



Put the “Help” Back into Help Desk

Jack Wagner, Practice Director, Technology & Integration, Vitalize Consulting Solutions, Inc.

Technology in health care is becoming increasingly more critical and its sophistication is certainly attempting to outpace our knowledge pool at every turn. As demands by regulatory agencies, physician committees, and patients come pouring into our doors; our Information Technology (IT) departments are adjusting to new changes, applications, and concepts at phenomenal rates. With the added influx of less experienced user communities, due to the move toward CPOE and the proliferation of departmental systems, it sometimes seems impossible to keep up.

Who do we have at the frontline handling the first call of any issue? Realistically, the people taking the brunt of customers' onslaughts are a group of people critical to the success of any IT department. This group is, many times, made up of personnel just beginning their careers in the technology field, which creates a tough challenge for them to keep up with all the new applications, equipment, and processes as it shoots past them. These brave souls staff the organizational “help desk.”

In many healthcare organizations, the help desk has the distinction of being the most visible portion of the IT department. This visibility also creates the potential to form either a positive or negative perception of the IT Department as a whole. Unfortunately, due to the challenges listed above and an array of other issues, many help desks have become known as “helpless desks.” In fact, many organizations throughout the years have changed the name of their help desk to support desk, support team, IT call center, and many variations thereof that move away from any unfortunate derisions of an informative name.

While many help desks have really done nothing to earn the unfortunate name that is given to them, sadly, many others have earned it time and time again. What causes our help desks to fail? Is technology moving too fast to keep up? Are we not hiring the right people to staff the help desk phones? Are we not answering the phones when they ring? Is our operating environment unnecessarily complex? Is our documentation not being kept up to date?

There are many factors that lead to the help desk's negative image, but luckily there are things that can always be done to repair this damage, or if it has not happened yet, to substantially curb the possibility of its occurrence altogether. As we all know by now, it is much better to be proactive rather than reactive.

So, what can we do? With the myriad of solutions and options out there, several basic factors remain at the forefront of this endeavor. Briefly stated, they are: performance metrics, proper measurement of performance metrics, regular reporting to the customer community, and ongoing quality assessment.

Performance Metrics Simply stated, performance metrics are what a help desk lives and dies by, and therefore, are an absolute requirement to ensure that the job is done in a reasonable time period and an efficient manner. Without metrics to measure our teams by, it is difficult to know how we are performing. Here are a few examples, though they are only a small fraction of the metrics that need to be measured:

- Number of calls per month - This is the number of Support Team calls compared to the number of nodes, and it conveys several things:
 - If each call is being entered into the ticket tracking system

- If the number of calls received are too few or too many for the current environment
- Staff to calls received ratio
- First call resolution - This lets us know how many issues are solved during the first call from the customer. You want this percentage number to be high (i.e. $\geq 80\%$).
- Average length of each call - This lets us know the average amount of time an agent spends on the phone per call. If this time is fairly long, than first call resolution should be great. Conversely, if it is short, than first call resolution percentages will be low.
- Work order closure time – This is a statistic showing how long it takes to close an average work order once opened. This should be separated into categories for Urgent, Critical, Non-critical, and Information type calls.

Metric Measurement First, metric measurement compares how much work the help desk team is doing to that of best practice values for similarly sized and organized healthcare enterprises. Secondly, it can point out gaps in performance that may be related to: understaffing, under trained personnel, or a number of other factors. Analysis of these gaps can help identify a mechanism to close them. Thirdly, the measurements just might illustrate that the help desk is already doing an exemplary job. We all dream to achieve number three.

Regular Reporting on Performance If there are metrics, show them off! Realistically, consistent communication about the service provided to our constituency is our responsibility. It also shows how well we are doing against the metrics set forth. If we have just established metrics and begun to measure them, it is possible that at first, we may end up reporting that we are not performing very well. Subsequently, after recurring education of the help desk staff on the processes and procedures required to hit the targets, as well as, training the customer on the expectations of proper IT service usage, these numbers will continue to improve and these reports will show the trend growing positively.

Also, statistic's go a long way to providing evidence of how well the help desk is performing when it falls under criticism. Let's face it, who among us has never received a call from our CIO telling us that a complaint was just received and that we have failed to please another customer? I would guess not many of us. These types of calls can really damage our leadership's overall perception of our help desk, regardless of our standard (dare I say stellar) performance. Well, would it not be great to have these reports to potentially debunk those types of overall claims?

Ongoing quality assessment is the final critical factor. Take for example that we are answering the phone in a reasonable amount of time, beating our established metrics, and all reports state that our help desk organization is running at optimum levels; does that mean that all is well and good with our customer base? Absolutely not...

We need to measure our quality on an ongoing and regular basis to ensure that our customers are happy with our performance. Most IT departments already have an annual quality survey implemented to measure overall customer satisfaction, but also recommended is the establishment of a work order completion-based survey. This survey is intended to be very short and therefore, very quick for a customer to complete. It is best to establish a method where this survey is sent to a certain percentage of the user community that had work orders closed on any given day. Also, those individuals should be selected randomly to ensure a good cross section of work order types will be covered. Many modern work order tracking systems have this capability; however, it may require the purchase of a separate module to fully implement.

What do you need to get started? Many of us have the right toolset in place already and may not be using it to our advantage. In the most basic form, a work order tracking system will be needed. There are many out there to choose from, and not only do they provide organizations with the method to receive, track, and properly close work orders, but they also provide reporting functions that can be used to measure current performance against metrics. Secondly, an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system is required to distribute incoming calls to a specific group of terminals that agents use

for the purpose of answering, logging, and tracking issues and/or resources. ACD reports provide critical insight into the number of calls received, the length of those calls, the average time customers must remain on hold before speaking with an agent, and a myriad of other statistics. They also enhance the capabilities that help desks have to support the customer organization.

In summary, help desks are a valuable part of any organization and critical to the overall success of any IT enabled project. Even if the implementation is on time and under budget, the project can still get a bad reputation if the help desk is not running smoothly. With some planning, work, and the right metrics, the help desk can be easily monitored for success and required improvements. Once improvements are identified, the help desk can move to the next level, where the phones are getting answered, problems are getting solved, and everyone knows the extent of effort put into maintaining the organization IT infrastructure and are happy with the results.

If you would like more information on this topic and the services that Vitalize Consulting Solutions, Inc. has to offer, please contact us at our Corporate Offices at 610-444-1233 or vcs@getvitalized.com. We are also always available on our website www.getvitalized.com.

Use of this document and the contents are VCS Intellectual Property and strictly for use by Vitalize Consulting Solutions, Inc. clients. VCS Confidential 2008.