

# The Case for Outsourced Help Desks

How offloading responsibility for service calls to a qualified third party benefits MSPs and their clients

*A Continuum Services Guide*

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Managed services providers (MSPs) are in the business of offering proactive and reactive support to their clients. Through remote monitoring and management (RMM) tools, they provide maintenance and troubleshoot services that ensure the smooth and continuous operations of servers, storage, endpoints and applications. While much of this work is automated, some tasks require human intervention – and that requires a help desk, also increasingly referred to as a service desk.

Service desk calls are often the primary contact between client and provider after the sale, making help desks not only a critical piece of technology service delivery, but also sales and customer retention. The customer's perceived value of a managed service is greatly affected by how service desk calls are handled and resolved. And, the renewal rates for managed services engagements can nearly always be mapped to overall help desk satisfaction.

### **Service Desk Satisfaction Success Factors**

With so much customer interaction going through help desks, it is essential to ensure customer satisfaction for continuing business engagements. The following are critical for customer service desk satisfaction:

- Hold time: How long was it before someone picks up the phone?
- Remediation time: How long did it take to resolve an issue?
- Quality of resolution: Was the issue resolved correctly?
- Technical knowledge: How knowledgeable was the help desk technician?
- Information conveyed: Was the information exchanged between the tech and client helpful?
- Clarity (language): Was the rep easily intelligible?
- Line quality: Was the phone line loud and clear?
- Courtesy and friendliness: Was the rep pleasant?

*To provide live help desk support, an MSP needs to have high availability in service hours with staff working at least 12 hours per day, five days per week -- if not 24/7 every day.*

Many MSPs are engineers or technologists at heart. They are completely comfortable gaining remote access to systems, troubleshooting computing and networking problems, and implementing/updating tools and applications that keep clients' IT functional and optimized. A disconnect comes when personal, one-on-one help is needed. Fielding calls, talking through remediation processes, logging trouble tickets and standing ready at all hours can quickly exhaust an MSP's resources.

None of this is to say an MSP is incapable of performing or facilitating help desk services. To the contrary, MSPs are willing and able to perform most help desk tasks, and manning the help desk to ensure quality service makes many MSPs feel better in managing their customer relationships. The challenge is cost in terms of productivity, scalability and opportunity. MSPs are better when they are performing complex tasks on behalf of their customers, as well as selling more services to new and existing customers. From that perspective, service desks are often a drain on capacity and focus.

Service desk challenges are only increasing. No longer are help desk calls lumped together during business hours and narrowly focused on desktop applications and connectivity issues. As industry trends indicate, businesses are increasing their adoption of mobile technologies, virtualization environments, and a variety of Web and cloud-based applications to perform job functions anytime from anywhere. With that comes the expectation that IT support is available for multiple platforms and a widening variety of issues at any time of the day or night. Providing broad, expert help desk support on a 24/7 basis is taxing, to say the least.

### **The Alternative: Outsourced Service Desk**

When it comes to providing live support for customers, an MSP has a few basic but important needs: High availability in service hours, with staff working at least during U.S. business hours – 12 hours per day, five days per week – if not 24/7 every day. The service desk mechanisms must be flexible and scalable to accommodate growing multi-faceted services practices. Moreover, support needs to be

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handled by trained, qualified staff that is responsive and able to deliver high end-user satisfaction while employing best practices with regard to logging and managing service calls. All of this should be couched in a service desk system that is under continuous review for improvement and operates by the tenets of recognized process management and quality controls.

Establishing and maintaining a help desk is a tall order for the average MSP, which often lacks the trained personnel and service desk management systems necessary to deliver the kinds of call center experiences customers expect. The answer for many is to offload this continuous effort and expense to qualified and experienced third parties that specialize in IT service desk support. Today's help desk outsourcers are often employing services automation, remote management, cloud technologies, software-as-a-service and Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL)-based processes on behalf of their clients' end users.

Service desk outsourcing enables MSPs to deliver world-class services while concentrating on core business and sales. There are numerous benefits to an MSP in outsourcing help desk operations.

**Reduction in costs** The primary driver for outsourcing service desk functions is cost. Service providers who entrust help and support desk services to a third party gain significant economies of scale. The help desk outsourcer invests in the tools, personnel training and ongoing process improvements, and delivers these best-practice-based services for a reasonable recurring monthly fee. Industry estimates put the average annual savings realized through service desk outsourcing at between 20 percent and 45 percent versus MSPs who staff, train and equip their own help desks.



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### Calculating Help Desk Costs

Help desk operations are not inexpensive. MSPs that choose to assume the responsibility of building and maintaining a help desk, on even a modest level, are assuming a substantial cost. The following is a hypothetical breakdown of what it takes to staff and operate a small help desk (handling 500 users, or approx. 1,300 incidents, per month):

**Staff: \$225,000 per year** (supervisor, team lead, senior and junior techs)

**After-Hours Support: \$12,000 per year** (8 hours overtime per week)

**Benefits/overhead: \$67,500 per year**

**HR/management time: \$5,000 per year**

**Systems, phones, software, etc.: \$5,000 per year**

**Total: \$314,500 per year (\$26,208 per month)**

In addition to the hard-cost savings, MSPs that engage help desk outsourcing typically see substantial soft-cost benefits: Process improvements, employed best practices and access to broader application and infrastructure skills by help desk professionals result in a reduction of repetitive incidents and expand support capabilities to a larger array of technologies.

**Better support** One way outsourcers deliver a superior help desk experience is by providing end users with a single point of contact for IT incidents ranging from troubleshooting and support for hardware to standard and proprietary software questions, eliminating virus issues, ID administration and remote access issues. The services are equally capable of handling technology issues on desktops, laptops and the many mobile devices in popular use today.

Organized support services from a reputable help desk outsourcer rely on standardized processes following industry guidelines such as ITIL and Six Sigma. This ensures services are delivered in a high-

quality and consistent way across all locations, and that process improvements are built into incident management response in a way that benefits the MSP's operations. These outsourced services are available across multiple platforms – telephone, Web, chat, e-mail, SMS and other mobile devices – in ways that would be difficult for individual MSPs to replicate.

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**Increased flexibility** Outsourced service desk providers are in the business of providing support services full time and globally. The capacities of a help desk partner can scale with seasonal changes, incident-driven call volume and client-base growth. With an outsourced service, MSPs can deliver support across the globe at any time and in a variety of languages, amplifying their market impact and opening new avenues for expanding sales.

### What to Consider When Outsourcing Service Desk Operations

In contrast to the benefits detailed above, most of the help desk services provided by MSPs revolve around reactive incident management. The goal of seeking outsourced help desk alternatives should be to transition such a request-and-problem-focused system to one that focuses on configuration and change management processes to drive higher levels of client performance while reducing the client's overall costs.

To get there, an MSP can reasonably expect to invest some significant effort into the outsourcing arrangement to guarantee success. Some of the key considerations for service providers looking to outsource help desk services are as follows:

**Be willing to spend some time** Bringing a trusted partner on board to handle your valued clients is neither fast nor easy. Signification documentation detailing how the help desk service will handle calls, what its processes are for logging and elevating calls, and how resolutions will be cataloged are just a few of the items on the pre-outsourcing punch list. This vital documentation needs to be thorough and detailed, and consider every possible scenario. Its creation can be time-consuming, but it will be time well spent.

*In addition to providing Level 1 and 2 support, the industry leaders can seamlessly integrate their service desks to a NOC where Level 3 technicians are always available.*

**Fine-tune the service to your exact needs** Help desk services are no longer an all-or-nothing affair. Outsourced help desks vary from simple call centers to robust IT response systems capable of actual maintenance actions. Additionally, the help desks can be available full time, or for smaller parts of the day, perhaps when the MSP is off duty. If you opt for 24 x 7 coverage, be sure it is “live” round-the-clock support. Some providers advertise 24 x 7 but you wind up leaving a message at 2 am with the promise of a call back later. Decide exactly what services are needed and craft an agreement the best suits your business.

**Look for a white label option** One of the keys to a positive caller experience is for the service technician to function as a representative of the MSP or their customer, which includes automatically answering the phone using the name of your firm.

**Insist on Level 3 expertise** Most service providers can offer Level 1 and 2 support, but some more complex issues may come up that require the deeper expertise from a Level 3 technician. It is not cost effective for service providers to staff their service desks with Level 3 specialists but the true industry leaders can seamlessly integrate their service desk to a network operations center (NOC) where Level 3 technicians are always available. In this scenario, it is incumbent on the service provider to assign a single point of contact who can coordinate all pending Level 3 issues with the NOC and stay with the open ticket until the problem is resolved to the end user’s satisfaction.

**Consider adapting processes** MSPs view help desk outsourcers as vendors who should bend to their will. However, outsourcers have developed mature, proven processes and best practices through hard-won experience that can benefit the service provider. MSPs should be willing to adapt to the way clients interact with the help desk to optimize the experience for all. Also, MSPs should spend time communicating with the help desk personnel in the same way your customers will. Consider the entire experience – from answering the phone through problem resolution – to be sure the client experience meets everyone’s expectations.

*Help desk services work best if the MSP and outsourcer share RMM tools and PSA services.*

**Investigate metrics** Find out how many calls and incidents each help desk technician fields in a day (the rate averages 30 calls and 24 incidents per day). Also, inquire about the tech schedule in terms of hours per shift, nights, weekends, holidays and vacations. In general, it's good to know the outsourcer's maximum phone line capacity and how it is prepared to handle surges in call volume due to events like system disruptions and applications upgrades.

**Strive for tight integration** Help desk services work best if the MSP and outsourcer share remote monitoring and management (RMM) tools with hooks into an existing professional services automation (PSA) suite. This becomes important when trying to track changes with help desk activities. Integrated systems keep all the call logs, service notes, system changes and resolutions in one convenient place, simplifying billing and improving communication with the client.

### Summary

Choosing an appropriate help desk model, be it in-house, outsourced or some combination thereof, depends a great deal on the business plan and the resources of a manage services provider. For those MSPs who are questioning the sustainability of maintaining an in-house operation, the outsourced service desk delivers compelling advantages, including cost savings, advanced services processes and technologies, and the freedom to refocus your efforts on more strategic internal tasks.



## About Continuum

Continuum provides a leading SaaS-based managed services platform that Managed Services Providers (MSPs) use to efficiently backup, monitor, troubleshoot, and maintain desktops, servers and other endpoints for small and medium-sized businesses. The comprehensive platform provides an intelligent Remote Monitoring and Management (RMM) solution and an advanced backup and disaster recovery (BDR) offering branded Continuum Vault – all integrated with an industry-leading Network Operations Center (NOC), delivering a single, unified managed services experience. The company currently employs more than 650 employees worldwide, supports over 3,300 MSPs, and monitors nearly 500,000 endpoints. The principal owner of Continuum is Summit Partners ([www.summitpartners.com](http://www.summitpartners.com)), a Boston based growth equity firm that has raised more than \$15 billion in assets. For more information, please visit [www.continuum.net](http://www.continuum.net).