

Press 1 to be disconnected, Press 2 for...

Last year I made first contact with the Internal Revenue Service in America. Needing to obtain an Employer Identification Number (an EIN) for tax reasons I discovered the only way to get one from outside the USA is to phone the IRS. No emailing or posting forms, they actually WANT you to talk to someone. This is a novel, if not alien concept for those of us in the UK who are used to dealing with the Inland Revenue.

Anyhoo, back to the story. You are instructed to print out the application form, which they then insist you fill out neatly, sign in your own blood, and swear not use as a coaster for your coffee cup for the duration of the interview. They also demand that you have it in front of you before calling.

Filling the form in with the limited online help was an uphill struggle that I imagine to be similar to that faced by Hannibal as he crossed the Alps whilst dragging a bunch of grouchy elephants along. I give you an example:

Section 1 notes:

Only use this form if you are a non-resident alien.

NOTE: If you are a US citizen and believe you have been abducted by aliens, obtain form IACN-24/7. Check box 13c, then fill out Sections 21a through 47d. Include 3 Xerox copies of your video rental store membership card and state if you have ever visited Roswell, New Mexico in this life or any previous one.

With the form filled out and in front of me I took a deep breath and dialled the number, after a brief frenzy of button pressing my way through a menu, a real human voice answered.

“Hi, my name’s Marion Eagleburger, my employee number is 6742A91GF2071.”

This was fine, except it had been fired at me in a shade under 4 seconds.

“Oh Hi,” I squeaked feebly as a feeling of dread washed over me.

Ms Eagleburger and I proceeded to work our way through the form section by section.

“Are you declaring anything under Section 12 Sir?”

“Oh, hang on. I’ll check.”

Section 12:

If you wish to claim for livestock not native to the USA that have been lost overboard from a ship flying a flag of convenience or having a drunken crew, you are required to submit Forms RL23/99A and LB63/7F to the IRS, the US Coastguard Service and the Alpaca Licensing Board of Wisconsin.

“Er, no thank you, I actually have a phobia of tall South American wool bearing animals that spit.” I offered as way of explanation.
Then suddenly we were on the final section, and it was all over.

In truth, Ms Eagleburger had been incredibly helpful and in just twelve minutes I had my EIN. I then bade a fond farewell to the lovely Ms Eagleburger, truly a shining beacon in a world full of grey government departments.

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