
Does Your Business Need an IT Help Desk? *Not Having One Could Be Costing You Plenty!*

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Most businesses don't set up an IT Help Desk function until it becomes painfully apparent that it's needed. But waiting for the pain to develop could cost you plenty in staff turnover, work disruption and lost business. So how do you avoid such pain and determine when's the right time to take the plunge? And if it's the right time, should you outsource it?

While there aren't simple answers to these questions, there are key indicators that will guide you. And it's not an all-or-nothing situation. You can put a plan in place to migrate to a full-blown Help Desk over time as your business grows and your needs evolve.

What is a Help Desk anyway?

The classic definition of a Help Desk is something like "...a single point of entry within a company to handle *customer* service requests." In this context, the *customer* is an employee of the company requiring assistance with a computer, network or software issue.

This sounds simple enough but an **effective Help Desk** is much more. You see, it's not so much about **fixing** problems. It's about **preventing** them! In essence, the truly effective IT Help Desk is a communications and knowledge transfer center of any business.

Measuring the true value of a Help Desk can be complex. Its true worth is based on diverse and intangible benefits. Value is primarily measured in end-user satisfaction and can be quantified in productivity gains and efficiencies such as:

- Increased productivity as a result of providing quick, efficient service and avoiding repeat issues
- Reduced ramp-up time for new employees
- Improvements to the information technology base as user feedback is incorporated into future plans
- Reduction of internal stress factors which improves operational processes
- Minimized demands on the Help Desk staff allowing them to handle strategic issues

How do I know if I need an IT Help Desk?

- Most businesses do need a Help Desk of some kind. In very small businesses, workers yell over the wall and help each other with technology problems. Often the hardware/software supplier serves as the de facto Help Desk though they usually are not properly equipped for the task. Ask yourself these questions to decide if it's time for a more formal Help Desk arrangement:
 - Can your business operate painlessly without its computer systems?
 - Can you meet deadlines in the midst of significant "computer" problems?
 - Have you been able to avoid all too common problems such as lost or forgotten passwords, system crashes, lost or corrupt files, virus attacks, excessive spam email, slow response times, equipment failures, etc?
 - Do you have a process in place for getting new employees set up on the network?
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- When an employee quits, is there a process for capturing their files and passwords?
- As you hire more people, are you getting the productivity gains you'd expect?

If you answered “yes” to all these questions, congratulations! Stop reading this article and take the rest of the week off. If not, a Help Desk can help you.

Okay, I'm still reading. Now what do I do?

You have two major options. You can staff a Help Desk with your own people which we'll call “insourcing” or you can hire an outside firm to handle it for you which we'll call “outsourcing.” In either case it can be a part-time operation or a full-blown department depending on your needs.

Before you can make the choice to insource or outsource, you must define your goals and expectations. This will lead you to critical success factors *for your business*. Here are some points to consider.

- Do you expect support to be available 24x7, during normal business hours or some other period?
- Is one-hour response and resolution required or can you accept 24 hours?
- What technical skills are necessary to operate the Help Desk effectively?
- How will you manage the Help Desk or outsource provider?
- What is the size and level of computing competence of the user base?
- What products and platforms will be supported?
- Is only electronic access to the Help Desk acceptable, or do you want human interaction?
- How can the success of the Help Desk be measured and monitored?
- What type and frequency of reports will you require?
- What other critical success factors can you define?

Insourcing your Help Desk becomes the better option if your information systems are critical to your business and/or you'll need significant human interaction. Outsourcing looks better when information systems are ancillary and/or your user base is very sophisticated.

When it comes to outsourcing, industry surveys suggest that 50-75% of firms that outsource Help Desk operations are less than satisfied with the results. The reason lies in a failure to fully define expectations and associated service levels. Whether you insource or outsource, you **MUST** create a “Service Level Agreement” (SLA) between your users (not your company!) and your Help Desk. While the subject of SLA's is beyond the scope of this article, you can get some basic information about creating one at <http://www.damicon.com/resources/sla.html>.

Don't wait for pandemonium to break loose! Know your business and user needs. Be aware of systems problems that interrupt operations. Get a Help Desk in place before you miss that critical deadline.

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