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Help Your Help Desk

Tips For Improving Help Desk Efficiency

Key Points

- Leverage available helpers within your help desk solution.
- Knowledge bases can limit those bothersome 10- to 15-minute help desk calls that can hamstring your IT staff.
- A coherent escalation process enables your staff to handle level 2 and higher concerns in a consistent, reasonable fashion.
- By logging all help desk calls, you will see patterns that can tell you the sorts of problems your employees are having and how to prioritize them.

Your IT staff has been cut in half. You're in the process of upgrading your server configuration to leverage virtualization and data encryption. You're comparing proposals from different email management service vendors. And, in the middle of all this action, you get a phone call from someone in payroll who is in a panic because he's unable to enter his password and can't access his accounting software. You spend five minutes calming the guy down and another five minutes diagnosing his machine remotely.

Granted, the aforementioned scenario is extreme, but your help desk should be able to help you as much as it purports to help your employees. Ideally, your payroll employee could have found information about his password problem in an easy-to-reference knowledge base and accessed a process that would have walked him through the steps to automatically reset his password.

So, what can you do to improve your help desk efficiencies, particularly in this economic climate? Here are a few tips to get you started.

■ Check Your Current Help Desk Solution

Time- and cost-cutting tools may already be a part of your current help desk solution, says Michele McFadden, director of product management at Numara Software (www.numarasoftware.com). "You might have a service desk tool that offers an automatic password reset option that's integrated with Active Directory or a self-service portal where users can search a knowledge base and see if there's anything published out there that resembles their problem," she says.

According to McFadden, companies often have eschewed such applications because they think users won't know how to use them, and IT doesn't have time to train them. "But when you're doing double the work, you really want to spend that little bit of time to put something in place there, so that next time a customer calls, you walk them through that self-service, walk them through that password reset so that they can do it again the next time," she says.

■ Set Up Knowledge Base Processes

If you haven't already, implement a user knowledge base, says Nick Cavalancia, vice president of Windows management at ScriptLogic (www.scriptlogic.com). "HDI says there is a 15% reduction in support calls when users can solve issues themselves," Cavalancia says.

McFadden says that putting together a knowledge base doesn't necessarily mean you have to hire a full-time knowledge architect to build it. "It's just when you solve a problem, and you say, 'Hey, wait a second. We've run into that before,' it should be easy just to publish that and make it available to the users," he says.

■ Have An Escalation Process In Place

Jeff Connally, president and CEO of managed help desk solutions provider CMIT Solutions (www.cmitsolutions.com), says that getting a help desk solution that integrates into your ticket systems means that your help desk can solve a high percentage of user questions, but when a level 2 answer is needed, the IT staff can get right on it.

"It's those 10- to 15-minute questions that knock an in-house staff off track and dilute their effectiveness. A ticketing system [can] really give the power to your help desk," Connally says.

■ Log Every Help Desk Call

Make sure you log each one of your help desk calls in both a descriptive fashion to provide you with the nature of the problem and a coded one so that you know what product or process is causing the difficulty, says Connally. "This gives you a way to prioritize what the critical issues are so you can determine the root cause of the reason the person called," he says.

Too often, in-house IT staffs run from fire to fire because no one has put together a big-picture overview about why problems are occurring. "For example, if people are having trouble with PowerPoint, maybe it's worth holding a series of classes for the departments that are trying to use it but aren't well-trained. That might be a much lower-cost solution instead of reactively handling 100 questions a month," Connally says. ■

by Robyn Weisman

It's The Little Things

Some of the most time-consuming help desk issues are completely avoidable with some common sense. Give employees a list of ways to avoid or minimize trouble and conserve your help desk resources for more complex issues.

These suggestions come from Michele McFadden, director of product management at Numara Software (www.numarasoftware.com). McFadden suggests emailing a list of these and other simple tips to employees, as well as posting these suggestions at desks, common areas, and on your company's internal Web site.

- When in doubt, reboot before you contact your help desk. "Whether it's rebooting because your computer is frozen, and you're afraid to touch anything, reboot or just do your reboot on a semi-regular basis," says McFadden. "Some people go six months or longer without rebooting, and we all know there are processes out there that wind up taking up a lot of memory."
- Before contacting your help desk, whether via phone, email, or online form, make sure you know the basics of your PC, laptop, or other device. For instance, know the OS your machine uses, the version of the OS, and the name of your machine.
- Avoid third-party toolbars and other widgets that can slow down your machine. Although many of them are quite functional, they can have a negative performance impact on your machine because so many of them are constantly trying to index themselves and connect to the Internet.
- Choose a password for your machine and your applications that you can

remember but is not memorable. For example, choose some combination of letters, characters, and numbers that doesn't include, say, your birthday, anniversary, or other public information.

- If you're unable to successfully enter a password, double-check that you didn't leave the CAPS LOCK key on by mistake.
- Finally, memorize your password. You should know by now that leaving a Post-it reminder in your desk—or worse, on your monitor—is not a good idea.

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