

HELP IS AT HAND

Every employee needs help with IT sooner or later. But what's the best way of providing it?

No system is perfect, and most employees – computer experts and novices alike – need some help using their computing resources at some point.

Minimising the amount of time and productivity lost to an organisation as a result of such problems is one of the main challenges of IT management. But support can almost be as costly as the problems it seeks to solve, even when outsourced. So what structures best meet IT support needs?

According to Giga Group analyst Julie Giera, outsourcing of help desk operations is increasingly popular as a strategy to “reduce costs, improve flexibility, increase service levels and mitigate risk”. She expects help desk outsourcing to grow between 11% and 15% for the remainder of 2002. But she also says there are both pros and cons to turning over support operations to a third-party specialist.

“Companies whose IT application portfolio is comprised mainly of packaged applications may find outsourcing of their help desk the most economical way to improve service delivery,” she says. “Conversely, companies with custom applications may find outsourcing reduces service levels.” For that reason, she says, companies with high levels of software customisation benefit from having an internal staff of specialists for the customised applications.

LEVELS OF SUPPORT

The first decision for any organisation is how to structure the help desk. According to John Rugsdale of Giga, the number of levels [of support] and the responsibilities of each level depend on the type of support, the locations of the employees and the software used for help desk automation.

“Two-level help desks are the most common, especially for desktop support, and two-level support should be the goal of companies wanting to streamline



How much support is needed?

FOR CIOs that choose to set up an internal help desk, one of the biggest problems is determining how many staff are needed. Analyst company the Robert Frances Group has created a formula that it says can help IT directors accurately work out their requirements.

If Incidents is the number of incidents within a specific period of time; Average

Time is the time spent resolving a typical incident; Available Time is overall working hours; Utilisation Rate is the percentage of time actually spent resolving incidents; and SVT is the time spent accounting for sickness, vacation, training and so on, then:

Number of staff members = (Incidents x Average Time)/(Available Time x Utilisation Rate/100 x (1 - SVT/100)).

incident processing and resolution,” says Rugsdale. “However, three-level support may be a better fit when incidents are often routed to experts outside of IT, or for large companies using a consolidated level one to support multiple geographic locations.”

Rugsdale suggests that successful two-level organisations have a pool of

level-one agents to answer the initial calls. Provided they have sufficient training and a database of issues upon which to draw, most level-one help desks can answer 72% of problems.

Problems that cannot be resolved over the phone are referred to level two, with support staff visiting the desktop concerned. Companies that already have

OUTSOURCING MODELS FOR HELP DESKS

OUTSOURCING MODEL	COMPANY CHARACTERISTICS			Level of change	Drivers
	IT environment	Locations			
Full outsource	Standard – packaged software	Global and/or multiple time zones/languages		High	Cost, flexibility, mitigation of risk
In-house	Custom	National, centralised offices		Low/medium	Service
Outsource level one and two, retain three	Mixed	Mixed		High/medium	Cost, flexibility, risk mitigation, service
Outsource level one, retain levels two and three	Mixed	Global, time zones, languages		Low/medium	Service, flexibility, cost, risk mitigation

SOURCE: GIGA INFORMATION GROUP

level three support for specialist users or functions might be able to integrate levels two and three if they use appropriate help desk software and databases for pooling information, he says.

RUNNING COSTS

Although running an internal help desk can be costly, Debbie Rosario, senior consultant at systems integration specialists Compass Management Consulting, says that through careful management, companies can do much to reduce the cost of internal support.

“While it’s true to say that at some point all users will require help, the type and the appropriateness of that help cannot be generalised,” she says. “What’s clear is that prevention is better and cheaper than cure.”

What is needed, Rosario claims, is a process for ensuring that changes to infrastructure are well-tested before implementation, using “robust change management, testing and implementation functions, complemented by a problem management function that monitors, reports and takes action where changes have compromised the infrastructure.”

A trend analysis function within problem management should identify common issues, develop fixes and inform all potentially affected users. “Self help can reduce resolution times and user impact thereby decreasing cost to the business,” she says.

Web-based self-help systems can also reduce costs. According to a study by Forrester Research, solving a support problem over the phone costs about £23. Over the web, it costs about 70p.

But key to that, says Andy Foley, IT director at lifeboat charity RNLI, is getting users interested in the technology they use. “There are those who really try to get to grips with the technology available, and there are those who don’t. Those who don’t cost the help desk and their


company in repeated requests to the help desk. Staff interest in technology is the key to maximising its benefits.”

Staff training is central to that motivation, Foley says. “Some may feel resentful, others feel they genuinely don’t need it. However, with an extra couple of sessions, it can really make a difference to the level of investment a company gets back from IT outlay, while the processes that staff complete are more streamlined.”

For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the internal help desk may not be a financially viable option. “SMEs almost all want to forget about IT,” believes Colin Boag, managing director of IT support services specialist JDS. “Most organisations don’t have IT support. They don’t pay IT staff very much. They want systems that run without too much interference. If you offer to take away IT staff, they’re very happy. And they get very real savings from outsourcing support.”

Giga’s Giera says that companies can make these savings because they do not have to spend money on buying and maintaining hardware and software, and the providers can use economies of scale to have dedicated help desk operations and hire experts that a single company could not justify maintaining on its own internal team.

Finding an outsourcer that can meet the requirements of a company is, however, something of an art. But British standard BS15000 aims to create a quality baseline for organisations that provide support and is on the way to becoming an ISO standard as well; companies that meet its requirements are likely to be capable of meeting any outsourcing needs.

Internal help desks remain the main support option for large enterprises. But picking the right structure for the help desk can cut costs and make it more effective when those calls from the experts and the novices alike come in. 

Outsourcing the wrong way

ALTHOUGH outsourcing can prove a cost-effective and even superior alternative to in-house help desks, it can have hidden costs. In June, the Probation Boards Association, the organisation which represents and supports the 42 probation boards in England and Wales, discovered that technician call-out fees for French IT services company Steria, which is responsible for supporting the National Probation Service’s IT infrastructure, rose from £485 during normal working hours, to £2,661 on weekday evenings, £8,704 on Saturdays and £11,600 on Sundays.

For the IT director, managing the outsourcing relationship can also end up taking as much, or more, time than managing the process internally. For example, the IT director of a large financial house – who wishes to remain anonymous – has been struggling to cope with the demands of his outsourcing provider for a year. His company decided to outsource the IT department’s infrastructure and help desk roles to a services provider in order to reduce costs, but he has been given sole responsibility for liaising with the outsourcer, which is proving to be very time consuming.

“I could quite happily have kept a small team of 15 or so occupied with what I considered vital work, but that would have cost £1 million, which wouldn’t have looked good on the balance sheet, so the CFO vetoed it.” Instead, he says, he has been working by himself, and has had the task of trying to educate the outsourcer about the company’s network so that it can then support him and his users.

C O N T A C T

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