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Incident Management - Do's and Don'ts

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Intended Audience

This White Paper is for IT Service Desk and Helpdesk Managers who are planning to implement a Service Desk based on ITIL® principles

About this White Paper

It is hoped this White Paper will be useful for anyone setting up a new Service Desk on ITIL® principles, or moving a current Help Desk to an ITIL® based single point of contact – by offering ideas and practical suggestions. The suggestions and observations contained in this article are taken from personal experience obtained over a number of ITIL® implementations.

Do – start with a baseline measurement of the current status of your Service/Help Desk

If you don't know where you are to start with, it is impossible to know if you have improved.

One of the most important measures you can take prior to your ITIL® Service Desk implementation is a Customer Satisfaction Survey – see our White Paper on Service Desk Metrics for more information.

Another important baseline to have is an assessment of the ITIL® maturity level of your Service Desk function and Incident Management Process. The tools to do a self assessment can be found on the ITSMF website (http://www.itsmf.com/bestpractice/selfassessment.asp). This tool, if answered honestly and by someone in your organisation with sufficient understanding and knowledge of your current processes and policies, will give you a baseline against which you can measure future progress.

Do – involve the Service Desk team in the planning stage of your Incident Management process

Very few people welcome change with open arms, change can be a scary process! Giving your team some ownership of the change from a Help Desk to an ITIL® based Service Desk will make the transition much easier.

Hold a few brainstorming sessions with your team – they answer the phones and log the calls every day, so they know the type of calls you will be receiving. Involve them in the testing of the new process and take onboard their suggestions. These are the people who will have to work with this process on a daily basis; it will be much easier if they are happy with it.

Do – ensure that the person taking on the Incident Management role has sufficient authority

One common mistake I have seen in ITIL® implementations is that the Incident Management role is often given to someone on the Service Desk, but they are not given the authority needed to ensure that the agreed Incident Management process is adhered to.

The Incident Manager will be checking the quality of the logged data and the resolution information sent to customers, they need to have the authority to re-open calls where the resolution information is inadequate or inappropriate and follow this up with the agents concerned.

It is very important for the Incident Manager to be able to direct Service Desk agents to take remedial action to resolve any issues with the calls they have been working on - if they are viewed as being a member of the team with no additional authority delegated to them, this task will be very difficult.

Do – talk to your customers

Find out what your customers want and expect from your Incident Management process.

The primary goal of Incident Management, and all ITIL® processes, is to improve the quality of service provided to the IT customers. If you don't ask them what they want, how do you know what you need to provide? Part of this involves the customer satisfaction survey mentioned earlier, another part should see you going out and talking to your customers. Find out what you are doing well and where you are letting your customers down.

I suggest convening focus groups of customers, representative of all levels of the organisation. Talk to them and find out what they want. Remember that you don't just have to please the people at the top; you need to provide high quality service to factory workers and CEOs alike.

The meetings are designed for you to get positive input about the improvements your customers are looking for. Find out what you are already doing well as well as the areas where you need to improve. It is very important that you set ground rules for these meetings – they should not turn into "moan" sessions about the IT Service, and they must certainly not be used as an opportunity to complain about members of the IT team.

Make sure you have an agenda, let the people involved know what you want to discuss before the meeting, this will give them a chance to talk with other people in their departments to get their viewpoints of the IT Service you provide.

These meetings can serve another very useful purpose: that is to build support for the changes you are making within the IT organisation out in the business – the people you involve in this way will be able to go out and spread the word about the positive changes being made to their colleagues.

Do – build a happy team

A service desk is a very stressful environment with a traditionally high turnover of staff. Each time a member of the Service Desk team leaves, a valuable resource walks out the door.

You cannot avoid stress on a Service Desk, but you can reduce the impact of this stress on your staff. You need to provide a safe environment for staff to discuss difficult customers – if you don't provide this environment within the Service Desk they will discuss these customers outside the department and this could cause you more issues with unhappy customers!

Have a debriefing session once a week, perhaps over afternoon tea. This needs to be a place where your team can vent their frustrations safely, have a laugh, a moan and share the issues that are impacting on their daily workload. You can use the time that your team spends in your meeting to serve another very valuable purpose – get some of your second level support staff to man the Service Desk during this time, this will give them a very valuable insight into the pressures faced by the Service Desk team every day.

Teambuilding exercises should not be underrated – getting the team out of the work environment doing something together will increase the sense of loyalty they have to the team and help them and you, understand how each member of the team "ticks". This could be a game of bowling one evening, an adventure education course or something similar – if you want your team to do this in their own time you need to make sure that it is something they are going to enjoy.

Do – look for and recognise the signs of stress in your team

Stress is one of the major reasons people leave the Service Desk. Most people can cope with short periods of stress, for example a Major Incident on the

Service Desk is likely to cause stress for the team. Customers will be phoning, probably upset with the situation, 2nd and 3rd level support may be coming to the Service Desk for more information, at the same time the team still has to deal with the normal Service Desk Workload. The stress caused in this situation can actually be positive, many people enjoy the thrill of meeting a new challenge, the most successful Service Desk agents thrive on stressful situations, they look forward to the adrenaline buzz that a crisis can give them; others will react quite differently to repeated stressful events.

Step back and look at how the team is coping. During a major crisis you will need all hands on deck, but at less frantic times, pay attention to any signs of stress in your team. Some signs of stress can be:

- Feeling close to tears much of the time
- Finding it hard to concentrate and make decisions
- Being short tempered with people at home and at work
- Feeling tired most of the time, Sleeping badly
- Feeling stretched beyond your limits at the end of the day
- Drinking and smoking more to help you get through the day
- Feeling that you just can't cope
- Eating when you're not hungry
- Feeling that you've achieved nothing at the end of the day

If you recognise these signs in someone on your team, do something about it, if you are able to remove them temporarily from the frontline, do so. If there is one customer who is causing stress to your team, handle those calls yourself.

Good information on managing Stress in the workplace is available from the Health and Safety Executive (http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm)

Don't – underestimate the impact of the cultural change you are undertaking

One of the biggest barriers to a successful Service Desk implementation is people! Some suggestions on dealing with these barriers to a successful implementation:

- Always make it their idea – there is an art to doing this, plant the seeds of ideas during conversation, give people information to read, then in meetings get them to make the suggestions, hopefully the seeds you have planted will produce the fruits you are looking for.

- Educate, Re-Educate, and Review the benefits of the new Incident Management Process – look out for interesting articles on Incident Management and share these with the team, keep them informed as you review the progress you are making, pass on good feedback from customers
- Hold the hands of the leaders and re-assure them that their Service Desk is going to excel - share positive results from your customer surveys so they can see the results
- Never take the aggressive stance and force feed ITIL® - you don't want ITIL® to be considered a "four-letter word", be an ITIL® champion, without being an ITIL® evangelist, you will turn off more people than you will attract supporters. If people are getting negative, start talking about "service" rather than ITIL®
- Don't give ultimatums, they work very rarely – you need to strike a happy medium, be firm without being dictatorial
- Know your team – as discussed earlier, teambuilding exercises should not be underestimated. Getting together outside the stress of the Service Desk will give you all an opportunity to get to know each other
- Listen to their needs and wants. Do not minimise any of them – regular meetings where the team gets a chance to vent their frustrations, ask questions and make comments freely are very valuable
- When the time comes to implement start the education process over again – understanding of what you are doing, how you are doing it and what you expect to achieve will keep people onside
- Low hanging fruit/Quick wins are always valuable to aiding the Cultural Change – make sure you share wins with the team, success breeds success, each win you have will encourage your team to try harder to for the next goal
- Metrics are not bad! They will not air the dirty laundry! If performance has not been measured before, the Service Desk team may find the idea of reporting on how well they are doing rather intimidating. You can find out more by reading the FAQs at the end of this White Paper, or by downloading a companion Serio White Paper on Service Desk Metrics.

Don't – sell Incident Management to your team as something that is going to make their jobs easier

This is not the primary goal of Incident Management. You are aiming to provide a better quality of service to your customers; initially this may involve more work for the Service Desk team.

Too often I have been involved in implementations where the Service Desk staff are very disgruntled because they have been told that their lives will become much easier once the ITIL® processes are implemented, when in fact they find that, to start with, they have more work to do.

You can assure your team that, after the initial settling period, the Incident Management processes will impact favorably on the Service Desk workload. This improvement comes as a result of improved customer satisfaction and repeatable processes.

Depending upon the previous processes that were in place and the size of the organisation, this settling period may be as short as 3 months, or as long as 2 years before the Service Desk notices the improvement in their workload and stress levels. "It won't happen overnight, but it will happen!"

Don't – expect the Incident Manager to undertake this role during "spare time"

Incident Management is not a role that can be successfully undertaken in a few spare minutes when the phones stop ringing.

The Incident Manager needs to be able to get away from the Service Desk and concentrate on the management role regularly. If the role owner is a front-line Service Desk operator this may mean that you need to get someone else to fill in on the Service Desk.

On a smaller Service Desk (10-20 agents), once the process is established, a half day a week, along with an hour a day will allow the Incident manager to keep a good control of the incident process.

The weekly process should include quality checking of resolution information sent to customers; looking at call categorisation to ensure that this is appropriate; reviewing survey responses from customers – any calls that have unsatisfactory responses from customers should be followed up with the customer and with the agent concerned.

Much of this work may seem like you are checking up on the members of your team, this may be a change to what you did prior to the implementation of your ITIL® processes. The thing to keep in mind here is that what you are checking on is that your customers are receiving the best service you can deliver, they are your priority. Just remember to try to make any criticisms you have are made constructively.

You will need to run a number of reports to help get the information you need for this process, see our Service Desk Metrics whitepaper for information on getting the information you will need. The information you get as a result of the Incident Management process will also feed into other ITIL® processes, so ensure that you pass appropriate information to other process owners.

About Serio

Serio are developers of Helpdesk and IT Service Management tools, celebrating our 10th year in 2007. Visit us on the web at the following addresses:

http://www.seriosoft.com – the Serio home page
http://www.seriosoft.com/Blog – the Serio ITSM blog

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How can we deal with one team member who is very negative about the ITIL® Service Desk function?

A: You need to reassure them that you understand their reservations, see the points above relating to cultural change and building a happy team for more help in this area. But it is very important to nip this problem in the bud – as the saying goes "one bad apple…. In my experience a direct approach is often best, taking the team member aside and explaining that this IS the way your Service Desk is going to operate in future. Let them know that their negativity is impacting on the rest of the team and undermining the potential service improvements you can offer your customers. Don't underestimate the effect that one negative person can have on the acceptance of the new process; you DO need to do something about it, and do it quickly.

Q: We are finding the implementation process very resource heavy and our service to customers is slipping rather than improving, what can we do about this?

A: This is common in the early stages of any ITIL® process implementation; things often get worse before they get better. The key to getting through this part of the implementation is customer communication, acknowledge that your service may be less than optimal, but let them know that this will improve and try to give them some timeframes around this. If you started the implementation with good management support and buy-in you may be able to get temporary additional resources on the Service Desk to get through this teething period. As already stated, communication is the key to getting through this, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Q: We are pretty happy with our Incident Management process – where should we go now?

A: Well done, a good, well established Incident Management process is a very good start to your ITIL® implementation. My recommendation would be to examine your incidents and see what is causing you the most pain. Are you getting a lot of repeat incidents? If you are then Problem Management would be a very good place to put your efforts into now. Problem management has the potential to dramatically reduce the number of incidents due to faults that you receive each day.
If you find you are getting a large number of incidents logged related to unplanned changes in your infrastructure, then you need to look urgently at your Change Management.
It may seem tempting to tackle your Configuration Management now, but I would caution you to leave this key process until your Change Management process is well bedded down; a Configuration Management Database that is

established without good Change Management in place is likely to be out of date very quickly.