

Five Hallmarks of Help Desk Excellence

By Anna Frazzetto, VP of Technology Solutions, Harvey Nash

An effective, first-rate help desk is easy to spot—you can hear, see and feel it. You can hear it in the satisfied relief of callers thanking support personnel. You can see it in help desk metrics that prove speed, effectiveness and successful problem resolution. You can feel it in help desk environments where business processes are carefully mapped and rigorously followed.

And while the evidence of success is clear, sometimes it's harder to identify the traits and practices that set great help desks apart from the average ones. The truth is great help desks come in all shapes and sizes. However, if you break each of them down to their core management and operational elements, you will find five recurring themes. They are the hallmarks of help desk excellence—requirements for any business seeking to gain significant business value from their help desk investment—and they are here for you to consider and emulate.

1. Passionate, Inspired Leadership

Every great team has a talented coach just like every great business has a gifted CEO. Like a playing field or a board room, help desk environments are also high-demand, high-stress environments that require the guidance and vision of effective management. Strong help desk managers bring a level of calm and much needed clarity to a workplace that can often feel chaotic and is greatly affected by outside factors—namely callers, be they customers or internal clients.

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A look at highly efficient help desks will reveal a manager (or team of managers) who has carefully laid out a vision of team success. Objectives and performance standards are clearly communicated and information between management and staff flows freely. In addition, these managers demonstrate their passion for “helping,” setting an important example for the entire help desk workforce. You will never find a successful help desk led by a manager who is bored or itching to be elsewhere. To succeed in IT service, you must be eager to support and help. In help desk environments that zeal to assist must begin at the top where an organizational tone of cordial helpfulness can be established and maintained.

The Big Five

Top help desks across the country and around the world have five common traits. How many of these standards of excellence can be found in your help desk environment?

1. *Passionate, Inspired Leadership*
2. *Ongoing, Interactive Talent Training*
3. *Process Adherence, Business Efficiency*
4. *Commitment to Innovation & Improvement*
5. *Satisfied Clientele*

2. Ongoing, Interactive Talent Training

Take another look at the common traits of world-class help desks and you will find a rigorous training focus. As technologies change so must the skills of support personnel. Those whose skills are up-to-date and far ahead of the challenges callers face will be best equipped to succeed and find satisfaction in their work. Regular technical training and skills updates can assure that the most prepared professionals are picking up the phones and addressing end user challenges.

In addition to technical training, you will also find customer service-focused training. While technical skills are critical in any IT support role, customer service capabilities and interpersonal skills are equally vital. Help desks that hone the communication and service skills of support staff are investing in retention—both customer (for external help desks) retention and employee retention. Those employees who are able to clearly and pleasantly solve support problems will enjoy their jobs and drive satisfaction among users. Customer interaction training for both new and established employees equals better help desk performance and a more talented, content workforce.

3. Process Adherence, Business Efficiency

Established and respected business processes are the roadmap to success for any IT or business environment. Great help desks will not only have clearly defined business processes and best practices in place, these procedures will be carefully followed 99.9% of the time, leaving exceptions for only the rarest of occasions.

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Strict adherence to business processes is especially important in a help desk environment where identifying a pattern of success or a problem area can greatly improve service and efficiency. For example, if call resolution reports identify a pattern of challenges with a specific software tool or upgrade, the help desk team can proactively design a solution for helping users address the common problem. However, if support professionals are not rigorous in completing call logs or documentation processes are lax, a help desk could end up spinning its wheels and losing valuable employee time on the same problem over and over again.

Redundancy of work is a high cost problem that in today's help desk environments is easily avoided through process adherence. In fact, business process adherence quickly becomes improved business efficiency by revealing extensive information about the help desk and its moment-to-moment performance.

4. Commitment to Innovation & Improvement

Though it's important to be rigid in following business processes in the help desk environment, the rigidity should not extend too far. The help desk serves the technical side of the business and should also be a haven for innovation. A top-notch help desk must also welcome improvements, be they technical, operational or service-oriented.

Regular objective assessments are an important part of help desk operational excellence and those assessments should include analysis of the tools and techniques used to support the business. An exceptional help desk will make identifying opportunities for improvement a standard practice that all team members—from management and support professionals all the way to end users and customers—can actively participate in.

5. Satisfied Clientele

The Holy Grail in help desk measures of success is, of course, soaring client/end user satisfaction. It is a trait achieved not by one undertaking but by a combination of the previous four efforts: strong leadership, continuous training, business process quality and adherence and continued improvement and innovation. Combine excellence in these four practices and you will achieve the fifth and crowning hallmark of help desk excellence—content, well supported clients and/or users who are certain that when they call the help desk, they will get the right answers and superior assistance.

About the Author

Anna Frazzetto, Vice President of Technology Solutions for Harvey Nash, is an IT executive who has architected, implemented and overseen application development, managed services and outsourcing/offshoring initiatives at Global 1000 as well as mid-size companies. In her more than two decades of IT leadership experience she has been responsible for the development and operation of technology practices in numerous organizations and held strategic responsibility for managing large-scale help desk, application development, data center and outsourcing/offshore practices. An acknowledged leader in the IT services industry, Anna today spearheads the development and implementation of technology solutions for Harvey Nash's network of nationwide offices.

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