HELP DESK VS SERVICE DESK: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

A few years ago, the ITIL® purist in me would have argued that help desks and service desks are two completely different beasts. Now, I am inclined to say that the distinction is probably more semantics than anything else. Still, many out there say that a help desk and a service desk are not the same, so in this article I will explore the differences and similarities between help desks and service desks. In the end, it is up to you and your organization to decide what to call the function that provides the gateway to your IT services—there is no right or wrong here.

Let's start with the most widely used definitions of help desks and service desks, along with some examples and tips on how to choose what's right for your company.

What is a help desk?

The IT help desk is typically seen as more tactical, with the primary goal of helping to quickly resolve end users' immediate needs and technical issues and incidents. The help desk is reactive in nature, but is expected to be efficient and speedy. The IT help desk can be separate from or part of a larger service desk operation to improve the overall organization's customer services.

Some key traits of the help desk include:

- Acting as a single point of contact (SPOC) for IT support
- Using a tracking solution for all incoming incidents
- Automating ticket tracking, routing, and email notifications

- Offering basic incident and service request management
- Some (limited) integrating with other ITSM practices, such as configuration management and knowledge management
- Some areas/applications supported by specialty groups outside of the help desk
- Providing Levels 1 and 2 support and pass incident ownership if escalation is needed
- Displaying basic self-service options for end users

Who might opt for a help desk? A toolset designed for a help desk is likely to provide support for incident and service request management and basic change enablement functionality. For smaller, less complex organizations, with minimal reliance on IT, this is a sensible and cost-effective option.

I work with many smaller organizations to improve their capabilities in IT service management and, virtually without exception, most are barely scraping the surface on utilizing the capabilities of the toolset they have purchased and implemented. These businesses could have saved considerable cash and reaped the same rewards from a simple help desk solution—a full-blown service management solution is not for everyone.

What is a service desk?

The IT service desk is a generally broader function that is more strategic and cross-organizational. A service desk looks at the wider business needs and context rather than being solely focused on resolving the user's needs, as a help desk does.

The ITIL definition of the service desk (service operation) is the single point of contact between the service provider and the users. A typical service desk manages incidents and service requests and handles communication with the users. The service desk typically has a help desk component, but its overall goal is to be proactive in improving IT and business processes across the organization. The best service desks are constantly looking for opportunities to run all IT processes, including the help desk, more efficiently.

Some key traits of the service desk are:

- Fully integrating with other ITSM processes
- Acting as SPOC for all IT areas, applications, and business processes
- Tracking compliance with service level agreements (SLAs)
- Providing a self-service capability for incident and service requests, with an integrated service catalog
- Integrating and communicating with the configuration management database (CMDB)

A more mature organization with complex IT systems, integrations with third party vendors and a critical reliance on their IT infrastructure will, almost certainly, need a full-blown ITSM solution with an integrated service desk function.

Best practices for choosing the right tools

If you go to various groups on LinkedIn or other forums, you'll find many passionate debates on this subject. These conversations often differentiate the type of software that you may use to facilitate the work done on your desk. Based on my experience, here are the best practices for choosing the right help/service desk tools for your organization.

Keep it simple

I am a firm believer in the KIS principle—keep it simple. Understand your organization's needs and find the tool that fulfils those needs. More is not always better.

I worked with an organization who had been persuaded to move off their in-house-developed call-tracking system and on to an ITSM solution. They duly invested in the software and a six-month project to bring it to life. When I came in, some 12 months after the project had been finished, the new toolset had been mothballed, and they had reverted to the basic call tracking they were familiar with. The new system was too complex and they didn't need all the information it could give them.

They definitely needed to move off their basic system, but an assessment of their reporting and process needs showed quite clearly that they just needed a basic 'help desk' product. More is just not always better!

Start with the basics

Start small and get a toolset that will grow with you. First, implement the high-priority modules, then gradually add to the capabilities as they become valuable. The more you use, the more you will improve your practices—expand your use of the toolset as part of a continual improvement program. You can't go from zero to hero overnight, and you shouldn't try to.

State-of-the-art isn't for everyone

Don't get blinded by all the bells and whistles available in today's ITSM toolset marketplace. Humans can be a bit like magpies—we like shiny things! The lure of added value features can sway us towards spending more than we planned.

Here's a perfect example: Last year I needed to purchase a new washing machine. I did my research and headed out to purchase the model that would fit my needs. When I got to the store, the salesman showed me the latest and greatest machine. It had outstanding features, like 43 different wash cycles to care for virtually any fabric you could ever need to clean, a bowl large enough to wash a super-king-sized quilt and, wonder of wonders, I could control it with my smartphone via Wi-Fi!

I am embarrassed to admit that I was enthralled by the possibilities this machine presented and spent $800 above my planned budget. A year on and have I used those 43 wash cycles? No! Only three of them are regularly used. Have I needed to wash a super-king-sized quilt? Not once. And have I found a need to control the machine via Wi-Fi? No, I installed the app and set an initial wash, but I have not used it since. In fact, I struggle to understand how I ever thought that WiFi feature would be useful. Another problem? The machine is so complicated that guests are too scared to use it themselves.

Keep my washing machine in mind when you think about the toolset you need for your ITSM needs. Don't be swayed by the possibilities that 'all-singing, all-dancing' state-of-the-art solution can offer if you do not have a real need for those results.

There is no wrong answer

In this article, I've described how many in the ITSM world do distinguish between the help desk and

the service desk. But, as I stated at the outset, there is no right and wrong here. ITIL specifically and ITSM in general provide a framework and ideas to help you create the capabilities you need to support your unique organization.

So, my advice is to call it what you want: service desk or help desk. The only thing that matters—bringing about the business outcomes that your organization needs.

Additional resources