



**Tax**

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## 'The whole thing stinks': outsourced ATO call centre workers shocked by conditions complain about inexperienced staff

Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand also say the ATO's 'phone system just doesn't work'

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Rob\* was part of an group of 16 workers hired by a private operator to answer phone calls for the Australian Taxation Office's custom After training, the cohort was put on the phone lines and three immediately quit. Within six months, only four staff from the origina "I was just shocked about what goes on in these places - it's unbelievable," says Rob, who worked for the private equity-owned Prob biggest outsourced call centre operator.

"The pressure they put these people under is extreme, every minute is monitored, and if you go over the call time, they'll let you kn

"The whole thing stinks, [the ATO have] transferred these jobs off to private enterprise, and the pay is dramatica companies to pocket the difference."

Those on the other end of the phones have also noticed.

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The Tax Ombudsman has been receiving reports of deteriorating service on the ATO phone lines from tax agents, who note that they who cannot provide informed responses.

According to an [ombudsman's report](#) released last month, outsourced workers - half of whom have less than a year's experience - an ATO calls, including those from tax agents.

And one of the problems is the huge turnover at the for-profit operators, according to the report.

In 2024-25, staff turnover across the outsource centres was 125%, although the data did not distinguish between the operators. This c ATO's internal workers.

In other words, it's as if the outsource companies' entire staff roster turned over during a calendar year, and then an extra quarter of

## Same work, lower pay

Workers like Rob **typically earn about \$26.70 an hour**, which amounts to a base salary of about \$52,800 a year, according to interview former staff. The rate rises to just above \$60,000 for team leaders.

The ATO's direct employees, working on the same phone lines, generally earn over \$72,000.

The outsourced workers argue that despite having the same duties, systems access and security obligations as ATO employees, the p training and inferior working conditions to the public service are extreme.

When Rob was working on the phones with Probe, he could increase his pay by \$2 an hour if he averaged 25 calls a day over a two-we

But other staff monitoring the calls could also declare a "strike" if they believed he gave inadequate responses, voiding his bonus for

The bonus system gets periodically adjusted, but is still broadly designed to encourage workers to take 25 calls a day, with "strikes" c nullify a bonus.

Denise\*, who works with Probe, says the incentives were so vague she "genuinely doesn't know how they work".

"Team performances can also mean some teams get extra money for pizza parties, or at least that is what they tell us. I've never seen

She says training is organised by ATO staff but provided by private contractors, which she describes as "woefully bad".

"We do the best we can when it comes to vulnerable taxpayers and I've handled a number myself. It's hard on outsourced staff as we which feeds into our turnover rate," she says.

"Vulnerable taxpayers mean longer phone calls which we are monetarily incentivised against as it affects our average handling time.

"As far as I'm aware, we are cheap and our stats are monitored down to the second, saving millions compared to ATO workers."

Probe declined to respond to questions, which included queries about the workers' experiences, pay rates, staff turnover and bonus

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## Tax agents unhappy with service

The KKR-owned Probe, the Nasdaq-listed Concentrix Services and the British multinational Serco [share in call centre contracts with](#) according to analysis of government tenders.

The ATO also uses a [private debt collector](#), although staff at the outsource call centres have also chased debts.

The contracts were enacted after a 2023 directive by the Labor government for all agencies to “move away from outsourcing work th APS or the agency”, referring to the Australian public service.

While consumer advocates have raised significant concerns over how the outsourced model affects vulnerable taxpayers, tax agents Susan Franks, from Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand, said the ATO’s online services needed a major investment to agents, while “the phone system just doesn’t work”.

“We would prefer the ATO’s phone calls to be answered by somebody with experience in tax and a deep knowledge of tax, rather than changing ... and haven’t got tax experience,” said Franks.

The Australian Services Union’s national secretary, Emeline Gaske, says the government must focus on procurement policies that de pay for workers delivering essential services.

“The federal government should be a model employer and ensure that outsourced labour arrangements it engages in don’t drive a ra and conditions, and leave workers in insecure jobs,” Gaske says.

Serco declined to comment, while Concentrix referred questions to the ATO.

The ATO declined to respond to a series of questions, including queries about the high staff turnover at the outsource centres, pay ar incentive schemes.

## ‘You get what you pay for’

Blair\*, a former worker on the ATO lines for Serco, says his work day began with “absolute pain” – just in finding a parking spot near Melbourne suburb of Box Hill.

But he says the parking issues were nothing compared to a job in a system he describes as “failing workers and the tax-paying public

“You get what you pay for; it’s not a good system for staff retention or the caller,” Blair says.

“The training is pretty basic, and the rest is just learning on the job; you are constantly calling over supervisors, and some supervisors they don’t know any better.

“You’re trained by people who have been trained in a hurry to bring other people up to speed. You’re getting what they think you ne possible, and hopefully you pick it up. If you don’t, you’re out, next person’s in.”

*\*Names have been changed due to employment confidentiality provisions.*

**Do you know more? Contact [jonathan.barrett@theguardian.com](mailto:jonathan.barrett@theguardian.com)**

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