

Commentary

Attacking the Help Desk Employee Retention Problem

For the enterprise, the highest cost in end-user support is personnel, especially with turnover and its associated costs for recruiting, training, knowledge loss, and stress on other analysts.

Burnout is a tremendous concern in a high-stress job such as end-user support. It is a serious problem for help desk employee morale and retention. Keeping support personnel is critical in maintaining high-service quality and reasonable cost of ownership. Personnel costs continue to account for the largest cost segment — 83 percent — of a help desk manager's budget. As recruiting and training replacements are time-consuming and costly, help desk managers need to develop strategies to reduce the rate of attrition in IT support; however, weak management will undermine all the other suggestions.

Start with a solid management focus. Good leadership and strong management are crucial for driving the philosophy of the support environment. By using one-on-one interviews, surveys or focus groups, help desk managers can determine what motivates a help desk analyst's decision to stay or leave the enterprise. A weak manager or one who's buried deep within the IS political hierarchy will provide insufficient guidance, and may fail to be an effective advocate for support employees.

Foster a creative, challenging work environment. From many client surveys, it is clear that few support analysts want to operate in firefighting mode over the long term. Analysts want to be part of a credible, proactive support organization that eliminates mundane calls and fosters proactive resolution of problems. More-challenging, complex calls often lower the rate of turnover. However, complexity without adequate tools, information, learning and management support leads to malaise. With challenging interactions (both internal/staff and external/customers), analysts feel more valued and more justified in their skills development. A key requirement is preparing the support staff to face the ongoing support challenges with adequate training, awareness and management. This requires an investment by the enterprise, a focus on teamwork, a priority on training, and the belief that support is a critical contributor to the enterprise's bottom line. Typically, analysts want positions that offer challenging job responsibilities, individual development potential, career progression, and opportunities to create an expertise base (using and supporting new "hot" technologies). The promise of career advancement is critical for the loyalty of support professionals, many of whom want to work for enterprises that use new technologies and innovative processes.

Limit the amount of telephone time and offer rotations. To reduce stress and burnout, help desk analysts should not be answering telephones eight hours a day, seven days a week. Shortening analyst

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time on the telephone to about six hours a day allows for redeployment of these resources to other tasks. In cases where limited head count makes rotation difficult, importing people from other parts of the IS organization or from the business units can provide relief. Sample tasks for analysts include developing end-user training, assisting with installations and upgrades, and focusing on their own learning. By involving analysts in the development of end-user training, they become better support providers by understanding end-user requirements. Other possibilities for redeployment include placing help desk staff members on re-engineering teams and involving them in discussions on new technical directions. In that way, the help desk stays abreast of future plans, and the IS organization gets a jump on problems that may arise with the adoption of a new technology. An especially fitting project is automated help desk tool evaluation, which involves defining the enterprise and IT requirements, creating a request for proposal (RFP), evaluating the market players, and acquiring and implementing the right solution.

Provide competitive compensation. To retain help desk analysts, enterprises must pay their worth on the market and offer value-based compensation plans. Reward individual skill development as contributions are made to organizational objectives. Translate change organizational needs into factors that motivate the individual to support those changes. Of course, pay will be affected by experience level, geographic location and certification. Managers need to decide whether they are recruiting and nurturing analysts to serve as operators or problem-resolution specialists. For help desk analysts, the pay range is \$32,500 to \$48,000 with bonuses of 1.6 percent to 10.5 percent. Enterprises looking for problem-resolution analysts (85-percent resolution at first point of contact) will need to compensate them accordingly (6 percent to 14 percent above the average compensation base). A lack of competitive pay will leave the enterprise open to analysts opting for more lucrative offers and taking critical enterprise knowledge with them.

Design staff develop programs. Inconsistent or poorly targeted training or the lack of it are sources of burnout. Staff development investments offer employees new skills development opportunities and increased morale. Raising the qualification level, training level and entire attitude toward the help desk can help combat burnout. Often, novice and intermediate help desk analysts are prone to burnout when faced with an endless series of basic inquiries. In such an environment, expert analysts also burn out quickly as they become the support source for the novices and intermediates. Learning, awareness, orientation and contextual positioning are more important for retention. It is important to develop an orientation package for new analysts, create formal mentoring programs, offer a skills inventory and scripting, and create knowledge bases with leveraged knowledge content. Help desk managers need to offer formal instruction on customer service and technical training techniques, monitored by dedicated training professionals. High, attainable standards, certification, and testing should also be part of a formal development program. Analysts want to be able to exploit their new skills toward meaningful goals. As employees feel valued and challenged, enterprises will experience lower turnover rates.

Offer acknowledgments and flexible benefits. Although money is often a driving force around retention, help desk managers also need to find other avenues for recognizing good performance. Recognition systems encourage solutions, engage individuals, build team value systems, celebrate success, promote a fun workplace, and help minimize potential turnover and related costs (e.g., recruiting fees, interview costs, temporary staffing costs, increased base salary and other compensation, relocation costs, lost knowledge, opportunity costs, and learning curve). 401(k) programs, employee stock purchase plans and health benefits are some of the top benefits. Offering flexible schedules and benefits increases morale and helps support analysts to concentrate on their responsibilities and performance. Even offering tension relievers such as stress balls, fun lunch events and massages during heavy peak times or migrations can make staff feel appreciated and valued as members of the team. The key is getting feedback from staff and using employee-generated suggestions to help reduce stress levels and staff turnover.



Recognition Best Practices

- Equitable salary base
- Bonuses based on performance
- Personal productivity/satisfaction incentive plans
- Annual compensation adjustments based on quarterly performance drivers
- Milestone bonuses
- Companywide bonuses tied to customer satisfaction
- Skill-based bonuses (e.g., certification-driven)
- Stock and equity incentives
- Comfortable work setting
- Various career options (relational, technical, managerial)
- Opportunities for new experiences
- Annual companywide excellence awards
- Quarterly presidential awards
- Career workshops
- Special rotations
- Flexible work hours
- Staff development plan
- Funding for training
- Mentoring program
- Time for learning
- Sabbaticals for long-term employment
- Educational opportunities at local universities
- Extended vacation periods
- Gift certificates to local stores and restaurants
- Certificates of achievement with bonus
- Semiannual department dinner and awards
- Opportunities for casual dress
- Special parking space
- Celebrations for industry recognition
- Celebrations for milestones met
- Special lunch breaks



- Early dismissal

Bottom Line: In addition to morale and environment being integral in employee retention and reduced burnout, help desk managers must address compensation, training, reinforcement of skills, recognition and flexible benefits to have the greatest chance of retaining analysts.

