

ITIL – Introducing the service desk

The service desk

The performance of a service desk is an indicator of the overall health of an organisation's IT. As well as being a key business function, the service desk enables organisations to thrive.

Cost reductions are a necessity in today's economy and internal support groups are a frequent cost reduction target. Service desks need to ensure that their services are clearly defined and aligned with business needs.

The service desk is a single point of contact (SPOC) for end users who need assistance/help.

The SDI service desk definition

- Resolves 60% or more of incoming incidents and requests without any escalation
- Improves customer satisfaction significantly, when first level resolution is at 50% or more
- Reduces costs and time to fix incidents
- Keeps businesses running efficiently

Ensuring service desk results

To introduce and maintain a successful service desk, it is essential that:

- Business needs are understood
- Customer requirements are understood
- Investment is made in training for service desk staff
- Service objectives, goals and deliverables are clearly defined
- Service levels are practical, agreed, and regularly reviewed

The benefits of a service desk

- Improved customer service perception and satisfaction
- Increased accessibility to assistance/help through a single point of contact, communication, and information
- Better quality and quicker turnaround of customer/user requests
- Improved teamwork and communication
- Enhanced focus and a proactive approach to service provision
- Better managed infrastructure and control
- Improved usage of IT support resources and increased productivity of business personnel

Service desk objectives

The primary aim of the service desk is to restore the *normal service* to the users as quickly as possible. In this context *restoration of service* is meant in the widest possible sense. While this could involve fixing a technical fault, it could equally involve fulfilling a service request or answering a query – anything that is needed to allow the users to return to working satisfactorily.

Specific responsibilities will include:

- Logging all relevant incident/service request details, and allocating categorisation and prioritisation codes
- Providing first line investigation and diagnosis
- Resolving those incidents/service requests that do not need escalating across IT
- Escalating incidents/service requests that the service desk cannot resolve within agreed timescales
- Closing all resolved incidents, service requests and other calls
- Conducting customer/user satisfaction call backs/surveys as agreed
- Communication with users – keeping them informed of incident progress, notifying them of impending changes or agreed outages, etc.
- Updating the configuration management system under the direction and approval of configuration management if so agreed

Service desk structures

There are many ways of structuring service desks and locating them – and the correct solution will vary for different organisations. The primary options are detailed below, but in reality an organisation may need to implement a structure that combines a number of these options in order to fully meet the organisation's needs.

A local service desk

This is where a service desk is co-located within or physically close to the user community it serves. This often aids communication and gives a clearly visible presence, which some users like, but can often be inefficient and expensive to resource, as staff are tied up waiting to deal with incidents when the volume and arrival rate of calls may not justify this.

There may, however, be some valid reasons for maintaining a local service desk, even where call volumes alone do not justify this.

Reasons might include:

- Language and cultural or political differences
- Different time zones
- Specialised groups of users
- The existence of customised or specialised services that require specialist knowledge
- VIP/criticality status of users

Centralised service desk

It is possible to reduce the number of service desks by merging them into a single location (or into a smaller number of locations) by drawing the staff into one or more centralised service desk structures. This can be more efficient and cost effective, allowing fewer overall staff to deal with a higher volume of calls, and can also lead to higher skill levels through greater familiarisation. It might still be necessary to maintain some form of *local presence* to handle physical support requirements, but such staff can be controlled and deployed from the central service desk.

Virtual service desk

Through the use of technology, particularly the internet, and the use of corporate support tools, it is possible to give the impression of a single, centralised service desk, when in fact the personnel may be spread or located in any number or type of geographical or structural locations. This brings in the option of *home working*, secondary support groups, offshoring or outsourcing – or any combination necessary to meet user demand. It is important to note, however, that safeguards are needed in all of these circumstances to ensure consistency and uniformity in service quality.

Follow the sun

Some global or international organisations may wish to combine two or more of their geographically dispersed service desks to provide a 24 hour *follow the sun* service.

This can give 24 hour coverage at relatively low cost, as no desk has to work more than a single shift. However, the same safeguards of common processes, tools, shared database of information and culture must be addressed for this approach to proceed and well controlled escalation and handover processes are needed.

Specialised service desk groups

For some organisations it might be beneficial to create *specialist groups* within the overall service desk structure, so that incidents relating to a particular IT service can be routed directly (normally via telephony selection or a web based interface) to the specialist group. This can allow faster resolution of these incidents, through greater familiarity and specialist training.

The selection would be made using a script along the lines of “*If your call is about the X Service, please press 1 now, otherwise please hold for a Service Desk Analyst*”. Care is needed not to over complicate the selection, so specialist groups should only be considered for a very small number of key services.

Building a single point of contact

Regardless of the combination of options chosen to fulfil an organisation’s overall service desk structure, individual users should be in no doubt about whom to contact if they need assistance. A single telephone number (or a single number for each group if separate desks are chosen) should be provided and well publicised – as well as a single email address and a single web service desk contact page.

Service desk skill levels

An organisation must decide on the level and range of skills it requires of its service desk staff – and then ensure that these skills are available at the appropriate times.

A range of skill options are possible, starting from a *call logging* service only – where staff need only very basic technical skills – right through to a *technical* service desk, where the organisation’s most technically skilled staff are used. In the case of the *call logging* type of service desk, there will be a high handling rate but a low resolution rate, while in the case of the *technical* service desk, this will be reversed.

The decision on the required skills’ level will often be driven by target resolution times (agreed with the business and captured in service level targets), the complexity of the systems supported and *what the business is prepared to pay*. There is a strong correlation between response and resolution targets and costs – generally speaking, the shorter the target times, the higher the cost because more service desk resources are required.

While there may be instances when an organisation’s dependency or criticality make a highly technically skilled desk an imperative, the optimum and most cost effective approach is generally to have a *call logging* first line of support via the service desk, with quick and effective escalations to more skilled second line and third line resolution groups, where skilled staff can be concentrated and more effectively utilised. However, this basic starting point can be improved over time by providing the first-line staff with an effective knowledge base, diagnostic scripts, integrated support tools and remote access tools (including a configuration management database/configuration management system), as well as ongoing training and awareness, so that first line resolution rates can gradually be increased.

This can also be achieved by locating second level staff on the service desk, effectively creating a two tier structure. This has the advantage of making second line staff available to help deal with peak call periods and to train more junior personnel, and it will often increase the first call resolution rate. However, second line staff often have duties outside of the service desk – resulting in rosters having to be managed or second line staff positions being duplicated. In addition, having to deal with routine calls may be demotivating for more experienced staff.

Another factor to consider when deciding on the skill requirements for service desk staff is the level of customisation or specialisation of the supported services. Standardised services require less specific knowledge to provide quality customer support. The more specialised the service, the more likely specialist knowledge will be required on the first contact.

Once the required skill levels have been identified, there is an ongoing task to ensure that the service desk is operated in such a way that the necessary staff obtain and maintain the necessary skills, and that staff with the correct balance of skills are on duty at appropriate times, so that consistency is maintained.

Service desk metrics

Metrics should be established so that the performance of the service desk can be evaluated at regular intervals. This is important to assess health, maturity, efficiency, effectiveness and any opportunities to improve service desk operations.

Metrics for service desk performance must be realistic and carefully chosen. It is common to select those metrics that are easily available and that may seem to be a possible indication of performance; however, this can be misleading. For example, the total number of calls received by the service desk is not in itself an indication of either good or bad performance and may, in fact, be caused by events completely outside the control of the service desk – for example, a particularly busy period for the organisation or the release of a new version of a major corporate system.

Example service desk metrics:

- First Level Fix (FLF)
- First Contact Resolution (FCR)
- Number of calls over a defined period (per day/per week/per month, etc.) – Trend analysis
- Number of calls over a defined time period (0800–1000, 1000–1200, etc.) – Trend analysis
- Call duration
- Incident Turnaround Time (ITAT)
- Average Speed to Answer (ASA)
- Abandoned Call Rate (ABR)
- Number of incorrectly assigned incidents
- No. of calls/incidents per analyst
- Cost per call or per incident