

Evaluation of the Europe Direct Contact Centre

**Executive summary of the final report
To the European Commission
Directorate General for Communication**

**Evaluation of the Europe Direct Contact Centre
Under Framework Contract No.
DG BUDG No BUDG06/PO/01/LOT 003
ABAC 101908**

EPEC

June 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides the results of the evaluation of the EUROPE DIRECT Contact Centre (EDCC) and its ability to address the information needs of the European public with regards to information about Europe.

The assignment was undertaken by EPEC between September 2009 and May 2010 within the framework contract of DG BUDG No BUDG06/PO/03. The evaluation was commissioned by DG Communication (DG COMM).

Object of the evaluation: The EDCC

The EDCC is a part of the European Commission public information and communication policy. The EDCC aims at providing coherent information to citizens in the Member States about the EU and its policies so that they feel adequately informed about the EU. Its main task is to answer questions from the public concerning general information on the EU's activities and policies, and to guide citizens towards the sources of information and advice that best meet their needs.

As an information service the EDCC can be accessed from anywhere in the EU and beyond. It operates via three communication channels:

- a call centre;
- an e-mail service; and
- an interactive, real-time Web assistance service.

The EDCC operates in addition to a number of information services for specific DGs. Such services include the Research Enquiry Service for DG RTD, the Export Helpdesk for DG TRADE, Air Passengers Rights information for DG MOVE and a helpdesk for the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

As a complement to its main role as information provider the EDCC provides a feedback service to the Commission services. The feedback is provided through reports covering issues such as scope and nature of enquiries as well as reviews of issues or user groups.

The EDCC is managed by DG COMM. Actual service provision is outsourced and currently contracted to ESN. ESN started operating the EDCC service in April 2008.

Objectives of this study

The aim of this study was to evaluate the ability of the EDCC to address the information needs of the European public with regards to information about Europe. The study had three main objectives:

- To assess the ability of the EDCC to address effectively and efficiently users needs for information on EU matters;
- To assess the visibility of the EDCC, awareness of the service among target audiences and its reach into the public sphere; and,
- To assess the contribution of the EDCC to the overall Commission efforts to inform and communicate the EU to European citizens.

Furthermore the evaluation paid specific attention to the identification of the profiles of the current users of the EDCC and explored the possibilities for attracting new audiences. It also focused on the quality, coherence and relevance of the information provided by the EDCC and the efficiency of the operational aspects of the service. Finally, the evaluation addressed the issue of cost efficiency of the EDCC.

Approach and method

The methodology for the study was developed in light of the objectives of the study provided in the ToR. The report relies upon data collected through the following methods and tools: user surveys; desk review of the EDCC and monitoring data; consultations with EDCC staff and DG COMM staff; consultations with DGs currently cooperating with the EDCC and other internal users and potential users (DGs); focus groups; mystery shopping; web visibility mapping; benchmarking; organisational review and IT audit.

Key findings

Relevance and effectiveness of the EDCC: To what extent does the EDCC satisfy the users' needs in terms of information on EU matters?

Meeting external users needs

The EDCC provides relevant and useful information to those using the service and replies in a satisfactory manner to their information needs. Satisfaction with the information received is high among all types of users. There is also a high level of satisfaction among users of the different services (web chat, email and telephone). Some minor differences with regards to satisfaction were noted with regards to the users of the Research Enquiry Service (lower satisfaction than average), citizens from the EU-12 (lower than average) and users of the telephone service (higher than average).

The evaluation results suggest that the activities of the EDCC have contributed to the main objectives of the service: the provision of adequate information on EU issues to citizens; the contribution to an increased awareness of EU issues; and an increased awareness of the rights and opportunities that the EU provides. However, the actual use of the service is very limited, if compared to the total EU population. In 2009 the EDCC received a total of 99,095 enquiries from an estimated 0.01% of the EU population. Given the small number of users the contribution of the EDCC to each of these objectives is small.

Meeting cooperation partners' needs

The services provided as part of the specialised cooperation agreements with DG RTD, DG TRADE, DG MOVE and EIT are considered valuable to the cooperation partners. As a result of the cooperation with the EDCC, the relevant DGs have benefited from a range of efficiency and effectiveness gains that have contributed to a significant added value.

The feedback mechanism, which is intended to provide the EC and its services with a basis to develop more tailored communication services and quick responses to misperceptions and issues of concern, operates less effectively.

The EDCC feedback services comprise, in the main, various reports on enquiries. The reports are useful for general monitoring of the service delivery and for providing a 'quick overview' of the topics of interest to users. However, in their current form the EDCC

monitoring reports provide very little data on the nature of the users, the purpose of enquiries and the 'real nature' of enquiries. If monitoring reports are to serve other purposes than monitoring they need to be enhanced with a more in depth qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Currently the feedback reports are not widely used to inform communication activities or political intelligence. The data are of limited interest to potential users who typically have a number of other information sources at their disposal.

The EDCC data have contributed to the monitoring of the implementation of one EC Regulation (Air passengers' rights¹). There may be scope for information from the EDCC to contribute to policy work in other policy areas. The systematic registration of enquiries and access to data may provide useful inputs to policy reflection.

Service delivery and ability of the EDCC to reply to questions of different levels of complexity

The service delivered is to quite some extent based on referrals to informative websites and to other information services/actors. It will not be possible to substantially enhance the quality unless the scope of the EDCC services is changed. The EDCC may not currently interpret EU information, provide legal advice or use sources of information other than those of the EC.

There is scope for the EDCC to improve the provision of information, building upon the already positive results. Currently improvements could be made through an increased use of the EC information as a basis for developing replies, as an alternative to simply signposting to EC information sources.

The EDCC's ability to provide answers to complex questions is less good than its ability to provide answers to simple questions. Typically, answers are less adequate and less well-adapted to complex questions. Incremental improvements of the service may contribute to addressing this situation.

The EDCC has a good overview of additional information sources and systematically uses these to reply to questions. Compared to the previous contractor the EDCC makes better use of and links up to other EC services and networks. Furthermore, referrals to EC networks are fairly systematic and consistent.

EDCC visibility: To what extent is the EDCC known to the general public and specific audiences as a tool for getting information on the EU?

The awareness of the EDCC among potential users is low, as is the use of the service. It is estimated that the EDCC serves around 84,000 users annually representing about 0.01% of European citizens. Less than 6% of the EU population is likely to have heard of the service.

To the extent that citizens have used the EDCC, it appears to be acknowledged as an important source of information on the EU. The service is, however, so little known that it cannot be considered that the service is 'acknowledged by the public as an important tool for getting information on the EU'.

Users and use of the service

¹ Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 establishing common rules on compensation and assistance to passengers in the event of denied boarding and of cancellation or long delay of flights

EDCC users are typically well educated, often holding a university degree, mostly aged 25 to 55 years old and already mobile or interested in moving and/studying abroad. The users having these characteristics represent two thirds or more of all users. Users are furthermore predominantly IT literate. Four out of five users use the Internet for private and/or professional reasons on a daily basis and most users search for information and news on the Internet on a regular basis. In these respects they are markedly different to the 'average' European citizen.

Typical users are professionals, working in the private or public sector or are independent.. Compared to the European public at large higher education students are , over-represented. The unemployed and retired represent below 10% of users. Other occupational groups are rare (<5% of all users).

The users of the EDCC appear very interested in European affairs, and, compared to European citizens at large, well informed about their rights. They are familiar with EU information sources: 85% report having used Europa website at least once. They also use other information sources to collect EU information such as the Internet and to a lesser extent EU publications.

About 40% of the enquiries submitted by users to the EDCC relate to information gathering used for professional purposes. Typically such information requests concern the collection of general information, documentation and legislation, and information on funding opportunities.

Private use of the service frequently relates to the collection of information on personal matters, such as rights of a user as an EU citizen in a specific situation, concrete problem solving, citizens' rights or employment opportunities in the EU, and to a lesser extent on citizens' participation in various EU programmes.

Europa is the main access point to finding the EDCC followed by the Internet in general. Other access points are rare. Considering that a majority of EDCC enquirers use Europa, it is not surprising that users generally find it easy to find the EDCC.

Promotion and visibility of the EDCC

The EDCC has been subject to very limited promotion targeted directly at potential users of the service. Promotion of the service has in recent years been focused on internal promotion with the aim to make the EDCC the first point of call for any citizen or other actor having questions to the EC – as well as the first point of call of other DG lead communication campaigns. This 'internal promotion' has yielded some results but there remains considerable scope for extension of cooperation with other DGs.

Promotional activities implemented by DG COMM and targeted directly to potential users are quite limited. Currently there is no strategy to guide promotional activities. Instead a number of activities have been implemented during occasional events in Brussels. The air passengers' rights communication activities have been successful in reaching a significant share of the EDCC actual users – and has had a sustainable impact on use.

Web promotion is limited to ensuring EDCC visibility on Europa. However, there is significant variability in the promotion of Europe Direct across Europa and European web sites for the public at large.

EDCC visibility in the public realm

The visibility of the EDCC in external information channels (third party informative websites and the media) may potentially be an important contributor to awareness raising of the EDCC amongst European citizens. The review of the EDCC web visibility and media coverage however suggests that the EDCC has only a low level of visibility in these sources. Apart from the websites of EU institutions, it is estimated that some 750 to 900 European websites/web pages include a reference to the EDCC.

The data available suggest that the EDCC enjoys a very low level of media coverage. A review of the effects of the TV coverage furthermore suggests that it yields only small and short term effects on the number of enquiries. The current approach of DG COMM not to focus on media coverage and media publicity appears justified, both because media coverage has limited impact and because the EDCC is not geared up to respond to marked occasional increases in enquiries.

EDCC efficiency: To what extent are the services provided by the EDCC user-friendly and timely

Efficiency of the EDCC organisational structure and processes

The broad organisational structure of EDCC is consistent with its overall mission and objectives when set against four evaluation 'barometers': compatibility with strategic and operational requirements; consistency with Commission strategic and operational priorities; convergence with the agendas of co-operating DG's; and coherence with broader policy priorities and initiatives. EDCC has put in place internal management, administration and governance arrangements to support its strategic and operational objectives. Internal management and administration operate effectively.

The current staff complement is consistent with the EDCC's mission, objectives, service user needs and SLA. The evidence would however suggest there is possibly an issue of surplus capacity outside peak periods. The staff skills base, supported with access to specialised knowledge is sufficient to ensure an adequate knowledge base to enable the EDCC to operate efficiently. Training and professional development is comprehensive, well-resourced and systematically applied – and compares favourably with other call centres. The EDCC's annual staff turnover has been broadly in line with the industry average of 20%, though it has increased from 15% in 2008-09 to 23% in 2009-2010.

On the whole, the existing EDCC technical infrastructure is fit for purpose. The choice of using open source tools ensures that the foundation for the applications are rooted in an open technology, that can be extended and used by future applications using a standard methodology. The infrastructure and choices of technologies seem sound from a technical perspective. The ToR for the EDCC regarding IT aspects and requirements uses however broad and imprecise language, which potentially could raise issues.

Performance of the EDCC with respect to communication channels, service levels, and language coverage

The communication channels available are considered relevant and useful (telephone and email – and to a lesser extent web chat which is only used by less than 3% of all users) and the tools available to contact the EDCC are easy to use. In terms of operational aspects i.e. politeness, understanding of user requirements, flexibility and responsiveness to users, the EDCC performs satisfactorily.

The EDCC meets most of its SLA targets, and EDCC has shown a marked improvement in meeting targets in 2009. In a number of cases, however, the results of the mystery

shopping results were less positive. The EDCC's SLA are stricter than comparable services, and meet or exceed the industry norms.

The EDCC staff possesses very good languages skills. The requirement to provide services to users in all the 23 official languages reflects the vision of the EDCC service and in particular the broader aim to promote citizen participation and engagement. However, user demand for services in the different languages varies widely. 81% of all enquires are made five languages: in contrast 1% of all enquiries (1385 enquiries annually) are made in 7 languages.

Applying new techniques

The data that the reporting tool provides is used by DG COMM to ensure that the SLA are being fulfilled by ESN. A more sophisticated extraction of statistics could give a better picture of which questions are currently being asked, which kind of questions have been asked historically, and how do enquiries vary between means of communication etc. As the EDCC service is the public's gateway to asking information on EU issues there is a considerable 'data mining' potential.

The information could be used as a dynamic web service integrated in EU web efforts by providing dynamic FAQ's and current Hot Topics. The EDCC could also benefit from exploring the possible advantages in using SMS texting and IVR technology and call forecasting.

Cost effectiveness of the EDCC

The costs of the EDCC to the EU are high. The current costs per enquiry dealt with are significantly higher than with the previous contractor. There are two main factors that explain the high unit costs:

The 'specificities' of the EDCC – and in particular the relatively low number of enquiries, combined with the requirement for the EDCC to provide responses to telephone enquiries made in all 23 EU languages during working hours. For this the EDCC needs to have personnel available at all times fluent in these languages. High set up costs and staff requirements regarding education and linguistic skills also contribute to high costs.

The Contracting procedures – although intended to ensure value for money, the previous call for tender only attracted few bidders. The limited market supply, combined with price structure of a (high) 'basic price' and a (low) 'marginal price' for enquiries beyond those included in the basic price, has contributed to the high cost of the service – as the current number of enquiries is low (and falls within the basic costs).

Recommendations

Strategic considerations

The EDCC set out as objectives to provide coherent information to EU citizens so that they feel adequately informed on the EU. It also aims at promoting citizen participation and engagement and giving a 'voice' to EU institutions. The EDCC aims at a wide audience, from 'any European citizen' as well as enterprises to quite specific user groups. These objectives are broad and there are currently no in-depth considerations on how large the usage should be or who should be the primary users of the EDCC.

There is a need to reconsider the vision and scope of the EDCC, and to set out specific and measurable objectives for the service. Accordingly it is recommended that:

- A. DG COMM sets out a strategy for the EDCC – including SMART objectives for the service. The strategy would include considerations on the scope and size of service, on which audiences the service should mainly focus on, the focus of the service, the provision of information services to the constituencies of other DGs and EU institution and links and support to other EC networks and services.

Europe Direct is only ever likely to be used by a small proportion of the European population. Most citizens do not know what to use the service for, or which questions to address to the service. An increase in the number of enquiries would however potentially be possible if the EDCC was promoted more actively. A higher usage would be a necessary condition for ensuring cost efficiency of the service – if the EDCC is contracted out on the current terms.

In addition to considerations on scope and aims of the EDCC, there would be benefits in reconsidering the current institutional set up. The Commission has chosen to provide the services via public procurement and outsourcing to private suppliers. The main reason for this approach is the wish to achieve value for money.

Outsourcing, however, has entailed high unit costs and the change in contractor has required a significant period of adaptation. To these disadvantages of contracting should be added that the contractual framework may be a constraint to making incremental revisions to the service.

In these circumstances consideration should be given to alternative institutional mechanisms for delivering the service. Accordingly it is recommended that DG COMM:

- B. Considers alternative options for the current institutional set up – possibly through incorporation of the EDCC into an existing or new Executive Agency.

This arrangement could reduce the costs of EDCC servicing in all official languages and communication channels. The integration of the EDCC in an Executive Agency may also enable the exploitation of Commission internal resources to speed up responses, and enable the technological capacity of the service to be enhanced leading to improvements in efficiency and quality. Furthermore there would be better opportunity to coordinate the promotion and development of the EDCC because the Commission would have more direct control over resource planning.

Visibility and promotion of the EDCC

If the EDCC is to increase usage and the number of users significantly it will be crucial to undertake a wider range of promotional activities than the activities currently implemented. Accordingly:

- C. It is recommended that the Commission/DG COMM develops a plan for promotion. Promotion should be composed of two aspects: Internal promotional activities and External promotional activities.
- D. Internal promotional activities should be targeting other DGs, EC institutions and possibly other EU institutions. These promotional activities should aim at gradually extending cooperation agreements and the role of the EDCC as a first stop shop for any enquiries sent directly to the EU institutions – including systematic promotion

on Europa. Internal buy-in could be gained by advertising the efficiencies, economies of scale and the current effectiveness of the service (customer satisfaction, etc).

- E. External promotional activities should be targeted towards external 'new' users. The EDCC has the potential to expand the number and range of its users to include other interested individuals. External promotional activities will need to focus on citizens who potentially would have an interest in gaining access to information provided by Europe Direct. Issues of interest are typically related to 'life changing' events (moving, changing jobs, getting married, divorced etc. within the EU) as well as citizen's rights and EU programmes (that could be of interest to 'new' users). The main potential target audiences that would have an interest in these areas include: students in higher education; young professionals; and local information service intermediaries/information institutions. Another potential target group is teachers.
- F. Information on the EDCC needs to be timely and available where it is searched for or where citizens are exposed to it. This would imply systematic promotion on national and local information sites – including sites which cover topics of thematic relevance to the topics covered by the EDCC. Promotion would also include viral marketing and capitalisation on European campaigns.
- G. External promotion needs clear to be clearly focused on thematic topics of interest. As EU affairs are often remote for EU citizens it will be important when promoting the service to create 'personal' hooks to which the EDCC can be related.
- H. Media campaigns promoting Europe Direct should not be used as they are likely to be ineffective.
- I. If target audiences are set to cover groups such as students in higher education, young professionals and employees of local information services, there would be a potential benefit of reducing the overtime by limiting the service to email and web chat channels – which are the preferred mediums for these target groups.

Improving services to external users

The high level of satisfaction with the services currently provided suggests that significant changes in service delivery are not necessary to meet user needs. However, incremental improvements of service delivery could be ensured. Accordingly it is recommended that DG COMM:

- J. Sets out stricter requirements regarding the form and the content/quality of the replies provided by the EDCC.
- K. Develops a more systematic approach to monitoring and control of the consistency of the replies provided by the EDCC.

If the depth of service delivery is to be altered a change in the mandate of the EDCC would be required. The high level of satisfaction with the service among actual users suggests that such a change is not necessary. In contrast it is possible that the remit and scope of service should be changed if the EDCC is to take up a more active role as proposed in the Feasibility study 'Streamlining European Networks'.

Improving services to DGs – including DG COMM

The services provided to cooperating DGs are relevant and provide efficiency and effectiveness gains. The 'listening' function of the EDCC is, however, not useful, and does not have the potential to contribute substantially to the EC information and communication policy. Feedback services in contrast have a potential to inform and to offer strategic guidance in the development of EDCC service and promotional activities. For this feedback function to be effective a change in the way the mapping of enquiries is undertaken and the way in which the data are analysed is required. This change in the monitoring system should be accompanied by the introduction of a system for surveying users. Accordingly it is recommended that DG COMM:

- L. Abandons feedback reports with an objective to provide political intelligence and 'listen' to citizens. Instead increased focus is given to analytical reports aiming at understanding the use of the service and users of the EDCC.
- M. Reviews the categories which are used to collect information on users and the enquiries in order to include more relevant and informative categories.
- N. Reviews the monitoring reports provided on a regular basis and sets out stricter requirements for these – including an in-depth and cross analysis of the categories (i.e. purpose of use, topic of interest and themes of use). They would also contain a qualitative analysis of a sample of enquiries – in order to present insight in the nature of the use of the EDCC.
- O. Requires the EDCC to set up a system for regular surveys of the EDCC users.

Increasing efficiency of the services

In addition to considerations on encouraging additional use (which would lead to greater cost efficiency) and to considerations on the organisational set up via an Executive Agency there would benefit in the Commission considering the following actions:

- P. Modifying services –merging where possible additional services with the EDCC. these services could include the Citizen Signpost Service and back office functions to the Europe Direct Network – this could ideally be combined with an alternative institutional mechanisms for delivering the service.
- Q. Reducing telephone access to the service and use of remote staff for 'rare languages': The most costly service is the telephone service. The use of 'remote' staff could very effectively be used if the EDCC was located in an Executive Agency. The discontinuation of the web chat could also be considered as it is very little used and relatively expensive.
- R. Using of FAQ's and current Hot Topics in the EDCC website. Significant efficiency gains could be achieved via the integration of FAQ's and current Hot Topics in the EDCC website and cooperation DGs websites. List of FAQ and Hot Topics could be provided depending on the interest of a given user (appearing automatically when selecting the topic of the enquiry). Cost efficiency gains using FAQ and hot tops can however only be achieved if the number of enquiries increases as the EDCC currently has over capacity - and hence have resources available to reply manually to enquiries within the current budget.

In contrast considering the aim of the service it would not be appropriate to reduce language coverage – even if overall the cost with this service is significant.

Aspects related to the forthcoming invitation to Tender for the EDCC service (2010)

This study recommends that the current organisational set up is reconsidered and that the EC integrates the EDCC service within the Commission Services - possibly within an Executive Agency.

However, should the Commission wish to continue to contract the service, the following recommendations are made with respect to the forthcoming Invitation to Tender for the EDCC:

- S. Depending on the overall strategy that is to be set out regarding the scope of the EDCC services, it is recommended that DG COMM assesses the intrinsic value and overall importance of providing both an email, web chat and a telephone service. On this basis eventual considerations on limitations in service delivery may be considered. Call centre services are increasingly becoming email based – as they are associated with higher efficiency. Thus in a longer term perspective a phasing out of the telephone service should be considered.
- T. It would be beneficial if DG COMM requested a cost breakdown for the telephone and email service per language – and an option to add or remove on additional languages from the service in its upcoming Call for Tender. This would allow DG COMM to assess actual costs of additional languages.
- U. There would be benefit in setting out clear requirements for the monitoring system and what should be monitored – including categories and requirements to monitor actual time spent on an enquiry. Also, the requirements for analytical reports and user surveys need to be clearly developed.
- V. There would be benefit in clearer specifications for the IT system to be put in place to support the operation of the EDCC.

Finally, it should be noted that if the number of users increases within the current institutional setup (i.e. contracting), DG COMM's back office might need to be reinforced. In addition, more cooperation agreements will be needed to shift some of the workload from DG COMM to other DGs. If the number of enquiries increases whilst the back office function is not strengthened and /or new cooperation agreements are not developed, there is a significant risk of backlog of all escalated enquiries to DG COMM.

If the EDCC is located in an Executive Agency it could also be envisaged to integrate back office services there. This could potentially address capacity issues in the back office.