

5 WAYS TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE YOUR SERVICE DESK

Written by Stephen Mann, March 2019



Introduction

The world of IT support has changed significantly in recent years. Not only have IT services, and therefore IT support capabilities, become more important to business operations, the needs and expectations of organizations, including those of employees and third-parties, have also increased. The way that IT services are sourced, delivered, and supported has also changed, with more and more services procured externally when it makes business sense to do so.

This paper looks at the impact these changes have on IT service desk operations, in particular on what it means for the IT service management (ITSM) tools used to deliver IT support and – potentially – wider enterprise service management scenarios. In doing this, the paper covers:

- The common challenges faced by IT service desks
- The need to “work smarter, not harder” – in particular through the use of fit-for-purpose ITSM tools and the optimization of workflows and automation
- The need for people, teams, and organizations to work better together
- Working optimally through better metrics.

Please read on to find out more.



Understanding the Common Challenges Faced by IT Service Desks

Your IT service desk will not be alone in feeling the various pressures on IT support – with not only the higher volumes of IT issues and requests but also a need to deliver a “better, faster, and cheaper” service. Something that requires even more consideration and action than the previously-popular mantra for IT service desks to “do more with less.”

Some of the common challenges faced by (IT) service desks are new, while others are old (and some perhaps significantly older). Some are internal, and some are external. And some require people and process-based change, while others require better-enabling support (and ITSM) technology. Plus, of course, some might require change across all three (of people, process, and technology).



Not all IT service desks will be affected by all the common challenges, but you might recognize some of the following ten examples:

1. Needing to deal with higher volumes of issues and requests with continued budget limitations
2. Rising employee and stakeholder expectations of service delivery and support
3. Greater business and IT complexity, including providing support for the changing technology landscape and the nuances of enterprise service management needs (including tooling)
4. Needing to work together better in delivering services and support – with both internal and external parties – including managing third-party service delivery and support performance in service integration and management (SIAM) scenarios¹
5. ITSM tool suitability across a variety of modern ITSM and enterprise service management needs, including consumer-grade self-service portals and service catalogs that present available services based on entitlement
6. Staff recruitment and retention, plus upskilling and reskilling, issues
7. Getting service management “basics” such as self-service and knowledge management right
8. Unsuitable performance measures – with decade-old metrics potentially out of line with modern business and employee expectations
9. The need to deliver and demonstrate value and better business outcomes
10. Using support technology to best advantage, including new capabilities offered by artificial intelligence (AI).

Even if not explicitly stated above, these ten challenges will also be applicable in enterprise service management scenarios. And in addressing them, and other common service and support challenges, there’s a need to identify and progress a number of opportunities to improve.

¹ The SIAM model is an approach to managing multiple suppliers of services. It integrates the services (including support) from both internal and external service providers to deliver end-to-end services that meet business requirements. From a support perspective, this requires the passing of issues and resolutions, information, and changes between different parties, different tools, and different processes.

There's a Need to “Work Smarter, Not Harder”

With much-higher workloads, plus a need to both understand and work within more-complex and more-complicated organizational and service-delivery structures, service desk practices and the enabling technology need to be focused on making life simpler and easier for everyone involved while still delivering better outcomes.

This necessary improvement can be viewed through a number of different lenses:

1. Improving Things for People

There are many different types of people involved in, and impacted by, support. There are the employees, and potentially external customers, who require help and assistance. There are the service desk staff plus the other employees who are consistently or occasionally involved in support activities. And third-parties that range from service providers to the suppliers of goods.

All these people, teams, and organizations need to work together to achieve the resolutions to issues, or to provide the services, that allow employees and business operations to work. And in working smarter not harder, the latter two people types – i.e. support staff and third-parties – need to be able to work (together) in a way that's both good for them individually and collectively. Plus, for the employees and potentially external customers who are ultimately supported.

This is done through the adoption of appropriate strategies, policies, and operational models that make the best use of ITSM practices and enabling tools. The latter two enablers are covered next.

2. Getting Maximum Benefit from the Employed Technology

The “employed technology” should include a fit-for-purpose ITSM tool as a minimum, with other technology solutions used as needed. In the case of the ITSM tool, it's important that it's truly able to help, not hinder, the involved people and the work that flows between them.

Sadly, however, dissatisfaction with ITSM tools and the resultant level of tool/vendor churn continues to be high in the industry, with the reasons for dissatisfaction commonly being the failure to deliver against customer-organization needs related to one or more of:

- **Accessibility** – including the speed/responsiveness across multiple access methods and global locations
- **Flexibility** – from the speed of implementation (and time to value) to the ease of change (and for use cases within and outwith of IT)
- **The ease of use and intuitiveness of the analyst console and self-help capabilities (for employees and customers)** – including meeting the modern need for the attributes experienced with popular personal-life services and apps
- **The desire for more automation** – to reduce any heavy reliance on manual effort and the associated cost
- **Alignment with industry best practice** – especially ITIL in the case of IT support
- **Insight** – the available native reporting and analytics capabilities
- **Integration capabilities** – from call-center telephony integration through to interoperability with the tools and processes used by other business units and third-parties
- **Collaboration capabilities** – again both across other business functions and with third-party service providers
- **Supporting tool use cases outside of IT** – potentially via corporate enterprise service management or back-office digital transformation strategies
- **Value for money** – where the very high costs aren't justified by the functionality delivered by the tool.

Sadly, the various combinations of the above issues result in ITSM tools (plus the associated support operations) that struggle, then fail, to deliver on the initial promise and the anticipated benefits of the corporate investment in the current way of delivering service and support.

This disconnect and the resulting dissatisfaction offers up the first way to improve your IT service desk and enterprise service management operations – it's the assessment of the fitness of your current ITSM tool, if you have one, in supporting the earlier list of IT service desk and enterprise service management challenges while avoiding the above list of common tool failures.

Ultimately, your tool needs to help more than it hinders, including how it allows people to work smarter not harder.

3. Optimizing Workflows and Exploiting Automation

While the previous list of common ITSM tool issues is important to understand, so is their impact. Because the wrong combination of support practices and technology will severely impact the ability of service desk agents, and their human touchpoints outside of the service desk, to communicate, collaborate, make decisions, and to do what needs to be done – i.e. to work well and to work well together when needed.

It's important here to understand that this is a multi-dimensional issue that will impact different organizations in different ways depending on how they currently work both inside and outside of the company. For example, there could be issues caused by different toolsets and disparate processes related to:

- IT, or other business function, support alone
- The whole IT department or another business function
- Multiple business functions (in enterprise service management and back-office digital transformation scenarios)
- Outsourced or multi-supplier scenarios.

One solution is to consolidate everyone onto a single operating model, including a single toolset, but a much more realistic, more secure, and cost-effective one – especially when third-parties are involved – is to ensure that there's interoperability between the toolsets and processes of the involved parties. With the aim of optimizing workflows across end-to-end service delivery and support.

There's also a need to introduce automated capabilities whenever the use of automation delivers superior operations and outcomes over manual activities. With three popular AI-powered support use cases, that are already available to help, being:

1. Virtual assistants or chatbots
2. Automated ticket categorization, prioritization, and routing
3. Content-based knowledge and assistance provision.

All this provides the second way to improve your IT service desk and wider enterprise service management operations – and it's something that's included in the new ITIL 4 best practice as a guiding principle for ITIL: "Optimize and automate."

Working Together for Better IT and Business Outcomes

While some might think that IT is all about technology, particularly as more automation is used to speed up processes and deliver better outcomes, the reality is that IT is powered by people. And, most importantly, people working together with common goals. The same is true for other business functions too.

This collaboration is important to service desk success on a number of fronts, and it's improved by two things in particular (in addition to better processes and technology use, although there are of course overlaps):

1. Better Knowledge Sharing

The topic of knowledge sharing could easily be a paper in its own right, but here's a quick summary of some of the key points to understand and address in order to reap the available benefits:

- **Get the focus of knowledge sharing right** – this includes the understanding that knowledge sharing is reliant on more than just the capture and curation of knowledge.
- **Appreciate how hard knowledge sharing success can be** – including the complexities of accurately capturing knowledge from people.
- **There's a need to change corporate, or at least service desk, ways of working and culture** – to promote the need to share and reward the sharing of knowledge. Making this as much about people change as process and technology change.
- **Make knowledge sharing part of business-as-usual activities** – rather than a separate process or bolt-on that can easily be neglected.
- **Make knowledge capture easy** – for some in IT, this will involve Knowledge-Centered Service (KCS) good practice. It will also require fit-for-purpose technology-based assistance.
- **Make knowledge use easy** – this covers a number of things, from the ease of accessibility and knowledge identification, through the ease of understanding, to the ease of content application or consumption. This should include making knowledge availability as frictionless as possible through multiple access points or delivery methods.

Remember that these key points also apply to enterprise service management scenarios. Plus, it should also be appreciated that knowledge sharing is now a three-dimensional support need. Firstly, there's the original, two-decade-old, support staff need for knowledge, which is now provided for by modern ITSM tools through in-context knowledge provision, including – for IT support – second-line knowledge articles and details of related incidents and changes, known errors, involved configuration items, etc. Secondly, there's knowledge availability and consumption related to employee self-service and self-help. And thirdly, there's the need for knowledge to fuel the AI-based capabilities mentioned in the earlier "Optimizing Workflows and Exploiting Automation" section.

This is the third way to improve IT service desk and wider enterprise service management performance, taking the steps needed to improve your knowledge sharing capabilities such that it will, in turn, better enable staff performance, self-help capabilities, and the potential to exploit new AI capabilities.

2. Working Better Across Team and Organizational Boundaries

No matter where you work within an organization, it's been a long, long time since "working together" was solely limited to the people in the same room as yourself. Of course, technology has helped, from the telephone, through business applications, to email and other forms of messaging; and more recently, social-network inspired capabilities such as collaborative digital workspaces.

However, these technologies are often focused on improving communication. Whereas most ITSM tools are focused on the efficient flow of work – especially in automating the commonly-adopted ITSM processes to make life easier for those who provide service and support.



Such ITSM tools have been of great assistance in facilitating the adoption of ITIL processes (now viewed as practices in ITIL 4) including incident management, service request fulfillment, change management (now called “change control” in ITIL 4), and problem management. But, as with older versions of ITIL best practice, the tool capabilities were commonly focused on an insular use case, where IT services are provided and managed internally with no need to cater for scenarios such as:

- Enterprise service management strategies or even simple needs related to working (within the organization) across business function boundaries and teams. For instance, tasks related to employee on-boarding and off-boarding.
- Managing the services delivered by third-parties such as cloud service providers.
- Working in outsourced arrangements, including multi-sourcing models where meeting SIAM-related service management needs is critical.

Now, however, modern service management needs require workflows and technologies to be able to cater for these more complex service delivery and support scenarios – to provide the seamless and frictionless extension of workflows into other teams, operations, and even external providers. It’s the need to make working together easier, from the ability to simply pass requests for help, information, or change to external providers to being able to quickly provide end-to-end insight into service performance, outcomes, and improvement opportunities (across all the involved parties). Such that the assortment of different service providers involved – whether internal or external – are working together for the common good.

The fourth way to improve your IT service desk is creating an operational model – enabled by appropriate people, processes, and technology – that allows the different service providers involved in service delivery and support to easily work together in meeting the needs of your end users or customers. With SIAM not just limited to IT service delivery and support, but also applicable to other business functions.



Working Optimally Through Better Metrics

While the previous four ways to improve the service desk are all important in their own way, there's also an overarching need to address here – that of the suitability and quality of your service desk metrics.

From one perspective – usually, the service-provider perspective – the metrics might appear great, because they're a series of performance targets that are consistently being met, with a big tick in the performance checkbox. However, they might be doing your service desk more harm than good – masking the real level of performance relative to the evolving needs of the organization and its employees.

The bottom line here is whether the employed metrics are fit for purpose in gauging whether your service desk is truly meeting the changing business expectations relative to operational performance, outcomes, and improvement. If it's not, which is likely given the following list of common metrics mistakes, then your service desk runs the risk of succumbing to the (untrue) management metaphor of the frog that's slowly boiled alive, with it unable to sense and react to the incremental, but perilous, change it finds itself in.

These commonly-observed metric issues and mistakes include that:

- Performance measurement and metrics are approached incorrectly.
- Metrics focus on what IT, or another business function, does rather than what it achieves (through what it does).
- Too many metrics are captured and shared.
- There's no structure for metrics, including no hierarchy or sense of their relative worth.
- Metrics can drive the wrong behaviors.
- The reports offered by ITSM tools can be outdated because they're not kept up to date with the customization organizations do in their tool – hence the organization is managed based on inaccurate information.
- The metrics portfolio rarely changes, other than targets being tweaked, despite the numerous changes happening within the support ecosystem.

The latter issue and any combination of the previous issues and mistakes should be enough alone for a reassessment of your current service desk metrics portfolio. But there's also more driving the requirement for metric change – with the evolving needs of the organization and its employees bringing about the need for two important perspectives of IT service desk performance in particular:

1. **Value-focused metrics** – because the business conversation has moved from cost to value, and while costs and budgets are still important there's also now a growing need to deliver and demonstrate value.
2. **Employee-experience-related metrics** – thanks to consumerization, employees now expect more in their personal lives and then bring these higher expectations into the workplace.

Hopefully, all of this makes sense and will be a catalyst for change in terms of your IT service desk's measurement of operational performance, outcomes, and improvement. However, as with the earlier section on "Working Better Across Team and Organizational Boundaries," the required improvement in metrics not only relates to tracking and reporting the right metrics and focusing on outcomes as well as outputs, there's also a need for end-to-end measurement and insight.

The critical point to appreciate here is that, while excuses might be made (such as that issues "get lost" or are too hard to manage when they go outside of the organization to be addressed by third-parties), employees and customers don't care – because they don't differentiate between the various service providers involved.

This all offers up the fifth way to improve your IT service desk and wider enterprise service management operations, optimizing work and workflow through the accurate measurement of end-to-end performance and outcomes – taking corrective actions as necessary. With a focus on the important things – for different groups of stakeholders – not just on the mechanics of support performance.



Next Steps

This paper covers a lot of ground in sharing five ways to significantly improve your IT service desk and wider enterprise service management operations:

1. Assessing the fitness of your current ITSM tool in supporting the common service desk challenges and avoiding the common tool failures.
2. Optimizing and automating, especially optimizing through automation.
3. Taking the steps needed to improve your knowledge sharing capabilities.
4. Creating an operational model that allows different service providers to easily work together in meeting the needs of your employees or customers.
5. Accurately measuring end-to-end performance and outcomes through fit-for-purpose metrics.

If you want to find out more about improving your IT service desk capabilities and outcomes, then there's more information available in an accompanying webinar called ["5 Ways to Significantly Improve Your Service Desk."](#)





About 4me

4me allows an organization's internal and external service providers to collaborate seamlessly, while the level of service that each party provides is tracked in real time. The unique features that 4me provides for service integration and management (SIAM) dramatically improve the success of selective outsourcing.

The self-service capabilities of 4me make it possible for organizations to offer their employees online support for any type of question, issue, or order. 4me makes it easy for all functions that support the core business – such as IT, HR and finance – to increase their support efficiency and, in turn, improve the productivity of all employees.



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