

Gartner



Key Ingredients of the IT Service Desk

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Summary

The IT Service Center can be both a boon and a burden to a company, either increasing customer satisfaction and return on investment or making customers and technicians miserable. The key ingredients to achieving the former are to define the operating processes, policies and procedures of the service desk and select the appropriate technology to enable these elements. The alignment and combination of these ingredients must meet the current and future needs of the business and the users, plus make the service technician's job more manageable and less complicated.

Since the adoption of distributed computing, the IT community has been faced with a daunting task of managing the support of IT services. Initial efforts in IT support started with a non-structured approach to service. This approach evolved to include multiple service desks within large enterprises. To reign in cost and control chaos, IT departments in large and small organizations have given high priority to IT support functions and have consolidated and developed standard processes and policies for supporting end users. Today, the IT Service desk is the single point of contact for providing multiple IS services to the user community and the source of automation for multiple workflow processes.

Objectives

The objectives of this research report include:

- Understanding the importance of an IT Service Center
- Defining the key elements required to operate an IT Service Center
- Describing future implications of the IT Service Center.

Existence of the IT Service Desk: *Why is it important?*

The Imperative

The arrival of e-business has been like opening Pandora's box for IS organizations and their customer service centers. Business pressures today increase the need for access to Internet-based business applications 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This translates to not only more demands on the traditional internal business user, but it also involves the external customer acquiring products, receiving information, or communicating with an organization via the Web.

These new applications of technology bring many benefits but also bring complexity and increased pressure on the internal IT Service team. Business users require consistent, predictable, high-quality IT services to function effectively. Delivering such service involves preventive problem solving that extends beyond the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" towards a continual and encompassing mode of operation.

Any company that has a computer network can benefit from some form of an IT Service Desk. At the very least it provides the company with a means of organizing and managing calls to the IT team for assistance. At its best, the IT Service Desk can be a cost saving implementation that not only handles client requests and queries but also acts as a repository of information about the network's overall performance, reducing the total cost of ownership of network devices, applications, and services.

The IT Service Desk's primary goal is to provide a single point of contact for supporting end users. This support team should provide general systems information, responses to requests on procedural matters and the development of a knowledge base to quickly resolve repeatable problems. The following reasons describe why it is important to establish a formalized IT Service Desk:

- *Empowers Associates to Improve Performance through the use of Technology*—Allows the company employees to focus on their business objectives and to utilize technology without having to spend a significant amount of time maintaining and troubleshooting the potential problems associated with the use of technology.
- *Provides Single Point of Contact into the IT Department*—The formalization of an IT Service Desk creates a point of contact for users to interact with regarding any type of IT-related request or question.
- *Supports Consistent Usage of Technology across the Organization*—The service desk agent has the luxury of seeing how different individuals use technology and can share these findings throughout the organization to assist others with new best practices.
- *Establishes the Foundation for a Knowledge Management System*—The information collected and experienced gained from troubleshooting can be documented and shared across the organization to resolve similar recurring problems or to identify root cause fixes that eliminate the problems completely.

The Challenges

One of the major challenges of building and running an IT Service Desk continues to be creating a support structure that channels problems and services to the best resource, while maintaining effective management and customer satisfaction. Part of the channeling challenge stems from poor problem identification and classification. The need for well documented cases and a knowledge management system are key to mitigating these challenges. From a much broader perspective, the overall IT Service Desk strategy must be well thought-out and the value of the team must be recognized viewing them as an asset not a liability.

Most small and mid-size organizations also have had limited success in exploiting the vision of total service delivery in IT partly because of culture, organization structure, and personnel skills. Other contributing factors to the lack of success are driven from hard-to-use products, poor quality of information, and difficult knowledge authoring and management capabilities.

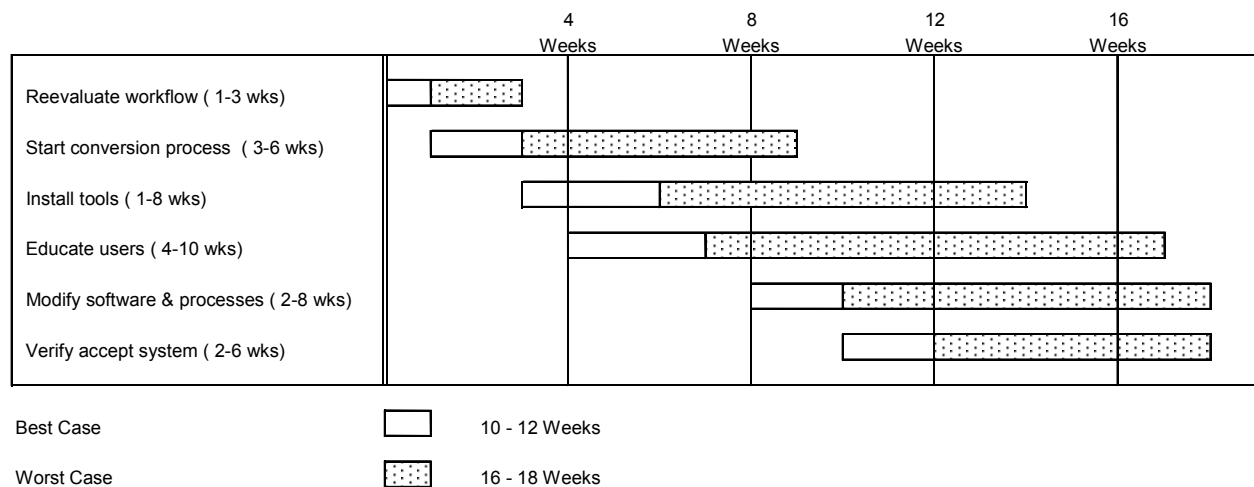
The driving proof of these challenges is found by examining the number of implementations that have failed to achieve ROI within the first year because internal capabilities are exceeded and costs are not anticipated. To avoid these pitfalls, organizations should be prepared to optimize

their support processes using workflow tools and be willing to spend additional money on professional services. Many “out of the box” processes exist and can be extremely helpful as long as the process is communicated and understood by the IT team and its constituents. After any Service Desk implementation, a vendor consultant should be present for one or two days to run a pilot before going live. Final changes and adjustments can then be incorporated into the technology and processes.

Poor implementation or incorrect selection of the IT Service Desk tools can result in failure to achieve the benefits of automation, but could also damage the reputation of the IS department. Frustrated users may opt to abandon the service desk and seek assistance from other end users (the “underground” channel). This impedes productivity and actually increases overall support costs. Proper planning which includes identifying the business and functional requirements of the service desk prior to selecting a tool will increase the likelihood of success.

Gartner’s Total Cost of Ownership studies indicate that for every dollar spent on formal IT support (define processes, policies, and using service desk tools) those same types of companies with informal support end up spending two dollars for the same and often worse levels of support. In essence, a formalized IT Service Desk will end up costing much less for those organizations that establish and execute to a defined operating model, than those that continue to operate in an informal, unstructured manner. For small to midsize organizations building an IT Service Desk, the following timeline can be used as a guide for planning the implementation.

Figure 1. Implementation Timeline



The Operating Model: *What does it look like?*

The previous section described why the service desk is important and highlighted some of the key challenges to be aware of when building the support organization. This section describes the key elements and best practices that make up the IT Service Desk.

The IT Service Desk is typically built around a call management application that fits the strategy and philosophy of supporting the business and user needs. There are many products available today that range from simple call tracking packages to more sophisticated problem resolution and expert systems. To prevent any of these from being a burden to the organization, the IT Service Desk lead must understand and consider the company's business, its networks, and the users' needs to select the best application.

The operating model for the IT Service Desk must be able to perform the following functions:

- Log problem calls
- Provide the ability to have one owner/single point of contact for problems
- Track and manage difficult problems, collect and build historical data and describe characteristics of the problem
- Identify potential training areas or topics; provide trends that show reoccurring user problems and the resolution of the problem
- Collect information about the use of products, the ability to capture product evaluations
- Provide a way to escalate serious problems and those that are slow in being resolved
- Resolve a high percentage of first contact resolution calls by allowing the service rep to reference a knowledge base of similar problems and resolutions
- Support and track configuration changes plus track IT inventory
- Generate and use problem history to improve the availability of systems and equipment; provide proactive analysis to predict potential failures
- Develop standard management reports for evaluating vendor performance and service level contracts.

Three practice areas are used to describe the operating model; they include People, Process, and Technology. The People practices involve recruiting, retaining, and training employees to have the right skills for providing high-quality customer service and being able to problem solve technical issues. The Process practices deliver the actual support service to the customer from the service desk agent. The agent orchestrates the organization's tools and capabilities to problem solve and serve the customer. The Technology practices are developed to enable processes and automate repeatable solutions with the customer.

Each practice area (People, Process, and Technology) is described below with their respective best practice.

People

Properly selecting and adequately training service desk staff cannot be overstressed. The staff does not need to be technical experts but must be able to problem solve and communicate in a jargon-free language. Most service desk personnel, when properly guided, can soon master the organization's technical aspects.

Unfortunately, service desk personnel often suffer from stress and the unpredictable work pace. They feel unappreciated by both the people they help and their own management. On occasion, they do not understand what is expected of them. It is not unusual for a service desk person to know what is wrong without knowing how to help the user solve the problem. Service desk personnel face multiple challenges that include identifying the user and the user's location, locating the faulty network device, determining whether the problem is chronic, and determining the status of the procedure in question.

Trying to keep people in the service desk role for the long haul is impractical in most organizations. Help desk attrition last year ranged from 15 to 30 percent. Organizations must pick people with key competencies, train them extensively, and assist them in transitioning to other jobs within the organization. Since the service desk jobs are transitory, there is a need to find people who can respond quickly, understand and interpret users' needs and are quick studies. Companies should continue to value technical aptitude and analytical skills in staff members, but should also realize these skills can be developed more easily than interpersonal skills and customer service orientation.

Organizations should use service desk roles to attract people to the company, particularly those looking to break into IT. As part of this campaign, the organization should outline the time frame (perhaps 18 to 24 months) during which individuals will learn a litany of skills and have a chance to achieve certifications. Potential candidates need to understand that after this tour of duty they will have the potential to go on to other IT roles.

Process

The IT Service Desk operational processes can be divided into six major categories. These categories encompass the key elements required to provide internal IT support and also become the foundational components of the overall Customer Service and Support capabilities. The six major categories are described as well as a brief definition of the associated best practice.

Problem Management

The process of problem management involves the ability to log, track, escalate, and report on a wide variety of data including calls, online history, call types, caller ID and downtime outage statistics linked to service level agreement tools. The process includes being able to perform staff modeling; automatically fill problem tickets with asset data; and remotely check and update tickets. This process enables other IT processes and provides access to equipment warranty information.

The logging of calls component of problem management is an area often overlooked. A cumbersome interface with minimal customization will naturally evolve to the manual logging of calls and increase the likelihood of never entering the incident into the system. This common mistake will reduce productivity, degrade the quality of information, and inhibit knowledge management capabilities. The ease of customization of the call logging interface is necessary as well because of the changing nature of the practices associated with the service desk.

Best Practice

Each problem situation has one, and only one, clearly defined problem owner with clear accountability to manage the overall situation to an acceptable resolution. The ownership may transfer and if so, must be clearly assigned to another individual. As part of the problem management process, standards for defining problem severity types should be clearly defined. The definition must be more descriptive than high, medium, and low severity. An example of the definition types are described below:

- **Business Halted**—Entire location or business process is stopped where anyone is able to work.
- **Business Interrupted**—Many portions of the business are affected; workaround processes exist.
- **User Affected**—Issue outstanding when a single user is unable to perform his computing function.

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is a key element of building an IT Service Desk that provides proactive support. It is a business process enabled by a tool for managing the problem resolution information relating to past incidents. This process requires discipline that promotes a collaborative environment for documenting characteristics and facts about problems and their resolution. The supporting tools include databases to store the information, documentation guidelines and standards, and also incentives to for sharing the uncaptured, tacit expertise and experience of individual workers.

Best Practice

The benefits associated with an effective knowledge management process are many. Some examples of these include: *Increased efficiency through faster identification of potential solutions; Increases the problem solving capacity of IT resources; Allows reuse of existing knowledge and solutions; Eliminates repetitive research; Enables self-service for easy-to-access solutions to end user via the web; and Accelerates ramp-up time for new hires or outsourcers.*

Knowledge management must begin with achievable goals and clarity of objectives and language to facilitate success. The implementation of this process should be broken down into manageable stages with a general timeframe for implementation, including organizational support, defined roles and responsibilities, established standards for the knowledge architecture, and culture of sharing and using knowledge.

Best practice organizations document the problem resolution workflow. To better control costs, the information in the knowledge database must be updated to ensure accuracy. Ensuring that controls are in place to keep information updated is critical because knowledge will frequently change. The procedures for handling these changes needs to be documented clearly and distributed. Determine also if the knowledge needs to be formatted into cases before it is used or is there some other type of documentation for training materials, procedures, etc. that the organization is familiar with that can be leveraged. If the overall knowledge management

process is done well the maintenance process should be simple. Maintenance involves correcting, refining, and expanding the knowledge base should be a single step reducing the lapse time between discovery and publication. In summary, the key best practices previously discussed include:

- Outlining the criteria for success
- Documenting problem resolution workflow
- Developing standards and templates for entering cases
- Creating controls for knowledge maintenance

Change Management

The process of change management provides the ability to track all modifications to the IT computing environment (e.g., PC, software upgrades, the addition or termination of employees, personnel moves to new facilities, scheduled network maintenance policy changes) created by end users and IT operators.

Best Practice

Best practice companies expand the scope to include tracking changes to the technologies, services, and programs the IT Service Desk supports. When changes occur, documentation is updated throughout the organization and appropriate notification is issued to impacted parties. A change management or content management database is used to identify all impacted documents and assets that require updating. This includes the logging of changes from the technical aspects of configuration options to process and procedural changes.

Asset Management

Organizations often refer to asset management, inventory management and configuration management interchangeably; yet they are quite different. Although all three types of processes and tools start with a repository as the basis of viewing, reporting, accessing, and updating information that relates to an asset, they remain distinct areas.

IT asset management is first and foremost a financial discussion, not a technology problem. It is about the value, contract, depreciation, ownership, and entitlements associated with a PC, network server or software component.

The second, inventory management is identifying in an automated fashion the components of a device in a network infrastructure. Inventory or auto discovery tells the service desk what the device is and where it is physically located, who is using it and how it has changed over time. This enables faster problem identification and repair times. It is also helpful in the planning of changes to understand what machines or components can accept the change and when the change or migration can be rolled out companywide.

The third and final, configuration management, is understanding the relationships and dependencies among the components beyond the simple containment hierarchy of inventory. Configuration shows how “this component” relates to “that component” in a hierarchical or peer-to-peer relationship. While inventory information is helpful in troubleshooting, configuration

data is critical in the isolation of problems and maintaining high availability in complex environments.

Best Practice

Best in class organizations understand the distinction between IT Asset Management, Inventory Management, and Configuration Management. These organizations define and understand that process is generally 80 percent of the equation and they know that a single repository of data sounds appealing, but will more than likely not exist, primarily because of scale and other demands. The first priority in integrating these three areas is to clearly define the processes for each discipline then begin to integrate the processes. All of this should be done prior to any technical integration and it should be known that often multiple tools are leveraged to build these capabilities.

Service Level Management

Service Level Management involves the activities and services covered by an SLA and must be built around measurable events. These measurable events ensure the SLA is meeting performance standards and that customer expectations are being met. A list of best practice measurements used in defining Service Level Agreements has been provided to help get the IT Service Desk started in defining suitable standards for their business environments.

The first step prior to developing the service level metrics is developing the general content outline or business plan for the IT Service Desk. This document is used to communicate to new and existing employees as well as the user base to help set appropriate expectations.

Table 1. Content Outline for a Service Level Agreement

Elements of SLA	Definition
Business Objectives and Scope	<i>A high-level summary of the business objectives for the IT Service desk.</i>
Policies	<i>The policies and procedures by which the IT Service Center will operate and communicate</i>
Updating the SLA	<i>The policy for updates and changes to the SLA</i>
Systems Summary	<i>The broad overview of the size and complexity of the organization's computing environment</i>
Resource Requirements	<i>The use of resources such as technologies, facilities, and people</i>
Problem Management	<i>Description of the policies and procedures used for handling problems, which in most cases results with a user call into the help desk</i>
Severity Level Settings	<i>The criteria used for severity levels for problem management and measures of quality, accuracy and reliability</i>
Service Level Penalties	<i>Consequences for the IT Service Desk's failure to deliver the level of support for the users.</i>
Performance Reports	<i>The content, frequency, and format of performance reports provided to appropriate user community or groups.</i>

Best Practice

Table 2. Service Level Metrics

Metric	Description	Target
Callback Time	The length of time it takes for an agent to get back to the end user for status of follow-up work	Next Business Day
Resolution Time	Involves the time based on a predetermined priority. Priorities are based on factors such as whether a problem affects one user or multiple users, the location of users, and the system affected. For example:	
a) Response Time	The time between identifying a problem and the time it takes for technical support to take action	30 seconds
b) Restore Time	The time required before a problem is identified as temporarily resolved; the restoration may be a temporary solution	One hour
c) Total Resolution Time	The time required to identify, diagnose, restore, and have permanent resolution to the problem	Six hours
Moves, Adds, Changes	The average number of business days from work order to completion	Three days
First Contact Resolution	The percentage of requests resolved at first contact	80 percent
Customer Satisfaction	Surveys identifying feedback from customers on satisfaction with service desk support.	Eight or better on a 10-point scale, poll at least 10 percent of customers quarterly
Contribution to Knowledge Management	Ensure that the service desk agents are partnering with one another and the users to create and manage knowledge content. There should be a target number of cases created by the team and they should contribute to knowledge management meetings and the knowledge base.	Document six cases per month

Technology

Technology is combined with People and Process to empower the IT Service Desk. Technology is not a panacea; however, when built into the organization and processed appropriately, can become one of the key components to a successful IT Service Operation. In addition to the call management application that facilitates the processes outlined above other key technologies are being deployed across many IT Service Desks today. These tools provide web interfaces to the call management application, enable the user to perform self help functions, create remote control for desktop trouble shooting, manage e-mail responses, and develop a unified messaging queue for supporting multi-channel interactions. These applications of technologies are described below:

Web Interface

The IT Service Desk is expanding its IT service capabilities into intranets and the Internet. The extension of these capabilities online varies greatly from company to company. At a minimum it involves enabling the service agent and/or user to access the service desk application online. The

service agents can use any standard Web browser to access, edit, and update call records, call status, a host of reports and any other feature of the applications. The user interface can also be reproduced on the browser to eliminate the need for additional training. For end users, the online capabilities provide an interface for “self help” features to reduce the calls to the service desk and improve user skills. Users can access the knowledge base and its search capabilities, allowing them to query the database and view resolutions to some of the more common problems without agent intervention. Calls (problem requests) can also be logged directly into the system from the browser interface. The calls are automatically processed and escalated to the proper technicians via the software’s rules set and automation features.

Self Help

Self-support technologies are a new set of solutions empowering users. These tools enable an end user to leverage established problem resolution knowledge. Early attempts at this were executed with FAQs, which provided answers for common outages or quick fixes, but often require users to leave the application and connect to enterprise servers. Today’s self help tools include the definition of common questions with pointers to the source of the answer to highly structured approaches used in problem resolution and product selection applications. These tools offer natural language matching between a user’s query and a predefined list of questions, symptoms, or requirements and then navigate the structured knowledge to provide an answer.

In addition to self-help, the adoption of self-healing has become more widespread among self-help capable systems. These are tools that maintain a root understanding of the distinct system and desktop profiles and can restore or heal to a functioning state. Registry settings and key application executables must be maintained in a desired desktop environment which, when corrupted, can be reset either automatically and independently of the IT service desk.

Remote Controls

Remote controls provide the ability to allow service agents to remotely access an end user’s desktop so both the agent and the user are viewing the same screen at the same time. An agent can even seize control of the impacted desktop when necessary and guide the user through the problem-solving process by entering appropriate commands. This method provides an excellent view for quick and efficient troubleshooting and makes it possible for organizations to centralize their end-user support functions. Using this function service desks agents can see exactly what is happening at the caller’s desktop. Most of these tools run over LAN connections rather than modem connections enabling authorized stations on a LAN to view each other’s screens and control each other’s activities.

E-mail Response Management System (ERMS)

E-mail management systems similar to Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automatic Call Distribution (ACD), provide control over incoming e-mail. The three main components of the ERMS include Intelligent Routing, Auto Response, and E-mail monitoring.

Intelligent routing determines which service desk agent should receive which e-mail based on skills and expertise area. Intelligent routing also allows for the use of prioritized routing rules to

streamline or slow down e-mails in the queue based on who the customer is and the text contained within the message. Auto Response is the second component which is an automatic suggest function where an automatic e-mail is sent in response to a customer with suggestions on how their problem can be handled. The auto response sends a standard message of acknowledgement and the auto suggest sends suggested steps for resolution to fix the customer problem. E-mail monitoring allows the manager to establish the rules, which monitor outgoing e-mails. If the subject or content of the e-mail falls within the boundary of the rules, the e-mail can be sent to the manager first rather than the customer for auditing purposes.

ERMS and IVR have traditionally been found in mid-size to large organizations in the United States and have been growing within small organizations for several years.

Unified Messaging

As interfaces with customers become multi-media (phone, e-mail, Web chat, etc.) the need for service agents having consistent and integrated views of all conversations increases. The unified messaging queue integrates conversation instances for various mediums into a single indexed and filtered directory. Interactions with clients across mediums are merged and viewable so the service agents have all client history at their fingertips. In addition, text to speech and speech to text translations accompany the integration services to ease service desk playback and distribution of client interactions across various media.

The practices mentioned in this section describe the key operational components of the Service Desk. These are the near-term elements that must be built into the service desk to provide internal support to users and the business. In addition to these near-term elements, one must consider longer-term evolutionary phases defining where and how organizations are beginning to transform the service desk. The next section describes the longer-term view of how the IT Service Desk and Customer Service and Support people processes and technologies will work together.

Enabling Customer Service & Support: *How is it Evolving?*

Foundational Components

Many experts believe it is very difficult (and often cost prohibitive) to solve all user problems at user expectation levels. Users usually become dissatisfied with their service desk when they misunderstand its functions or have unrealistic expectations. To meet user expectations, management must clearly define the service desk roles before building the team. Managers must also determine beforehand whether the service desk should mainly “fight fires” by resolving immediate user problems and/or also function as an important data gathering center for overall IT performance. The following criteria must be defined to select today’s operating principles.

- Types of problems the service desk must solve
- Reporting/escalation rules for referring long-term, unsolved, difficult problems
- Types of data to gather to understand network performance
- Report generation formats
- Service agent responsibilities.

Once these elements have been established, the longer-term view must be considered to find points of leverage and natural evolution.

Evolutionary Philosophy

New channels of access to the organization will continue to progress as will the expansion of customer support incidents or requests, many of which will be dependent on services provided by the IT team. This issue of increasing access channels leads to the challenging question of whether or not Customer Service and Support and the IT Service Desk evolve to become one and the same or are managed as separate entities.

Gartner's perspective is that common processes between the two must be identified and shared. In other words, a customer service strategy requires articulation and a clear plan for support from the IT Service Desk. Often this means sharing processes, technologies, and people but does not mean merging the teams directly. At a fundamental level the overlapping responsibilities between the two groups involve the management of incidents and interactions.

The common elements of tracking problems, resolutions, and root causes are evident. Problem management that includes call tracking, incident tracking, and service request management is the core function of both the IT Service Desk and the CSS team. These common elements become great foundational components to build that can be shared by both the IT Service Desk and the CSS department.

As mentioned previously, the key components of the IT Service Desk include Problem Management, Change Management, Asset Management, and Service Level Management. The IT Service Desk is also the integration point for multiple IT management disciplines. The Customer Service and Support department, once known as the complaint-handling department, is responsible for retaining and extending customer relationships once a product or service is sold. Customer Service, like the IT Service Desk, interacts with customers (users) on a reactive or proactive basis more than any other department and is responsible for maintaining customer (user) satisfaction.

The biggest difference causing the two departments to keep their independence involves the business needs and buying centers. Customer Service and Support departments accumulate and apply user data differently. From the CSS perspective, applications are designed to capture customer data that enables more focused customer service and an increased likelihood of first-interaction resolution. The data must also assist in cross-selling, up-selling, opportunity management, targeted marketing and more personalized interactions. Capturing this type of data is a key function of a customer service system. The IT service desk is focused on supporting the

use of technology to fulfill business goals. Another philosophical difference between the two departments is the external customer service function. This function is focused on extending and maintaining the customer relationship.

While 80 percent of these capabilities overlap (see Table 3) the other 20 percent illustrates where organizations run into problems when attempting to force fit one into the other. Following is an inventory of features and capabilities of both groups and identifies where there are leverage points or differences.

Table 3. Inventory of Features and Capabilities

	Common Elements	Unique Elements
Call tracking	X	
Problem Management	X	
Service Request Management	X	
Incident Reporting & Tracking	X	
Change Management		IT Service Desk
Asset Management		IT Service Desk
Service Level Management	X	
Integration Points		Each is Different
Internet Based Self Help	X	
Contact Centers (multi-channel support)	Evolution-IT Service Desk	
Field Service & Dispatch		Customer Service & Support
Cross-Selling & Up-Selling		Customer Service & Support
Opportunity Management		Customer Service & Support
Targeted Marketing		Customer Service & Support
Personalized Interactions	Evolution-IT Service Desk	

The Internal Service Desk Must Evolve to Provide Technical Support for External Customers

External Web strategies have magnified the external customers' integration into online services or corporate extranets. Organizations must establish well defined IT Service Desk processes that address not only internal, but also external requirements. The call logging and tracking activity of yesterday has expanded to a much greater array of customer services. Gone are the days when all user interactions are about a single subject. The use of multiple channels by customers necessitates that the Customer Service & Support and IT Service Desk are well versed in how their overall support processes integrate. The only way for this to succeed is to be collaborative in the creation and execution of process design between the Customer Service and Support team and the IT Service Desk team. Some of the key areas that need to come together for the common goal of the customer relationship include:

- Ensure each problem situation has one and only one clearly defined “problem owner” with clear accountability to manage the overall situation to an acceptable resolution
- Ensure that once a problem is dispatched to a “problem owner”, problem ownership would remain with that person until resolution

- Ensure that service levels for customers are negotiated separately and communicated to the organization and its customers.

We are not advocating a merger between the Customer Service and Support team and the IT Service Desk; however, we are advocating collaborative design of support processes and the sharing of common incident and interaction management tools.

Contact Information

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