

'Self'-Support Technologies Expand Support of Desktops

"Self"-support technologies are a new set of solutions empowering users. Here we will clarify the question: What are the types and the definition of self-support tools?

Core Topics

Software Infrastructure: Desktop Software Configuration; Problem Resolution Technologies

Key Issues

How will problem resolution technologies empower end users to resolve their own technical support issues?

How will new computing technologies evolve and shape desktop configuration management solutions?

Attempting to address the ever-increasing call volume associated with supporting the distributed computing environment, new technologies are beginning to expand the capability of problem resolution in the self-support environment. The renewed interest in problem resolution is driven by the need to reduce service call volumes, dispatch assistance costs and maximize end-user productivity, all while increasing service levels.

Empowering end users to solve problems can be facilitated via universal access to problem resolution knowledge. First attempts at this were presented to users through FAQ servers that had answers to common outages or quick fixes, but required users to leave the application and connect to enterprise servers. Other attempts were made to add smart agents to desktops to try to proactively alert users to problems and stand-alone to resolutions. Neither have reduced call volumes. Recently, however, several vendors have emerged with product functionality designed to diminish end-user outages through self-support capabilities.

What is Self-Help?: Tools that enable an end user to leverage established problem resolution knowledge to benefit desktop productivity. This may range from the definition of a list of commonly asked questions with pointers to the source of the answer (e.g., Ask Jeeves) to highly structured approaches used in problem resolution and product selection applications (e.g., Inference, ServiceWare, ServiceSoft). These products 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.

What is Self-Diagnosis?: Tools that enable an end user to analyze the cause or nature of a problem with the ability to offer solutions to resolve this problem. These tools are offered from vendors (e.g., Motive) that have compiled resolution information

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for common desktop applications with an engine that presents potential "what to try" when a user has an error. They can also be invoked to assist in "how tos" (changing a printer driver and updating new virus software).

What is Self-Healing?: Tools that maintain a root understanding of the distinct system and desktop profiles (DNA) and can restore or heal to a functioning state (e.g., Motive, Serena, Support.com). 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 a help desk analyst (see Note 1) or by a call to a help desk analyst who "hits the recover button." Other uses of this type of tool may be to proactively reset key files (e.g., DLLs) every time a user executes an application (see *Research Note TU-07-2291*).

Note 1

Independent Healing

Files, registry settings, executables or even DLLs are cached on the system. As the healing agent detects a change, it restores any of these to its prior state. The key to this technology, whether run independently or with help desk assistance, is understanding the implication of resetting a prior state and knowing what changes were needed and which were not. This understanding is not done with healing tools, but with technical support staff who are intimately familiar with each user's configuration.

Where is it Gray?: Not only will enterprises need to sort through the similar jargon used to describe these different self-support resolution technologies, but they will also need to learn that these partnerships between the varying solutions represent just a marketing arrangement. Vendors' solutions may provide some of the above capabilities today, but no vendor has the complete solution yet. There is minimal overlap between these technology groups. However, it is clear that the product road maps for these vendors are on a collision course, because all three technologies attempt to address the same problems — "break fix problems/dispatch" for the technologies and "how to" problems for self help and self diagnosis. In addition, the market for these "self" solutions RAS is still maturing, thus enabling new players with plausible technology to enter with viable solutions (e.g., back-up and storage retrieval vendors). Over time, self-support solutions will consolidate and be embedded in solutions such as CSD or CRM or used as an enabling technology for service providers.

Acronym Key

CRM Customer relationship management

CSD Consolidated service desk

DLL Dynamic Link Library

FAQ Frequently asked questions

Bottom Line: IS organizations must develop and leverage new processes and technologies to offer self-help, self-diagnostic and self-healing problem resolution. The capability to capture problem resolution knowledge is essential to becoming more predictive and agile in the delivery of IT service, and this must be done in the context of the problem resolution and knowledge management process. Enterprises can reduce ever-rising end-user support costs with "self" technologies, but should consider their purchases as tactical solutions in an immature and volatile market. Enterprises must implement these technologies with a defined focus toward specific help desk "points of pain." Deploying all these technologies can create overlap in addressing a set of help desk calls. It will be difficult to measure the success of each using the same metrics.

