

Customer Support is a People Business



Technical Support Alliance Network

In this article Leigh Darby, Executive Director at TSANet Europe takes a detailed look at the changing role of support and in particular how expectations on support professionals have dramatically increased. The article explains in detail how emerging technologies and trends are impacting on customer support and how customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction are inextricably linked.

When a passenger sits down in one of our airplanes and notices that the table has not been cleaned, they will wonder whether we do the engine maintenance...

Sir Freddie Laker

The IT industry is in good shape according to the latest 'Effective IT Report' published by the UK's leading business and technology title, Information Age. The report reveals that public and private sector IT planners are doing much more than merely fire-fighting and, for the second year in succession, defensive IT strategies are in decline. So, now that there's a little breathing space on the horizon for IT departments, this is probably a good time to reflect on the changes in recent years, especially relating to customer support.

The role of customer support has undergone a radical transformation within organisations and IT vendors, in particular, are much more aware of the growing significance and impact that support has on the profitability of a business - how it affects the bottom line. One of the key reasons customer support is moving up the value chain is because end users are demanding much more from suppliers. Customers evolve and what was good enough yesterday will not be good enough today or tomorrow.

The Importance Of Satisfied Customers

As customers become more demanding so customer satisfaction becomes a bigger issue. Customer satisfaction is the cheapest way to improve profits and grow the business. For example, the accepted wisdom is that existing customers are between five and ten times more profitable than new customers. This is largely due to the decreasing cost of sale and increasing account efficiency. Pound for pound, euro for euro, more money spent creating a happy customer generates 20 times more business through referral than advertising.

It is interesting to note that customer satisfaction is largely about the 'people relationship' and experience shows that customers' express satisfaction in terms of:

- People rather than product qualities
- The responsiveness of the supplier to contact
- The customer 'getting more' than they expected
- Individuals within the supplier organisation taking ownership of the problem
- A willingness to recommend other suppliers or vendors to customers.

Customer satisfaction is inextricably linked with customer support. However, what is surprising is that when customers purchase technology they expect problems. In fact when problems don't happen, customers often believe they have been hidden rather than they didn't exist in the first place. It is fascinating, but recent research indicates that we tend to be happier with a company that has successfully resolved a problem than we are with a company where an issue has never arisen. What appears to be of most importance is how the supplier responds to customer concerns.



The Modern Support Professional

If customer support is much more focused on the 'people relationship' has this changed the role of support professionals?. The first notable difference if you were to walk into any modern support department is a physical one. Gone are the days of the bearded, sandal-footed techie who tended to be kept in the back office and rarely seen, let alone spoken to, by a customer.

Service and support is now incredibly customer driven, support professionals need to be much more relationship focused with good verbal communication skills. Today support involves a complex mix of technical knowledge, relationship management, daily customer dialogue, project management and general people management skills. Individuals in support need to be diplomatic, empathetic, and helpful and because of this we are seeing a new breed of support professionals emerging.

According to Sean Bucknall, director for technical support at CA, the profile of CA's support team has changed in parallel with the evolution of technology. CA's support group was once very stereotypical in that they were generally aged from 45 upwards and predominantly male. Now, with the advent of newer technologies, there is much more of a diverse mix of support professional from all kinds of backgrounds with and a much higher proportion of under 30's. In some areas nearly half of these support professionals are women.

Emerging Trends

Linked to these people changes (which are happening universally to most support organisations) are a number of market drivers or trends which also impact on the way customers are now supported:

- **IT At Your Service** - Managing 'IT as a service' is definitely the new mantra for IT departments today. Rather than thinking about technology as just a pile of equipment, the IT stack is being re-imagined as a series of services carefully mapped to the requirements of the business, ensuring the organisation is more flexible and responsive. By applying a more service-oriented approach to the way they think about IT, today's agile businesses are starting to leapfrog the competition.

This in itself has created a shift in the way the service desk and customer support is developing. From its initial role of providing a place to complain about IT, the service desk has evolved into a guardian of and repository for all aspects of infrastructure management process - from incidents to changes to pro-active service provision.

- **Complexity Requires Collaboration** - As businesses demand more and more value from their IT services, functionality and flexibility must keep pace. This inevitably means the complexity of the underlying technology and systems design must increase. The challenge is that complexity cannot be allowed increase at the expense of reliability of product or service. These complex systems are composed of many components - hardware, software and data - from multiple suppliers and vendors. There are natural consequences that affect the people at the 'sharp end' of the support operation.

First, they cannot know everything about the solutions they are supporting, let alone keep pace with their changes. Second, they need frameworks and processes to enable quick and robust interactions with other vendors when they need to collaborate. This is the role of organisations such as TSANet within the IT service industry. Provided TSANet-like services exist, support people can learn to confidently 'let go' of the technical issue to another expert - much like a runner passing on the baton in a relay race. Only together can the team can win the race - to respond to the mutual customer as quickly as possible.

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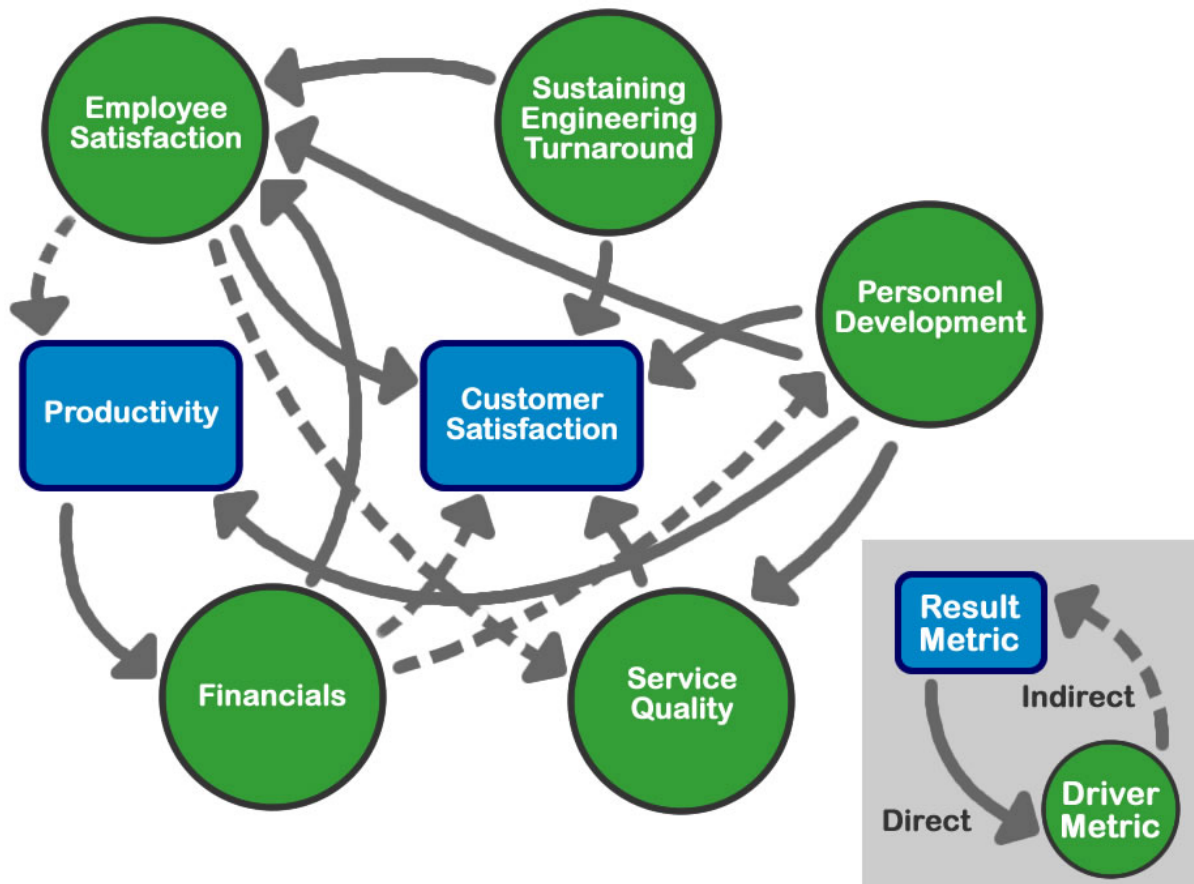
- **The Impact Of Offshoring** - According to leading technology analyst group, Gartner, the Indian subcontinent is the world's offshoring hotspot, boasting an industry now worth \$23.6 billion annually. In the next two years Gartner believes that European based companies will help to fuel further growth, spurring a 50 percent annual rise in offshore spending.

Making the decision to offshore is a fundamental change for any organisation and brings with it enormous language and cultural barriers. The impact this can have on your support function and ultimately customer satisfaction needs to be very carefully considered before embarking on an offshoring programme.

- **Remote Control** - Dealing with customers remotely is much more common place than it was in the past. Suppliers don't always send their support technicians on site to deal with a customer, issues are often resolved just as quickly and efficiently remotely. However in order to meet the demands of a remote customer, an organisation needs to have a good knowledge base in place and the appropriate infrastructure.

A Case In Point

All of the above is best summarised by looking at a case in point. CA is one of the world's largest IT management software providers, supplying a range of products to both the enterprise and small and medium businesses to the home and home office market. The company has recently undertaken a comprehensive Six Sigma Initiative to review its support processes. Six Sigma is a globally proven methodology and CA has been implementing this programme to improve its customer support processes (by improving both quality and efficiencies.)



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Outlined above is CA's web of influence diagram which captures the key drivers of customer satisfaction with technical support. It demonstrates how important employee satisfaction is on customer satisfaction and that this is a key metric within the organisation when assessing customer support. Earlier in the article we referenced how important 'people relationships' are and a disgruntled employee might not deliver a satisfied customer.

Sean Bucknall, Director Technical Support, CA, comments:

"People are more important than products in the support equation. If you think about it by the time a customer phones technical support, the response they receive is more important than product quality because the technology failure has already happened. And at this point, the link between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction is critical and a key metric as far as we are concerned. Customer satisfaction is driven by employee satisfaction - you can hear it in someone's voice when the person you are dealing with is smiling.

This comes through in our customer satisfaction surveys that show the engineers have a much greater influence on the overall satisfaction than any other part of the support service. We have a balanced scorecard in place as part of our Six Sigma initiative to manage technical support where the people section is given equal weighting to productivity, process and quality."

The Importance of People, Processes And Technology

People processes and technology are critical components in ensuring satisfied customers. Important people issues focus around communication, responsiveness and being able to demonstrate a caring approach. From a process point of view it is important that problems are fixed or replaced/rebated within a given timeframe. Technology helps organisations to capture the information and facilitate resolution. From TSANet's perspective, we provide organisations like CA with a legal framework and a code of conduct that ensures best practice and the fast resolution of multi-vendor customer issues. CA uses these support interactions to identify and resolve issues or to create a workaround to service a mutual customer.

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