

20. J Walker

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This is a copy of a letter I have just sent to the Mercury newspaper in Hobart. I believe it explains one big disincentive for older people in the workforce.

Sir

So the government wants older people to stay in the workforce. I am 69 and have just made three trips into town, spent several dollars on parking meters and spent three half-hours hours on an unanswered phone in vain attempts to simply report my occasional casual earnings to Centrelink.

If you do not receive a pension or are not unemployed you may not have had cause to deal with Centrelink in recent times and may not know that they have gone “self-service”. Believe me, it is the biggest farce anyone could have dreamt up.

I am not allowed to post in a copy of my pay sheet. My only choices are to sit for a minimum of one hour in an office, or wait over 30 to 40 minutes on their “express” phone line. If I phone from home and get through after the same length of time I find that every Centrelink number now takes you to an automated program which asks for your customer number, your pin number, your full name, repetition of a set of numbers and an answer to a secret question before you are “authenticated” whereupon a robot asks you to listen to nineteen menu items, asking you to either repeat the menu item or “say that one”. If you fail to do this with sufficient speed, the menu starts again at the beginning.

Then you discover there is no menu item for reporting earnings for those on age pensions and despite the huge push for everyone to “go online” so you don’t have to wait in an office, I have been informed that those on age pensions are not eligible to do so.

The new method in Centrelink offices also entails queuing up at the entrance to tell your private business to a “liaison officer” who after asking questions and listening to answers which are audible to the rest of the queue, tells you to go “online”, wait for at least an hour, or ushers you to a phone where the whole fiasco repeats itself. So far I have overheard the details of one young man just out of prison and another who had lost his job – the issue of privacy seems to be unknown to this department.

We used to have a Seniors department in town but this closed last year and now those of us who have worked and paid our taxes for half a century are forced into these humiliating circumstances. One office even has a “toy town” carpet printed with directions of where to line up.

This is not how older Australians, or anyone for that matter, should be treated. And if you think I am exaggerating, I suggest you “go online”, google “Centrelink complaints” and see what it comes up with.

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