IT SUPPORT LEVELS CLEARLY EXPLAINED: L1, L2, L3 & MORE

As an IT service management provider, customers frequently ask about the various approaches to IT Support and how they can be used to organize help desks and service desks. In this article, we'll explore:

- The role of technical support
- IT support levels/tiers 0-4
- Trends
- The necessity of support
- Setup tips
- And more!

The role of technical support

Technical support is a service that supports users of technology products or services. Technical support is also known as IT support, help desk, or service desk. In contrast to traditional training, technical support typically focuses on helping with a specific user problem or issue.

Technical support often contributes to or supports a company's overall customer service philosophy, so the team or department may straddle the technical world of IT and the practical side of customer service.

Technical support may be comprised of a single employee for small companies or may include

many departments and workers. For example, a large company like BMC often has two types of teams:

- An internal IT support team that helps employees when they are dealing with a technical problem.
- An external-facing support team helps customers and users of BMC's systems.

Technical support can be delivered in a variety of ways, depending on the support level or tier, including by phone, email, live chat or video, chatbots, online tutorials and how-to's, message boards, and other logging tools. Popular third-party tools for help desk support include Zendesk, Salesforce, and BMC Helix, among many others.

(Understand the differences between customer service & technical support.)

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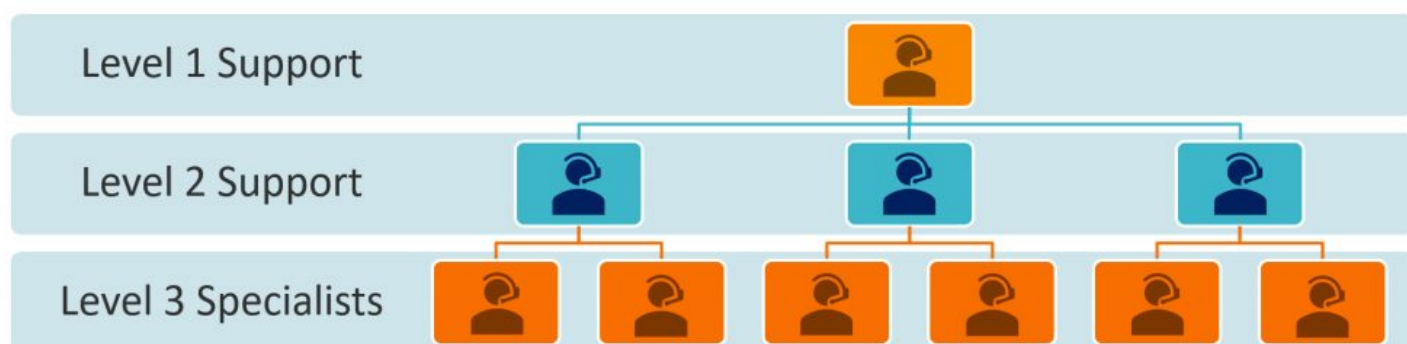

IT support levels (tiers)

The terms "support levels" and "support tiers" are phrases used interchangeably within IT organizations.

Structuring your IT support around levels or tiers is useful for several reasons:

- Strategically addressing customer needs
- Creating a positive customer experience
- Quickly resolving small or easy-to-manage issues
- Establishing a timeline and protocol for harder-to-solve problems
- Increasing employee satisfaction
- Improving employee training, upward mobility, and retention
- Obtaining feedback and suggestions for product development

With some variations, a typical IT Support infrastructure is usually organized around the following support tiers:

IT Support Level	Function	Support methodology	Staffing needs
Tier 0	Self-help and user-retrieved information	Users retrieve support information from web and mobile pages or apps, including FAQs, detailed product and technical information, blog posts, manuals, and search functions. Users also use apps to access service catalogs where they can request and receive services without involving IT staff. Email, web forms, and social contact methods such as Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., are used to send questions and requests to upper support tiers or company personnel. Customer forums allow users to crowdsource solutions, usually without input from company personnel.	Tier 0 requires technical and marketing resources to create, maintain, and update product information. A development team handles web site and app creation. Moderators are used to monitor customer forums. Tier 1 personnel respond to requests received through email, web sites, or social media.
Tier 1	Basic help desk resolution and service desk delivery	Support for basic customer issues such as solving usage problems and fulfilling service desk requests that need IT involvement. If no solution is available, tier 1 personnel escalate incidents to a higher tier.	Lower-level technical personnel, trained to solve known problems and to fulfill service requests by following scripts.
Tier 2	In-depth technical support	Experienced and knowledgeable technicians assess issues and provide solutions for problems that cannot be handled by tier 1. If no solution is available, tier 2 support escalates the incident to tier 3.	Support personnel with deep knowledge of the product or service, but not necessarily the engineers or programmers who designed and created the product.

IT Support Level	Function	Support methodology	Staffing needs
Tier 3	Expert product and service support	Access to the highest technical resources available for problem resolution or new feature creation. Tier 3 technicians attempt to duplicate problems and define root causes, using product designs, code, or specifications. Once a cause is identified, the company decides whether to create a new fix, depending on the cause of the problem. New fixes are documented for use by Tier 1 and Tier 2 personnel.	Tier 3 specialists are generally the most highly skilled product specialists, and may include the creators, chief architects, or engineers who created the product or service.
Tier 4	Outside support for problems not supported by the organization	Contracted support for items provided by but not directly serviced by the organization, including printer support, vendor software support, machine maintenance, depot support, and other outsourced services. Problems or requests are forwarded to tier 4 support and monitored by the organization for implementation.	Preferred vendors and business partners providing support and services for items provided by your company.

Many companies modify this template and combine support tiers according to their resources and philosophies. In some organizations, Tier 1 and Tier 2 functions are handled by the same personnel. Other companies may combine Tier 2 and Tier 3 functions, for example.

Another way to think about the tiers is as a timeline: the higher the tier a problem is escalated, the more time (and perhaps resources) it will take to solve. Your company can:

- **Set time limits on tiers.** For instance, if a Tier 1 problem takes more than 15 minutes, it is automatically elevated to Tier 2.
- **Let IT support staff determine** when to escalate a problem.

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Trends for tiered technical support

Trends we are seeing frequently in tiered technical support include:

- **Automation and orchestration.** Automating and orchestrating as much of technical support as possible increases efficiency and availability while reducing incident queues.
- **Self-service & knowledge management.** If information is easily accessible in Tier 0, customers can quickly find solutions without IT help, saving higher skilled resources for creating new

solutions and troubleshooting difficult problems. This combines two practices that are here to stay: self-service portals and knowledge management.

- **Live chats (not pre-scripted).** At higher tiers, live chats continue to replace a significant portion of phone calls. Offering a live chat option to your customers may prompt them to seek help more quickly, which can promote the positive customer experience.

Of course, as users of any product become savvier, your help desk agents need to keep up—both with your own product as well as with your competitors. With comprehensive internet access, knowledge is the baseline; today, it is personalized help and customer service that become the medium for positive experiences.

(Explore chatbots & virtual agents.)

Is tiered technical support necessary?

A case can be made against tiered technical support. Swarming support, including intelligent swarming, has proven to be a strong alternative to traditional tiered support.

Opponents of tiered support sometimes cite employee boredom—solving the same problems repeatedly—or customer frustration, especially when the user realizes she knows more about the product than the help desk rep who's trying to "help" her.

Collaboration is an often proposed solution: the idea that a help desk ticket is assigned to a specific individual or group who either resolves the issue directly or shepherds the ticket (and its user) through the support system. This can help support staff learn other areas of the company and ensures that customers feel better cared for.

A collaborative approach still relies on delineation around who can solve which problems or which teams are responsible for tickets, while others are there to assist with the help process as needed.

Setting up tiered technical support

Establishing or making changes to your technical support team can be overwhelming, especially as your company grows.

Developing a structure is the first step. Start with identifying your needs and circumstances. For example, a software company's users will likely have a lot of technical issues whereas a service or retail company will have monetary or other issues. Using the tiers template above, determine what sorts of topics and issues might fit into each tier. Note that some companies use fewer tiers than the five levels (0 through 4) listed above. If you only have enough staff to support three levels, that is a fine approach!

Once you've established your support structure, consider how you can continue to support your support staff, so they can continue to create positive customer experiences:

- **Define top skills for support staff.** This may include strong verbal and written communication, a technical expertise, empathy, good listening skills, and more.
- **Define top skills for support managers.** This may include goal setting, motivation, experience with change management and conflict management, strong communication, and hiring experience.
- **Create opportunities for growth.** This can include formal and informal trainings, mentorships,

and ongoing education through web resources and readings.

Tiered IT support is greatly enhanced by ITSM and software products that automate many of the functions provided by each tier.

(Learn about [choosing ITSM tools.](#))

Additional resources

For related reading, check out these resources:

- [BMC Service Management Blog](#)
- [Technical Support Engineer Role & Responsibilities](#)
- [Becoming Agile in Technical Support](#)
- [Service Desk Best Practices for Creating More Value](#)
- [TIPS Explained: Ticket, Incident, Problem, Service Request](#)
- [State of ITSM Today](#)

[Swarming: How a new approach to support can save DevOps teams from 3rd-line ticket hell](#) from **[Jon Hall](#)**