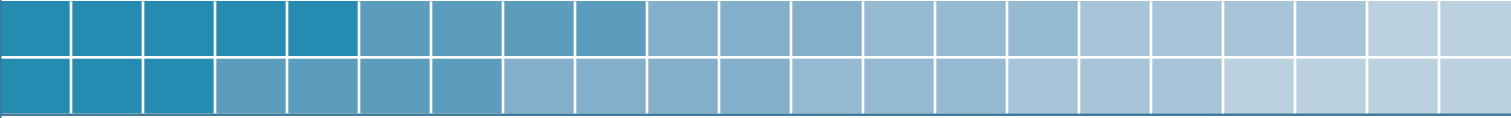# The Single Point of Contact:
Driving Support Process Improvements
with a Consolidated IT Help-Desk Approach

By Jim Hoen, Vice President of Marketing and Sales, North America, TechTeam Global, Inc.

Today's IT help desks are facing challenges on every front. Reliance on IT infrastructure, hardware, and software continues to grow — software outages and other IT-related downtime become less acceptable over time, as all business increasingly becomes developed, automated, and managed using information technology (IT). Users continually want reductions in both call-response times and, in particular, call-resolution times. And budgets continue to remain tight, leaving most companies with internal help desks to scramble to find new ways to "do more with less."

For many companies, consolidating multiple help desks can provide company-wide benefits, including cost savings, improved service levels, enterprise-wide consistency, and access to a centralized repository of IT information. Yet, in order for companies to reap all of the benefits that consolidation has to offer, they must establish a highly structured and documented process that will enable them to achieve success. This white paper outlines specific steps developed by TechTeam Global in consolidating help desks. TechTeam Global is a global provider of IT and business process support solutions whose clients have benefited from consolidation and enterprise-wide solutions to IT service needs. This paper offers solutions to the CIOs and senior IT managers who are hard pressed to improve service while reducing costs.

The Challenge of the Decentralized Help Desk

There are many reasons why companies maintain multiple decentralized help desks. Global companies often make a case that each country needs its own help desk to answer questions in the native language, by people who understand the culture. Individual divisions cite specialized applications, unusual work hours, or highly critical and/or sensitive operations that require specialized support. And large companies, in particular, build help-desk capacity for the simple reason that they don't always understand what resources are currently available. The problem is one that leads to classic sub-optimization — it can be easier to build a new help desk to meet individual section needs than to reach out to existing corporate resources in a way that can benefit the whole company.

"However well intentioned, most companies operate too many help desks. While users believe they receive better support, research often uncovers inefficiencies and waste that belie their assumptions."

Whatever the reason, and however well intentioned, most companies operate too many help desks. While country- or department-specific users believe they receive better support, research often uncovers inefficiencies and waste that belie their assumptions. Worse, the companies are deprived of the ability to move their organization forward by compiling a centralized database of support incidents — while individual help desks may make great strides in improving support, when they operate independent of their peers in other countries or divisions, those efforts must continually be replicated when they could be developed once and shared.

Inconsistent practices from location to location lead to wild swings in support levels — an unacceptable condition for today's globally minded companies. Consolidation of the whole support process into a disciplined, customer-responsive entity such as TechTeam's SPOC (Single Point of Contact) service desk provides multiple benefits for companies. In essence, the SPOC process enables end users to reach out to one, single point of contact for all support incidents, and rely on that contact to provide resolution. End users may choose an online portal, telephone, email, or in some cases, on-site agents, and their inquiry will be captured

into a centralized database repository, documented, tracked to ensure that it meets negotiated service level agreements, and resolved without requiring the end user to call additional parties. The SPOC approach combines customer convenience, service-provider accountability for results, and efficiencies. The SPOC solution helps the CIO deliver better service and lower costs — a winner in any business environment.

With a consolidated approach using the SPOC model, companies can begin to blur the lines between level-one support and more advanced levels, driving down costs, improving service, and maximizing the use of IT resources to achieve business results.

The Benefits of Consolidation

For many companies, it is difficult to approach the prospect of consolidating multiple regional help desks, in part because end users are reluctant to change. However, when companies weigh the benefits of help-desk consolidation, they often find the scales tip dramatically in the favor of consolidation.

For starters, many companies can save money by consolidating multiple help desks by turning to a company like TechTeam Global to be their solution partner. TechTeam has established facilities with adequate software, hardware, and telecommunications infrastructure to deliver service, saving customers large sums by leveraging their use at our facilities rather than replicating them among customers' many facilities. Smaller companies, those with three or fewer help-desk sites, will notice cost savings; large global enterprises will achieve dramatic cost savings. There will also be other benefits in terms of improved service to the users and support to business results. A good rule of thumb is that companies with more than 1,500 end users or more than three separate help-desk locations will reduce costs enough to make consolidation a smart business decision. The more end users and the more locations, the more money a company will save.

One challenge is to find the right balance between acceptable service levels and affordable support — many companies find a wide variation in support levels provided by multiple internal help desks. Some report exceptionally high customer satisfaction levels — but at exceptionally high prices. Others struggle to maintain minimum standards, while generating increasing end-user frustration. One of many benefits of working with a competent outside service provider to deliver the consolidated service is that such companies can establish consistent, enterprise-wide support levels. While this may be frustrating to a few of the divisions or geographies that experience exceptional but costly support, overall the company bottom line and service levels will improve, and customer satisfaction among lagging divisions and geographies will rise.

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In general, companies discover that after the initial transition phase, customer satisfaction often improves. Customers no longer must bear the responsibility for determining which desk to call for a problem — the act of a consolidated support desk removes the complexity for the customer or end user. A single call to the support desk will be handled right by the agent, or it will be escalated to an alternate agent or location when necessary. The TechTeam SPOC approach means that the service desk agent becomes accountable for the support issue — not the end user. The agent will do the work of discovering the answer or escalating the problem on the end user's behalf, while carefully documenting issues and procedures for future use. The service desk agent takes ownership of the problem and sees it through to a satisfactory resolution.

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Steps to Success for Consolidation

A consolidated approach can save companies large sums of money, dramatically improve service levels, and provide a platform for true support innovations, but companies must follow a structured process. TechTeam Global has delivered outsourced, consolidated solutions for many global firms, consolidating anywhere from half a dozen to more than 100 support desks into an efficient, results-oriented support solution. Its teams of support experts have used their years of experience to develop the following step-by-step approach:

1 **Discovery**: TechTeam representatives work with a customer to gather as much information as possible on the support environment, from technologies and users, to support to timing issues and customer "hot buttons." Deliverables from this phase include a financial proposal, a transition proposal, a solution design proposal, and a letter of intent.

2 **Chartering**: In this phase, TechTeam works with all of the internal and customer stakeholders to establish a high-level description of project targets, budgets, timing, roles and responsibilities, risks, and success measurements. After establishing this document that outlines common objectives, every party must sign off on it — ensuring that expectations are set and goals are communicated.

3 **Planning**: Detailed plans help TechTeam move the project from the charter into an actionable event. Deliverables include a project plan, a communications plan, a risk management plan, and a resource plan that identifies who will be responsible for which contribution to the transition as well as the overall solution.

4 **Data Harvesting**: This step of the process enables TechTeam to gather the data it needs to validate the solution, and analyze existing support functions. Every piece of the solution is included, from application profiles to service level agreements and escalation procedures, along with site and customer profiles.

5 **Solution Validation and Design:** TechTeam creates a validated description of how, what, when, and who will implement the solution, and the deliverable is a documented scope of work. Items include tool architecture, team organization, incident volumes and activity, service deliverables, and training plans.

6 **Implementation**: The solution is built and implemented according to timelines, solutions, and resources defined within the scope of work. The staff is trained, processes are defined, and the knowledge base is created.

7 **Testing**: At this phase of the process, TechTeam tests all critical components of the solution, including technology, processes, staff knowledge, escalation processes, and reporting.

8 **Go-Live**: The solution goes live according to the specifications defined within the scope of work.

9 **Post Launch**: An independent quality representative conducts a post-launch review to ensure that the launch has fulfilled all requirements specified within the scope of work.

Companies find that the data reporting and logging feature is one of the biggest benefits of a consolidated help desk. According to a Forrester Research report written by analyst Chip Gliedman, "Data collection is the first step to a systematic improvement process. With good data, you can identify trends, recognize star performers, and intercept future problems."[1] Because the SPOC process drives all support queries, agents capture information at every stage of the inquiry process. Support activity becomes a support process, with an end-to-end solution where all pieces are recorded into a centralized data repository. Companies

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can mine that data to analyze support needs, trends, and other areas to determine where they need to invest more — and also to discover where they can invest less. Companies can gauge how effective their applications are, both those that are off the shelf as well as those that are developed in house or by other partners. And companies can develop plans on how to improve processes in the future.

For example, global companies can act immediately on a central repository of support data. When a company rolls out a new application, it can analyze the type of calls handled during the first wave of a rollout. A global company can use information gleaned from the European launch, and make adjustments to handle the North American rollout only hours later. Companies can begin to benefit from lessons learned immediately, and leverage this valuable support data. According to a Forrester Research report, Chip Gliedman recommends organizations use analytics to "find the patterns and fix the ones that are problematic."[2]

This ongoing repository also makes it easy for companies to reduce the costs of delivering support. Level-two help desk calls are costlier to resolve, simply because the agents tend to be more senior and with more skills. Yet, companies that use a consolidated help-desk approach can capture and document the steps required to resolve a level-two call, and bump it down to the level-one category, enabling the company to provide a fix — better, faster, and cheaper. In addition, when companies use a consolidated approach, the level-two agents are available to jump in to handle level-one calls whenever there is a spike. This fluid handling of resources enables SPOC-oriented help desks such as TechTeam's outsourced solution to offer a just-in-time approach to help-desk staffing, maximizing available resources without the costs associated with overstaffing, or the service degradation associated with understaffing.

This seamless data sharing between levels one and two also enables the more senior staff to share institutional knowledge that can drive improved service performance. Because level-two and high-level system engineers often work in closer contact with the users of business-critical applications, they understand the nature of the way those applications impact the company, including the impact of an outage or downtime. That cultural awareness is difficult for level-one help desk analysts to achieve; by blending the two organizations and sharing information across both, it is easier for level-one technicians to absorb the knowledge, and be more sensitive to boosting response levels where appropriate.

For many of the companies for which TechTeam provides SPOC help-desk support, knowledge on specific applications, the critical periods, and the context in which they are used is fed into a knowledge base that all help-desk technicians can access.

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According to Forrester, this type of information sharing is critical because it enables the help desk to retain control of the support incident. In a recent report, Forrester provides an example where "the 'expert' in the outside department, such as someone in accounting who answers complex procedural questions on internally developed accounting applications, does not have 'responding to customer issues in a timely manner' as a performance objective...helping customers may always take a back seat to job duties."[3]

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Forrester also recommends bundling help-desk services into desktop outsourcing contracts, in part because it focuses accountability on the help-desk outsourcing vendor. In a June 2003 Q&A, Forrester cites leverage, economies of scale, cost savings, and service improvements as benefits of bundling these two levels together. In addition, the report states, "the most important reason is pushing increasingly accountability for cost and service improvement to the outsourcer.... For instance, if the outsourcer does a poor job, or cuts corners in desktop maintenance, there will be a rise in costs in the help desk operations as the number of problems and incidents rise."[4]

The consolidated approach, managed and executed by a competent, experienced service provider, gives companies another set of eyes when it comes to evaluating hardware and software deployments. When the service provider oversees all of the support issues, it can report on the number of incidents associated with every piece of technology, and provide meaningful statistics on their value versus cost.

Training is another area positively impacted by a consolidation solution. A consolidated desk can gather incident information for the enterprise, and create training opportunities from highly reported incidents. In addition to providing opportunities for end-user training, when the consolidated help desk is run by a competent outside service provider, training becomes the service provider's responsibility. According to a Forrester Research report, few companies use their full allocation of training dollars budgeted. "It is far easier for most managers to justify canceling or deferring a training session that removes one or more of the staff from the call queue than it is to face potential short-term service issues," states Chip Gliedman in the report.[5] An outside service provider has the critical mass of agents needed to scale appropriately, and can find it easier to schedule the ongoing training required to deliver top-quality support.

In general, the benefits of service desk consolidation are many. Companies can:

- Create enterprise solutions rather than local solutions;

- Achieve better balanced service levels with predictable costs;

- Deliver consistent service levels while managing the overall cost;

- Ensure a predictable, measurable support experience throughout the company and around the globe; and

- Position themselves to take advantage of other support opportunities by focusing scarce capital (equipment, dollars, and people) on core business activities.

Maximizing the Benefits of Consolidation by Moving Beyond the Help Desk

Once companies have consolidated their help desks using the SPOC approach, other opportunities arise to streamline support. Companies can integrate proactive and reactive support, participate in a shared services model, and facilitate remote repairs. In short, companies can use the help desk to be the hub of a streamlined IT support process, continually driving down costs while boosting service levels, and they can use the infrastructure, processes, and technologies to combine other call centers — including HR, facilities maintenance, and operations — into a single enterprise support center. At TechTeam Global, we have found that this consolidated approach provides a launch pad for a consistent, enterprise-wide, globally enabled support solution. Considering the dollars invested in IT solutions, and the increased reliance end users place on IT to achieve business objectives, we recommend a consolidated, SPOC-oriented approach as a process that achieves maximum return on IT resource investment, and more importantly, enables achievement of business objectives and bottom-line results.

[1] "Thirty-One Best Practices for the Service Desk," Forrester Research, Inc., June 28, 2005, www.forrester.com

[2] "Thirty-One Best Practices for the Service Desk," Forrester Research, Inc., June 28, 2005, www.forrester.com

[3] "Escalating Help Desk Incidents Outside of IT May Guarantee Poor Service Levels," Ideabyte, Forrester Research, Inc., June 2003, www.forrester.com

[4] "Benefits of Integrating Help Desk and Desktop Management in Outsourcing Deals," Ideabyte, Forrester Research, Inc., June 2003, www.forrester.com

[5] "Thirty-One Best Practices for the Service Desk," Forrester Research, Inc., June 28, 2005, www.forrester.com

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About TechTeam Global, Inc.

__TechTeam Global, Inc.__ is a worldwide provider of information technology and business process outsourcing support services to Fortune 1000 corporations, multinational companies, product providers, small and mid-sized companies, and government entities. TechTeam's ability to integrate computer services into a flexible, total single-point-of-contact (SPOC) solution is a key element of its success. Partnerships with some of the world's "best-in-class" corporations provide TechTeam with unique expertise and experience in providing information technology support solutions, including diversified IT outsourcing services, government technology services, IT consulting and systems integration, technical staffing, and learning services. For information about TechTeam Global, Inc. and its outstanding services, call 1-800-522-4451 or visit www.techteam.com. TechTeam's common stock is traded on the Nasdaq National Market under the symbol "TEAM."

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