KEY STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING SERVICE DESK CALLS

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The service desk plays an integral role in IT service management. It's the single point of contact between the service provider and end-users, as defined by ITIL. Being a crucial part of IT processes, it's therefore important that the service desk teams are working at their best. But how is this possible when they're constantly bogged down with unnecessary calls?

We look at some strategies for how organizations reduce repetitive calls and free up time for service desk teams to tackle the more complex issues.

Why is reducing service desk calls important?

Service desk teams often have to deal with a lot of work with little resources, so looking for ways to relieve the pressure is essential to ensure high-quality support to end-users. One of those ways is reducing the number of calls the service desk receives. Here are four reasons why this is crucial.

1. Cost of service desk calls increases exponentially

When it comes to the service desk, the largest expense is the personnel. It costs a lot of money to provide phone support and the more time spent on the phone resolving one issue, the higher the cost. Furthermore, if the issue isn't resolved on the first level, escalating the problem to the second and third levels, etc., will exponentially increase the cost as the time taken to resolve lengthens.

2. High loss of productivity

In addition to the direct IT cost, you'll also need to factor in the loss of productivity. If all service desk inquiries go through the phone, it makes it difficult to prioritize more urgent issues and agents can be stuck dealing with repetitive inquiries that take time away from other calls that need their technical expertise more. Let's not forget the loss of productivity from the end-users' side as well. Time spent waiting their turn in a busy support line to resolve their issue could've been better spent in more productive activities.

3. Inefficient way to resolve issues

Another reason why it's important to reduce service desk calls is that phone support is simply inefficient. Carrying out issue resolutions over the phone often leads to one-to-one training, as the agent directs the end-user on how to fix the problem they're having. This becomes a very ineffective way of training people over time. When more than one end-user faces a similar issue, the agent will end up having to repeat the same training over and over for each person.

4. Unable to cater to changing needs

Over-reliance on calls to resolve problems prevents organizations to accommodate the end-users' changing needs. What people look for when it comes to support changes over time and can differ between different groups. This can change based on the type of people or the age and experience level, all of which would have different viewpoints, perspectives, and needs. For example, while older age groups might consider picking up the phone as the go-to for support, younger age groups might consider it as the last resort and opt for FAQ articles instead to solve the issue by themselves.

5. Increased risk of burnout and high staff turnover

Looking at it from the perspective of the service desk analysts themselves, they're under a lot of pressure. They put the phone down from one call and it rings for another call and their day continues like so. This can have a knock-on effect, leading to burnout and high staff turnover, with 64% of organizations struggling to recruit and retain service desk staff. The service desk having one of the highest turnover rates across the business functions means organizations lose trained agents, making the service desk less effective in dealing with issues until new recruits get up to speed.

What are the demands service desks are faced with?

To curb the number of service desk calls being made, we should understand what is being asked from them. The service desk can receive all sorts of demands, which can vary from company to company, but they largely fit into these three broad types: failure, information, and value.

Failure demand

Failure demand is when something has gone wrong and can often involve incident management activities. For example, it can be that there's a problem with the end-user's device, they can't access a service, or a tool they're using has stopped working. They can come in a call disgruntled, as whatever the issue is has had a negative impact on their work and productivity. These will be urgent for the end-users and something that they'd want to resolve quickly.

Information demand

Information demand is often overlooked but is another type of demand that the service desk often receives. This is when an end-user is looking up information related to the services provided. This happens when information is hidden and the end-user is trying to expand their knowledge on a certain topic, such as best practices for a tool or where to find a specific functionality. While not often discussed, information demand calls are where the one-to-one training that was mentioned previously often happens.

Value demand

Value demand is when an end-user requires something new, whether that's a service, app access, or device, which they believe will help them work better and more productively. Each call of this type effectively represents a chance for IT to add significant value. So, getting it right can do nothing but increase the satisfaction of the end-user community. In which case, this is the area where you don't necessarily want to decrease demand. Instead, you would want to increase it, as well as have more time to deal with this type of demand.

Top-level strategy: reducing or diverting demand

Now that we know the different demands occupying service desk agents' time, what can be done next to better manage these demands? As previously mentioned, we'd want to encourage and make more time for value demand calls. This means reducing or diverting the calls for failure and information demands.

Reducing demand

To decrease incoming failure demand calls, it's important to get things right the first time round or solve them before they hit. Successful service desk management means working beyond firefighting mode. This boils down to improving your problem and change management processes, providing employee training, and ongoing systems monitoring. By having your finger on the pulse of all things IT services, you can prevent issues from cropping up in the first place. And in the case they do happen, active monitoring can help IT teams to spot and resolve the issue before the end-user notices. Fixing your processes and fine-tuning your IT infrastructure give little space for failures, so the number of related calls will be reduced.

Diverting demand

For the less urgent, common, or simple issues, this is where self-service can prove particularly useful. An IT self-service portal can provide end-users the resources they need to solve issues by themselves without having to wait to speak to an agent. There are many tools IT can use to achieve this: service catalog, knowledge base, peer support forum, and more. And with automated routing integrated into these tools, solutions can be found quickly and easily without human intervention.

By implementing processes and systems that help reduce or divert demand, service desk teams can then focus on the more critical issues, preventing headaches for everyone involved.

The strategic matrix: demand type vs strategy

So, we know the different types of demand as well as how to reduce or divert demand. But what strategy works best for each type? This is where the strategic matrix comes in.

The strategic matrix puts the different types of demands against the approach you'd want to use for them. This matrix reflects what service desks face pretty well, as well as the tools they can utilize for each area. Depending on how many calls you get for each demand type, the matrix can prove useful in determining which area you should prioritize and what strategy to implement.

For example, as you can see from the diagram, the tools are stacked over towards the failure demand side, which goes to show that getting it right the first time is so crucial in relieving the burden on the service desk teams. So, if the majority of calls are falling in the failure demand category, you should explore how you can fix your processes.

What IT does affect the volume of service desk calls

Decreasing the volume, as well as time spent on service desk calls, doesn't just rely on the service desk teams themselves, but also on IT as a whole. From the service design to service transition and operations, how these various activities are carried out will have an impact on the number of calls that fall to the service desk.

Starting out right

Throughout this article, we've mentioned how getting it right from the beginning can save everyone time from fixing issues later down the line. It's important to design and deliver the service that the business wants, make it robust, and make it accessible and easy to use to reduce friction.

Bringing services online

Too often when rolling out a new service, it's usually done in a hurry, making it so easy to overlook things that can go wrong. Careful planning of service implementations enables IT teams to minimize disruptions not just in the new service but also to other systems/services which are often the source of service desk calls.

Handling day-to-day demands

Without strategies designed to handle the different types of demands – failure, information, and value – it can be all too easy for service desk teams to be swamped with calls every day. When it comes to reducing calls, prevention is the best solution. Rooting out the causes of these calls and resolving them through problem and change management while diverting demand around the service desk helps everyone to work at their best with minimal interruptions.

Improving services

Continual service improvement shouldn't be forgotten either. How can the service desk be better? What tools can be used to further improve the resolution process? Improving your services isn't a one-time deal; it's an ongoing process that should be ingrained in the organizational culture. And knowing what to improve isn't really possible without tracking the right thing. If you don't measure it, you can't possibly control it. If you can't control it, you can't manage it. And if you can't manage it, you can't improve it. Likewise, there's no point in measuring things you can't do anything about.

Having all these considerations as you create your IT and service desk strategies all contribute to reducing service desk calls.

How you can leverage self-service portals to manage demand

With all the technology available to us, it's no surprise that there are tools that can help users find solutions without having to rely solely on the service desk. Self-service portals where people can just log in to find answers to their inquiries are one great way to curb demand. But proper design and implementation of such a tool are crucial, otherwise, you could end up with tools that are left unused as they're not meeting the needs of your end-users. Here are some things to consider on how best to leverage self-service portals.

1. Make sure solutions are visible

You might have a portal complete with the solutions for the most common issues, but when an end-user can't find the answer they're looking for, they'll still turn to the service desk. This defeats the purpose of having a portal in the first place. It's important that you have a user-friendly portal that is easy to navigate and find the tools and services relevant to the end-user.

2. Track activities and performance

Monitoring how users interact with the different parts of your self-service portal gives you an insight into what can be improved. For example, how many people are going into a particular FAQ article and then contacting the service desk afterward? A high number of users doing this could indicate that the article is not solving the issue they have, and you may need to revise it or write a new article.

3. Keep the Service Catalog business-friendly

Some end-users might not know what services and tools are available to them simply because the terminologies used in the service catalog of their self-service portal are too technical. The IT team is providing services to the rest of the business, so the language used should be aligned with what makes sense for the different departments. Otherwise, these can be easily overlooked, and the service desk will receive the call instead.

4. Automate service fulfillment

You can enhance the end-user experience by creating automated workflows for your predictable services. For example, when onboarding an employee, they would need to be provided with equipment, logins, etc. An employee onboarding request can be easily sent via the portal and automated routing will set off various activities and assign tasks/approvals to the right people. This makes the whole process simpler and much faster to complete.

5. Enable users to track information relevant to them

You can help reduce service desk calls even further by enabling end-users to not only find but keep track of information that is most relevant to them. Whether it’s an incident or outage status update or answers to a forum article, end-users can track these changes through the self-service portal by signing up for alerts. This makes it easier for them to plan their day and minimize interruptions in their daily work.

What NOT to do when curbing demand

We've covered several best practices and approaches to take when looking to reduce service desk calls, many of which are focused on making continuous improvements to how services are delivered and how the service desk works. It can be tempting, however, that before the benefits for those are realized organizations would opt for "quick wins". Unfortunately, in many cases, these can do more harm than good.

Here are some things you should avoid doing when throttling demand.

1. Stop picking up the phone

One of the easiest ways to reduce service desk calls is to not just pick up the phone! But this is the most infuriating method that you can do to end-users. Making support inaccessible, especially when an issue is urgent paints a bad picture of the IT department.

2. Promoting the other channels when already on the call

Just as frustrating as a non-response would be if an agent picks up the phone, only to be told to send an email or log a request on the portal instead. Redirecting end-users to another channel gives off the wrong impression that the service desk is not looking to solve the users' issues and can make them look unreliable and unhelpful.

3. Charge business units on a per-call basis

Charging business units for service desk calls is a sure-fire way to disengage the rest of the business. Not only would it hurt IT's relationship with the rest of the business, but it can hinder the effective exchange of information between different departments, e.g., reporting of incidents.

Take the stress out of the service desk

Need help in reducing service desk calls in your organization? With IFS assyst, you can divert up to 80% of calls from the service desk with easily accessible service tools. Expand your service desk capabilities without adding pressure on your team. Why not get in touch to learn more?

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