

The Best *Best* Practice Guide:

# Benchmarking for Service Desk Success



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## **Introduction**

Benchmarking is a critical process for any Service Desk that wants to gauge the quality of their service delivery and processes. Too often, desks are overly concerned with industry benchmarks and hitting industry metrics for call waiting times, time to respond and the perennial cost per email/call. It is true that industry benchmarks can be extremely useful in discerning at what level your service is, but true benchmarking and true benefits to service delivery come from benchmarking from within.

**The best way to continually improve and to deliver the best service is to measure, trend and set goals for your services and then benchmark against yourself** – this is the very definition of service improvement and this guide will show you some simple ways in which you can accomplish this.

The second part of this guide is a discussion of best practice; namely what is it and how can it be achieved. The ITSM industry is awash with standards and practices all of which purport to show you the way to deliver best practice, and it is a minefield for any Service Desk that is seeking to make service improvements. This guide will navigate through this and show how you too can deliver the very best practice by performing some simple steps and measures and by taking a holistic approach to your service delivery.

## **The Different Types of Benchmarking**

The most popular way to benchmark your desk is to compare some core metrics against other desks in the industry.

This is a popular method as it allows you see at a glance what the current average industry levels of performance are and allows you to instantly gauge how good your service delivery actually is. There is kudos to be gained from realizing that you are outperforming the industry standards which, in theory, means that you are providing above industry standard service delivery. However, there are numerous problems with relying on industry metrics to judge your performance. Firstly, every Service Desk is different – they have different technical abilities, support different customers, have different software and, crucially have different SLAs. A more technical desk will have longer resolution times written into their SLAs than a log and refer desk, but this does not necessarily equate to bad service. Say, using SDI's 2009 Benchmarking guide, that the average cost per call is \$3-4 For a log and refer desk it may be entirely feasible that they will match or better this cost as they are dealing with a high volume of calls, but a technical desk will not as their incident resolution rate will be higher due to the extra time they spend on the call – in fact a cost of \$25per call would be about right for a technical desk. A quick glance at the industry benchmark would tell you that the log and refer desk is performing well whereas the technical one was lagging behind – this impression would, of course, be false.

## **The Other Way**

Although the above is dismissive of industry benchmarks, this does not mean that they cannot be useful. For anyone who is starting to get to grips with measurement they provide a useful indicator of what you should be measuring and provide some ballpark figures. However, the best way to benchmark your Service Desk is to benchmark against yourself. It may appear that this seems like a worthless endeavour – how can you know how good you are if you are only competing against yourself? The answer is that it is very easy to do, and you can start doing it today.

Action Item: Take a picture of all of your measures (call waiting, resolution times etc.) and write them down as an average for the last month. Then do the same next month, the month after and so on. Very soon you'll have data that is trending, and after a year will have some pretty comprehensive

results. Now look at these measures and compare them to a year ago and they will tell you in what direction your desk is heading, and you are now in a position to set goals and targets and ensure that the data is trending towards the goal. The very best desks that SDI have certified do this, and it comprises a large part of our industry standards – best of all it's very easy to do.

The point is that you do not need to measure against the industry to know how good you are, and in fact it is dangerous to do so. That log and refer desk that was hitting the industry standards would have been pretty pleased with their performance, but what if their cost per call could have been even lower? What if by meeting industry benchmarks they had become complacent and failed to notice that their cost per call had actually increased over the last year even though they were still matching the industry standard? This would not be considered best practice.

The message then is simple – measure, trend and set goals. Go to your superiors and tell them that over the past year cost per call has decreased by 5% – they will be much more impressed by this than if you tell them you're hitting the industry standards and all the myriad desks and their myriad measures that are included in this.

### **Measuring for Success - The Key Metrics *Every* Desk Should be Measuring**

To benchmark and improve service you need to be measuring a core set of metrics in a uniformed and considered way. According to SDI research a massive 74% do not measure the cost per call and 81% do not measure the cost per email. These results are staggering considering that the industry is haemorrhaging staff and budgets are being slashed. How are you going to prove your value and quality of service if you can't tell the business how much your desk costs to operate?

**What to Measure:** The good news is that measuring metrics is easy, and here are some that every desk should be measuring.

1. Average Cost Per Call/Email:

This is the essential metric to grapple if you want to know how much it costs to provide the services you offer

2. Call Abandon Rate:

If customers are not able to contact their Service Desk then this is

obviously a cause for concern, and indicates that either service representatives are not being proactive enough in making sure they are able to take calls, or the desk is understaffed.

3. First Time Fix Rate:

Knowing the first time fix rate is important as this will give you an understanding of the competency level of your service representatives and the type and difficulty of the incidents that your service representatives are attempting to grapple with.

4. First Level Fix:

First level fix is fundamentally different to First Time Fix Rate in that it describes the number of incidents that are fixed at the first level, not necessarily the first contact.

5. Longest Delay in Queue:

This is ostensibly linked to the call answering time and call abandon rate. From this measure (which would ideally be located on a screen that was visible to all service representatives) you can tell at a glance if more service representatives are required to man the desks and reduce this time.

6. Time to Respond and Resolution Data:

These measures are often referred to as SLAs. It compares the agreed business response and resolution times and those actually achieved. This data provides a good indication to the rest of the business as to the performance and business value of the Service Desk.

7. Call Duration:

Knowing how long customers are on the phone is an essential metric to measure as it will inform you about the complexity of the calls that your desk is receiving and you can gauge whether your team are being efficient enough in dealing with them.

**I have my Metrics, now what?**

All too often desks measure metrics just for the sake of measuring without a clear understanding of why they do it. As outlined above, metrics are a great way to benchmark against yourself and see how your service delivery

changes over time but they have a good many other uses as well. Below are some key ways in which metrics can be used not only to improve your service, but also to market yourself to your organization.

### **Improving Service**

Service improvement is the goal for any Service Desk. Service can always be improved, but many desks are unsure of how they can achieve improvements or where they should direct their energies and resources. A crucial way in which you can identify where improvements should be made is by using metrics and a *balanced scorecard* approach. Trending your data will identify changes and where they are occurring. For example, if call duration times are increasing is this because a new system has just been installed that users are unfamiliar with? Conversely, has the successful implementation of a self service portal led to a fall in call volumes, and if so by how much. By measuring these metrics you can see the effect of improvements or key areas that are deserving of attention. This is a balanced scorecard approach that takes a much more holistic approach to service improvement. For example if you have just updated your knowledgebase did the volume or duration of calls you receive actually fall? It is vital that you understand the impact of one metric on another as the effects will not always be positive. A bad self service portal might actually increase call volumes and duration as users call to complain that there is bad information on the portal that might have actually made the problem worse.

### **Marketing**

This is an area that Service Desks usually perform very badly. A large percentage of desks are unable to make the business sit up and listen to them and shout about what they do and why they are so vital to the business. Here are three key ways in which you can start selling and promoting the service that you deliver:

1. Sing from the same songsheet. It is vital that the Service Desk and the business are communicating effectively to one another – SDI research shows that over 50% of Service Desk Managers rate communication as only fair or worse. Organizations are responsible for making the Service Desk aware of the business vision and mission and the Service Desk must ensure that its operations are geared towards achieving these objectives – in short they must be talking the

same language. All too often we find that the Service Desk is not talking ‘business’. Desks are unable to adequately state why they are integral to the business and where they fit within the organization – much of this has to do with communication. The Service Desk needs to produce reports that the business can use, namely they must report their costs, their staffing requirements, and what expenditure is needed to improve service provision.

In turn, the business needs to take these reports and act on them. The Service Desk needs to ask the business exactly what they want the Service Desk to tell them and let the business know exactly what they need to tell the Service Desk. If your Service Desk currently has no representation at higher level then be proactive in ensuring that you get a seat at the table. There is a wealth of evidence that the most successful desks are those that are closely aligned to the business so share information and make sure that they are aware that the Service Desk sits at the heart of service delivery.

2. Shout from the rooftops! Has your Service Desk performed particularly well lately? Has the first time fix rate broken through the 80% barrier? If it has then make some noise about it! The Service Desk is perpetually shy about celebrating their achievements with the business and or research shows that nearly 50% don’t market their achievements. Realistically, the Service Desk cannot become aligned with the business if they continue to ignore marketing. Marketing will exponentially raise the profile of the desk and make sure that everyone in the business is aware of your achievements. As an added bonus, such promotion has a motivating effect on the Service Desk as it is the ultimate acknowledgement of a job well done. The more the business is aware of how well you’re doing the more central the Service Desk’s role will become.

3. Proactively court and record feedback. The best judge of the service you provide is – ultimately – your customers, so make sure that they are able to share their opinions about your service with you. Make sure that you always have tangible customer satisfaction figures to hand to present to the business and share all feedback with the business and your service representatives. Equally important is to offer ways in which customers can offer suggestions to your desk about services, hardware or processes that would help them work more effectively and efficiently: make sure there are formal mechanisms for

obtaining and recording suggestions. For example, the use of post-session surveys is a great way to gather this data and monitor the success of your service representatives. Make sure that you have one in place so that you can demonstrate to the business that your desk is proactively seeking feedback from customers and is working hard to provide them with the service they need and deserve. If you can show the business that your desk is attuned to your customers' requirements then you can help cement your position as a business asset and core service function.

4. Twitter. Twitter offers a fast way to interact with the Service Desks but it also offers the potential to improve customer service due to the ability for all company members to view the interactions between users and service desks. This level of transparency is readily available in Twitter and does not rely on reviewing telephone recordings or trudging through e-mails. In addition to improving customer relations, the replies can help other users by letting them know that the service desk is responding quickly to problems and may even provide solutions to problems that users were about to ask. Used effectively, Twitter can offer lightning fast solutions to users problems, allowing them to get up and running quickly. In this way Twitter can save time for both the user and the analysts. Organizations should be aware that many of their customers may already be active Twitter users and thus it makes sense to broaden their reach into this domain. By extension, if users are already using Twitter at work then it makes sense to give them the option to contact their Service Desk through this medium.

### **Remote Support and Benchmarks**

Remote support has been a useful tool for Service Desks for a long time now. Some key benefits of remote support are:

- Ability for service representatives to quickly and effectively solve incidents directly without the need to describe actions to users over the telephone or by email.
- Reduces the time taken to close an incident which has significant benefits in terms of being able to take more calls and raising

productivity levels by allowing users to get back to work quickly.

- Service Desk can provide support to users all over the world as long as they have an Internet connection. This has significant benefits in organizations that are worldwide and work on different time zones.
- Removes one of the major barriers of providing support – the technical knowledge of users. Users might think that they have good technical skills, but perhaps they are not as competent as they think. This can lead to problems for service representatives as users may try and implement their own fixes exacerbating the problem. Conversely, if users have little technical knowledge then remote support removes this problem.

### **Things to Consider**

- Some users do not like someone else taking control of their machine so it is vitally important that there is a set procedure in place when service representatives are using remote control. They should also be made aware when it is about to happen and to give their permission.
- Decreases call duration by allowing service representatives to collaborate on one session together, which can be visible or invisible to the user. Additionally, user satisfaction increases with the ability of service representatives to seamlessly pass all session information to another service representative that is more suited to resolve the issue.
- Make sure that remote support is not simply used as a quick fix that covers an underlying problem. Whilst it is important to get users up and running quickly, in the longer run it is much more effective to investigate and solve the problem than to keep patching up incidents.

Remote support is not only a crucial tool for the Service Desk, but it can have a significant impact on benchmarks and improving metrics. Remote support can slash fix time fix rates; reduce call duration; and lower cost per call (or interaction). Improving these metrics and starting to trend towards your goal will have an impact on your benchmarking and will allow you to set higher goals. You will also be able to demonstrate that your metrics are trending in a positive direction.

Perhaps due to budgetary constraints or lack of understanding about what remote support can offer, only 28.6% of respondents to a recent survey responded that remote support integration was essential to their service desk system.<sup>1</sup> This is discouraging, but the numbers who demand remote support will likely increase when it is shown the positive impact it can have on improving your benchmarks and, ultimately, the level of support you can offer to your users.

### **Best Practice**

Just what is the best practice that all Service Desks should adhere to? Quite simply the best practice is performing whatever operations, procedures and processes that enable you to deliver the best service to your users. This might incorporate parts of ITIL, or it may include none of them. The salient point is that to offer the very best level of service you do not need to rigidly adhere to one particular framework or standard: indeed doing so may make your desk inflexible and overly concerned with procedure and not results. Here are some key points to take on board and consider if you're serious about improving service.

#### **ITIL®:**

ITIL® has been much maligned of late with opponents charging that it is too rigid and that adherents lose sight of the wood for the trees. It is also contended that ITIL is only a partial framework and is one which leads to poor management. Whatever your position on ITIL, the most important addition it has made to the ITSM arena is that it gets everyone talking the same language. In days gone by different areas of IT would refer to the same process but call it a different name which impaired on their ability to streamline their processes and produce results. ITIL is best used piecemeal, taking the parts that fit your overall objectives and goals and setting aside those that do not. For example, you may want to implement ITIL's change management process but leave out problem management. Best practice is knowing what will work for your desk and then putting in the time and effort to ensure that these processes succeed and are adhered to. If you take nothing else away from ITIL, training service representatives to use the correct terminology will greatly reduce confusion and make sure that everyone is singing from the same songsheet.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.servicedesk360.com/archives/?p=3021>

### Soft Skills:

All too often Service Desks become consumed with process and procedures. Of course these are a vital part of any Service Desk operation, especially one that is adhering to best practice. What is often forgotten is that the Service Desk is increasingly moving away from the ‘techie in the corner’ image that has stigmatized it for so long. The Service Desk is now a customer service hub and is the point of contact for your users on anything IT. The point here is that knowing how to communicate, respond and react to users is as important as the processes you have in place to deliver your service to them. You can have the best processes in the world, but if your communication is wrong then this is what users will remember and will judge you on.

Soft skills need to be constantly monitored and improved through training and development. It is also important to run regular customer satisfaction surveys in order to truly gauge what your customers’ think of the service that you offer and where improvements can be made. A mixture of selecting the best processes and delivering exceptional customer service will ensure that you are performing to your optimum levels.

### Conclusion

In essence there are two main components to delivering the best service to your users – having an open minded approach to best practice frameworks and emphasizing the importance of soft skills and benchmarking. These two components are wedded together as they will necessarily impact on one another. A balanced scorecard approach will inform you about this impact and will enable you to see where improvements have been made and the effects of changes in service delivery.

It is key to remember that we are in a customer service industry and that everything we do should strive to improve the service that we deliver to them. This may sound trite but all too often this is missed when we think about processes because they can become detached from this overarching goal. If ITIL® is the framework to deliver exceptional service to your customers then great, but it is more likely that the very best service is achieved by candidly and wisely selecting the best processes that work for you and your users. Every Service Desk is different in composition, expertise and support widely divergent user bases so it would be absurd to suggest that there was a one-size-fits-all solution; and indeed there is none.

Benchmarking is a vital part of service delivery, but it is important that it is used in the right way. Benchmarking against industry standards has value, but much greater returns will be experienced when benchmarking against your own standards. If you have recently implemented a new change management process then you will be able to see whether this has improved service by examining your metrics and looking at the trend of your data. If metrics have improved as a result of the processes you have implemented then make a song and dance about it to your organization – it's the only way they'll truly know that you are committed to improving service for their employees and increasing productivity.

The best *best* practice is therefore to take a holistic approach and really think about whether the processes you have in place are improving the service delivered to your users. Think about what message your Service Desk is delivering to your organization both at higher levels and for your customers – would they both agree that you are essential part of the business, deliver exceptional service and provide excellent value for money? If the answer to any or all of these questions is no then it's time to take stock and make some immediate changes – it is hoped that this short guide has given you some practical ways in which to achieve this.

### **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 organization 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 center operation through its globally recognized Service Desk Certification audit program.



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