Taking the leap from reactive Help Desk to proactive IT Services Management:

why processes are crucial.

By Noel Bruton

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enhancing the client experience

White Paper

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Introduction

In the IT user support industry, the past few years have seen a profound cultural and structural shift. Since the late nineteen-nineties, the traditional helpdesk has been shifting from being an almost isolated, reactive technical support function into the heart of a new, integrated IT Services Management culture. Numerous factors have contributed to this.

Among these is the growing realisation of just how important user support now is. Companies in Western economies have been under pressure to increase local productivity or risk succumbing to competition from distant equivalents in lower cost parts of the world. Output per employee has had to increase, and information technology has a necessary part to play in that.

Where that output is impeded by a failure in IT or its usage, the helpdesk steps in to rectify the situation. Helpdesks keep companies working - it took some of us a while to grasp that, but now it is the inescapable reality of IT-dependent business.

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Structure

Cost driven change

Then there was the change in structure. The new recognition of the tactical importance of helpdesking caused the industry to approach it differently. The costs of this labour intensive function had to be addressed, so it became the focus of new management attention. The one-time 'helpdesk manager' post has in many places been replaced by a supervisory or team leader post under a new rank of professional IT services management. IT has split itself into the two factions of that which considers the future of computing in the organisation and that which looks after the present - these are commonly known respectively as 'Development' and 'IT Services'.

Slick procedures and professionalism

Over the years of its existence, the helpdesk had become probably the most 'procedurised' part of IT. In few if any other sections of the IT department would all incoming work be logged and passed along a common workflow path toward resolution. This was helped of course by the maturation of helpdesk tools such as enquiry management software.

When I first began consulting in IT support at the beginning of the 'nineties, the helpdesk was typically a loose group of technicians, leaping about at the beck of the next incensed user or perceived emergency. Now, it is more often a slick operation with sophisticated tools and a defined means of working and professionalism comparable, if not superior to that of most other departments in the organisation.

The helpdesk's professionalism stems in part from its service ethos. The helpdesk has always been very customer aware, and was invariably the first and often the only part of IT to offer its staff training in customer service techniques.

As the IT Services concept and structure have emerged in ever more companies, the helpdesk has found itself at the heart of the movement. Its existing processes and customer orientation have routinely been used as a model for other factions of IT being brought under the 'Services' umbrella.

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Transition

The ultimate goal: productivity

For some departments, the change in thinking has been a difficult transition. Network support, for example, may have been seen in the past as a purely technological function, supporting machines rather than people - but even this must now be seen for what it really is. The support of machinery, communications links and software are only the means to a greater end, which is the support of the users. But that too is only an interim step.

Ultimately, the users too are a means to an end, namely that of their own productivity and its contribution to corporate output. In the private sector, that output is revenue and profit. In the public sector, it is the careful management of corporate budget to control costs so as to leave as great a proportion as possible for delivering the service to the community.

Reactivity equals financial risk

In the days before the Helpdesk was part of IT Services, it stood alone typically as a reactive function with a relatively narrow brief - solve all reported computer problems as soon as possible after they are reported. It was a fire-fighting operation. It is safe to say that many helpdesks do not always plan to meet demand. They may even tend to recruit staff after demand has already exceeded their capacity to cope with it. In other words, the busy helpdesk is often playing catch-up, building its skills just-in-time and lunging from one problem to the next. Given that the final product of the helpdesk is sustained user productivity, this reactivity carries with it considerable financial risk for the company.

The need to manage this risk may be a contributing factor in the way IT Services (ITS), on the other hand, takes a much broader perspective, viewing the lifecycle of user computing from end to end. For ITS, helpdesk user support is only one element of the service portfolio. ITS will also supply the computer and guarantee the availability and capacity of the network to which it is configured.

It may also have specified the computer in the first place, designed the operational standards with which the hardware and software must comply and ensured the user was adequately trained to use the system. But ideally, ITS does not see these as a loose collection of services, but as part of an integrated process.

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Process integration

Taking the workflow concept much further

For a process to be truly integrated, there must be a workflow connecting all its constituent parts. There must be co-dependency between these parts. A unit of work will arrive at one stage of the process, have some value added to it and then be passed to the next stage. The typical workflow of a helpdesk - log an enquiry, capture details, assign to resolver, resolve and close - is represented in numerous purpose-designed software tools.

ITS, however, is much more complex and there is as yet only limited guidance or accepted standard ways of running it. For this new market, purpose built tools have yet to emerge. For the most part, IT Services remain stuck in a legacy of isolated tool for single function, with little or no integration. We may take computer procurement as an example - where this is carried out by ITS, as opposed to a financial department, one may quite often find that the data management is handled by a spreadsheet or local database, usually created by the clerk who collates procurement requests.

Linking known data

To manage IT service provision as a whole, we may look upon the userbase as a market into which we deliver a range of IT products and services. Fortunately, the market is captive and finite - most companies know who their employees and contractors are and for the most part, where they usually are when they are doing their jobs.

We can record this market as a set of records in a database. To these records, we can add information about what hardware the user has under his charge, and what software runs on that hardware.

We might add data useful to supporting that installation both financially and technically. When do the software licenses expire? When was the equipment installed so we can anticipate its obsolescence and plan its replacement? Does the installed software match the training courses the user has attended? To which port on which network switch is this machine connected, so that the user can be advised of planned network segment shutdowns for maintenance? To which printer does the user typically send hard copy output? Where are any remote drives? Which corporate Email box does he use?

While helpdesk software may often include a form of 'assets database', it may be of limited use when storing everything it might be useful to know about a member of an ITS market.

But in any case, such a database can be the foundation of the ITS process - for ultimately, everything in the corporation (including people and the knowledge in their heads) is an asset and everything that happens is either an enquiry about or a change to an asset.

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Is ITIL the answer?

Where ITIL delivers

In recent years, one methodology for running IT Services has come to the fore. The Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) has already considered what may be the main processes of ITS and how these link together. The idea of the assets database is represented in a Configuration Management process. Change management then covers how an item of technology may be considered and approved for procurement or creation and then deployed.

The deployment is of course a change in itself, one of absence to presence of a product, software program or service. Service management looks after the support of the asset and its user under the parameters of preset service levels, which may also function as IT staff productivity targets. ITIL goes further with its Problem Management process which looks at how repeated similar incidents may point to a deeper problem, which when rectified, can make a significant improvement to the usability of the computer systems.

ITIL Service Management	
Service Support	**Service Delivery**
Service Desk (function, not process)	
Incident Management	*Service Level Management*
Problem Management	*Financial Management for IT Services*
Configuration Management	*Capacity Management*
Change Management	*IT Service Continuity Management*
Release Management	*Availability Management*

Where ITIL falls short

Some observers of the industry are keen to point out however that ITIL does not have all the answers, even though it is for now, the best we have in terms of ITS procedural guidance. ITIL is not prescriptive and deliberately makes no insistence about staff or indeed customer management. These would appear for some to be critical omissions - ITS is after all still relatively labour intensive and customer support in part defines its existence.

ITS staff have technical knowledge that needs to be managed so that there is the right amount of it available when needed. Get that wrong and enquiry backlogs grow, with user productivity consequently impeded.

ITS runs projects of various scales, which consume resources and require effective task management. This too begs the need for a process, not represented in ITIL. Customer satisfaction is a critical business metric - for what would be the point in providing a service that did not meet customer approval? Yet again, ITIL does not specifically recognise the issue. Strong as it is, ITIL cannot provide all the answers and perhaps that is just as well - for if it did, it would have to be so complex in being applicable to any type of company in any industry, it may thus make itself inapplicable anywhere.

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Key success factors in setting up processes

Key success factors
■   *Based strictly on services to be delivered*
■   *Understood by all - train staff in process as well as technology*
■   *Making sure the routine work gets done*
■   *Practical and pragmatic*
■   *All process components must add value*
■   *Clear changes of ownership where necessary*
■   *Self-auditing - process measures its own effectiveness*

ITS is a production line, making a complex range of service products for a wide, varied and demanding market. For it to work properly, it must have processes that are understood by all members of staff. There are too many variables to leave things to the old ways of relying on the goodwill and enthusiasm of the staff, which characterised the Helpdesk in its earlier, less mature days. The risks are too great of a handover not taking place and job ownership being lost, or of insufficient value being added at some stage of the production line so the job goes into abeyance. All such delays impede the delivery of IT into the business, thus putting profits and corporate goals in jeopardy.

For the processes to work, they have to be doable - too much bureaucracy, difficulty or complexity may consume effort that could be used more cost-effectively elsewhere. These have to be designed pragmatically and then ideally expressed in a tool that can manage as much of the mundanity of the work as possible, leaving the humans to do the more interesting and motivating parts of the job while ensuring accuracy and consistency in the quality of the work produced.

The processes should ideally be self-auditing - exceptions should be obvious and a route through the process should be designed to anticipate and deal with them. It should be possible to take statistics not just at the end of the line to ensure that service level targets were met, but at crucial stages in the workflow to report how efficiently the line is working.

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Tools

The potential complexity of the new world of ITS and the perhaps understandable and unavoidable incompleteness of ITIL as an approach forces software vendors to accept the need for flexibility. A recent survey of companies adopting ITIL showed that only 7.5% implemented process management tools 'out of the box' - the vast majority had to customise the system to reflect the process. Most software tools will allow for the construction of forms and reports, but not all will allow for the creation, design and adjustment of an altogether new process.

Some are 'hard-coded' to express how the programmer sees the workflow rather than how it works in an individual company and this can hamper true expression of the actual processes. Industry evidence suggests that the tool has to be customised anyway - in that case, it should be one that offers the kind of flexibility that ITS will demand.

Noel Bruton is an independent consultant and trainer to IT service and helpdesk managers. He is the author of 'How to Manage the IT Helpdesk' (ISBN 07506 49011) and of a forthcoming book 'Managing the IT Services Process'. Contact him on +44 (0)1239 811646, noel@noelbruton.com or see his Website at http://www.noelbruton.com.

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