
The Use and Abuse of Voice Mail

On February 13, 1997, a member of the Ontario Legislative Assembly introduced a private member's motion to get rid of voice mail. A number of other members participated in the discussion. The following article is based on extracts from the debate. Bill Murdoch is the member for Grey-Owen Sound, Gilles Morin represents Carleton East, Gilles Bisson represents Cochrane South and Bob Wood represents London South.

Bill Murdoch: The 20th century is about to come to a close. It will be remembered for many advancements in technology that have made life easier and more enjoyable for all of us: inventions like the vehicle, the television, the computer and the telephone, just to name a few. But before we move ahead into the 21st century, I think it's necessary to take another look at the telephone.

In the past, if you wanted to talk to someone in a provincial government office, you simply dialled the number. The receptionist would answer your call and direct you to the person you wanted to talk to. If that person was not in the office, the receptionist would take down a message and give it to that person when they returned, and they could phone you back.

However, this has all changed. A few years ago someone, who probably thought they were contributing to the advancement of the telephone, introduced the invention called voice mail. At the time the inventor probably thought he or she was doing a good thing. In fact, what they introduced was the death of telephone communications as we knew it. Nowadays, if you want to get hold of someone in a provincial government office you dial a number and many things can happen.

First, you can be put into a telephone directory where the cold voice of a computer lists a number of confusing options. You are instructed to pick one of the options and press the corresponding number. If you miss one of the options, you have to wait until they are repeated. If the list of options does not include your question or concern, you have the option of blindly hitting a number and pleading your case with anyone who may answer.

Second, if you are lucky enough to reach the right person but they are not at their phone or are on the phone, you are thrown into the voice mail system again. You are

left with a choice of leaving a message that may never be answered or hanging up and calling again.

These are just two of the examples that I am sure a number of legislators and their constituents are familiar with. The voice mail system is not designed to benefit the caller. It is designed to benefit the end user.

I am not totally against voice mail. I do use it after hours in my office. But during the day people deserve to speak to a human being. This is a policy in my office.

Bill Murdoch

The following are a few of the reasons why the provincial government should pull the plug on voice mail:

- Rural and northern Ontario residents get whacked with long-distance charges every time they call Queen's Park. That is not fair.
- Voice mail promotes laziness. Even the most dedicated provincial employee is tempted to let a caller disappear into the voice mail abyss.
- If you are calling from a pay phone and get a voice mail you can kiss your quarter goodbye.
- A phone call to a provincial government office is a call to action, not a voice audition.
- If you have enough patience to listen to the message and press the right button, you may be told, "Sorry, mailbox full, please call again later."
- It is a big, fat waste of money. We will still have receptionists to answer the phone when callers hit zero.

- In the Common Sense Revolution the government promised practical ideas for making the government work better for the people it serves. Getting rid of voice mail would be a step in the right direction.
- The taxpayers of Ontario pay the salaries of all provincial civil servants, elected officials and their staff and therefore deserve to talk to a living, breathing human being when phoning a government office and not a machine.

For these reasons I am strongly urging the House to support the removal of voice mail from every provincial government telephone paid for by the taxpayers of Ontario. The taxpayers are our customers and it is our job to listen. I do not know how anybody could disagree with this simple concept. Voice mail should be left behind on the scrap heap of useless 20th-century inventions like the Rubik's cube, new Coke and spray-on hair. This is not a political issue. It is a matter of common sense. Let's get rid of voice mail before it is too late.

Gilles E. Morin: This resolution gives me an opportunity to talk about my concerns about how our commitment to public service has deteriorated. Our colleague's resolution also gives us the chance to debate whether the technologies we have adopted really serve the public. I think everyone would agree that automated phone systems have become an annoyance.

Maybe I am exaggerating, but it certainly is true that calling any business or government office has become an obstacle course of multiple choices, none of which are quite right for your purposes. A warm hello and a straightforward answer are the exception rather than the rule these days. We are trimming down government operations in the name of efficiency. But what about effectiveness? Is saving money the only vision that guides your actions? Or is public service still something we can be proud to stand behind?

Although automated answering systems are an annoyance for everyone, they are especially an issue for seniors and other vulnerable people, like some in the disabled community. For people who were not raised with technology or those who are frustrated by complexities, there is much that is confusing and offputting when getting the runaround from a machine. Many simply give up.

I think we need to remember that regardless of economics, certain principles and basic rights apply, and these rights and principles are non-negotiable. We are in office by the grace of our electors, but our responsibility is to serve all the people of Ontario. Regardless of their

situation, each of them has the right to a direct relationship with their government in whatever form serves them best.

I believe that politicians and bureaucrats are criticized in exact proportion to their indifference to the constituents they come in contact with. On each occasion that we in the public service treat a constituent with respect and courtesy, we improve the reputation of government as a whole.

As a former minister for seniors, I met with many wonderful and challenging and, yes, demanding seniors. As a minister without portfolio, I had little in the way of money to offer towards these projects. Nevertheless, they appreciated the interest. I and others in my position showed to their concerns a great interest. My experience proved to me how important it is that the lines of communication remain open, both with interest groups and with individuals.

To raise a side issue but still a relevant one, it is my opinion that the previous government's decision to disband the office for seniors' issues was a real mistake. Advocacy is a big part of our work, but to really understand people's concerns, you have to get close to them and the office gave the signal that the government was listening. In its time the ministry, the 1-800 line, was receiving 15,000 calls a year and each call was dealt with personally.

Whatever reorganized system we finally end up with, we must be careful not to create a Fortress Ontario to defend us against the very people we are meant to serve. To understand things we have never experienced is almost impossible; to not even try is inexcusable.

Gilles Morin

The office for seniors issues offered a program that was incredibly valuable called "Through Other Eyes". It allowed participants to experience first hand some of the disabilities that seniors and others must live with every day. I must tell you going through the experience really opened my eyes. The frustrations of having to deal with your own limitations and then adding the frustration of dealing with a convoluted government information system would drive you right round the bend.

This government is determined to see us as a business. Whether that approach is correct or not continues to be debated. However, if we accept the basic premise and conduct the business of government in a businesslike

fashion, we must pay attention to customer service, and as one financial services giant says, "One customer at a time."

Mr. Murdoch's resolution deserves our support as a way to let the people of Ontario know that the government of Ontario is open for business, and that means their business, once again.

Gilles Bisson: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in favour of this motion, but I want to say for the record: I am not a Luddite. I think I am known as the technological guy of the caucus who drives his staff crazy at all hours of the day and night with e-mail messages and all kinds of fancy-dancy little things that we can do on computers, but I have got to say that I agree with the member.

The big issue here is that often, not only within government but within the private sector, incoming lines where the public is trying to get hold of somebody for a particular service are greeted by a voice mail system. I will just give you the example of a couple of situations I have had to experience over the last little while.

A constituent called me in January, and said, "I was trying to get hold of somebody in the Ministry of Education." It was a fairly serious complaint. The system they had there was not only voice mail; it was like a call-screening system so that when you call up the individual it says, "Who do you want to speak to?" and you press the particular number – they give you a directory – so you get to the person responsible for the particular complaint. Then when you get there you are supposed to leave a little message saying who you are and what your complaint is about.

This poor individual would call, I believe it was the Ministry of Education, and say, "I'm calling about this particular thing," and from the tone of his voice the person at the end figured out that this person obviously was somewhat upset. Needless to say, nobody ever answered the phone. I suggested call them up and say you are calling to congratulate them on a wonderful initiative and bang, the phone will be picked up right away.

The other one I had was about two or three weeks ago, and this one drove me crazy. I was up in Timmins and there is a 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock flight on Monday mornings back into Toronto from Timmins. I was booked on the 10 o'clock and my constituency appointment was running later than normal; a particular individual had a problem. I needed to call in to Air Ontario to rebook my time so I could go back out at 11. They've just introduced

this system where you call in and they say, "Welcome to Air Ontario; your call is important to us," and they went on to give me about 27 different choices of what I had to press to get what I wanted. By the time I actually figured out all the buttons I needed to press because the whole rigamarole was quite incomprehensible, I missed my flight. No kidding.

It took me 15 minutes to work my way through that one and one of them was, "If you know the flight you're on, please press in the flight number." Well, who knows what flight number they are on? You have got an open ticket is how we travel. I had to listen to all the different cities coming up and all the different times – I am telling you, it was more complicated than it needed to be. I ended up coming here at 2 o'clock instead of 11 o'clock. The point I am trying to make here is that I wish this motion could go further than just the government. They need a bit of common sense in the private sector.

Voice mail is a useful tool if properly used, but I certainly suggest that the member's going in the right direction in saying we should eliminate voice mail from the face of the public services.

Gilles Bisson

I say to the member for Grey-Owen Sound, I support generally the motion you are bringing forward. I only want to put this one caveat. I think voice mail is a good tool, if properly used. I think voice mail is fine for within the bureaucracy. If I am trying to get hold of your private line and you are not around and I want to leave some detailed message, I would still like to have the ability to call up the member for Grey-Owen Sound, his own personal, private voice mail system, where I can say: "Hey, Bill, something's going on and here are the details. Would you get back to me."

The interface between the public and the civil service, and the public and businesses should be: We reach a receptionist or we reach whoever the person is who is responsible, to take our inquiry. There is nothing more frustrating.

Did you ever try to call the family support plan line? That one takes the cake. If you want to see something that is in total disarray, never mind the system, call that number. I have constituents, who literally, for days, sit by the phone and ring and ring and keep on calling. They never get through.

One of the reasons we are using voice mail is because there is not enough staff within the civil service. The

government is trying to make itself more efficient, so the government tells us, because I have inquired about this before, and one of the ways it did that was lay off a whole bunch of people and it is using voice mail systems with a vengeance. The reality is that one of the reasons we have all this voice mail is the government has laid off most of the staff, in some ministries over 50% of the staff, like MNR and MTO; there are a lot fewer employees there to deal with inquiries.

Bob Wood: I rise in my capacity as skunk at the garden party to give the Management Board point of view on this matter.

The Management Board agrees with the complaints that have been offered by members from all sides of the House. But we see the solution as not being to get rid of the technology, but to make the technology serve the people. We would like to point out that voice mail is essential to the productivity and cost-savings that the voters have made clear they expect us to deliver, along with good customer service.

We currently have over 25,000 voice mail boxes, used by individual government staff. Using voice mail, a typical government office with 200 staff and four receptionists could save more than \$100,000 or 80% on message-taking costs. The cost of voice mail at \$8 per line is only a small fraction of the cost of full-time receptionists, who often earn more than \$30,000 a year plus benefits at the Ontario public service rates.

While voice mail is occasionally a nuisance, it can also reduce the cost of phone tag by allowing for detailed messages and responses, rather than second- and third-hand messages that can easily be garbled in

transmission. There are also more than 400 audio text information mailboxes which provide prerecorded program information. Most of these provide toll-free service for long-distance callers. Technology also allows for the renewal over the phone of thousands of routine transactions and licences, saving taxpayers time and money.

The answer to the very legitimate concerns of the member for Grey-Owen Sound and others is to make voice mail work for the people.

Bob Wood

The biggest criticism often made of automated communication systems is that they do not always have the kinds of human backup systems that may be necessary when our constituents' inquiries do not fit into a particular bureaucratic pigeonhole. Government is committed to improving its communication systems and, wherever possible, to ensuring there is a real, live human being available to back up the system when various forms of automation will not provide adequate service. In short, the Management Board believes, "If you can't fight 'em, join 'em."

We understand that a good number of members may well vote for this resolution in frustration. We personally do not support it because we feel the answer is to make the system work for the people rather than getting rid of a system that can do a lot of good for all. We can provide better service at less cost, and surely that is the bottom line.