

# Research Paper



User experiences of Acas 'Helpline Online':  
A qualitative evaluation of the new tool

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# Summary

Acas commissioned TNS BMRB to evaluate Helpline Online, an automated web-based information and advice service, at an early stage of its development. An online methodology of web-enabled focus groups was used, and 19 employers and employees were engaged as part of this research.

The research aims were:

- To understand user experiences of the Acas Helpline Online, in terms of
  - Content and quality of information provided
  - Whether it provides users with the information they need to resolve their queries and the confidence to know what to do next
  - The look and feel of Helpline Online in terms of format, navigation and accessibility
- To explore how use of Helpline Online relates to use of the Acas telephone helpline in terms of when they are used and how they are used
- To gain an understanding of the types of services customers associate with Acas and how these might be communicated in the future

Employers and employees reported varying usage of Helpline Online according to their level of experience – either along a grievance process for employees, or in an HR function for employers. Those early on in their information seeking process tended to come across Helpline Online via a search engine, whereas more frequent users of Acas' services had the website bookmarked, and tended to navigate directly to Helpline Online once they had discovered it.

Respondents felt that Helpline Online was a good complement to the Acas telephone Helpline, seeing it as supporting rather than supplanting it as a service. The overall view was that whilst Helpline Online was good for general or simple enquires, or fact checking, it could not answer more complex questions that related to particular individual circumstances. It was felt that the telephone Helpline was far better suited to this. The telephone Helpline was also deemed to be better for severe or urgent matters, or when a user needed reassurance that they had understood an issue correctly. Helpline Online was preferred in some instances over the telephone Helpline as it enabled users to access information conveniently at any time of day, and to work through written information at their own pace. Users reported using both services in tandem, either using Helpline Online to research the context to an issue to help them frame their question on the telephone, or when the information online did not completely answer their query.

Helpline Online was deemed to be clear, well laid-out and user-friendly. Respondents lauded the 'predictive search function' as it allowed them to use general keywords rather than type full questions. The search function overall was thought to be better than other website (such as CIPD), though respondents had occasionally experienced a few issues in returning relevant search results. The popular questions function was not deemed to be useful as it was seen as far too general, and respondents felt they were unlikely to find their own question here. There was more of a preference for the 'FAQ categories' instead, which listed topics rather than specific questions, as respondent disliked being funnelled into specific queries.

Overall, both employers and employees were pleased with the service, and said it met their expectations. Where queries had not been resolved by Helpline Online, users had not been put off using it in the future as they felt it had sign-posted them adequately to the telephone Helpline or to other websites.

Respondents appreciated that the language was clear and 'jargon-free', neutral and unbiased, and accessible to all. There was a strong belief in the quality of information and that it was kept up-to-date.

Respondents felt that improvements could be made to the search function in being able to combine key search terms. They also suggested the inclusion of case studies to be used as examples as part of the guidance offered. Some respondents suggested that the guidance be split by employer and employee, though did not find the 'combined' guidance to be a problem in the current usage of the site. The introduction of a web-chat tool was supported, as respondents thought it would be useful to have a transcript of the conversation, as well as be able to get live guidance online.

# 1. Introduction

## Background to the research

In June 2013 Acas launched 'Helpline Online', an automated web-based adviser service. Helpline Online is aimed at both employers and employees (or their representatives) seeking help on employment law or their rights at work, allowing them to ask specific questions and providing detailed answers in a language they can easily understand. The system learns from user queries and provides subsequent users with answers to the most popular queries. Its name reflects the fact that the system was borne out of and is designed to sit alongside Acas' longstanding telephone Helpline service; the content of Helpline Online was designed to broadly replicate the sort of information and advice dispensed by (telephone) Helpline advisers and the branding/presentation of the system reflects that fact (see screenshot below).

Figure 1: Helpline Online



Acas wished to evaluate Helpline Online service at this early stage of its development, to both understand how it was working for users but also to check how it fits in alongside the existing telephone Helpline service (which it was designed to complement). At the time of the research (January 2014) Helpline Online had not yet been widely or actively promoted, so usage levels were still fairly modest<sup>1</sup>. The findings from this research are intended to inform refinements to the system before it is advertised more widely and usage levels accordingly increase.

<sup>1</sup> As of January 2014, when fieldwork for this project was conducted, user sessions were in the region of 1500-1800 per day.

## **Aims of the research**

- To understand user experiences of the Acas Helpline Online, in terms of
  - Content and quality of information provided
  - Whether it provides users with the information they need to resolve their queries and the confidence to know what to do next
  - The look and feel of Helpline Online in terms of format, navigation and accessibility
- To explore how use of Helpline Online relates to use of the Acas telephone helpline in terms of when they are used and how they are used
- To gain an understanding of the types of services customers associate with Acas and how these might be communicated in the future

## **Recruitment approach**

The recruitment for this project operated via a self-selection process where participants 'opted in' through a 'pop-up' on the Acas website. Users of Helpline Online were prompted to submit their e-mail address once they had accessed the online service. TNS BMRB then contacted and screened all those who had opted in with a mini-survey pro-forma (see appendix B). Participants were screened on their user type, satisfaction level, and the reason for using the service, as well as whether their query was resolved. We found that the use of the pro-forma screener appeared to reduce the response rate so we dropped the approach, only asking those recruited to complete it.

Four web-enabled focus groups were then conducted with employers and employees in small groups; moderators followed a discussion guide (appendix A). Participants dialled into an online web-conference, sharing both visual and audio. They were able to view screenshots of the Acas website and simultaneously 'surf' Helpline Online and other sites during the online group. Groups lasted for one hour, and were split by employer and employee, and whether or not their query was resolved.

The original intention was to split by satisfied and dissatisfied users, though through recruitment it was discovered that very few users reported being dissatisfied with the service. Groups were subsequently split by whether their query (for their last visit to Helpline Online) has been resolved or not.

Employees x 5	Query was not resolved	Employer group x 4	Query was not resolved
Family friendly policy Holidays and working time; Contracts Discipline, dismissal & grievance Absence, sickness & stress; Maternity, paternity & adoption; Diversity & Discrimination Absence, sickness & stress Holidays and working time	Very satisfied Satisfied Satisfied Fairly satisfied Dissatisfied	Settlement agreement; Discipline, dismissal & grievance Absence, sickness and stress; contracts; Retaining medical details on site	Satisfied Fairly satisfied Dissatisfied n/a
Employees x 6	Query had been resolved	Employer group x 4	Query had been resolved
Contracts Redundancy, lay-offs and business transfers; Deception & corruption against employees; Discipline, dismissal and grievance Absence, sickness & stress Redundancy, lay-offs and business transfers; Maternity, paternity & adoption; Discipline, dismissal & grievance Absence, sickness and stress	Extremely satisfied Very satisfied Very satisfied Satisfied Satisfied Fairly satisfied	Contracts; Contracts Absence, sickness and stress Family friendly policies Holidays and working time Redundancy, lay-offs and business transfers; Discipline, dismissal and grievance; Contracts	Extremely satisfied Extremely satisfied Extremely satisfied Very satisfied
<b>Total employees</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Total employers</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Total numbers:</b>	<b>19</b>		

Fieldwork was conducted in January 2014.

## Methodology

Helpline Online is anonymous at the point of use; there is no requirement for users to register or divulge any personal details in order to access the system. Hence there is no existing sample frame of users from which to draw a sample; instead, any sample must be specially built, most likely by means of some kind of 'opt-in' (as was the case here). However, the lack of any existing profile of users against which to compare those opting-in makes undertaking a representative (quantitative) survey of Helpline Online unfeasible. This was one of the reasons for adopting a purely qualitative approach on this project; qualitative research was also felt to be best suited for establishing an in depth an account of the user experience and developing suggestions for system improvements.

Web-enabled telephone groups were the specific qualitative method used – for several reasons. Firstly, as respondents were being asked to review their experience of an online tool, utilising online methods allowed users to engage with Helpline Online during the group discussion. Whilst the online method allowed researchers to share their screen with respondents as well as show them various screen-grabs, respondents spontaneously accessed Helpline Online during discussion to individually repeat their last query step by step, or test new queries in the group setting. This allowed the research to take place in a context much closer to users' experiences than would be achieved in a traditional face to face focus group.

Practical reasons also made an online methodology a more cost-effective approach. As the users of the website were likely to be disparately spread geographically, a face to face group discussion would have been both impractical and expensive. Further, an online group allowed respondents (particularly important for employers) to fit the group around their busy schedules, and meant they could take part from work or home, without needing to factor in travel time.

Online groups also provided anonymity for respondents, many of whom were discussing sensitive information about past or current employment grievances.

Employer and employee views are interweaved throughout the report but drawn out where there are differences by group.

All quotations are verbatim, drawn from audio recordings of the group discussions. Quotes are attributed to employer or employee as applicable.

## 2. Journey to Helpline Online

This section will explore how and why users were accessing the Helpline Online service, beginning to build a profile of users. It will also look in detail into the ways in which users became aware of the service, how they first accessed it and where they access it from.

### **Why use Helpline Online?**

For both employers and employees, Helpline Online was viewed primarily as a place to obtain general information and guidance about employment law or their rights at work. However, employers and employees had slightly different reasons for using the service, linked to their level of experience, and whether they were using it for themselves or on someone else's behalf. These reasons are outlined below:

### **Employees**

- Employees who were at the early stages of information seeking, or looking for general information had generally not been previously aware of the Acas site. Using a search engine, they had looked for information on a particular issue and had come across Acas Helpline Online.
- Employees who had greater experience, for example were further along a grievance process or an ongoing dispute, were looking for more specific information. This group was also checking back on information they had read previously to reassure themselves or build confidence in the area, and were often printing out the guidance and legal information for reference. This group navigated directly to Helpline Online.
- Employee representatives (or employees in a representative role, such as union representatives) were using the service regularly to obtain advice on a range of issues, on behalf of others. Representatives would share information found on Helpline Online either indirectly (verbally) or directly, by printing and sharing the information or asking the employee to look through the Helpline Online information and talking them through it. Representatives were also using Helpline Online in order to build their own knowledge base.

### **Employers**

- Some employers, from smaller not-for-profit companies or charities, were fulfilling an HR role but had little or no prior experience in the area. These employers were using the service for basic and general information, when in doubt about something, and to "get themselves up to speed". Helpline Online would be accessed fairly often.
- Employers with greater levels of experience in HR and employment law were generally using it to look up specific statutory information, both for reference and confirmation. Helpline Online was used fairly regularly. Queries from this group also tended to be quite specific and complicated.

### **How the service was first accessed**

Employees had come across the Acas website through internet searches related to their dispute, and then noticed the Helpline Online service on the site. A few employees had been directed to Helpline Online by a colleague.

Most respondents had the Acas website ([www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)) bookmarked, or accessed it regularly by typing the beginning of the address into the navigation bar. Those who had been using the general website for a number of years, mainly employers or employee representatives, had noticed the Helpline Online feature advertised on the site, though commented that it was not particularly prominent. These users then started using the service as soon as they discovered it, and whenever they had a query that they expected the general website would not be able to answer.

*"I knew Acas had a lot of documentation online so I was happy to have a look myself before ringing and then I saw the Helpline Online so I went onto that."* (Employer)

Employers who had less HR experience had heard about Helpline Online from colleagues and had been sent a link directly to the service. One employer became aware of the service through e-mail advertising. Once employers or employee representatives had discovered the service they had shared the link with their colleagues.

### **Where service was accessed from**

All respondents were using desktops or laptops to access the service, as they felt there was too much content to be able to view it on a mobile device. Employees would only access the service from home as it would be too sensitive to do so in the workplace. Some employees mentioned that they expected their employer might track their Internet browsing history so would not want to use the service at work even if their screen was not visible to others. Employers were accessing the service from work, and occasionally remotely by tablet computer.

*"I wouldn't use a computer at work, because it's their property. And it has a history. And it might cause a conflict later on."* (Employee)

### 3. Interplay with the Acas telephone helpline service

This section looks in detail at how users viewed the Acas telephone Helpline in comparison to 'Helpline Online' and how the two services were seen to interact. It explores the reasons users might have for using one service over another, and the extent to which they were viewed as separate or complementary services.

Reference to the telephone Helpline varied by user experience (including some who had never used it before). For those respondents whose most recent query had been resolved by Helpline Online, discussion referred to use of the telephone Helpline in the past for different, unrelated queries. For those respondents whose most recent query had not been answered by Helpline Online, discussion referred to their use of the telephone Helpline for the same query. However if they had also used the telephone Helpline in the past for other queries they included their experience of this in their evaluation of the service overall.

#### **The telephone Helpline**

The majority of respondents who had used the telephone Helpline had found it a very useful and effective service. It was compared extremely favourably against other telephone helplines, particularly government-run services such as HMRC. The telephone service was noted to have low waiting times, and advisers were viewed as understanding and professional in their approach. Respondents noted that Helpline staff were skilled at 'asking the right questions' and disentangling complex issues.

*"It's probably the best telephone Helpline I've ever used"* (Employer)

*"The people on the phone never make you feel like you're in a rush, or that you're asking a stupid question. I know early on I was asking some very basic questions which I now think probably sounded really stupid, but they didn't make me feel like I was wasting their time."* (Employer)

Telephone Helpline staff were also perceived to have a broad knowledge base, being able to provide the context to an issue, with callers assuming they were experts in the field of employment.

*"I've never been in a situation where they either didn't have the information readily available or know exactly how to go and get it pretty much straight away."* (Employee)

Two employee respondents did not have such a positive experience with the telephone Helpline. They were both disappointed that it failed to meet their needs, admitting that they had initially had high expectations for the service. One respondent felt that their query was not really properly understood; her query was not resolved and she was signposted elsewhere. Another had received conflicting advice from two different telephone Helpline advisers.

One downside noted by one of the employer respondents was that the telephone Helpline did not provide a transcript following the call for future reference.

*“On the telephone, you’re having to scribble it all down as well, some written answers or instant messaging might be a solution...it would be useful to be able to reflect on some of the discussion and use it for reference.” (Employer)*

However other respondents reported being e-mailed a summary of their conversation following a call. This ‘email summary’ service was highly valued, though clearly it had not been offered to all users of the helpline.

### Reasons for not using the telephone

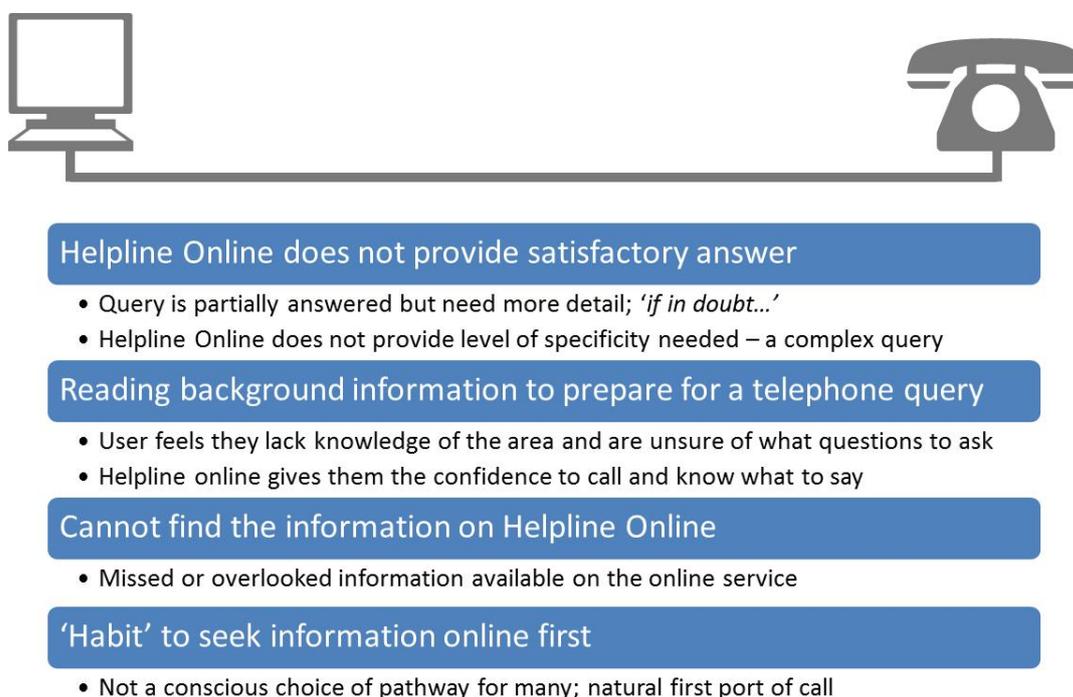
Four respondents had never used the telephone Helpline before. These employees had either found all the information they needed on the Helpline Online service, having only ever had fairly general queries, or had been redirected to the appropriate government website. Others had become aware of the Helpline Online tool before the telephone Helpline, and as their query was resolved they had no need to use the telephone service. A couple of the younger employers expressed a strong preference for using online channels over telephone Helplines, due to a dislike of using the telephone.

*“It sounds a bit funny, because I work in a fundraising call-centre, but I really don’t like using phones if I can help it. I’ll always try to get information online first” (Employer)*

### Using the two services

The following section maps out different journeys customers might take.

**Figure 2: From Helpline Online to telephone Helpline**



With regard to the specific instance when respondents had been using Helpline Online and were recruited for this study, the majority of respondents were using Helpline Online first, though a few had gone straight to the telephone service as they knew their query was too

complicated to be handled by the online tool in the first instance. If users were unable to find a satisfactory answer to their query online, or wished to check any areas of ambiguity, they would then ring the telephone Helpline. In a few cases respondents had not been able to find the information on Helpline Online and had called the telephone service, but during the online research groups they had discovered that the relevant information had in fact been available online. In some cases respondents noted that Helpline Online would direct them to the telephone Helpline; which reassured them that Acas had adopted a responsible approach to providing an online service.

*"The information online was quite open to interpretation. I wasn't sure what that meant for me, so I called them to confirm my assumptions about the guidance."* (Employee)

Another common journey, particularly for employees or employers with less experience dealing with employment disputes, was that Helpline Online was used as a precursor to using the telephone Helpline. In these circumstances, users felt they wanted to know more about a certain issue but lacked sufficient background and contextual knowledge to take their query forward. Reading the guidance online helped them to shape their question, not only by being able to navigate by topic but also as they were presented with the types of question others had asked. Users built up their understanding online, which gave them the confidence and the vocabulary to then speak to an adviser.

Respondents noted that choosing between the two services was not necessarily a conscious choice, and that their tendency to start with online was merely habit. These respondents reported that the web was almost always their starting point for accessing information.

*"It was not a conscious decision; it was something I did without really thinking"* (Employer)

### **From telephone to Helpline Online**

Some customers made the reverse journey, as telephone queries were usually resolved, or if they were not, users were being sign-posted elsewhere (beyond Acas). One respondent mentioned that a telephone adviser had made them aware of the online service, so they had used it for a subsequent query.

Respondents mentioned using the two services in tandem when they had a long term dispute or grievance, as they were accessing Acas guidance on a fairly regular basis through multiple channels, depending on their needs and emotional state. This is further explored below.

For one respondent, the telephone helplines were busy so used the Online Helpline FAQs instead.

### **Comparing the two services**

As mentioned in the previous section, the Helpline Online service was viewed as being best suited for general information seeking, or for checking simple and factual information. Respondents regarded the Telephone Helpline service slightly differently, as more tailored to complex, specific queries.

*"The online tool is for questions without a lot of nuance or ins-and-outs"* (Employee)

Respondents agreed that the two services were complementary; that basic queries could be handled by Helpline Online, with the telephone Helpline being used where there was any confusion or a need for specificity.

*"I think the Helpline online has a long way to go to come anywhere close to speaking to a human with the depth of knowledge that the Acas members have. I would like to think that as more questions become asked the Online Helpline will be developed further and be updated; it's got a long way to go but it's definitely on the right track"* (Employer)

Respondents pointed to further reasons why they might choose one service over another.

The **severity and urgency of the issue** – if the matter is urgent respondents would prefer to call to get an immediate and definitive response from the telephone Helpline. Examples were given of tribunals and disciplinary matters.

The **need for reassurance** that they have got it right and they understand the issues, particularly in complicated circumstances or where there is a lot of space for interpretation. This was also stated to be important by employees when they were feeling emotional. For most respondents it was felt that the telephone was best suited to meet this need.

*"You want to make sure that any nuances or their interpretation is exactly right and you can double-check when you're speaking to someone"* (Employer)

Helpline Online was described as **conveniently accessible at any time** of day or night and able to be checked for a quick reference (though would not be used at work by employees if it was for a personal issue). Respondents valued being able to look at issues in their own time and at their own pace, noting there was not time pressure.

Some respondents expressed a **preference for online** in general, saying they disliked dealing with people on the phone.

The **ability to review written guidance** online was valued, as respondents said they liked to be able to work through information at their own pace, particularly if they had to familiarise themselves with new language or 'jargon' (though it was noted that Acas Helpline Online was fairly '*jargon-free*'). One employer with a great deal of experience in employment law took this a step further, saying she preferred having things written down to ensure that they had the official information without someone else's interpretation of it, which might occur on the phone. However it was also deemed important to be able to have both services, so one could come to their own interpretation as well as check against Acas advisers'.

*"If you're looking at a benefits form, or in the case of Acas if you're looking at a contract, it's there in black and white, and you can check for yourself – then if you're not sure you can check it with somebody else."* (Employer)

For employees particularly, **emotional distress** was a driver of channel preference, though in different ways depending on the user. Whilst some employees preferred to speak to a person to get reassurance and empathy, others felt that if they were anxious or in a state of distress, they would rather use the online tool for reassurance. These employees may then call the Helpline once they were in a calmer state of mind.

Employers had more specific purposes when accessing Helpline Online, as many of them found it useful for **keeping up to speed on legislation**; working out what is contractual and what is statutory. This was a key reason for employers using the service.

Some 'employers' fulfilling a junior HR function with little to no prior experience in dealing with employment issues said they would only ever use Helpline Online, as they only dealt with basic issues. They felt that anything more complex that required a telephone call would most likely be dealt with by somebody more senior.

There were mixed views as to whether those operating the telephone lines had **the most up-to-date knowledge**, with some believing that Acas would effectively and efficiently share information internally, so that all their staff would be aware of any recent changes or developments. Advisers answering telephone Helpline calls were deemed to be experts, able to provide definitive, official information. On the other hand, some respondents believed that the online medium was more effective at reflecting immediate changes, so would have the most current information.

All respondents agreed that the two services were serving different purposes and viewed Helpline Online as complementary to the telephone Helpline, rather than supplanting it.

*"I would say the telephone is a supplement to the online...you get more specific information on the telephone; obviously the broad terms you're going to put online will come up with a general overview, it can't be as specific as you want it to... if you want specifics you have to take that one step further and actually make the call." (Employee)*

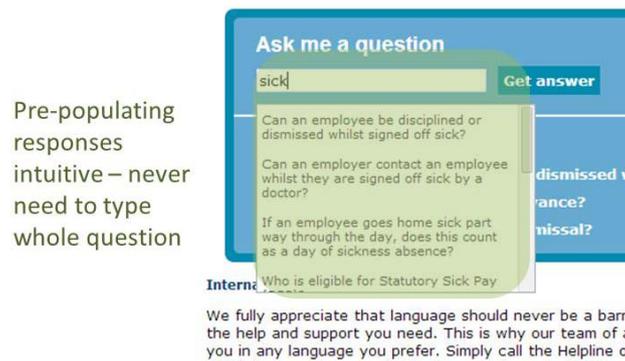
## 4. Using Helpline Online

This section looks at how employers and employees were using the online service, including their use of and attitudes towards the various features. It also examines the extent to which users felt their queries were resolved, how this affected their satisfaction levels, and whether the guidance gave them confidence about their next steps. Finally, it looks at users' assessment of the format and navigability of the tool, and the look and feel of the service.

### How the service is being used

The majority of respondents were using the search function to type in their question. The 'predictive function' (see figure 3), where suggested questions appeared in the search bar, had strong appeal; though not all respondents were aware of this function; those who had not experienced it thought it was probably related to their browser settings. Those who were using it said they never had to type a full question, but just entered key words, which felt intuitive and allowed users to quickly determine the relevance to their query. The suggestions helped them to shape their questions, as discussed in section 3.3.

**Figure 3: Predictive function**



Other employees found that whilst they had used specific keywords in their search, the search results had only included general information about two of those terms, but had not returned any results that combined the search terms to answer the specific query. The search results returned were thus viewed as 'wrong'; and the respondent went on to call the telephone Helpline for further information. The inability of the search function to meet the user's needs led him to view the service as fairly unsatisfactory.

Amongst the employer group whose query was not resolved or only partially resolved, their confidence in using the system was not reduced. Their queries were unresolved not because the guidance was unclear or confusing, but because their query was too complex to be answered through the online tool. These respondents said that whilst Helpline Online had provided them with enough context to be able to frame the question, it had not necessarily provided them with enough information to be able to take action. However, respondents did not really *expect* Helpline Online to be able to answer specific queries, for example where a respondent felt they had a fairly unique case or an unusual situation, so respondents still felt

fairly satisfied that the service had fulfilled its purpose. Further, when respondents had been sign-posted to a different site, they felt that Acas had enabled them to know who to turn to next.

*"It was Acas who said you've got to contact X, Y, Z; we got there in the end."*  
(Employee)

## Popular questions

As well as offering users the chance to type their own questions, the front Helpline Online interface prominently displays a list of regularly updated 'popular questions' (e.g. 'How can an employee raise a grievance?', 'What are the different types of dismissal?') based on real usage data.

**Figure 4: Popular questions**



For some employee representatives, these 'Popular Questions' were useful as they were essentially looking up the same or similar sorts of questions fairly frequently on behalf of their 'clients'.

*"Having those popular questions is sort of a useful triage"* (Employee)

Other respondents thought 'Popular Questions' could be useful for people who were in the very early stage of seeking information. Beyond this, however, there was little reported use of them, and there was a view amongst both employers and employees that they were far too general for anyone who was reasonably far along the information-seeking process. Respondents felt that the popular questions were unlikely to relate to them or else would be framed in such a specific way that they would not be practicable. These respondents suggested that rather than popular questions, popular topics were more useful (like those in the FAQ categories), as it more closely matched how they were thinking about their problem and how they wanted to approach it.

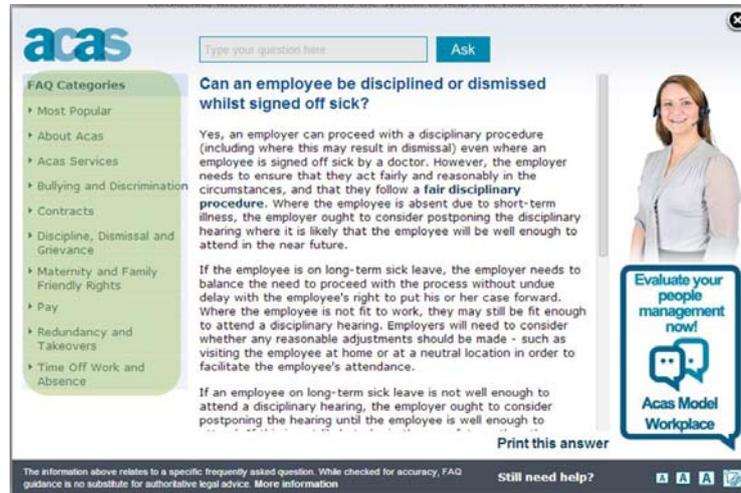
*"There's nothing there that relates to me even loosely, so I went straight to the search box"*. (Employee)

*"I'm not thinking about the question, because I don't have the question yet; I'm thinking I need to find out more about this."* (Employee)

## FAQs and 'Other Customers have asked'

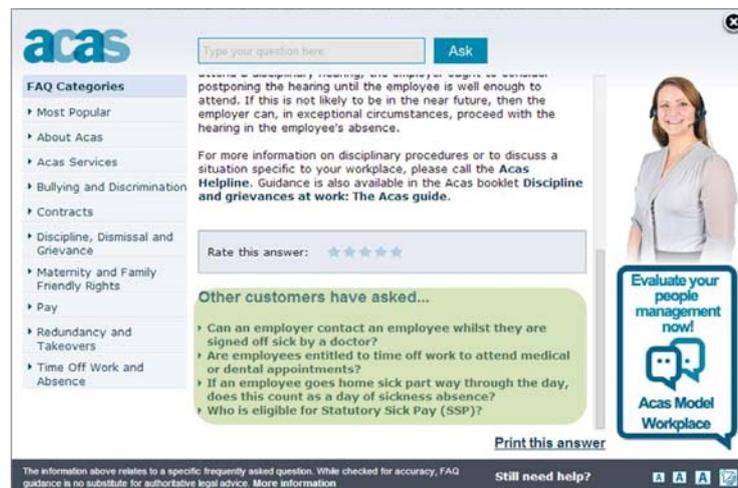
Answers returned by Helpline Online are displayed alongside other supplementary information and links, including a 'FAQ Categories' panel that lists the main question categories for Helpline Online (e.g. Pay, Bullying and Discrimination, Contracts etc.).

Figure 5: FAQs



There was some use of this 'FAQ Categories' panel, mainly amongst employees and employer representatives. However many felt that this would be a more circuitous route to answering their query, and that they would have to go through several layers of information before they drilled down to the requisite level of detail. The search function by comparison was seen as a much more direct and efficient method. The 'Other customers have asked' lists (based on real usage data and shown at the foot of each individual answer, in the vein of the 'Customers who bought this item also bought' lists commonly used by online retailers) was used by a few respondents who felt it was useful as it provided context around their query. Employers thought this section was particularly useful as they felt it would 'learn' from previous queries and regularly update itself based on this information. One employer felt the information would be of interest though he had rarely had the time to read more.

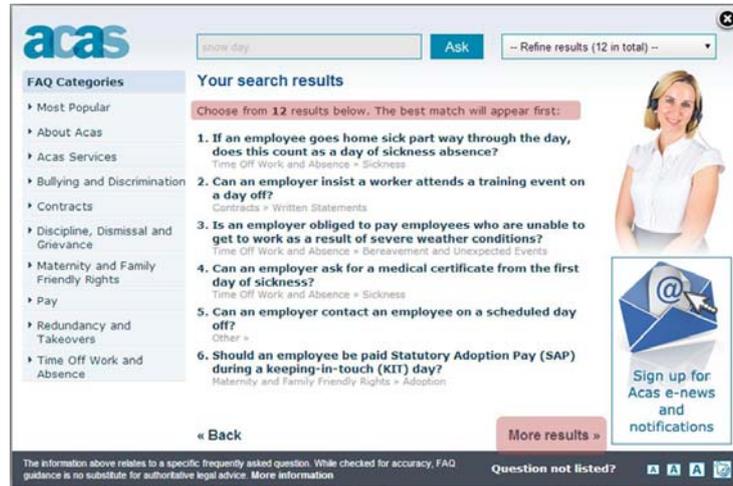
Figure 6: Other customers have asked



## Format/navigation issues

Once respondents had searched, a few amongst the employee groups had trouble then finding the information they needed. For one respondent, the search results returned had exceeded the number that could fit on the screen (see figure 7). The respondent had only read the first six results and assumed that was all the information that was available, so had called the telephone Helpline as a result. Others noted that sometimes the search results could be as high as thirty, which felt sometime to be too high, with minimal relevance to their query.

Figure 7: Search results



Information was judged to be easy to read and in digestible chunks. Respondents reported that the format of the guidance displayed was appropriate and usually seemed to be the right amount of information, though this was dependent on the query that had been made. There was a desire to keep the level of information on Helpline Online reasonably short, as respondents valued the clear and succinct nature of the information presented, and disliked having to scroll down within the tool too much.

The look and feel of the site and service was described as being clear and simple, if slightly non-descript. Users commented that the search bar was much more prominent than usual, especially compared to government websites where they felt it was often hidden in the right-hand corner. One issue related to the image used of the adviser wearing a headset (see Figure 8). Respondents found this image to be misleading as the headset suggested a live chat function, and thought that once they'd typed their question they would be connected to a live web-chat.

Figure 8: Headset



*"It makes it look like you are going to be connected to a person; I definitely thought I'd be connected to someone."* (Employer)

As mentioned earlier, some respondents felt that the tool was quite difficult to find on the Acas website and could be made more prominent. Some respondents commented on the level of text and content on the webpage hosting Helpline Online being too high (see Figure 9), and that it should be cut down to avoid having to scroll to the bottom of the page to access the tool. (It should be noted that, as Acas increasingly seeks to promulgate the existence of Helpline Online, the service is becoming sited on various pages all across the Acas website, not only the particular webpage being critiqued here and shown in Fig 9.)

**Figure 9: Finding Helpline Online**



One respondent with dyslexia noted that the background colour made the content quite difficult to read, and that the tool would benefit from having coloured backgrounds rather than white.

## 5. Attitudes towards the service

This section explores respondents' overall views of the service and perceptions of the quality of the information provided. It also examines their views as to whether the service seems to be aimed principally at employers, employees or both equally.

### Overall perceptions of the service

Helpline Online was perceived to be a useful and efficient tool by both employers and employees. Though they had slightly different reasons for using the tool, both felt the online tool was well suited for general enquiries and simple queries, and appreciated the clear and simple language it was presented in. It was deemed to be a good starting point for both employers and employees for information seeking.

Employees considered Helpline Online to be a comprehensive reference tool, even if their query had not been resolved. This was because employees saw the purpose of the service as providing an overview rather than answers to specific questions. Content was regarded as both useful (for some) and empowering for employees:

*"I found it very empowering – it was employment law, it was printed, I could print it and say 'this is what Acas is saying'." (Employee)*

Employers shared employees' enthusiasm for Helpline Online service overall, regarding it as helpful, logical and intuitive. As more regular users of the service, their positivity was slightly more pronounced than employees.

### Quality of information

Perceptions of the Helpline Online service were strongly influenced by users' opinion of Acas itself. Respondents referred to the 'Acas brand' as being very strong, with a reputation of being 'at the front line' of employment regulation, in that they are well informed of developments to regulation. Information provided through Helpline Online was thus trusted to be correct and up-to-date as well as of a high quality. This trust in the Acas brand was more pronounced amongst employers, who were more familiar with Acas.

*"...very helpful and you can rely on it being up to date...Acas are seen as the people who know the statutory stuff really thoroughly." (Employer)*

*"You've got the confidence to pass it [information] on to somebody because you got it from the Acas website, as opposed to some other company." (Employer)*

### Who it is seen to be aimed at (employers/employees)

Employees broadly agreed that the service was aimed equally at both employers and employees, perceiving Acas' stance to be neutral and the language to be non-confrontational and non-combative, but also clear and non-technical, meaning it was accessible to all. They felt some employers might use the tool for training purposes, and could be especially useful for

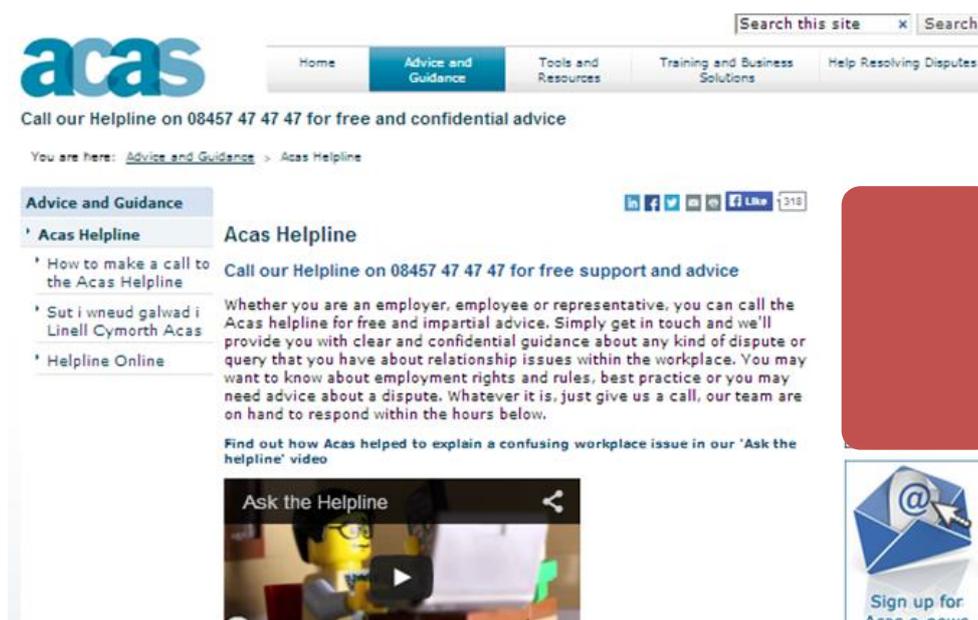
smaller businesses that may have less knowledge about employment law, and could help employers in general become more ethical in the process of becoming more compliant.

*“It’s not confrontational; it just sets out the facts for both employers and employees. It’s not like a union.”* (Employee)

Some employees felt that Helpline Online was perhaps slightly geared more toward employees due to the simplicity of the language, and the fact that it provided general, rather than specialist, information.

Employers had mixed views about *who* the service seemed primarily aimed at, although they did not perceive the advice to be biased in any sense. One of the employer groups did feel that the site was aimed slightly more towards employers largely because the webpage where the Helpline Online tool was located also contained an advertisement for the Acas (telephone) Helpline which quotes an ostensibly employer-focussed statistic: “96% of managers would recommend the Acas helpline to a friend”. This gave the (incorrect) impression that Helpline Online was being presented as ‘a manager’s tool’, and respondents thought that this could potentially be off-putting for employees. (In actual fact, as already noted, the Helpline Online interface is accessible via a number of different pages across the Acas website, not just the one being accessed for this research exercise).

**Figure 10: ‘96% of managers...’**



Other employers reported having had the impression from the ‘popular questions’ listed beneath the Helpline Online search bar that the tool was geared slightly more towards employees, although they caveated this with the possibility that this was simply a reflection of the types of questions people had most often asked (e.g. ‘How can an employee raise a grievance?’).

One employer group felt that the service should be separated into two, depending on whether it was being used by an employee or employer, much like the HMRC website.

## **Comparison with other sites**

Employers compared the Acas Helpline Online to the CIPD website, which was perceived to be far less intuitive a tool. The CIPD search engine was reported to be clunky with too many results and rarely related to the search terms. The layout of the site was felt to be dense and not user-friendly. Employers complained about the way the information was ordered, with the newest information presented first; this compared unfavourably with the Acas website which presented more relevant information first, or at least more popular. Employers also preferred the fact that Acas' guidance was phrased as an answer rather than as a factsheet.

The Acas Helpline tool was seen as much better than other government sites (in particular HMRC's website, [www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)). This was both due to the 'clean' and simple look and layout of the page, but also the level of information provided. Whereas government sites respondents had used in the past had complex information in very dense and long prose, Acas Helpline Online was short, succinct and jargon-free.

## 6. Future use

This section outlines respondents' suggestions for ways to develop and improve Helpline Online, including their views on the value of introducing web-chat functionality and their observations about how best to advertise the service in the future.

### Suggestions for improvements

Employers and employees had several suggestions for developing the service in the future.

Respondents noticed that the service was not being strongly advertised on the Acas site. They suggested that it could be made more obvious on the Acas homepage by including it in the carousel – and suggested displaying the top 5 questions asked to engage users to click on it. Respondents also thought that the Helpline Online tool should be located at the top of the page, rather than at the bottom after a lot of content, to make it more prominent and to reduce the need to scroll through information. It should be noted that, at the time of the research (January 2014), Helpline Online was only in its infancy and was in the process of being 'softly' launched by Acas.

Employees in particular stated they would like to see hyperlinks to relevant websites embedded within the content. Suggestions included government websites (such as gov.uk) as well as support websites (such as the Samaritans) for employees who were distressed.

- The search tool was selected as a feature that could use improvement, particularly to increase the relevance of search results. Respondents were unsure how this could be done but suggested adding more tags to the content. There was also a desire for Helpline Online to be better able to answer *specific* queries, that is specific to the individual circumstances of the user, rather than just general ones. It was thought that this would happen as long as the tool learnt from previous questions, but also thought it could learn from web-chat if this was introduced. However respondents recognised that as the specificity of their questions often arose from having individual, complex circumstances, an online tool would not be able to drill down into the requisite detail to address these. Examples of queries that were regarded as too complex for Helpline Online included:
- Matters relating to specific employees who have particularly complex circumstances, often relating to contracts or historical issues
- Where something specific has happened during a grievance situation and an employer is unsure what they can do about it (e.g. an employee had found text messages about other members of staff and had written them down)
- Matters relating to a group of employees, as advice is mainly applicable to individuals

Employers suggested that testimonials from other users could be useful to include. It should be noted that there is testimonial information on various pages of the Acas site, though these clearly had not been noticed by some of the respondents. They also suggested that Acas provide a timeline of upcoming regulatory changes through Helpline Online. A few employers

felt that case studies to illustrate some points would be helpful and relevant, to illustrate what typically may take place but also to 'set a precedent'.

A few respondents felt it would be advisable to split the advice by user type, so having separate information for employers and employees, mirroring the HMRC website. However, it was employers who felt that employees would benefit from this, and vice versa.

One respondent with dyslexia stated that coloured backgrounds would make the text much easier for them to read.

## **Web-chat**

One issue with Helpline Online was the desire amongst some respondents to be able to ask a longer, more detailed written question; something they would prefer to do for very serious or complex issues. In these circumstances they lacked the confidence to discuss the matter over the telephone and felt that the issue was too complicated for them to convey verbally. A longer question format was thought to provide the respondent both the space to include more detail about their individual circumstances, but also the confidence that they had not forgotten anything and had presented all of the relevant issues. A desire to communicate in this way was linked to the level of confidence of the user, rather than anything specific to the query itself. Respondents mentioned accessing the Acas website to try and find an email address they could use for this purpose.

*"I feel like I would struggle to get my point across, but with e-mail you can take your time and word things carefully, especially if it's a serious matter."* (Employee)

Respondents also thought that a web-chat function could go some way towards addressing this issue. The concept of web-chat arose spontaneously in all groups, and there was strong support for this kind of service. Respondents felt that it would be beneficial for a number of reasons. First, as suggested, inexperience in employment relations and employment law was a reason for preferring web-chat, as some employees felt that they lacked the necessary confidence to explain their problem on the phone, and would prefer to take the time to type it out in full to ensure they were asking their question in the 'right' way. Second, a web-chat service was preferred to an automated system without live human input (e.g. Helpline Online) on the grounds that it would be better able to interpret and respond to specific or more complex queries.

Some employees felt it would be a more efficient route to getting answers than the telephone service, as users would be able to converse more quickly and potentially more often. Automatic transcripts of the web-chat conversations would also be highly valued, as some respondents lamented the lack of a written record from telephone conversations.

One respondent expressed reservation about using a web-chat service, and felt strongly that it should not replace either of the existing services. The respondent felt that web-chat would not suit her needs, though attributed her discomfort to her age and her dislike of the 'chat' format in general. She was not opposed to it being introduced as an additional service however.

## **Advertising**

It is worth noting that this section was only covered briefly in the groups.

Respondents were asked about where they would advertise Acas' services and what messages they thought would be the most effective. Employees mentioned various social networks such as Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as radio, and bus stops. They also thought leaflets could be distributed in workplaces and left on people's desks. Employers suggested that the CIPD website could have a link to Helpline Online.

Accuracy of advice was thought to be a strong and convincing message for persuading others to use Helpline Online. Other respondents pointed to the fact that Helpline Online picks up on the most common issues, that it is independent and has an apparently neutral stance, and that it is a free service. Employers thought that the phrase '*You're not alone*' could be effective in attracting employers to use the service.

# Appendix A: Topic guide

## Acas Helpline Online Evaluation Topic Guide

### Research aims:

- To understand user experiences of the Acas Helpline Online, in terms of
  - Content and quality of information provided
  - Whether it provides users with the information they need to resolve their queries and the confidence to know what to do next
  - The look and feel of the Helpline Online in terms of: format, navigation and accessibility
- To explore how use of the Acas Helpline Online relates to use of the Acas telephone helpline in terms of when they are used and how they are used
- To gain an understanding of the types of services customers associate with Acas and how these might be communicated in the future

### Introduction (2 mins)

- Introduce yourself and TNS BMRB and explain your role
- Explain that the research is for Acas and concerns their experience of using the Online helpline
- The research will help ACAS improve the system for future users
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity
- Duration of the discussion 1 hour

### Background (2 mins)

- About themselves
  - Tell me a little about your business (employers) / the type of work you do (employees) - Briefly

### Searches and dealings (5 mins)

- How do they normally search for information: online, telephone, some other method
  - reasons

- How do they normally deal with official organisations (e.g. HMRC, DVLA, Local Council): online, telephone, some other method
  - Reasons
- What methods do they prefer to use when looking for information /advice
- Under what circumstances / for what type of issues would they use:
  - Online
  - Telephone

## **Acas Telephone and Online Helpline services (10 mins)**

- Use of Acas helpline services
  - Have they used the Acas Telephone Helpline before?
    - If not, did you know it existed?
    - If Yes, what are their views about it? Did it provide them with the answers they needed / enable them to take the next step? Reasons why / why not?
  - Have you use the Acas Helpline Online before?
- For THIS query:
  - Where did you start first – telephone or online helpline?
  - Why this approach?
  - Is / would this be your usual approach?
  - Have they changed their approach? Reasons why
- Acas Online Helpline
  - Who do they see it as being for (employers, employees, others)
  - Reasons why they see it in this way
- How do they see the relationship between the Acas Telephone and Acas Helpline Online services?
  - EXPLORE: Are they the same / different / complementary; in what way
- Under what circumstances would they use:
  - Acas Telephone Helpline
  - Acas Online helpline
    - Spontaneous, then PROBE: topic, complexity, sensitivity, their emotional state, etc.

## **Looking for information to resolve a query using the Acas Helpline Online – the journey (20 mins)**

*I would like you now to think back to the point where you started to look for information about how to resolve your query...*

- How did they come across the Acas Helpline Online
  - Prompt, if not spontaneous: used it previously, recommended by a colleague/ friend, found it by searching the Acas website, search engine, suggested by Acas telephone Helpline, etc.

- What information / support were they looking for?
  - Prompt, if not spontaneous: legal, employee assistance, etc.?
- How did they access Helpline Online?
  - Mobile device / PC
  - Views about accessing this sort of service on a mobile device
- Where did they access Helpline Online?
  - Home / Work / elsewhere
  - Reasons why
  - Views about accessing from work
- How did they make their query?
  - Probe if not spontaneous: typed in query, used 'Popular Questions' (Stimulus A)
  - When they got to the next screen (Stimulus B), what did they do: clicked on one of the search results, refined your search, used the FAQs
    - Reasons for their action
    - What do they think of this screen (right number of options?)
- Did the Acas Helpline Online direct them to the right page?
  - Where did they find the information they wanted (FAQs, search results)
  - How easy was it to find what they wanted?
- Did the Acas Helpline Online answer their query (PROBE: fully / partially / not at all); in what way?
- How confident did they feel after using the Acas Helpline Online that they knew what to do next?
  - What made them feel confident?
- What did they do next?
  - If called the Acas Telephone Helpline
    - PROBE reasons for doing this
    - Whether using the Helpline Online first, made it easier / more useful to use the Acas Telephone Helpline
- Overall, what were their initial impressions of the Acas Helpline Online?
  - How easy was it to find the information that they were looking for?

## **Review of Acas 'Helpline Online' service (10 mins)**

*Researcher note:*

*Walk participants through the Acas Helpline Online beginning with the Home page; then to the Helpline Online section; and then look briefly through each key content area as relevant to your respondents – e.g. contract issues, disputes and mediation, etc.*

- Views about the idea of an internet-based tool for providing information on employer/ employee relations
  - Views in principle
  - Once they had used it

- Having used the Acas Helpline Online what are their overall impressions of the site (the look and feel)
  - E.g. professional / amateur; informed / basic; engaging / boring; etc.
  
- Views on the Acas 'Helpline Online' offering in terms of:
  - **Appearance**
    - Did it look like it was 'for you? Why/why not?
    - Was the site what you expected?
      - If NO, why not?
    - Anything that would improve the appearance?
  - **Content**
    - Was the language clear?
    - Was the language easy to understand?
    - Is the focus right?
    - What, if anything, is missing
    - Is there anything, in terms of content, that would make the site more useful?
    - Anything, in terms of content, that would turn them off / stop using the Acas Helpline Online service?
    - Anything that would improve the content?
  - **Navigation**
    - Was the site easy to use and navigate (i.e. find where to ask a question, navigate between pages); reasons for views
    - Would anything make it easier?
  - **Signposting**
    - Did you follow the 'Other customers have asked' links? Which? How many?
    - If not, why not?
    - How useful is it to have these links?
    - Anything that would improve the signposting?

## Developing the Acas 'Helpline Online' service (5 mins)

- Are there any changes / developments that you would like to see for the Acas Helpline Online?
  - How you look for information
  - Additional content
  - Changes to the way content is presented
  - Look and feel of the site
  
- Have they ever used online web chat facilities; which
  - Experiences and views about them
  
- If there was a 'web chat' facility on the Acas Helpline Online would it be of interest?

- Would they use it?
- For it to meet their needs, how would it need to work?

## **Advertising the Acas 'Helpline Online' service (If time allows)**

*Acas provides two helpline services: Telephone and Online...*

- If they were looking for employment relations advice and you did not already know about Acas how would they go about finding it?
  - What methods would they use to look for information?
  - Where would they look for information?
- If they were responsible for advertising Acas' helpline (Telephone and Online) services:
  - Where would they advertise (which channels)?
  - What would they say?
  - What would be the most important issues to communicate to people?

## **Revisiting the Acas 'Helpline Online' concept (6 mins)**

- Would they use the 'Helpline Online' in the future?
  - Probe: for all queries; only specific types of queries; reasons why
- Would they encourage other employees / employers to use it?
  - Reasons why / why not
- What is the best part of the site – the number one thing it should not lose?
- What would their top three changes be?
- Would they continue to use the Acas Telephone Helpline?
  - When would they use the Telephone Helpline / Helpline Online

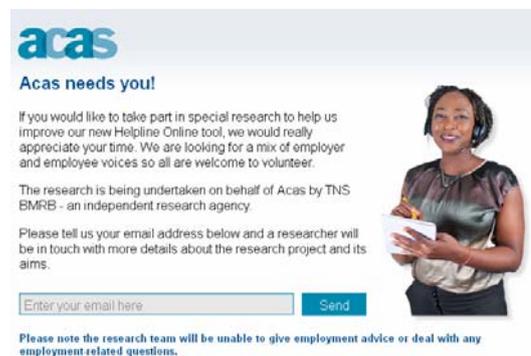
**Thank and Close**

# Appendix B: Mini-survey

## Acas 'Helpline Online' recruitment screener

Thank you for registering your interest in this project. TNS BMRB is an independent research agency conducting research on behalf of Acas, into experiences of using their 'Helpline Online' service – a new automated tool which allows users to ask questions to a virtual adviser on the Acas website (see screenshots below).

We are contacting you because you kindly gave your permission to be contacted when you used 'Helpline Online' recently.



As part of this research, we will be running a series of online focus groups. These will take place remotely, with participants logging in from their computers at home or at work, at a mutually convenient time. Participation in the focus groups is completely anonymous and confidential, and all focus group participants will receive a £50 cash gift as a thank you for their time.

In order to check whether you are eligible to take part, please complete the mini-survey below. It should take about 3 minutes to complete, and your answers will be kept confidential. Once we have received your completed mini-questionnaire, we will be able to confirm your eligibility and, where applicable, make arrangements for taking part in the focus group.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Emily.Fu@tns-bmrb.co.uk

Please answer the next few questions in relation to the query you made using Acas 'Helpline Online' when you were asked to take part in this research and gave us your email address

1. When you used the Acas Online Help, were you using it... (please cross one box only)

- As an **employer or manager**, calling about your organisation and/or its staff (e.g. in your role as an owner, manager, line manager, pay clerk, HR manager etc.)
- As an **outside representative calling on behalf of an employer** (e.g. in your capacity as a consultant, lawyer or other external representative)
- As an **employee**
- As a **former employee**
- On behalf of an employee or former employee** (e.g. as a friend/relative, solicitor/trade union rep. or other employee representative)

2. From the list of subjects below, please indicate which were covered by your query.

Please cross **all that apply**.

- Maternity, paternity and adoption:** (e.g. Maternity rights, Paternity rights, Parental leave, Leave relating to adoption)
- Contracts:** (e.g. Terms and conditions, Notice period/pay, Probation period, Rights of casual/temporary/fixed-term workers)
- Diversity and discrimination:** (e.g. Race discrimination, Sex discrimination, Disability discrimination, Sexual orientation discrimination, Religion or belief discrimination, Age discrimination)
- Discipline, dismissal and grievance:** (e.g. Discipline procedures, Dismissal, Grievance procedures, Bullying/harassment)
- Absence, sickness and stress:** (e.g. Absence, Sick pay, Stress)
- Family friendly policies:** (e.g. Flexible working regulations, Rights of part-time workers, Time-off for dependants)
- Holidays and working time:** (Holiday entitlement, Working time regulations, Bank/public holidays)
- Redundancy, lay-offs and business transfers:** (e.g. Redundancy/redundancy pay, Lay-offs /short-time work, Company take-over/merger)
- Wages (including National Minimum Wage):** (e.g. Non payment/Deduction of wage, National Minimum Wage, Other wage issues)
- Others:** (e.g. Trade union issues, Information and consultation issues, References)
- Anything else (Please specify below)**

3. Please indicate how far you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by crossing one box on each row.

Thinking about your use of Acas 'Helpline Online', the information provided...

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Answered your enquiry in full	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helped you to decide what to do next	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was valuable to you	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gave you the confidence to deal with similar issues in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. After using the Acas 'Helpline Online' service, did you then go on to seek further information or guidance by calling the Acas telephone Helpline?

Please select

If yes, please give reasons for using the helpline below:

5. Considering everything, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received from the Acas 'Helpline Online' service? Please select one only.

Please select

**The next few questions are about your workplace and the larger organisation that your workplace is part of. By workplace we mean the site or location at, or from, which you work**

6. Approximately how many employees are there at your workplace? Please select one only.

Please select

7. Is your workplace part of a larger organisation? Please cross one box only.

Please select

*If Yes to previous question, approximately how many employees work for the organisation as a whole? Please cross one box only.*

Please select

**8. Do you work in the... (please cross one box only)**

**Please select**

**9. Does your workplace have a personnel or human resources specialist or department? Please cross one box only.**

**Please select**

**10. Do you have any responsibility for introducing or changing policies and/or procedures in your workplace?**

**Please select**

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION (Please note that this section is optional, and any information you choose to provide will help to ensure that ACAS is meeting the needs of all sections of the population).

**11. Are you...**

**Please select**

**12. What was your age on your last birthday?**

Age:

(In years)

**13. It is possible that Acas may undertake some further research to follow up on particular issues arising from this research. Would you be willing to be re-contacted by Acas for this purpose? Acas will use your personal data for RESEARCH PURPOSES ONLY.**

**Please select**

**Thank you for completing this mini-survey. One of our research team will contact you by e-mail to let you know if you are eligible to take part in this research.**

I confirm that I am willing to take part in an online focus group, and have access to a computer with a broadband connection and a landline telephone line (Please note that full information including system requirements will be provided)

Please select

Alternatively, if you would prefer to provide your details over the phone, please call us on 02070365783.

Please note that TNS BMRB will not be able to provide any advice or guidance on employment relations – the online groups will be focusing purely on your use of the Acas 'Helpline online' service.



