The Evolution of the Service Desk: White Paper

September 2012

Neil Penny
Product Marketing Manager
Sunrise Software

putting you first

sunrise

The Evolution of the Service Desk

Synopsis

Gartner analysts are predicting that by the year 2015, due to the wave of new Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) applications owned by departments and business owners, *"…35% of enterprise IT expenditures for most organisations will be managed outside the IT department's budget.*[1]*"*

Gartner's prediction demonstrates how integral operational systems have become the foundation of any business. The astounding rate of technological developments, coupled with the accessibility of these systems and increased process maturity has created a reliance on sustainable, flexible and agile solutions, which must sit hand-in-hand with the increasing number of communication channels available to customers. From on-premise installations to Software-as-a-Service, or from self-service to social media, enterprises must adapt quickly to cope with business and consumer trends that allow them to compete at any level.

With new developments emerging every day, how will the landscape for Service Desks look in ten, five or even one years' time, and will it continue to evolve in the same fashion as previous years?

In the beginning…

The traditional help desk emerged with the birth of the first mass market software and hardware as the needs of an increasingly complicated and distributed IT infrastructure dictated. It became commonly defined, by ITIL, as simply "*A point of contact for Users to log Incidents. A Help Desk is usually more technically focused than a Service Desk and does not provide a Single Point of Contact for all interaction.*"

With support being largely reactive the focus was on supporting the technology and fixing problems rather than necessarily providing a service to the end user. However, due to continued increasing demands the young help desk quickly grew from its modest beginnings as a manual system based on paper or, more commonly, home-grown spreadsheets and databases.

This maturing help desk software helped to standardise processes and brought with it additional productivity tools, such as remote control, asset discovery and a technical knowledge base, all

---

[1] Gartner's Top Predictions for IT Organizations and Users, 2012 and Beyond: Control Slips Away

integrated to assist support staff in delivering a more consistent and quality level of support.

As the internet arrived technology became openly accessible to the mass market through self-service leading to two major impacts. Firstly, a desire for more flexibility as consumers and users became more tech-savvy, and secondly a rapidly rising volume of incidents needing to be logged and fixed. With demands on call-out engineers spiralling, the internet became paramount for enabling a distributed Service Desk to efficiently serve a distributed workforce.

But with technology and organisational complexity increasing, businesses demanded tighter controls over IT and a greater alignment to strategies and objectives of the business. Finally here was the emergence of the modern day Service Desk, defined by ITIL as, "*The single point of contact between the Service Provider and the Users. A typical Service Desk manages incidents and service requests and also handles communication with the users*".

However, even with these standardised processes, more efficient servicing solutions and improved data capture processes, around 80% of the IT budget was going towards simply 'keeping the lights on'. This cost pressure led to IT budgets being consumed with less and less being available to innovate. The "do more with less" mantra was never more appropriate leading some to invest in the "one stop shop" approach of a common Service Desk fronting customer communication for all issues, whereas others took the approach of moulding their Service Desk tools into query management applications for other areas of business such as human resources, facilities, health and safety, compliance and many more.

With an increase in the number of communication channels, such as phone, mobile, email, web and instant messaging becoming available, so increased the expectation from customers that Service Desks should accommodate all of these. As the number of disparate platforms to be supported increased often no common operation and integration strategy existed within organisations to bring them together under one service umbrella.

The original centralisation of IT resources and the emergence of self-service and remote desktop tools were introduced to lower the cost of providing support and an attempt to unify an approach to service management. Self-service systems are now common practice as a valuable "call avoidance" tool, and in order to minimise the involvement of costly IT resources in day-to-day customer communication. This was part of a more integrated 'whole service' approach as customer requests included demands for non-fix related issues such as systems access, employee on-boarding and change requests.

Challenges still remain. The complexity of the IT environment ensures there are more things that could go wrong and the impact and cost to the business when they do is far higher. In turn this leads to a greater variety of technical controls to constantly monitor the IT estate and mitigate against the ever present risks and the associated impacts they bring. Support has truly become a competitive differentiator, focused on quality to avoid the potential of financial or reputational risks due to poor support or embarrassing service outages.

Today, many see configuration and integration to be the way forward incorporating a range of proactive communications via a range of channels, developed to ensure that end-users were always up-to-date with the latest system status. Many enterprises no longer shy away from using standard web service integration techniques to customise their 'out-of-the-box' toolset implementations, creating automation and interoperability between systems, improving visibility and collaboration between previous silos. The cloud has also become a viable model for consuming software applications. However, while there are benefits in not having to manage the environment or software upgrades, this too has to be closely managed as spending on business applications that come from budgets outside of traditional IT will only increase leading to the very real risk that departments other than IT may have the larger IT budget.

Welcome to the future…

The future is, in reality, already with us in many ways. We can expect increasing levels of maturity and ease in creating fully integrated solutions across a wide variety of disparate systems and applications, regardless of the location from where the service is provided.

Core factors in motivating future innovation include the continued escalation of support demands; an on-going focus on driving down costs, whilst still retaining quality; IT availability and data security. However, more than ever, speed of provisioning new services has become a key business and competitive differentiator. This agility will require support to not only become proactive but instead to become "predictive", ably supported by information from fully-integrated service management processes across the whole IT estate. As standard these will be aligned with business objectives and focussed on the core values that agility in IT can provide.

This drive for a more agile IT department will lead many to question their adopted processes, reset their expectations and embrace a more pragmatic and localised view of ITIL, with extensibility to other non-IT functions being a high priority. The complexity of the IT estate will likely increase rapidly as the "internet of things" enables a far greater number and all manner of devices to communicate and interoperate. This technology and integration alignment will allow the Service Desk to be a more closely integrated orchestrator for the provision of all services across a far wider spectrum of the IT ecosystem. Ultimately, an open and scalable architecture must be capable of being harnessed by IT and adapted to the changing landscape and needs of an organisation.

As well as previous channels of communication, social media will become increasingly important to the Service Desk, allowing instant, proactive support, integrated with complementary service management processes. Social media can also help improve viral brand protectionism via quick-thinking customer service and help avoid unnecessary public backlash. More complicated communication options will mean a larger emphasis on traceability of all interactions for governance requirements, and establishing burden of proof will become a must for all Service Desks and applications.

sunrise

By 2015, mobile application development projects targeting smartphones and tablets will outnumber native PC projects by a ratio of 4-to-1. Smartphone and tablet users will no longer accept access to limited interfaces with fewer, simpler features but instead will demand a fuller access using applications designed specifically for them that fully harness the location-aware nature of smartphones. The very idea of accessing the Service Desk 'on-the-go' will become an expected feature of all software and it is expected that by 2016 at least 50% of enterprise email users will rely primarily on a browser, tablet or mobile client instead of a desktop client[2]. However, email is just the start and even before then, IT departments will need to ensure that the wave of "Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)" and its security implications are adequately catered for with BYOD users set to double by 2014[3]. But BYOD isn't all about the impacts on IT departments. Staff too will see the lines of work and home-life becoming blurred with almost ubiquitous access to work resources at home, in the restaurant, in the coffee shop, on the commute and in the office.

Software-as-a-Service platforms will continue to evolve with the ease of "off-boarding" becoming as important to potential customers as the ease of initial "on-boarding", with limited vendor lock in and easy access to a full data archive. New SaaS licencing models such as "pay-as-you-use" utility pricing will begin to make inroads on traditional term contracts. The consumerisation of IT and the resulting expectations of the "app generation" will make the traditional long implementation cycle for some applications redundant as organisations demand immediate productivity through short-term implementations and long-term simplicity.

But it doesn't end there. Technological developments will allow almost anything to be integrated into web-centric business applications. How about the Service Desk integrated with "augmented reality" via Google Glass style location-aware applications that display relevant service-specific information to the user on a wearable heads-up display? In the future these integrations will occur via simple configuration employing user interfaces that anyone can use, rather than complex customisation via client-side scripting and server-side coding that both limits the imagination and complicates future changes.

Business software designed around the same concepts that keeps gamers playing the latest console blockbusters will also make an increasing impact, with modern applications introducing gamification[4] concepts allowing users to attain rewards, challenge other users and view their rankings in relation to others on leaderboards. Used as a motivational aid or tied to financial incentives this will become increasingly popular within the forward-thinking Service Desk and other business applications.

But many of these points are simply the continued leveraging of technology trends. What actually is the future of "IT Service Management" if the purchasing and consuming of IT continues to move towards the business and away from the more traditional budget owners in IT? Significant

---

[2] Gartner's Top Predictions for IT Organizations and Users, 2012 and Beyond: Control Slips Away
[3] Mobile Security Strategies: Threats, Solutions & Market Forecasts 2012-2017
[4] See http://gamification.org for full details

fragmentation is not only possible but indeed likely, and often compounded by the negative perception from the user base. To counter this erosion of influence the Service Desk will need to lean on its soft skills, embrace communication channels such as social media, and learn to market itself as an enabler and facilitator at the very heart of the business.

In an on-going process the convergence of business activities and point solutions, a common platform will emerge that includes elements of service management, project management, risk management, communication, and collaboration, coupled with best of breed integration capabilities to the wider IT ecosystem. Whether delivered from a public or private cloud, or from an on-premise installation, whether accessed from a traditional PC, tablet or smartphone, the future is a Service Desk derived from a fully integrated platform that allows IT to shift focus towards the common business goal of delivering the highest quality value-added services, at the right time, using the right resources, and at the right costs.

Isn't this therefore the future - next generation "IT Management" not simply "IT Service Management"?