained to answer questions dealing with EI, whereas 1 800 O-Canada performs the best in scenario 3, likely because the agents have been trained to answer questions on EI. If the agents at 1 800 O-Canada were trained to handle simpler business-oriented questions the same way they are trained to answer simple EI questions, this would drastically reduce the referral rate.

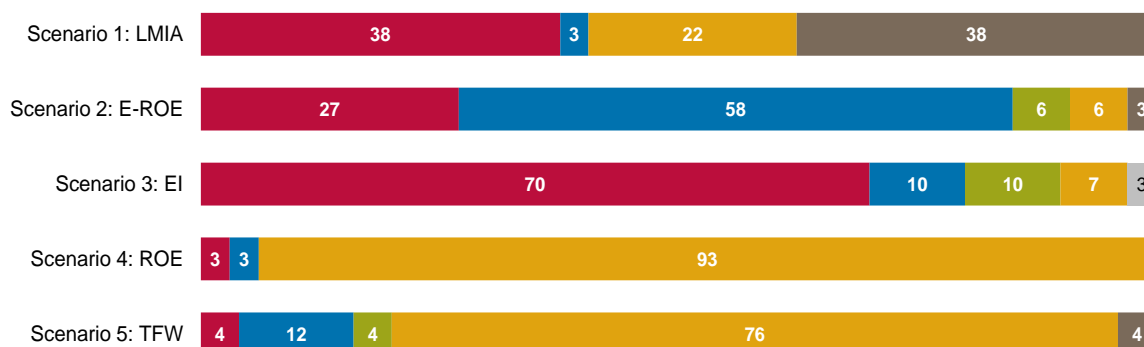
For a small business owner with limited time, it can often be frustrating having to call several departments and spend more time on hold before getting the right answer, rather than being transferred directly to the right person. As such, ideally, CFIB would like to have seen more of the simpler scenarios answered correctly by 1 800 O-Canada agents instead of being referred elsewhere. Implementing a phone system that allows agents to directly transfer a call to another department would also help cut down the time a business owner spends on hold.

Additionally, as information provided on the website can be difficult to find and is often hard to understand, or may be out of date, it is essential that frontline call centre staff, particularly those in the Employer Contact Centre, are able to help business owners navigate more complex issues as well.

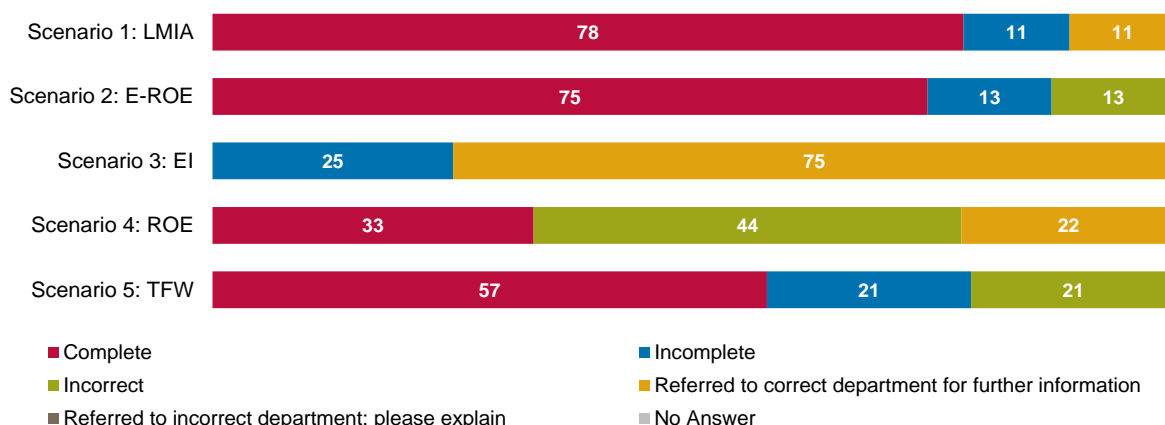
Figure 5

**Was the answer provided complete, incomplete, correct, referred to the right department for further information or referred to an incorrect department? By line and scenario (% of all calls)**

#### 1 800 O-Canada



#### Employer Contact Centre



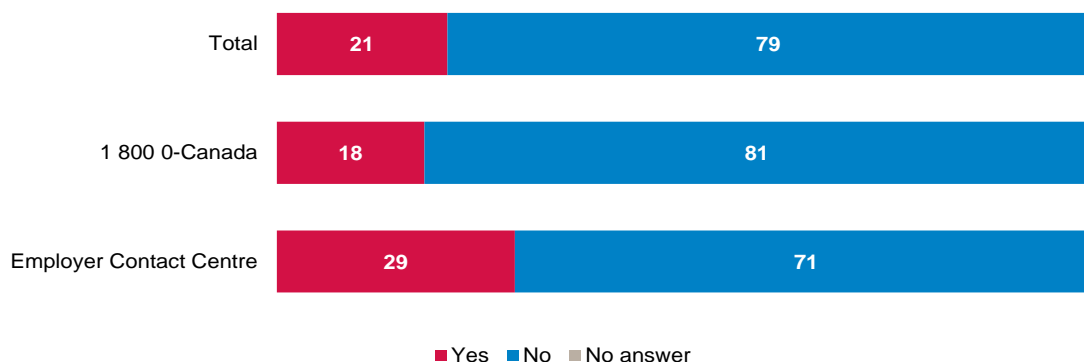
Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=198

Notes: No answer refers to calls which were abandoned

An additional component to the grade on the accuracy of information was whether callers had to prompt agents for web links. Providing web links to callers is essential to providing quality service, as it allows the callers to verify any information they are given and can be a resource that they know about for the future. Ideally, callers should not have to prompt agents to provide a web link. Agents should be directing callers while on the phone to the website that contains the information they are looking for.

Largely, CFIB callers did not have to prompt agents to provide a web link (see Figure 6). Although 81% of callers to 1 800 O-Canada did not have to ask for a link, more often than not, agents only provided general web links. The web links provided often did not directly lead CFIB callers towards the answer to their question(s) and, as agents only send links after the call is ended, there is no way to make sure that it is the right information until after the call is completed.

Figure 6

**Did you have to prompt the agent to provide a web link? (% of calls)**

Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=198

Notes: No answer refers to calls which were abandoned

The government of Canada websites can be difficult for small business owners to navigate to quickly find information. In a survey of our members, over a quarter said that the readability and simplicity of information provided by Service Canada were either poor or very poor.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important that call centre agents provide links with as much specific information as possible so that the small business owner is confident they have the right answers to their questions and do not end up frustrated as they search through a generic site before finding what they need.

### Accountability Agent

It is our understanding that Service Canada agents are each assigned a unique ID number that they are only required to provide when specifically asked by a caller. However, as this practice is not clearly indicated on the website, most business owners would be unaware that they are able to ask for an agent's ID number.

When answering calls, the majority of agents did provide their first name, but 14% spoke too fast or did not provide one at all. Unlike the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), the agents at 1 800 O-Canada and the Employer Contact Centre are not required to automatically provide their ID numbers when answering a call. As most small business owners would not know they can ask for an ID number, if agents do not provide the right information or refer callers to the wrong place, it is more difficult for business owners to identify call centre agents should they need to follow up or would like to lodge a complaint. This makes it more difficult for Service Canada to address issues with its employees.

<sup>1</sup> CFIB, *Insuring Employment: SME Perspectives on the Employment Insurance System*, September 2016.

## Professionalism

The breakdown of calls that were able to connect to an agent shows that 76% were rated “good,” 17% were rated as “acceptable,” and 6% were rated “poor” (Figure 7). CFIB callers noted that agents were kind, friendly and answered the calls professionally. Small business owners find that speaking with agents who provide good and friendly customer service can help alleviate their red tape burden. However, this is only part of the equation for providing good customer service. Despite the friendly demeanour, it is essential that callers are also able to receive complete answers to their questions. Even though 34% of all calls were referred to the right department, being referred without being transferred can be frustrating for business owners especially when the question isn't very complex.

Figure 7

**How would you rate the level of professionalism of the agent? (% of calls)**



Source: CFIB, *Service Canada Mystery Shopper Survey*, 2018, n=198

Notes: No answer refers to calls which were abandoned

## Conclusion

Service Canada Call centre agents demonstrate a high level of professionalism when responding to callers. Unfortunately, both the Employer Contact Centre and 1 800 O-Canada underperform when it comes to the accuracy of information they provided and could do more to hold agents accountable for the information they provide to callers.

As the first line of communication for many small business owners, 1 800 O-Canada agents are an important gateway in navigating government services and helping small businesses to comply with government rules.

“The O-Canada number primarily directs you as to where to call and they will send you a link to a specific department to call... i.e. CPP, OAS. When you call that number, you can wait hours to get through to someone.”

**Tax and Accounting Professional, BC**

Although the mandate of the line is to provide general information, many call centre agents had difficulties providing information even for the simpler scenarios. The Employer Contact Centre performed better in answering employer questions; however, it can be more difficult and takes longer to connect to an agent on that line. Further to this, the Employer Contact Centre is less visible than the general line, and as a result, many small business owners may not even know it exists.

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## Recommendations

In some aspects, the Service Canada call centres (1 800 O-Canada and the Employer Contact Centre) perform very well; however, there are areas that could still be improved. As such, CFIB is making the following recommendations:

### 1. Improve staff training

- Ensure consistency in call centre agent training so that business owners will receive the same answers regardless of which agent they speak with.
- Increase agent's familiarity with Service Canada services and the website. With more familiarity, agents would be able to better direct callers to a specific location where information can be found.
- Ensure that call centre's agents are quickly made aware of any changes in policies or practices and that they are adequately trained to answer questions on those changes.
- 1 800 O-Canada agents should be trained to answer more basic employer questions to help lessen the burden on the Employer Contact Centre. The Employer Contact Centre is consistently experiencing higher call volumes.

### 2. Improve accessibility to Service Canada information

- Increase the delivery standard for the Employer Contact Centre from 80% to 90%, and reduce the target for time it takes to answer a call from ten minutes to five minutes. This would ensure that small business owners do not face long wait times to talk to agents.
- Agents should direct callers to the webpage where information can be found during the call rather than sending it only after the call is completed. This would ensure that callers understand the agent's response and that the information they have been referred to addresses the caller's question.
- Create more awareness of specialty lines like the Employer Contact Centre and the Employment Insurance line so that business owners know where to call with specific or technical questions

- Ensure that websites are up-to-date on current practices. For example, the section on the website which explains to business owners how to fill in Block 15C of an ROE was no longer up to date during the period of this study, though it has now been updated.

### **3. Improve agent accountability**

- Implement a mandatory ID system similar to CRA's system, to ensure that call centre agents are accountable for the answers and service they provide. This would involve requiring each agent to automatically provide their ID numbers to callers and ensuring that small business owners are aware of ID numbers. This would allow callers to more easily identify who provided them with the information and could assist Service Canada in assessing their individual agents.

### **4. Better utilization of technology**

- Develop a more user-friendly website that allows business owners to easily and quickly find answers, and ensures the information on the website is kept up-to-date.
  - Create the ability for business owners to leave their phone numbers next to the section they have questions about on the webpage so that an agent who is prepared to answer can call back.
  - Create an email address where business owners can send their questions. Currently, there is no option to contact Service Canada by email.
- Create the ability for an agent to directly transfer a call to another department so that business owners can more quickly be in contact with the correct resource instead of having to hang up and dial another number.
- Create a function on my Service Canada Account (MSCA) which allows business owners to send questions electronically through their online account and receive an answer electronically through the same system, similar to CRA's My Business Account. This would help to lower the number of calls received by the call centres and provide the business owner with a written response.

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## **Methodology**

CFIB callers were asked to evaluate and rate the level of service of the Service Canada call centres based on the following criteria: connecting to an agent, wait time, the accuracy of information, accountability and agent professionalism.

Test calls were made from May to July of 2018 and 205 calls were logged. Of the calls made, 28% were made in French and 25% were made to the Employer Contact Centre. Callers were given five scenarios which each had one to two questions. The scenarios used were chosen based on questions CFIB members ask our business counsellors. The questions range in

difficulty in order to get a complete view of the ability of Service Canada agents to provide information. The scenarios used are outlined below:

**SCENARIO #1:** Unemployment rate by economic region for a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) application

- *Can you tell me where I can find the unemployment rate for my region for the LMIA application?*

**SCENARIO #2:** Electronic Record of Employment (ROE)

- *Can I complete and submit an ROE electronically to Service Canada?*
- *Do I need to provide a paper copy to my employee?*

**SCENARIO #3:** Employment Insurance Benefits for an employee

- *Can you confirm that my employee will qualify for EI, while on temporary "lay-off" for shortage of work until he returns back to work next summer?*
- *How long does it take for my employees to receive their EI benefits, while on temporary "lay-off" for shortage of work?*

**SCENARIO #4:** Record of Employment (Insurable hours and earnings)

- *What is the proper way to complete Block 15C (Insurable hours and earnings)?*

**SCENARIO #5:** Temporary Foreign Worker employment contracts

- *I'm calling on behalf of a client who currently employs a temporary foreign worker and would like to give them a raise, as they have taken on more responsibilities. Can she just go ahead and change his employment contract, and how can she go about doing this?*

CFIB callers were asked to record:

- Whether they could get through to the call centre system;
- The number of minutes they spent waiting on hold;
- The agent's name and location;
- The accuracy of the answer provided by the agent, if they were given a link with supporting information, and if they got referred to call a different phone number;
- The level of professionalism of the agent (assigning a grade of "good" "acceptable" or "poor," at their discretion); and,
- If they encountered any difficulty understanding the agent's explanation.

In the data collection phase, there were circumstances in which calls were abandoned but were still included in the data set. This scenario happened in three circumstances: (1) if the caller was placed on hold, they would wait no longer than 30 minutes before hanging up (2) if the caller placed a call and was cut off while on hold, or (3) if the caller reached a busy signal, they were instructed to call back two more times within 30 minutes before abandoning the call.

To ensure that our calls did not come from the same source, we tasked **11** CFIB employees from **six** provinces to participate. The full list of calls by province is listed below:

Province	Number	Percentage (%)
<i>British Columbia</i>	10	5
<i>Alberta</i>	12	6
<i>Manitoba</i>	13	6
<i>Ontario</i>	153	75
<i>Québec</i>	10	5
<i>Prince Edward Island</i>	7	3



