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Exclusive Interview:

How Do ITIL Standards Improve Service Desk Performance?

Many IT executives know that ITIL is the best practice standard for service desk performance. Few, however, understand the nature of ITIL or how it impacts every issue that comes in. John Raos, Vice President at Innovative Technology Solutions, explains the nature of ITIL and how top service desk providers, like ITS, leverage the standard to improve service quality.

Let's start with a basic question. Why is it important for IT Managed Service Providers, or MSPs, to follow ITIL standards?

ITIL, which stands for Information Technology Infrastructure Library, is an internationally-recognized source of best practices for a host of IT services, including managed services. ITIL has been refined over the years through several editions. While ITIL is not the only major service management standard, it has been proven effective through many thousands of implementations. Plus, it's uniquely suitable for integration with an organization's own values and strategies. Its flexibility and proven effectiveness makes it the gold standard for MSPs.

What are the key ITIL processes that apply in particular to service desk MSPs?

ITIL is very diverse. It's built around five highly detailed central volumes, of which one—Service Operations—is most applicable to IT service desk MSPs. Service Operations itself describes five key processes that are fundamental to service desks. As an MSP, we focus primarily on two of those, "Problem Management" and "Incident Management," to govern our ongoing service desk practices, although "Request Fulfillment" is involved as well.

Before we go further, we should clarify something. Many people use the terms "service desk" and "help desk" interchangeably, but they mean something quite different, don't they?

There are varying degrees of interpretation to these terms, but generally we consider a service desk to provide, for lack of a better term, overall service. We'll do as much as we can to not only document your problem within the ticketing system, but also try to fix that issue and get you back up and running as quickly as possible, regardless of complexity. Service desks are staffed by highly skilled technicians—people who possess a deeper level of technical troubleshooting and resolution capabilities.

Help desks, on the other hand, are usually staffed by entry-level technicians who follow scripts. They will gather your personal information, document the issue, and if the script doesn't resolve the issue, they will escalate it to a resolver team. That's all they're going to do. Help desks are not going to do any triage or remediation, nor will they remotely access your work station to try and understand the issue further. They're going to leave that for another team to resolve and work on at some later date.

Thanks for that clarification. So can you explain the differences between Incident Management and Problem Management as defined by ITIL?

When someone contacts a service desk with an issue, it's usually treated initially as an incident. Our goal is to resolve that incident as quickly as possible. It can be through a temporary workaround, a knowledge-based document that describes how to fix the issue, or through troubleshooting by a high-level technician. With Problem Management, we note a number of incidents coming into the desk around the same issue. When this happens, we initiate, with the assistance of the resolver team, a root cause analysis to determine if the issue is systemic to a broader issue in the environment.

Are Incident Management and Problem Management two sides of the same coin? What are the pluses and minuses of these two processes?

They work in concert with each other. If you have a number of incidents along the same lines, they can be indicative of a broader problem. So as a single point of contact, the service desk can lead the team to investigate if an incident, or issue that's generating multiple incidents, may involve a particular application or server or network device. We can actually be the first to identify a problem—something the customer may not have readily caught itself.

Can you give an example?

Sure. A perfect example would be if you have a number of people who can't access a web page, or access a share on a server. The particular server may be down, but the alert may not be coming through to the monitoring team. We'll notice the trend and raise it up to the customer's server team. Even though a ping test may say it's still up and running, we've got people who can't access it. So the remediation team can go in and resolve the issue and do root cause analysis on it.

And how is Request Fulfillment a part of the picture? Is it something totally separate from Incident and Problem Management?

It is. It's considered part of the Service Requests area. Request Fulfillment is the process where we handle various Service Requests—which can be small/minor change activities, requests for information, and so on. So, for example, one could be requesting to order a workstation or have a new workstation installed for the new user. All the details regarding the request would be captured by the Service Desk agent and put forth into a Service Request ticket, and routed to the correct group for execution on the request.

What is a best-practice description of the Incident Management process?

First, with the service desk acting as a single point of contact, an issue will come in either by phone, email, web ticket, or chat session. If it comes in by phone, which is the method we see most often, the individual agent will gather basic information including the individual's name, phone number, location, and asset they're using.

Once the agent documents the information in the ticketing system, he or she will do an initial triage and then categorize the ticket according to severity, which sets the SLA time period for resolution. Then we go through a diagnostic and look in our knowledge base, based on the details the individual has provided. If we can't resolve it at the desk, we would outline where we need to send the ticket. The level two team then looks at the issue and begins their work. The goal here is to get the service restored, or in this case the individual's incident fixed in the quickest time frame. We continually analyze the data on what wasn't resolved at the service desk to identify opportunities to resolve it next time the incident arises. This may include updated knowledge, access or training. At a high level, that's our process.

Does escalation to a level two team always mean Problem Management processes will be applied?

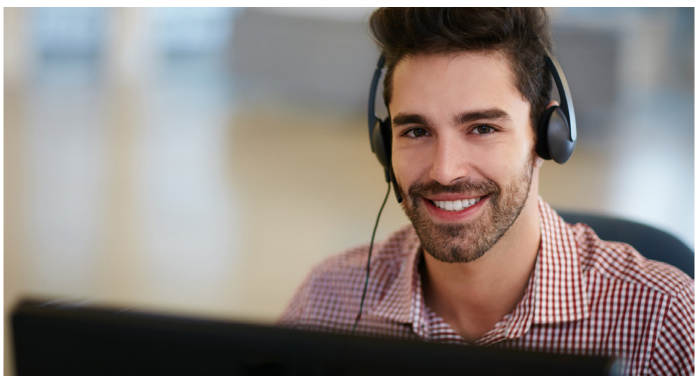
Not necessarily. A subsequent diagnosis will determine if it is to be labeled a problem for purposes of root cause analysis. But our goal is always first contact resolution, and having a high resolution rate at the desk.

Why is First Contact Resolution the most important metric in service desk services?

It's the key differentiator between one service provider and another. ITS customers know that as often as 79% of the time that their end users call in, the issue in question is going to be resolved on that first contact. When an incident escalates to additional support groups beyond the service desk in an organization, it costs more to resolve it by a higher skilled group. Also, it distracts those support groups from core business initiatives and causes end user dissatisfaction due to longer resolution times.

Why is it better for an organization to partner with an outsourced provider to manage their service desk support than do in-house?

Most companies that want to outsource, understand that the service desk isn't their core competency. But they know end users have to call someone, somewhere, when there's an issue. When we step in, it's because service desk is our core competency—we're interested in helping the customer's end users get back to work so they can focus on the company's larger goals without being impeded by IT issues.



As a specialist, a service desk MSP is held to an average speed-of-answer standard, a first contact resolution standard, an abandon rate, and a customer satisfaction rating. Some companies look at service desk as a low priority. They think, "It's an internal call. It can wait." We, on the other hand, look at it as making the customer's employees more productive. We want the user to be focused on business goals, versus being brought down by an IT issue that an internal desk may take a day or two to resolve.

Companies often don't realize there is a hidden indirect cost to inadequate service desk support. If an employee is unproductive because his or her workstation isn't allowing work to be done, there's a significant cost to that—a cost that isn't necessarily tracked anywhere.

What should an enterprise look for when evaluating an MSP for their service desk function, beyond the four performance metrics you mentioned?

I would say that it varies. Sometimes the major factor has to do with service hours. Does the customer want something that's 24x7? Or are they looking only for their core hours, Monday through Friday? We do have customers who say, "I don't need you during the day but I need you to work weekends and nights for us." A good MSP will be able to accommodate all options.

Other than service hours, first contact resolution and customer satisfaction are probably the two biggest considerations. If end users know they have an 80% chance of getting their issue resolved, they're going to call the desk. They may wait a couple of minutes knowing that will be the case, but they'll willingly do so because their issue is going to be resolved. They know they'll be back to work within 15 to 20 minutes of making the call. That's the true enterprise value-add that a well-run, outsourced service desk can deliver.