

June 28, 2005

Thirty-One Best Practices For The Service Desk

by Chip Gledman

BEST PRACTICES

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Includes Business Technographics® Data



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by **Chip Gliedman**

with Meredith Morris, John Ragsdale, and Jessica Harrington

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forrester recently surveyed 2,138 technology users at US companies to uncover their opinion of their company's IT organization and its technologies. While users are generally satisfied with the technologies their company has adopted, such as desktop technology and business applications, the IT organization needs to work on its help desk support and communication. Just 53% of users report being satisfied or very satisfied with their help desk support. This is cause for concern. As the help desk or service desk is the face of the IT organization, loss of help desk credibility can negatively affect IT perception, potentially resulting in tighter budgets, longer approval cycles, and a reduction in the overall role of IT in driving business change. Help desk organizations must assess their competencies, find areas for potential improvement, and grow. A list of best practices can serve as the starting point for such an evaluation and improvement process. Use this list to reconsider what you're doing and why, and what you should be doing and when. Balance each potential change in a practice, procedure, or technology with a cost/benefit analysis.

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NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester has surveyed, interviewed, or assessed hundreds of internal and external service desks and service desk users. Through these discussions and evaluations, we've seen what works, what doesn't work, and how hard it sometimes is to see what is really going on within one's own organization.

Related Research Documents

"Simplicity Theme Appeals To Service Management"
May 16, 2005, Quick Take

"Help Desk Or Service Desk: Difference Or Hype?"
March 11, 2005, Trends

"Trends 2005: IT Service Desk"
November 1, 2004, Trends

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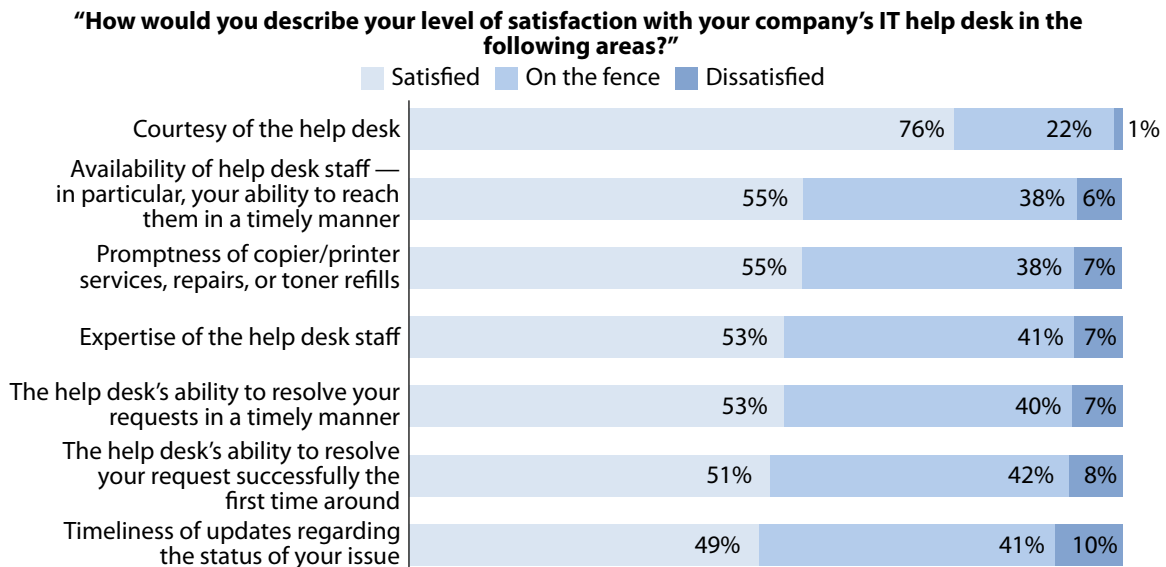
HELP DESK NEEDS HELP

In Forrester’s Business Technographics® March 2005 United States Technology User Benchmark Study, we surveyed 2,138 technology users — outside of the IT organization — at US companies with 500 or more employees.¹ Although 53% of users are satisfied with the help desk’s support overall, 41% are on the fence with their opinion (see Figure 1). Courtesy of staff is not an issue, but areas like time to resolve requests, timeliness of status updates, and even help desk expertise could use improvement in users’ eyes. A periodic assessment of service desk or help desk practices may identify areas of potential improvement to help reposition the help desk higher in the eyes of its customers.²

To improve, an organization must assess its current practices against those used in other organizations, or “best practices.” Simply put, a best practice is the most effective way to get something done. These practices, processes, and procedures have emerged as proven models for the majority of organizations. However, best practices are dynamic, evolving over time to adapt to changing needs. Periodically, new methods, models, and technologies arise, augmenting or replacing the existing best practice with a new one.

Comparing responses of those who are satisfied with those who are dissatisfied with their help desk shows the areas that make the biggest difference in help desk satisfaction. Look at these specific areas, as well as lessons learned from help desk organizations worldwide (see Figure 2).³ Periodically review current practices against such lists and identify opportunities for improvement.

Figure 1 The Help Desk Is Not Meeting Customer Expectations

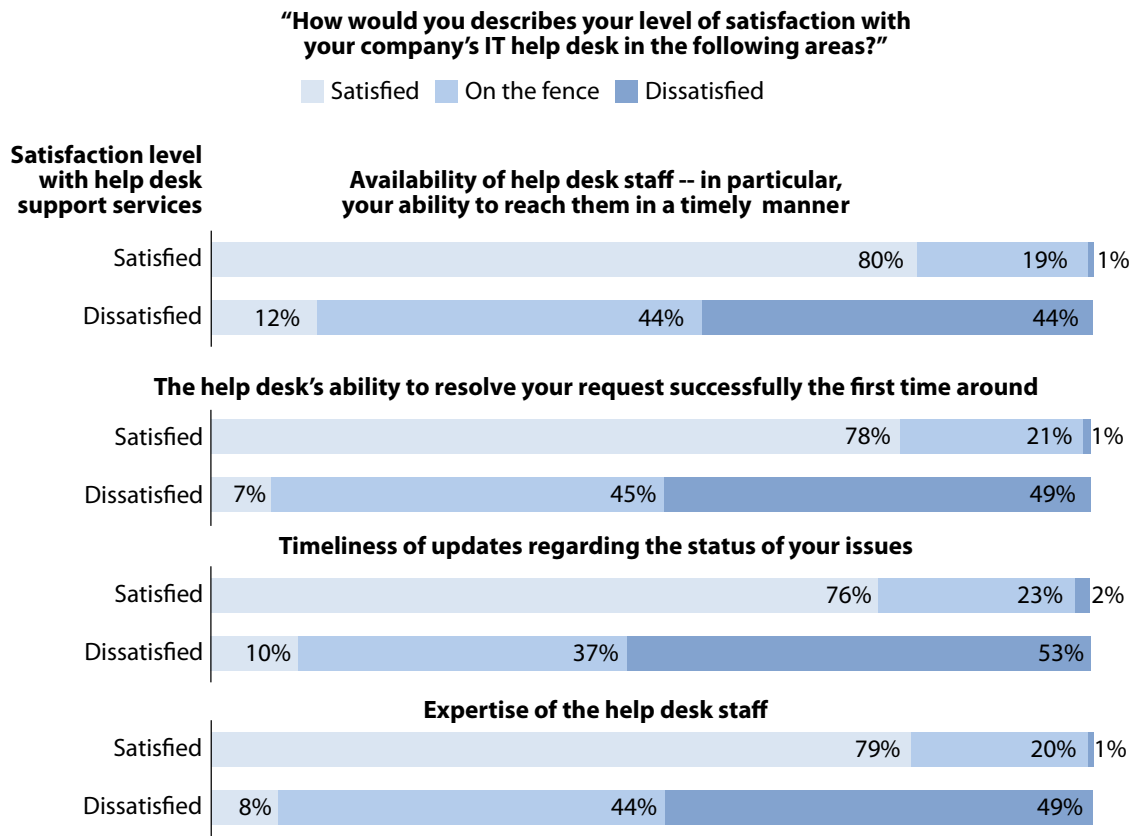


Base: 2,138 technology users at US companies (percentages may not total 100 because of rounding)

Source: Forrester’s Business Technographics® March 2005 United States Technology User Benchmark Study

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Differences Between Satisfied And Dissatisfied Users Point To Best Practices



Base: 1,194 technology users who are satisfied or dissatisfied with their IT help desk

Source: Forrester's Business Technographics® March 2005 United States Technology User Benchmark Study

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

The core of the help desk is its people. Evaluate how you hire, train, and manage your people to build the optimal organization. Among the practices we’ve observed, we’ve identified the following key best practices for people and organizations.

1. Hire The Right People

In addition to the technical and communication skills required to perform the user support functions, the ability to handle stressful situations and grumpy users is also a requisite. Behavioral analysis shows that people generally look to past experiences to guide their behavior in a given circumstance. In times of stress, this repetition of previous behavior is virtually certain. Therefore, when interviewing potential help desk staff, slant questions away from, “What would you do in this situation?” which will likely elicit the right answer. Instead, ask candidates to describe a time when

they were faced with a specific set of circumstances. Ask, “What **did** you do in that situation?” Look to the past to learn the behavior you can expect in the future.

2. Train Your Business Users

Employees who are effectively trained on how to use company technologies, such as business applications, are more likely to view the help desk as very important to their job and rate their support services as satisfactory. Three-quarters of technology influencers who received effective training on their company’s packaged business applications, compared with 26% of influencers who did not receive effective training, are satisfied with their IT help desk.⁴ Better-trained employees are better equipped to make use of their help desk support.

3. Train Your Help Desk Staff

Almost half of business users are either on the fence or dissatisfied with the expertise of the help desk staff. The need to complement and supplement on-the-job training with more formalized programs to improve both technical and business prowess is well understood. Few managers would be willing to eliminate the training line item from their proposed budgets. However, few organizations we have assessed have been able to retain or use their full allocations of training over the course of a budget year. Industry surveys, such as those conducted annually by the Help Desk Institute, confirm these findings.⁵ It is far easier for most managers to justify canceling or deferring a training session that removes one or more of the staff from the call queue than it is to face potential short-term service issues.

4. Lower The Common Point Of Management

Check your organization chart. Envision support scenarios requiring communication and allocation of resources outside of the service desk and see how high in the organizational chart you have to go to find a common point of contact between the service desk and the resources required to fix or change the relevant systems.

We recently reviewed one organization where all key business systems are developed, hosted, and supported by a US-based IT organization. However, each international service desk reported up through the local country operations manager, who, in turn, reported to a vice president of larger geographic regions. As a result, the lowest common point of management at this organization between the local support and the IT applications developers was the chief operating officer of the corporation. It is no wonder that non US-based users were dissatisfied with the perceived performance of the local service desks. Absent the ability to reorganize across these geographies, ensure that escalation paths and expected responses are clear and mutually agreed upon by all parties.

5. Don’t Confuse Decentralized Location And Decentralized Control

It is still difficult for many organizations to support a management structure spanning multiple geographies. However, an organization supporting multiple locations should strive to place

resources close to the users if economically viable. Locating support staff remotely does not automatically imply local management (see point above). Control (management and organization) should be centralized for all personnel supporting a given type of user, regardless of their location.

6. Don't Scrimp On Staff

Service desk demand models are not linear. The number of reported incidents varies by time of day and day of week, as well as varying in required time to resolve. Staffing based on average demand will lead to customer dissatisfaction during such peak demand periods as mid-morning and early afternoon. Other than resetting customer expectations that service levels during these times will be worse than at nonpeak times, the best help desks either staff for the peak and then have the staff work on projects during slower periods, or have additional staff, such as second- or third-level personnel with other responsibilities, available and accountable to backfill peak demands as needed.

7. Adopt A Customer-Focused Charter

One organization we worked with had a charter that described its goals using a very internally focused set of descriptors, such as, “We provide timely and effective problem resolution” and “We are cost mindful and value driven.” Shifting the words to put the users/clients into the charter begins the repositioning of IT as a service organization. After tweaking, the new charter included, “We solve customer problems timely, take ownership of customer problems, and keep customers informed as problems are resolved” and “We balance the needs of businesses with fiscal restraint.”

8. Re-evaluate Your Remote-Access And After-Hours Support Policies And Processes

The era of the eight-hour, five-day work week is long over. A substantial proportion of businesspeople have technical needs outside of these periods and from a potentially wide variety of locations. Rather than relying on information from call logs and problem tracking systems, survey your users as to their off-hours support needs. The calls may not be coming in, not because there are no problems, but because the users are not expecting anyone to be there — a circle where each side's behavior reinforces preconceptions.

Regardless of the support model chosen to cover off hours, the users must have resources available as required to ensure business continuity. The processes and procedures for receiving off-hours support should be available on-demand to a user with access only to a telephone. Best practice points to a message outlining the process to be followed on the main help desk phone line, rather than an online directory of services, as the problem at hand may prevent connecting to such a directory.

9. Compensate After-Hours Support Correctly

Consult the experts when designing an after-hours compensation plan. Local labor laws may create land mines for an unwary manager if help desk staff covering after-hour periods put either nonexempt status or standard work days/weeks at jeopardy.⁶

10. Help Your Staff Embrace Change

Improvements to the service desk affect people, as well as processes and technology. What may be perceived by one person as an exciting opportunity may be perceived by another as a step into the unknown and an opportunity for failure. Ensure that each change in roles is accompanied by a plan for success. This can include formalized mentoring by an experienced person, extra training, regular feedback sessions, and assurances that a successful transition will reflect positively on everyone involved.

11. Create A Culture Of Innovation

Not every idea will succeed. Create an environment in which suggestions for improvements that don't work out as well as planned are treated as opportunities for organizational learning and growth. Assigning blame and penalizing an individual or group for what is most likely a complex set of interrelated actions, reactions, or inactions will stifle future innovations and opportunities.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVICE DESK PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

Codifying the processes and procedures for service desk operations adds predictability and repeatability to behavior. Establishing a sufficient number of rules and rigidity, coupled with a lightweight control system, will generate the greatest flexibility and value. Among the best practices for service desk processes are:

12. Provide Timely Updates

While technology users tend to be pleased with the demeanor of the help desk staff, they are least likely to be satisfied with the timeliness of updates regarding the status of their issues. Seventy-six percent of users who are satisfied with their help desk, compared with just 10% of users who are dissatisfied with their help desk, are pleased with the timeliness of updates received. When we asked tech users what the IT organization could do to improve, 41% overall suggested more timely information on the status of issues. But two-thirds of users who are displeased with their help desk, versus 36% of those who are satisfied with the help desk, are likely to suggest timely updates as a necessary area of improvement.

The service desk is the eyes, ears, and face of the IT organization to the vast majority of business users. When you think you're communicating enough, take two steps further. Communicate information and service expectations with each incident. Summarize and report — both up the management chain and out to the users — on a monthly and quarterly basis at a minimum. It is far easier to cut back on communications than it is to repair the damage an aloof and out-of-touch service desk can cause for all of IT.

13. Set User Expectations At Every Contact

When a service incident is initiated, set customer expectations for service. Let customers know when they can expect resolution, or at least an update of status, based upon organization policies and service levels. Don't assume that the users know the policies.

14. Let User Needs Override Default Service-Level Expectations

Defaults are fine, but check them with the user to ensure that there are no unknown business issues that would point to higher or lower service-level requirements. A user should always be able to request priority service based upon business needs without requiring multiple levels of approval from senior executives whose time is likely better spent on other tasks. When in doubt, meet the user-set expectation and include numbers and types of exceptions in monthly and quarterly reports to serve as input to future service-level agreements.

15. Implement SLAs, Not CYAs

Design a service-level agreement with both organization costs and benefits in mind. When set too low, business value is negatively affected. When set too high, additional and unnecessary costs may be incurred. Establishing and agreeing on the appropriate service levels requires two-way communications between the service desk and the user groups. Most often we see service levels that are set just below the level that is expected to be achieved, rather than the level that provides the best balance of costs and benefits.

16. Balance Operational Metrics With Outcome Metrics

Help desks/service desks most frequently lead with operationally oriented metrics. Good operational metrics include:

- First-call resolution rate: percentage of questions handled on the first call
- Number of system outages (network downtime, dead printers, phone systems)
- Overall number of phone calls to support desk by agent, day, hour, system
- Overall number of incidents opened with the support desk by agent, day, hour, system

These and related metrics track how many problems customers are encountering and how quickly they are getting the answer they need. Plotting numbers on a weekly/monthly basis helps track service levels and agent productivity. Adjust schedules and staffing to fit the peaks/valleys for support, which is more complicated as large companies consolidate help desk operations and one help desk must service employees in multiple time zones. Metrics also allow reporting on root cause analysis and trends like hardware failures.

Balance these operational metrics with metrics that point to the mission of the service desk — to prevent or cure interruptions in employee productivity. On this front, track such metrics as:

- **Number of incidents per employee.** Ideally, problem prevention will lower this number.
- **Average minutes of downtime per employee.** Likewise, tracking the time spent fixing problems, on a per-employee basis, will point to prevention and problem avoidance. This type of metric is often difficult to track, as many service management applications measure the time that an incident is open, rather than the time that an employee is affected by the incident.

17. Balance Outcome Metrics With Predictive Metrics

In addition to operational and outcome metrics, which look at what happened in a previous period, a best-practice organization will also define, monitor, and communicate predictive indicators. These metrics will help the organization better forecast future support demands and may point to areas requiring proactive intervention. For example, predictive metrics can include:

- **Diversity of assets.** The number of hardware makes, models, configurations, software versions, the concordance or deviation of installed hardware, and software from published and tested standards can predict future conflicts and service costs.
- **Age of installed hardware.** PCs, laptops, printers, routers, and other such devices fail more frequently as they age. Tracking and reporting these metrics, as an indicator of likely hardware failure and future business interruption, also points to the targets for preventative maintenance.

18. Know Thy Customers

Build bridges to your user communities. Send service desk people out to regularly meet with business groups in a semi-formal situation, such as a brown bag lunch with the users. Listen to what they say — they are your customers. Bring back the information about what makes them tick and what is important to them, what your organization is doing well, and what they tell you that you can improve.

19. Steal Mercilessly From Other Organizations

Join a local, regional, or national organization of your peers. Read the reports, attend the events, mingle with your peers. When possible, ask your peers if they have ever faced a situation similar to one that you are facing. If their solution sounds good, steal the concept and bring it into your organization. Pilot and adapt it to suit your needs. Don't worry about "not invented here." Worry about results.

20. Conduct Satisfaction Surveys

Surveying for satisfaction is not a one-time event; it means having an ongoing program in place to measure how satisfied employees are with all aspects of service desk support — courtesy, competency, and communication. Surveys highlight potential problem areas for managers. While surveys identify pain points and potential problems, make sure you understand the reasons for dips in satisfaction, if they occur. In one organization we worked with, clients did not like a business-imposed policy, and they took it out on the messenger. Satisfaction dropped, and it really had nothing to do with the service desk.

21. Invest The *Right* Amount On Process Frameworks

Many organizations are looking at ITIL to provide the model for optimal performance.⁷ Whether you turn to ITIL or any other model, don't necessarily jump in with both feet. Frameworks are fine,

in the proper dosages. There are no panaceas, and, if not careful, an organization can invest more time in training, modeling, and discussion than in implementing positive changes. Look at the systems and processes defined by your chosen framework, adapt them when appropriate, and adopt them in the proper amounts and at the proper interval. Don't parachute in an entirely new process unless absolutely necessary, as wholesale changes rarely take hold successfully.

22. Leverage Internal/External Filters On Knowledge Bases And Self-Healing Fixes

Employee self-service can be a controversial topic. Conventional wisdom says to make as much information available to clients as possible. However, before implementing employee access to a knowledge base or self-service options, evaluate the types of problems you want your employees trying to fix on their own. Resetting their own passwords is one thing; downloading and installing operating system patches, hardware drivers, or other technical fixes is probably a bad idea. For these problems, you can do it better and faster and avoid lost data. Packaged knowledge base and eSupport products, and even the knowledge bases bundled with service desk software, allow all content to be labeled as internal or external, with only content labeled as external visible to customers performing self-service.

BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVICE DESK TECHNOLOGY

23. Track Your Incidents

These days, there is little reason not to be using an incident or problem management product to track calls and their resolutions. Data collection is the first step to a systematic improvement process. With good data, you can identify trends, recognize star performers, and intercept future problems. Without good data, an educated guess is the best that is possible, and even here, it's tough to track the impact of changes. If you're not ready to buy and implement a solution in-house, look at hosted applications or "rentals." Software as a service (SaaS) offerings, such as those from salesforce.com and Unipress, are potential alternatives to purchasing an in-house implementation, depending upon specific organization size and functional needs.

24. Buy, Don't Build

According to surveys, 17% of organizations are using home-grown problem management solutions. It is hard to believe that there is not a commercially available solution that would not meet the majority of needs of a large majority of these users. Moving to commercial software provides many benefits, including:

- **Exploiting industry best practices.** Commercial products codify the practices of many organizations. Home-built applications likely just enshrine current practices, rather than best practices. Additionally, virtually all commercially available service desk offerings are either preconfigured or compliant with practice frameworks, such as ITIL, if this is a corporate direction.

- **Maximizing scarce internal resources.** Service desk applications are peripheral to core business functions at the vast majority of organizations. Save your business-savvy resources for applications that contribute business value.
- **Benefiting from leveraged development.** Commercial software buyers benefit from the competitive pressures that spur innovation. Each new version of a commercial package adds functionality, fixes, and extensions to the service desk offering.
- **Integrating more easily.** Commercial software is designed to integrate with other software. Minimize the integration effort by selecting and acquiring software that can drop right into your environment.

25. Reassess Your Incident And Problem Classification Categories

Menu choices and problem categories have a nasty habit of growing past the point of usefulness. As new problems and problem classes occur, new categories are added to menu choices. Don't have more than a dozen or so problem classes in any menu. One organization we worked with had lists with hundreds of choices. Store detailed information or subclasses somewhere else. With too many choices, users will end up picking the same dozen anyway. You'll get less information about what is really going on than you will with a more limited, but well-designed set of choices.

26. Embrace Electronic Filing Of Incidents

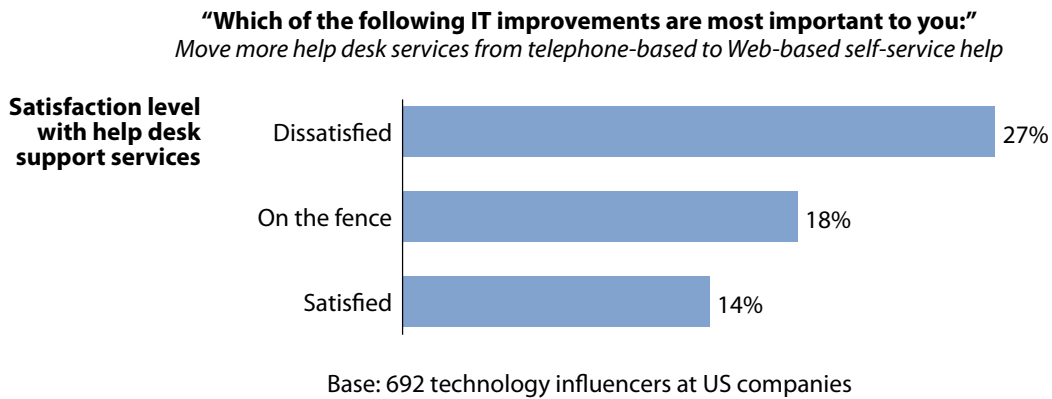
Regardless of any decision to implement or avoid solution self-service, install the ability for users to enter incidents and problems electronically. This can be done as simply as setting up an email form and mailbox, provided that someone will monitor mailed incidents. Moving noncritical incident reporting to this medium frees up the phones and agents to deal with business-critical problems. Also, having a queue of electronically filed incidents can fill agent time when the phone lines are slow. The result — money savings, better agent utilization, and happier clients.⁸

27. Balance The Use Of Knowledge Bases Against The Diversity Of Problems

Many times, the sheer number of permutations and combinations of installed hardware and software creates a problem set that makes the use of standard knowledge base tools difficult and less effective for internal service desks than external customer support organizations. This is not to say that solutions to frequently encountered problems shouldn't be available to everyone in the service desk organization. It is to say that the effort to document the problems and solutions should be aimed at problems that are likely to reoccur. For large organizations with complex support environments, consider an eService specialist, such as Kaidara, instead of the knowledge base tools bundled with your service desk application.

28. Use Analytics

Find the patterns and fix the ones that are problematic. Use robust tools to troll through your incident data (up to 30,000 per month at some organizations). Turn this data into information and the information into actions through the use of analytics (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Dissatisfied Users Want Self-Help

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Vendors like Peregrine are going one step further and organizing available information along business process or application lines for service-level management and system transparency that matches the way the business operates, and almost all service desk vendors support common reporting systems, such as Crystal Reports, to supplement “out-of-box” reports.

29. Invest In Asset Management Tools

Know thy customers and know thy customers’ systems. Without asset repositories, predictive metrics are difficult, problem resolution is longer, and rollout of new apps is problematic. With asset repositories, changes to installed software can be tested against common configurations, hardware leases and maintenance contracts can be tracked, and software licensing compliance is easier.

30. Use Remote-Control Software

If you’re not using it, you should be. Remote-control solutions allow you and your users to “meet” at a secure online location. Seeing the user’s configuration can speed diagnosis. Watching a user take the steps you recommend ensures proper compliance with instructions. Demonstrating how to do something teaches a technique and may head off a future call. In addition to remote-control capabilities found in many desktop management tools, such as those from Altiris, McAfee, Microsoft, and Novell, among others, as well as the big systems management framework vendors, third-party solutions, such as those from Control-F1 and GoToAssist, have service-based offerings.

31. Don’t Blindly Embrace Password Reset Tools

If your service desk can reset a password in about a minute, it may take a tool that automates the repair of about 75,000 passwords to free up the time of one service desk technician (assuming 1,880 hours per year, 60 calls per hour, 66% on phone time during workday). However, this is one time where satisfaction may trump pure economics. Increased security, audit requirements, and legislation have raised the bar on password complexity, rates of change, and reuse. As such, user lock-outs will rise over time. Allowing users to fix the problem and get on with work on their own will help the service desk avoid the fallout of these corporate policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CAST A COLD EYE UPON THYSELF

Self-evaluation and self-criticism are extremely difficult. As time goes on, practices become codified, and everyone assumes that the current way is the right way. When conducting a self-assessment, remember to:

- **Put the service back in service desk.** Evaluate your processes and procedures as your clients see them, not as you provide them. To be a service desk, you must serve your clients, rather than make them change what they do to meet your needs.
- **Take criticism constructively.** In most cases, comments should not be taken personally, but as additional inputs that can be considered when formulating plans. There is an old expression that your friends are the ones who tell you that you have a piece of spinach stuck in your teeth after lunch. Your enemies will let you continue along ignorant of the way you appear to others.
- **Balance the use of benchmarks.** Industry averages are just that — averages. If you want to be thought of as average, shoot for the middle. To be superior, pick the ways that will add business value and elevate the stature of your organization.
- **Benchmark your organization against itself.** Measure satisfaction on a regular basis and look for areas of improvement. Progress against previous metrics is comparable and helps guide future changes.
- **Run the numbers before you jump.** Even if short and informal, a business case with the cost of process, procedure, or technology changes balanced against business benefits puts proposals in perspective.
- **Ask and act.** Talk to your clients. Listen to your clients. Tell them what you've heard and what you're going to do about it. Tell them what you did and how it worked.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Online Resources

Help Desk Institute US: www.thinkhdi.com

Help Desk Institute Europe: www.hdi-europe.com

IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL), UK Office of Government Commerce: www.itil.co.uk

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Forrester surveyed 2,138 technology users at US companies during October 2004. Technology users are defined as employees who sit outside of the IT organization and use the IT organization's products and services. Ninety-five percent of respondents use their company's IT products and services for more than one hour per day. See the April 8, 2005, Data Overview "How Do Users Feel About Technology?"
- ² The term "service desk" has supplanted the use of the term "help desk" in both vendor and user communications. Part of this is vendor hype, part the desire by users to grow and expand responsibilities. See the March 11, 2005, Trends "Help Desk Or Service Desk: Difference Or Hype?"
- ³ We asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with various technologies on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied). We grouped ratings of 1 and 2 into the "dissatisfied" category, 3 and 4 into the "on the fence" category, and 5 and 6 into the "satisfied" category.
- ⁴ Forrester surveyed 2,138 technology users at US companies during October 2004. We further whittled this group down to 692 respondents who were qualified to answer questions about IT organizational governance. To qualify, respondents, who we termed technology influencers, needed to have a manager or executive-level title.
- ⁵ Twenty-one percent of the respondents to the 2004 HDI Practices Survey stated that they target over 11 days of training. Forty-five percent more stated that they target five to 10 days. At the same time, the majority of respondents (55%) say that they budget less than \$1,000 per person per year for training. The 2004 Help Desk Practices survey is available through the Help Desk Institute at www.thinkhdi.com.
- ⁶ The time a support technician is on-call to handle potential support needs may, in some jurisdictions, be considered as work hours. As such, they may require the payment of overtime wages. Likewise, hourly base compensation for on-call time may change an employee's status from "exempt" to "nonexempt." See the June 14, 2004, Best Practices "Employee Compensation For After-Hours Support."
- ⁷ ITIL is the Information Technology Infrastructure Library, a series of publications documenting an idealized process for the service desk developed by the UK Office of Government Commerce (OGC). See the November 1, 2004, Trends "Trends 2005: IT Service Desk."
- ⁸ In the 2004 Help Desk Practices Survey conducted by the Help Desk Institute, respondents reported that their mean cost to complete a telephone incident was \$31.70 as opposed to \$25.20 for emailed incidents. The Help Desk Practices Survey is available from the Help Desk Institute at www.helpdeskinst.com.

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