

Urgent Telegram: Phone Calls: Healing the Trauma, Changing Lives.

From: ruth@atypical.tips

To: Customer Service Departments, Utility Companies, Internet Service providers, Financial Institutions, Government Agencies

CC: Neurodivergent Customers and users

Importance: High

Action: In order to meet their obligations under the 2010 Equality Act, businesses and public authorities must implement reasonable adjustments for customers and service-users who are disadvantaged by ADHD.

Deadline: 10 September 2011 (Overdue)

Summary:

Businesses and public authorities are failing to meet their legal duty to anticipate the needs of customers and users who are disadvantaged by problems with working memory, processing information, time-management and inattentiveness. Reasonable adjustments to be implemented as a matter of urgency. Below I share some personal insight and offer a number of recommendations.

Background:

I experienced a familiar sense of dread when dialling the number of a government agency today. Having daydreamed through the automated questions and repeatedly entered the wrong options on my keypad, I finally got through to someone who was, thankfully, friendly, patient and helpful.

I was particularly taken aback by her offer to send correspondence printed in large font on coloured paper. Being able to spot important letters among the anonymous envelopes that litter my house would be life-changing. "Oh God, yes please", I replied, with a lump in my throat.

My emotional response caught me off guard and got me thinking about the layers of trauma I carry from countless futile attempts at resolving administrative issues over the phone: forgetting to ask a question, not having the right reference numbers to hand, being too embarrassed to request clarifications, pretending to understand numbers and amounts, wanting to ask the person slow down but worrying I will sound stupid...

On the rare occasions when I end the call with a clear understanding of what just happened and a road map for what to do next, the satisfaction is short-lived and any clarity evaporates within ~~minutes~~ hours. An avalanche of inadequacy tumbles to the pit of my stomach eclipsing any light from an otherwise happy day. Since a negative mood has a debilitating effect on my brain function and productivity, this can have serious implications.

It's little wonder I delay making essential calls. Of course, this compounds the problem and by the time I ~~have plucked up the courage~~ am forced to pick up the phone if I want to keep my home/bank account/phone/internet/electricity, what would have been a minor administrative task has grown unruly tentacles, and metamorphosised into an ugly ecosystem of complex puzzles.

Before attempting to navigate the maze, I am required to deliver my pre-rehearsed excuses and to repent for my sins. "*You should have called earlier/called a different department/filled in a different form*", my interlocutor will say, oblivious to the emotional power of her stomach-piercing words.

I will never meet her, never speak to her again. Her opinion doesn't matter. And yet, in my regressed state she is an authority figure. She is the teacher reminding me I've forgotten my homework, the examiner deducting a mark because I missed a question, the horrified driving instructor slamming on the breaks to prevent me hitting an elderly couple while I'm distracted, the librarian telling me to be quiet when I think I'm whispering, the official grilling me about my budget when I have no idea how to do one. She is anyone who has ever asked me quizically, "*aren't you cold?*" when I've forgotten my coat, the countless perfectly groomed women offering me unsolicited reassurance that I "*could actually be pretty*" if I "*just made an effort with my hair*". She is every authority figure who has ever reminded me how useless I am at life. As if I didn't know.

This is such a frequent occurrence that I'm in fight-or-flight mode long before I pick up the phone: primed for the oncoming onslaught, ready to defend myself against the reprimand, ready for battle.

Recommendations:

However, after this morning's painless experience I began dreaming about what it might be like to make a shame-free call, tick it off my list then get on with my day. The administrative utopia I envision looks something like this:

- 💡 **A single, named contact person**
There is a strong chance I may have to call more than once since I will have forgotten something the first time around. In addition, my failure to deal the issue at an early stage, or in the right way, is likely to make my case more complex. Dealing with one person who has an overview means I don't have to repeatedly explain (and be told) how useless I am.
- 💡 **Telephonist script to include a question about any additional needs (with the option of referring to a specialist team if necessary)**
Some organisations already have specific teams to handle calls from people with particular difficulties. Others make the claim on their website but in reality gate-keep the service like they are guarding class-A drugs. God forbid an unworthy beneficiary gets extra support. It's not easy to admit that I need help. Please don't make me beg.

- 💡 **Key information such as contact details and case number to be sent by email. Failing that, telephonist scripts to include a prompt to note these down.**

I frequently forget to ask the right questions, so it's vital I can speak to the same person when I call back. At the end of every call I kick myself for not asking the person's name and promise myself that I will remember next time. I never do.

- 💡 **A follow-up email containing key information including figures, dates and action needed presented in bullet points or table form.**

This would allow me to refer back to the information, paste it into different applications and snooze the email as a reminder. It also gives me an invaluable timeline of my interactions with a particular organisation. For extra points, financial information, to be sent in a spreadsheet that can be uploaded to money management applications.

- 💡 **The option of customising reminder frequency and format**

One reminder is simply not enough for my embattled brain. Receiving the reminder both by email and by text increases the likelihood that the information will filter through to my consciousness.

- 💡 **Appointments to be sent as links in all formats (Ical, Outlook, Google etc.)**

Adding them to my calendar in a single click would reduce the chances of me forgetting and missing important appointments.

- 💡 **Call a spade a spade!**

Euphemistic terms for unpleasant things doesn't lessen the blow. On the contrary. It's confusing and could mean the difference between tackling the problem and putting it to one side. If you are making me pay something, call it a fine. If I need to fill something in, it's a form. If I have to do something at a certain time, give me a deadline...and don't get me started on job titles. You're fooling noone. No one likes your jargon except the overpaid people who spent way too much time coming up with it.

Final thoughts:

I have always been a fan of clear communication but I was an amateur until I took a job writing diplomatic telegram on bilateral relations for ministers at the British Embassy where I learned from the masters. Aware of competing demands on a minister's time and attention, diplomats would edit our drafts ruthlessly, restructuring paragraphs and slashing adjectives, before sending them back for more work.

This game of word ping-pong would continue for hours, sometimes days, with one objective: to allow busy ministers to take in important information and make decisions quickly. Telegrams had a punchy title and were in an easy-to-read font. The summary signposted the reader to the policy lead, any action required, key dates and other essential information. If they wanted to know more, they could read on.

CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED. FOR WIDE CIRCULATION.

I dream of a world where neurodivergent service users are treated with the respect and consideration shown to ministers. That's why I am stepping out of my comfort zone to demand that my needs are met.

Best regards

Ruth Bartlett

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