

Help Desk: From Evaluation to Implementation

By Scott Vanderlip, President of Internet Software Sciences



Evaluation

Lets face it... is your support organization operating in the most efficient and effective processes? Does the person with the loudest voice get the best service? Can teachers and staff quickly create work orders that are evaluated, dispatched and followed up? Does your school administrators and staff feel satisfied with the level of support? Is there a well defined process by which support work orders are dispatched, tracked and managed by the support staff? Are you able to create reports tracking technicians and trouble areas and check technician accountability? When a difficult support issue is solved, is it documented for future reference in a searchable knowledge base? **Maybe your support organization needs a Help Desk Software solution!**

Case Study – Oxnard Unified High School District

Stephen Wolodkin, Director of Information Technology at Oxnard Unified High School District found his support process needed to be evaluated when he first started his job there. Originally the support process consisted of a set of 7 cell phones. Every morning, techs would come in and take one of the 7 cell phones. School district employees were provided a list of 7 phone numbers and were instructed to start at the top of the phone list and call until they got an answer.

Stephen quickly identified the need for a better process to track and manage their IT support Help Desk and the Web+Center product was chosen. Stephen describes his situation as:

“Prior to using Web+Center, the end users dialed the cell phone numbers of our techs in sequence until somebody answered the phone! We needed a simple, budget-friendly, web-based solution that we could deploy rapidly to remedy this situation. Web+Center was chosen and deployed very quickly and we have loved using it ever since.”

SELECTION

If you decide you need to automate your support organization with a Help Desk product, the choices are often overwhelming. A quick web browse of the vendors listed on the www.HelpDesk.com will give you a partial list of vendors.

Web-based or Client Based application?

The first choice one should probably consider is whether the product will be web-based or a traditional Windows/Mac Client program. A web-based product offers immediate access to anyone with a browser while a traditional client based program will require software installation on individual machines making upgrades and initial deployment for all planned users of the system difficult and time consuming. In today's Internet connected world where universal connectivity is often available for both home and schools, a web-based system typically will offer substantial advantages over a client program based application.

Features and Cost

Help Desk packages vary from FREE or low cost to hundreds of thousands of dollars. When evaluating a system, it is always important to find one that BEST fits your support processes and requirements and budget. Although many help desk packages may offer many attractive bells and whistles in their product, these added complexities and increased data input requirements may actually prevent a successful implementation of a Help Desk system. ***A balance has to be made between a Help Desk program complexity and data input requirements versus the ability and willingness of the techs and customers to use the system.*** If it takes 10 minutes to create a single trouble ticket, the system may be un-acceptable and not used by support staff or customers. If extensive training is required and no training time or budget is available, an expensive investment in help desk software may sit on the shelf for years before deployment. It might be valid for some IT support organizations to envision a two step evolution where a simple Help Desk system could be installed to quickly obtain a higher level of automation into their IT support organizations with a second planned phase that would utilize a more comprehensive Help Desk package configured in a more centralized environment across multiple departments. Some Help Desk implementations fail when attempting to involve too many departments and buyoff and agreement on processes becomes the bigger issue and not the software itself.

The true cost of the software should be carefully compared when shopping for a Help Desk Product. Pricing and annual support costs are often difficult to extract out of vendors and while initial per tech seat costs may appear cheaper with one vendor, it may

turn out to be more expensive when including per customer licenses or web-based features or add-ons. Additional customizations or deployment costs should also be carefully calculated before purchasing a software product.

Deployment and Implementation

Implementing a software Help Desk solution often goes well beyond the simple automation of work orders into a database, but it also forces many organizational changes and improvements not originally planned. Implementing a Help Desk solution forces organizations to evaluate their processes, priorities, and support resources. A new automated software Help Desk solution might be the catalyst for much needed change. It might be a way for an organization to help bridge and create better multi departmental collaboration and cooperation by all sharing a common support database. Others can easily justify the cost of a Help Desk system by using its reporting tools to show decision makers the level of work required for technicians and how additional tech resources should be funded.

Finding the budget and purchasing the software may be the easy step compared to deployment of the Help Desk product. Help Desk products often fall into two types: a “toolkit” approach or an “out-of-the-box” solution. Often higher end Help Desk “toolkit” products require some level of customization/programming before any functionality can be extracted from the product. This additional cost and time is often underestimated in the original deployment plan and budget and many Help Desk projects sit on the shelf due to lack of funding or technical resources for this additional initial configuration and deployment step. Out of the Box solutions can usually be configured with internal support staff but may lack some of the customization options of a toolkit based system.

Deployment should be carefully planned and phased. While working with many educational IT departments, tech acceptance of the Help Desk solution and their perception and their appreciation of a system that makes their job easier and less stressful is important to any successful launch. It is important that the system is not perceived as a method to monitor tech performance although many Help Desk system have the ability to obtain statistics on work orders and technicians performance. A good Help Desk product should be viewed by technicians as a tool to help track and dispatch support work orders and a collaborative way to share knowledge and experience and distribute the work load.

Making the customer part of the solution

A well designed Help Desk product should have the ability for the support customer to be part of the solution by offering a searchable knowledge base of common support issues and questions and a way for customers/staff to easily create their own support tickets. With a web based interface, most users are able to navigate simple web forms with fairly high success rates to submit a trouble ticket or find answers to frequently asked questions or common problems.

The system should also have some form of automatic email notification to keep the customer in the loop without the tech having to make a phone call. Many Help Desk systems have options to keep users continually informed with email notification messages so that users do not feel that their support issue has fallen into a “black hole”.

Customer surveys provide the ultimate test for a support organization. Often simple improvements to the process and organization can be identified by customer surveys and resolved, creating better working environments between IT support staff and users.

Successful Implementation

A successful Help Desk implementation is realized when your users feel their support issues are timely created, tracked, dispatched and solved. The techs should feel that their jobs as support technicians are run by thoughtfully managed support processes that allow for a collaborative environment that fosters experience and growth.

A properly deployed Help Desk software product for an IT support organization can often be the single catalyst that helps to optimize the overall effectiveness simply by forcing process and organization into the chaotic world of IT support.

About the Author

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Internet Software Sciences offers a web-based Help Desk product called Web+Center that is very popular with K-12 and higher education users. Over 25% of California Community Colleges use the Web+Center product to automate their IT support organizations, and many K-12 CETPA users include San Francisco USD, Pasadena USD, Madera COE, Oxnard UHSD, W. Placer USD, Golden Valley and others.

The Web+Center product can be evaluated on-line or downloaded from the Internet Software Sciences website at: <http://www.inet-sciences.com>