Humanizing the Service Desk

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Introduction

The Service Desk industry is moving at an ever-faster rate. Tasked with supporting an increasing array of technologies, services, software and devices, Service Desks have to be flexible and make decisions about what they do support and what they don’t. Additionally, Service Desks are exploring new ways to offer support be it through self service and self help, social media, or implementing their own technologies such as Asset Management, remote support and new ITSM software and add-ons. What all of this means is that support is changing as technology pushes Service Desks to consider how they operate and how they can improve the way that they support customers. However, despite all of these technological advances and changes in the way people work, the Service Desk industry is still very much customer focused and customer driven – so how do we ensure that the service delivered is still human? How can service maintain the personal touch when it’s delivered through live chat or without any human interaction at all through self help?

This guide will identify some key ways to keep the Service Desk human and ensure that customer service stays at the front and centre of everything that the Service Desk does.

Keeping service human

With a multitude of different ways to support customers, it’s easy to forget that service needs to be human. Human interaction is a significant part of IT support, but there are large changes in how users expect service and support to be delivered. When we think about retail websites such as Ebay® and Amazon®, there are pages and pages of support questions and answers to wade through until you’ll be able to find a phone number and actually speak to someone. Enabling and empowering customers to find their own answers to their problems is increasingly becoming accepted as providing a good support mechanism – why spend 5 minutes on the phone when you can search for your own answer in a matter of minutes?

These changes are finding their way into the Service Desk arena as customers become more au fait with using these systems of self service and not picking up the phone to find out the answer. Indeed, what we are increasingly seeing is that Service Desks are struggling to keep pace with customer and business demand to provide self help and self service and to develop it to the standard that customers are accustomed to when they shop online at home. What makes the online experience so appealing for customers is that they can shop in their own time and to their own schedule. Additionally, online commerce sites offer a range of customer reviews, ratings, and opinions and there is the ability to engage in online conversations with customer support agents. The challenge is, therefore, to offer the same level of self support service in the office as can be experienced at home without sacrificing customer service. Below are some key ways to achieve this.
Culture

There will always be users who will adapt to self service much more readily than others. Indeed, the major problem with self service is not in the technology and content but in encouraging people to use it and weaning them off of firing off an e-mail or picking up the phone. There are significant benefits of self service to the Service Desk – not least of which is the amount of time that can be saved and the reduced cost of support – but it is important to remember that the Service Desk has to deliver the service that its customers demand and expect. Good self service solutions should always be underpinned by a continuing provision for phone and e-mail support, and it must remain at a high standard. It is important that customers are aware that self service is only one channel of support; it should never be the only one. Despite the advances in self service technology and its increasing user acceptance, it is still true that there is no substitute for human interaction.

Customer service skills

It is easy to forget that the most important asset your Service Desk has is the customer service skills of your Service Desk team. In a recent webinar, we found that attendees voted customer service skills as the most important attribute they look for in a potential candidate. Customer service skills trumped technical knowledge and other skills and qualifications. What this demonstrates is that despite the variety of support channels that Service Desks offer, customer service is still overwhelmingly the key asset for an Analyst to possess – this underlines that we very much exist in a customer service industry.

With this in mind it is important that customer service skills are developed through training and are constantly monitored. Providing training for soft skills will ensure that Analysts are consistently striving to improve and make sure that they are developing and demonstrating the right habits. Managers should also ensure that they are monitoring Analysts’ calls and e-mails on a regular basis to determine if they are meeting the required standards for the desk. By constantly monitoring, managers can determine if there are any areas of weakness and where improvements can be made.

Deliver customer service through technology

It is important to make sure that technology is underpinned by a high level of customer service – the customer needs to feel that they are being dealt with in a human and personal way, even if the interaction is via technology rather than by telephone or face-to-face. This is also true of remote support where it needs to be explained to the customer what the Analyst is going to do; whether the customer is comfortable with the Analyst taking control of their machine; and the reason behind offering support in this way. Remote support offers a great opportunity to improve support and enhance the ability for Analysts to solve user problems and issues. Being able to fix more incidents will improve the impression of the Service Desk and, by
extension, enhance the customer experience. It is very poor etiquette to jump straight onto someone’s machine without first establishing the rules and boundaries. What we’re saying here is that technology offers a wealth of opportunities to improve customer support, and to deliver better service, but it is vitally important that technological advances to not come at the expense of reduced customer service. Technology should be leveraged to improve the customer experience, not to replace the human element and customer service aspect of service delivery.

**Social Media**

Social media is growing at an astonishing rate, and there are real opportunities to utilise the technology to improve the customer service experience. Social media offers customers the ability to ‘project’ their issue and hope that the company will respond to them. From a support angle, social media provides Analysts with the opportunity to interact with customers through Twitter® or Facebook® - it is important to ensure that these channels of support maintain the human element by ensuring that Analysts use their real identities and pictures if possible. This humanizing of support has been shown to have worked effectively for companies such as Dell® and Comcast®. When Comcast® started out they had standard Comcast® company names - now, however, each agent has their own picture and personal address like AlexComcast. This personal touch has allowed many more users to actively engage with the company, and has raised their levels of satisfaction – this is, for many, elusive jewel of the support industry.

Aside from Analysts offering support through social media, there is also the opportunity to utilise user forums and support groups to offer peer-to-peer support. What we are seeing is that IT users are becoming more and more tech savvy, and having forums where they can offer support to each other is a great way to tap into this knowledge source and allow customers to support each other. This method of support is a great way for customers to engage and interact with each other and allows Analysts the opportunity to offer advice and support when and where it’s needed.

**Know your customers**

It is vital to ensure that whatever the channel of support you are delivering the service that you have agreed (or sold) with your customers. If there are SLAs in place then they need to be adhered to, but additionally Service Desks make promises to customers in terms of customer service and expectations. Through whatever channel an incident is raised, the desk needs to demonstrate ownership and responsibility and keep the customer updated throughout the process. It’s important to remember that every channel of support needs to have the same uniform service to ensure that one channel does not slip through the net. This is especially important if Service Desks are introducing new channels for support such as live chat or self service – one bad experience for the customer might mean that they are dissuaded from using this channel again which will undo all of the work that has been put in to developing it.
Knowing your customers’ constraints, their knowledge and level of understanding, their issues and common complaints will put you in tune with their needs and those of the business. The Service Desk must understand who their customers are; how and where they use support; and what you can do to make their lives easier. A sound understanding of the business is vital if the Service Desk wants to move to become a core business asset and become an integral part of the business. Technology is great, but there really is no substitute for human understanding and awareness.

**Learn from your customers**

This may seem a strange concept, but if desks have savvy users within the organisation, then why not use them? Sometimes analysts do not have an answer to the users’ problems so why not appeal for help? You could create a page on the desk’s web portal and allow users to post solutions or suggestions. Some might think that such a suggestion undermines the desk’s competency, but it does show that the people who staff the desk are only human and cannot be expected to know everything. In addition, it shows that staff are being proactive in searching every possible source for a solution, and if users are tech savvy enough, then they may just find one. Users who spend all day tied to their Blackberries may well have a much greater and more intimate understanding of the devices than the desk – by appealing for help this knowledge can be put to good use. Taking these steps demonstrates that support is not a one way process as, after all, it is in the Service Desk’s and the user’s interest to arrive at a solution. Offering human service means harnessing and utilising all of the knowledge that is available, whatever the source it is derived from.

**Conclusion**

The underlying message of this report is that all Service Desks need to retain the human element of empathy, understanding and exceptional customer service. Technology should be used to enhance the customer experience, not detract from it. If Service Desks have any fears that self service and other automated support functions will make the Service Desk redundant, they are completely unfounded – there will simply never be a substitute for the human knowledge and support system. Additionally, whilst there is a strong move towards self service technologies owing to customer demand and the belief that it is an acceptable channel of support, such moves are still highly dependent on culture. There will be some users who will always want to speak to someone in person, and we must ensure that this provision is always there. Striking the balance between what customers demand and what the Service Desk is willing and able to offer is a difficult balance: understanding your customers will aid immeasurably in ensuring that the balance is the right one.

Using new support channels should be encouraged but it is important that there are rules, boundaries and etiquette. Remote support is a fantastic way to deliver great service and quick fixes, but it must be used in a uniform way with proper rules of use established. The better the customer experience of new technology, the more
accepted and established it will become by the user community. This is the goal of any Service Desk, but this can only be achieved if Service Desks remain human and retain the personal touch.
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About The Service Desk Institute (SDI)

Founded in 1988 by Howard Kendall, the Service Desk Institute (SDI) is the leading authority on service desk and IT support related issues, providing specialist information and research about the technologies, tools and trends of the industry. It is Europe’s only support network for IT service desk professionals, and its 800 organisation members span numerous industries.

Acting as an independent adviser, SDI captures and disseminates creative and innovative ideas for tomorrow's service desk and support operation. SDI sets the best practice standards for the IT support industry and is the conduit for delivering knowledge and career enhancing skills to the professional community, through membership, training, conferences, events and its publication SupportWorld magazine. It also offers the opportunity for international recognition of the support centre operation through its globally recognised Service Desk Certification audit programme.

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