

To: UC Programme Board Members **From: Will Garner**
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Paper Title: Use of journal for broadcast communication

Issue: UC is often asked to broadcast communications to all claimants via the journal. We believe that the journal is not a good way to do this.

Recommendations/Decisions required:

- **For Information / below the line paper.**

Introduction

1. The UC journal was designed for a specific purpose as a record of interactions between a claimant and the service.
2. The UC programme often gets requests to use the journal to communicate to all UC claimants at once.
3. This kind of non-specific communication was not what the journal was designed for, and as such has a number of issues.
4. Because the journal was not designed to be used in this way it is technically difficult to deliver, as demonstrated last year by the £20 uplift messaging.

What the journal was designed for:

5. The journal has multiple functions, including:
 - Summarising information claimants have declared and actions they have completed via automated entries.
 - Recording notes from claimants and agents that are visible to both parties.
 - Providing an asynchronous messaging channel, as claimants and agents can address these notes to each other.
 - Sending bulk journal messages from agents to claimants on their case load, for example informing them of training or new vacancies available that match their experience.
6. We have evidence that claimants already find the journal confusing because of both the variety of use cases and the resulting number of entries in it.

There are a number of issues with using the journal for broadcast communications:**A. Effectiveness at reaching claimants:**

7. We have no confirmation that a journal message is actually read by the claimant. We know that only 80% of claimants log in to their account in a given month.
8. A journal message cannot reach all claimants. About 200,000 claimants have telephony claims, and so don't have a journal. An alternative method will be needed to reach them.
9. Communicating via journal message presents a number of barriers to some claimants. Digital access issues affect a much wider population than just telephony claimants. This loss of access could be temporary. Complicated messages delivered solely via the journal could be difficult for some claimants to understand, for example if they have difficulty reading or if English is their second language. These problems are mitigated for other uses of the journal, as they are either a record of something the claimant has done themselves, or a conversation with an agent who can be asked for help.

B. Driving additional contact

10. Other journal messages are specific to that claimant and their agent and to activities the claimant is aware of. As the claimant is expecting the message it is unlikely to drive further contact. With broadcast messages this context is missing, which may lead to an increase in contact via telephony as claimants want an explanation of how this message relates to them.
11. It is easy for claimants to reply to a journal message with a journal message of their own. The claimant perception of the journal as a messaging service almost encourages this. We don't want agents to have to deal with replies to a broadcast message.

C. Damaging the relationship between agent and claimant

12. There is a risk to the relationship between agents and claimants if claimants perceive these messages to be coming from the agent. This is especially a problem for messages about potential help available. The claimant may have already discussed this with an agent and discovered the help doesn't apply to them. Subsequently receiving a broadcast message could offer false hope or look like the agent is ignoring the claimant's personal circumstances.
13. At a more serious level, there is no control of abusive journal messages. This is already a problem, but could be made worse, especially if the broadcast message is not perceived by claimants as advantageous.
14. We have processes in place to look out for messages that indicate vulnerable claimants may be at risk of harm. Broadcasting difficult messages to all claimants at once may put stress on these processes.

D. Undermining the important of other messages

15. There is no distinction or prioritisation of different types of journal message. A broadcast message about potential help with broadband costs (for example) would appear equally prominent as a message from their work coach with a job vacancy or a request to provide evidence needed to unblock payment. There is a risk claimants end up missing important messages.
16. Each journal message results in a notification to claimant to check their account (as there is a message for them in the journal). We want claimants to trust these notifications and assume that if they get one it is because there is a message for them personally to read. Sending the same message for a broadcast communication that may not apply to the claimant could lead to claimants viewing these notifications as spam and therefore subsequently missing important messages from their work coach.

E. Cost of additional SMS messages

17. Sending automated SMS notifications asking claimants to log in to their account and read the journal message has a financial cost which will not have been accounted for. The subsequent log ins will generally require another SMS message for two-factor authentication, which again will be an additional cost above our forecast rates.

F. Performance impact of asking all claimants to log in at once

18. The service cannot handle 6,000,000 claimants logging in at the same time (mainly because the authentication process relies on sending out codes via SMS). If we don't stagger the journal messages sufficiently then the resulting log ins can overwhelm our SMS service, effectively preventing claimants from logging in. This is essentially a self-inflicted denial of service attack.

Our experience from the £20 uplift communications showed that broadcast journal messaging is hard to deliver:

19. When the £20 uplift was removed in Autumn 2021 we sent two rounds of journal messages to all claimants to inform them. This highlighted a number of problems with using the journal to deliver this kind of message.
20. This work distracted a team for around 2 months. It wasn't the whole team working on the problem for the entire period, but it was enough of a distraction to significantly slow progress on other agreed priorities. The largest impact was on our technical development capacity, which was already our biggest constraint.
21. To send a message to all claimants we had to:
 - Write and build a custom journal message. This can't just be the equivalent of a normal agent message if we want it to contain links to more information.
 - Build some logic to determine who gets the message. The removal of the £20 uplift didn't apply to claimants still in their first assessment period, so we didn't want to send the message to them.

- Filter out phone claimants. We initially forgot to do this with the first £20 uplift removal message, leading to a large spike in calls from worried claimants asked to log in to an online account they didn't have.
- Build something to trigger the message gradually. As above, the service can't handle all 6,000,000 claimants logging in at once, so the notifications have to be sent out gradually.
- Actively manage the triggering manually over a period of weeks to avoid the performance problems mentioned. There's no way of automating the service to send out as many messages as we can cope with, because the performance problem is an indirect one caused by the subsequent log-ins. The number of messages we can send varied by time of day and day of the week. To get them out as soon as possible we had to actively monitor performance and trigger messages for a period of weeks.

Summary

22. This paper has been brought to this meeting because PDE asked for a summary of UC's position on using the journal for broadcast communications. Our position is that the journal is not a suitable channel for broadcast communication to all UC claimants. It is not what the journal was designed for, and the previous attempt to do it demonstrated how difficult it was to deliver. Alternative communication methods should be considered, whether inside the UC service or outside.