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Qualitative Research on CRA’s Secure Portals with Tax Intermediaries

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Canada Revenue Agency

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For more information, please contact: cra-arc.media@cra-arc.gc.ca

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Canada

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Supplier Name: Sage Research Corporation
January 2023

The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) commissioned Sage Research Corporation to conduct a qualitative public opinion research study on various aspects of the CRA's secure online portals. Five two-hour online focus groups were conducted between November 3 and 15 2022, with one group in each of the following regions: Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies and Pacific. For all focus groups, the qualified participant was a tax intermediary professional working in a small or medium-sized firm who acts as a representative for small or medium business clients or individual clients on tax matters.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre: Recherche qualitative sur les portails sécurisés de l'Agence avec des intermédiaires fiscaux.

101 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario   K1A 0K2
Canada

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Executive Summary

Given the current environment and as more Canadians make use of online services, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) is reaching out to tax intermediaries to explore channel preferences for tax filing and capturing their experiences when accessing and using the CRA's secure portals (*My Account*, *My Business Account*, and *Represent a Client*). This research project is intended to identify and explore barriers that may impact the ability to effectively use the secure portals and determine which services/assistance could increase the overall client experience.

1. Research Purpose and Objectives

The objectives of this research were to:

- Explore reactions to the concept of single sign-in and to proposed designs for the single sign-in log-in and *Welcome* pages. Single sign-in will provide access to the CRA's digital services from a single authenticated secure portal, as compared to the current system of separate sign-in pages for *My Account*, *My Business Account*, and *Represent a Client*.
- Get suggestions from tax intermediaries for the functionality of a new online service that will be a centralized hub for future communications and interactions with the CRA. This centralized hub will include the *Mail* section of the secure portal landing pages as well as other capabilities for communication and interaction with the CRA.
- Explore reactions to a new design and new features for the *Mail* section of the secure portal landing pages.

2. Methodology

Five two-hour online focus groups were conducted between November 3 and 15, 2022, with one group in each of the following regions: Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies and Pacific. For all focus groups, the qualified participant was a tax intermediary professional working in a small or medium-sized firm who acts as a representative for small or medium business clients or individual clients on tax matters. Additionally, all used the CRA's secure portals at least several times per week, either on average during the year or during tax filing season. There were five to six participants in each group, for a total of 28 participants. Participants were paid an honorarium of $225.

3. Limitations and use of the findings

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the topics explored, but cannot be statistically generalized to represent the full population. Qualitative research does, however, produce a richness and depth of response not readily available through other methods of research. It is the insight and direction provided by qualitative research that makes it an appropriate tool for exploring participants' opinions on the CRA's secure portals.

Results from the research will be used to support and influence business decisions, to inform the design, development, and enhancements of digital services. The findings will be shared with program areas to identify opportunities where programs, services, and large-scale projects can be adapted to better address user needs digitally.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Single Sign-in

Reaction to the single sign-in concept depended on whether the participants were considering their usage as a tax intermediary or as a business client user of the CRA's secure portals. In terms of their usage as a tax intermediary, the majority did not see a benefit to single sign-in, as most of their usage is through *Represent a Client*. However, most said this would be good for business clients who have both a personal *My Account* (MyA) and one or more businesses – and therefore one or more *My Business Accounts* (MyBA). The perceived benefits for business clients included:

- The user sees all their accounts in one place, which gives them a better view of all their accounts with the CRA.
- The user does not have to manage/keep track of multiple log-in credentials. Single sign-in makes it more convenient to access different accounts.

Small numbers of participants (one or several participants each) voiced concerns or made suggestions:

- With single sign-in, security is an even greater concern, because if a user's single sign-in is "hacked", the damage is greater because all their CRA accounts are exposed.
- Another security-related concern stemmed from including both personal and business accounts together, and the possibility that a coworker might see personal information that they are not authorized to access.
- Several suggested continuing to maintain the ability to log in directly to *Represent a Client*, given most of the time they only access *Represent a Client*, and this would avoid the extra step of first logging in to the single sign-in page.

Participants were shown mock-ups of the single sign-in log-in page, the *Welcome* page that provides access to the user's accounts, and a demonstration of how to switch to a different account after selecting a particular account.

Log-in page: Participants liked the design, and some particularly liked putting log-in options side-by-side, thereby reducing the need to scroll.

***Welcome* page and account switching:** There was widespread positive reaction to the *Welcome* page and to the process for switching accounts from a particular account page. Positive perceptions included:

- Overall a good design in terms of appearance and layout
- Both the *Welcome* page and the account switching processes are user-friendly and easy to navigate
- The accounts – both on the *Welcome* page and the drop-down *Switch account* menu – flag when there is unread mail

Participant suggestions included:

- Some participants suggested including the ability to create a nickname for an account. This would be particularly helpful when a user has multiple numbered companies, as a nickname could be easier to use to quickly identify a company as opposed to a company number.
- Several suggested having the ability to rearrange the position/order of accounts by dragging them. This could be used to position similar accounts together, or to put a frequently accessed account at the top – such as the *Represent a Client* account for a tax intermediary.

4.2 Communications Hub

Participants made a variety of suggestions, including:

- Integrate phone calls into the communications hub. While one participant suggested the CRA agent upload their notes to the hub, several suggested that even if the content of calls with the CRA cannot be provided, it would be good if the communications hub contained a log of calls. The log would include the date, time and CRA agent ID. This would help if the caller subsequently wants to contact the CRA and refer to a specific call, with the assumption that the agent could then look at the CRA's internal record of the call and be aware of what was communicated on the call.
- Integrate regular mail into the online communications hub by including scanned copies of mailed material – including both mail sent by a client and mail sent by the CRA. Together with integration of phone calls into the hub, this would provide a more complete online record of communication with the CRA.
- Some participants suggested the hub include online text chat with a CRA agent. There were two rationales:
  - — The more common rationale was that this could be a faster way of getting responses to "quick questions" as opposed to calling the CRA and waiting on hold. Note that the underlying assumption is that an agent would respond reasonably quickly to a user request to chat.
  - — An online chat interaction provides a written record of what was said, which could then be incorporated into the communications hub for later reference.
- There were several suggestions to expand capabilities for sending files to the CRA. The following were each suggested by some participants:
  - — Expand the types of information that can be sent to the CRA online, and a specific example mentioned by a few participants related to backdating a GST registration.
  - — Increase the number of files that can be uploaded at one time to reduce the number of upload sessions for someone who has to send a lot of files.
- There were two suggestions to provide the ability to contact an appropriate CRA agent:
  - — Several participants suggested that online mail from the CRA include a "request for an agent to call" option. The agent calling would presumably be knowledgeable about the matter, so this would reduce the time spent on the phone with the CRA.
  - — A few participants suggested the communication hub have a way to submit an enquiry to find out who specifically to talk to at the CRA about a particular matter.

- Some suggested the CRA send a confirmation whenever it has received something from a client. The perceived benefits are:
  - It provides reassurance that the CRA has received the material.
  - It is proof that the CRA received the material, in the event such proof is needed at a later time. Note that this capability is included in the new design for *Mail*, and the example *Mail* page shown later to participants included a confirmation email.
- A few participants – with agreement from other participants – suggested the communication hub have some sort of short list of common questions (e.g. "top three questions") from individuals or businesses that involve getting personalized information from the CRA, and the answers shown would contain the personalized information of the user.
- The moderator asked about interest in receiving notifications of an attempted contact by the CRA, and many participants agreed this would be helpful because people may be reluctant to answer a call from the CRA because of the prevalence of CRA scam calls. In this context, several participants suggested that the notification should include an option to request a callback from the CRA.
- The moderator asked about interest in receiving updates and reminders on changes for the upcoming tax filing season or to the website, and the majority agreed they would be interested, albeit more so for changes pertaining to an upcoming tax filing season.

4.3 *Mail*

Overall reaction among virtually all participants to the proposed design and features was positive, and often very positive. This included both the overall look of the page, and the various features. Of particular note:

- The messages in the list of messages are easy to read and clearly labeled, and it is good to have a flag the user can set to indicate items of higher importance. Some suggestions by a small number of participants:
  - Add a time stamp to the priority flag, so the user knows how long ago the item was flagged.
  - Include an option to enter a note in message description box. This could be a note about the current status of the matter addressed by the email, or a note to a client.
- Virtually all participants liked the reading pane opening up next to the list of messages, compared to the current system where the reading pane opens in a new window and the list of messages is no longer visible. This new way allows easier and faster scanning of different messages. Several suggested allowing the user to control, through dragging, the size of the reading pane, particularly if they want to allocate more space to it.
- With regard to sending enquiries and information, the moderator demonstrated the *Reply* function that would be on some emails, the action icon and banner, and the *Submit new* feature. All of these features were perceived to be useful. Several participants suggested the user should have the ability to remove the action icon from the message list once the item has been dealt with.

- With regard to mail filtering and sorting, participants liked the capabilities shown, including the addition of a *Search* function. There were some participant suggestions for additional filtering capabilities, including ability to: select multiple years rather than just a single year, select items requiring action – e.g. with the action icon, select unread messages, select items the user has flagged. With regard to mail sorting, one of the available sorting dimensions is referred to as *Status*. Several participants said it is unclear what this means. They wanted to know what specific dimension(s) *Status* refers to and how this would affect sorting.
- Participants liked the option to turn message threading on or off. That said, they were split in terms of whether and how they would use it: some would not use it, some would use it, and some would switch back and forth between non-threaded and threaded.

5. Contract Value

Contract value: $62,381.65 including HST

6. Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of Sage Research Corporation that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, and standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Rick Robson
Vice-President
Sage Research Corporation