Continual Service Improvement: The Catalyst for Service Desk Excellence and Enterprise Productivity

Introduction

By definition, the service desk produces measurable business value by enabling improved productivity, service availability, resource utilization and cost effectiveness. In practice, however, IT managers must work unceasingly to maintain these capabilities and improve service and quality; otherwise, they run a high risk of performance deterioration over time.

Continual Service Improvement (CSI) is part of ITIL® and its framework of best practices under IT Service Management (ITSM). CSI promotes the use of quality management methodologies to measure, analyze and learn from past successes and failures to improve service desk results. Its objective: the sustainment of operational excellence through continual improvement of the effectiveness and efficiency of IT processes and services outlined as part of ISO 20000.

In taking Mount Everest, climbers learn a life and death lesson – it is easier to reach the 29-thousand foot summit than it is to stay there. Compared to the months spent preparing and then climbing to the summit, their time on the peak is very short – only minutes – because there is no apparatus or process in place to sustain them against the harsh environment.

Without CSI, sustainment of service desk quality will be temporary as well. By ensuring IT services are continuously aligned with changing business needs, CSI provides a structured approach and quality orientation to sustain performance, drive improvement and manage costs, inhibiting the root causes of service quality decline.

There is one caveat, however – results will be commensurate with the level of management commitment and it requires an all-in mindset focused on driving the highest customer service at the lowest cost.

Dissatisfied with its service desk cost experience, a Fortune 1000 company took aim at its first call resolution rate (FCR), mandating that calls not exceed a five-minute limit. While some calls were completed within the allotted time, many were not. Buzzers were used to alert service desk employees that time had expired, leading to an abrupt end to the calls even though user issues were unresolved.

In those cases, the problem was transferred to another individual, who – not subject to a time limit – would call the end-user to resolve the incident.

Unfortunately, incident resolution time and cost went up, not down. Senior IT managers concluded that continual service improvement was not an internal core competency and ultimately placed the service desk with a remote CSI-certified, Gartner-recognized provider.

Why companies find service desk improvement difficult and hard to sustain

There are three primary reasons why an organization struggles to effectively drive and sustain service quality and cost improvement: lack of commitment, lack of process and lack of structure.
As fundamental as it sounds, CSI begins and ends with leadership and commitment – a top-down, bottom-up mindset that extends from senior management to the analysts on the front lines. Commitment means setting high expectations for service and quality, regular reporting on KPIs and ongoing improvement initiatives, a high priority on customer service, and individual accountability for results. Commitment also must make provision for a standardized, process-driven methodology and the support structure required to accomplish performance goals.

Process and structure are the means to an end and they define the organization and resources required to achieve desired outcomes. Many companies’ service desks, however, have evolved in patchwork fashion around legacy IT systems and processes, built up over time without the disciplines of clear strategy, operational focus and effectiveness criteria. As a result performance is often supported by little more than super-sized help desk transactional processes incapable of effectively diagnosing recurring user issues, capturing and applying new learning, and adapting processes to improve results.

Turning that around requires qualified CSI leadership and, in most organizations, that includes one or more individuals in management and team leadership roles who are ITIL certified at the intermediate or, better yet, at the ITIL Expert or Master levels. They embody the ITIL methodology, best practices and leadership requirement necessary to embed process improvement into ITSM processes.

Without a deterministic process and commitment to continual improvement – including dedicated CSI resources – organizations will lack confidence in their environments and capabilities – what is working and what isn’t, how to measure effectiveness, where and how to make needed improvements, and sustain them.

A Midwestern U.S. manufacturer discovered its service desk relied upon a complicated ticket classification system, with 1,871 ticket codes based upon a monthly volume of 10,000 tickets. This ratio was unacceptably high and was indicative of needless complexity, ineffective root cause analysis and impaired ability to resolve user issues quickly.

CSI analysis determined that 1,293 codes were unnecessary (69% reduction), resulting in 50% fewer costly, misdirected and escalated tickets, and improved end-user satisfaction.

**Deploying the CSI methodology**

Continual Service Improvement is not a discrete service or solution in a box. It is equal parts an overarching quality framework and an applied mindset as opposed to a fixed set of tools or detailed instructions specifying what to do when. CSI is effective in driving improvement because it is embedded in every service desk process, permeating every action, application and desired outcome.

Providing structure, CSI organizes around a framework of four distinct process areas designed to review and evaluate key processes and services, and to manage the progress of improvement initiatives.
CSI Process | Objectives | Key Performance Indicators
--- | --- | ---
**Service Review** | • Review business and infrastructure services to improve quality and cost | • Service Reviews conducted  
• Weaknesses identified
**Process Evaluation** | • Evaluate processes on a regular basis  
• Identify areas where metrics are not being met  
• Conduct regular audits to improve processes and services | • Benchmarking, audits and assessments conducted  
• Evaluations conducted  
• Weaknesses identified  
• Initiatives completed
**Definition of CSI Initiatives** | • Define initiatives to improve processes and services | • Initiatives in process  
• Initiatives completed
**Monitoring of CSI Initiatives** | • Verify initiatives are on plan | • Initiatives at or behind plan  
• Corrective measures applied

Against this framework are applied CSI best practices and tools that will improve the quality of service on a consistent basis, delivering real value to the bottom line in terms of increased productivity and cost efficiency.

- Standard ITSM methodology
- Econometrics-driven decision making
- Knowledge Management, or Knowledge Centered Support (KCS™)

The standard approach most often employed is the **ITIL V3 7-Step CSI process**, a deterministic, data-driven methodology that provides the roadmap for identifying opportunities, improving performance and reducing cost.

![The ITIL V3 7-Step CSI Process Diagram]

Applying the CSI methodology involves detecting, analyzing, evaluating, identifying and acting upon improvement opportunities with return on investment potential. The last steps in implementing corrective actions to a process also include the establishment of new performance baselines as well as process validation. These steps ensure the new changes being implemented are seamless and deliver the expected improvement.

Despite the linear depiction in the above illustration, the CSI process is designed to be an ongoing, continuous loop – as one improvement cycle ends, the next cycle begins anew to measure and evaluate all processes within the ITSM environment.

- **Incident Resolution** - restoring normal operations quickly
- **Access Management** - managing user rights to services
- **Service Request Fulfillment** - managing user requests
- **Problem Management** - minimizing impacts resulting from errors
- **Asset Management** - tracking asset lifecycle value
- **Change Management** - controlling changes to minimize impact
A top 25 financial services institution struggling to absorb hundreds of newly-acquired branches saw its service desk KPIs going the wrong direction, along with costs and end-user satisfaction.

CSI methodology proved critical in root cause analysis, re-engineering processes and driving out cost, leading to a significant reduction in cost per call (40%), improvement in first call resolution rate (37%) and increased end-user satisfaction (31%).

The reactive and proactive sides of continual improvement

In practice, CSI occurs both reactively and proactively in an organization and that is important because an integrated team of people at different points in the process identify issues, analyze root causes, implement solutions and capture new learning for the service desk knowledge database.

Much of what occurs at the service desk is reactive by design – responding to end-user phone calls, e-mails, live chat, web forms and self-service tickets. A problem is documented, a dashboard metric has turned yellow, or too many tickets are being escalated to costly, time-consuming resolver groups.

In fielding dozens of calls and contacts a day, the level one analyst efficiently resolves most routine incidents, but will escalate those he can’t resolve to a more experienced level two analyst. Analysts are expected to “own” the contact and to troubleshoot and resolve as many issues as possible at the service desk using all available knowledge tools and coaching support. Escalating to 2nd or 3rd level support may follow if hands-on deskside resolution or specialized application support is required.

Throughout this sequence of escalation, data is collected at each stage of the process for examination by CSI analysts to improve incident handling in the future or, better yet, prevent similar incidents from occurring altogether.

The CSI-driven Service Desk - Roles and Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Level Manager (SLM)</th>
<th>CSI and KCS Process Analysts</th>
<th>Service Desk Analysts</th>
<th>Business Relationship Manager</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Directs all service desk activity</td>
<td>• Analyze support processes to identify efficiency and continual improvement opportunities</td>
<td>• Provide first level support for inbound service requests</td>
<td>• Works closely with Client and program managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Works with Client and Business Relationship Manager to meet Service Level Agreements (SLAs)</td>
<td>• Manage and maintain central knowledge database used for support services</td>
<td>• Provide second level support for escalated issues</td>
<td>• Generates and delivers reporting and identifies improvement opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build training content for client specific needs</td>
<td>• Deliver access and problem management services</td>
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From a proactive perspective, CSI analysts are tasked with taking a longer view, performing formal quarterly reviews of the service desk, or individual reviews for each desk within a multi-tenant remote environment to identify areas for improvement. Even if a client’s Service Level Agreement
does not specify productivity and process improvement goals – which it should – CSI analysts are charged with identifying opportunities, making recommendations and implementing a Service Improvement Plan.

**The value of data to cost and productivity improvement**

The service desk is a data rich environment and econometrics-driven decision making is used to analyze vast amounts of raw data in order to identify efficiency improvements, measure impact, build a business case for improvement initiatives and quantify expected ROI.

When an inbound contact occurs, the service desk immediately identifies the user, location and all related user-computer information. This data can be tied together and analyzed to determine what is happening in the environment and why it may be generating calls to the service desk. Every call and contact are recorded and documented, and a representative sample of screen shots captured to facilitate thorough call quality, ticket quality and incident resolution analysis.

Econometrics-driven decision making drives out costs by finding better ways to resolve more calls at the service desk in less time with fewer service exceptions and escalations through improved processes and technology. With the wealth of available service desk data, root cause analysis is conducted to make sure causes, not symptoms, are addressed, illustrated here by the isolation of issues related to poor ticket and incident coding.

By applying sophisticated mathematical and statistical techniques against incident data – cluster analysis, trend analysis, word frequency analysis, etc. – CSI-certified analysts determine why, for example, first call resolution varies by ticket type, or on a larger scale, how the environment will need to change before a client can effectively migrate from a traditional high cost, on-premise support model to a lower cost, self-service model.

Finally, econometrics-driven reporting and trend analysis often are used on a regular basis to provide service desk analysts with feedback and coaching on call and ticket handling, and to identify areas for employee skill and career development, including ITIL and CSI training and certification.
A Fortune 50 global consumer products company decided to consolidate several autonomous and siloed North American operating companies’ service desks. The goal: to evolve to a more balanced, cost-efficient and end-user-oriented self-service model supporting over 56,000 end-users.

Despite some initial organizational resistance, call volume decreased 50% and costs fell 20% in the first two years of deployment. CSI identified both low hanging fruit and long-term process improvements as part of an ongoing, multi-phase transformation to drive improved performance, end-user satisfaction and lower costs.

Out of shared knowledge comes enhanced productivity, improved service

The service desk isn’t immune to the idea that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of the past are destined to repeat them. Unfortunately, too many organizations fail to capture data and document lessons learned from the thousands of incidents that could be used to improve future results.

**Knowledge Centered Support** (KCS) is a key building block of continual improvement and it provides an important framework and strategy for capturing, organizing and sharing service desk knowledge. In practice, KCS becomes a central knowledge database providing best practices to improve incident management, problem management and other service desk operations.

When the analyst captures information related to an incident and documents how it was resolved, it becomes part of a knowledge database, immediately available to other analysts and providing environment-specific information to resolve similar incidents. In time all newly-added information is vetted – validated by other analysts as a trustworthy approach to use. Automated and specialized knowledge base support tools, such as RightAnswers® or CA Technologies®, provide end-user self-service options and enable analysts to quickly identify, diagnose and resolve user issues with any of hundreds of applications.

In a remote multi-tenant service desk environment, the ability of KCS to solve problems faster and more predictably is multiplied due to the effective cross-pollination of incident and problem management data. Leveraging lessons learned in one client’s environment helps resolve issues in another in a fraction of the time and cost. As a result, more issues are resolved faster, and with fewer escalations that would add time, cost and reduce end-user satisfaction.

A Fortune 1000 manufacturing client experienced longer than normal wait times during peak periods resulting in an unacceptably high call abandon rate – callers hanging up before being given an opportunity to leave a voice message and enter a queue for a return call from the Service Desk.

CSI analysis determined the optimum length of time a caller would wait to leave a message. The ACD system was reprogrammed, shortening the wait time by 15 seconds, immediately improving the abandon rate by 25% along with overall customer satisfaction.
Final thoughts

CSI must be embraced by senior IT leadership as an internal core competency before an organization stands a good chance of increasing user satisfaction, driving productivity, reducing costs – and sustaining improvement. Without question, access to actionable data and the development of knowledge management are also key indicators of how capable a company will be in driving Continual Service Improvement.

Organizations where CSI is not an internal competency may evaluate on-premise or remote third party service desk support. Key considerations should include CSI and HDI certifications, the availability of a robust knowledge management infrastructure, industry references, analyst recognition, and a track record of productivity and cost improvement and end-user satisfaction that consistently surpasses frequently quoted (and sub-optimal) industry averages.

More is expected of the outside service desk provider because this is their core competency and it will be accountable for delivering agility, flexibility, scalability and that speed-to-solution mindset required to improve productivity, reset the bar and repeat the CSI process over and over again.

In the final analysis, it may matter less whether an organization integrates CSI into an on-premise or a remote service desk operation as long as it is managed to achieve the high expectations of continual improvement at the lowest cost. In either case, CSI will consistently deliver a measurable return on investment and customer satisfaction, year over year.

About Pomeroy

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