



Making it **COMPLEX**

A SNAPSHOT OF GOVERNMENT
CUSTOMER SERVICE in Atlantic Canada



**CANADIAN FEDERATION
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Making it Complex

A snapshot of government customer service in Atlantic Canada

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With today's connectivity, customers are becoming much more proactive. They can do their own research, they are more in control of their own customer journey, and they are able to get results almost instantaneously. This is the standard people are coming to expect in their interactions in the private sector.

Unfortunately, governments have been slow to adopt the same customer service practices. With government holding a monopoly on their services, this can lead to frustration for individuals and business owners.

Introduction

“Complexity is the enemy of execution.”

– Tony Robbins¹

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) face a large burden when dealing with excessive government rules and regulations. These regulations are significantly more costly and more time consuming to SMEs than to large businesses. Poor customer service adds to the red tape, making it harder to find, understand, and comply with regulations.

In order to support SMEs and reduce red tape, good customer service must be practiced by government. In this research brief's companion report *Make it Easy – Improving government customer service for small business in Atlantic Canada*, CFIB outlined the four principles government could use to improve business facing services. By documenting experiences interacting with government departments using a “secret shopper” technique, this report identifies strengths and weaknesses of several departments in each province and points to measures to improve the relationship between government and small businesses.

Methodology

CFIB's Government Customer Service Snapshot was created to provide a comparative analysis of the customer service delivered by each of the four Atlantic governments to SMEs using five website and phone scenarios. The provinces scoring best on the website metrics are those where the information is easy to find, easy to understand, accurate, and the department is accountable for the information provided. The provinces who score best on phone metrics are those which provide correct numbers, offer clear and accurate information and are accountable for the information they share.

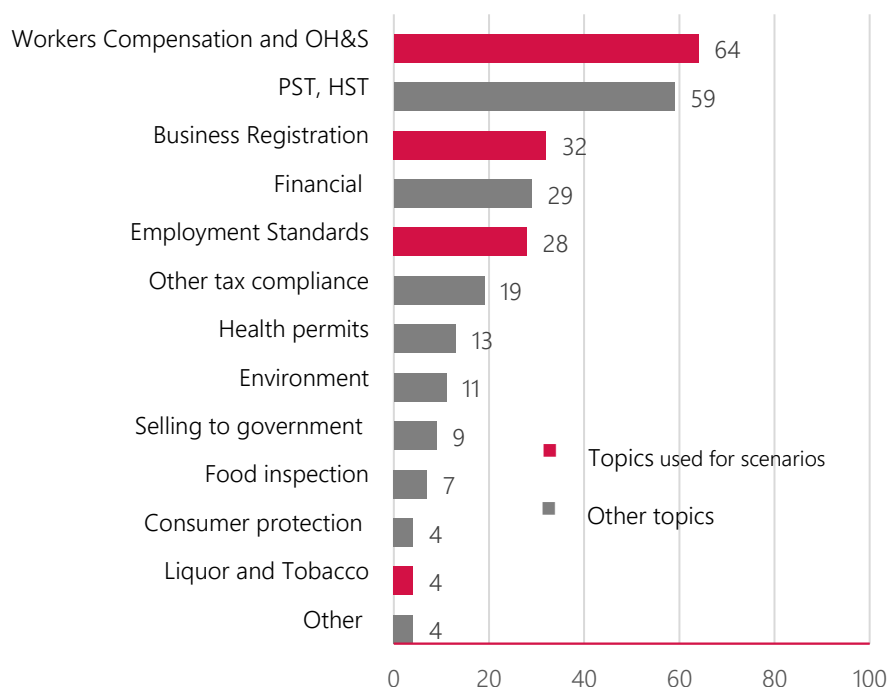
¹ Entrepreneur, best-selling author, philanthropist, and the world's #1 life and business strategist.
<https://www.tonyrobbins.com/biography/>

For each scenario, the secret shopper began at the provincial government’s website to find information on the specific issue and evaluated how the information was presented. Then, the secret shopper posed as a small business owner and called to ask a question to each selected department of each province.

Scenarios evaluate the departments on how they deliver the information both via website and on the phone without comparing one medium versus the other. The scenarios were selected to represent common concerns of small business owners in Atlantic Canada as shown by the 2017 CFIB *Regulation and Paperburden Survey*² (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Which provincial government regulations are most burdensome to your business in terms of time and money spent on compliance? (% responses)



To assess government customer service, the CFIB used the five scenarios and tested four different departments in each province (see Appendix D for the list of departments). The scenarios selected for this report evaluate the answers to the following questions:

- 1) “My employee hurt her back yesterday at work, do I need to report it?”
- 2) “What are all of the forms I need to comply with Occupational Health and Safety standards?”
- 3) “How do I pay an employee who is working on Canada Day?”
- 4) “How do I register my business?”
- 5) “How do I apply for a liquor license?”

² CFIB, *Regulation and Paperburden Survey*, 2017, n = 676 (only responses from Atlantic Canada)

Both the web and phone components were tested with their own sets of metrics to reflect the four pillars of client centered government as defined in *Make it Easy*: findability, accuracy, clarity, and accountability³ (see Figure 2).

Figure 2⁴

Web Metrics

Findability	Accuracy	Clarity	Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of clicks from home page to find correct page • Search position from government site • Search position from Google • Were contact numbers and emails provided? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link or reference to legislature or regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the Flesch Kincaid Reading ease?⁵ • Is there a FAQ section or example of compliance? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions/ concerns link or contact info "was this information helpful?"

Figure 3⁶

Phone Metrics

Findability	Accuracy	Clarity	Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the numbers provided on the website work? • Number of interactions (transfers, calls, voicemails, return calls) required • On hold • Was a voicemail left? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the agent ask the appropriate questions to ensure their understanding of the scenario? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the agent ask the caller if they understood the explanation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the employee provide their name?

³ CFIB, *Make it Easy*, 2019

⁴ The web data was collected from May 21st to May 31st, 2019.

⁵ The Flesch Kincaid reading ease is calculated at <https://www.webfx.com/tools/read-able/>

⁶ The phone data was collected from June 3rd to July 19th, 2019 and most calls were completed between 9:00am and 12:00pm AST.

Findings

Web Scores

Scores were based on these variables and questions:

The number of clicks required to get sufficient information, was a contact number or contact email provided, search position on government site, search position on Google, a link or reference to relevant legislation, the Flesch Kincaid reading ease score, example of compliance and/or and FAQ or "Was this helpful" at the end.

In most cases, the websites provided contact information for follow up questions and reference to applicable legislation. The metrics with the most variance in scores are the Flesch Kincaid reading ease and the search positions on the government site and Google. Provinces with higher Flesch Kincaid reading ease and top results from searches are more likely to have a better overall final score.

Low Flesch Kincaid scores mean the information is difficult to understand similarly to what is found in legislative writing. Complex language and lack of examples of compliance often lead to information being misunderstood.

Hard-to-find information using the government web search function can typically be found on affiliate government sites, for example Workers Compensation Board or liquor commission's websites.

Nova Scotia and PEI scored highest on both sets of metrics relative to the other provinces. This was because the information was relatively easier to find using both shortcuts and search functions on websites and because their departments had better reading ease scores. Nova Scotia has a feature on some pages that allows readers to immediately provide feedback found under a "was this helpful?" heading. New Brunswick has the most inclusions of a Frequently Asked Questions section on their webpages; however examples of compliance were not commonly found on any of the provincial websites.

Table 17

Web Scores

	<i>Workers Compensation</i>	<i>OH&S</i>	<i>Holiday Pay</i>	<i>Business Registration</i>	<i>Liquor License</i>
PE	5.1	6.7	8.4	4.9	5.9
NB	6.1	2.7	5.1	6.6	5.0
NS	6.1	5.6	8.5	6.1	6.0
NL	3.8	3.1	4.3	4.5	6.1

⁷ In Table 1, the blue cells contain the highest scores and the red scores contain the lowest scores for each scenario

Phone Scores

Scores were based on these variables and questions:

Did the number(s) provided on the website work, what was the number of interactions, was the call put on hold, did the caller have to leave a voicemail, did the agent ensure they understood the issue, did the agent ask if the caller understood the response and did the government employee offer their name.

Newfoundland and Labrador is the only province to receive a score of 10. This score is assigned to the *business registration scenario*. This score is given because the phone number listed is correct, only one call was required for resolution and the agent asked the correct follow up questions, ensured the caller understood, and provided her name.

The two lowest scores are also assigned to Newfoundland and Labrador in the *OH&S scenario* and the *holiday pay scenario*. These scores are due to the high number of interactions required before the correct information was found. An interaction is defined as a call being picked up, a call being sent to voicemail, being transferred, or having a voicemail returned. For the *holiday pay scenario* in NL, the answer to the scenario's question was found after nine interactions taking place over three weeks; while the *OH&S scenario* was still not resolved after four weeks and eleven interactions.

“The biggest barrier our company finds when dealing with government is their lack of urgency. It generally becomes very frustrating when issues take weeks, months, or even longer to get resolved.”

— Business Owner, Newfoundland and Labrador

Most agents asked if the caller understood at the end of a call, but there were many agents who didn't ask all the appropriate questions to ensure their own understanding of the question asked by the “mystery shopper” posing as a business owner. For example, in the *Workers Compensation scenario* where an injury occurred in the workplace, in New Brunswick, the agent answering the scenario in French, and the agent in NL were the only agents to ask if the injured worker went to the hospital.

There were also cases where the agent was not familiar with their department's website, particularly in the *Workers Compensation* and *OH&S scenarios*. For example, Nova Scotia has a checklist for small businesses to comply with OH&S regulations on its website, but the agent was not aware of this checklist.

“Government employees should be better trained. I sometimes have to talk with 5 people to get an answer to my clients' questions.”

—Business Owner, Nova Scotia

“[Governments could improve customer service by] setting performance expectations and holding people accountable.”

—Business Owner, Prince Edward Island

Table 2⁸

Phone Scores

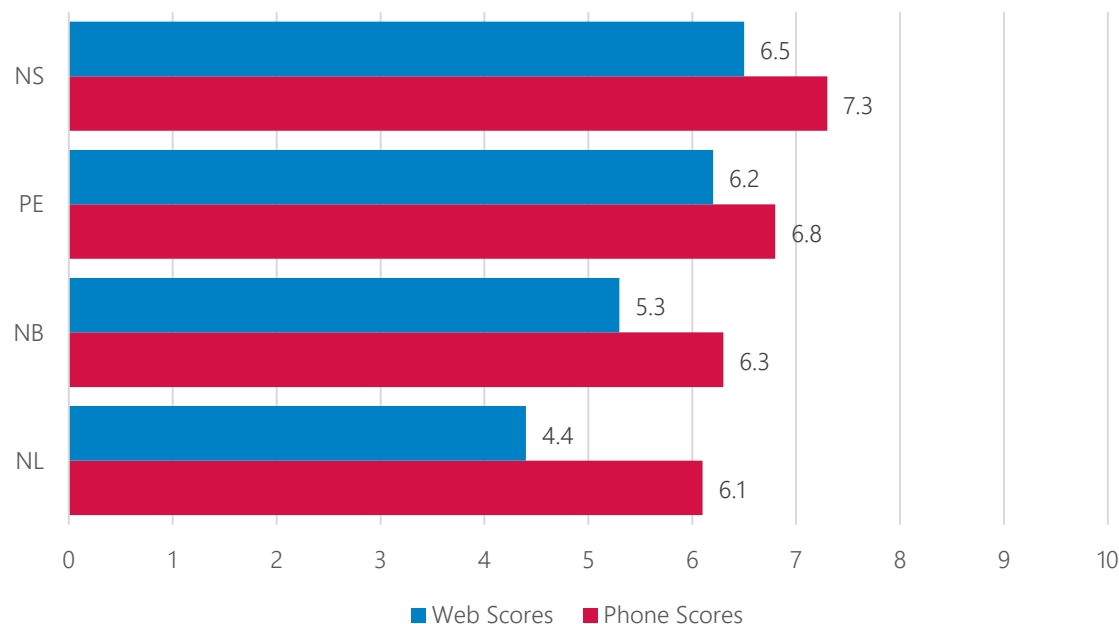
	<i>Workers Compensation</i>	<i>OH&S</i>	<i>Holiday Pay</i>	<i>Business Registration</i>	<i>Liquor License</i>
PE	7.1	5.6	7.1	5.7	8.6
NB	5.7	6.3	6.9	6.7	5.7
NS	8.6	7.0	5.7	8.1	7.1
NL	8.6	1.4	3.6	10.0	6.7

Overall Scores

Overall, in both the web and phone tests, the best scoring province was Nova Scotia. Its websites has good reading ease scores relative to the other three provinces. In the phone category, Nova Scotia consistently had fewer interactions required for the resolution of an issue and typically the caller was not placed on hold or required to leave a voicemail. Being able to resolve an issue on the first interaction is something all governmental departments should be striving for.

Figure 4⁹

Overall Phone and Web Scores by Province



⁸ In Table 2, the blue cells contain the highest scores and the red scores contain the lowest scores for each scenario.

⁹ The scores in Figure 4 are found by taking the average of each province's final scores for both web and phone.

Recommendations

In order to become a client-centered government based on the four pillars recommended in this report's companion document *Make It Easy – Improving government customer service for small business in Atlantic Canada*, CFIB recommends the provincial governments in Atlantic Canada make the following improvements to both their web and phone services:

Findability

- Websites should be organized to minimize the number of clicks required to land on a desired webpage. Link headings should be specific enough to ensure correct information can be found on the first attempt.
- Government sites should utilize search engine optimization (SEO) with a focus on key word optimization and ensure information is easy to find through the search function on its homepage.
- Homepages should list links for external government websites such as a province's Workers Compensation Board or Liquor Corporation to increase ease of finding information. Other government websites should appear in the search results from the main government home page.
- Ideally, there should be someone available to answer live inquiries either by phone or chat. However, when a business is required to leave a voicemail, clear standards of when they can expect their voicemail to be returned should be established.

Accuracy

- Agents answering calls should have a functional knowledge of their department's resources and website to enhance the live service they offer to a customer.
- Agents should be trained and know the correct questions to ask in order to offer clear explanations as a supplement to what is on the website.

Clarity

- Simplify the language used on websites to enhance reading ease and provide clear examples of regulation compliance.

Accountability

- Other provinces should follow Nova Scotia's lead in implementing a "was this helpful" feature and Nova Scotia should include this feature on all websites, not just the main government website.
- Nova Scotia also provides the option for callers to participate in a survey at the end of a call which other provinces could implement as well. The responses to this survey should be publicly reported and monitored so that feedback can be implemented.
- Agents should either provide their name or an agent ID number to a caller so they are held accountable for the service and information they provide.

Conclusion

In order to reduce the red tape faced by small and medium sized businesses, it is crucial to focus on customer service. Although historically government customer service has been perceived negatively, the scores in this report outline a good starting point for government to improve its service reputation. Atlantic Canada has the opportunity to lead on a provincial level by making important improvements to the service it provides.

For future analysis, this snapshot can be updated to discover what changes have been made and the impact of any improvements on service. This snapshot may become more comprehensive by extending the lists of departments tested. More service mediums could also be tested such as email or visiting an office in person.

“I don't have a specific example of poor service come to mind at the moment, I always set the bar low when dealing with government, and then I am not disappointed as often.”

—Business Owner, New Brunswick

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business represents the views of over 110,000 small- and medium-sized business owners from all corners of Canada. CFIB has more than 11,000 members in Atlantic Canada and regularly takes the pulse of its membership through surveys on various topics. CFIB is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation focused on improving the odds of small business success.

Learn more at cfib.ca.

Appendix

Note: In Appendices A and B, the information in white columns represents raw data while the information in blue columns represents calculated scores.

Appendix A

Web Metrics for Scenarios 1 through 5

Workers Compensation	PE	NB	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Clicks Required	3	2	2	2	0.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Was a contact number provided?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Was a contact email provided?	No	No	Yes	No	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Search position (labour department site)	1	1	2	11	10.0	10.0	9.0	0.0
Search position on Google	1	1	1	1	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Link/Reference to Legislation	Yes	Yes	No	No	10.0	10.0	0.0	0.0
Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	61.9	51.0	57.8	39.3	6.2	5.1	5.8	3.9
Example of Compliance or FAQ	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
"Was this helpful" at the end	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
					5.1	6.1	6.1	3.8

OH&S	PE	NB	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Clicks Required	2	1	6	4	8.0	10.0	0.0	4.0
Was a contact number provided?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	10.0	0.0	10.0	10.0
Was a contact email provided?	Yes	No	Yes	No	10.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Search position (labour department site)	5	11	3	11	7.5	0.0	10.0	0.0
Search position on Google	1	11	5	11	10.0	0.0	6.0	0.0
Link/Reference to Legislation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	49.8	42.3	48.2	38.7	5.0	4.2	4.8	3.9
Example of Compliance or FAQ	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
"Was this helpful" at the end	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
					6.7	2.7	5.6	3.1

Holiday Pay	PE	NB	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Clicks Required	3	3	4	4	10.0	10.0	0.0	0.0
Was a contact number provided?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Was a contact email provided?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	10.0	0.0	10.0	10.0
Search position (government page)	1	1	1	1	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Search position on Google	1	2	1	2	10.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Link/Reference to Legislation	Yes	No	Yes	No	10.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	58.5	62.2	62.2	86.7	5.9	6.2	6.2	8.7
Example of Compliance or FAQ	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
"Was this helpful" at the end	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
					8.4	5.1	7.4	4.3

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Business Registration	PE	NB	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Clicks Required	2	3	5	2	10.0	6.7	0.0	10.0
Was a contact number provided?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
Was a contact email provided?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
Search position (government page)	1	1	1	1	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Search position on Google	11	2	1	2	0.0	9.0	10.0	9.0
Link/Reference to Legislation	No	Yes	No	Yes	0.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	44.2	36.4	51.3	19.3	4.4	3.6	5.1	1.9
Example of Compliance or FAQ	No	No	Yes	No	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
"Was this helpful" at the end	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
					4.9	6.6	6.1	4.5

Liquor License	PE	NB	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Clicks Required	2	4	2	1	6.7	0.0	6.7	10.0
Was a contact number provided?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	10.0	0.0	10.0	10.0
Was a contact email provided?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Search position (government page)	11	1	1	11	0.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
Search position on Google	1	1	2	1	10.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
Link/Reference to Legislation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	60.8	48.4	50.8	46.8	6.1	4.8	5.1	4.7
Example of Compliance or FAQ	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
"Was this helpful" at the end	No	No	Yes	No	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
					5.9	5.0	6.9	6.1

Appendix B

Phone Metrics for Scenarios 1 through 5

Workers Compensation	PE	NB En.	NB Fr.	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Did the number(s) from website work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Number of interactions	1	1	1	1	1	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
On hold?	No	Yes	No	No	No	10.0	5.0	10.0	10.0
Had to leave a voicemail?	No	No	No	No	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Agent ensured they understood	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	0.0	5.0	0.0	10.0
Agent asked if caller understood	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0
Employee offered name	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	10.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
						7.1	5.7	8.6	8.6

OH&S	PE	NB En.	NB Fr.	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Did the number(s) from website work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Number of interactions	2	3	1	2	11	9.0	9.0	9.0	0.0
On hold?	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	10.0	5.0	10.0	0.0
Had to leave a voicemail?	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	0.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
Agent ensured they understood	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	0.0	5.0	10.0	0.0
Agent asked if caller understood	No	Yes	No	No	No	0.0	5.0	0.0	0.0
Employee offered name	Yes	No	No	No	No	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
						5.6	6.3	7.0	1.4

Holiday Pay	PE	NB En.	NB Fr.	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Did the number(s) from website work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1/2 worked	10.0	10.0	10.0	5.0
Number of interactions	1	2	2	1	6	10.0	8.0	10.0	0.0
On hold?	No	No	No	No	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	0.0
Had to leave a voicemail?	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	10.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Agent ensured they understood	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	0.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
Agent asked if caller understood	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	10.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
Employee offered name	No	No	No	No	No	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
						7.1	6.9	5.7	3.6

Business Registration	PE	NB En.	NB Fr.	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Did the number(s) from website work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Number of interactions	1	4	1	2	1	10.0	5.0	6.7	10.0
On hold?	No	0.7	No	Yes	No	10.0	6.7	0.0	10.0
Had to leave a voicemail?	No	No	No	No	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Agent ensured they understood	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	0.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Agent asked if caller understood	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	0.0	5.0	10.0	10.0
Employee offered name	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0
						5.7	6.7	8.1	10.0

Liquor License	PE	NB En.	NB Fr.	NS	NL	PE	NB	NS	NL
Did the number(s) from website work?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Number of interactions	1	3	2	4	2	10.0	5.0	0.0	6.7
On hold?	No	No	No	No	No	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Had to leave a voicemail?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Agent ensured they understood	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	10.0	5.0	10.0	10.0
Agent asked if caller understood	No	No	No	Yes	No	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0
Employee offered name	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
						8.6	5.7	7.1	6.7

Appendix C

Scoring

The scoring takes into account scalar and binary metrics. For each scalar metric with the exception of the Flesch Kincaid reading ease, the province with the best performance receives a score of 10, while the worst performing province receives a score of 0. All other scores are based on the scale formed by these two values. Since the Flesch Kincaid scale is out of 100, the scores were divided by 10 to ensure the final overall score of each province was out of 10. The rest of the metrics are binary, meaning the best score (either no or yes depending on the metric) receives a value of 10 and the worst score receives a value of 0.

In the example of the first web metric, “number of clicks found,” the best performing province had the least amount of clicks, meaning lower values in the raw data column achieve higher final scores. This is the case for each scalar metric. Because a lower score is assigned for a higher value and a higher score for a lower value, the formula used is:

$$10 - 10 * ((x - \text{min}) / (\text{max} - \text{min}))$$

Where x = the score to be calculated

Min and max are the minimum and maximum of the range of indicators.

Each type of metric was weighted equally, so the average of all metrics was used to assign each province final scores out of 10 for both the web and phone components. For New Brunswick, the metrics were tested in both English and French, so the final score reflects the average of both tests. CFIB’s Government Customer Service Snapshot is a relative index rather than an absolute index. Each metric is ranked in relation to the metric’s range in other provinces.

Appendix D

Phone Numbers and Websites tested

Prince Edward Island:

- **Workers Compensation Board of PEI** via their phone numbers, 902-628-5680 and 1-800-237-5049, and website <http://www.wcb.pe.ca/>.
- **Labour and Industrial Relations** via their phone numbers, 902-368-5550 and 1-800-333-4362, and the official government website for P.E.I., <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en>.
- **Consumer, Corporate, and Insurance Division** via their phone number 902-368-4550 and the official P.E.I. government site
- **PEI Liquor Control Commission** via their phone number 902-368-5710 and website <https://liquorpei.com/>.

New Brunswick

- **WorkSafe NB** via their phone numbers, 506-632-2200 and 1-800-222-9775, and website <https://www.worksafenb.ca/>.
- **Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour** via their phone number 1-888-452-2687 and the official New Brunswick government site <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en.html>.
- **Service New Brunswick** via their phone numbers, 506-453-2703 and 1-888-762-8600, and the official New Brunswick government site.
- **Public Safety** via their phone number 506-453-7472 and the official government site.

Nova Scotia

- **Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia** via their phone numbers, 902-424-5400 and 1-800-952-2687, and their website <https://www.wcb.ns.ca/>.
- **Labour and Advanced Education** via their phone numbers, 902-424-4311 and 1-888-315-0110, and the official Nova Scotia government site <https://beta.novascotia.ca/>.
- **Access Nova Scotia** via their phone 1-800-670-4357 and the official government site
- **Alcohol, Gaming, Fuel and Tobacco Division** via their phone numbers, 902-563-3495 (Sydney office) and 1-877-565-0556, and the official Nova Scotia government site.

Newfoundland and Labrador

- **Workplace NL** via their phone numbers, 709-778-1552 and 1-800-563-9000, and their website <https://workplacenl.ca/>
- **Labour Standards Division** via their phone numbers, 709-637-2364 and 1-877-563-1063, and the official Newfoundland government site <https://www.gov.nl.ca/>.
- **Service NL** via their phone number 877-636-6867 and the official government site.
- **Newfoundland Labrador Liquor Corporation** via their phone number 709-724-1100 and their website <https://www.nliquor.com/>.