

Serving Up Service -- Help Desk Evolution

By [David Nichols](#)



The service desk of today no longer acts as a "gatekeeper" but as more of an enabler of IT services. The modern service desk is the IT interface to the user community. It acts as the user's representative within IT.

In today's complex IT environments the terms "help desk" and "service desk" are often used interchangeably.

While most people don't really know the difference, or care for that matter, it's important for the IT professional to understand those differences as a practical matter of implementing a continuous service improvement program.

The initial version of the IT Infrastructure Library® (ITIL®) contained a volume titled "Help Desk." This volume combined the concept of the need for a central functional group within IT to, "... provide a central source of support for its group of users" and "... oversee the rectification of service problems on behalf of the user community."

ITIL Versions V2 and V3 describe Help Desks, Call Centers, and Service Desks. The Service Desk kicks the "Help Desk" up a notch by not only providing the single point of contact and restoration of service of the call center and help desk, but it also handles user issues that do not involve the disruption of services.

The Service Desk "... extends the range of services ... It not only handles Incidents, Problems and questions, but also provides an interface for other activities such as customer change and service requests, maintenance contracts, software licenses, Service Level Management, Configuration Management, Availability Management, Financial Management for IT Services, and IT Service Continuity Management."

Following I describe the relationship of Help Desks with Service Desks, and explain how you can and probably will have both in your ITIL-conformant organization.

Help Desk Evolution

The initial version of ITIL didn't separate the "function" from the "process." That is not surprising considering the genesis of the library and the technological dominance of the mainframe at the time the library was initially conceived and written.

Early in the history of IT the "help desk" turned out to be whoever responded when a user pushed the buzzer at the door to the computer room. As applications evolved from the data processing of batch input to online applications the need grew to support the end user when trouble occurred. Often the problem was not with the computer or communication, but with the application itself, so the users ended up tracking down some one in the application group.

In order to provide efficient support of the users, IT responded by setting up a group of individuals to take calls from users and to restore their service. As the IT infrastructure became more complex, IT organizations found many such "help desks" springing up; often around applications used throughout the enterprise.

As mainframes spawned "departmental computing" which spawned "end user computing" which spawned, "personal

computing” which spawned “internet computing” ... things were really getting out of hand.

IT organizations found that significant resources were being consumed providing restoration “help” in numerous “help desks” within the same enterprise. The early ITIL recognized that it was more efficient if an IT organization could offer a single point of contact for their users to contact to report a disruption of service. And that was pretty much all they did.

Where was a user to turn when they had a “problem” but nothing was broken; such as provisioning a new employee, getting an upgrade to a desktop application, gaining access to a needed application, and so on?

Enter the Service Desk

IT recognized the need to deal with user issues that didn’t involve “broken stuff” and responded by expanding the scope of the “help desk” to include providing support to the user for things that weren’t broken. Thus the “service desk” was born.

This emerging best practice was incorporated into the ITIL in its second refresh that was published in 2001. ITIL V3, which rolled off the press in 2007, clearly details the role of the Service Desk in the Service Operation volume of the Service Lifecycle.

Today IT organizations deploy a number of different organizational structures to meet their user’s requirements for support, including:

- Call Centers
- Help Desks
- Service Desks

Call Centers. A call center is most often used when it’s necessary to handle a large volume of incoming calls. Very little time is spent by call center personnel trying to restore the user’s impacted service. Instead the call center’s mission is to determine the nature of the user’s problem and direct the call to the appropriate second level support organization. This provides the user with a single point of contact, and provides a structured method of screening and distributing calls to the correct IT resource for resolution.

Help Desks. As mentioned earlier, the help desk normally focuses on coordinating IT resources on the timely restoration of the impacted IT service. The help desk is staffed with personnel with a general knowledge of the IT infrastructure. Using tools such as call tracking and knowledge base products help desk staff can restore the service or diagnose the incident sufficiently to allow escalation to an appropriate technical functional support staff for resolution. The help desk is all about “fixing stuff.”

Service Desks. The scope of a service desk can vary widely and is solely depending on the needs of the implementing organization. However, typically a service desk provides a source of support for:

- Resolution of disrupted IT services through Incident Management process
- Service requests through Request Fulfillment process
- Application queries
- Requests for “adds, moves & changes”
- Consumable requests for supported office products
- Collection point for user generated requests for change

In fact the list could include anything that the IT organization chooses to include in the scope of its “service desk.” After all, as the name implies its all about providing service to its users.

Summary

The service desk of today no longer acts as a “gatekeeper” but as more of an enabler of IT services. The modern service

desk is the IT interface to the user community. It acts as the user's representative within IT. One of its objectives when acting on behalf of the user is to improve service. It also provides advice, guidance as well as ownership of incidents and the restoration of normal IT services.

Service desk teams are equipped not only with technical expertise but are now "business savvy" and have the necessary communication skills to deal with the non-technical business user. "Geek speak" in the service desk is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

The "help desk" has come a long way from its days of computer room operators helping users at the computer room door to fully developed "service desks" capable of providing a wide range of support services to the business user community.

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