

## A Better Way to Hire and Develop Help Desk Staff Members

**In virtually all organizations, help desk jobs are temporary roles. Enterprises should use the guidelines here to make the help desk a training ground for future IT stars.**

---

### Core Topic

IT Workforce Performance: Worker Markets and Planning

### Key Issues

How are labor market trends influencing IT staff composition and skill sets?

What approaches to staff planning enable effective utilization of high-value skill sets?

### Strategic Planning Assumption

Through 2003, enterprises that fail to establish an integrated strategy for attracting, training and assisting help desk staff members with making the transition to new roles will fail to meet rising service-level demands (0.7 probability).

### Tactical Guidelines

- Develop candidate profiles that emphasize customer service orientation, lifelong learning, analytical skills and technical aptitude.
- Establish a coaching program for new employees that leverages the skills and experience of help desk staff members.
- Design, implement and maintain a career development planning process that prepares help desk employees for future jobs.
- Offer monetary bonuses for individuals who acquire new skills through independent study, self-learning and certifications.
- Reward people for eliminating or mitigating causes of chronic service problems or poor response.

Help desk positions are among the hardest hit by the shortage of skilled IT professionals and high turnover. Trying to keep people in the help desk role for the long term is impractical in most organizations, except in help desk outsourcing firms (where help desk jobs can be careers).

Since it is impractical to try and lower help desk attrition (which usually ranges from 15 percent to 30 percent annually), what should enterprises do? This *Research Note* describes a better approach to hiring and training help desk staff members and assisting them with making the transition — one that involves picking people with key competencies, training them extensively and assisting their movement to other jobs in the organization.

**Hiring:** Since help desk positions are transitory, there really is not a market for help desk professionals. However, there is a huge market for people who can respond quickly, understand and interpret users' needs and are quick studies. Traditionally, enterprises have chased technical skills when hiring help desk staff members, but we believe companies should place a higher priority on candidates' interpersonal skills and customer service orientation. This is because as the complexity of technological problems has increased over time, so has the significance of human interaction. That said, companies should continue to value technical aptitude and analytical skills in help desk staff members. Since most enterprises will provide technical training to these professionals, those with an orientation toward lifelong learning will do best.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for most enterprises to hire experienced help desk staff members. As a result, the time and money that was once spent recruiting experienced staff members will be reallocated to developing younger, relatively inexperienced workers. Enterprises should use help desk roles to attract individuals to the company, particularly those looking to

### GartnerGroup

Entire contents © 1999 by Gartner Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction of this publication in any form without prior written permission is forbidden. The information contained herein has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable. GartnerGroup disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. GartnerGroup shall have no liability for errors, omissions or inadequacies in the information contained herein or for interpretations thereof. The reader assumes sole responsibility for the selection of these materials to achieve its intended results. The opinions expressed herein are subject to change without notice.

#### Note 1

##### Training for Help Desk Staff Members

Some enterprises provide only on-the-job training, while others provide extensive programs. We believe help desk staff members need training to flourish. Following is a suggested curriculum for new help desk personnel.

*Week 1:* Company overview, review of customers and service-level agreements, change management procedures, client communications, introduction to the desktop, use of phones and headsets, logging into the queue and logging out, administrative procedures (time tracking, education requests) and overview of customer support organization

*Week 2:* Technology training

*Week 3:* Further technology training, as well as instruction on creative problem solving, communication skills (learning what questions to ask to determine end-users' problems), teamwork and career planning

*Weeks 4 through 8:* Working alongside a coach (transition to independent work will vary, based on the individual)

#### Note 2

##### Coaches Help

In some companies, the help desk coach has technical call experience as well as additional skills, such as customer support skills and knowledge of root cause analysis techniques. In other companies, the coach role is formally identified as a job position that includes mentoring others as well as taking calls. In still other organizations, coaches are responsible for unstructured on-the-job training that is necessary to get the new hire up to speed.

#### Note 3

##### Keep Them Happy... While You Have Them

One company that provides outsourced help desk services uses what it calls a "daily recognition program" to help associates better understand how their work impacts the company's bottom line. Based on the concept of a profit and loss statement, the program provides help desk staff members with daily goals that are closely tied to incentives and bonuses.

break into IT. As part of this campaign, enterprises should outline the time frame (perhaps 18 months) during which individuals will learn a litany of skills and have the chance to earn coveted certifications (which should be described). Potential applicants need to understand that after this tour of duty, they will have the potential to go on to starring IT roles.

**Training:** Generally, new hires need a mix of training on customer service skills, as well as call center tools, operations training and technical training, which will take one to three weeks, depending on the complexity of the environment (see Note 1). Yet, since enterprises will increasingly hire help desk professionals from various places (including business units and other non-IT channels), they should consider "service academies" that are tailored to the profiles of the new hires. For example, there might be a program for recent college graduates and one for industry hires. Companies should also use coaches — support analysts with at least a year of experience — to assist in the development of new staff members (see Note 2).

**Retaining Becomes Transitioning:** Help desk work is stressful, which means that while individuals are working on the help desk, recognition is key (see Note 3). However, the retention picture for help desk staff members is different than it is for the overall IT population. If the expectation is that help desk staff members will stay for 18 months, clearly the enterprise must keep them engaged, motivated and content during that time (using traditional rewards and perks). Just as important, however, is the management of the help desk staff member's impending transition to a key role in the organization, which involves the following:

- Periodic skills assessment to determine where individuals need additional training and development
- Ongoing development to prepare individuals for future roles
- Performance management that goes beyond call volume, and focuses on customer satisfaction and the individual's overall understanding of the business and end-users' needs
- Involving help desk staff members in projects and dedicating them to project teams
- Implementing job sharing between help desk staff and other IT staff members to allow a gradual migration to a new role

**Bottom Line:** Planned attrition can transform a help desk into a training ground for the future stars of IT. Therefore, enterprises should seek individuals with strong behavioral competencies and a commitment to lifelong learning, and carefully manage their transition from the help desk to another role in the organization.

