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Are Qantas making up the Telephone Sales strategy as they go along?

ASU members would be forgiven for thinking that the telephone sales strategy is being made up as they go along. The conflicting information we have been given since the closure of the Melbourne and Brisbane centres was announced certainly supports this contention and the meeting between your ASU reps and the company on 23rd September to hear the latest version of the plan serves only to reinforce that view.

As we know on Monday 22nd September – 4 months after the initial announcement and strategy on 22nd May – Qantas decided that despite telling staff and the world that it was not offshoring the telephone sales jobs Qantas management have decided to do just that. In May we were told that all the jobs would be going to Hobart irrespective of how many existing staff decided to relocate to Hobart, we were told that Auckland was not going to grow beyond its capacity of 150 – all the growth would be in Hobart. This was because the Tasmanian government had stumped up a \$10.9m subsidy to Qantas to stay in Hobart and put new jobs there.

This week that “promise” is no longer true (if it ever was) – Qantas is now putting at least 50 new jobs in Auckland and only creating 60 new jobs in Hobart. You wouldn’t know that from the announcement that John Lonegran sent out about the changes on Monday – you only know that because the ASU told members what is proposed.

What we found out

We found out a lot of disturbing things about the “new strategy” at our meeting with Qantas yesterday – here is some of the main points:

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- To accommodate the 50 new jobs in Auckland – Qantas is leasing a new floor in their existing building which will have a capacity for 50 -70 more seats and a training room (i.e. more than is needed for the 50 new staff) – this is an additional cost despite the half empty Hobart call centre (which could absorb the new staff without cost) and the lease in Brisbane which has until 2018 to run but which is going to be broken. Clearly there is money to spend – just not on Australian staff.
- Unlike the Tasmanian government – the New Zealand government is not providing any incentives for Qantas to put jobs in their country.
- The Company intend that there will be 270 staff employed in Hobart and 200 in Auckland at the end of the closures in 2016. Currently there are 531 staff in Brisbane & Melbourne and 210 in Hobart and 150 in Auckland – i.e. a total of 891 now down to 470 by 2016.
- Qantas is not saying “what” the new IT systems they are planning that will reduce call volumes so that waiting times do not go through the roof – they just keep saying they have IT solutions in the planning stage.
- Hobart and Auckland will have different operating and management models apparently that is a justification for separating the work they say. What those models will be is still being “planned” over the next 2 months – but supposedly there will be different KPIs and management styles – your guess is as good as ours what that means as Qantas clearly does not know – it sounds like some sort of HR speak from a text book to us to justify more jobs in Auckland.

- Overseas calls will still also be handled by Auckland
- One justification for putting the jobs in Auckland was the inability to train enough staff in Hobart – we really cannot fathom how this is so but it was said to us.
- There are no plans to change the Hobart operating hours beyond the 7am – 12 midnight span. This means that the premium customers will be handled by Auckland outside of these hours – so much for the model separating customers – it is likely that Hobart will get calls intended for Auckland at peak times too – given this fact it beggars belief that all the new jobs cannot be created in Hobart.
- Qantas says that they are not extending the span of hours in Hobart because staff there do not want this – they could not elaborate how they gauged this opinion – it seems they are relying on the “vibe”
- Qantas says that the future of customer interaction will be based around web based and social media type work yet the company refuses to put the social media or web based work in Hobart because there are existing staff performing these jobs in Auckland. The existence of current staff doing their jobs has not stopped Qantas making thousands of Australian redundant so we can’t see how Auckland staff are immune. If the future is in that sort of work – what is the company’s real commitment to Hobart?
- Qantas has not yet signed any agreement with the Tasmanian government – no one can explain why there is such a delay.

Confusion reins

We understand that Lyell Strambi has confused many staff in his presentations recently when he attempted to explain how job swaps and redeployment will work. This was very unhelpful and the company will be formally putting out information about how this works which is contrary to what was represented in some meetings. We know that there are going to be limited opportunities for redeployment but you should not be discouraged from applying for jobs because of some ill-informed throw away lines from an senior manager who does not know the detail of what we and Qantas HR have been discussing.

Qantas will also be shortly clarifying the position which they have so far confusingly expressed but which is that any staff member in Brisbane and Melbourne can change their mind at any time before their centre closes and opt to go to Hobart regardless of what they have said previously. Jobs will continue to be available there for Brisbane and Melbourne staff.

What’s next?

Your ASU delegates do not think we should just accept the offshoring of the jobs to Auckland as a result of some ill-conceived half-baked plan that is still being formulated. Qantas promised that no jobs would be offshored – we have to hold them to that. There is no good reason we can see for not giving the opportunity for a career at Qantas to an extra 50 Tasmanians. The Qantas group already has over 1250 call centre jobs offshore – enough is enough.

At a time when other companies are bringing call centre work back to Australia – Qantas is doing the opposite, this does not bode well for the passengers of Qantas.

Watch out in the next few days for what you, your family, friends and passengers can do – if Qantas is not going to stand up for Australian jobs – we have to and we must

Organisers

State	Name	Phone
TAS	Kath Ryman	0429 004 237
VIC PS	Imogen Sturni	0433 339 656
QLD	Jo Justo	1800 177 244