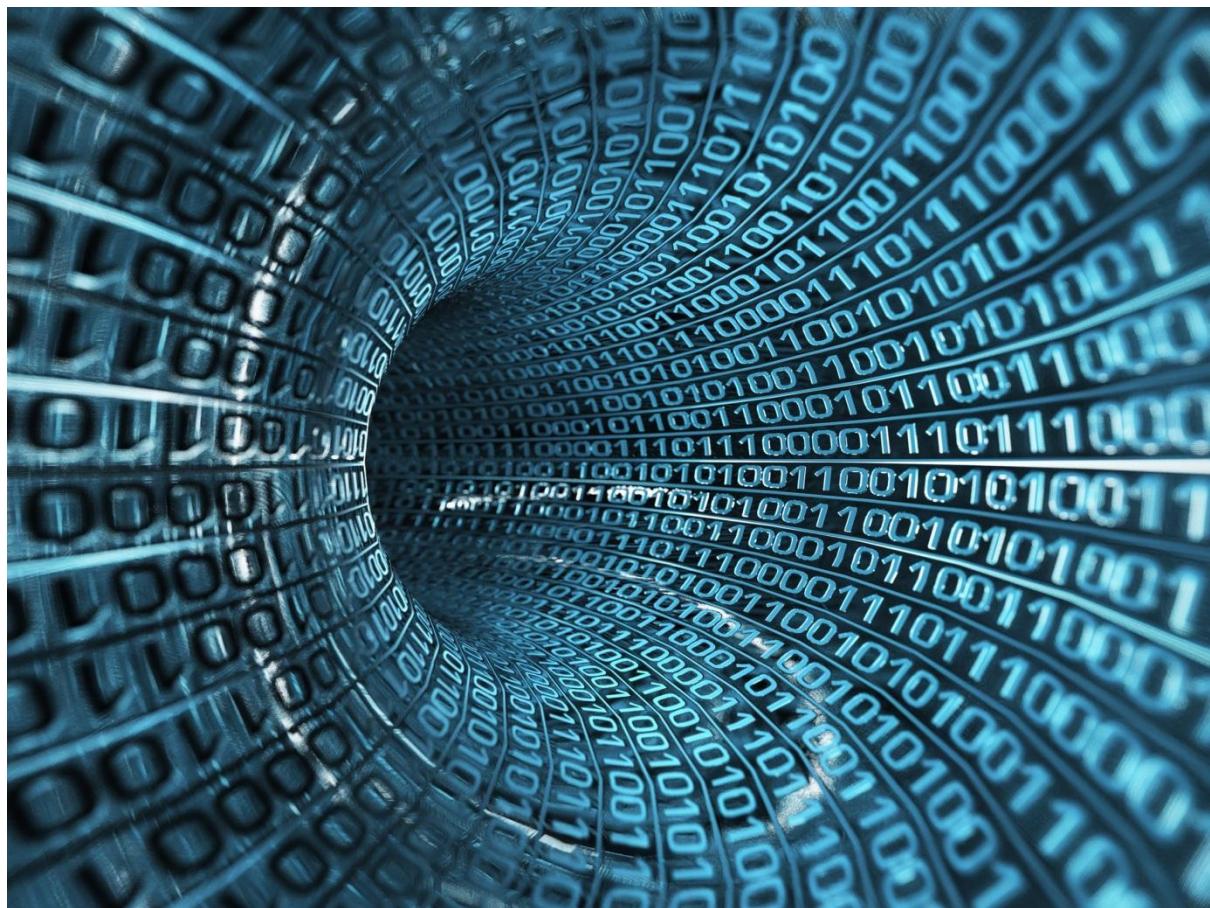


The Future of the Service Desk



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Introduction

What does the future of the service desk look like? Of course, the answer to this question depends on how far ahead we want to look. The service desk in 5 years' time will probably look very different to that of 50 years' time, if indeed service desks still exist. Will we reach a point where hardware and software is 'intelligent' enough to self-diagnose and fix itself? Will the idea of humans trying to repair technology appear faintly ridiculous to future generations? It would be fun to speculate on what will happen to support in the far future, but I think it's wiser to look at the question from another angle: how can you ensure that your service desk will survive and be prepared for any future events? What can we do today to guarantee that we are ready to face whatever will come our way? These are big questions for service desks and we need to make sure that we've covered all of the basics so that we have a strong foundation on which to build future enhancements.

What we need to do NOW!

What can we do right now to prepare for the future, whatever it may hold? The first thing is to ensure that you have all the service desk fundamentals covered. We're referring to: processes, metrics, channels for obtaining and understanding customer satisfaction and perceptions, vision and mission statements, training and development and good resources (in terms of both people and hardware and software). With the essentials covered, you can create a strong base on which to start adding new service provisions and offerings.

Let's break down what has to be in place now:

Processes

Processes drive everything that a service desk does; their importance cannot be overstated. The goal of any service desk should be to be consistent, whereby every call is answered and handled in the same way. Consistency helps to manage customer expectations as the customer can be assured that each and every call the service desk logs will be processed in the correct way. From a customer's perspective, they don't care if it's your first call of the day or the 10,000th – customers expect a certain standard and level of service. Think of the service desk as a machine: the raw materials are fed in and a uniform product is produced at the end. This consistency and repeatable action is absolutely essential in improving service desks and removes the stress and apprehension that can come from a deluge of calls or uncertainty about how to proceed.

So processes are crucial, and you need to ensure that everything done by your service desk has a documented process. Once all necessary processes have been documented, the next step is to make sure that everyone is following them. You could have the best documented processes in the world, but if no one's following them, they will be of little use.

How do you make sure that processes are adhered to and used by every analyst? There are numerous ways of doing this, but the most popular ways are through call and ticket monitoring and audits. Call and ticket monitoring allow you to see and hear if processes are being correctly followed. Audits are more involved and include checking individual tickets to see if the process has been adhered to.

Metrics

Service desks are no different from any other business unit: they need to know and understand how much the services they provide actually cost. Unfortunately, the reality is that very few service desks have a firm grasp of these figures. The 2011 SDI benchmarking survey found that 84 per cent of respondents did not know the average cost per email (fully loaded) and 75 per cent had no idea how much each incoming call was costing their service desk. These are the two most popular channels for customers; without knowing how much these interactions cost, the desk simply can't communicate its costs to the rest of the organisation. If service desks are unable to measure and communicate their value, then the stigma of IT being a 'cash drain' will remain in vogue. Furthermore, with companies tightening their belts, reducing spending on IT might be near the top of the cull list – if companies don't know the value of IT, then they will more likely cut the service desk's budgets in preference to areas of the business that do provide tangible evidence of their value.

Thus, there is a pressing need to start getting to grips with metrics now and make sure that you are measuring data that is important to your desk. If you're looking to add new services or supported products in the future, then you'll need to understand the cost implications and the impact that this could have. Of course, offering new services will have an impact on an array of metrics, which is an important consideration and is something that should be built into the planning and business justification process.

Measuring customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is at the heart of everything that the service desk does, but knowing how to record it, what to do with the information that is fed back, and how to improve service based on feedback is a significant challenge. Indicative of the changing perspective of the service desk is the increased usage of the word 'customer' and the move away from 'user'. Employees no longer just 'use' IT and the service desk, instead they are customers. They purchase IT services, which come with service and support attached to them.

But how do we turn our 'customers' into loyal customers who rave about the service that we provide? If we were to ask our customers today if they would use another service desk, how many would say that they would remain loyal and not jump ship? In other words, how do we know what our customers want, need and demand from the service that we provide? These are key questions to answer as we look towards the future.

Mission and vision statements

Mission statements are so important that they are the first question in the policy and strategy component of the SDI certification standards. The question simply asks if you have a mission statement, what it means for your service desk, whether your employees understand it or not, and how it correlates to the organisation's mission statement (if there is one).

Mission statements are critical for any organisation. They provide a constant and vivid reminder of what sits at the heart of every business. In our day-to-day lives, we can easily be distracted by issues and problems that might not even be of our own doing, but whose pieces we still have to pick up. Mission statements serve to remind us that, despite all of the challenges sent our way, our underlying mission remains potent and strong. Mission statements also provide an overarching goal

for the service desk and are something to constantly strive for and work towards. They help define and clarify strategy, and are something to remain conscious of when creating any new projects or initiatives – just how will the additions you are making serve and relate to the mission statement?

People management

It goes without saying that the people on your service desk are your most important asset. The best service desks do not necessarily have the best people, but they certainly have the best teams. People management is typically a big time drain for service desk managers. All the essential components of people management – nurturing people and making them feel integrated into the team, providing them with clear goals and progression routes, maintaining morale and motivation by attending to problems and issues – are time intensive tasks. Getting the people component right by ensuring that you have the right people in place and creating the team that you want is fundamental to the future success of the service desk.

What might the future look like?

Emerging technologies

There is lots of new technology on the horizon that will impact service desks and the ways that they operate and provide service. In many ways, the move towards new methods of support is happening right now, which is why it is so vital that service desks create the correct strategies to ensure that they stay ahead of the curve. Whatever devices you choose to support and the strategy you create, the end goal must be to keep your company's workforce working. This is the heart of what every service desk is designed to do, and the strategy must be built with this ultimate goal in mind.

A major advance in the IT service sphere is service catalogues. In a nutshell, service catalogues detail all the hardware that the service desk supports. The most savvy service desks include the cost of support in this catalogue, which in turn means that IT users truly are customers of IT. By including the cost of support, customers are forced to make decisions: do I choose the latest and greatest smartphone even though it costs more than the previous generation? Including the cost of support creates an incredible transparency about IT costs and places the ball firmly in the customer's court. Customers then have to justify why they want a particular device or piece of hardware, and they can be held responsible for their choices. Calculating the cost of support for each device can be difficult, but if you have a firm grip of the cost of support then it should be possible to calculate it.

BYOD

BYOD (bring your own device) is an emerging trend in the ITSM industry. As the name suggests, BYOD involves bringing your own personal device – smartphone, tablet or laptop – into the office or connecting to a company network. Because user devices offer speed, efficiency and familiarity, BYOD has surged in popularity. This trend can offer efficiency savings and productivity gains for employees, but poses numerous problems for the service desk in terms of security, access, asset management and the desk's ability to support the myriad devices.

BYOD is gaining traction and will likely become more and more prevalent in the future. Thus, whilst analysts cannot be expected to know how to support every device that customers own, it's important to think now about setting parameters: what are you able and willing to support. Will the service desk support anything and everything or only select devices? Where do we draw the line

about what is viable to support and what is not. It's very important that such policies, procedures and decisions are put in place now so that the service desk is not playing catch-up in the future.

Social media

"Social IT" encompasses more than mere social media channels for communication. From a service desk perspective, social IT includes: intra-team connectivity, engaging communities in new ways to achieve business value, social strategy, and mass communication. In particular, social media provides the channels through which to achieve the aims of social IT. Social media provide the tools that can facilitate collaboration and collective learning and engagement. Social IT, in a nutshell, is utilising new ways to improve service and explore how to engage people and increase the knowledge pool.

Social media has already found its way into all of our lives, so we should not be surprised if IT support also starts to incorporate more and more of social media. Again, it's important to consider how – if at all – service desks will use social IT to further enhance their service delivery. Social IT will not be feasible for every service desk, but for those that do venture into this realm it offers great opportunities in terms of collecting knowledge, engaging customers in new and interesting ways and increasing the available channels for feedback.

Longer term advances

If we think back to technology 10 years ago compared to what we have now, the advances seem vast. The most popular mobile phone of 2002 was a Nokia 6100, which featured such advanced features as an infrared port, polyphonic ringtones and a built-in calendar. Today we're looking at phones that have voice recognition, plan the fastest routes to your destination and unlock simply by looking at them. If we've come this far in 10 years, how far will we go in the next 10? The question is almost impossible to answer, but there are technologies on the horizon that will undoubtedly make life easier for service desks analysts (think of head tracking, touchscreens, voice recognition and virtual displays) and others that will continue to challenge and push the boundaries of what is possible (virtual reality, self-healing hardware and software, etc.)

Whilst it is difficult to predict the future, the need for human support will remain for the foreseeable future, and in terms of what the business will expect from the service desk, it is likely that little will change. Just like any area of the business, it will be expected that the service desk should offer value for money, excellent customer service, advice and consultation and be proactive in implementing improvements to help drive the business forward. These expectations can be met, but there is a pressing need to act now to ensure that you're not overtaken and overwhelmed by future changes and advances.

The challenges that the service desk industry will face should be embraced as opportunities and possibilities. There are now more ways than ever to support customers and to improve the service that is delivered. The decisions that need to be made now will place the service desk in a formidable position at the very heart of the organisation and will demonstrate that they are the perfect conduit between customers and the business.

Conclusion

Predicting the future course of any industry is a difficult task, but this task is made all the more difficult in a fast-moving industry like IT. Technology will continue to advance at a startling pace and our expectations of what IT will enable us to accomplish will keep rising. What we can be sure of is that IT will be an ever-present in our future world, as we become connected to each other in more ways than ever before. With all this technology, perhaps the service desks of the future will become highly skilled business technology service community hubs, advising on best use of services to maximise productivity and innovation. They might become technology experts, providing the link between suppliers and vendors and advising the business on how it can benefit most from the solutions on offer.

Something we've looked at in this article is how service desks need to capture and harness knowledge from a broad range of sources and to keep their own skills up-to-date. Technology might advance to the point where it can 'heal' itself, greatly reducing the number of IT failures. In this scenario, self-help and self-healing options with sophisticated knowledge bases are used to drive down the need for an expensive premium 'human support service'. However, intelligent decisions will still need to be made for industries where there simply is no alternative to speaking to a human being – in some sectors, like legal and finance, a rapid human intervention could be more cost-effective and should be retained.

The service desk of the future will need to keep on top of metrics and be able to provide reports that demonstrate business value and drive service improvements. That's why this report advocates starting a comprehensive metrics programme now to ensure that you're ready for the future (it's never too early to start collecting data). The service desk has always been the customer-facing portal into IT – it's future role will be to measure the performance of technology services, act as the 'dashboard' for assessing the success of the services operation and provide pertinent, timely and useful information to the business to enable them to make informed decisions.

As the portal into IT, service desks will need to keep improving their communication skills so that they are increasingly seen as the most professional communicators in the organisation, setting standards to which others aspire. This communication will extend to third parties and suppliers to ensure that strong relationships are formed and that any provision of third-party services is seamless, with the customer unable to readily identify differences between internal and external services.

Underpinning all of these changes and advances will be a range of best practice standards. Standards will continue to help service desks define their operations and enable them to identify areas for improvement. As best practice becomes more established and mature, ITSM processes will be used selectively and in a balanced way so that inappropriate effort is not invested in processes that don't offer any significant return on investment. ROI and value for money will drive almost all service desk operations as competition in the market will create keen prices. Consequently, service desks will need to produce reports that reflect their value, in a language that the business and customers understand.

About The Service Desk Institute (SDI)

Founded in 1988 by Howard Kendall, the Service Desk Institute (SDI) is the leading authority on service desk and IT support-related issues, providing specialist information and research about the technologies, tools and trends of the industry. It is Europe's only support network for IT service desk professionals, and its 800 organisation members span numerous industries.

Acting as an independent adviser, SDI captures and disseminates creative and innovative ideas for tomorrow's service desk and support operation. SDI sets the best practice standards for the IT support industry and is the conduit for delivering knowledge and career enhancing skills to the professional community, through membership, training, conferences, events and its publication *SupportWorld* magazine. It also offers the opportunity for international recognition of the support centre operation through its globally recognised Service Desk Certification audit programme.



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