Do the Impossible: Lower Help Desk Cost AND Improve Service!

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Often, lowering cost and improving service are diametrically opposed. We've all heard horror stories of companies or been victimized by service providers that cut costs and make it far more difficult to do business with them after the initial sale. But it doesn't have to be that way!

When it comes to the IT Help Desk, implementation of best practices and prudent use of information technology really can achieve the impossible. Your staff will be happier and more productive while your business workers enjoy the level of service they deserve.

Many Help Desks start as a reaction to the proliferation of PCs in the company .The Help Desk becomes an "afterthought." It is often staffed by untrained, unskilled employees. Even if it's outsourced, the service provider selection process is often poorly executed resulting in a doomed relationship. Don't let it happen to you.

The following eight steps will help you do the impossible.

1. Know Your User Community

Your company's employees will be a mix of those who are technologically savvy and those who have limited computer knowledge. Before you develop Help Desk policies and procedures, take the time to learn about your end users' knowledge level to make sure you can meet their business needs.

2. Define Company Standards for Hardware and Software

You can reduce problem volume and the time spent diagnosing problems by standardizing on a limited number of hardware platforms and software applications. The more varied your environment, the more likely it is that you'll encounter significant integration issues. This applies not just to using multiple software packages but also to using different versions of the same package. Take inventory of what you have today. The results will almost surely surprise you.

3: When a Problem Occurs, Resolve the Business Issue First

Users want their problems resolved now. They have jobs to do and deadlines to meet. Analysis can be done later. For now, resolve the business issue! Here's an example. The Assistant to the CEO in a large company needs to print a report to be handed to the Board of Directors in a few minutes. Her printer is not responding and she's about to panic. Troubleshooting this technical problem could take hours. Instead, solve the business problem by directing the print job to another printer on the network. The Assistant's business problem is solved and the technical problem can be traced and corrected properly so that it does not happen again.

4: Leverage Technology to Reduce and Prevent Problems

So often, companies buy good software tools and turn them into “shelfware” by not supplying adequate training, not integrating the tools with other corporate systems, and not changing business processes to leverage the tools. It’s common for only 20-50% of the functionality of a software package to be used effectively. Always look for more ways in which your tools can help you reduce the time it takes to resolve as well as prevent problems.

For example, did you know that Microsoft Word has a feature for recovering text in the event that a system crash occurs before a document is saved? There’s also a feature to recover text from damaged documents. Enable these features and empower your users.

5: Employ Root Cause Analysis

Root Cause Analysis is a methodology for evaluating problem types and resolutions with the goal of identifying the underlying source of trouble. Once identified, the support team can find a way to prevent the problem from recurring or at least document a quick way to recover from it.

Root Cause Analysis may require troubleshooting across multiple support calls. For example, you discover that the Help Desk is getting an increasing number of calls about loss of network connectivity. You find that almost all the recent calls are from people on the same network segment. This makes the network router a likely source of the problem. Repair or replace it.

6: Provide Adequate Staff Training

The best way to assure that Help Desk professionals resolve support issues quickly is by making sure they are properly trained. Such training needs to be provided on an ongoing basis because information technology is constantly changing as are the needs of your business. Take advantage of vendor training classes as well as independent training firms.

Focus your training on the 20 percent of all problem types that make up 80 percent of the incident volume. It’s okay to take time resolving obscure technical issues but the common ones require lightning fast resolution. Consider that you don’t have to train everyone on everything. You can select 2 or 3 staffers to be the experts on a given subject area.

Also spend time speaking with the Help Desk personnel. Don’t rely exclusively on comments entered into an incident database. Ask them how you can help make their jobs easier.

7: Take Full Advantage of Electronic Support Options

You must find ways to eliminate or reduce support calls as well as reducing the diagnostic time for complex calls. Your user community needs training and frequent updates to be as self-sufficient as possible. Provide them with knowledge bases, online documentation and simple troubleshooting tools. Many will greatly appreciate this effort as they will be able to prevent or resolve their own problems in less time.

8. Analyze Trends and Metrics

Define, prepare and review reports on a regular basis. Watch incident volume, problem resolution times, first call resolutions, recurring problem types, etc. Verify that the Help Desk is properly staffed and that end user needs are being met on a timely basis. An effective help desk must evolve over time.

If you follow my outline here, your support costs will be greatly reduced while satisfaction with your information systems and support personnel rises dramatically.

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