

Help Software

HELPDESK

A help desk is an information and assistance resource that troubleshoots problems with computers or similar products. Corporations often provide help desk support to their customers via a toll-free number, website and/or e-mail. There are also in-house help desks geared toward providing the same kind of help for employees only. Some schools offer classes in which they perform similar tasks as a help desk. In the Information Technology Infrastructure Library, within companies adhering to ISO/IEC 20000 or seeking to implement IT Service Management best practice, a Help Desk may offer a wider range of user centric services and be part of a larger Service Desk.

Functions

A typical help desk has several functions. It provides the users a central point to receive help on various computer issues. The help desk typically manages its requests via help desk software, such as an incident tracking system that allows them to track user requests with a unique ticket number. This can also be called a "Local Bug Tracker" or LBT. The help desk software can often be an extremely beneficial tool when used to find, analyze, and eliminate common problems in an organization's computing environment.

The user notifies the help desk of his or her issue, and the help desk issues a ticket that has details of the problem. If the first level support technician is able to solve the issue, the ticket is closed and updated with documentation of the solution to allow other help desk technicians to reference in the future. If the issue needs to be escalated, it will be updated, noting what was attempted by the technician and dispatched to second level support.

There are many software applications available to support the help desk function. Some are targeting enterprise level help desk (rather large) and some are targeting departmental needs. See Comparison of issue tracking systems.

From the mid 1990s research by Middleton at The Robert Gordon University found that many organizations had begun to recognize that the real value of their help desk(s) derives not solely from their reactive response to users' issues but from the help desk's unique position where it communicates daily with numerous customers or employees. This gives the help desk the ability to monitor the user environment for issues from technical problems to user preferences and satisfaction. Such information gathered at the help desk can be valuable in planning and preparation to other units in IT as well as non-IT departments such as sales and product development.

Organization

Large help desks have different levels to handle different types of questions. The first-level help desk is prepared to answer the most commonly asked questions, or provide resolutions that often belong in an FAQ or knowledge base. Typically, an incident tracking system has been implemented that allows a logging process to take place at the onset of a call. If the issue isn't resolved at the first-level, the ticket is escalated to a second, higher, level that has the necessary resources to handle more difficult calls. Also note that some organizations have a third, higher again, line of support which often deals with software specific needs, such as updates and bug-fixes that affect the client directly.

Larger help desks have a person or team responsible for managing the tickets and are commonly called queue managers or queue supervisors. The queue manager is responsible for the ticket queues, which can be setup in various ways depending on the help desk size or structure. Typically, larger help desks have several teams that are experienced in working on different issues. The queue manager will assign a ticket to one of the specialized teams based on the type of issue. Some help desks may have phone systems with ACD splits that ensure that calls about specific topics are put through to analysts with experience or knowledge on that topic.

Many help desks are also strictly rostered. Time is set aside for analysts to perform tasks such as following up problems, returning phone calls, and answering questions via e-mail. The roster system ensures that all analysts get time to follow

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up on calls, and also ensures that analysts are always available to take incoming phone calls. As the incoming phone calls are random in nature, help desk agent schedules are often maintained using an Erlang C calculation.

Deskside team

The deskside team (sometimes known as "desktop support") is responsible for the desktops, laptops and peripherals such as PDAs. The help desk will assign the desktop team the second level deskside issues that the first level was not able to solve. They set up and configure computers for new users and are typically responsible for any physical work relating to the computers such as repairing software or hardware issues and moving workstations to another location.

Network team

The network team is responsible for the network software, hardware and infrastructure such as servers, switches, backup systems and firewalls. They are responsible for the network services such as email, file, and security. The help desk will assign the network team issues that are in their field of responsibility.

Other teams

Some companies have a telecom team that is responsible for the phone infrastructure such as PBX, voicemail, VOIP, telephone sets, modems and fax machines. They are responsible for configuring and moving telephone numbers, voicemail setup and configuration and are assigned these types of issues from the help desk.

Companies with custom application software may also have an applications team, who are responsible for development of any in-house software. The Applications team may be assigned problems such as software bugs from the Help Desk. Requests for new features or capabilities to in-house software that come through the Help Desk are also assigned to Applications groups.

Not all of the help desk staff and supporting IT staff are in the same location. With remote access applications, technicians are able to solve many help desk issues from another location or their home office. There is a need for on-site support to physically work on some help desk issues; however, help desks are able to be more flexible with their remote support. They can also audit workstations.

Help desk is a broadly applied term referring to a staffed resource—often, an actual desk, or a telephone service—that can help persons answer questions or to use resources such as audio-visual or computer resources.