

# Seeking Legal Help Online

## Understanding the ‘missing majority’

November 2020

# Acknowledgements

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Jo Szczepanska and Emma Blomkamp, for Justice Connect © 2020

**Justice Connect acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and their connections to land, sea and community.** We wish to acknowledge in particular the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, on whose land this research was conducted. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today as they continue to fight for justice.

**The Victoria Law Foundation supported this project through a 2019 Knowledge Grant.**

**The authors warmly thank the Justice Connect team who have contributed significantly to this project and report:** Raquel Dos Santos, Jacqui Siebel, Zoe Chan, Kate Fazio.

**We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the 15 participants who generously shared their experiences, ideas and opinions.** They are not named here to protect their identity.

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# Executive Summary

## Why Justice Connect commissioned this research

Online self-help resources can help people to solve common legal issues on their own. They are especially important for people who can neither afford a lawyer nor access free public or community legal assistance. In Australia this group is known as the 'missing middle'. With an ever-growing cohort of people in this 'justice gap', we have renamed it 'the missing majority'. As the missing majority progressively adopts technology, there are increasing opportunities to find new models of providing cost-efficient and effective free legal assistance at scale.

Justice Connect has already carried out user research on general interest in online resources, and a number of our projects now provide service access points in online settings as well as static and interactive self-help resources. Through this new research, Justice Connect is particularly interested in better understanding the opportunity to assist the missing majority through online resources – their potential as well as their limits.

Justice Connect was funded by the Victorian Law Foundation to undertake user research to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of people looking for and using legal self-help resources online to solve common civil law problems. This research aims to inform better design and deployment of digital self-help resources.

The research project was designed in early 2020, then revised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic so that all research activities were carried out remotely in July and August 2020 with 15 participants from Victoria, Australia. We recruited participants from priority groups with increased vulnerability to legal problems and often assumed to have lower capability or limited access to online resources. This includes recent migrants, people living with a disability, single parents, and people living in a regional, rural or remote community. We learned from a diverse range of people about what they found useful in online resources to help them begin to resolve legal problems related to debt, work, housing, and accessing courts remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Report purpose

This comprehensive human-centred report outlines the context, rationale, methodology and findings of this almost year-long research project. It describes the hypotheses, strategy, tactics and assumptions of the research design, as well as its outcomes in the form of insights, recommendations and design principles. These are illustrated with words and images directly from research participants. Copious quotes throughout this document ensure that readers never lose sight of the people at the heart of this project and ensure that participants' thoughts, needs and experiences are described in their own words. Visual diagrams, tables, illustrations and screenshots help to bring the research to life and provide specific examples of the methods used and actual experiences of people in the priority groups.

The report also references other literature on legal self-help. While some of this project's findings confirm those from similar research, the conclusions of this report also differ from existing research and assumptions. In particular, our research found that demographic features such as education level, language spoken, disability, location and migration status did not determine a person's likelihood to use online legal resources. More significant features were a person's level of legal knowledge, based on prior experience, and their sense of self-efficacy in resolving legal issues independently.

# An overview of the report

**Part One** introduces the context and approach of the research. It provides a rationale for the focus on certain priority groups and the types of legal problems and online self-help resources explored. It introduces the participants and describes the methods and resources used to better understand the journeys of people in the 'missing majority'.

**Part Two** presents the key insights from the research. People in the missing majority use online resources not only to understand and resolve their legal problems but also sometimes to help others. This research highlights the strengths and frustrations of this cohort, who tend to be highly capable and determined.

The research insights cover, in the following order:

## How people search for legal help online

A Google search is the first step in a help-seeker's attempt to resolve a legal problem on their own. While most people initially search by describing their problem in everyday terms, some search specifically for organisations to help them. The first set of insights describes the variety and mixed results of searching techniques used by participants in this research.

## What the self-help journey is like

The challenge of solving legal problems on your own is explored in the second set of insights. Legal jargon is confusing for most people who haven't studied law; the rules and procedures of the legal system can be opaque; and the process to understand and resolve an issue can be incredibly time-consuming. Even if help-seekers have interacted with the legal system before, and have a high level of English literacy and digital capability, they tend to find themselves in a highly stressful situation and are anxious about the outcome.

## How different resources can help and how resources are consumed

Help-seekers in the missing majority can identify which online legal self-help resources will work best and when they would use them. The third set of insights presents the results from a card sorting activity along with key themes to show how each type of resource had different ways of supporting the help-seeker. These insights draw on participants' own analyses and explanations of why they would select certain tools, when they would use them, and what combinations of resources would work best for them and their issue.

Our research participants had confidence in who to trust and what to avoid. If self-help became overwhelming, they would start looking for a professional to help them.

## How resources could be improved

The fourth set of insights covers some of the shortcomings of existing legal resources and the behaviour exhibited by people as they try to decipher and then apply new knowledge. These insights highlight issues of access, trust, accessibility, appropriateness and usefulness.

Unfortunately, for the missing majority, many of the legal resources they can access online today do not meet their expectations. Looking for practical knowledge to start the process of self-help, or at least to understand their options to make informed decisions, people are quickly overwhelmed by an avalanche of text and information. The missing majority becomes stuck when language is unclear, they don't have the 'evidence' they need to continue their journey, or resources do not work as they should.

Despite huge advances in digital technology and inclusion, many online legal resources remain limited in their design, mirroring segmented procedures, bureaucratic paperwork, and folded information handouts. Some people with disabilities cannot access or use online legal resources at all because the resources have not been designed with their needs in mind. Resources often also contain overly technical and complex language.



## How help-seekers define a legal problem

The fifth and final set of insights takes us back to the beginning of the self-help journey: the moment when a help-seeker determines they have a legal problem. These insights draw attention to the mental model and challenging circumstances of a diverse range of people who find themselves in need of legal information or assistance.

Overall, the stories from participants and examples from live searches and testing of resources highlight the differences and commonalities of searching for legal help and information online.

**Part Three** of the report presents a series of recommendations and design principles, offering guidelines for improving online legal self-help resources. The recommendations focus on how to involve people with lived experience and relevant professionals in funding, researching, designing, testing, implementing, promoting, and evaluating online self-help resources. Suggestions are tailored for this report's different target audiences: funders, service providers, and resource makers, in five main areas:

- Invest in information design and user experience
- Involve people with lived experience in making online resources
- Break down silos between sectors, organisations, communities, and self-help
- Establish communities of practice to support makers of online self-help resources
- Invest in consumer outreach, search engine optimisation, communications, and marketing

Listed in full below, the design principles offer research-informed, best practice guidelines for the development and deployment of online resources.

Part Three closes with acknowledgement of the gaps and limitations of this research and practical suggestions for future research to build on the findings presented here.

**The appendices** offer further details and examples of the research and recruitment design, including images of the actual materials used, pre-interview activity guide and interview questions, and example responses from participants representing each key archetype: the Cautious-Traditionalist and the confident Do-It-Yourself 'super searcher'.

## An overview of design principles for online self-help resources

We have developed a set of design principles for online self-help resources that provide a concise summary of learnings and offer research-informed, best practice guidelines for better design and deployment of digital self-help resources.

### Good online self-help resources must:

- be easy to find *first* by those who need them, when they need them
- have names that describe what they do
- set clear expectations
- be as easy to read as possible
- describe processes
- work equally well for everyone
- be current
- be quick to use
- connect to other resources and services
- build in extra support
- allow some people to speak to a human
- be designed with communities.



## Before we begin

This report has been designed with the following aims:

### Share best practice generative research tools and techniques

Use this research as an example of how to engage and support communities in building better online legal help resources.

### Amplify the voices of people likely to use legal self-help resources

We wanted this report to be a true picture of the diverse ways that people look for and use legal self-help resources when trying to solve a legal problem on their own. We share the voices of research participants so that you can learn directly from their lived experience. Throughout the report participant quotes look like this:

“ Exact words that a participant said.  
– Name (pseudonym)

### Offer flexible reading and use

We have structured the report for different audiences and modes of consumption, so that readers can move between sections depending on their needs. When you see bold coloured text preceded by an arrow, like the examples below, it links to another section of the document.

→ Teal links go to related sections in this document

→ Purple links go to the recommendations and advice section

### Encourage further thinking

We have used callout boxes to link content to other publications and pose provocations to readers.

**Provocation**  
What if ...?

**The Justice Project** (2017)  
Law Council of Australia

↗ tells you where there is a link out to a webpage or resource.

If you happen to have a printed version of this report, take full advantage of the links by downloading a digital copy from ↗ <http://www.justiceconnect.org.au/mmreport>

## Reading guide

If you are new to design research or human-centred design, we recommend that you start from Part One, so you can read about the research approach. After that, you can move forward or backward to revisit sections you want to discuss with peers, and skip content that you already know well.

In → **Part One** we describe how we set up and ran our research online with participants during COVID-19 restrictions.

In → **Part Two** we share what we heard, saw and learned.

In → **Part Three** we put forward recommendations for legal professionals, organisations and funders, aimed to encourage the co-creation of better online self-help resources with the communities who will ultimately use them.



# Part One. What we did: an introduction to the research

This part of the report introduces the context and approach of the research. It provides a rationale for the focus on certain priority groups and the types of legal problems and online self-help resources explored with participants. We introduce the participants and describe the research design, that is, the methods and resources we used to better understand the journeys of people in the ‘missing majority’.

To skip the rationale and methodology and get straight to the findings and examples from the research, go to → **Part Two**.

To see all the recommendations and tips for resource makers, head to → **Part Three**.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The relevance of online self-help for the “missing majority”

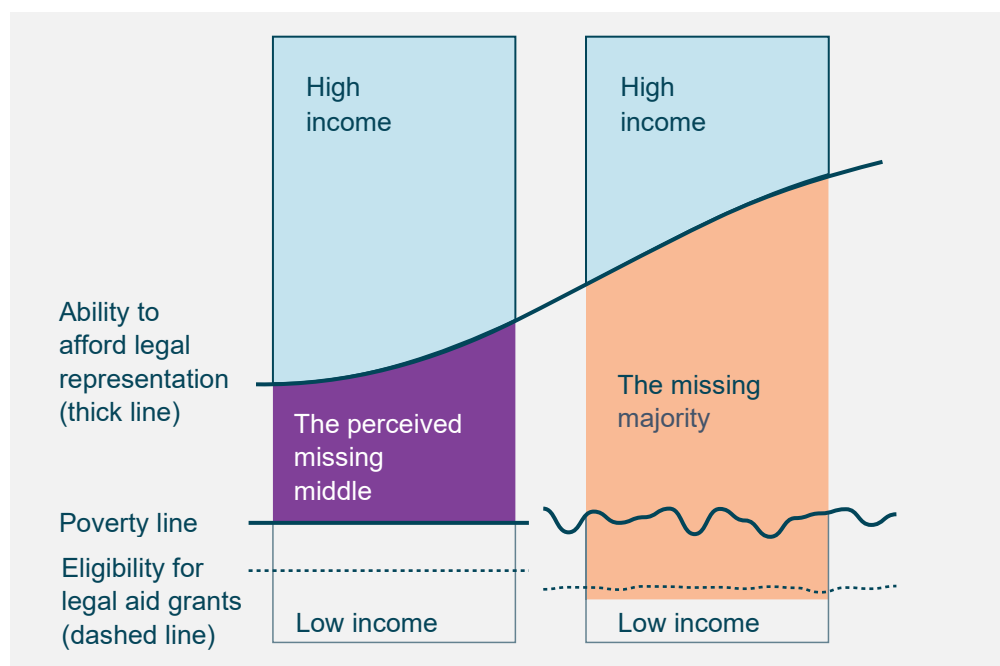
In 2012, researchers calculated that each year 8.5 million Australians have a legal problem — yet less than half access legal help (Coumarelos, et al., 2012). Millions of low-to-medium income earners in Australia are falling through the gap between what government funded systems can provide and the legal services that they cannot afford. These people have been increasingly described as Australia’s ‘missing middle’ (Productivity Commission, 2014).

In 2020 in Australia, hundreds of thousands of people lost their livelihood and/or home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and bushfires, and many had to rely on support services for the first time. With disrupted accessibility and paths to in-person services, and Google now being the go-to for many problems in life, people are looking for legal help online. In March 2020, we embarked on a research journey to better understand what people in the so-called missing middle need from online legal self-help resources.

Informed by the Legal Australia-Wide Survey (Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, 2012) and The Justice Project (Law Council of Australia, 2017), we identified key priority groups with increased vulnerability to legal problems. Our research focused on learning from people often assumed to have lower capability or limited access to use online resources, including recent migrants from non-English speaking countries, people living with a disability, single parents, and people living in a regional, rural or remote community.

We learned from a diverse range of people who live in Victoria about what they find useful in online resources to help them solve (or begin to solve) legal problems related to debt, work, housing and accessing courts remotely during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We also heard from research participants that the Australian ‘missing middle’ could be more accurately described as the ‘missing majority’. In this report we propose a shift from the concept of ‘missing middle’ to ‘missing majority’, to reflect how participants saw themselves in the legal assistance ecosystem.

**Figure 1 Comparing the concepts of the ‘missing middle’ and ‘missing majority’**



Emerging from conversations with research participants, the concept of ‘missing majority’ is supported by data showing that **only eight percent of Australian households would likely be eligible for legal aid grants**, even though around **14 per cent fall under the poverty line** (Law Council of Australia, 2018). People in the top income bracket, earning over \$156,000 per year before tax, represent 3.8% of income earners in Australia, as measured by the **Census** .

Online self-help resources are a significant part of the access to justice toolkit to deliver a solution at scale for low-to-middle income earners in the ‘missing majority’. They should be designed to augment, not replace, in-person and more intensive legal services.


Analysis of the Legal Australia-Wide Survey tells us that in 2008 only 20% of survey respondents used self-help resources to resolve legal problems. However, well-designed self-help resources, integrated with other legal assistance services, have the potential to improve the resolution and outcomes of legal problems for users (McDonald, Forell & Wei, 2019).


In the United States, research points to decades-long efforts by the legal community to develop self-help resources to educate people about the law, despite many self-help resources failing to address the psychological and cognitive barriers that prevent people from successfully deploying those resources (Hagan, 2016; Griener, Jimenez and Lupica, 2017).

This project aims to add to the limited empirical research available in Australia on the experiences of people searching for and engaging with online legal self-help resources.

Most of this report reflects the ideas, experiences and problem-solving approaches adopted by research participants. We believe that only by being informed by users’ experiences — in searching, accessing, and using online legal self-help resources — can we better understand what makes resources effective for different types of users with different types of legal problems.

Key previous research:

**Legal Australia-Wide Survey**  (2008) Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales

**The Justice Project**  (2017) Law Council of Australia



**People who can access  
free legal help**



**Missing majority  
- everybody else**



## 1.2 Project objectives

Justice Connect was funded by the Victorian Law Foundation to undertake user research to better understand the needs of people looking for and using legal online self-help resources to solve common civil law problems. The research aims to inform the better design and deployment of digital self-help resources.

The research project was designed in early 2020, then revised in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, so that all research activities were carried out remotely in July and August 2020 with 15 diverse participants from Victoria, Australia.

In this project, we adopted a human-centred approach to:

- Investigate and test existing legal self-help resources with help-seekers and identify elements for successful online legal self-help.
- Uncover levels of help-seeker confidence, literacy and capability in 2020.
- Capture some help-seeking attitudes and behaviours people have, and find out if demographics, social factors, education level and culture intersect.
- Use participatory design methods with community members to scope and design new or improved online self-help resources.
- Identify new ways to promote legal self-help resources and reach under-served groups.
- Suggest ways to reduce stigma to using self-help resources for people with legal issues.
- Provide the legal sector with suggestions on how to support people using online self-help resources.
- Bring a consistent, strong help-seeker voice to future work.

### 1.2.1 Online self-help resources, information and tools

In this report we use the term '**online self-help resources**' to describe both legal information and interactive tools that people search for on the Internet and digital applications and use in response to a legal problem. Learn more about online resources we tested with participants in → [Table 6 In-session live resource testing](#). A '**legal problem**' is a situation or incident that 'raises legal issues with the potential for legal resolution, regardless of whether the respondent recognised this or took any action involving the justice system' (McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019).

It is important to note that there is a mismatch of mental models when it comes to how the legal sector and help-seekers think about legal help and self-help resources. Legal professionals may have clear rules and language around what constitutes legal advice, legal information and the various types of online self-help resources they create; but community members are more likely to think of online legal help as a complex web of pathways and combinations.

Research participants did not talk about 'legal self-help'. When seeking help on their own, they often expected to find information, rather than a tool or resource that would enable them to resolve their situation without direct professional support. Our testing nonetheless showed that, to be helpful in solving a problem, online resources need to provide more than just information.

This supports the view that online self-help resources are most effective for certain client groups when they are combined with a range of other services and strategies to empower people to understand and exercise their rights (McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019).

#### Technology for Legal Empowerment – A Global Review ↗

by the Engine Room (2018) showcases other examples of worldwide initiatives using technology to provide more accessible legal information and services.



Fundamentally, help-seekers see legal help and self-help resources intersecting and working together to resolve a legal issue. Learn more about → [4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations](#). Legal semantics and siloed organisations meant that participants found some resources challenging to find or frustrating to use, because they were not working together as people expected.

There are links to advice on how to name pages and resources → [8. Design principles for online self-help resources](#)

## 1.2.2 Research participants: our experts by experience

Fifteen people with lived experience of legal problems involving debt or bankruptcy, employment issues, housing or tenancy, or accessing or navigating the civil justice system online participated in this project.

We identified the range of ages, characteristics, and digital confidence we wanted to investigate before recruitment commenced. We selected people with a range of legal issues, so that we could compare and contrast experiences with online self-help. We spoke to a mix of people who had used legal services before and people who may have been eligible but did not have experience with legal services.

We selected our participants based on demographic characteristics found to significantly influence the use and helpfulness of self-help resources (McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019).

The following tables summarise how participants described themselves in the screening survey.

**Table 1 Participants by characteristic**

Characteristic	
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1
Tertiary education	8
English as a second language	5
Physical disability or chronic illness	5
Cognitive impairment	2
Mental ill health	4
Single parent or carer	4
Rural or regional location	2
LGBTQIA+ community	3

→ [Read about the participant mix in section B](#) in the appendices.

See also → [5.1 Some priority groups are less likely to successfully use legal resources](#)

**Table 2 Participants by digital confidence (self-reported)**

Digital confidence	
Not confident at all	2
Slightly confident	2
Very confident	2
Extremely confident	9

**Table 3 Participants by age group**

Age	
18 – 24 years old	2
25 – 34 years old	4
35 – 44 years old	3
45 – 54 years old	2
55 – 64 years old	4

People more likely to experience digital exclusion in Australia include those who are in low income households, over 65 years, mobile-only users, did not complete secondary school, or have a disability (Varley & Bagga, Consumer Views and Behaviours on Digital Platforms, 2018).

A limitation of our research, especially because it was conducted remotely during periods of lockdown in Victoria, is that people needed digital access to participate



in it. Nonetheless, our focus on the ‘missing majority’ and participatory design principles meant activities were inclusive and accessible. For instance, we helped people to set up and use Zoom on their mobile phone for the first time and made extra efforts to recruit older men. We were thus able to include participants with low digital capability and confidence.

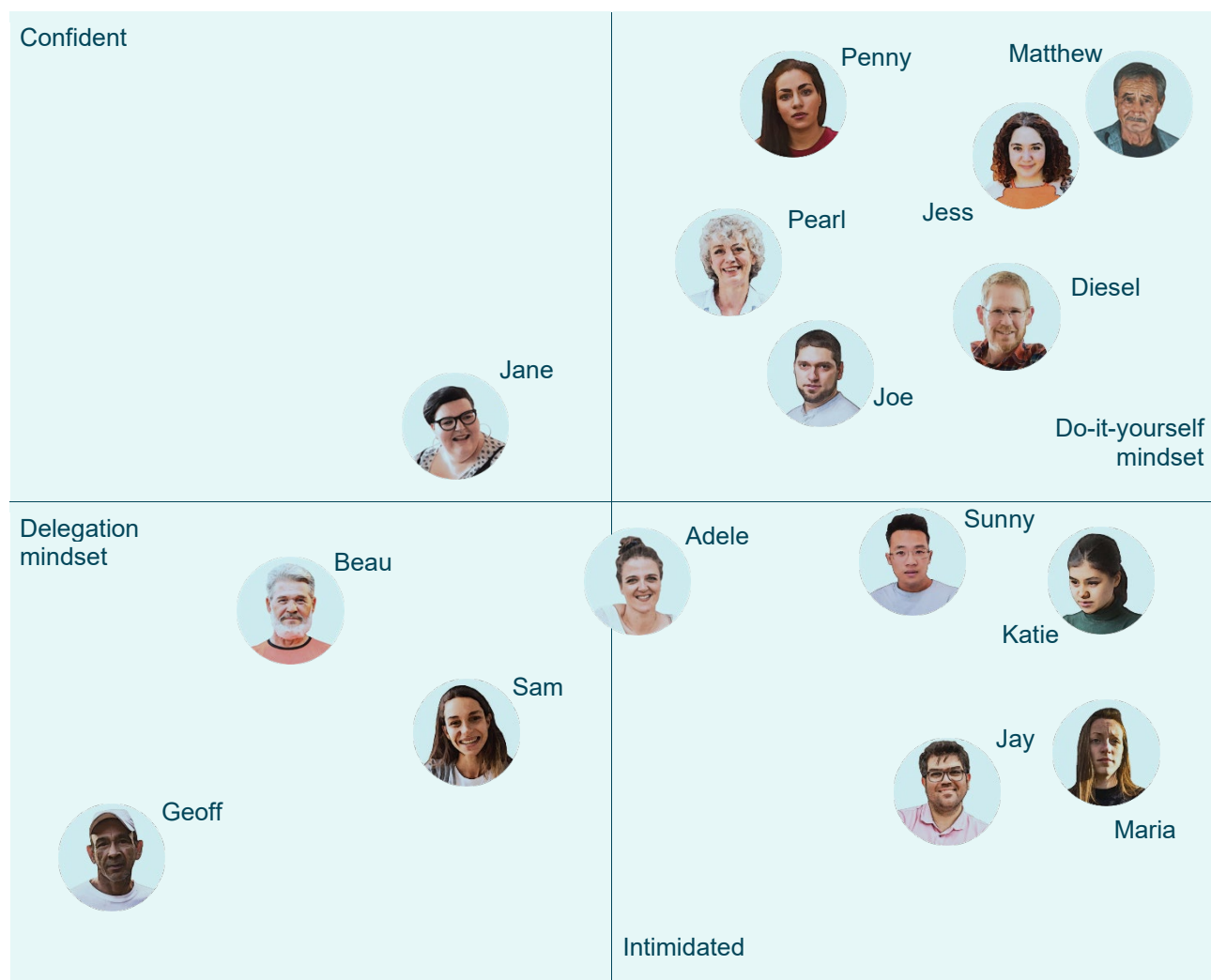
### 1.2.3 How participants reflected legal user archetypes

The table below has been adapted from Hagan (2017) to reflect how participants approached searching and using self-help resources online. Hagan’s work defined two vectors for the archetype matrix:

- **Confidence vs. intimidation.** How confident a person feels about their ability to find legal information or use resources. This can cover use of technology, legal language, or a complex system.
- **Delegation vs. do-it-yourself (DIY) mindset.** How likely a person is to try to look for a legal professional or take care of their legal task on their own.

As you will hear later through their stories, and see in the self-help journey maps (→0 **Visualising the legal self-help journey**), participants’ confidence levels and determination to take care of their legal tasks often shifted throughout their journey. They are placed below where we believe they would have been at the start of their legal self-help journey. In some cases, their placement aligns with tool type preferences → 4.7 **There is no ‘one tool’ to rule them all but there are useful combinations.**

**Figure 2 Participants mapped to legal user archetypes**

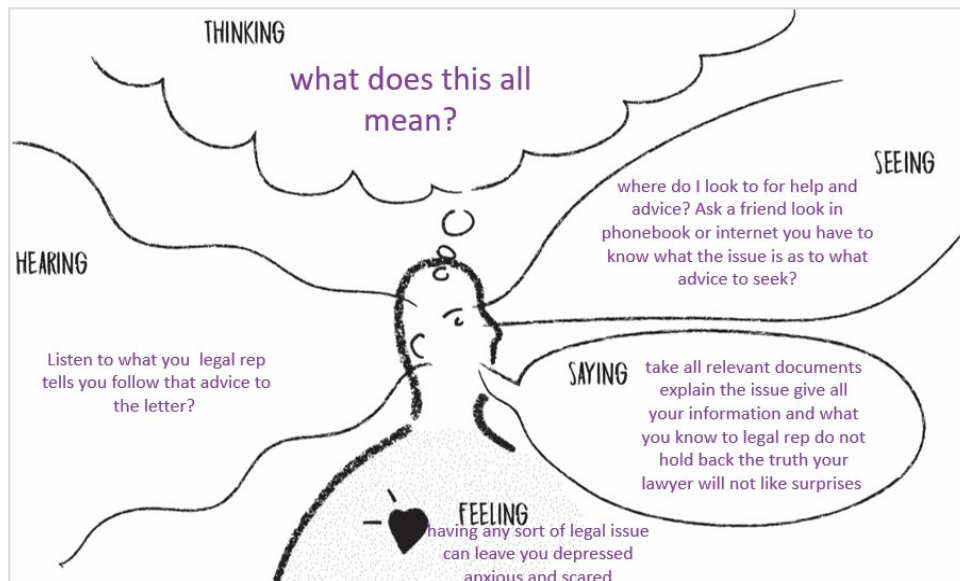


## The Cautious-Traditionalist mindset

The Cautious-Traditionalist user has a delegation mindset and is somewhat intimidated by legal processes. They are eager to hand off their situation to an expert as quickly as possible. They don't trust in their own ability to do things right or have had a poor experience of trying in the past. A Cautious-Traditionalist expects the system to be so complicated that they cannot trust their own intelligence, intuition, or research skills, even though they could be capable of resolving the situation on their own → **6.2.2 A legal problem means you need a lawyer.**

This group prefers to rely on someone who specialises in law to advocate on their behalf. This group would ideally like a total hand-over of the legal problem, but with support so they can complete tasks and try resources shared by an expert.

**Figure 3 Empathy map created by Geoff, sharing a Cautious-Traditionalist point of view**



## The Do-It-Yourself mindset

The DIY user is confident in their ability to read and comprehend information, even fairly complex legal information. They just want to get their task done and move on with life. They realise that a lawyer may help, but they feel that might be a waste of time, money or more trouble than it's worth.

This group are tech-savvy and expect they can use Google to find the guidance, definitions and strategies they need to get a legal task done. They will start on their own, asking for help later, if and when needed. → **4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations**

**Figure 4 (below) Empathy map created by Jess who was researching the law around starting a new business; a good example of a Do-it-Yourself mindset.**

## When you were looking for help What were you...

• Seeing?	• Hearing?	• Thinking?	• Doing?	• Feeling?
<p>Lots of irrelevant information (either no my situation or not for Australia)</p> <p>Lots of jargon that was hard to understand</p>	<p>Opinions of friends (Just continuing to tell me that it was important)</p>	<p>I really hope to find all the information online and I'm able to do this myself and not require the help of a lawyer</p>	<p>Researching online (many many google searches)</p>	<p>Anxious (I won't be able to find what I want)</p> <p>Overwhelmed (I'm in way over my head)</p> <p>Powerful (can't believe this is where my life is headed)</p> <p>Proud (to be in this situation)</p>

### Provocation

- Are there ways you can tell if someone is in a Cautious-Traditionalist or a Do-It-Yourself frame of mind? Do you see it in your practice?
- What different strategies might you use when assisting a Cautious-Traditionalist person to feel more confident?
- To stretch that thinking, how could you build that support into an online resource?

## 1.3 Research design

Our approach to this research was participatory, design-led and human-centred. It involved participants in a series of remote activities to capture thinking and engage them in the design of online self-help resources. We combined qualitative interviews with participatory design research techniques and usability testing approaches to capture the nuances of people's needs and expectations from digital legal self-help resources.

We ran a total of fifteen 2-hour online research sessions that allowed each participant to individually share their experiences of having a legal problem and engage with a range of interactive activities. The → [detailed description in the Appendices](#) can give valuable context to those not familiar with human-centred design or design research techniques.

**Table 4 Research activities, value and duration**

Activity	Description	Value	Duration
Recruitment invitation <i>Online and video</i>	An online recruitment video is part invitation and part project summary. It is an enacted version of a Plain English research statement that is common in academic research. Video 'call outs' explain what research activities will happen and how people can get involved as well as show who is running the activities.	Making a video can help researchers explain their project while building trust with participants. It is a good way to increase interest and buy in from diverse groups. Creating videos makes the call-out easier to share and more engaging on multiple platforms. It also makes the invitation more accessible to people who might have difficulty reading long text.	4 weeks (concurrent with screening survey)
Screening survey <i>Online</i>	Screening surveys are a way to get participants to express interest in an activity. Screeners usually contain demographic and project related questions.	Apart from demographics like age, gender, disability, employment status/income, languages spoken, highest level of education (proxy for literacy) and location (postcode), screening surveys can also ask about past experiences. Screening surveys ensure teams can identify a diverse range of potential participants, and save people being asked for such personal information during research sessions.	Open and ongoing until final participant selected
Remote activities <i>Online and in-home posted packs</i>	Remote design research activities can be used to collect qualitative data about user behaviours, activities, and experiences over time. To be accompanied by interviews, bite-size activities are designed for people to complete on their own at home.	While remote studies can require more time and effort to conduct than other user-research methods, they yield invaluable information about people's real-life behaviours and experiences at the time, rather than being recounted later.	4 weeks total (concurrent with interviews)
Semi-structured, open-ended interviews <i>Online using videocall</i>	An open-ended interview is a way of gathering information from and building a relationship with people. An interviewer asks questions of a participant, who then answers those questions. The interview is considered open-ended because even though the questions can be scripted, the interviewer usually doesn't know what the contents of the response will be. It is semi-	Interviews are useful alongside activities to discuss certain responses and reactions. A one-on-one interview is a great way to add depth of understanding of the participant's thoughts, feelings, experiences, knowledge, skills, ideas and preferences. Individual interviews are a good way to ensure maximum safety and value from participation,	2 x 2-week sprints

	structured as the interviewer may ask follow-up questions, change the order or adapt the script to suit the participant.	especially during a global health crisis. This way each participant gets to share their story and participate deeply in tasks, without worrying about other participants.	
Participant debrief <i>Online event</i>	A group debrief is an opportunity to share research findings with participants before they are finalised and made public. It is a way to validate findings and ensure sensitive representation of people from groups that are sometimes marginalised or misrepresented. If appropriate, project sponsors or partners may also attend the debrief, to meet the participants and hear some of their stories and feedback firsthand.	Debriefs encourage a spirit of reciprocity and enable the sharing of findings with participants in an accessible format. By presenting an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on early results, interpretations can be checked. Researchers can also ensure participants' identities and ideas are represented in a respectful and accurate way.	1 x 60 minutes

### 1.3.1 Online resources tested with participants

Each participant was provided with a resource to test before the interview and conducted a live test of another selected tool during the research session. We allocated the resources for each participant with a relevant issue based on their screening survey profile and ensuring a mix of participants tested each tool type (as shown in Tables below).

**Table 5 Pre-session resource to review**

	Money (bankruptcy)	Employment (small claims)	Housing (tenancy)
Web page or factsheet	<b>Justice Connect</b> ↗ 'Get Help' or <b>bankruptcy page</b> ↗	JobWatch <b>Making A Small Claim Under The Fair Work Act</b> ↗	
Video	Australian Financial Security Authority <b>Bankruptcy</b> ↗	Fair Work Ombudsman <b>Guides to Small Claims</b> ↗	
Guided pathway - document assembly			Justice Connect <b>Dear Landlord</b> ↗

**Table 6 In-session live resource testing**

	Housing (tenancy)	No. tests	Money or consumer	No. tests
Guided pathway to legal information			Law Access NSW <b>Being chased for money</b> ↗	2
Guided pathway to document assembly	Justice Connect <b>Dear Landlord</b> ↗	3	VCAT <b>Goods and Services application form</b> ↗	4
Chatbot	Chicago's Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing <b>Rentervention</b> ↗	8		

Most participants tested one resource in the session; two participants tested two from our list. We discovered and observed the use of three resources from organic searches:

- **Ask Izzy by Infoxchange** ↗
- Get Legal Help tool by Illinois Legal Aid
- A form from Consumer Affairs Victoria entitled *Notice of rent increase to resident/s of rooming house* (Word, 753KB).

Our workflow and research approach is reflective of human-centred design and corresponds with methods used in Margaret Hagan's (2016) project, **The User Experience of the Internet as a Legal Help Service – Defining standards for the next generation of user-friendly online legal services** ↗

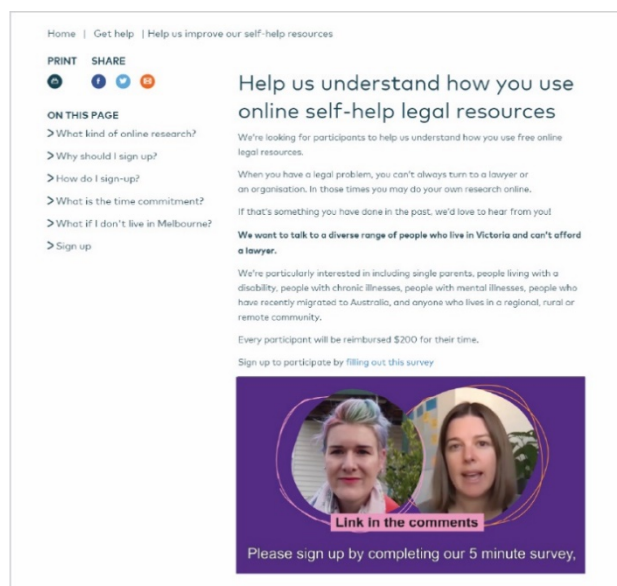
### 1.3.2 Collecting observations and stories

We gathered responses to online self-help resources in a variety of ways during sessions by:

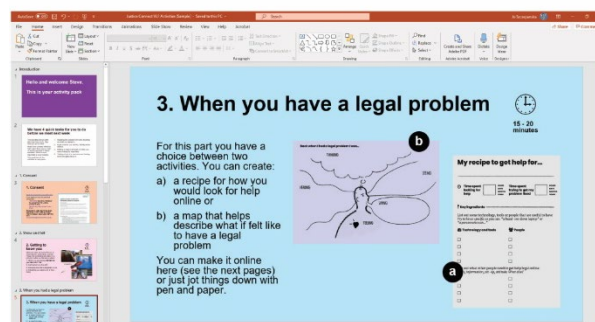
- Collecting stories using an 'empathy map' or 'recipe card' template provided in advance of the session. We asked follow-up questions to learn about how participants would search for help online.
- Sorting cards with images of different types of resources. We asked participants to rank concepts using digital or physical cards in order of importance for solving a legal problem.
- Conducting a five-minute online search relating to a scenario provided and character created by the participant, with follow-up questions and discussion.
- Live testing a real tool using a hypothetical situation. See details above, below and in → **Table 6 In-session live resource testing**

See detailed examples of the activities  
→ **D Online research session** in the appendices.

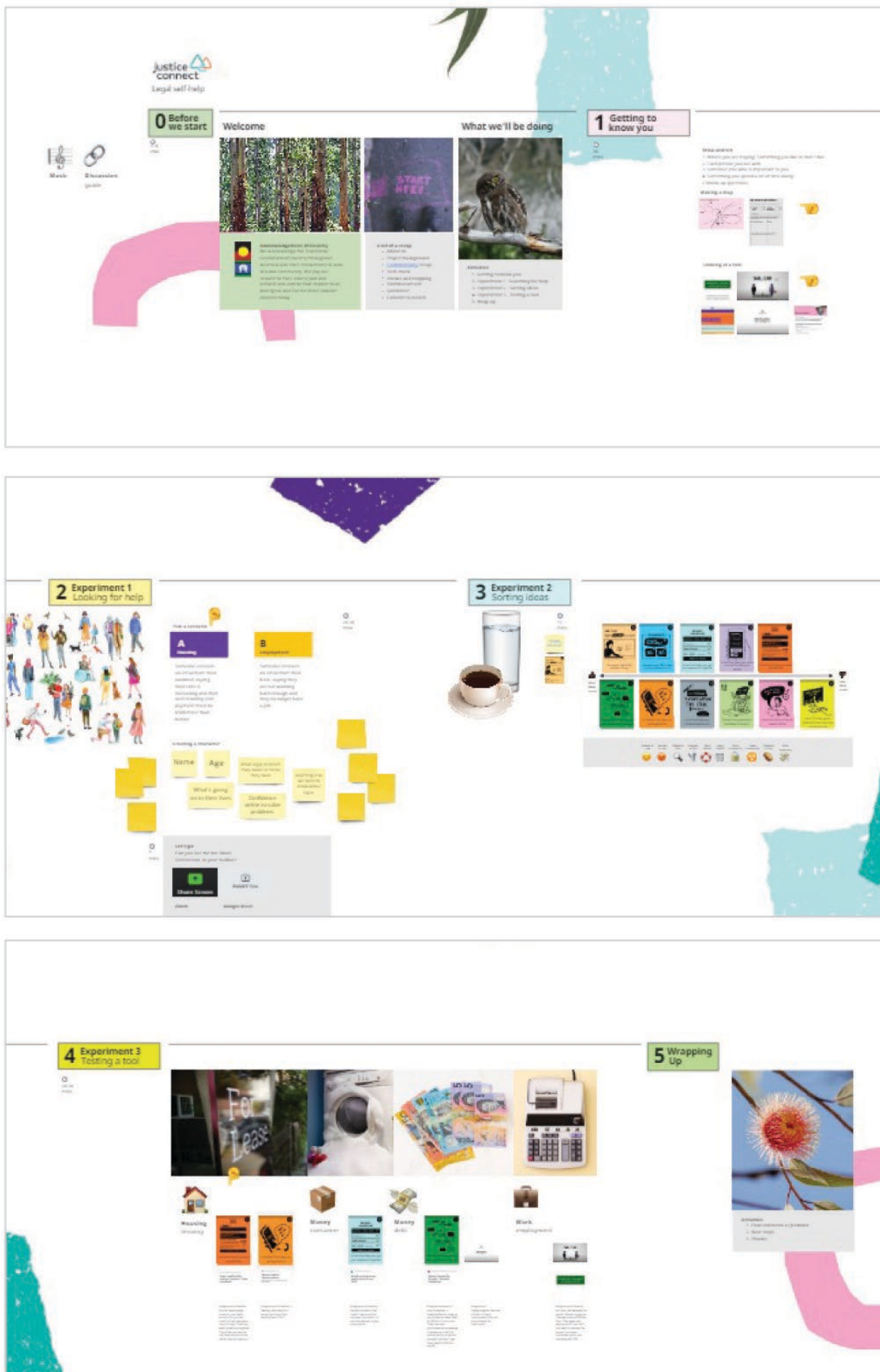
**Figure 6 Recruitment video and webpage**



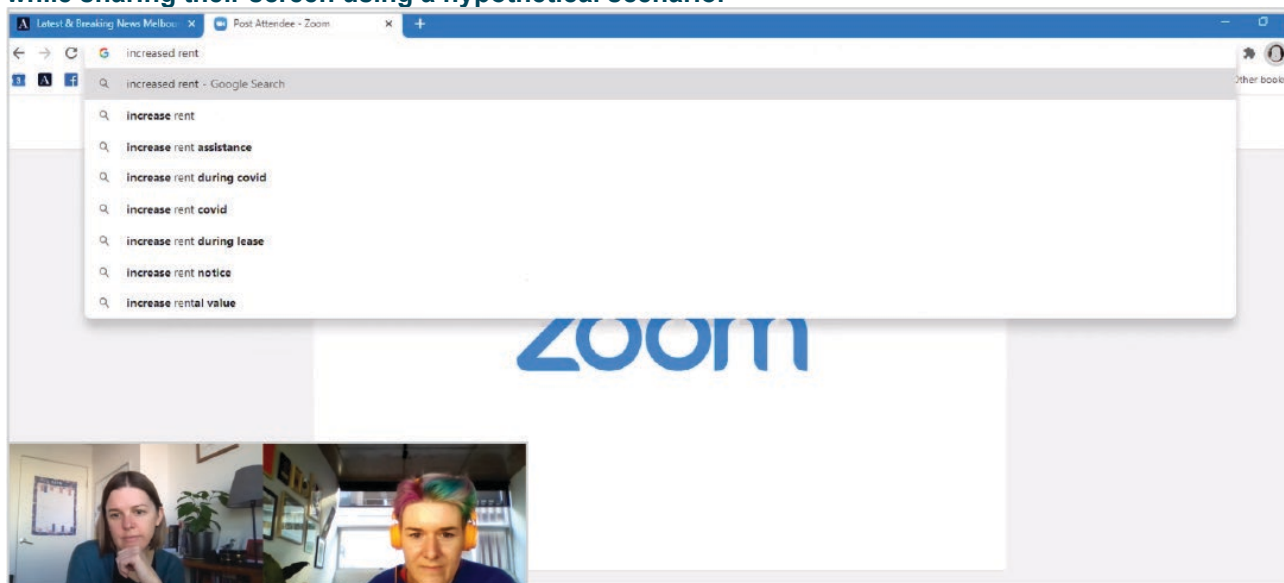
**Figure 5 Physical (top) and digital (bottom) activity pack sent to participants before the session. This included the empathy map and recipe template for their legal help activity.**



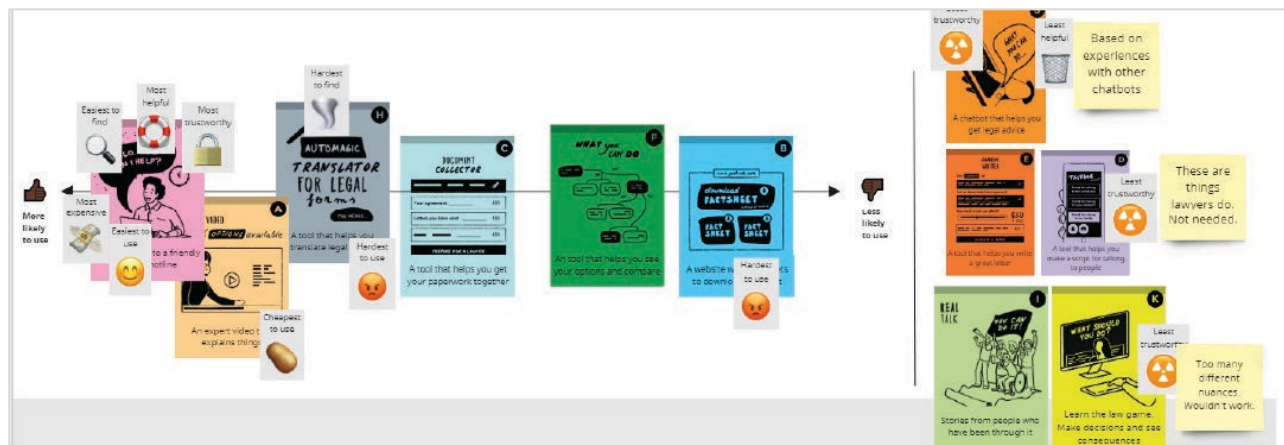
**Figure 7** We held our sessions in a video-call and a digital space created in Miro , which provided a timeline for researchers and participants.



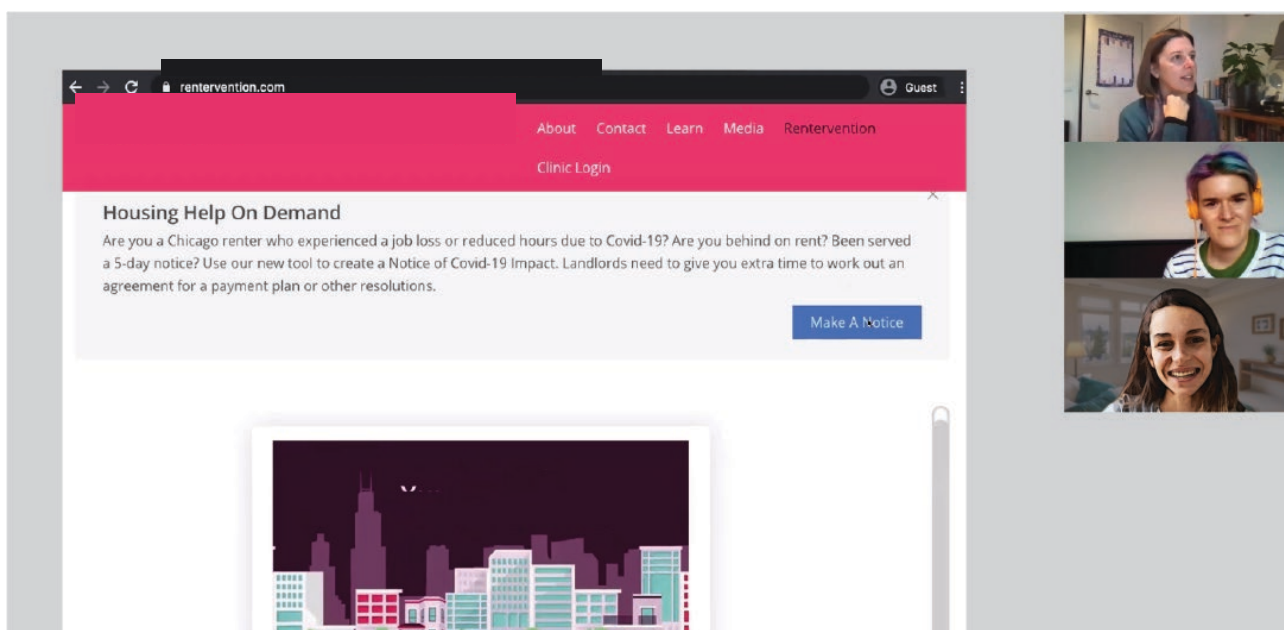
**Figure 8** During the session participants conducted a 5-minute online search while sharing their screen using a hypothetical scenario.



**Figure 9** Participants conducted a card sorting activity, ranking online self-help resources by likelihood to use.



**Figure 10** The final activity was user testing a live legal help resource (see also → [Table 6 In-session live resource testing](#))



### 1.3.3 How we conducted the card sort

In our card sort we invited participants to arrange a series of legal tool concepts by preference, either as themselves or the character they developed in the previous activity. Everyone ranked the cards from their own point of view, even if they started by talking about the character and making some assumptions about their choices. The continuum had them rank ideas from 'most likely to use' to 'least likely to use'. We also had a container for concepts that they told us they would not use at all or would never be interested in using.

In addition to ranking, participants also tagged ideas by which ones they felt would be:


- Easiest to use
- Hardest to use
- Easiest to find
- Hardest to find
- Most helpful
- Least helpful
- Most trustworthy
- Least trustworthy
- Cheapest to use
- Most expensive (to use)



#### Our resource concept cards

- A. **Expert Video** A video explaining things from an expert
- B. **Factsheet** A website with factsheets you can download or print
- C. **Document Collector** A tool that helps you get your paperwork together
- D. **Script Writer** A tool that helps you create a script for talking to people
- E. **Letter Writer** A tool that helps you write a great letter
- F. **Flowchart** A tool that helps you see your options and compare them
- G. **Chatbot** A chat bot that gives you chat to and legal advice
- H. **Legalese translator** A tool that helps you translate and explain legal words
- I. **Real Talk** Stories from people who have been through it
- J. **Lawyer hotline** One-click dial a friendly lawyer
- K. **Learn the law game** Play to see the consequences of choices

### 1.3.4 Analysis and sensemaking

After each session, the research materials were collected, saved securely in a digital folder, and de-identified. Participants were then associated to a participant number and a name of a character. A majority are now represented in this report by the name of the character they created.

Audio recordings were transcribed and analysis took place remotely using a tool called **Dovetail** . Both researchers took part in thematic analysis to synthesise the data. This means we read and coded transcripts and watched videos of tests, looking for common and significant experiences and behaviours. These key 'themes' were then compared and arranged, with reference to the research questions and objectives, to develop the higher-level insights that structure this report.

Card sorting and participant analysis were calculated using both **spreadsheet templates**  and a more sophisticated online tool called **Optimal Sort** .



### 1.3.5 Participant debrief

We held a voluntary one-hour lunch-time session with participants to reflect on our key findings before writing this report. The online debrief helped to confirm respectful representation and discuss how participants felt about being described as the 'missing middle'. Participant responses encouraged us to reframe our representation to be the 'missing majority' and ensure recommendations incorporate learning about communications and marketing.

Debriefs encourage a spirit of reciprocity and enable the sharing of findings with participants in an accessible format. They are uncommon due to the myth of objectivity in research as well as time and budget pressures, but should always be considered when working with community members, who may otherwise not have an opportunity to see or know about their contribution in a project.

For us, the participant debrief was important in confirming commonalities between experiences and challenging the order, framing, and prioritisation of what we wanted to share.

### 1.3.6 Report writing

The richness of data and breadth of research objectives have resulted in a lengthy report. Drafting and editing this report, we have needed to negotiate what content could help support other organisations to run a similar project, communicate key messages clearly, and add to the nuance of understanding online self-help for the missing majority. While showing respect and ensuring accessibility to research participants and others in the missing majority, the primary target audience for our report includes funders and organisations in the legal sector in Australia as well as other professionals involved in creating, distributing, and evaluating online self-help resources for common legal problems.

One observation from our team is that the act of writing a report for a highly literate audience saw us more likely to select quotes from people whose first language is English, who were usually able to share their thoughts and experiences more clearly, quickly, and confidently than non-native speakers. To counter this, we intentionally included observations, maps, and stories to balance representation of Jay, Joe, Katie, Penny and Sunny. Representation of people from non-dominant cultures (often labelled in Australia as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' communities) in reports such as this one is paramount for improving access to justice.



## Part Two. What we learned: key insights

This section presents the key insights from the research, enriched by the words of our participants, observations of resource use and participant feedback on concepts we shared. Key areas of insight include:

- How people search for legal help online
- What the self-help journey is like
- How different resources can help
- How help-seekers consume information
- How resources could be improved
- How help-seekers define a legal problem



# Google

WHAT DO I DO NOW? IS THIS FAIR? WHO CAN HELP?



Inbox (270)



My files



Alex messag...



Zoom



Add shortcut

## 2. Help-seeking starts with an online search

Almost without exception, a Google search is the first step in a help-seeker's journey to attempt to resolve a legal problem on their own. While most people initially search by describing their problem in everyday terms, some search specifically for organisations to help them. This first set of insights describes the variety and mixed results of searching techniques used by participants in this research.

- 2.1 Seeking help starts with Google
- 2.2 Initial search terms often describe the legal problem in everyday language
- 2.3 Some help-seekers start by looking for legislation or organisations
- 2.4 Super searchers open multiple tabs and triangulate knowledge
- 2.5 Most help-seekers pay attention to jurisdiction
- 2.6 Public resources are most trusted



## 2.1 Seeking help starts with Google

While every help-seeker's circumstances and characteristics are unique, there is a common flow of starting to seek help with an online search. Consistent with other research (see evidence callout box to the right) nearly every help-seeker we interviewed said they would start looking for help by "googling". In response to the card sort activity, one participant noted that Google was the first type of legal help tool they would use. Only one participant did not specifically name Google during our session – but they nonetheless opened a Google search as the first step in the housing scenario help-seeking test.

Our research mirrors other findings about the most commonly used digital platforms in Australia: 96% of people use Google as their main search engine and Internet browser (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Consumer Views and Behaviours on Digital Platforms, 2018).

- “ The first moment, when I was in this trouble, I just search on the Google – *Jay*
- “ If you type it into Google, type anything into Google, you can find it. – *Adele*
- “ Google first, of course, navigating to the browser to the search engine — *Diesel*
- “ Maybe Google and find out where to go. Contact a lawyer. But I would probably Google first. – *Maria*

Help-seekers typically start by looking for general information, before orienting towards more personalised help, then possibly try out a tool. Of course, people need to first realise they have a legal problem before they seek legal help.

### → 6.1 At first, many help-seekers don't realise they have a legal problem

One key exception was a person familiar with homeless services, who started their search in our simulation with a local service directory called Ask Izzy. But this participant still searched for the directory on Google as the first action in the searching scenario. Then, when they could not easily find what they were looking for on the Ask Izzy app, they returned to Google.

Starting with a Google search is in line with Hagan's finding that the Internet is increasingly a first port of call for a person when seeking out information about whether their problem is a legal one, and how to possibly address it (Hagan, 2016)

## 2.2 Initial search terms often describe the legal problem in everyday language

First-time or infrequent help-seekers rarely start a search for legal help online knowing legal taxonomies. They typically start with a question or very simple problem statement. During our debrief session, participants continued to comment on the start of their search and how hard that process had been. Picking the right words is hard, and the search is often urgent, so people throw in questions, statements and descriptions of what is happening to them.

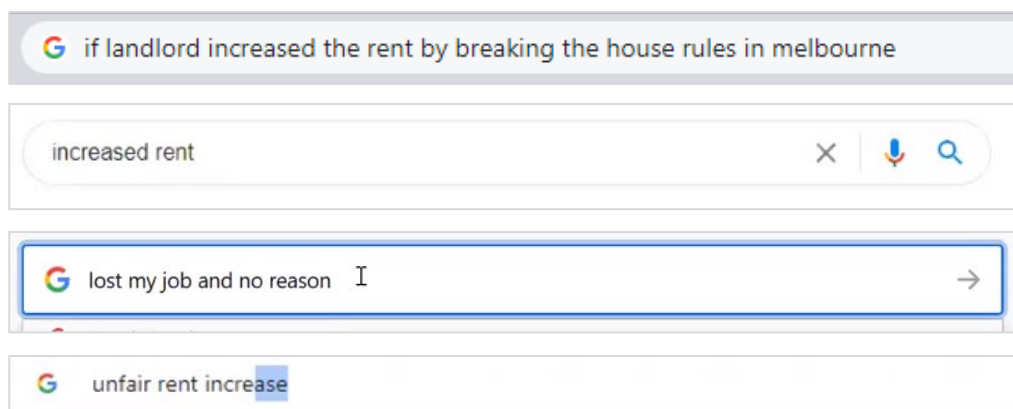
- “ I don't know how to phrase that, actually, in a Google question. It's quite tricky. I'll just Google it. *How much advance notice for rent increase Victoria?* Okay, yeah. So I'd just click the first link and see. – *Katie*

what do I do now that I got the sack

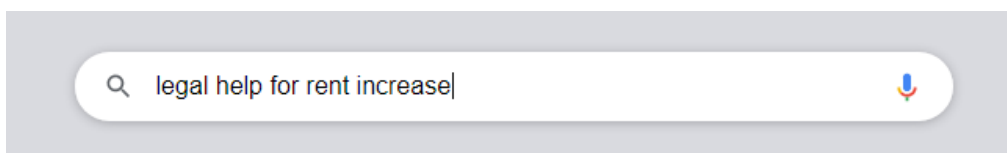


- “ I just got into Google and I said, *What do I do now that I've got the sack?* And then it's come up with help, what to do when you got the sack. – *Geoff*

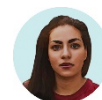
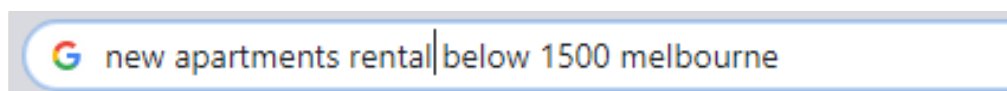




“ I think that initial, whatever I typed into Google there, she would probably type something like that. The context, so *rent increase*. Maybe, *unfair rent increase*. And then *legal aid*. Or *free legal aid*, I think that word *free* is a really important word. – *Beau*



Not all people started their search thinking that their housing scenario was a legal issue. One participant started by looking for a new place to live.



- “ Rent. I'm just literally googling, *rent increase*... Oh, something popped up, Melbourne. Let's have a look at that. The Melbourne [rent] increased in the December quarter... – *Penny*
- “ You don't really know how to describe a problem until you've done further research into it, and you see the kind of language that you're using and then you just start using that as well. And in turn, it just makes it easier to look up things online. – *Sunny*

## 2.3 Some help-seekers start by looking for legislation or organisations

Some help-seekers, typically those with higher capability or more experience dealing with social services, would expect a relevant government department to exist for any particular type of legal issue. They were more likely to draw on existing knowledge and search for an organisation by name as they started to look for helpful information.

- “ [Suggesting where to look for help] It depends on the problem. If it's a small business, go to the small business people. I know that there's government agencies for different areas. If there's rental, I'd still be saying Consumer Affairs or Tenants, or whatever, as the first call.... [In my case] I can't remember whether I Googled "rent relief grant" or "rent relief", or went straight to Consumer Affairs. I might have had enough instinct about it to go to Consumer Affairs in the first place. – *Pearl*

Despite many different strategies most participants had diagnosed a legal problem within 5 minutes of organic searching online.

This supports American research (Hagan, 2016) that shows most people would like to be able to use a standard Internet search to diagnose and then proceed through resolving a legal problem.



- “ At some point there is something that lets you know you have a problem, once you have that, work out where the problem exists, whether it's the tax department, whether it's the police department, whether it's the lands department, the landlords, finance, find out where that part is. – *Geoff*
- “ I looked at my options for getting redundancy pay. First step was the Ombudsman - Fair Work Australia. Looked at websites. – *Beau*

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People who had prior experience with the legal system were more likely to type legal key words and legislation in their initial search. These people had dealt with legal issues before on their own and had a stronger grasp of legal language and concepts. They tended to know about Acts, agreements, and entitlements.

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Searching using legal terms had disadvantages for some help-seekers during testing. Searching for an Act, for instance, was successful, but led one person into dense legislation not designed to provide accessible information about their situation.

## 2.4 Super searchers open multiple tabs and triangulate knowledge

For self-helpers, it takes multiple windows, tabs, and searches to find the information you need to firstly identify a legal problem and then decide if and how you want to act. During testing we saw some help-seekers use multiple tabs to explore a topic. At least one out of five help-seekers demonstrated their skills in online searching in this way. The 'super searchers' tended to be younger women with higher levels of digital capability and access. Most participants did not benefit from this level of capability and efficacy in finding and triangulating information. Those who were not as skilled in searching did manage to find relevant information, but not as fast.

What set 'super searchers' apart was that they looked broadly at first, then systematically discarded irrelevant results. Starting with trusted organisations, they would scan pages for key words, opening documents and resources in tabs to read later. Each page would lead to others. Some of these pages were seen as irrelevant, untrustworthy, or potentially leading to a paid service, and would quickly be dispatched as the search continued.

See → [Appendix F Search simulation](#) for one participant's five-minute search around a tenancy issue. It is an extreme case of progress in five minutes, as

Those with lower capability are less likely to use self-help resources to resolve their problems but are more reliant on not-for-profit legal services. (Randell 2018)



displayed by one of our super searchers who represents the Do-It-Yourself mindset.

One participant explicitly described their online research skills as a key asset for legal self-help:

“ You also need to be able to do a pretty decent Google search. I didn't realise that I was really that great at Google searches until I've seen other people try and do a Google search... And I realise lots of people can't do that. – Jess

It would take multiple tabs and different sources confirming information to make these 'super searchers' feel confident that they were on the right track.

“ I would probably open a new tab for the 'About' section, and then open a new tab for the 'Contact' section as well. And at the same time, I would also open a new tab and look at Rentervention reviews. – Sunny

“ [The character] has to compare this information with another information as well. So if he will compare and if they will find a common point, so he can get more knowledge this way, then he has to take action according to that. So first, he has to find out more information, compare it.... Triangulation helps with confidence. – Jay

On the other hand, reading multiple sources increased the likelihood that these help-seekers came across contradictory information. This could lead to a sense of overwhelm, potentially driving them to close down the computer and come back to the search another day. See → [Visualising the legal self-help journey](#).

Even for searchers who were determined and tech savvy, lack of legal capability could lead to confusion and loss of confidence.

“ So searching will not make you feel any more confident. You have to find that confidence. – Jay

“ If I read three things that say yes, yes, yes and I read one thing that says, no, then I suddenly get skeptical. I want more. I want to know more yeses. I don't want to know any nos. I'd rather have three yeses and a maybe than three yeses and a no. – Jess

“ And so some places would, you know, the information was spot on, then some was different, and then... Yeah, I reckon it did more bad than harm. Sometimes I'd just get so frustrated I'd throw the phone and think, oh look, God, I'll leave it today. I'll start back again tomorrow. – Sam

This approach to searching does not work on a mobile phone, however, which is a common platform for legal self-help. Our research showed that, even when people own another device, such as a tablet or computer, they still often use their phone to search for legal help, take part in video calls, and access resources online.

Three participants (20%) took part in the research session via their smartphone, and, along with others, they described using their phones to search for legal help. One described watching videos about going to court on their phone (*Matthew*). Others described the different relationships they had with using their phone to go online.

“ I do use my phone to go online, pending with the sort of information I would have got. I didn't even put my iPad [on the activity sheet]. I'll add my iPad. I would've used that purely because the screen would have been bigger where the phone might've been a bit hard to read because it's not very big. And the computer of course, for the same reason. – Jane

“ [I use] my mobile phone. It's iPhone. To me it's like a laptop. – Maria

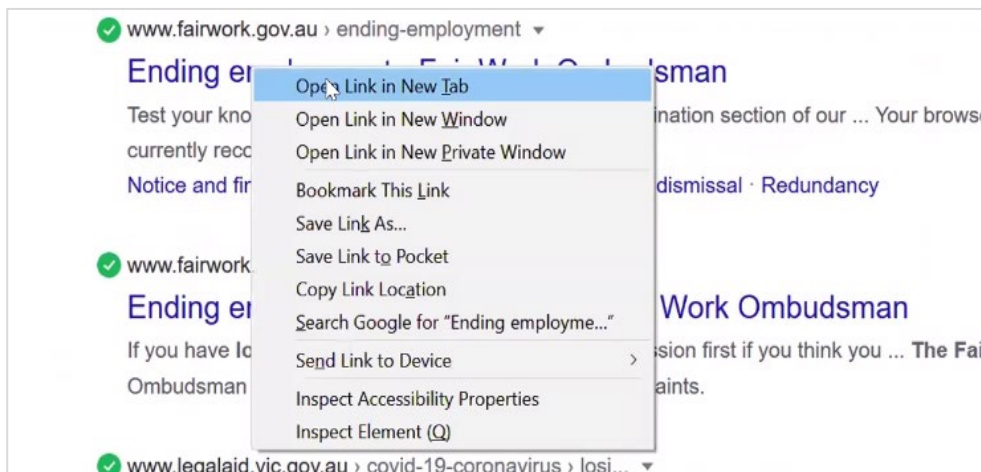
### Provocation

How can the legal sector work together to ensure that language is consistent across organisations and online resources?

Our super searchers are one embodiment of the idea that digital capability is not the same as legal capability: "That users undertake a range of activities online is not to say that they have the capability to undertake legal processes online" (Denvir 2018, v).



**Figure 11 ‘Super searchers’ would open multiple tabs then circle back to consolidate information and verify its reliability.**



Describing their response to one of the pictures in the card sort activity, a participant highlighted the ubiquity of the smartphone:

“As soon as you see the smartphone, that's what everyone can relate to in a way. Not everyone has a computer, not everyone has a laptop, not everyone has a tablet, but everyone's got a phone. – Sam

## 2.5 Most help-seekers pay attention to jurisdiction

Most people in the missing majority are aware that the law varies depending on which state and country you live in. Many help-seekers specifically sought websites that end in .au. Most participants knew to consider jurisdiction, realising that different Australian states have different laws and processes.

Ten of the 15 participants initially told or showed us, when they searched, that they were looking for help specifically in Victoria or Melbourne. Four of them even knew the type of law that applied to their situation, before they saw any search results.

“I always look for an Australian site because the laws, and look for a site that explains laws in Australia. That's what I would do. There's one here, [workplacelawyers.com.au](http://workplacelawyers.com.au). – Geoff

“I just typed in separation Melbourne to see if ... I don't know if they're different all over Australia. – Adele

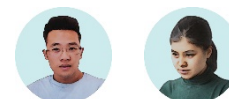
We discussed the problem of a New South Wales website appearing higher in the search than a Victoria site with one participant, who moved to Australia nine years ago:

“Well, that was on the first page and it did say "New South Wales" but it didn't catch my eye immediately, so I could have been fooled by that. Because most people will... like me, who are not used to looking at the specific state websites, especially if they don't have it in their own country. I'm just talking like another migrant... I'm a bit more cautious about it because [when] I'm searching for information about relevant websites for my work, I need to be looking for it all the time. I need to know that I'm on the right state website. But the first one we got was New South Wales, and it is probably going to say something similar, but you don't want to be referring to the wrong website. You want to be referring to the right website and there might be subtle differences. – Joe

91% of Australians have a smartphone (Deloitte Australia , 2019) but mobile-ably users are more likely to be digitally excluded (Varley and Bagga, 2018).

Our participants had some awareness of jurisdiction, state, and identifying trusted sources, which contrasts with Hagan's (2016) findings that most people often don't consider jurisdiction.

This contrasted with overseas research (see callout box below). We did not, however, have a large number of young people take part in our research: only two were under 25 years old, and both were tertiary educated recent migrants from a non-English speaking country. It is possible that younger help-seekers would have encountered greater difficulties. Read more in → [9 Extensions to this research](#)



Our research confirms some of Hagan's (2016) findings, in particular: the ideal legal help site is official, free, comprehensive, modern, and conversational.

Unlike in Hagan's (2016) research, most of our participants considered jurisdiction and did not express disappointment and frustration over *the Internet's failure* to serve their (legal) needs. They were frustrated by referral loops and lack of transparency throughout online and in person. And, even if frustrated by the quality of some self-help resources (design, accessibility, written content), many of our 'missing majority' would persist in use, usually hoping to save money by not needing a lawyer.

Many of the live Google searches in the research session offered 'in Victoria' as an autocomplete. Penny was the only participant to use autocomplete to fill in organisation names. Of the three help-seekers who actively searched for organisations, many had "Victoria" in the name, e.g. Victoria Legal Aid or VCAT. Overall, we observed that, with autocomplete suggestions, Google helped a lot in searching jurisdiction intuitively.

## 2.6 Public resources are most trusted

Publicly-funded self-help resources are more likely to be used by help-seekers than resources from other sources, because they consider them more trustworthy.

Six participants explicitly stated that they would be more likely to trust and therefore use a tool from a 'government website' than another source. Others also expressed skepticism around information or help offered by a law firm; and some avoided any website that contained advertising and/or advertised results that appeared at the top of their search.

“ You probably wouldn't use this if it wasn't a government website... Government totally provides that true information. – Jay

“ I'd probably tend to go for a government website. So maybe this one here. I guess the reasons for that is they're maybe more reliable, and I'm less likely to have to pay. – Beau



Some help-seekers deliberately avoid .com in favour of .org or .gov – seeing governmental and not-for-profit websites as more reliable sources of information. Interestingly, although many described 'government websites' as the most trusted source, when searching, they and others preferred sites that ended in .org (or .org.au). A couple of help-seekers identified this domain name as signifying 'independent', while others actually described it as 'a government website'.

One participant described avoiding any site with advertisements. Yet a couple did not distinguish between advertisements and other listings in their search results. The first websites they visited in our test search were private lawyers or companies. Most people we spoke to deliberately avoided those types of websites, however.

Our participants confirmed that people look for official sources that are affiliated with the government (Hagan 2016).



“ I just got into Google and I said, "What do I do now that I've got the sack?" And then it's come up with help, I've been, what to do when you got the sack. And for me, I always look for an Australian site because the laws and look for a site that explains laws in Australia. That's what I would do. There's one here, [workplacelawyers.com.au](http://workplacelawyers.com.au). Termination of employment, which is probably the one, would be either that one or "what to do when you get sacked" is where I'd go. – *Geoff*



Government websites were seen as a good place to get free advice, though not everyone trusted them.

“ Personally I would be looking at what the government offers first. But if I felt that the government wasn't meeting my needs or speaking on my behalf, I would trust the tenants person to do it for me. And perhaps if absolutely necessary, be happy to pay a small fee to them – *Pearl*



Trustworthiness of legal websites and sources was on people's minds when searching for information or assistance. There were a few strong opinions about sites with prominent advertising. People who had considered paying a lawyer found it difficult to choose one to contact by searching online.

“ Well, firstly ... if there's a lot of fraudulent advertising on it and things like that. So appearance first. Second is the organisation that runs it; we'll see how legit they are. Also the wording, like literally just how they phrase their descriptions and if it sounds proper or if it just sounds like, "Click this link to find out if you will be solved of your legal problems." – *Katie*



“ I think it's important that government websites and reputable websites show up in your search, on the top searches if possible. Because if you're redirected to wrong information, that could be damaging. But I did do all right I think, searching for the right website. But as you see there, other websites, just they're ads and they're wasting your time. They're not the ones you need to read. – *Joe*



Free services were seen as the default from government or community organisations. Free consultations coming from other sources began to make some help-seekers suspicious. They questioned if there would be secret fees or pressure to sign contracts.

“ And I'm suspicious about... If you can actually have a one click dial to a friendly lawyer hotline. Is that even a possibility? Lawyers cost a lot of money. – *Joe*



Sometimes the service or organisation's name might put someone off, for instance, if the resource seems to be provided by a department that is solving a different problem to theirs or focused on a group of people that they don't identify with.

“ That Homeless Law Service, that title puts me off the whole thing – *Pearl*



While being transparent about who created a resource can build trust, it's not always advantageous to have the organisation's name in the title of the resource, especially when it aims to take a preventative approach or there might be stigma attached to it.

**See also → 8. Design principles for online self-help resources**



### 3. Help-seekers must persevere to resolve legal issues on their own

Solving legal problems on your own isn't easy. Legal jargon is confusing for most people who haven't studied law; the rules and procedures of the legal system can be opaque; and the process to understand and resolve an issue can be incredibly time-consuming.

It helps if you have been through the legal system before, have a high level of English literacy and digital capability, and someone supporting you. Even with these resources, it doesn't help that you're generally in a highly stressful situation and anxious about the outcome.

- 3.1 Visualising the legal self-help journey
- 3.2 Solving a legal problem takes more time, problem solving and dedication than people expect
- 3.3 People often feel overwhelmed and anxious when seeking legal help
- 3.4 People transfer knowledge from other sectors into solving their legal problem
- 3.5 Many people are motivated to "right a wrong"
- 3.6 Legal writing is a big barrier to understanding and action
- 3.7 The first time is the hardest

### 3.1 Visualising the legal self-help journey

Journey maps visualise the process that a person goes through to accomplish a goal. For the missing majority, the goal is to solve a legal problem online.

Tools like journey maps are used by organisations to boost understanding of customer or user needs. Told in a chronological order from the perspective of a character or persona, these maps focus on actions and reaction, showing subtle shifts in behaviour and mindset as people progress through a situation.

Although the characters are fictional, they are based on real people who took part in our research and testing sessions. The journey maps presented here visually summarise the insights in this section.

#### Elements in our maps

**A profile for our character**, sharing some of their background, goals, and preferences.

**Actions** are things this person will do to accomplish their task.

**Touchpoint and People** are the roles, resources, and services they need to interact with.

**Emotions** focus on their level of determination and confidence (to solve their issue online). This section often has a charted sentiment line, which signifies how they are doing at each step.

**Mindset** What the person is thinking and feeling at each step.



**JESS**

Is a determined 'super searcher'. Motivated to resolve her tenancy issue without dipping into savings

Single-parent Female  
Tertiary education Tenant  
Low income household 25-34

#### TOOLS THEY PREFER TO USE

Flowchart or decision tree with an expert video  
A template with instructions

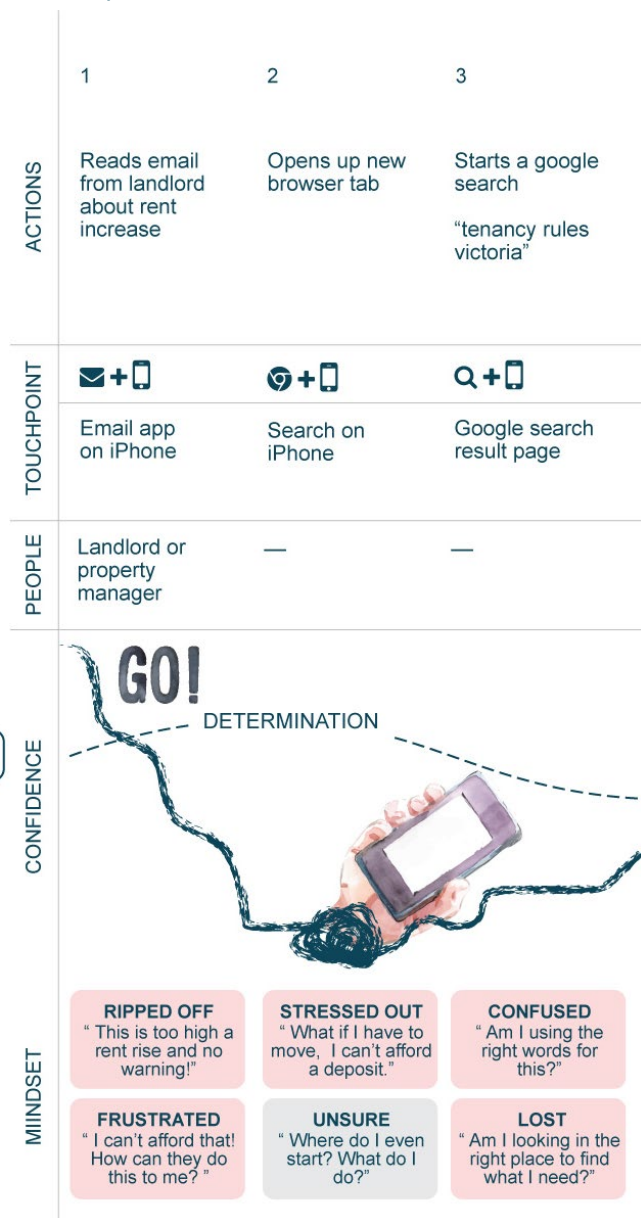
#### WILL AVOID

Websites that have ads  
Long documents unless necessary

#### Provocation

Journey maps like these can be very helpful, especially in allowing multiple teams to identify and craft service improvements.

What could you do to support Jess and Jay in the online self-help experience?



4	5	6	7	PAUSE	8	9	10	11
Reads information on relevant looking website about "tenancy agreement"	Opens new tabs for organisations to call for advice  Calls a few numbers but doesn't get through	Emails organisation with a screenshot of the landlord's email. Gets generic email back to expect delays.	Posts a message to a Facebook group asking for advice	School pickup Prepares dinner School lunches Bed and bath time	Reads responses from other parents who've had similar issues	Opens link from a comment with many likes Starts using a "rentevention"-style chatbot	Starts trying to edit the email on the phone  Battery is on 20%	Opens up old laptop  Emails landlord using phrases suggested by the chatbot
Rent increase page	Phone call	Email app on iPhone	Local parents facebook group		Local parents facebook group post comments	Browser on iPhone	Email app on iPhone	Browser on iPhone. Google document and Email on laptop
Tenants Victoria	Tenants Victoria Legal Centres near work	Tenants Victoria	Facebook group		Parents and friends	Chatbot	—	—



<b>VALIDATED</b> "I have an agreement, they can't do this."	<b>FRUSTRATED</b> "What am I going to do. I want to talk to someone."	<b>WORRIED</b> "I need help. I have kids"	<b>RESTLESS</b> "I just want to know what I can do and expect."	<b>FRUSTRATED</b> "I should know more by now. This is difficult."	<b>CONFUSED</b> "So many ideas and links here what is the best one?"	<b>FRUSTRATED</b> "I'm not really getting anywhere with this."	<b>FRUSTRATED</b> "Editing on this device is taking too long."	<b>ALONE</b> "I wish someone would support me in this."
<b>PRIMED</b> "The rent can't be increased on my fixed contract!"	<b>ANNOYED</b> "I spent hours trying to get though to someone."	<b>DETERMINED</b> "Maybe I can get help in a different way? Not a call?"	<b>DETERMINED</b> "I am in the right here. What they are doing is wrong."	<b>HOPEFUL</b> "If other people got something out of this I will try it."	<b>REASSURED</b> "Other people dealt with this and I can too."	<b>HOPEFUL</b> "If other people got something out of this I will try it."	<b>IMPRESSED</b> "I think these words make me sound impressive."	<b>HOPEFUL</b> "I hope this is enough and it works."



**JAY**

Came to Melbourne last semester to study his master's degree. His employer hasn't paid his last month of wages

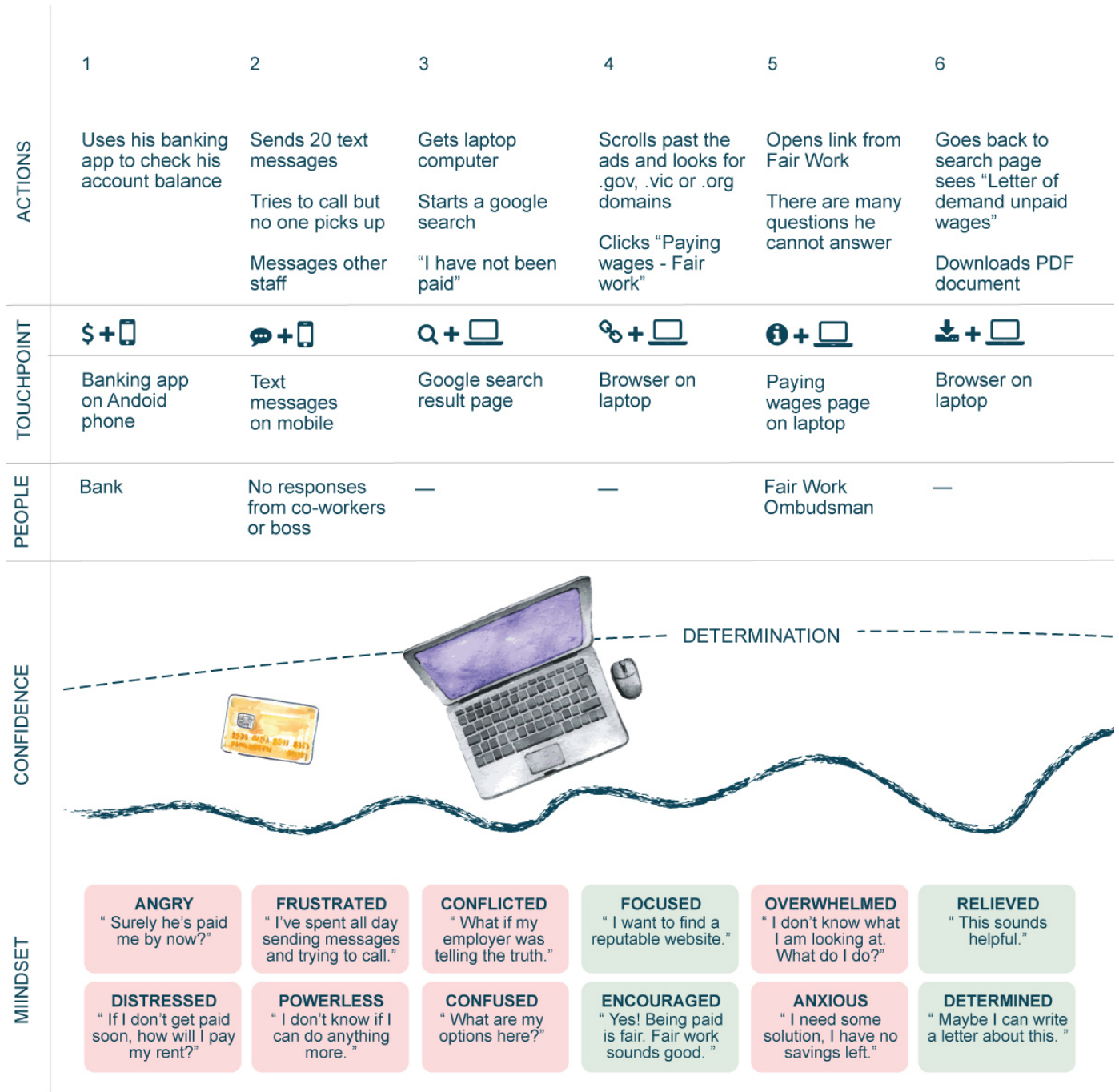
- New migrant
- Male
- Tenant
- Tertiary education
- 35-44
- English as a second language










#### TOOLS THEY PREFER TO USE

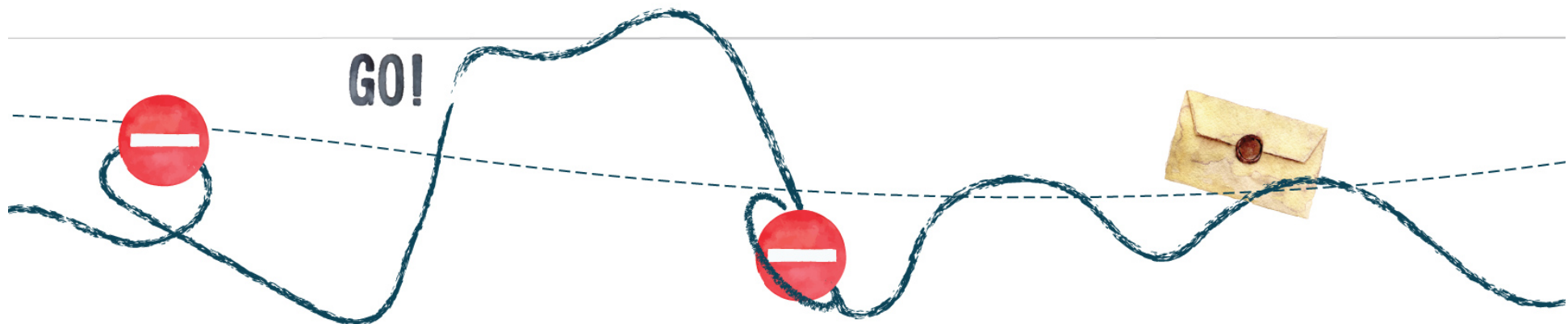
RealTalk stories by others  
Lawyer hotline  
Short video

#### WILL AVOID

Not interested in talking to a chatbot  
Unsure about if the government will help him

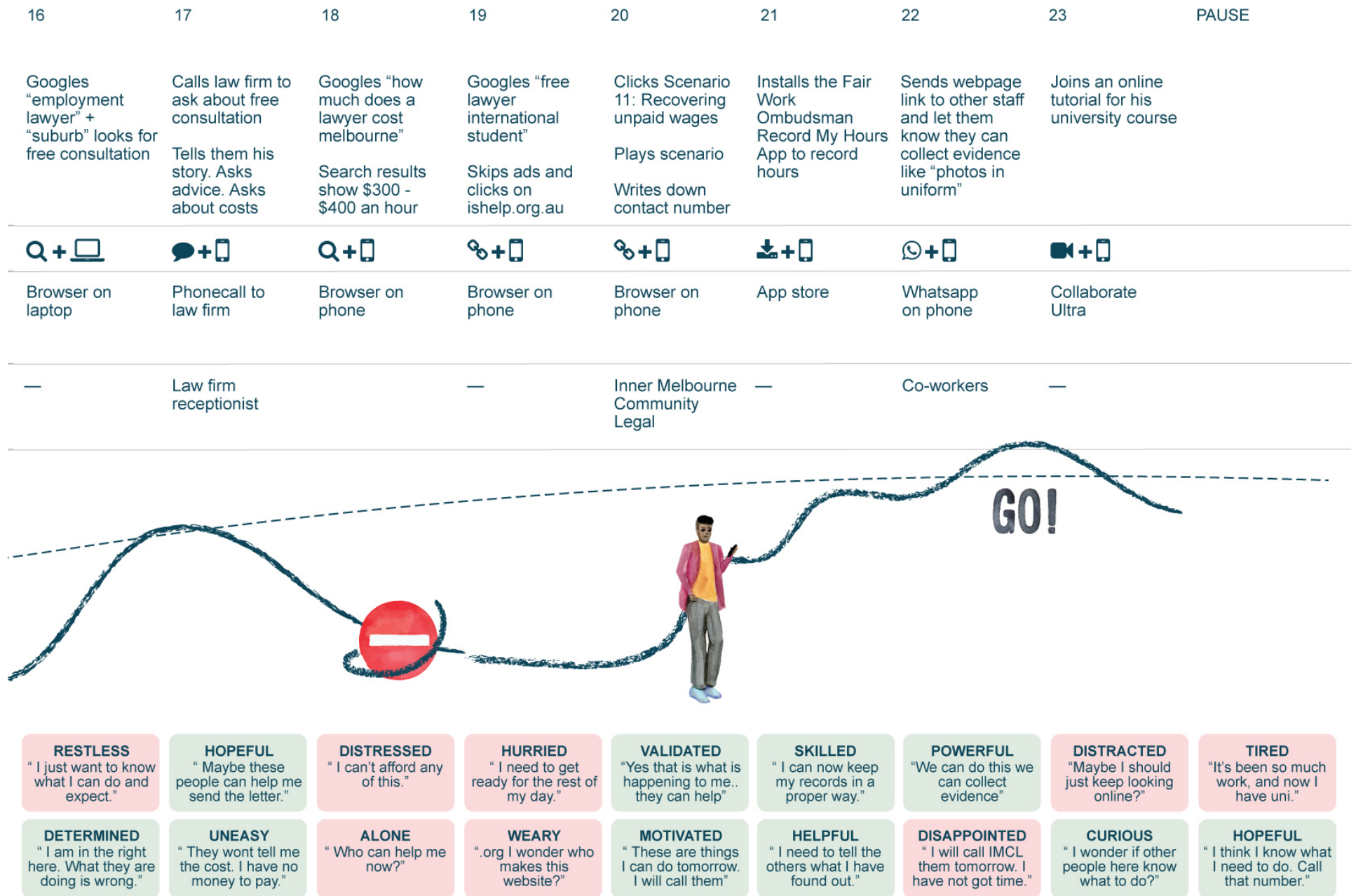


7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Keeps looking at results and websites  Sees that the union can help him in a comment on a page	Googles "Job Watch" after union recommended it  Searches "get paid by employer"	Clicks on top result, an article "Success in court: Justice served to an International student" and reads it	Types ISWRLS into google search  Clicks on first result is ISWRLS Facebook	Sees top post "This FB Page is Inactive from July 2019"	Keeps reading page. "free services" closed facebook group  Clicks link, and answers questions to join	Goes back to letter opens the PDF  Opens Word and copy + pastes text to edit. Format breaks.	Fills in letter and returns to Jobwatch  Scrolls to Factsheets & Resources and clicks	Downloads four factsheets and reads them
								
Calls the number of his union	Browser on laptop	JobWatch website	Browser on laptop	Browser on laptop	Browser on laptop	Acrobat reader Microsoft word	JobWatch website	Browser on laptop
Union representative	Google JobWatch	JobWatch	—	—	—	—	JobWatch	JobWatch



<b>RESTLESS</b> "I just want to know what I can do to solve this today!"	<b>FRUSTRATED</b> "I'm not really getting anywhere with this."	<b>EXCITED</b> "International students get free legal help here!"	<b>EXCITED</b> "I'll be able to chat to someone and ask questions"	<b>UPSET</b> "Why would they do this if they are closed down?"	<b>ENCOURAGED</b> "There are so many members. They can help."	<b>MOTIVATED</b> "This template is good. I need to find my hours."	<b>UNSURE</b> "What do I do with the letter now. Can I email it?"	<b>FOOLISH</b> "I don't understand this legal writing. It makes no sense."
<b>SUSPICIOUS</b> "I am not sure why they wouldn't help me?"	<b>HOPEFUL</b> "Site looks professional. I hope they will help me."	<b>ENERGIZED</b> "Other students have gotten help for things like this."	<b>CONFIDENT</b> "I'm doing so well, look how far I am getting on my own."	<b>CONFUSED</b> "Maybe the other website was old and wrong?"	<b>ANXIOUS</b> "I hope they approve me soon. I want to post."	<b>IRRITATED</b> "Why could they not give me a word file?"	<b>DETERMINED</b> "Maybe JobWatch has a guide on what to do next."	<b>LOST</b> "Maybe I do need a lawyer to help me with this."





## 3.2 Solving a legal problem takes more time, problem solving and dedication than people expect

Legal processes and language are especially confusing if you haven't studied the law or been through the justice system before. It can be surprising just how long it can take to resolve an issue. Solving your own legal issues often requires sheer determination.

“ I [had] a lot of knock backs before I even got the initial help. But, you still just keep on going because that's what you've got to do, I suppose. – *Sam* ”



“ Overall it was fairly clear to me what steps I needed to take. My first language is English, I'm educated at university. I wouldn't like to be someone with limited English doing what I did... It would be very different if I didn't feel as confident in English as I do. Even [with my background], I came across language I wasn't familiar with and had to look up words. – *Beau* ”



Similar sentiments were expressed when exploring the scenario of a person searching for help in relation to an employment issue.

“ Well, I'd be feeling stressed out still. I probably wouldn't give up. I'd probably just keep on going and going and going and going until I kind of I got to the point where I'd speak to a human. I wouldn't be satisfied myself. I'd keep on going. – *Sam* ”



“ She'd be a mess but she has to call because it's unfair dismissal and it's not fair. So she would feel very, very anxious, but determined to call because she wants to keep her job I guess. After 25 years, she's 57. Another, how many years until retirement? Obviously she wants to keep-, she's got a mortgage. She's got grandchildren, children. I would be determined to call, but very, very anxious. – *Beau* ”



As other research has shown, help-seekers need significant time and direction to find helpful legal information, especially compared to legal experts like lawyers or librarians. (Hagan, 2016)

This was especially the case for people with employment problems who found they had to commit an incredible amount of time and effort to pursue a small claim.

“ I guess I realised more and more I would need to do a helluva lot of work to get my application together. I worked on different levels - I would have to supply specific documentation, names of people who could help me, names of my colleagues, to verify certain things in my application. Because it was so much work, my application, I realised I wasn't going to let it go. I'd spent so many hours on it. If somebody had told me you're going to put 60 hours into it, I might have thought twice. ”



By hook or by crook I was going to see it through, because it had taken so much of my time, and so much work. I spent a lot of time getting the application together - hours and hours - it was a lot of work: writing emails, filling out forms that weren't very clear... a specific form that needs a lot of info - sending of documents, writing a lot. Keeping the motivation up. – *Beau*

“ The three words that I would use to describe the situation are: confusion, betrayal, and lack of safety. It took me two months to clear the exact path that I need to take. I didn't know what's the difference between going from Ombudsman, going to WorkSafe? I was absolutely unclear, it took me two months, \$500 to just get that out there. – *Penny*



“ [Advice for someone in a similar employment dispute?] If they're keen enough to continue in the vain that I've done, let's say for the last three years, then yeah go for it. But if they feel it's a waste of time, then they might as well not consider it at all. They might as well just give it away and I'd say, "Move on." And that's probably the majority of people in that situation. – *Matthew*



See → **5.4 Legal self-help resources lack timeframes and timelines**

“ Actually, it took 12 weeks from my first phone till agreement was lodged. If you want to tell how bad that is, that's the exact length of time it took me from a general visit to the gynaecologist with no suspicion of a problem until I finished my radiation treatment, in a delayed COVID situation. – *Pearl*



“ You need a lot of determination and persistence because this stuff is hard to figure out and if you want an answer then you can just keep looking until you find one you're happy with...

“ Anytime I'm online, looking for something legal, I'm always so determined to find the answer because my belief is trying to pay a lawyer to answer my question is way too expensive... Money's tight and you don't want to be spending it on something if you can research the answer to it. — *Jess*



### 3.3 People often feel overwhelmed and anxious when seeking legal help

If you've got to the point that you realise you have a legal issue, you are likely to be feeling at least a little worried or concerned. When your income and/or housing is at stake, especially if you have children or other dependents, are on a low income and/or have more debt than savings, you may be panicking or highly anxious.

- “ I felt a bit lost. Yeah. Like oh my God, what am I going to do,” sort of thing. Where do I even start? ...
- “ I started freaking out and thinking, "Oh God, I'm going to get booted out of here, I haven't got long to go.”.
- “ It's not a nice place to be, it's not a good head space for you to be in. You feel like you're almost desperate, like, "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" ...
- “ Really, when you've got kids involved, that's what makes a difference.... [Searching for help online] you get frustrated because you can only go so far. Do you know what I mean? I didn't feel satisfied until I actually spoke with [Justice Connect].” – *Sam*
- “ How I felt was really, really badly anxious. I'm feeling it now, because this is my livelihood. – *Maria*



Participants described the imagined person in the tenancy scenario as likely to be, “a bit erratic, panicky and overthinking the situation.” (*Diesel*). One pointed out that the character was based on their real neighbour, before suggesting, “I think she'd be panicking a little bit. I think she'd be feeling a bit intimidated, and angry probably.” (*Beau*).

Participants similarly described the imagined person in the employment scenario as likely to be “quite anxious, nervous. Might be feeling quite sad because they could really like their job and that they could be proud of that they've got a job.” (*Jane*).

- “ The other issue there is stress because trying to keep up her job and survive already and have a life, and being stressed to have to challenge the rent increase because it's not reasonable. – *Pearl*

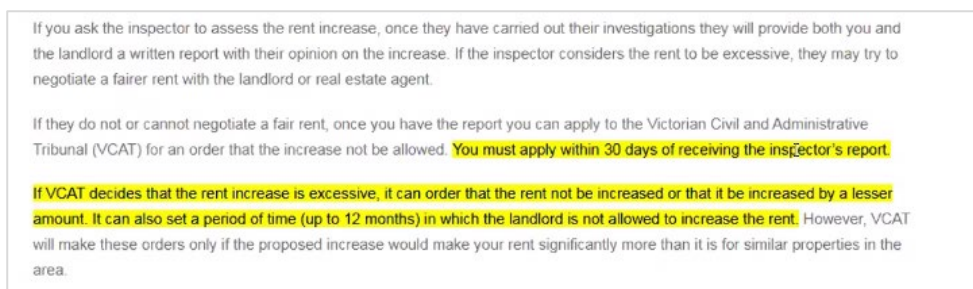


The mental state of the help-seeker can be the first barrier to overcome. People want resources that help them feel calm and empowered. Yet poor information design too often increases their levels of stress, anxiety, and confusion.

- “ I think a lot of these [legal resources] or government websites, there's too much text, too much information. And the way it's laid out, is not the easiest to manoeuvre. Anything that, without dumbing it down necessarily, just making things really clear [would help]. You can do that with the size of text, you can do that with colours. I think that website, the criticism I would have, it's very wordy. And that's okay for me. But the more information you have, the more information you have to read and you have to come to terms with. And potentially the more confusing it could be. So, clarity I think. Making it user friendly. User friendliness. – *Beau*

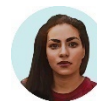


**Figure 12 An example of a dense legal page we came across during testing, the yellow highlighting linking to an information box provided in a Google search**



Information overload only makes the situation worse, as people search online and uncover a plethora of websites, dense legal jargon, irrelevant or unhelpful information, and contradictory advice.

“ When you're searching for help online, there's so much information. You just panic, potentially very distressed, because if you're putting forward a claim and you don't want to go to a lawyer, this is the essence of online stuff. So, you want to know fast if this is for you. – *Penny*



“ I just found a lot of websites that I would just go around in circles. There was no new information on there and there was no...Some things were really scary. Like when they had scenarios come up of what people had gone through, I found that scary in some ways. Because every person's going to have a different situation. – *Adele*



Their mental state affects the ability of help-seekers to search effectively for information.

“ I was thinking, what can I do to fix this? How can I find info and assistance? And I was quite overwhelmed... How I was feeling to start with, a lot of it was, I need the time to absorb it. Because otherwise I was just feeling like I couldn't think properly. So that's what I wrote for that [on the empathy map]: I'm overwhelmed and I need some time to calm down and gather my thoughts. – *Jane*



Our findings are reinforced by other research on online self-help resources that demonstrates:

- A person's mental state is a huge barrier to resolving their own legal issues; help-seekers tend to have an overtaxed bandwidth, anxiety, feelings of threat or impending disaster. Successfully addressing a legal problem oneself requires cognitive capacity or 'prospective memory' (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017).
- Many are moving quickly when searching and parsing results, without paying close attention to the details of what legal help service they're using or whether it is the right match for their issue. (Hagan, 2016)
- Personal and emotional attachment to the outcome may impair or compromise a self-helper's ability to make logical or rational choices or weight options in a favourable manner (Lawler, Giddings, & Robertson, 2012)

Sometimes people were so overwhelmed, they would stop trying to get help, and aim to come back to it later or another day.

“ Initially, [a legal help-seeker is] stressed as hell. Speaking to family and friends. "How am I going to do this? What's happening?" So that's the initial reaction. And then probably the next day is like, "Right, what do I do now?" Once the thoughts have settled and their head's cleared, wake up with a fresh head and think, "Okay, this has happened. What can I do?" – *Diesel*



“ [Testing out a guided pathway:] I'm not sure I'm going to make my next repayment and the only other option is, “you're going to sell your house”. And if I'm starting my journey on this and you're already telling me I need to sell my house, then I am going to close the website, I'm going to go and have a cry and then I'll come back to it another day because that's too much to hear when I first starting to look at this. – *Jess*



Other research has shown that people don't take legal action when they think it will take too long, would be too stressful, or would cost too much (Coumarelos, et al., 2012). We accordingly found that some participants would decide not to take legal action to avoid further stress and confusion.

“ “I was just feeling really anxious. I was feeling overwhelmed and just over it. And just sort of wanted to get it over and done with so I could just get on with things. I think that's probably part of the reason I wouldn't have gone to VCAT because it just would have dragged it on.” – *Jane*



“ [Testing a chatbot to resolve a tenancy issue, asked if it would be helpful.] No, because there's too many hoops to jump through to actually get the help or even to submit the help that I need... You don't want to heighten the stress as it is. Some people just like to have it then and there straight away. – *Diesel*



See also → 8. Design principles for online self-help resources

### 3.4 People transfer knowledge from other sectors into solving their legal problem

People transfer the skills and techniques they have used elsewhere when they are navigating the legal sector. Some common examples include dealing with government services and healthcare or disability service providers. Those with experience in large organisations or professional roles bring with them knowledge of systems and processes, having a bit more understanding of how things might work behind the scenes.

People with knowledge of unions called on those networks.

“ I think [the character] would call the union, and the union, they're not very good. At most schools I have learned all you have to say is, “I've called the union, and this is what they've told me.” (Education)

One participant explained how to navigate the gatekeeping that happens on phonelines.

“ Probably ask the gatekeeper when phoning. She's the one that will either put you through to a solicitor or she will not. The reason I use that is because I used to do telesales, so trying to get past the gatekeeper is the hardest thing to get to the manager. (Communications)

Skills can come from unexpected places. One person with a background in safety and manufacturing had great insight about how to use charts to simplify legal information, which could help people make informed decisions.

“ [On flowcharts] Surely if it works in industry for manufacturing and places like that, surely it would work out in explaining as you proceed through the [legal] process, what steps do you require had this something like this been plotted to me like if there's no response where the first no is, there's no response from the employer. What's your next step? They're beneficial in the workplace, I use them all the time. It's a cause and effect diagram, which we know in the industry as a, yes, you do this repair, but what's the ramifications. (Management)

#### Provocation

What other industries could inspire or push your thinking?

Are there any partnerships that might revolutionise how you create online self-help resources?

Other research has shown that non-legal skills and abilities (e.g. basic literacy and numeracy skills) and the ability to make informed decisions make a self-helper more effective (Lawler, Giddings, & Robertson, 2012)



People with skills in reading and synthesising written information noted that they had an advantage in legal help-seeking.

“ Overall it was fairly clear to me what steps I needed to take. My first language is English, I'm educated at university. I wouldn't like to be someone with limited English doing what I did. I'm not sure how much support there is for translators and interpreters, I believe most information online is in English. It would be very different if I didn't feel as confident in English as I do. (Education)

Although prior experience can be useful, it can also be misleading, especially if people are bringing past experiences and skills from overseas or even other states of Australia.

“ I mean for someone who's never done it, and I thought [my country of origin] is a really bureaucratic country, and putting anything, a claim or any legal matter by yourself is out of the question, so I thought this would be a lot more difficult.

“ So for skills, information, sort of, an aptitude for reading is kind of good here because there is heaps of material we need to read through. Not only your own material you have to read through as well, if you're collecting information. So in my job, we don't necessarily read a lot for work. That was something, obviously we draw most of the time rather than read, because we're more visual. (Art and Design)

### 3.5 Many people are motivated to “right a wrong”

Help-seekers have to draw on their inner strength and resolve to persevere. Often it helps to be motivated by a sense of justice or fairness, either to right a wrong or to help others avoid a similar situation.

One participant described this in an employment matter, for instance:

“ Underlying it was always a feeling of anger... and a certain amount of revenge - I didn't want them to get away with it. I knew they'd ripped a lot of people off - the vengeance aspect motivated me quite a bit. – *Beau*

Similar comments were made about different types of employment and financial disputes:

“ It's probably the situation that most people face: not really familiar with the system. They know they're in the right. They know they've been done wrong by, and they have somebody [who] let that happen and not take action, I don't understand. I can understand people want to move on and just let it be, forget it. Some, maybe they're in a situation where they have somewhere where they can to move on to straight away.... Then again everyone's different...

“ The commitment came from having seen other people in similar situations and they just move on.... But for me, it's about the next bloke as well, or the next person that goes into that business and gets conned again. And if they want to do something, somebody else has set the groundwork for them. If the magistrate hears that business name again the second time, the third time, or maybe in the case where somebody else like myself had done the groundwork for me, I wouldn't have been a first... So for those reasons, I felt I'm doing the groundwork for other people as well not just myself. – *Matthew*

When testing a guided pathway on a consumer issue, help-seekers deliberated over whether they would follow a confusing process and make a payment in order to get information about a company and submit a small claim.



“ I probably would [buy the company abstract]. It's only \$9 plus the application fee... Yeah, I probably would do it if I really thought I was in the right. If they really weren't meeting me halfway. – Adele

See also **1.2.2 Research participants: our experts by experience**

→ **6.2.1 A legal problem means my rights were not respected,**

→ **3.2 People often feel overwhelmed and anxious when seeking legal help.**

## 3.6 Legal writing is a big barrier to understanding and action

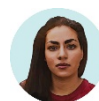
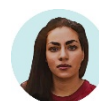
Legal jargon is hard for people to understand, especially if they have no experience in the legal system, low literacy, or English is not their first language. Even highly educated, fluent English speakers struggled with legal writing, finding it made the process of seeking help take longer than they would have expected. Like others, they preferred resources that had plain, simple, everyday language.

“ So I like very straightforward language, which is very unbiased and you're like, okay, this is professional honest legal advice, but also somewhat comforting in the sense that it should not be written in the way that it reads, like your options are limited. – Penny

“ When I was looking for stuff, I did have to look up some legal words. – Adele

This insight should be obvious, but it needs to be emphasised because it came up so often in interviews. It was also endorsed when presented in the participant debrief, with comments such as:

“ Spot on: legal words are often of similar meaning and I truly could not differentiate between them until it was pointed out to me directly – Penny



Similar research also points out the problems with typical legal writing that result from its overuse of long sentences, jargon, paragraph complexity, and the passive voice (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017). An excessive focus on conceptual understanding in online self-help resources impedes their efficacy. Not every aspect of every legal problem requires the individual to understand the context, background, and nuances of potential defenses (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017)

Community lawyers' desire to educate the citizenry rather than provide specific help with tasks at hand can prevent them from creating resources that actually help people. (Lawler, Giddings, & Robertson, 2012)

Many help-seekers described getting lost or being confused by legal jargon. This was often one of the first things they noticed or remembered about online self-help resources.

“ Initially everything I looked at was on the computer screen. First thing you notice is lots of words, lots of information, lots of legal jargon. I'm sure whoever puts it together tries to simplify it but... Initially it was overwhelming. I realised it would take a number of hours. Luckily I wasn't working! I was a little overwhelmed. If you're not familiar with legalities and the legal process, it's easy to feel intimidated by the language and way things are set up. For a low income earner, the whole legal system is overwhelming. You feel like the underdog just because you don't have the legal resources. – Beau



“ A lot of jargon, a lot of links for other services. So I open one page and read about four more pages, and then get lost in the legal world. Very lost... I wanted to feel like I knew more by the end of it. But I felt more confused and more lost by the end of it. – *Adele*

“ Trying to find information on the family courts website on the circuit court, which is just overwhelming, incredibly. It's just that the system, I think, needs to be made for idiots, instead of all professional and all political jargon. It's like medical stuff, it's all in legal terms and should be written for dummies. It would make it a lot easier. – *Diesel*



Others got tripped up in the resource testing by terms like ‘arrears’, ‘defendant’, ‘lucrative order’, ‘statutory demand’, ‘statement of claim’, and ‘foreclosure’. It helped when there was a symbol next to these terms with a pop-up definition when clicked or hovered over.

Too many of these symbols or definitions could be distracting, however. For instance, one participant got frustrated with a guided pathway when symbols kept appearing next to words they would need to have understood at that point in the process.

**Figure 13 An example from testing where one screen had a total of eleven very prominent popovers with definitions.**

If this happens the plaintiff can:

- send you an examination notice ?
- ask the court to send you an examination order ?
- apply for a writ for levy of property ?
- apply for a garnishee order ? on your bank or employer, or
- take steps to make you bankrupt ? if you owe more than \$5,000.

If you are bankrupt or have applied to become bankrupt you will need to contact your trustee ? immediately.

Other research has shown that not knowing the mundane details of how the formal legal system works causes embarrassment, confidence-shattering, and increased cognitive load (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017).

A tool focused on translating legal jargon wouldn't necessarily help, either, because people did not want to learn difficult terms. Help-seekers generally only wanted to make sense of their own situation and options. The ‘legalese translator’ tool only became useful further down the track, after watching videos or talking to a lawyer. Participants suggested it would be most useful when reading details and filling out forms and processes with legal jargon.

“ A translator, yes that would help, because sometimes that can be very overwhelming when it's all written in legal terms. And it's like, I don't understand, what's it mean? [Is that something you or (the character in the scenario) would have found helpful?] In my personal opinion? It would have taken him a little bit of anxiety away, probably. – *Diesel*

Also see → [Visualising the legal self-help journey](#)

See → [8. Design principles for online self-help resources](#), and  
→ [7 Recommendations](#)

### 3.7 The first time is the hardest

If you have been through a similar legal process before, you might know what to expect. The first time is the hardest, though, and most people will only (and hopefully) experience certain legal problems once. One help-seeker explains this well, describing their increasing familiarity with affidavits as part of their employment case:



- “ They're all okay once you know the process. The initial ones are always the hardest as in anything that you're learning for the first time. It becomes common practice or standard practice after you've done it a few times. – *Matthew*
- “ This is nothing against people that have gone to university or spent their life studying - it's easier for people who understand that, than it is for somebody off the street who's never had anything to do with any part of the law. It doesn't matter what part it is. If you've never had any dealing with law or the lawyers, that's the hardest part, is understanding what the problem is. – *Geoff*
- “ If you have experience of these things, then that experience is always helpful. But I think most people don't, fortunately or unfortunately. – *Beau*
- “ For most people, I haven't been in a courtroom, I don't know what it's like, so having something like that [video about small claims court] is great. If you're a completely law-abiding citizen and you've never been in a courtroom, it's somewhat daunting and it's a bit scary even though [...] you're not on the stand or anything like that, it's still daunting. – *Joe*


### Provocation

Are there ways you could better support people who are navigating their first legal issue?

**Figure 14 Jay's 'recipe' to get legal help for an employment issue. People like Jay were interacting with the legal sector and community services for the first time. Finding help was a challenge for them.**


## My recipe to get help for...

### Employment Matter

 Time spent looking for help
 

1


HOURS  
DAYS  
MONTHS  
YEARS

 Time spent trying to get my problem fixed
 


HOURS  
DAYS  
MONTHS  
YEARS

### Key ingredients

List out some technology, tools or people that are useful to have  
Try to be as specific as you can. "a hand-me down laptop" or "a person who can..."

 Technology and tools
 

☐ Google
 ☐ Facebook
 ☐ University
 ☐

 People
 

☐ Staff member
 ☐ Community lawyer
 ☐ FairWork
 ☐ Labour Union
 ☐

List out what other people need to get help legal online.  
Skills, information, set-up, attitude. What else?

☐ Don't spend money
 ☐ Take help form the
 ☐ Positive attitude
 ☐ Facebook by
 ☐ Spend time for right information
 ☐ posting your problem

### Directions

Step 1. I was looking for the help one month. This is the time of the March month.

Step 2. Use the goggle for particular information about the problems. Then, try to find out the community lawyer. Or, try to contact the unions for the help.

Step 3. 1) I searched on the google for helping the international students. I got the study Melbourne contact. I contacted them, they helped me for the rent and the grocery. They informed to contact to my university legal service. 2) I contacted to my university for my problem. They handout my case to the Monash community lawyer. They informed to go through the Fair Work. 3) I contacted the Fair Work, they informed that I didn't have enough proof. They suggested me to go small circuit court. I again contacted to my university. Monash community lawyer was helping me for the lodging the case to the court. My case is still going on.

**Figure 15 One participant's 'empathy map', describing clearly what it was like to try to solve their first legal issue.**

When you have a legal problem

I was thinking

- How difficult the situation was and how much easier it would have been if my housemate just became reasonable
- How badly I wanted peace and an easy solution
- About how easy it would have been if my housemate just moved out
- About how the whole issue would have been prevented if I was there during the interview process
- About how useless the police were

I was hearing

- Words of encouragement from my friends, how I was going to get through it
- Words of support – that I was not at fault and that my housemate was the problem
- Advice from my friends, a student advisor specialising in housing situations, legal advice from a legal counsellor in North Melbourne
- That there was nothing the police can do because it was a civil matter

I was seeing

- Friends and my partner for support
- A legal counsellor for VCAT and tenancy advise
- A student advisor for tenancy advise
- My housemate escalating to the point where he broke down my door and attempted to physically harm my other housemate

I was feeling

- Scared
- Overwhelmed
- Frustrated
- Angry
- Distraught
- Tired
- Powerless
- hopeless

I was saying

- How tired I was of feeling powerless
- How frustrated I was at the situation and how long it took to be resolved (about 6 months?)
- How angry I was at my housemate and the legal system
- How badly I wanted the problem to end, how much I wanted peace



## 4. Different resources serve different purposes at different times

Help-seekers can identify which resources will work best and when they would use them. Our card sorting activity revealed that people could make decisions about resource usage even when given very little information. They could analyse and explain why they would select a tool, when they would use it, and what combinations or resources would work best for them and their issue. Each type of resource had different ways of supporting the search for help or moving someone through the legal process.

- 4.1 Online self-help resources are useful for common legal problems
- 4.2 People know which resources will work for them and when to use them
- 4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation
- 4.4 People generally hate chatbots...until they try a good one
- 4.5 Videos are useful but legal help-seekers don't usually look for them
- 4.6 Other people's stories are not always trusted
- 4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations
- 4.8 People often prepare online before seeing a lawyer
- 4.9 Legal help-seekers want information, not fun and games
- 4.10 Online resources help people learn legal terms and processes

## 4.1 Online self-help resources are useful for common legal problems

Participants whose main recent legal issue related to housing or tenancy were most likely to use one of the resources we tested. People with a work or employment related matter were also likely to use at least one of the online self-help resources presented through the research.

During the session, participants all selected a scenario relating to housing or employment for the search activity and most uncovered useful resources to address their problem. Some expressed relief and even surprise that they were able to use online resources to help with these types of legal problems.

“ [My advice for others] Make use of all the free online legal resources you can. Use them to your full advantage and educate yourself as much as you can. As well as, I think one thing that could be useful for a person who doesn't have a legal background, [you may] feel is not well educated about their rights. So I feel we should all be more educated about the law. – *Katie*

“ I do think [the Justice Connect website] is truly a worthwhile thing, because I've been one of those poor bastards that doesn't understand the law and is suddenly confronted with something that I know nothing about. And at that time I couldn't afford a lawyer, and in the days when you could get a lawyer for a hundred bucks, go to a court place for you. Now, I think they charge you, I bet, a hundred bucks just to write a letter, if not more. So I think this is a great idea, and if I can do something to help or promote it, then let me know. – *Geoff*

We identified a slight correlation between legal issues and tool types, though this would need further testing to produce conclusive results. Those who chose a scenario related to employment seemed more likely to prefer a factsheet (especially women); while the interactive resources of a chatbot and flowchart (a guided pathway that showed options) were more popular among people who chose a scenario related to tenancy. → **9 Extensions to this research**

The participants who described their experience of less common legal issues - bankruptcy, divorce, and family law - had less success with the resources tested in the session. These three collectively tested a factsheet, website, two different guided pathways, and a chatbot, all of which they were unlikely to use satisfactorily on their own. → **5.5 Existing resources do not adequately account for emotional or financial stress.**

Having considered the types of legal problems for which resources were identified as useful, the rest of this section focuses on the different types of resources and participants' preferences for each. If you are interested in the relationship between participants' identities and use of resources, we explore this further in the following set of insights → **5.1 Some priority groups are less likely to successfully use legal resources.**

Online self-help resources have been shown to be most effective for legal processes which can be broken down into clearly identifiable steps.

Self-help resources may be less effective in instances where the self-helper's intellectual engagement is limited to following well-defined processes with predictable outcomes. (Lawler, Giddings and Robertson 2012)

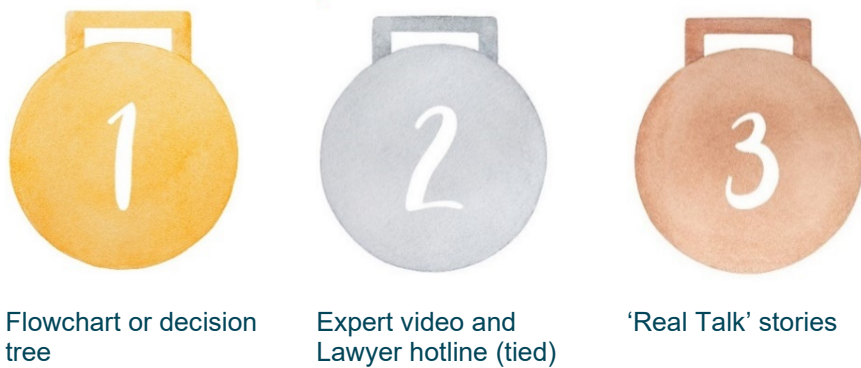


## 4.2 People know which resources will work for them and when to use them

As described in the → [Introduction](#), participants ranked, tagged, and discussed legal self-help resource types through a card sorting activity. Participants in our research were largely discerning and effective consumers of information, able to determine the legal nature of the problem in their scenario and identify steps to resolve it. Picking an online self-help resource to express their preferences was fairly easy for our participants. Looking at concept cards, they could select tools they felt would be valuable and accessible.

Although resources moved around in different combinations, when preferences were aggregated and themes were coded, a clear first choice could be identified: the flowchart or decision tree tool → [4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation](#). Aggregating the top three and top five concepts indicates the flowchart or decision tree tool is the most popular resource type. 14 out of 15 participants (93%) chose this tool in their top five and 10 of them (63%) chose it in their top three, making it outflank the other resources that fluctuated more in the ranking.

**Figure 16 Top ranked resources by participants**



Overall, there were four resource types that ranked highest. When presented with a diverse range of resources, the most popular choices typically corresponded to resources people would use first in the process. Discussions with our participants highlighted that each resource had a unique way of supporting the search for help or solving a legal problem on their own.

- **Flowchart** would describe the process and the steps to get help, ideally including times and costs. → [4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation](#)
- **Video** could give an idea of the process. You can watch it anytime and can listen multiple times until you understand it. A video should ideally link to other steps to take immediately or other organisations that can help you. → [4.5 Videos are useful but legal help-seekers don't usually look for them](#)
- **'Real talk' (people's stories)** could help you set expectations and check the information given by lawyers, webpages, and other resources. For people who had legal problems that were now affecting their mental wellbeing, they imagined these 'Real Talk' sessions were community based and could even be support groups. → [4.6 Other people's stories are not always trusted](#)
- **Lawyer hotline** could help you figure out the issue and give you confidence and a plan of action. → [4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations](#); → [5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool](#)

Each of these concepts captured close to a quarter of 'votes'.

Consistent losers, or tool types that people did not want to use, included the **game**, **script writer** and **chatbot**. The reasons for those choices included: not being interested in games; wanting a quick answer; feeling a script was too formal for the conversation they needed to have; and a general aversion to chatbots based on experience or expectations. The chatbot was popular for some, though, and worked well in the live testing; [see → 4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation](#) for more about this polarising option, which could also link help-seekers up to resources and services quickly, any time of day or night. See [→ 8. Design principles for online self-help resources](#) and [→ 7 Recommendations](#)

People had various expectations of each of these resources, and with 18 votes for a 'first choice', participants showed us they would be using multiple resources at the same time (see [→ Table 8 Participant tool ranking results](#)) See also [→ 4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations](#)

**Table 7 High and low ranking resources**

Card Title	% of Top 5 votes	% of 1-3 rank	% of 4-6 rank	% of 7-10 rank	% of not interested	Rank avg.
Expert Video	60.0	53.3	26.7	46.7	6.7	3
Factsheet	53.3	33.3	33.3	46.7	6.7	4
Document Collector	53.3	6.7	53.3	60.0	0.0	6
Script Writer	40.0	0.0	40.0	26.7	53.3	9
Letter Writer	40.0	13.3	40.0	40.0	33.3	8
Flowchart   Decision tree	93.3	66.7	26.7	33.3	0.0	1
Chatbot	40.0	33.3	6.7	20.0	40.0	7
Legalese translator	33.3	26.7	20.0	40.0	26.7	10
Real talk: stories from others	46.7	26.7	33.3	33.3	26.7	5
Lawyer hotline	60.0	60.0	20.0	26.7	6.7	2
Learn the law game	20.0	6.7	13.3	13.3	73.3	11

**Table 8 Participant tool ranking results**

Card Title	Ranking											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		12
Expert Video	2	5	1	0	1	3	2	1	0	0		1
Factsheet	1	4	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	0		1
Document Collector	0	1	0	5	2	1	1	2	1	2		0
Script Writer	0	0	0	3	3	0	1	0	0	0		8
Letter Writer	1	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	1	0		5
Flowchart   Decision tree	4	1	5	0	4	0	1	0	0	0		0
Chatbot	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	3	0	0		6
Legalese translator	0	1	3	1	0	2	1	2	1	0		4
Real talk: stories from others	3	0	1	2	1	2	1	0	1	0		4
Lawyer hotline	3	5	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	0		1
Learn the law game	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0		11
Total number of cards ranked in this position	18	17	15	17	15	15	12	10	4	2		41

## Each resource type has specific functions

An overview of what we heard from participants about each resource type is presented in brief here, with more details in the subsequent insights.

**Expert Video:** *A video explaining things from an expert.* A good general introduction to a topic or an issue. Needed to look professional and not have adverts. Most people didn't think about searching on YouTube for legal videos, but some would consider them as alternatives to fact sheets if they were short. The video needed to link to other resources rather than stand alone.

**Factsheet:** *A website with factsheets you can download or print.* Could be useful at any time, but not a first choice. Used in conjunction with other resources like a video, chatbot or legal language translator.

**Document Collector:** *A tool that helps you get your paperwork together.* People could see this being a paid tool, to securely collect documents for court and keep their own records. Some people felt they would struggle with this if it did not provide alternatives or advice about different types of evidence.

**Script Writer:** *A tool that helps you create a script for talking to people.* People didn't like the idea of writing a script; a few bullet points should be enough to support dialogue. They did not want conversations to feel unnatural.

**Letter Writer:** *A tool that helps you write a great letter.* People assumed this was a template they could fill out on their own, which they would feel comfortable using. This tool ranked in the middle of 'useful' because you would not be sure if you needed it at the start. That depended on the issue and phase you were at.

**What you can do (flowchart/decision tree):** *A tool that helps you see your options and compare them.* When aggregating top choices this tool outranked others. People saw this as valuable to help them identify where they were in the process and what they needed to do.

**Chatbot:** *A chat bot that gives you ideas and legal advice.* Some people said they would never use a chatbot simply because of the name or experience. Others felt that it was a good first step in learning about the potential issue they had and finding additional resources or clues.

**Legalese translator:** *A tool that helps you translate and explain legal words.* This only became useful later down the track after watching videos or talking to a lawyer. This was most useful when reading details and completing forms and procedures with legal jargon.

**Real Talk:** *Stories from people who have been through it.* This tool had mixed results. Some really gravitated towards people's stories and real-world examples as a way to verify legal websites and advice. Others felt that stories from people would need to be vetted, because every person and circumstance is different. People were also concerned that the information could be old, leading you down the wrong path and wasting time.

**Lawyer hotline:** *One-click dial a friendly lawyer.* We were surprised that this was not a clear first choice. There were two sentiments around contacting a lawyer later in the process and not calling up at the start. Some people genuinely wanted to figure out if there was a legal issue before they called. Others were worried that this might be a paid service that was expensive, or free at the start then pushing you into a payment plan. It was considered too good to be free.

**Learn the law game:** *Play to see the consequences of choices.* Most people did not want to play a game to find out if they had a legal issue. Scenarios were seen as helpful but most participants said they would not have the patience or motivation to play a legal game.

## 4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation

A key message we heard from help-seekers could be summed up as: “I want to know all my options so I can make a decision that suits my life”.

On the whole, as mentioned above, the most popular tool type was a flowchart showing options. This could be presented as a static diagram, an interactive guided pathway, or a (well-designed) chatbot. This resource type was especially, but not only, favoured by those who had not used legal services before or who were experiencing a particular kind of legal issue for the first time.

When we tested a guided pathway or chatbot with people, they tended to find it most useful if it gave them options. Sometimes they might choose one option, for example, respond ‘yes’ to a question, just to see what the next screen or text box would say, only to return and provide a different answer. Others grew frustrated with these resources when they did not clearly show options or potential consequences of certain decisions and actions.

- “ Yeah, I feel like a little anxious in not knowing enough about what's going on. I don't clearly know what are the options that could look like going forward. What's going to happen?
- “ [...] I think a more simple diagram of this is: what could happen, and then that could happen if you take this option, and then it goes down to here. One of those diagrams. – Jess
- “ I suppose you could do a standard chat for applications to get a hearing in court and maybe follow with a yes-no type graph that tells you if you're going down this path where it will lead you if you go to that way or what obstacles might stand in your way, depending on which road or path your travel. – Matthew
- “ I feel, at that point, that I would have a somewhat idea of what I wanted to do. So, it would just be a matter of getting help and helping deciding if I've taken the right path, and also, I think the other thing would be is what are potential consequences of my actions? – Jane

People did not appreciate it when resources were designed in a way that removed their agency, by sending them on a particular path without giving them a real choice. Comments from one participant about different resources, for instance, kept coming back to how a tool could help them by showing steps and options.

Help-seekers did not want to be educated about legal rights, rules, or processes in general. They wanted specific guidance on their individual situation, the options available to them, and the possible implications of taking particular actions.

See → [8. Design principles for online self-help resources](#)

Other research on legal self-help resources has similarly found that a barrier to their use is their typically excessive focus on conceptual understanding.

Not every aspect of every legal problem requires the individual to understand the context (e.g. abstract concepts), background, and nuances of potential defenses (Hagan, 2016)



## 4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one

The chatbot was a polarising option for participants. In conversations around the card sort, it elicited some of the most strongly worded negative comments. Yet many responded positively when testing the 'Rentervention' chatbot (a resource for Chicago renters produced by a group of lawyers and advocates in Illinois, USA) in the session.

The bias against chatbots is not an issue only for legal resources. Poor past experiences or no experience with chatbots led people to be skeptical that such a tool would work for them.

Several participants asked what a chatbot was, when presented with this type of tool in the card sort. One kept referring to it mistakenly as "dropbox", after initially asking "what's a bot?". Some people said they would never use a chatbot simply because of the name or experience.

“ I think the chatbot would be my least trustworthy one actually.... It's lacking that personal touch and I feel like technology hasn't caught up to that point yet where you can diagnose a question specifically very well using AI, just based on my previous experience. Like for example, like I said with Optus and Centrelink, these services, they- Just, no. – *Sunny*

“ I don't like talking to robots. I don't think anyone does, do they? Maybe robots like talking to robots. I wouldn't like this. – *Beau*

“ Chatbots, I don't think can grasp the subtleties... Most situations, I don't think it is helpful. It might be damaging, actually.... Chatbots are a thing designed to grasp specific words in your communication and direct you. – *Joe*

“ [Would a chatbot help?] No, no, no. Because almost all time you will not get your particular answers. They just say, "Okay, we are now processing something." Or they just give a link. You just have to go to that link and you can search it. – *Jay*

Others felt that a chatbot could be a good first step in learning about the issue they had and finding additional resources or clues. Those who identified the chatbot as useful in the card sort tended to describe it as a first step that would help to link to better information, services or resources. Some would only want to use it in combination with other resources. See also → **4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations**

“ I would go (G) a chatbot that you chat to and get legal advice, [then] I'd go the friendly lawyer. Then I'd go the (F) tool that helps you see your options and compare them. – *Sam*

“ Actually, option G [chatbot], for me, would come around the same time as the lawyer, so I would do all the three things at once to compare my information. – *Katie*

Some who tried Chicago's Rentervention hated it, finding the questions increasingly personal or 'sneaky' and intrusive. This led one participant to terminate the test scenario, while acknowledging they did learn something about their legal rights from using it. Another person admitted after completing the test that they would not have continued with it if they were using it in real life.

This attitude towards chatbots is another confirmation that legal self-helpers are mainly motivated by a desire to resolve legal issues with minimal expenditure of resources including time, money and intellectual engagement (Lawler, Giddings and Robertson 2012)



“ Every time it asks for information. First it was my house. I was okay with it. It was me. It was kind of okay. It led to the information about my landlord. And at that point it's like, I'm doing a legal case, but the entire internet knows about it. I don't want to disclose that...only information we ask potentially could be your email or phone number because we need to communicate with you.

“ Chatbots are great, but this one was very horrible... I have never seen a robot so intrusive, but at least now I know something... It wasn't completely empty handed. I know that it's illegal for me to not have hot water. So I know that I do deserve help. You always get something from chatbots. – Penny



Most participants who tried the chatbot in the session had a positive experience, however, with some surprised at how well it worked.

The chatbot also received three number one rankings from our participants during the card sorting ahead of the test. Those who chose it told us they would be using it alongside other resources like the hotline, flowchart or factsheet to confirm answers. The chatbot alone wasn't considered sufficient.

“ It was quite easy to use. I think my main issue was definitely going to be privacy, and how the information that I was providing is going to be used. But apart from that, I could see myself using that tool. I know I said before that it would be the least trustworthy one, but I've got enough experience with these kinds of things to know that they do kind of lead to some results. And based on what I saw... it seems promising... It's just so hard to contact people now and they make you wait for so long. I think having a tool like that... It was pretty quick. So that that can quickly give you what you're after is quite amazing actually. – Sunny



“ [Asked to review the chatbot tool] I'd just say kind of simple and easy to navigate through it. I'd definitely recommend it. – Sam

See also → **5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool** and → **4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations**

## 4.5 Videos are useful but legal help-seekers don't usually look for them

Participants generally found the videos they tested would offer a good general introduction to a topic or an issue. They were more likely to trust a video that appeared to be professionally produced and without advertising. Several suggested that a video should never be a standalone tool for legal self-help but could be complementary with other resources. Videos were seen as helpful at the beginning to give a general overview, losing relevance as a person attained knowledge and needed more contextual explanations relevant to their situation and options.

We found similar results when videos appeared within another tool we were testing, such as the Rentervention chatbot. While some participants skipped the video, others appreciated the short (under 2 minute) animated video at the start of the resource that explained what it did and how it could help them.

“ The video looks good. It was reassuring. It was a good video to watch. It looks like this site would be helpful. – Jane

“ [Responding to the expert video card] Some of those provisions that were available in video is very beneficial early in the scene for somebody who hasn't experienced a court case before. Very beneficial. – Matthew

Each month roughly 17.6 million people in Australia watch a YouTube video (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019) .

The Digital Platforms Inquiry of 2018 found that 91% of Australians commonly use YouTube to search for and watch videos online (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Consumer Views and Behaviours on Digital Platforms, 2018).



“ [Responding to Rentervention video] Ideal, isn't it? Straightaway you've captured the person and you've gone straight into “what I provide”. – *Matthew*

Legal help-seekers who expressed a preference for video tended to be either a non-native English speaker or not tertiary educated. This may suggest that participants with higher legal capability were less likely to use a video for legal help. Some who preferred video nonetheless had very high digital and legal capability - so it was not a preference simply because they couldn't use other resources.

“ If there's a video then I probably would have read nothing and they would have to say everything. And would that be again too much? – *Jess*

“ I was immediately drawn to the video again, but it doesn't necessarily need to be a video, obviously. Maybe that video is just written in a way that all the dramatic information is taken out of it, that it's just pure facts and just factual information. – *Joe*

None of the participants had searched for legal videos in relation to their recent legal issue, but some would consider them as alternatives to factsheets if the video was short. Several participants expressed surprise that video would be considered a tool for legal help. Even if it is a medium they use for other activities, such as learning new skills through YouTube clips, they wouldn't think to search for legal help videos. Yet, when presented with a good video, many help-seekers found it useful.

“ At that time [seeking legal help online] I don't know why I didn't think to [watch a video]. It's funny because I go to YouTube for pretty much everything but I didn't come across any... or I didn't even think of going to YouTube to look at videos, I rather just engaged with print media, like articles and things like that. – *Katie*

“ In general I think short, simple, well designed videos are a good idea. A roleplay with situations with people? Maybe if it was short, clear and simple. – *Beau*

The style and language in the video would need to be considered. Also see  
→ **5.3 Existing legal resources are not accessible enough for everyone**

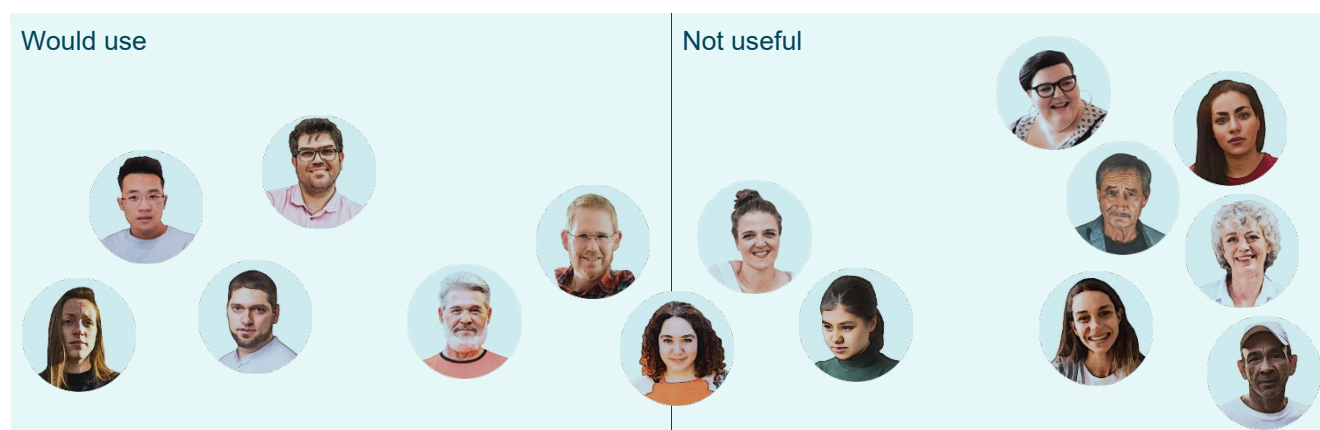
## 4.6 Other people's stories are not always trusted

One of the tool types in the card sort was a hypothetical resource called *Real Talk* and described as 'stories from people who have been through it.' We had very mixed responses to this tool, both in terms of participants' interpretation of what it was and how it might work, as well as whether they would like to use it. While some people thought stories might provide useful information on what to expect, they didn't always trust other people's experiences for various reasons:

- Too variable
- Outdated or old information
- Too emotional
- Not getting to the point
- Deceptive, leaving out important details



**Figure 17 What our participants thought of the Real Talk concept**



Some really gravitated towards people's stories and real-world examples to verify legal information and advice. A couple of participants chose Real Talk as their first preference in the card sort, explaining it would be the first thing they would want to engage with, before using other resources.

This resource type led some to think about support groups and suggest they would be a useful connection to help people make. On the other hand, some participants suggested you would not need a resource like this, as you can hear stories from your own social networks. See also → **5.5 Existing resources do not adequately account for emotional or financial stress**

Some help-seekers suggested it would depend on how the story was put together and conveyed. A lot of emotion, and sometimes trauma, is experienced in these situations, and those kinds of details could disturb others.

It can be hard to vet the source or determine the credibility of the story or information provided in this format. For that reason, this resource was often considered not trustworthy, because every person and circumstance is different, and it also “might not give the whole story” (*Jane*). Some participants were concerned that getting irrelevant information could confuse or stress them out.

The information in these stories could also be old or outdated, leading a help-seeker down the wrong path and wasting time.

## **4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations**

There was no strong, overarching pattern for ranking or using resources among the missing majority as a whole, as the discussion and tables above show. We observed a mix of preferences and attitudes towards different types of legal self-help resources. Many of the participants were likely to use one of the resources we tested in the session, but not the other. Some would use a video but not a chatbot or guided pathway; others wouldn't use a video like the one we shared but would use a guided pathway or letter writer.

See also → **5.1 Some priority groups are less likely to successfully use legal resources.**

As some participants pointed out, every person experiencing a legal problem is in a unique situation and it would be hard to find or make a tool that works well for everyone.

“ How do you capture the same people that are going to experience the same situations? Everybody's case is tangentially different, directed differently. – *Matthew*

“ I just found a lot of websites that I would just go around in circles.... when they had scenarios come up of what people had gone through, I found that scary in some ways. Because every person's going to have a different situation. – *Adele*



One consistent theme emerged nonetheless: a combination of resources is usually needed, ideally in conjunction with personalised professional help.

See also → **5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool**

People who wanted to use the chatbot at the start (see → **4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation**) told us how they would most likely use it with other resources simultaneously.

“ While I'm watching a video, I'll probably chat with the chatbot. In general, that's my approach to many things in life. I clump it all together. My research phase comes number one, and then based on the advice I get and the information I've collected, then I see how to progress to step two. – *Katie*



## Popular combinations of tools

Only two pairs of participants chose the same top two resources in the card sort. Nonetheless, some common combinations of preferred resources suggested two main types of DIY help-seeker (→ **1.2.3 How participants reflected legal user archetypes**) based on their preference for either narrative or analytical information.

**People with a more 'intimidated' DIY mindset tend to seek resources for dialogue** (e.g. lawyer hotline, real talk, chatbot) and exhibit a preference for conversations and stories in relation to common legal problems. This group includes two participants who recently sought legal help for an employment issue and chose Real Talk and the lawyer hotline as their top two resource types. Both (Jay and Maria) are tertiary educated, low income and less confident online - but otherwise had quite different characteristics (gender, age, etc.). They were the only participants who chose Real Talk as the tool they were most likely to use. One other participant had Real Talk as a first preference, along with a video. He (Joe) was also tertiary educated but extremely confident online and had English as a second language.

**People with a more 'confident' DIY mindset want resources to focus on facts** (e.g. flowchart, expert video). Three participants exhibited this type of combined preference for different legal issues. They (Jess, Matthew, Diesel) had mixed capabilities and legal issues but all were aged over 35 and were less likely to use one of the resources we tested with them, especially the chatbot.

Other than these groupings, there was a real mix in preferences and attitudes towards different types of resources. Other participants with similar income and digital capability levels chose different resources as their most likely resource types to use in a legal help-seeking context.

We also used a software package called Optimal Sort to identify similarities in responses and show us which resources clustered in the same ranked position. These results paired with our interviews and preference scales identified some combinations of resources that people saw working together. This is a piece of work that could be easily scaled to validate what we have seen with our small sample.

- Factsheets were consistently mentioned, ranking evenly by participants from first to last choice. Participants highlighted the need for a factsheet to lead to other resources.

Our simulations were quick examples of the stages of legal help-seeking (Hagan, 2016) .

To self-help a person must have agency —she must (1) believe her interests are legitimate, (2) believe that it is legitimate to pursue those interests, and (3) have the capacity (the self-confidence and the assertiveness) to pursue them.



- Videos tended to be seen as complementary, either a 'go to' top one or two choice or trailing at the end. It depended on personal preference, patience for video and point in the process.
- Video and factsheet linking together
- Chatbot linking or referring to other resources
- Letter writer and script writer together
- A combined factsheet, document collector and script tool

→ 4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one and

→ 4.5 Videos are useful but legal help-seekers don't usually look for them

See → 8. Design principles for online self-help resources

### Provocation

Do you know any examples that take the form of these popular combinations?

How might you monitor usage or pathways from one to another?

## 4.8 People often prepare online before seeing a lawyer

The help-seekers we spoke to had two main ways of thinking about the best time to speak with a legal professional. One group saw the legal professional as step one, a way to identify the issue and get guidance on next steps (see → 5.2 **At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool**). This was not the majority. Participants who expressed a preference for the lawyer hotline were mainly older men who had chosen the employment issue scenario prior to the card sort activity.

Most participants would not speak to a legal professional as the first step in seeking to understand or resolve their problem. They wanted to start by doing their own homework and understanding key concepts in order to have a better first conversation and ultimately a better legal result. This group tended to describe using different types of self-help resources in combination with each other and alongside consultations with professionals.

“ I do try and do a lot of research before I even spoke to someone on the phone, which was a national hotline. – *Adele*

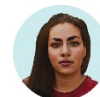
“ So I think for me, because when you're looking for something, [the] majority of time you're not clear what you're looking for... Before you call a hotline, you want to know exactly, you want to learn a few things so that's why I put it second [in the card sort]. – *Penny*

“ I guess, before going to the community legal centre, it would be good if [the character] educated herself, so read all these stuff on Tenants Victoria or all the other websites. – *Katie*

The drivers behind wanting to feel prepared are multi-layered. Some are driven by a sense of pride or professionalism, while others are simply concerned about getting the most out of their time, effort or money. Some people genuinely wanted to figure out if there was a legal issue before they called, so they would not be embarrassed. Others were worried that the lawyer hotline might be a paid service that was expensive, or free at the start pushing you into a payment plan. Some realise that the difficulty in accessing help and high cost of lawyers mean they will not get an opportunity for professional advice twice. For everyone, it is safe to say, they are seeking to increase their confidence by using resources before speaking with a professional.

“ I feel like when you start getting in legal space, you want to sound like you know what you're talking about and when someone can make you sound like you know what you're talking about, that really helps. – *Jess*

Other research similarly found that legal self-helpers are mainly motivated by a desire to resolve legal issues with minimal expenditure of resources including time, money and intellectual engagement (Lawler, Giddings and Robertson 2012)



See also:

→ 1.2.3 How participants reflected legal user archetypes

→ 4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations

→ 6.2.2 A legal problem needs a lawyer

## 4.9 Legal help-seekers want information, not fun and games

Almost no one wants a game for learning the law, but hunting down help online is a choose-your-own-adventure.

One of the tool types we tested in the card sort was a 'learn the law' game. It scored lowest in the preferences of all the resource types, with 73% of participants not interested in using it. Most people did not want to play a game to find out if they had a legal issue. Scenarios were seen as helpful, but most of the people we spoke to did not have the patience or time to play a legal game when they were trying to resolve a legal issue of their own.

People are looking for information, not 'tools'. As one participant put it:

“ Information is more than just tools. (Debrief session)

In the stressful situation of experiencing a legal issue and trying to seek help on your own, people want clear and relevant information, not entertainment or frivolous, distracting details. See also → 3.2 People often feel overwhelmed and anxious when seeking legal help

“ No, not good. No game. No. Because I have not, I'm not playing games – Jay

“ [Describing an animated film:] the drawing was nice, but that was frantic. Here we are trying to give people calm information, and the whole thing was sold on some artistic idea to make it look cute, and cute is supposed to get people in. But it was bleurgh. – Pearl

Only one of the eight participants who tested the chatbot commented on the animated gifs in a testing session.

Contrary to the finding described to the right, we observed a lack of interest and engagement with illustrations and memes when inserted within a resource such as a guided pathway or chatbot. In a hurry for relevant, serious information, people tended to ignore features designed to entertain them.

## 4.10 Online resources help people learn legal terms and processes

Online legal resources help people learn about the language of law and the justice system. Even if they engage with a resource that they conclude is not for them, people can transfer knowledge from it to their next search.

As seen in → 4.1 above, help-seekers are quick to scan a web page for value. For some, once they decide that the page is a reputable source, they look for validation they are in the right place. Collecting keywords and checking definitions was a common search technique during our searching simulation.



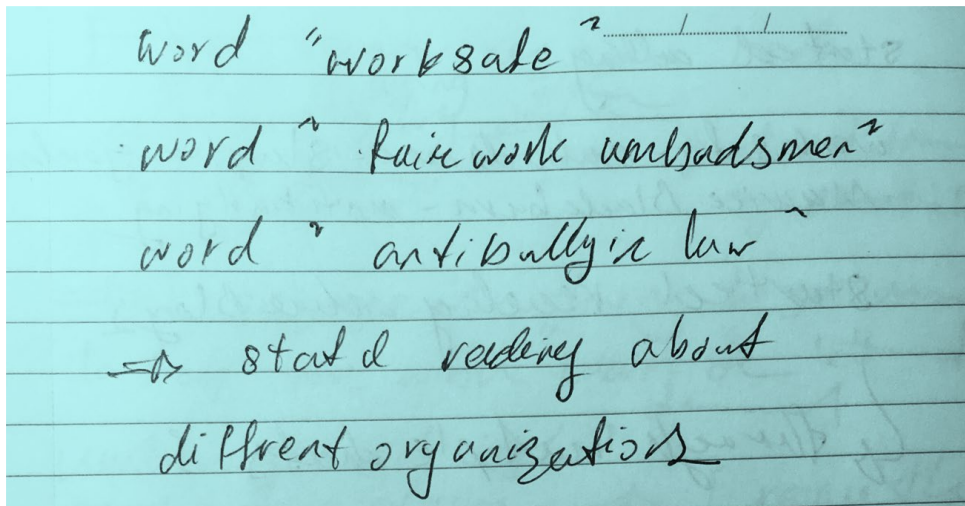
Participants commented on the potential of illustrations but didn't notice or comment on the animated gifs they saw during testing.

Overseas research found that images and illustrations (e.g. cartoons) can ease anxiety, entertain so as to motivate, facilitate understanding, and serve as mnemonic devices (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017). We did not see signs of this during our testing.



Collating information across multiple resources, websites and organisations is time consuming—and at times frustrating. Online searching works well when each source boosts the help-seeker's confidence and contributes to their mental map of what is available to help them.

**Figure 18 Breadcrumbs in action. Photo from Penny's notebook reflecting what they saw when looking for help online for an employment issue. Finding a legal term was described just like finding a key or a clue.**



During the search simulation, participants chose either a housing or employment scenario. Their task was to go online to figure out how they could resolve the issue. Searching styles varied slightly depending on past experience with the legal sector or a general 'know how' about how government and public services work.

Those with lower legal or service literacy simply started by typing a question into Google or describing what was happening to them. As their search progressed through web pages, they would return to the search box and begin again using the words that they had just learnt. Many people did this by opening multiple tabs that eventually held a summary of options, a list of available services, definitions or words. All of these combined to help participants decide what to do next.

“ You might find words or things that would be beneficial to investigate a bit further. Maybe it gives you a name or something that you feel is applicable to what you've got in your letter and try and follow up from what the wording is here. – *Matthew*



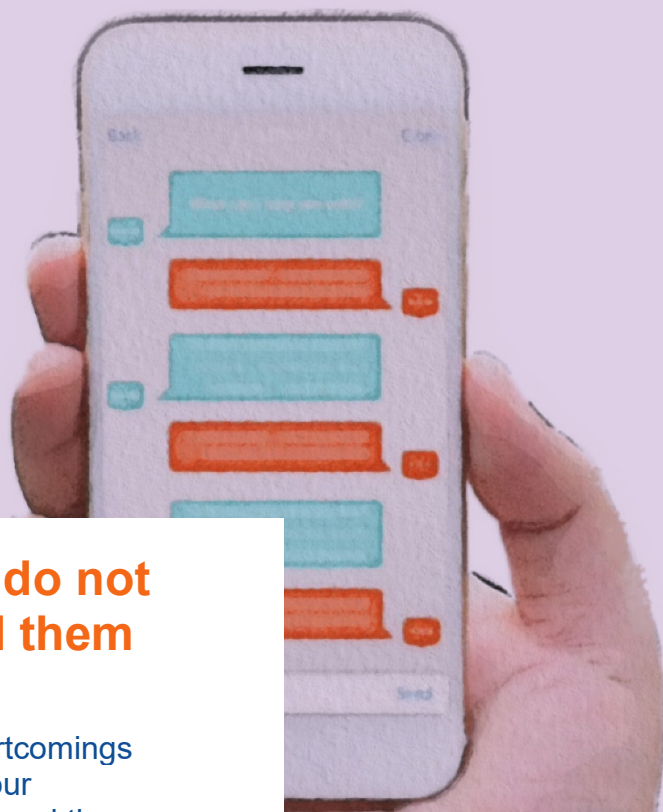
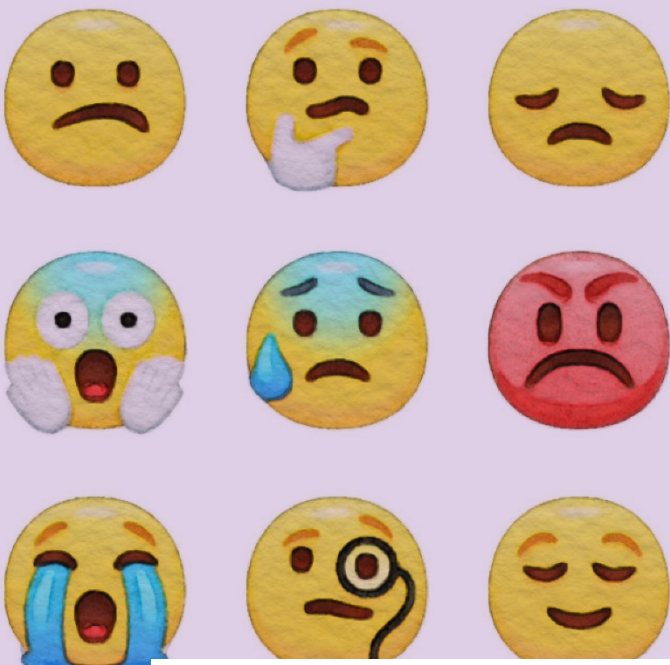
“ You don't really know how to describe a problem until you've done further research into it, and you see the kind of language that you're using and then you just start using that as well. And in turn, it just makes it easier to look up things online. – *Sunny*



Some participants effectively picked up 'knowledge breadcrumbs' from testing resources in the session. The chatbot seemed particularly effective at imparting key words, knowledge about legal rights, and confidence in legal processes.

Collecting knowledge does not only apply to online resources for legal help either; it helps with interactions with relevant services. Many people begin by looking online, then once they have their keywords, they are more likely to approach a service provider. The search for help continues there too.

See also → **5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool**



## 5. Legal self-help resources do not work well for all who need them

In this section we discuss some of the shortcomings of existing legal resources and the behaviour exhibited by people as they try to decipher and then apply knowledge. We highlight issues of access, trust, accessibility, appropriateness and usefulness.

- 5.1 Some priority groups are less likely to successfully use online resources
- 5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a profession than use a tool
- 5.3 Existing legal resources are not accessible enough for everyone
- 5.4 Legal self-help resources lack timeframes and timelines
- 5.5 Existing resources do not adequately account for emotional or financial stress
- 5.6 Resources could help more with hard conversations and negotiating
- 5.7 Just because a resource exists doesn't mean people will find it
- 5.8 Reviews of resources might increase use

## 5.1 Some priority groups are less likely to successfully use legal resources

### Defining this project's priority groups

When considering access to legal self-help resources and the 'missing majority', priority groups were initially defined based on prior Australian research. The Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales (McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019) identified two distinct groups, which we made deliberate efforts to include in our research → **B Crafting a participant mix** in the appendices.

The first group is **more likely to use self-help resources** and find them helpful. It includes:

- 25-34 year olds
- people with disabilities
- people with post-school qualifications
- solo parents (expanded by us to include carers)

The second group is people who were found to be **less likely to use self-help resources**:

- lower education
- a non-English main language
- those living in remote and regional areas (McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019).

Our research has shown that people in both of these groups could access online self-help resources, but many struggled to get the help they needed. Having digital access, a tertiary education, or being younger made little difference to participants' ability or preference to use online legal self-help resources. In contrast to other research into online legal resources, we found that new migrants, people living in regional areas, and people with disabilities could use self-help resources, but design, language, and accessibility challenges made it harder or took longer to use the tool to resolve a legal issue.

### Priority group intersectionality

In order to ensure a diverse range of people were included within our small sample, and in recognition of the multiple identities we all have, we explicitly considered intersectionality in our research and recruitment design. We selected people who belonged to multiple 'priority groups' and had broad lived experience. This meant that we could interrogate resources from multiple perspectives and understand more broadly how different types of discrimination interact and render individuals experiencing compound discrimination invisible in the eyes of the law and in universalist design principles and practices (Law Council of Australia, 2018; Costanza-Chock, 2018).

“ It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. — Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality (Schnall, 2020)

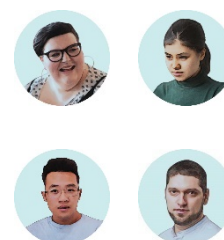
**Figure 19 Intersectionality and access to justice based on Canadian Council for Refugees Power Wheel ↗ (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.)**



## Likelihood of seeking online self-help resources

The main factors that distinguished the two overarching groups in our research were that people with high *digital capability* (i.e. highly confident seeking information online) and common legal issues (housing or employment → [4.1 above](#)) were more likely to find existing online legal resources satisfactory. People with low *legal capability* (largely a lack of experience with legal services) and legal issues related to relationships were the least likely to use one of the resources tested in the research. We expand on this observation immediately below. This analysis does not match neatly with the legal archetypes presented in Part One (→ [1.2.3 above](#)); rather, this is a different way to group participants based on their *likelihood* to use any type of online legal self-help resource. Another group poorly served by existing resources are those with accessibility needs → [5.3 below](#).

The participants **most likely to use** one of the resources tested in the research were aged under 44 and had **high digital capability**. Most of them had multiple



devices that they could use to go online (e.g. a laptop or tablet and a smartphone), were tertiary educated, and had a first language other than English. They had mainly experienced housing or tenancy related issues but would use the resources for employment related issues too. They had mixed legal capability and experience with service systems.

For three of these four people who were highly likely to use online legal resources, video was one of the most popular resources (via the card sort and as selected for testing). The fourth participant in this group, a man with little experience of the legal system and a very low income, preferred a lawyer hotline or factsheet to a video. Participants in this group who tested the chatbot in the session had a good experience with it and indicated they would use a tool like this for a similar issue in future. See also **→4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they find a good one.**

On the whole, as mentioned above, the most popular tool type was a flowchart showing options. This could be presented as a static diagram, an interactive guided pathway, or a (well-designed) chatbot. This resource type was especially, but not only, favoured by those who had not used legal services before or who were experiencing a particular kind of legal issue for the first time.

When we tested a guided pathway or chatbot with people, they tended to find it most useful if it gave them options. Sometimes they might choose one option, for example, respond 'yes' to a question, just to see what the next screen or text box would say, only to return and provide a different answer. Others grew frustrated with these resources when they did not clearly show options or potential consequences of certain decisions and actions.

“ Yeah, I feel like a little anxious in not knowing enough about what's going on. I don't clearly know what are the options that could look like going forward. What's going to happen?

“ [...] I think a more simple diagram of this is: what could happen, and then that could happen if you take this option, and then it goes down to here. One of those diagrams. – *Jess*

“ I suppose you could do a standard chat for applications to get a hearing in court and maybe follow with a yes-no type graph that tells you if you're going down this path where it will lead you if you go to that way or what obstacles might stand in your way, depending on which road or path your travel. – *Matthew*

“ I feel, at that point, that I would have a somewhat idea of what I wanted to do. So, it would just be a matter of getting help and helping deciding if I've taken the right path, and also, I think the other thing would be is what are potential consequences of my actions? – *Jane*

People did not appreciate it when resources were designed in a way that removed their agency, by sending them on a particular path without giving them a real choice. Comments from one participant about different resources, for instance, kept coming back to how a tool could help them by showing steps and options.

Help-seekers did not *want* to be educated about legal rights, rules, or processes in general. They wanted specific guidance on their individual situation, the options available to them, and the possible implications of taking particular actions

See **→ 8. Design principles for online self-help resources**

A key message we heard from help-seekers could be summed up as: “I want to know all my options so I can make a decision that suits my life”.

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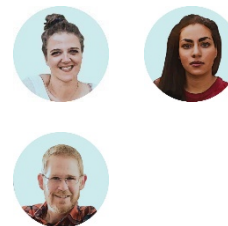
- “ Yeah, I feel like a little anxious in not knowing enough about what's going on. I don't clearly know what are the options that could look like going forward. What's going to happen?
- “ [...] I think a more simple diagram of this is: what could happen, and then that could happen if you take this option, and then it goes down to here. One of those diagrams. – *Jess*
- “ I suppose you could do a standard chat for applications to get a hearing in court and maybe follow with a yes-no type graph that tells you if you're going down this path where it will lead you if you go to that way or what obstacles might stand in your way, depending on which road or path your travel. – *Matthew*
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Help-seekers did not want to be educated about legal rights, rules, or processes in general. They wanted specific guidance on their individual situation, the options available to them, and the possible implications of taking particular actions.

See → **8. Design principles for online self-help resources**

People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one. The participants **least likely to use** one of the resources tested in the research were dealing with legal issues related to relationships that caused emotional challenges. They also happened to be aged 25-44, were not in the lowest income bracket, and had **low legal capability**. Those ineligible for Legal Aid had no prior experience with legal services. The only participants we spoke to about family related legal issues (divorce and custody) said they would not want to use a tool like the one we tested with them. See also → **5.6 Resources could help more with hard conversations and negotiating**.



Two out of three of the people unlikely to use legal resources had a tertiary education and multiple devices that they could use to go online. Two out of three were single parents, two had mental health challenges, one was a recent migrant, and the other two either had a chronic illness or accessibility needs. They each had a different level of digital capability. This group seem to firmly represent the 'missing majority' and it is concerning that online legal self-help resources do not work well for them.

Collectively, this group tested a factsheet, guided pathway and chatbot, with little success – despite choosing these as preferred resources in the card sort, indicating a strong willingness to use them. However, the resources they tested failed to resolve the issue in the scenario. The rest of this section expands on ways in which existing online legal resources are failing to meet people's needs.

## 5.2 At some point, most people would rather speak to a professional than use a tool

Many help-seekers spoke about how it's much easier to talk to someone than use an online resource, often at a certain point in the process. Some would like to use a tool first, to prepare themselves with the right language and grasp basic knowledge. See → **4.8 People often prepare online before seeing a lawyer** and → **4.7 There is no 'one tool' to rule them all but there are useful combinations**.

The comments in this section also help to explain preferences for videos of experts and the lawyer hotline, which were a common second choice of tool type.

Participants were often keen to 'figure out the basics' before they speak with someone like a lawyer about their problem.

Some participants described needing to search for a long time in order to find a professional to speak with, which would be their main objective for using any online resource.

“ I'd probably just keep on going and going and going and going until I got to the point where I'd speak to a human. – *Penny*



“ It's always much easier just to pick up a phone, dial a number, and then you've got that rapport with the person. You ask a question, they answer the question. You ask for information, they give you the information. As a first step, I think that's the easiest thing to do. – *Beau*



Others said they would be happy to use a tool if instructed by a legal specialist, but didn't know where to start on their own. Faced with information overload, many wanted a professional to point them in the right direction.

“ I would get advice first and see what that person says... It's always easier when someone is telling you what to do versus you finding out what to do, so I would suggest that... My first option would always be talking to someone who is an expert in that certain situation, that will always be my first option. – *Sunny*



“ When I was looking by myself ... I reckon I was just overwhelmed by it all, to be honest. Every site had different fact sheets and it got to the stage where I was like, well, which one's going to apply to... They were all different. So I ended up bypassing them altogether because each website was different. I still was like, nah, I just want to find some kind of lawyers or something and then just go off their word from there, as opposed to trying to figure it out for myself. There's just a huge amount of information, but it's all conflicting in a way. – *Sam*



Some lacked confidence in their ability to use online resources correctly and expressed concern that not getting expert advice might disadvantage them.

“ You can become too complacent doing things online, such as missing the information that what's been asked, or what you were supposed to do. Therefore I, always [prefer] a real person, yeah. I don't know whether it's just me because I'm old school in that regards. – *Diesel*



“ It's a two sided sword. If it's not available, you have to pay for it. And still it's the most sought after thing, because you have a real person, with real experience saying what is what. Like filling in a form, it could be tipped off by the smallest thing. So, it's great to have a form, for example, you know what you're doing. You go towards the facts and it's completely explained. – *Penny*



Some participants spoke about the value of face-to-face conversations, often acknowledging that would not be possible at the time of the interview, which took place during the stay-at-home orders in metropolitan Melbourne.

“ Obviously the best thing... I don't know about other people, but for me, I would always, always, always want to talk to someone, and have an actual person talking to me about the issue. But I do know just how hard that is in this current age, so I'm willing to make concessions around that. – *Sunny*



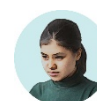
Several help-seekers said they would much prefer to speak to a real human than use a computer or the internet to get advice on legal issues. The strongest objections from this group came when a chatbot was proposed or tested. See →4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one.

This aversion to Artificial Intelligence type resources was common among people who had lots of experience with legal issues as well as those with limited exposure to the legal system. Those who had been to court, in particular, seemed to think a lawyer should be involved in any legal issue, with one describing online help-seekers as “self-representing”. One participant thought most online resources would be irrelevant, because if it's a legal matter, you should have a lawyer doing things like writing letters for you. →6.2.2 A legal problem means you need a lawyer.

Some participants were particularly keen to talk to a person because they really disliked reading lots of information. These comments mainly came from people with visual accessibility needs or whose first language is not English – reading legal information in English is likely to be much more difficult for these people than others.

“ I want to hear it from the lawyer themselves. I can't be bothered reading. – *Diesel*

“ I'd definitely talk to someone and see what options I have, a hundred percent. I think talking to someone would make me feel better, I guess, also as compared to reading things, because, personally, I feel like I prefer that. – *Katie*



Several participants suggested that talking with someone would make them feel less anxious (see also →3.2 above). Sometimes a tool like a video that replicates a human conversation might be sufficient for a person who prefers resources that offer dialogue and stories (see also → 4.7 above).



“ I found some videos that lawyers have spoken as if they're speaking to you and it's nice to have a person's face. A person actually speaking to you. – *Adele*



For others, nothing replaces a real live conversation where you have the ability to ask questions and have them answered by someone with the appropriate knowledge and experience. Our participants wanted an issue resolved quicker than reading documents and they believed a legal professional would help them.

“ It's good to speak to real people. You can ask exactly the question you want, and that person should actually answer that question... I think most people would want legal advice, and from a lawyer, because that's what you're dealing with. You're dealing with the legal system, so obviously if you're sick, you go to a doctor. – *Beau*

“ For me anyway, I'd rather pick up the phone, call someone, than type an email. And then you just feel a little bit reassured. I don't know, obviously, you're anxious and everything, but you just feel a little bit reassured that you're speaking to someone on the phone and then just kind of checking, “what do I have to do?” And they verbally tell you, it just gives you a little bit of peace. And then you know, you go through the incident. That makes sense to me anyway. I would prefer to call in that situation, definitely. – *Maria*

The person a help-seeker speaks to, at least initially, does not necessarily have to be a legal professional in order to be helpful. Some would start by speaking with friends or acquaintances who understand their situation, before seeking professional help. Some described how their character would initially respond to the scenario where they received an email that indicated a legal problem they would need to address.

“ I think she would probably talk to her friends at this point. I think she would probably want to do that more than actually looking at the problem itself, because I think one of the things that people like Sarah would probably find more helpful is getting, first of all, words of support from their friends. But at the same time, they would probably trust what their friends know more than what a website would tell them. And also, it'd be easier. It would be easier to just get an answer from a friend versus having to look for the answer yourself on the internet. – *Maria*

This does not mean online resources are irrelevant to these help-seekers. Rather, consideration should be given to the complementarity of digital resources and professional legal advice, as shown in other research on legal self-help (Balmer, Pleasence, Hagland, & McRae, 2019).

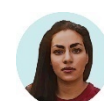
See → **8. Design principles for online self-help resources**

This insight is supported by other research that most people who use online self-help resources also ask for help from a professional advisor (Balmer, Pleasence, Hagland, & McRae, 2019).

### 5.2.1 Bad experiences with organisations, not only resources, impede help-seekers

Difficulties in accessing and comprehending information were not confined to the online world. Participants shared many anecdotes of gatekeeping, inconsistent information, and dead ends, when looking for help from organisations or lawyers.

“ The union did not provide me with any help and the person was doing the consultation assistance, he said, “Now you have to give them the four weeks notice and just stop going to work basically because it's not work at that point.” And I said, “Well, I don't want to go back to work for four weeks, I'm stressed.” And he said, “Just take an order from doctor.” – *Penny*



- “ She just rattled out 20 minutes worth of legal info about property and children. And I think towards the end I got a question. But I had questions from 17 minutes ago, and I couldn't remember what they were.[...] I didn't find them helpful because, again, I felt rushed. — *Adele*
- “ And when I had spoken to... I just got constantly referred and referred and referred, I felt like I was going around in a circle, I felt like it was a maze, actually, to be honest. And then I'd have to wait a couple of days for someone else to ring me, and then that phone call would take me back another two steps where I'd already been. I just felt it was a nightmare, to be honest. — *Sam*
- “ I got stonewalled for about six weeks [is] the short version. Then eventually I went online at some stage in that process, not at the very beginning, but after I started getting stonewalled. — *Pearl*



## 5.3 Existing legal resources are not accessible enough for everyone

People with a disability were the main priority group consistently less likely to use online self-help resources (on 'priority groups' see →3.2 above). All other participants, except for those with family law related issues, were likely to use at least one of the resources we tested with them. Given the increased likelihood of people with disabilities facing legal problems, this is a concerning finding.

Many of the resources we tested with people who had visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments were not accessible enough for them. We observed that it took people with disabilities longer to navigate websites and get results. Those that used magnification couldn't always view all the information together; those with hearing impairment couldn't understand videos without captions; and those with cognitive impairments and chronic illnesses were frustrated by repetitive writing.

Some websites would have failed basic Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Issues included small typefaces, low contrasting text on coloured backgrounds, and text as an image without alternative text for screen readers.

- “ I can't read the smaller stuff at the top. — *Penny*
- “ There's a lot of people that can't see very well like myself, and I found that a bit disturbing. I know it's small, but I just thought if you could maybe change that to an alphabet number and numerals, if that's possible. — *Maria*

**Magnification of webpages** and other text-based resources broke design elements and structure.

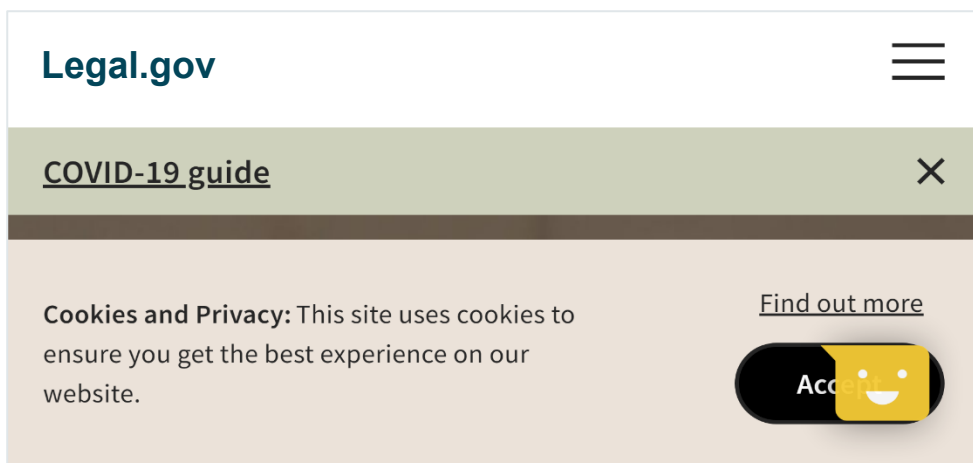
- “ Trying to find the bloody get help function. How do they have to get help? [after not being able to find a contact number, started describing what they saw on the page] Find big answers, ah there we go, contact us. It's there, second last. So click on that. Contact us, quickest way is to... Search...my eyes are a bit weary. Is to search da da da... Speak to us in your language, again, same sort of thing. There's no... contact us, I'm on the contact us tab, online location, oh no, office locations. But I can't see a phone number. Just the app with multiple locations around Melbourne. [after panning around the number a few times] Got a 1-800 number. Not easy to find, though. — *Diesel*

**Figure 20** An extreme example of one webpage on a desktop when magnified to 200%. There is a pop-up over an alert over an accept button.

Accessibility or online self-help resources is incredibly important as people with a disability are more likely to have legal problems than other disadvantaged groups (Coumarelos, Macourt, People, & McDonald, 2012)

People with disabilities were 1.3 times as likely as others to use online self-help resources (Balmer, Pleasence, Hagland, & McRae, 2019)





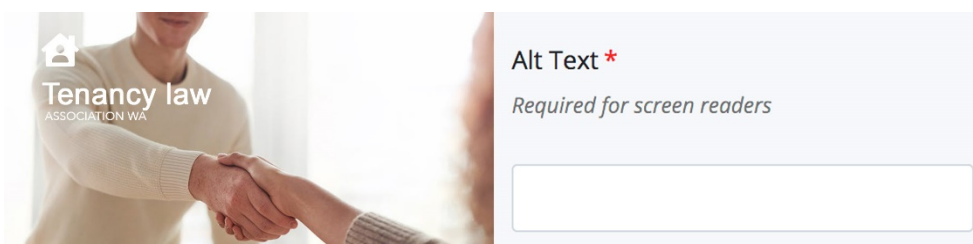
**Small typefaces** meant that more could fit on a page, but they were also more likely to overwhelm. Good websites used white space and arranged chunks of content under headings to make it easier to navigate.

“ I have found a form that I can fill in, which looks gobbledygook because it looked complex because the type face is small and everything... was small and it looked like a lot of information. – Pearl



Smaller typefaces were likely to be missed by our participants as they looked for keywords and headings. One participant entirely missed that they were on a website from a different state (NSW) during testing.

**Figure 21 An example of WCAG non-compliance. Not enough contrast between the text and the background, use of a flattened image with text, and no alternative description (alt text) for people using screen readers.**



**Websites conveying state-based legal information** assumed that people had knowledge of local systems or processes. Regardless of age or ability level, language and presentation of information without hierarchy made reading and navigation a challenge.

See also: → **8. Design principles for online self-help resources**

For people with cognitive or visual impairment, content that was lengthy and repetitive was particularly problematic. **Verbose text** took longer for them to read and comprehend, making some sites confusing to use.

“ Because too much information on paper, I get muddled in the head, where I deal better with talking to [someone]... After two paragraphs, I couldn't remember what the first paragraph said. But doing things like this [interview conversation], I can give you an answer, the moment I see it, I know if I'm going to use it or not. – Geoff



“ It seemed very basic and very easy to navigate, but then the more I got into it today and had a look around, there was unnecessary things that needed to be in there and things were repeated. – Diesel



### Typos, broken links, and other mistakes also degraded credibility quickly.

Resources and websites not regularly maintained are more likely to have usability errors or issues.

A participant with higher digital capability spoke about the need to provide feedback loops for improvement.

“ I think it's a design of itself, it's all about user experience design. So obviously you need to make it as basic as possible, but it needs to be comprehensive as possible too. So it's at least got to be a good mixture of both things... I think the more people use them, and if there's sort of quick feedback boxes, if it doesn't make sense, just put in information and things like that. — Joe

**Videos without captions** were a concern for a diverse group of people; those who had a hearing impairment, an issue with cognition, or spoke English as a foreign language.

“ For me with the hearing problems, the second I see video without captions, I switch off, and certainly if it's got background music. That's me, and that's a long-term result of my hearing problem. But with over 15% of the population having hearing issues, all right, that's skewed towards elderly, and not everybody that's older is incompetent, and not using computers, and not managing their own lives. — Pearl



“ [Lack of captions] could be frustrating and ... difficult for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. I didn't find it too bad to understand for myself, but I'm definitely more comfortable with subtitles... I find it good to have subtitles... It's funny because my hearing is actually quite good, but my comprehension isn't always great. So sometimes I'll mishear words and that can be quite frustrating when there's no subtitles. Because I'd get things out of context. So yeah, I've always used subtitles. — Jane



Even the **background music** selection and level was a barrier for some.

“ [Feedback on a video] The very first thing that hit me was the background music, and the frantic-ness of the background music[...] There's two levels to this. First of all, as a person with a hearing problem, background music is shit. Inevitably it's too loud. I've been around communications as much as it's supposed to set the scene, and get rid of the white noise, and all that sort of stuff, but you should never have it so loud that it distracts from the actual substance... Would I have watched it a second time? For me with the hearing problems, the fact there were captions- The second I see video without captions, I switch off, and certainly if it's got background music. That's me, and that's a long-term result of my hearing problem. — Pearl



## 5.4 Legal self-help resources lack timeframes and timelines

At the start, no one we spoke to expected it to take more than a few months to resolve a common legal issue. Yet some of the research participants had been waiting years for a financial, family, or employment dispute to be resolved. See → 3.1 above.

Self-help legal resources rarely present clear information about likely timeframes for resolving issues such as small claims. The legal resources we tested seemed to avoid setting expectations around timelines. An exception is the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) Goods and Services application form, which clearly showed the estimated time, both to complete an application and for it to be processed.



Figure 22 Screenshots from VCAT set clear time expectations.

**Estimated time to VCAT**

Due to COVID-19 these timeframes don't currently apply. It will take longer to hear from us about the next steps in your case.

Approximately **8 - 14 weeks** to a mediation, compulsory conference, directions hearing or hearing.

**How this form works**

At the start of your application we'll ask you some questions to estimate fees, timeframes and documents you need.

- 1 Fee estimate 10 mins
- 2 Claim details 35 mins
- 3 Review 10 mins

Two participants clearly described creating a timeline as a key method for preparing for action. Joe explained how they followed advice in 'guidebooks' from the Internet, collecting information to document their case against their employer.

“ So what is important is the next thing, because you need to make a timeline of all the events that you went through. You need to be able to write it down as accurately as possible. And if your situation is going [for] a long time, it might not be easy or you're not good with keeping that notes in your head. Things like that. So having all the documentation that you can look back on might be important. I think I read something on the internet... So I put in all the information and the timeline and the cases where I thought things occurred against the workplace rights. I filled in all of that, and then put all the additional documentation that supported the timeline and then filed a claim. – Joe



Jane, who did not feel confident on the phone, described how they prepared to speak with organisations like Tenants Victoria and Consumer Affairs, after the real estate agent said they had to pay for damages to the carpet on leaving their rental property.

“ I was trying to gather up the story as clear and concise as possible so that I could get some answers.... I wrote it down, so I tried to write down like a timeline. So we could address it. – Jane



See → [4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation](#)

## 5.5 Existing resources do not adequately account for emotional or financial stress

Emotional distress and financial pressure influence how people navigate the legal system and make decisions. As noted in → 4.1 above, participants facing emotionally complex legal issues, such as discrimination at work or custody of their children, were less likely to successfully use online self-help resources. And as shown in → 3.2 above, many people are likely to experience stress and anxiety when seeking legal help, no matter the issue.

“ Often the emotional support is even more important than having people who, financially, can help you. – Pearl



Common adverse consequences for people in Victoria with legal problems include financial strain, stress-related illness and physical ill health (Coumarelos, et al., 2012). Each of these consequences compounds the strain of help-seeking on a person and affects their ability to take legal action.

Online self-help resources generally do not reflect the multiple facets of help required for a person to start and maintain legal proceedings. These needs were particularly acute for those dealing with family law situations. The participant seeking a divorce explained:

“ I did some more research and then I plucked up the courage to go speak to a lawyer and he scared me. So I didn't go through with it... I didn't feel empowered for a few reasons. I wasn't working full time. I was still looking after my child. I just didn't feel like I had my shit together and really in the right head space. Whereas now, probably a year later, I feel stronger as a person. I feel because I'm back working full time, I have money, I had income coming in, I feel a bit more like I could go and sit down and talk to someone.... [When first looking for help] I was dealing with [my ex-husband's] emotions as well. We separated in the beginning of March, but he refused to leave the house until the end of June. So I was doing all this under a very tense roof, where we were living two very separate lives but trying to still be okay for our daughter. – Adele

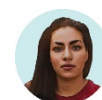
### Provocation

What if legal self-help resources combined with resources from other sectors to provide more holistic support?

Those with mental health challenges face additional barriers to help-seeking.

“ For example, anti-bullying order. It took me two, three days, as a depressed person, to read and it was very hard and just say, "This is the process. How it's going to impact you and if it's not going to work in the organisation. It does not mention how to act about it."... [I was] thinking, I'm not sure if I need help, if I deserve help. I was a victim of bullying and my confidence was obviously very shattered and I was doubting myself....

“ I was thinking, "what kind of help do I need? Do I need to go to a doctor or do I need legal help? I was thinking, where do I get this help? Is this tool applicable to me as a non-Australian? Do I have anyone? What is the terminology? What am I looking for? Like, I can't raise my hand in the meeting. What is the organization's name that I should talk to? How many places I should talk to? Should I pay for a lawyer? What kind of lawyer should I get? What am I doing?" It happens when you're stressed. Your brain is not really there... It's so important for people who look for legal help to feel safe. ... All of this is hard for me because of PTSD. I don't want to have any more legal issues. – Penny



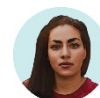
Another participant described the distress an older person would likely experience if their rent was unexpectedly increased.

“ [A person in this situation would] have a meltdown and after she's been comforted, depending on her type of person that she may have access to the meltdown, maybe referred by another person to someone that can help her. Maybe have the support of somebody else who knows a bit more or the same as her to have a look online. Maybe, and I'm thinking again of that age group, looking for a phone number. "I want to speak to somebody so I can ask my questions, because I couldn't find it online and I'm very distressed." – *Pearl*



This emotional strife can lead to poor decision making, where people want the issue to be resolved fast, so they settle before a suitable offer or arrangement is made.

“ Due to a mental health crisis I was and suffering that I was experiencing. I accepted [the employer's offer] in the hopes of finishing all that.... I would say the three words that I would use to describe the situation are confusion, betrayal and lack of safety. It took me two months to clear the exact path that I need to take. – *Penny*



“ I was just feeling really anxious. I was feeling overwhelmed and [I] just wanted to get it over and done with so I could just get on with things. I think that's probably part of the reason I wouldn't have gone to VCAT, because it would have dragged it on. – *Jane*



One participant had some advice for people in this kind of situation, based on their own experience of seeking help:

“ Make sure that you've had some time to make sure you're calm, you're in a good mindset, and to reach out for help if you need it. Like if you need help accessing the assistance, see if you can find someone to help you.[...] To start off with I [was] saying to people, "please let me relax first so I can focus." And then when I was relaxed, I was trying to gather up the story as clear and concise as possible so that I could get some answers. – *Jane*

Support groups, potentially social media groups, were suggested as one way to address these emotional needs.

“ I would incorporate it into that support groups. I guess groups for people struggling with custody or going towards contact a men's support group, or dad's support group. And you could have previous clients and you could incorporate social media into that, such as a Facebook group. – *Diesel*



This insight is particularly concerning in light of broader research on common legal problems.

The most common adverse consequences resulting from the legal problems experienced by Victorian LAW Survey respondents were income loss or financial strain (29%), followed by stress-related illness (19%) and physical ill health (18%). Relationship breakdown (10%) and moving home (5%) were also evident. (Coumarelos, et al., 2012).

Relationship breakdown is one of several problem types that appears to trigger debt, legal action, and other family problems. It is not surprising that divorce, domestic violence and separation can trigger further problems, given that they can lead to substantial life changes. They may lead to financial hardship, less suitable accommodation, difficulties in maintaining employment as a single parent, and dependence on maintenance, child support, and welfare benefits.

Injury and employment problems also often trigger financial problems. Previous research has shown that personal injury and work-related ill health can lead to employment problems, which in turn can lead to problems related to welfare benefits and debt.

Our scan of online resources found few examples of resources that combined financial, emotional, and legal services. The examples we discovered helped people deal with family law and legal separation. The evolution of legal self-help resources for people with family problems supports the analysis of findings from the LAW survey (2012), which identified this as an area of great need.

Recent technology development efforts in the legal and related sectors have focused on chatbots (e.g. **DSP Help tool** ↗; **VEOHRC Sexual harassment support and response tool** ↗ **Hello Cass** ↗ ). Our participants could see chatbots working for all sorts of issues, in particular as a starting point with sensitive issues to access relevant referrals. Many were, however, skeptical about using chatbots, especially for personal matters. See → **4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one.**

“ I'm not sure how it's going to go with more intimate things, like say, domestic violence. I feel like that needs a human touch. But in terms of renting, I can see that [chatbot] working perfectly fine. What else? [...] Working rights, as well, may be good too, but at the same time... I don't know. I think when it comes to more sensitive issues, like, say you suffered from discrimination at work, or something like that. I guess, having said that, if you were having issues with, say, your partner about domestic violence, that would be a good tool to use as a starting point, and then it can direct you to hopefully more, better services, more empathetic services than this tool can provide. – *Sunny*



## 5.6 Resources could help more with hard conversations and negotiating

Before even considering legal self-help resources, people need help with having difficult conversations to try and resolve the issue with the other person or organisation involved. People want to sort out issues *before* they become legal problems. If something becomes a legal problem, then they would like to resolve it as quickly and smoothly as possible. Several participants pointed this out in the scenario related to a sudden rent increase.

“ Before acting all legal about it, I want to have a chat with landlord, probably if he or she knows I know my rights, he's not going to do that. – *Penny*



“ I guess the first step would be to try and reason with her landlord with facts and see... She can be like, "Hey, I looked this up and this is what it says, so I don't think so." And also empathetically reason. Explain her situation, say that she's out of a job and she's a uni student so it's hard. See if, on any compassionate grounds, things can be worked out for her. I guess that'd be first step. – *Katie*



“ Obviously [she] would probably contact the real estate agent before this. – *Beau*



We didn't talk to anyone who actually wanted to take another person or organisation to court. If people were owed money, for instance, they would much prefer to receive it directly than to go through a longwinded legal process. Yet, when there were resources for issues like unpaid wages or mortgage stress, they tended to quickly escalate the issue and offered little advice or support around negotiating with the other party. In response to the script writer, some commented on how many resources skip past the negotiation phase of a legal issue.

One guided pathway recommended that people try to resolve the issue directly with the other party, but offered no guidance for doing this. The tool did not sufficiently describe the scenario we were testing either. As a result, at least one participant would have stopped using the resource.

“ It did say, "If you can sort it by yourself, try to," so I don't think I'd continue reading the site because... In the sense someone is chasing me for money but the situation's not mentioned in the site. – *Katie*



“ “Have you approached the landlord for rent reduction?” Yeah. Well, in this case I've approached the agent to talk about a rent reduction and had no response. That doesn't fit into yes or no. – *Pearl*



One participant who tested the letter writing tool pointed out that this resource would be useful for negotiating with a landlord, and could also become evidence if the case ended up in court.

“ Well, if he's never written something legal-related, he might, especially if he's... not from here, maybe he's not very comfortable about it, about writing it, and if he thinks he might be bullied by his landlord? That landlord sounds like a bully, asking for [a rent increase] in the middle of a contract. So he might want to write something really polished up or he might just think, "I'm just going to send it, say what I need to plainly and as nasty as possible and then let's see what's going to happen." ....



“ [After testing 'Dear Landlord'] That should be a good [way] of fulfilling my end of the bargain to have this [letter]... This is an amazing tool. I like it. This would take me a lot more time to write it, definitely. And it wouldn't be as polished.... First of all, if anything, you've proposed to solve this situation at first, then even if it goes to VCAT, you've already put forward some good intent that you're willing to pay and you're acknowledging your end of the bargain. So, this is already a good document to take into VCAT if it comes to it....

“ I think most people would take this [letter] seriously. I mean, it's a very nicely generated letter, and it says you can agree or not agree, you can take me to court if you wish. You're not giving up your rights, so anyone who receives this kind of letter would probably agree or at least it opens up a conversation. So, it's great. If you're already feeling guilty about not being able to pay and you just can't find the right words to write a nice letter, this would help. – *Joe*

Another participant, however, thought the letter writing tool failed to provide advice on negotiating with the landlord.

“ Shouldn't there be something there about negotiation? Like, in my case, it was rejected. I just got a short email rejecting it, saying, "That's unfair. The landlord is happy to negotiate." So then I wrote back and said, "Well, how would you like to negotiate?" And didn't hear. So it wasn't until I got that phone call and then I did my own maths before I rang again, because two weeks later, I hadn't heard any response to me excepting the notion of negotiation. I would have thought the landlord would come back and say, the landlord's said what I'd offered was unreasonable. You would think that they would say, "We would like X." – *Beau*



“ When I decided to ring, I did some maths, so I knew what I was going to say first, knew what I would accept, like working on the basis of whatever you say is going to be rejected and something in between. So there's nothing here about negotiation. It's black and white, if you're accepted or rejected. Surely the person making the application should be aware that negotiation has a step prior to... I mean, mine was registered as a dispute because I hadn't heard back anything... In my case, it was necessary, but it can be quite threatening for a landlord that owns one little property in the first instance. You know, not all landlords are big business people. – *Pearl*



Another participant described their recent experience successfully negotiating a bond deduction with a landlord, although they had not realised that was an option in a similar situation previously.

“ It was my first time negotiating that, but that actually had happened before in the previous rental we were in. The carpet was just as bad. But that one we didn't really negotiate because the figure that was said to us at the time was just over a hundred. So we were like, "We'll just pay." So we didn't feel at that time we needed to negotiate, we just said, "Yep, that sounds okay."  
[More recently] I think the compromise that we came to was based on a rough calculation that we found. And I can't remember that exact calculation, but it was based on depreciation of the carpet and the carpet's expected lifespan. I mean, that's another thing that was frustrating because we didn't even know how old the carpet was. There was no record of that. I think it was something like, say, it was 20 years old. We'd been in the property two years. So, that would be 10%. I think that's how we came across the cost. And I think that we might've got slightly less than that. So he said, I think he said around 500 and I believe we paid just over three. So we did do a bit of compromise. – *Jane*



Interestingly, when we presented this insight to participants in the debrief, they were not convinced that negotiation resources would help. Perhaps it is hard to imagine an online tool successfully teaching how to negotiate; this may instead require coaching and conversation that can only be provided by another person.

See also → [9 Extensions to this research](#)

### Provocation

How could self-help resources give guidance on self-advocacy?

For example, how to negotiate bond deductions would be very useful for many tenants.



## 5.7 Just because a resource exists doesn't mean people will find it

People with common legal problems don't generally expect to find online resources to resolve their issues. Unfamiliar names and tool types also meant participants often avoided or missed potentially useful resources.

People generally search for content (i.e. information about their rights, the law, their options in a particular situation) rather than a method, or tool, to resolve their issue. The search terms illustrated above (→ 2.2 and → 2.3) illustrate this. Several of our research participants expressed surprise or relief to find useful legal resources freely available online.

“ [Describing what a help-seeker needs:] Access to internet is key, obviously, most of these things are on the internet, which I consider amazing actually. I think it's far better than navigating and going to an office and trying to find out what forms you need and things like that. Let me just point it out, I've never navigated in the legal system before, so I lack prior knowledge about how you make a claim or anything like that. I was really happy when I realized it's all online and just a quick one sort of scenario, rather than trying to find an address and find an actual office and find the proper form. – Joe



If they had been able to find them at the time, some of the resources that participants tested would have been helpful to understand or resolve their issue.

→ 4.5 Videos are useful but legal help-seekers don't usually look for them

→ 4.3 Help-seekers want to see steps and options for their situation

→ 4.1 People know what resources will work for them and when to use them

People who are unfamiliar with resources may not realise what they can do.

→ 5.8 Reviews of resources might increase use

→ 4.4 People generally hate chatbots... until they try a good one

Asked what they would type into Google to find a tool like the Rentervention chatbot, one participant said:

“ I'm not sure. To find that chat specifically, maybe legal advice for renters in Victoria. And I would just browse pages until I found something similar. – Jane



Resources with names that describe the issue are more likely to be found than naming the type of tool. The vignette of images and quotes from one interview on the next page shows this in relation to potentially calling a resource “employee rights” rather than “unfair dismissal download” in factsheets and publications.

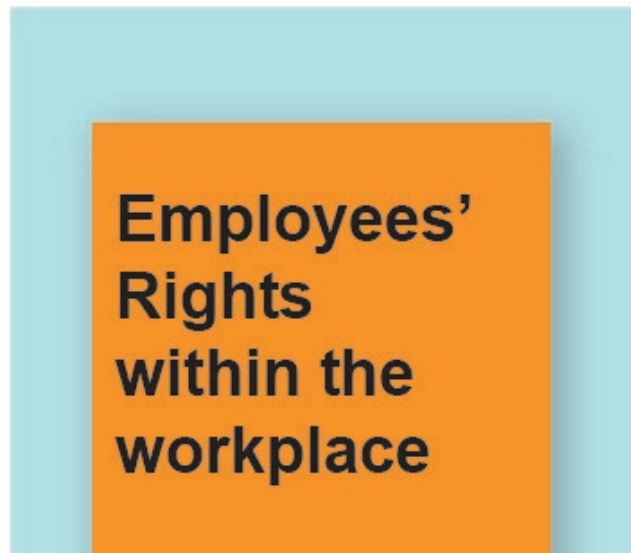
“ First impression, I'm not sure about the name. I felt like it seems like a good manual. It seems like a manual what to do when you are in a position that you think you have a claim, but you don't know what... But I kept thinking the name is not that clear. It says Small Claims Circuit Court of Australia. I thought that the name could be a bit simplified just to make it more catching. – Matthew



See → 8. Design principles for online self-help resources.

## Factsheets

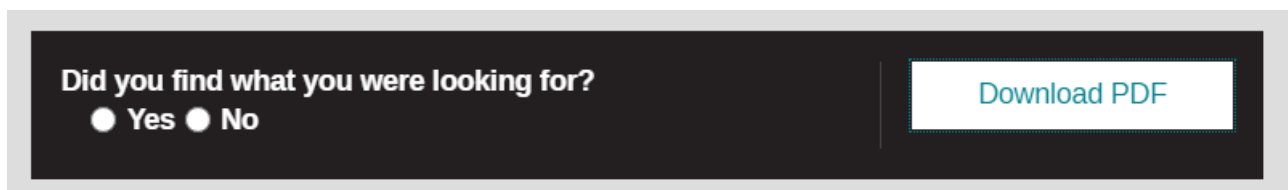
Sexual Harassment – [Download](#)  
Social Media – [Download](#)  
Superannuation – [Download](#)  
Unpaid Trial Work – [Download](#)  
Unfair Dismissal – [Download](#)  
Unlawful Wage Deductions – [Download](#)  
Warnings – [Download](#)  
Working Overseas – [Download](#)  
Workplace Bullying – [Download](#)



“I probably would never have called anything a fact sheet, but I would understand it to mean that it's probably something that indicates information with bullet points or something like that.”

“Well, I like what they got there in the way that I see now that it's got employees' rights there. Why not call it that? Employees' Rights Within the Workplace or something like that” – *Matthew*

**Figure 23 Another example of an undefined download from a legal website. Clicking the Download PDF button prints the page creating a factsheet or factsheets. This lack of description makes it difficult for people to make a choice and inaccessible for people using a screen reader.**



**See also → 2.2 Initial search terms often describe the legal problem in everyday language; → 8. Design principles for online self-help resources.**

Another reason people do not find existing resources is that they are not effectively linked to. Online referrals from legal self-help resources today mean a link that opens a new browser tab. Examples include financial calculators, eligibility checkers, and factsheets. Other reasons for failing to connect participants with useful resources include:

- Old or broken links
- An overlap or duplication of questions on the page linking to different sources
- Information and communication styles are different. Misalignment or inconsistency in content adds to confusion, frustration and mistrust of online self-help sources
- The processes are difficult to track. It is difficult for people to estimate time or effort required to complete an action and plan accordingly
- Resources do not close the loop. People are directed to send people back to the main form or process they started.

These observations are explored in more depth in various insights throughout this report. See, for example, → 2.2 → 3.5 → 5.1 → 5.3.

## 5.8 Reviews of resources might increase use

Despite some aversion to listening or learning about people's stories (→ 4.6 [above](#)), finding out if a resource worked for other people was seen as a value-add. A couple of participants interpreted the 'Real Talk' concept card as being similar to reviews, while others said in their sorting or testing of resources that they would like to read a review of a tool to help them decide if it would be reliable and helpful for them.

“ The only thing I'm thinking about is when I saw “letter writer”, it didn't appeal to me. But when you define what letter writer is, it'd be good to have some reviews.  
– Pearl

“ I think it's a bit like reviews for restaurants, or reviews for hotels, or things you buy online. People tend to look at the reviews, and so this is a similar sort of function to a review, I think. And it's always good to know that other people have been through this too. Personally I would find this useful [...] Although I probably wouldn't spend a long time looking at it. – Beau



The 'review' might be a comment on Facebook recommending a certain resource. For instance, a help-seeker posts their problem in an online group and someone tells them where to get help, as was the case for an international student who was being exploited by their employer. They wrote a post in a community group about their issue, without naming their employer, and received advice about how to get help.

“ So they informed you can go to the Fair Work. Some people say that, “You will not get your money because you don't have proof”. I say, “Okay, we have this proof.” Then they say, “just go to the Fair Work, they will do something.” And even they also told [us] that there are some unions, they will help you.... So at the time I explain everything. Then in that comment box, the review. So in the review someone mentioned that you can, if you are international student, there is free services - JobWatch, Study Melbourne - you can contact them. So you don't have to pay any fees and they will definitely help you because you are international student. That's fine. So this is the first stage for the searching.  
– Jay



Reviews would be especially useful for resources that people have not heard of before, such as a letter writer, like **Dear Landlord** ↗.

“ Now I've never used that sort of product, so you would need, at the front, some recommendations and reviews to [get] people trust the product... The recommendations need to be: Joe Bloggs, senior lawyer, one line, and if necessary, a link to detail, X thing, landlord of 50 properties, this is great. So just boom, boom, boom, and then if necessary the detail behind it, and then a couple of tenants, an opportunity for people to add their own, so you're getting live, real reviews. – Pearl

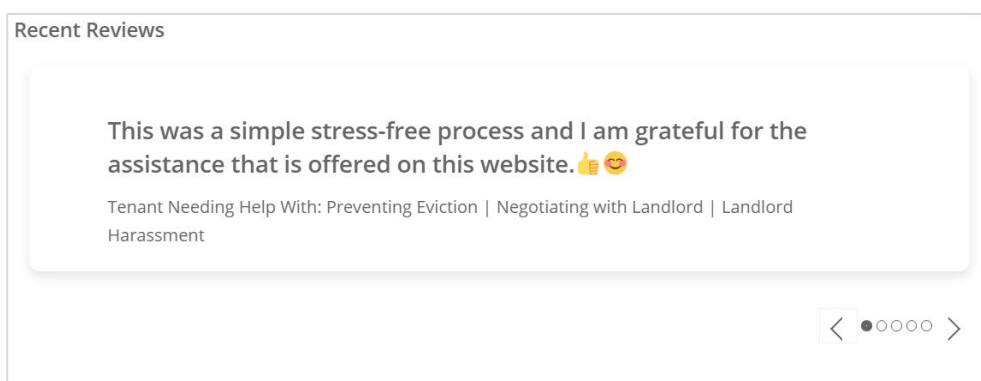


At the time of writing, the home page for Rentervention actually now features 'Recent Reviews', which were not there at the time of testing. This may reassure some help-seekers that this is a worthwhile resource. However, one participant specified that they would not trust testimonials on the same site as the tool. They would seek independent verification from other reliable websites before trusting a chatbot like Rentervention.

“ I would also open a new tab and look at Rentervention reviews. Because it started to ask for a lot more information than I was expecting it to. And what I would be looking at in this, like here, is just maybe some comments from other users that would alleviate some of the fears that I have with using the app. [...] In terms of the veracity of the service and how trustworthy it is, I guess that would be hard. Because personally speaking, I wouldn't trust a service just based on what that service is selling. Like say, if the Rentervention had testimonials or something like that in the website itself, I wouldn't trust that. I would still want to look at other websites that talk about it, and give some sort of reviews about it, and confirms that it is an authentic tool to use. – *Sunny*



**Figure 24 This legal website not only has user reviews but contains links to news outlets that have published stories. These techniques help boost the resource's credibility.**



Similarly to comments about stories from other people (→ 4.6 above), one participant suggested you would need to strip the emotion out of a legal experience and focus on the facts, if the review or recommendation was to be useful:

“ I'd want to know the facts of what happened, like, this is the process that I took, and these are the results that happened. And less of the emotion that's involved because I feel like that's really personal and not everyone feels those same things. – *Jess*





## 6. By the time you're looking for legal help, you've got a significant problem

One of the most significant factors shaping a help-seeker's attitude and behaviour is their conception of the type of problem they have. This final set of insights takes us back to the beginning of the self-help journey: the moment when a help-seeker determines they have a legal problem. These insights draw attention to the mental model and challenging circumstances of help-seekers at the time they find themselves in need of legal information or assistance.

→ **6.1** At first, many help-seekers don't realise they have a legal problem

→ **6.2** People have different ways of identifying a legal problem

→ **6.2.1** A legal problem means my rights were not respected

→ **6.2.2** A legal problem means you need a lawyer

→ **6.2.3** A legal problem means there's something in writing

## 6.1 At first, many help-seekers don't realise they have a legal problem

Some help-seekers don't immediately identify a legal problem as such. Whether the issue is related to work, housing, finances, or family, people typically start off by seeing it as a situation that is unfair or stressful before realising they have a legal problem. Especially if they have not engaged with the justice sector before, help-seekers' understanding of legal rights and options is likely to be limited.

Generally, as noted above, people want to sort out issues *before they become legal problems*. Nobody we spoke to actually wanted to instigate a legal process or court case. Help-seekers would try to resolve issues directly with the other party or would put off taking action until they felt they had no other option. This was clear in many of the real-life and hypothetical scenarios we explored.

“ I probably would do it [buy the company extract to complete the VCAT application] if I really thought I was in the right. If they really weren't meeting me halfway.... I think I would have put it off for a while unless it was really, really urgent.... I probably would have left a little while before I did it because I would be thinking it over in my head, "Is this something I really want to do? Can I still call them? Can I go see someone?" ... I would have gone through all that before I got to this [completing online form to make a small claim]. To me, VCAT is still a legal thing. So to me, I probably would have tried to avoid it because I'm not familiar with any of this. – *Adele*

“ I had no idea what was right and what was wrong in terms of expectations and things like that. So I was just trying to figure out what is acceptable and when is unacceptable. But even then I felt without comparison, some situations are just unacceptable, but it was more of justifying to myself. – *Katie*

“ If I borrowed \$500 off my neighbour, and I paid it back and then suddenly they say, "You didn't pay it back." I'm not sure legally where we could go with that. I don't know. I'd need to find out where I could go, what my legal rights are and then the person I borrowed the money from would also do the same, I guess. – *Beau*

If you've got to the point that you realise you have a legal issue, you are likely to be feeling at least a little worried or concerned. See → **3.2 People often feel overwhelmed and anxious when seeking legal help.**

“ People don't start looking these things up until the problem is there. And usually at that point, they're overwhelmed by the problem. Or – obviously this is based on my experience – and perhaps the experience of many people [...] is that they only really start accessing these things when the issue is already happening. I think the only thing that can be done to facilitate that process is to make it as easy as possible to find relevant services. – *Pearl*

“ [Testing a guided pathway about mortgage repayments] So far, it's like a whole lot of stress. If I was at this point where I don't think I'm going to be able to pay my repayment, and here I'm seeing information about going to court. I'm starting to get a little stressed out about the potential situation that may arise in the future but the tool seems fine. – *Jess*

A key step in solving an issue yourself is validating that it is a legal problem.

This matches findings that people need to be able to identify a problem as legal – i.e. be aware that the law may potentially offer a solution to the problem – before they seek any form of legal help at all. (Balmer, Pleasence, Hagland, & McRae, 2019)

Legal needs surveys have repeatedly shown that ignoring legal problems is common (Coumarelos, et al., 2012).



## 6.2 People have different ways of identifying a legal problem

The people we spoke to used a range of methods to identify whether they had a legal problem. In fact, that process unfolded live during our first interactive activity in the research sessions, when we gave participants a scenario and asked them if it was a legal problem.

People used a mix of intuition, past experience, and evidence of documentation to determine if a problem was in fact a legal one. Participants' ways of determining whether something was a legal issue did not always correlate with their legal user archetype (discussed above at →1.2.3); this is a different way of grouping participants by their mental model of what constitutes a legal problem.

For many, the first step was an emotional or gut response that the scenario they were facing seemed suspicious or unfair → 2.2 Initial search terms often describe the legal problem in everyday language. If a participant felt confident something was unfair, they would begin to investigate their rights → 3.4 Many people are motivated to “right a wrong”. Once they had confirmed the matter was a legal issue, depending on financial circumstances, the severity of the issue and their level of confidence, they would choose to start looking for an advocate or try to solve their problem on their own →1.2.2 Research participants: our experts by experience

### 6.2.1 A legal problem means my rights were not respected

Many participants saw the main purpose of the law as to protect people's rights.

“ I didn't feel good initially, but I felt that I was hard done by and it just wasn't right. I had to do something about that. And, as I explained, and not just for myself, but for if they do it again to someone else and they choose to take the same sort of action, then they're not the first one. That was more incentive to continue as well. – Matthew



Responding to the tenancy scenario, one participant demonstrated their awareness of additional protections put in place due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly stating any contravention of these indicated a legal problem.

“ I would say personally, if the landlord offered an increase at the last minute, that's not enough time, especially given the current [COVID-19] scenario where people are making adjustments to things like rent and being more accessible around things like that. So I feel like it's extremely unjust to do something like that. We literally have, at the moment, provisions and rules and things around that, so it definitely classifies as a legal problem. – Katie



A sense of unfairness or injustice was a key motivator for seeking help or taking action. Describing a case against their landlord who was refusing to acknowledge or address the black mould in their rental property, a single parent explained:

“ I was determined also because I felt like he [landlord] was in the wrong, and he knew I had kids. Just couldn't believe that someone would do that. So, I suppose I wanted to get the last say... And then, the other side of me was also, well, I wouldn't want this to happen to any other single mum. – Sam



Two of the three participants who used the term 'rights' in our sessions were university students. More investigation would be needed to verify if people aged between 18 to 24 years or those with higher education levels indeed have higher legal literacy or access to information. → 9 Extensions to this research

## 6.2.2 A legal problem means you need a lawyer

For participants with more of a delegation mindset (→1.2.3), the threshold for defining something as a legal problem was whether you needed a lawyer or not. These participants were not very interested in any self-help resources, as they felt they were not likely to get far without professional advice. The delegators recognised the limitations of their legal knowledge and found it difficult to determine the best course of action in any serious scenario without seeking advice.

- “ I just don't know about the fine line between being able to simply deal with something yourself without having to go to a lawyer for something more complex. – *Pearl*
- “ I'll tell them to go straight to, I'll just tell them to ring Justice Connect. I'd just tell them that. I mean, to be honest, I probably wouldn't even tell them worry about the apps and go on Google and things like that because, yeah... I'd just tell them, “Ring Justice Connect.” – *Sam*
- “ And I have to say one thing. It would depend on what sort of day I was having. Yeah, like if it's a real bad day, maybe half a dozen questions, and I'd think, “Oh, screw this. I'll just get the phone.” Yeah, I'll look for a site that's got a number, I'll ring and I ask. If they answer me, [great]; they don't, and I'll move on. – *Geoff*



## 6.2.3 A legal problem means there's something in writing

One way that some participants would define a legal problem is by identifying a relevant law. If legislation about the issue exists, then it means the issue you are experiencing is a legal problem. This manifests in the search tactics of help-seekers who look for relevant legislation when they are trying to understand their rights in a particular situation → 2.3 Some help-seekers start by looking for legislation or organisations.

- “ I was looking up what the legislation was around on tenancy in Victoria. I think I was reading certain, what was it called? The tenancy agreement? I can't remember the exact name of it, but there seems to be like a tenancy agreement within Victoria itself. And it had some useful advice about what can be done, not really useful advice about what can be done, but just some things that I thought was related to the problem that I was having. – *Sunny*
- “ So, there must be something that these managers of tenancies know toward them saying that to me. There must be some sort of an act that governs them by law as well, to make sure that the tenants' agreements are looked after to the letter of the law, and that's what makes me think, it must be something in place there that would be preventing the owner from doing what he's doing. – *Matthew*



Another aspect to this written dimension of defining a legal problem is the need for written evidence documenting your situation. In the tenancy or employment scenario, for instance, many participants described referring to the character's contract or agreement as an important part of determining whether they had a legal problem.

This understanding of the law is reinforced by legal tools that continue to have a sometimes anachronistic focus on conventional forms of written evidence. Because of this, some help-seekers get stuck when they don't have the right kind of evidence. Very few people still send and receive letters, for instance, yet many online legal resources continue to focus on letters.

Several help-seekers were confused or deterred by resources that referred to needing a letter as evidence or action. Few, if any, of these resources acknowledged emails, texts, or social media messages or comments as valid forms of written evidence.

On the other hand, some online resources were considered helpful specifically as they created a written record of an issue (see also Joe's comments in → 5.6

**Resources could help more with hard conversations and negotiating.)**

“ I think at this stage [in a hypothetical financial dispute]... this might have been a text message, or it's been verbal, but at some point if some legal action is to be taken, then it needs to be on paper. And there needs to be some paper trail. This [sample letter] is a good way of instigating that paper trail. – *Beau*



“ One of the things that I found out was that everything had to be in writing. That way you've got your back covered when it does end up going to VCAT or somewhere... So we had that good relationship, but I think it definitely would have been useful to have something in writing, just because obviously, I couldn't have predicted what would have happened with my landlord as well. So it would have been good to just have everything covered legally. – *Sunny*



## Part Three. What we recommend: guidelines for improving online legal self-help resources

The stories from our participants highlight the differences and commonalities of searching for legal help and resources online. Help-seekers are able to articulate what they are looking for and how they search. The following recommendations build on this premise:

- Invest in information design and user experience
- Involve people with lived experience in making online resources
- Break down silos between sectors, organisations, communities, and self-help
- Establish communities of practice to support makers of online self-help resources
- Invest in consumer outreach, search engine optimisation, communications, and marketing

## 7. Recommendations for legal resource funders, providers, and makers

Without repeating all the information already presented in the insights or specific suggestions from participants, this section of the report presents high level recommendations for those involved in developing or deploying online legal self-help resources.

These recommendations build on the findings presented above and are reinforced by external evidence along with the authors' recent experience in designing and delivering similar research and design projects for organisations in the justice, health and community sectors.

Slightly more detailed guidance on the development and deployment of online resources is offered below for resource makers in → **8. Design principles for online self-help resources**

### 7.1 Invest in information design and user experience to improve outcomes

Good design helps online self-help resources be perceived as quality services. They must be easy to navigate, with a modern and trustworthy appearance, and with interactive, intuitive features (Hagan, 2016).

Challenges that participants in this research faced to effectively use online legal resources often emanated from poor information design and a lack of attention to user experience. Particularly pronounced for people with health or accessibility needs, issues with existing websites and other resources provided by the justice sector and related community and government organisations included the following:

- Dense text
- Complex language and grammar
- Outdated information and broken links
- Repetitive writing
- Small typefaces
- Videos without captions and/or distracting background music
- Low contrasting text on coloured backgrounds
- No alternative text for screen readers
- Concerns around data privacy or security
- Illegible, hidden or overlapping text and images when magnified
- Other incompatibility with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

The list above should be seen as an anti-checklist, that is, things to avoid when making online legal self-help resources.

Designing for great user experience is evolving but there is already a legacy of 30 years of solid research about what works well.

One important piece of research attributes four ways in which a website can communicate trustworthiness: (1) design quality; (2) up-front disclosure; (3) comprehensive and current content; and (4) connection to the rest of the web. (Nielsen Norman Group, 2016)

To improve outcomes for legal help-seekers, we recommend that:

- A. **Funders** and providers of online resources involve people with lived experience and professional designers in decision-making as partners, team members or contributors.
- B. **Funders** support and mandate projects in ways that enable updating, maintenance and repair or removal of dated information and resources.
- C. **Organisations** triage their online resources and create a project development and maintenance pipeline.
- D. **Organisations** allocate time and budget for staff to build and procure skills in user experience research, human-centred design and information design.
- E. **Resource makers** upskill and apply best practice principles and techniques of human-centred design or co-design, Plain English writing, accessibility, and usability testing.

As Hagan (2016) argues, legal services need to follow fields such as business and healthcare in valuing *user experience* as a key metric to complement outcome-based measures of success. She explains clearly, ‘user experience is defined as whether people are engaged with the service—meaning, are they able to understand it, can they use it intuitively, and do they find enough value in the service to spend time (and perhaps also money) on it.’

Our emphasis on user experience aligns with Hagan’s key recommendations from similar research:

Laypeople want legal help sites that appear at the top of a search, that are affiliated with a government or other public institution that they can trust, and that have information that is at once direct, reliable, and systematic. They want official sites that present information and services with: (1) **clarity** (with easy navigation and search to quickly find the right information); (2) **open access** (so they do not have to pay or see advertisements in order to use the service); (3) **authority** (giving them confidence that they know the information is reliable and expert); (4) **comprehensiveness** (so that they can find all relevant information in one place and go from understanding to action); (5) **modern design** (visual layouts and interactive features that demonstrate the site is up-to-date and trustworthy and that give rich tools for customization and filtering of information); and (6) **conversation** (question-and-answer format with personal narratives and anecdotes to illustrate scenarios).

(Hagan, 2016, p. 408)

### Provocation

There are great examples of embedding consumer and community participation in healthcare including **Australian Safety and Quality Framework for Health Care ↗ Safer Care Victoria: Partnering in healthcare framework ↗ and Doing it with us not for us: Strategic direction ↗**

How could the legal sector embed partnering with self-helpers?

## 7.2 Involve people with lived experience in making online resources

Involving people with lived experience in funding decisions, research, design, implementation, and evaluation can vastly improve the experience and impact of products and services. Where it is not possible to fully engage people with lived experience, at a minimum you could consult with community advocates or review previous research that has explored user needs.

Legal resource providers and funders could learn from other organisations and sectors who are shifting from an ‘expert mindset’ to a ‘participatory mindset’ (Sanders & Stappers, 2008) through their adoption of approaches such as co-design (Blomkamp, 2018) and co-production (Alford & Yates, 2016). Within the legal sector globally, excellent examples can be found, in particular, in the work of the Stanford Legal Design Lab and Margaret Hagan as cited throughout this report.



To improve the design, use, and impact of online legal self-help resources, we recommend in particular that:

- F. **Funders** explore how priority groups would co-design, use, and promote online legal-self-help.
- G. **Organisations** continue building capability and confidence in human-centred design and working with a diverse range of communities.
- H. **Organisations** explore and define who their ‘missing majority’ communities are, considering intersectionality.
- I. **Organisations** consistently allocate budget for community participation and/or employment of team members with lived experience.
- J. **Resource** makers partner with people who have lived experience in the design, implementation, and evaluation of resources.

### 7.3 Break down silos between sectors, organisations, communities, and self-help

Adopting the perspective of help-seekers would enable the justice sector to see the ecosystem of interconnected resources, capabilities, and organisations that can support people to resolve their legal issues holistically, considering mental and social factors for better outcomes. Rather than developing new resources, some organisations could improve outcomes simply by creating better online pathways to existing resources, including both information and other forms of assistance, legal and non-legal. When new resources are developed, a systems perspective would help to ensure they are funded, designed, and implemented in a way that strengthens connections and avoids duplication with existing tools, services, and organisations.

To improve connections between sources of legal help and information, we recommend that:

- L. **Funders** consider co-funding arrangements with other sectors to promote collaboration among resources and organisations.
- M. **Organisations** create opportunities for multidisciplinary partnerships to explore more holistic self-help resources.
- N. **Resource makers** explore and advocate ways of connecting resources to their ecosystem.
- O. **Resource makers** build multidisciplinary teams and upskill in systems thinking.

### 7.4 Establish communities of practice to support makers of online self-help resources

Communities of practice or similar networks can support further learning and capability building in order to improve the design, user experience, and impact of online self-help resources. Interested professionals could tap into existing groups, such as the international **Design Justice Network** ↗, a local community of practice like **Service Design Melbourne** ↗, the **Justice Navigation Working Group (part of the Joined-up Justice Project)** ↗, and various design meet-ups, or create their own.



To foster ongoing knowledge exchange and capability building, we recommend that:

- P. **Funders** continue to proactively support knowledge exchange and capacity building, as well as the research and development of online self-help resources.
- Q. **Organisations** create issue-based and/or values-based communities of practice that encourage collaboration and continuous improvement of resources and staff capabilities.
- R. **Organisations** create opportunities to learn from people from other sectors, such as co-design and co-production in health.
- S. **Resource makers** connect with others with similar roles and projects to build and exchange knowledge above and beyond individual projects.
- T. **Resource makers** explore strengths-based practice, co-creation, universal design, and design for disability and inclusion.

## 7.5 Invest in consumer outreach, search engine optimisation, communications, and marketing

There is no point in creating brilliant legal resources if nobody can find them or understand what they can help with. Participants' responses consistently illustrated the importance of finding resources in their searching, which relies on a strong consumer outreach strategy and effective communications and marketing. Without this, many people find it too hard or too slow to find the help they need online, even when it does exist.

To improve the reach, use, and impact of online legal self-help resources, we recommend that:

- U. **Funders** support and mandate projects to plan for, implement, and evaluate effective consumer outreach, search engine optimisation, communications, and marketing, in order to reach their target audience(s).
- V. **Organisations** review their target audience profile, data analytics, and resource feedback, and create a consumer outreach strategy, findability goals, a communications plan, and evaluation plan for their online resources, if these do not already exist.
- W. **Organisations** allocate time and budget to build and procure skills in communications, outreach, digital marketing (both paid and organic), search engine optimisation, data analytics, and social media.
- X. **Organisations** consider how to share and promote online resources to their target audience through existing community networks and infrastructure, such as public libraries, community centres, social service providers, and social media.
- Y. **Resource makers** carefully consider naming and promoting online resources, and test these with actual or potential users.

## 8. Design principles for online self-help resources

- Be easy to find *first* by those who need them, when they need them
- Have names that describe what they do
- Set clear expectations
- Be as easy to read as possible
- Describe processes
- Work equally well for everyone
- Be current
- Be quick to use
- Connect to other resources and services
- Build in extra support
- Allow some people to speak to a human
- Be designed with communities

Design principles are fundamental pieces of advice for people to make easy-to-use and impactful products and services (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.). Often presented as a set of statements that distil user needs and communicate the intent of a new design, they represent the accumulated wisdom of researchers and practitioners. Design principles are particularly useful for providing a concise summary of relevant learning from user research, without a diverse range of stakeholders needing to read every detail of the research.

The design principles presented here offer research-informed, best practice guidelines for the development and deployment of online legal self-help resources. They target resource makers in particular, but a broad appreciation of these principles would be beneficial among all those involved in funding, commissioning, informing, supporting, and distributing online legal self-help resources.

## **Good online self-help resources are easy to find *first* by those who need them, when they need them**

- Work with user groups to identify and create definitions for keywords for common legal issues.
- **Design and test wording and google featured snippets** ↗ for your webpages and online self-help resources.
- Create a strong consumer outreach strategy and effective communications and marketing for online resources.
- Ask or employ community members to craft, test and evaluate targeted campaigns.
- Structure site navigation to reflect what people look for, in the order they look for it.
- Promote resources and services widely - online and out in the world.
- Use search engine optimisation, data analytics, and audience analysis to regularly review and improve the reach and accessibility of resources.

## **Good online self-help resources have names that describe what they do**

- Name services and resources wisely – **consider using verbs** ↗. The name does not need to describe what type of resource it is or who you are, but what issue the tool addresses or what it can help achieve.
- **Test your names** ↗ with people who are likely to search for them.
- Legal resources should have simple and straightforward names, rather than trying to be too clever or fun.

## **Good online self-help resources set clear expectations**

- Set expectations early. Get better at communicating **timeframes, paperwork, eligibility** ↗, and costs.
- Be upfront on what to expect from resources that collect data to reduce perceived 'sneakiness'.

- Create resources with a **visual timeline** ↗ and process to resolve common legal problems, to help people document their case and identify when to gather relevant evidence.
- Provide information about expected timeframes for the main phases of common legal problems. For example, how long you need to wait after writing an initial letter of demand to a final demand letter.

## Good online self-help resources are as easy to read as possible

- Communicate clearly in **plain English** ↗ – even if you’re writing a specialist guide, you still need to make sure everyone can understand what the content is about.
- “ Write the way the intended user speaks and thinks. Write as though you are competing for the time and attention of busy and stressed individuals. Because you are. (Griener, Jimenez, & Lupica, 2017)
- If simplifying language in resources, consider leaving ‘breadcrumbs’ such as, “when speaking to other organisations...”, “legal words you need to know”.
  - Use **Plain English writing style** ↗
  - Use **Easy English** ↗ if potential users may have a cognitive impairment or low literacy.
  - Explore **dual read guides** ↗ for different levels of legal understanding, literacy and comprehension.
  - Use consistent legal words across websites.

## Good online self-help resources describe processes

- Use **visual diagrams** ↗, video, or other media to explain tricky concepts.
- Work on making the logic behind tool decision-making visible to people.
- Use maps and/or videos to explain what decisions need to be made.

## Good online self-help resources work equally well for everyone

- Be accessible and inclusive.
- “ Inclusion is a necessity not an enhancement (Downe, 2019)
- Consider how some questions and logic in resources, e.g. binary gender options or evidence requirements, can be barriers to access. **Check language for inclusivity** ↗ to see if it is excluding people.
  - Audit and test sites and resources for accessibility standards. **Check documents for accessibility** ↗
  - **Check language for readability** ↗; aim for age 9 or grade 4 level and test with target users/community members.
  - Monitor online tool usage, bounce rates, and abandonment.
  - Test resources with community members to see what is preventing completion.

- Check for contrast and related errors using tools like **Wave Accessibility Evaluation Tool** ↗ or **WhoCanUse** ↗
- Use the **10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design** ↗ and check for **WCAG compliance** ↗
- Write **excellent Alt Text** ↗ and **image descriptions** ↗

## Good online self-help resources are current

- Reflect today's language and reality, e.g online self-help resources refer to "messages" that people may receive or send, rather than "letters". Email-writing resources and sample email messages are provided alongside letter templates.
- Stay up-to-date with industry developments. New technologies are regularly reviewed and tested for suitability to make existing resources more useful, accessible, or user friendly.
- Resources are **updated, improved, and replaced** ↗ regularly.

## Good online self-help resources are quick to use

- Do more with less. Use as few words, have as few steps, ask as few questions as possible, to help someone see results.
- Don't hide important information in documents (e.g. a PDF) that need to be downloaded.
- Value people's time and effort by keeping things short.
- Make templates editable (word versions, rather than PDFs) and **documents accessible** ↗. For documents with rigid formatting, support people in the quick transfer of information.
- Share progress and information often, not just at the end of the process or resource.

## Good online self-help resources connect to other resources and services

- Connect resources and services together – one tool is rarely enough. Connect the video, factsheet, and intake form to create a pathway for people.
- Monitor to see if your pathways work as expected.
- Conduct **Card sorts** ↗ with your community to learn about what resources to link together and how.
- Consider deep-linking to explanations of words, organisations, and materials, or using in-place explanations.

## Good online self-help resources build in extra support

- Build relationships with organisations, services, and resources that can support people. Ideally connect to other partners to provide holistic support for, e.g., emotional, financial, or housing needs.
- Create resources that bridge across organisational structures. Try not to create resources that are defined by what one team does or cannot do. Good



resources share information throughout an organisation to prevent referral loops and repetitive application processes.

- Design legal resources to create a calm, or calming, experience for the help-seeker.

## Good online self-help resources allow some people to speak to a human

- No user left behind! Create paths for people to speak to real humans when needed. Some questions are too urgent, complex, and emotional to be left to navigating online alone.
- Support people with urgent needs by creating resources to help them prepare to see a lawyer; give them chunked tasks to complete in their confirmation email or SMS; share resources to boost their confidence in holding a conversation.

## Great online self-help resources are designed with communities

- **Work with your communities** ↗ (users) to find the best path forward in prioritising your ideas and then designing them.
- Don't just involve people in testing (at the end); consider getting them to be advisors, contributors, or partners in your project team from the start.
- Build in **feedback mechanisms** ↗. Audit, test and refresh resources regularly – track usage, survey for usefulness, usability test when needed. Make sure there are no dead ends.
- **Do regular user testing** ↗ to confirm whether the design effectively works.



## 8. Extensions to this research

In addition to the suggestions above about how to apply and build on this research, we have identified a number of opportunities to address its gaps and limitations as well as to respond to learning from the project.

Most importantly, a higher number of participants in similar research, or quantitative research on selected narrower topics, could enable stronger comparisons and conclusions to be made. This could support investigation of, for instance, the relationship between different kinds of legal issues and tool type preferences, as well as among different participant profiles (e.g. different mindsets, demographics, or capabilities). There are, of course, challenges in achieving research of this breadth. Significant resources are required, especially to avoid sacrificing depth for breadth of knowledge.

Potential focus areas for future research to address hypotheses and gaps in our findings include the following.

- Future research could explore how young people understand and use online legal-self-help. The presumed legal knowledge and digital capability of younger adults has been noted in other research but was not a priority of this study. A focus on young people in Australia in future research and testing of legal self-help resources, as well as older people and other age groups, would be illuminating.
- The recent migrants who took part in our research were more likely than others to speak to community members and organisations to understand and verify what was happening to them. More data is needed on the role of community-based support and stories for migrants.
- Testing out tools for negotiation and to address mental health needs, both immediate (such as helping someone feel calm and less anxious) and ongoing (such as trauma related conditions). Research into mental health and legal processes could explore, for instance:
  - Which legal issues are more likely to need wrap-around services?
  - What partnerships with legal services and health providers could be leveraged to increase support for people during a legal process?
- Researching further strategies for connecting people with online resources of the right type at the right point in their legal issue journey would add value to consumer outreach strategies.

Online legal self-help resources should instil hope and confidence while explaining to the individual their rights (Griener, Jimenez and Lupica 2017). Only they know what they need.

# Appendices

- Impact of COVID-19 on our research approach
- Crafting a participant mix
- Recruitment design
- Online research session
- Self-help recipe activity
- Search simulation
- Project flowcart
- Bibliography



# Research design and activities

## A. Impact of COVID-19 on our research approach

Our original plan for this research project was to run a series of in-person workshops. Given the risk of COVID-19, physical distancing requirements, and the vulnerability of research participants, it was not safe or appropriate to proceed with any face-to-face activities. To ensure that our research was conducted sensitively and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic did not impact the research quality and results:

- We created a more robust research plan and discussion guide, allowing all team members to carry on the research in the event of an emergency or unplanned absence. This allowed for consistency among the team and individuals when working remotely or if people were unwell;
- We acknowledged pressures on service providers, recruiting sensitively through personal networks, social media and resilient grassroots communities. This approach made our project less reliant on frontline services passing on our materials, respecting their need to prioritise COVID-19 service delivery and support;
- We moved all research activities to an online setting: recruiting, running video interviews, and feedback loops;
- We recruited fewer research participants but designed interactions to create the most value. This was done by encouraging intersectionality of lived experience from our participants and running 1:1 sessions instead of workshops with multiple participants. This allowed the research to go deeper into experiences, attitudes and preferences;
- We deliberately incorporated online testing and generative activities into our online facilitation. This way we learned from how people reacted, what they did in online settings, and how they designed solutions, as well as what they could communicate verbally with us;
- We adapted the issue areas for provocations to legal problems involving debt, employment, housing and barriers accessing the justice system;
- We extended the timeline to adapt recruitment and research activities as needed, while creating more regular check-in points to maintain momentum;
- We increased reimbursements paid to participants, cognizant that many would be experiencing financial strain at the time;
- We celebrated and shared our findings on conclusion. In the spirit of reciprocity, we shared findings with participants in an accessible format. By presenting an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on early results, we could check our interpretations and ensure we were representing participants' identities and ideas in a respectful and accurate way.



## B. Crafting a participant mix

We initially aimed to recruit 20 participants who had lived experience of legal problems involving debt or bankruptcy, employment issues, housing/tenancy, or issues accessing or navigating the civil justice system online. We anticipated that these are likely to be common issue areas for people in the missing middle who were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although there are no official numbers for design research, participation drop out can be around 10%. In the end, we recruited 16 participants and were able to complete research activities with 15 participants.

A clear participant mix ensures that research includes a range of ages, digital literacy and adoption. We looked for participants who have intersectional lived experience, for example, a participant may be a single parent living with a disability.

We aimed to recruit a majority (75%) of participants that were reasonably confident in using online resources on their own, having used an online bot, survey or website to try to solve a problem in the past. To contrast that, we also aimed to recruit 3 to 4 participants with lower digital literacy.

Our mix needed to cover a range of legal issues, so that we could identify potential for self-help online. We investigated people's past experiences with legal issues via a screening survey. Our goal was to recruit a combination of people who may have accessed legal information services and people who had reason to do so, but for some reason did not.

**Figure 25 Original participant mix in research design**

	Debt or bankruptcy law	Civil justice system (online access)	Employment	Housing and tenancy
Culturally and linguistically diverse groups	1*	1	1*	1
People with disabilities including chronic illness	1*	1	1*	1
People at risk of poor mental health	1*	1	1*	1
Carers and single parents	1*	1	1*	1
People from rural and regional communities	1*	1	1*	1

\* Given the impact of COVID-19, debt and employment issues were highlighted as priorities. Even if participants had not experienced any issues in the past, we can explore how they would look for help now.

## Participant mix definitions – our priority groups

We identified a participant mix to start goal setting and selecting participants.

Criteria	Description	Mix
People from culturally and linguistically diverse groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migrants to Australia; especially less than 5 years</li> <li>• English as a foreign language</li> <li>• Refugees and asylum seekers</li> <li>• People who have not used legal services before</li> </ul>	4
People with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with a physical disability or mild cognitive impairment</li> <li>• People who experience accessibility issues online</li> <li>• People who have low vision, are hard of hearing or deaf</li> <li>• People who experience chronic conditions</li> <li>• People who receive some NDIS or NDIA support</li> </ul>	4
People at risk of poor mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people (18-25)</li> <li>• Men in rural and remote areas</li> <li>• People who access services for mental ill health</li> <li>• People who are neurodivergent</li> <li>• LGBTQIA+ community members</li> </ul>	4
Carers and single parent households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women who are single parents</li> <li>• Single-parent households</li> <li>• Participants with tertiary education</li> </ul>	4
People from rural and regional communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People who live outside of metropolitan Melbourne</li> <li>• People who live in areas with lower access to legal services</li> </ul>	4
Total		20

The following pages of the appendices display the actual materials we used in recruitment and research activities.

## C. Recruitment design

Home | Get help | Help us improve our self-help resources

PRINT SHARE

ON THIS PAGE

- > What kind of online research?
- > Why should I sign up?
- > How do I sign-up?
- > What is the time commitment?
- > What if I don't live in Melbourne?
- > Sign up

### Help us understand how you use online self-help legal resources

We're looking for participants to help us understand how you use free online legal resources.

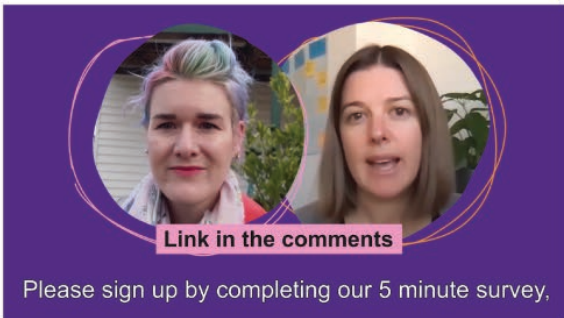
When you have a legal problem, you can't always turn to a lawyer or an organisation. In those times you may do your own research online. If that's something you have done in the past, we'd love to hear from you!

**We want to talk to a diverse range of people who live in Victoria and can't afford a lawyer.**

We're particularly interested in including single parents, people living with a disability, people with chronic illnesses, people with mental illnesses, people who have recently migrated to Australia, and anyone who lives in a regional, rural or remote community.

Every participant will be reimbursed \$200 for their time.

Sign up to participate by [filling out this survey](#)



Please sign up by completing our 5 minute survey,

### What kind of online research do I need to have done?

We are wanting to include people who have looked for online legal information about a range of things including:

- Money issues including debt and bankruptcy
- Work and employment
- Housing and rent
- Information about attending court

### Why sign up to our research project?

By signing up to our research project you can help us improve our online self-help resources. We value your time and will reimburse you \$200.00 for participating.

### How do I sign up?

If you're interested in participating in our research, simply [fill out this simple survey](#) and we'll get back to you.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call Jo Szczepanska for a chat on 0401 \_\_\_\_\_

### Recruitment webpage

#### Invitation/Call to action

Goal of the research

#### Who we were looking to speak with

Being as specific as possible

#### Reimbursement amount

Considering time spent on activities and homework tasks

#### Link to sign up form

This is a screening survey that has questions to identify the participant mix

#### Video about research

More accessible way to promote research than text, also easier to share on social media

#### Frequently asked questions

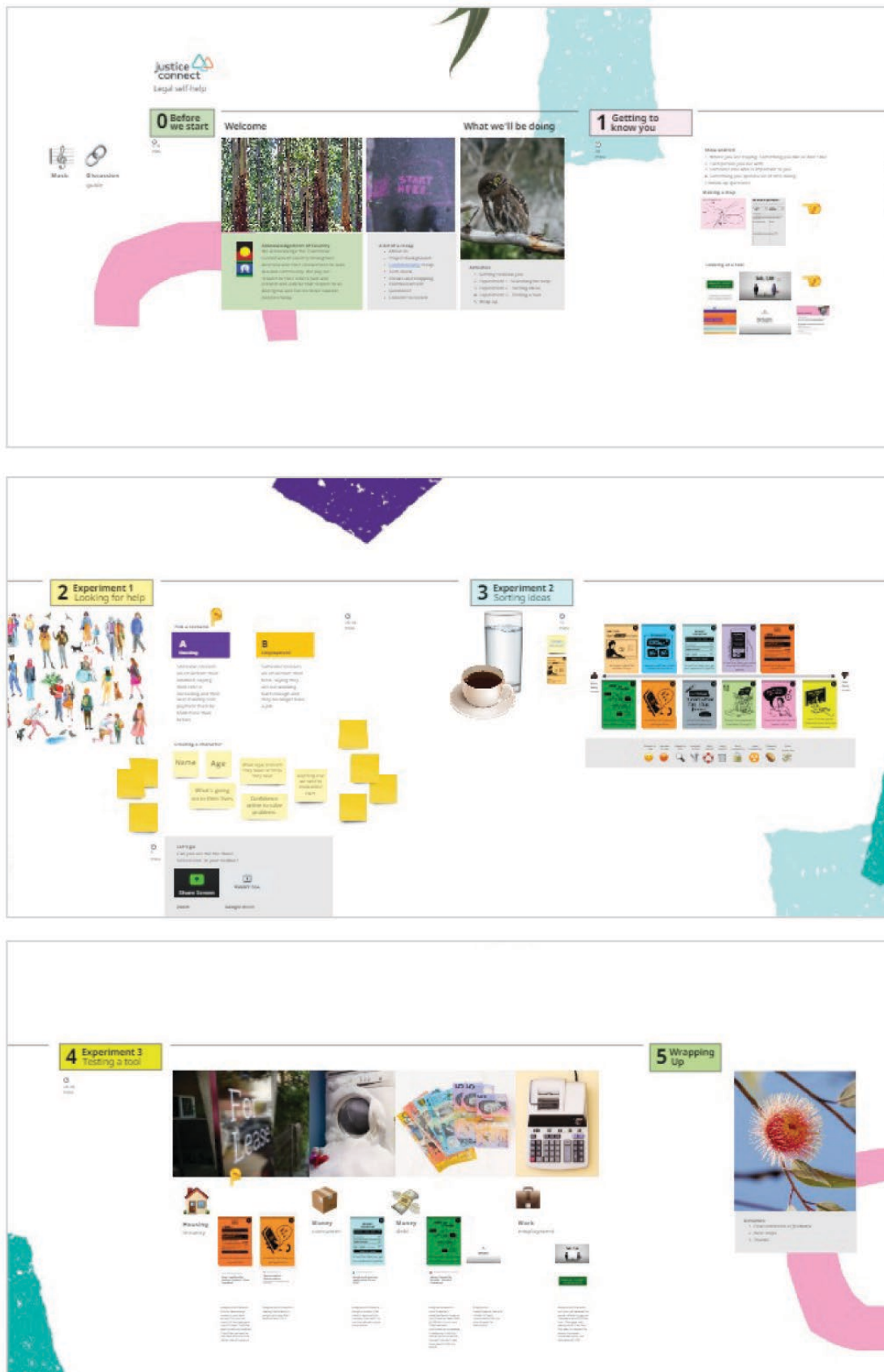
- Focus of the research
- Value of participation
- How the session is run
- Accessibility
- Confidentiality
- Support available

#### Contact person for questions

Providing name and phone number.

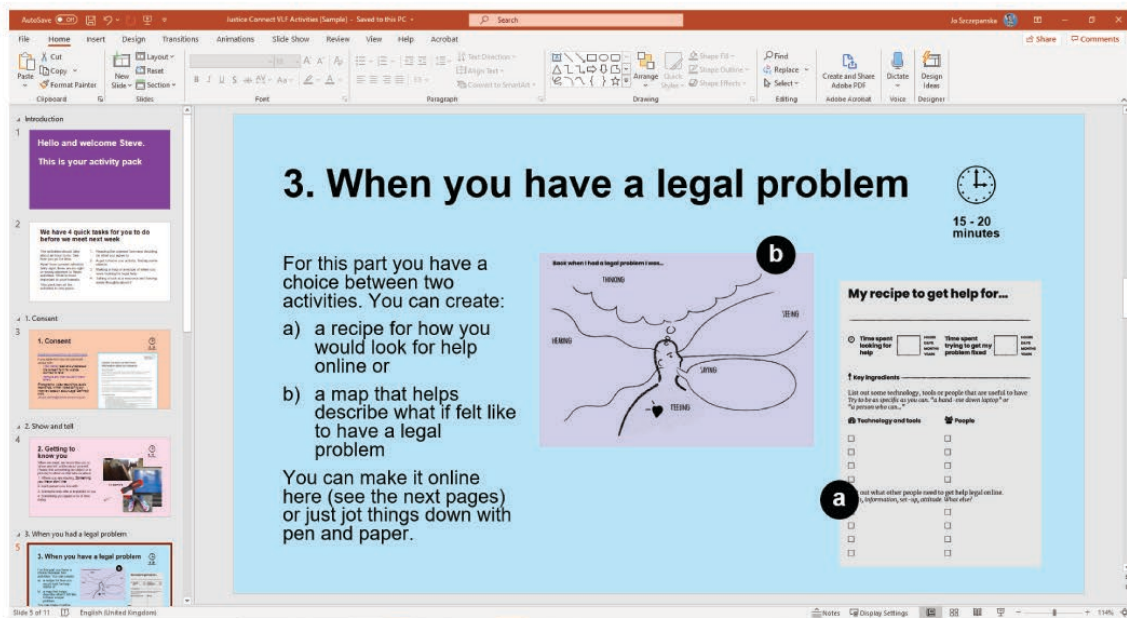
## D. Online research session

Miro board [↗](#)



## Step 1. Pre-interview activities

Physical and digital packs



## Activity instructions

Expect this will take about 1 hour.

### 1. Information and consent

**Suggested timing: 10 minutes**

*Read the sheet and form we have sent and note down any questions you have. If you are happy to do so, please email us to give your consent.*

### 2. Find things to help us get to know you better

**Suggested timing: 10 minutes**

*When we meet, we would like you to 'show and tell' a little about yourself. Please find something (an object or a picture) to show us that tells us about:*

- *Where you are living - something you like or don't like*
- *Each person you live with*
- *Someone else who is important to you*
- *Something you spend a lot of time doing*

### 3. Legal issue activity

**Suggested timing: 20 minutes**

We'd like you to choose one of these activities to complete to share your experience of looking for help. Think about the issue that you mentioned on the survey to join this project.

- Either (a) Write up a 'recipe' of instructions for someone else looking for help on this issue;
- or (b) Complete the 'empathy map' to show what you were thinking, feeling and doing when you were looking for help about the issue.

#### 3a. Recipe instructions

1. Give yourself a moment to get comfortable and a quiet space
2. Begin by thinking back to a time you had a legal problem
3. Go around the worksheet and note down your recipe. What did you do to find help, especially when looking online? The sheet has three main parts we want to know about.

**Time:** How long does looking for help can take?

**Ingredients:** What will people need to have to find help?

**Method:** What are the first three steps to getting help?

#### 3b. Empathy map instructions

1. Give yourself a moment to get comfortable and a quiet space
2. Begin by thinking back to a time you had a legal problem. All the way back to the very start.
3. Go around the worksheet and note down some sentences and words for each section. What were you thinking? Seeing? Hearing? Saying to people? Feeling?



#### 4. Try out a tool

**Suggested timing: 20 minutes**

We would like you to take a look at this tool in your own time and, when we meet, we will ask for your opinion. This is not a test - there are no right or wrong answers.

*Note: We chose a resource for each participant to test, based on assumed relevance according to the screening survey profile and noted down in our participant spreadsheet:*

*(a) bankruptcy;*

*(b) employment small claims;*

*(c) tenancy*

*We provided instructions and a link to the tool (in each case a video or a static site/PDF document) and asked the participant to watch the video or go through the website and make a note of:*

1. What are your first impressions? What do you like? What don't you like?
2. Who do you think the [video/website] is for?
3. Why would someone use this [video/website]? What problem might it help them with? How might it help?
4. Would you use a [video/website] like this? Why or why not?

### Step 2. Research session

**Est. total time needed: 2 hours (1 hour 50 minutes approx.)**

#### A. Introduction

**Est. 5-10 minutes**

- Introduce selves, research project
- Purpose and overview of interview
- Ethics - de-identification using pseudonym
- Discuss any questions or concerns
- Check tech set up (run through Zoom features if needed) and housekeeping - include can take a break any time
- Start recording
- Verbal consent form if not received written one

#### B. Contextual 'get to know you' part

**Est. 30 minutes**

1. Let's begin by seeing and hearing about the things you collected to show us.
  - Where you are living - something you like or don't like
  - Each person you live with
  - Someone else who is important to you
  - Something you spend a lot of time doing
  - How have things been different during the pandemic? [need to know how current situation may affect their responses, relevance beyond COVID]
  - How are you keeping in touch with friends and family at the moment? [social context and segue to next section]



2. We'd like to hear about the issue you explored in the activity to create a recipe of instructions or map of thoughts and feelings. Which activity did you do?

Ask them to show and tell. Follow up questions to understand:

- What was the issue, how did they seek to resolve it, what happened
- Likelihood of using a lawyer or applying for legal aid

3. Give feedback on tool tested

- What were your first impressions? What do you like? What don't you like?
- Who do you think it is made for?
- Why would someone use this? What problem might it help them with? How might it help?
- Would you use something like this? Why or why not?

### **C. Workflow mapping with a character and an Internet search**

**Est. 25 minutes**

For the next activity, we are going to imagine a problem that someone might have, and how they might solve it.

1. First, we will share 2 situations with you, and we would like you to choose one that you can imagine happening.

- A is about renting. "Someone receives an email from their landlord, saying their rent is increasing and their next monthly rent payment must be \$500 more than before."
- B is about employment. "Someone receives an email from their boss, saying they are not working hard enough and they no longer have a job."


Would you like to explore issue A or B?

2. Create a character based on your own experience or people you know; someone who might experience this issue.

The next activities will be easier to complete if we are a bit more specific, so we will need to create a character together. We have a few elements that we need to capture. A character will work best if they are based on your own experiences, or those of people you know. They are the person experiencing the issue you just chose. Prompt and note down character's:

- Name
- Age
- What's going on in their lives
- What legal problem they have/think they have
- How confident they are using the Internet to find information and solve problems

3. We're going to imagine [NAME] goes on the Internet to try and figure out what to do when they receive that email. We're going to invite you to imagine you are [NAME] looking for information and help.

- First we'll ask you to open an Internet search window.
- Now please share your screen with us, so we can see what [NAME] does. Can you see the the Share Screen icon  in your toolbar?



- We'll also ask you to tell us what they are doing and why.
- Now we've got 5 minutes to see what happens when [NAME] goes online and looks for help. Shall we begin?

4. Set timer.

5. After 5 minutes: Let's talk about how that went.

- How do you think [NAME] is feeling now?
- How do you think they were feeling when they were looking for information/help?
- What did they find that was (a) helpful? (b) not helpful?
- What would they do next? How/why would they do that?
- What rights does [NAME] have in this situation? (Prompt if needed: do they have to do what their landlord/boss says?)
- Who could help them in this situation? What could they do/how might they help? How could you find that person/organisation?
- If they were talking to a lawyer about this issue, what would a lawyer say about it?
- What could have made it easier or better for them to find help?

[short break if needed]

## D. Legal self-help tools

**Est. 15 minutes**

Show visual examples [e.g. digital card sort on Miro] of different tools

1. [Referring to fictional issue and character from section C]: which of these tools would they prefer to use to get information or help about this problem? Why?

Probe/follow-up questions: why they chose that tool/ranking, how they would expect it to work, what they might do after using it.

2. Do you have any other ideas of options that would work for your character?

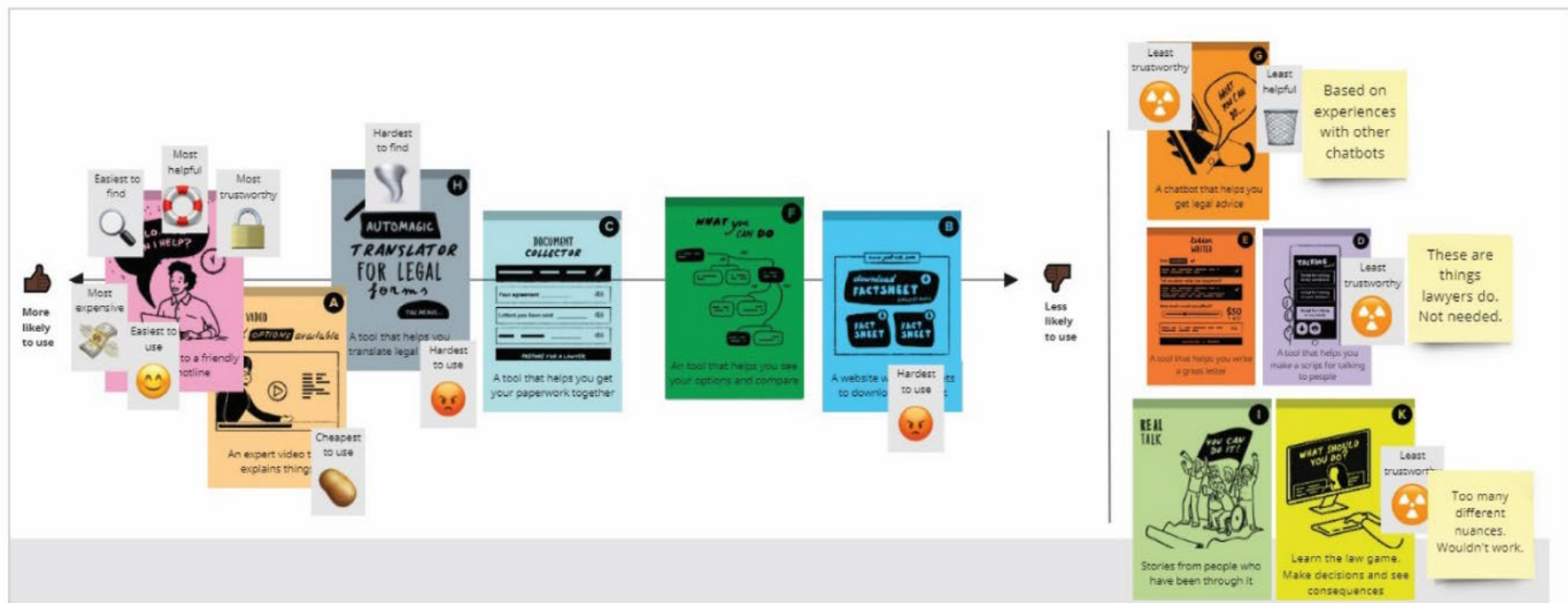
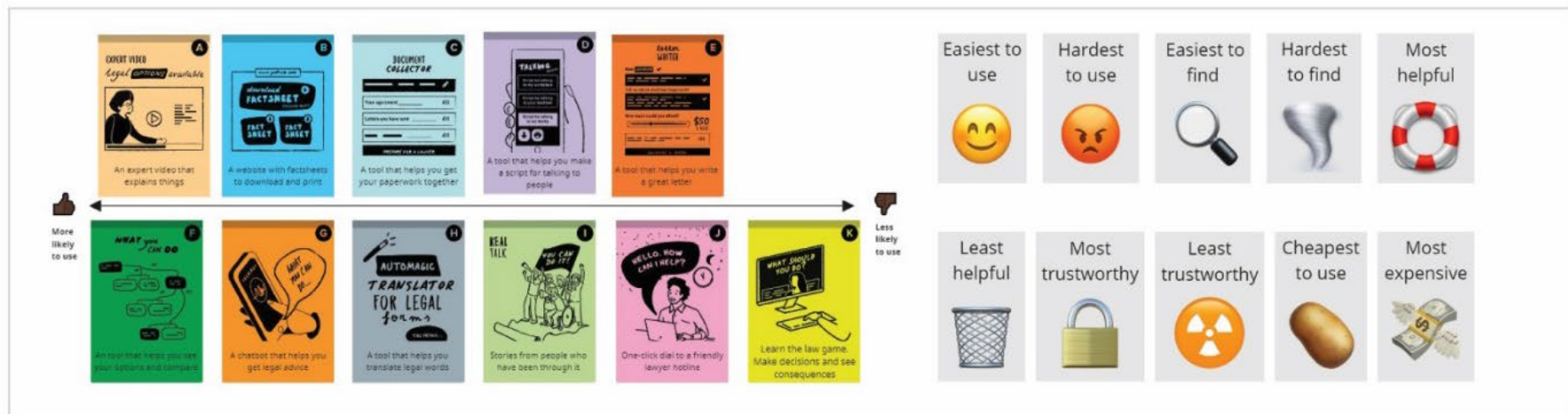
How do you feel about each of these things as a way to help understand and solve legal problems?

3. If you had another problem like [real experience from section B]: which of these tools would you prefer to use to get information or help?

Which one would be:

- |                   |                           |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| • Easiest to use  | • Least helpful           |
| • Hardest to use  | • Most trustworthy        |
| • Easiest to find | • Least trustworthy       |
| • Hardest to find | • Cheapest to use         |
| • Most helpful    | • Most expensive (to use) |





## E. Test out tools using scenarios

Est. 30 minutes

Test out a guided pathway or chatbot.

We're now going to try out one of these tools. (*Choose a tool that fits their circumstances and preferences*)

	Housing (tenancy)	Money/consumer
Guided pathway to legal info		Option 1
Guided pathway to document assembly	Option 2	Option 3
Chatbot	Option 4	

2. Would you like to do this activity as your character or as yourself?

3. Introduce scenario for use

**Option 1** - Being chased for money: Imagine someone in your/character's extended family is saying you/character owes them \$1,000 but it's not true. They have sent you/character a message threatening to tell the police that you stole the money if you don't pay them back \$1,000 this month.

**Option 2:** Imagine you/character did not have enough money in your bank account for your last month of rent payments to go through. You/they want to ask your landlord if you/they can pay the rent back a bit at a time, rather than a lump sum.

**Option 3:** Imagine you/character bought a product that doesn't work and the company that sold it to you/them has refused to give you a refund.

**Option 4:** Imagine your/character's heating has broken. It's winter and your/their landlord won't fix it.

4. Introduce tool and how we'll be using it

- One researcher to be the "remote hands" - interviewee to direct them what to do, and speak aloud about why.
- Use notes for testing with information for form-filling so we can complete the form quickly (copy+paste) and without any privacy implications.

5. Talk us through what the character would do.

6. Discuss how that went

- How were you feeling when we were looking for information/help?
- What did you/they find that was (a) helpful? (b) not helpful?
- What would you/they do next? How/why would you/they do that?
- What rights do you/does [NAME] have in this situation?
- Who could help you/them in this situation? What could you/they do?/how might they help? How could you find that person/organisation?
- If you/they were talking to a lawyer about this issue, what would a lawyer say about it?
- What could have made it easier or better for us to find help?
- Have you used a tool like this before?
- If we were making a tool like this or redesigning this one, what should we change or improve?

7. Do you have any advice for others who are seeking legal help online?



## F. Close interview

**Est. 2-10 minutes**

That's the end of our activities and questions. Thanks so much for everything you've shared with us.

- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about legal self-help resources or anything we have discussed?
- What we're doing next - when you will hear back from us.
- Have you got any questions or comments before we end the interview?
- Giftcards/payment.



## E. Self-help recipe activity

One participant had significant experience with various legal issues and government services, and strongly advised anyone with a legal issue to find the right type of lawyer or similar specialist. Is a great example of someone who has experienced has the Cautious-Traditionalist mindset. For them legal help means finding the issue and then locating an advocate or professional to help.

Also see → [Figure 2 Participants mapped to legal user archetypes](#) and → [1.2.3 How participants reflected legal user archetypes](#)



### Geoff's recipe for legal self-help

#### My recipe to get help for...

Once you know the problem the rest is one, two, three ... easy

#### Directions

Step 1. The problem you have to know what it is exactly

“At some point there is something that lets you know you have a problem. Once you have that, work out where the problem exists, whether it's the tax department, whether it's the police department, whether it's the lands department, the landlords, finance, find out where that part is.”

Step 2. dependant on what the nature is what dept government or civil find the appropriate

“Contact them if you must, just to confirm, that they tell you exactly what your problem is, and then find a lawyer. If it's not something that can be dealt with... All right, you have a car payment. “Look, I just was off work for a week. My compo hasn't come through. Can I do further payment or is that in my best interest?” Those are questions that you need to ask a lawyer.

“Anything below that, if they say, “Oh, we understand that your pay hasn't come in because you're now on compensation, and we're all good with that, we won't penalize you.”

“Then that problem is something you can solve yourself. But anything above that, never try to do it on your own because you'll come off worse end of the stick....

contact the applicable entity if you don't understand the reason

“Once you know where your problem comes from, that's the point you start and you think, right, okay, I've got a problem with conveyancing for my property. So therefore I need a conveyancing lawyer...”

Step 4 look for applicable entity to assist you with solution

“It doesn't matter what problem you have. Once you know where that problem emerges from or what the downfall is, that's where you start.

Step 5 be it by phone internet or friend always seek legal advice if you are unsure .

“And in the end, it's always got to involve a lawyer because every law is written by a lawyer. It's not written by politicians or public servants. They are written by lawyers and believe me, the Australian government has a team of them on 24/7 call.”



## F. Search simulation

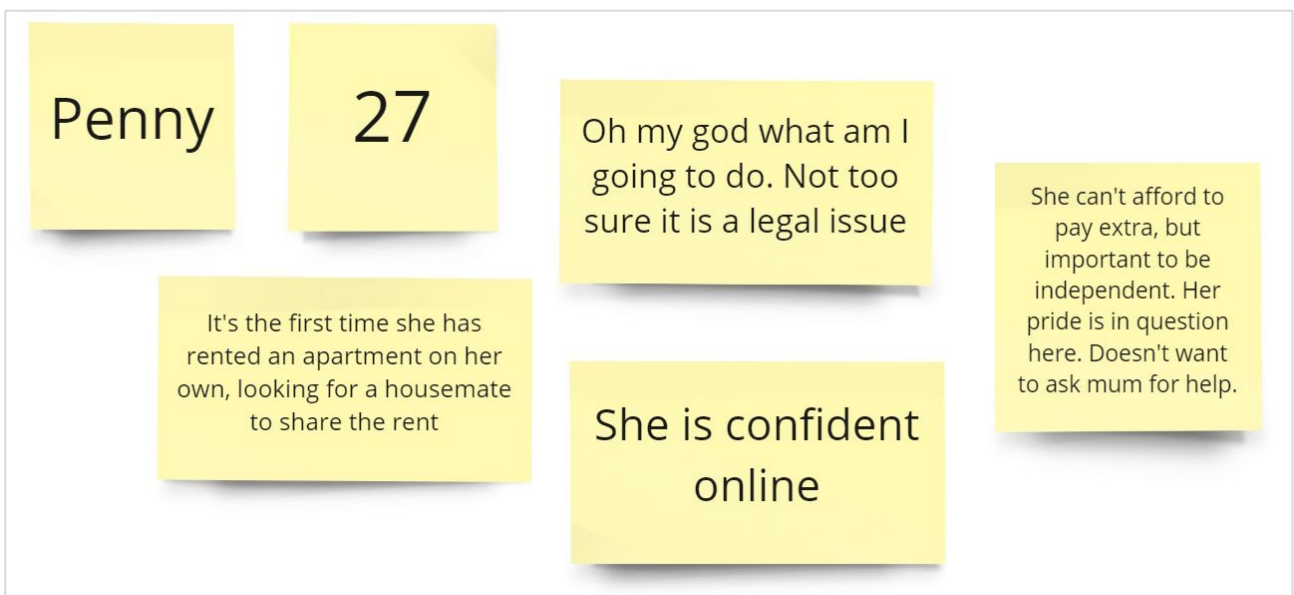
### Penny spends five minutes looking for legal help

The following pages show screenshots from one participant's 5-minute search around a tenancy issue. It is an extreme case of progress in five minutes, as displayed by one of our super searchers, who represents the Do-It-Yourself mindset → [2.4 Super searchers open multiple tabs and triangulate knowledge](#). We are sharing this example because it is the most complete example of a search journey.

Most of the information the participant learned was from the Featured Snippets provided by Google searches, reducing the need to even open a page. This method saved time, as highlighted information from inside well-ranking websites was presented upfront. See → [7.1 Invest in consumer outreach, search engine optimisation, communications, and marketing](#) and → [8. Design principles for online self-help resources](#)

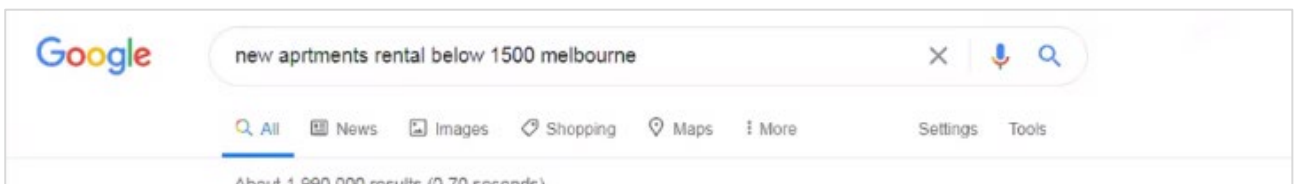
“ People usually use Google, so making it clear that if you look up a problem on Google, maybe the first thing that you see easily summarizes the kind of services that, that link provides, or what information is contained within that link. So that would be really, really useful. – *Sunny*

The scenario for this test was “**Housing**: Someone receives an email from their landlord, saying their rent is increasing and their next monthly rent payment must be \$500 more than before.” Our participant created a character called **Penny** based on themselves or someone they knew well.

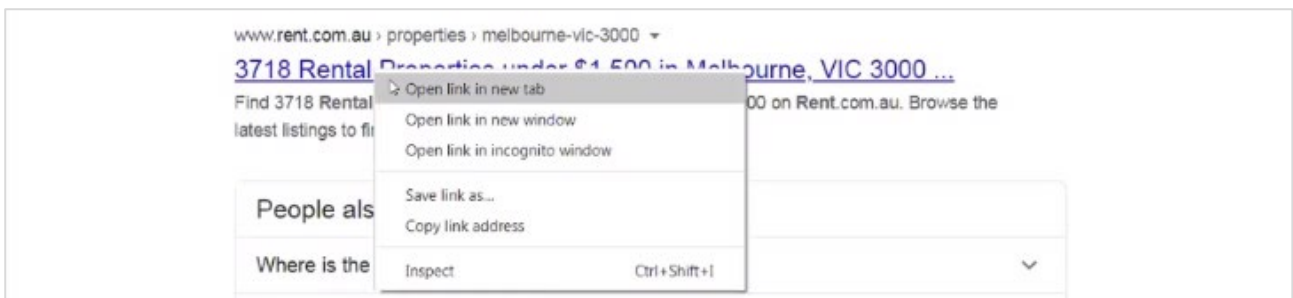


#### How Penny approached the online search

“ Concerning that she's not that experienced, she just thinks, "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" I think this is all... Like it happened. It could happen. It's legal. She doesn't know, at first, she has a legal problem. What am I going to do?



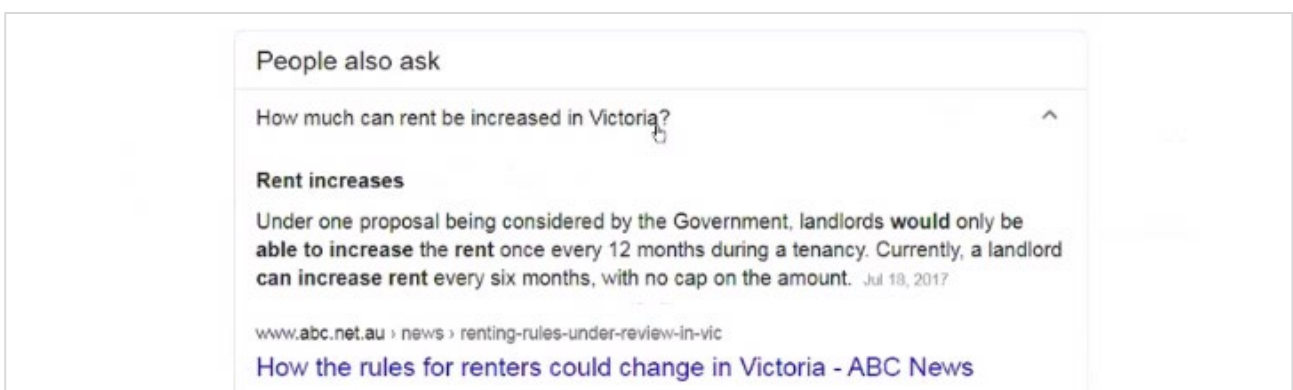
“ I think as Penny, I'll first look for new apartments, rental, below 150, that one. This is something I'll have a look. So I'm kind of going forward in this.



“ I'll go through some of these links and then, I'll think, Oh my God, it's really hard to find. Then, I'll open another tab. Rent. I'm just literally googling, rent increase...



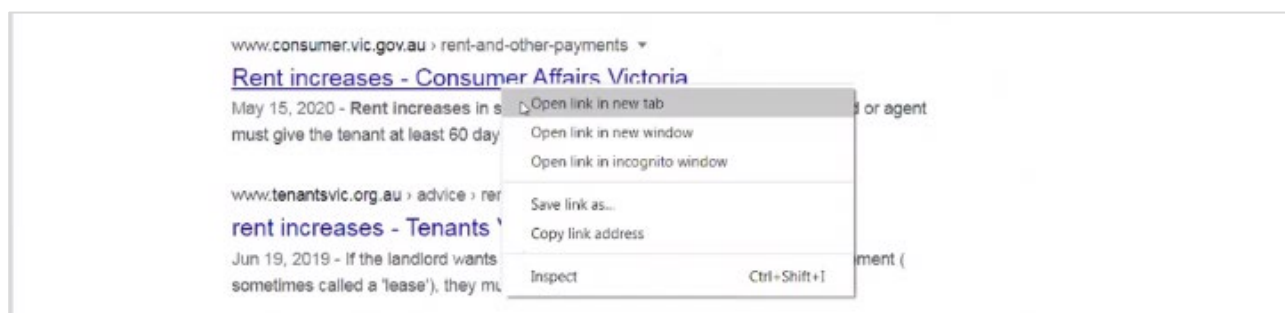
“ Oh, something popped up, Melbourne. Let's have a look at that. The Melbourne increased in the December quarter in 12 months.



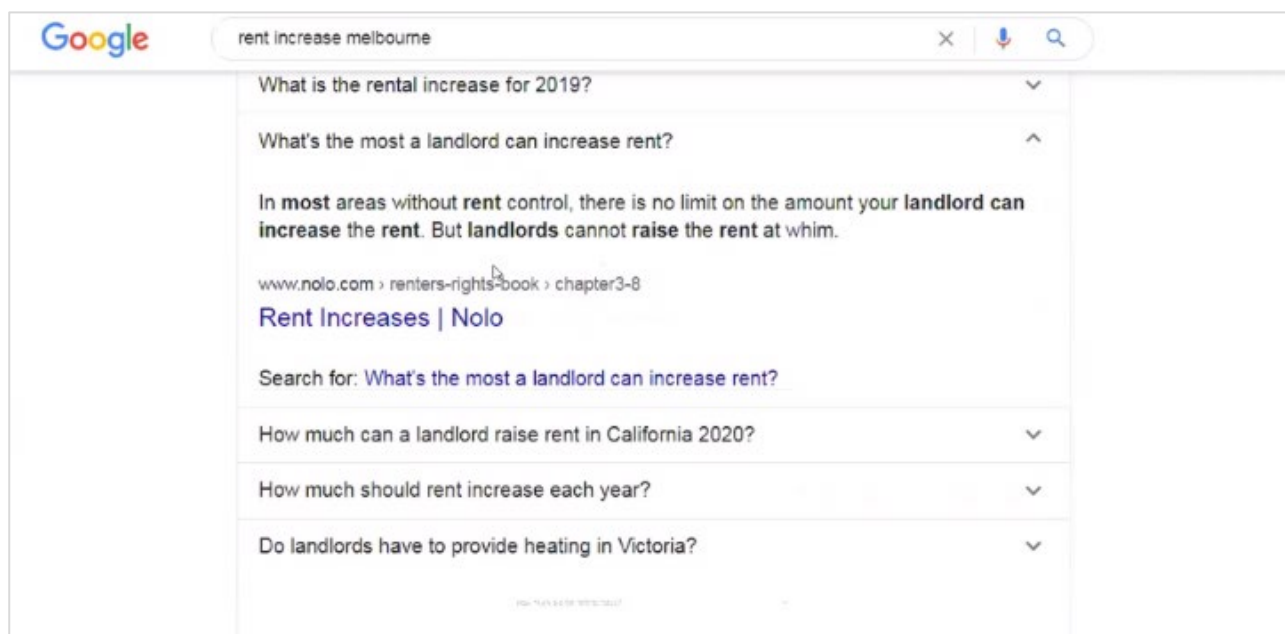
“ Annual rate of increase is below that in the 12 months of December 2018. And I'm thinking, wait a minute. Not now. This is for before. So they're not saying now. And then, I'll have a look at questions down below.



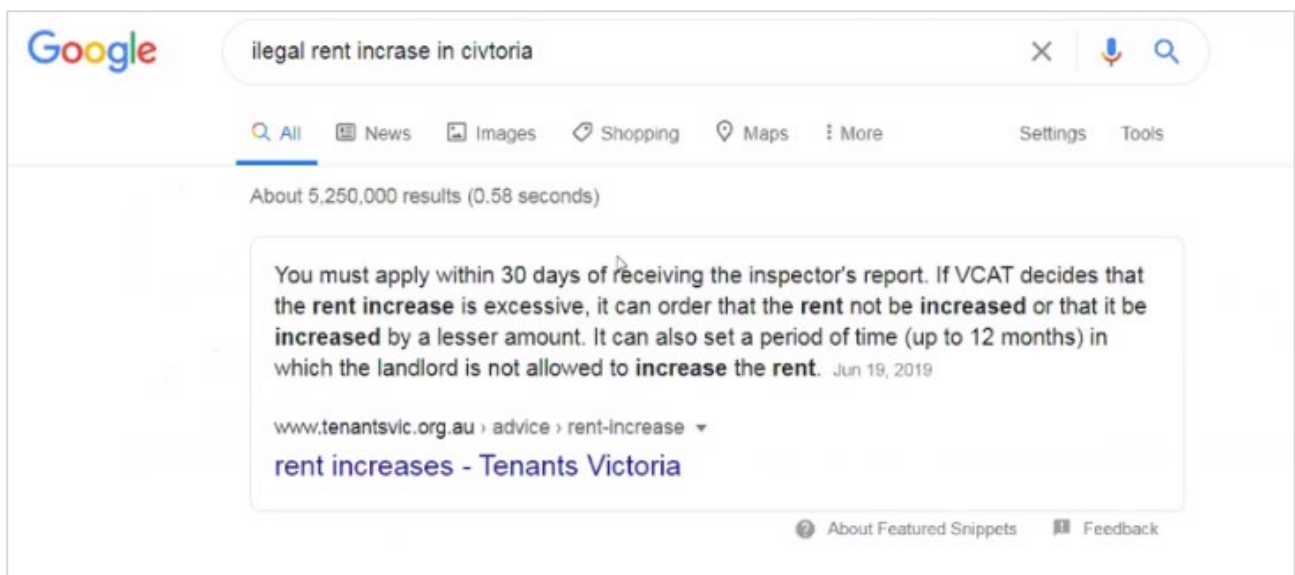
“ How much can rent be increased in Victoria? Fair enough. Did my landlord do something legal or illegal, rent increases, under what proposal being considered by government. Landlords would only be able to increase the rent once every 12 months. I've not been living here for 12 months. Oh, my God. Could this be an issue?



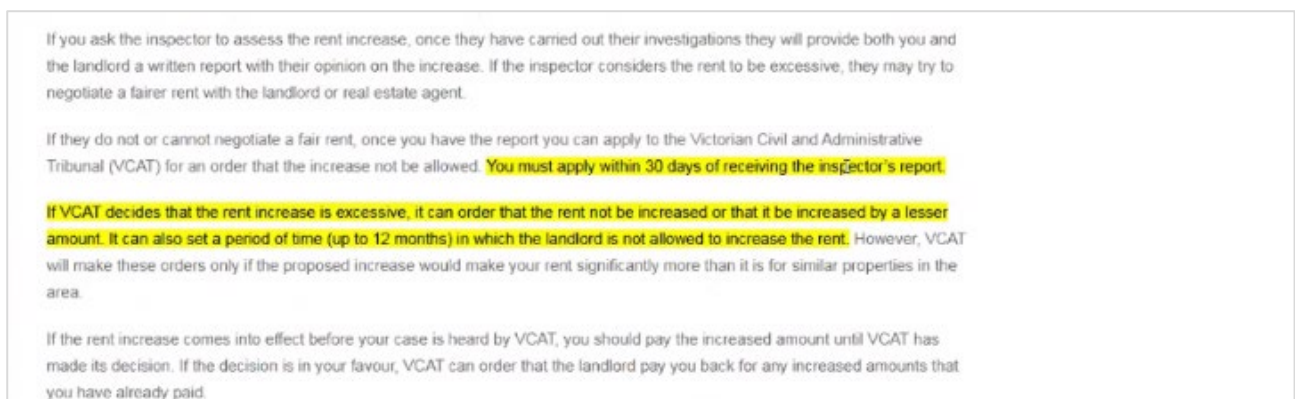
“ Rent increases-Consumers Affairs Victoria. This sound like... One second, let's open this. What's the most a landlord can increase the rent?



“ Oh my God. In most areas, without rent control, there is no limit. Okay. So, probably, it can do that, but landlords cannot raise the rent at whim. Hmm. Let's see what this one says. This is California. Let's see. So this one so far looks interesting. I'll go to Consumer Affairs Victoria. It says rent increase in short term lease, up to five years.



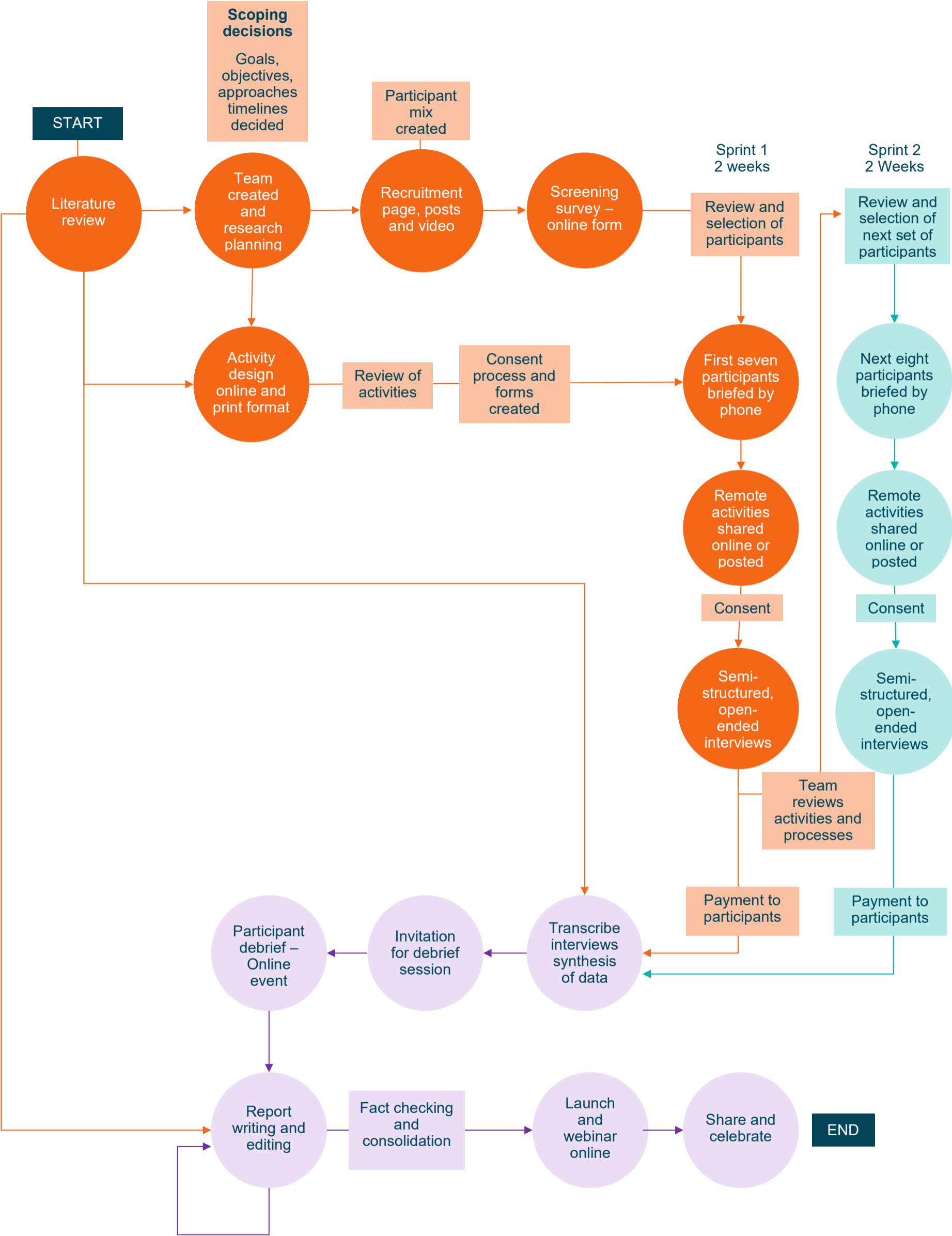
“ ... Oh, let's see what is it. You must apply within 30 days. Okay. It is 30 days. I literally just received it. How we may kept? Then make these orders only if the proposed increase would come, make your rent significantly more than it is for familiar private properties in the area. Negotiating with the landlord. Notice.



“ How about I call them tomorrow? I see a... No, this is fax. They have a number, so I can have a chat with them. Or they have thought about... Contact. And before acting all legal about it, I want to have a chat with landlord, probably if he or she knows, I know my rights, he's not going to do that. Tenant advice line. Here it is. I'll call them tomorrow morning, and tell them that this is the case, and it's illegal. So potentially, I'll see how they would say. And I'll tell them that I don't want to act on it. For now, I'm just going to chat the landlord or my agent and see where it goes. Do you want me to pursue the legal action procedure?

At this stage our participant decided they had enough of a case to contact the Tenancy Union to prepare documentation.

G. Project flowchart



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