Multichannel Support:
Strategic Considerations

by

Roy Atkinson
Senior Writer/Analyst, HDI

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Executive Summary

It is almost taken for granted these days that support centers will be "fishing where the fish are," and will be available on their customers' terms and on their schedules. The old 5×8 support model (five days a week, eight hours a day) simply doesn't get the job done anymore, with companies and organizations branching out into separate locations and virtual offices, not to mention overseas. Meanwhile, staffs in many support centers, depending on industry, are being thinned, or at least not growing.[1] As Jenny Rains reported in this year's *HDI Support Center Practices & Salary Report*, "With less than a quarter of support organizations increasing staff size, those that reported an increase in incident volume will find it challenging to maintain current performance levels. At least 40 percent will have an increased workload, with no corresponding increase in staffing."[2]

One of the solutions has been to move to multichannel support, placing less emphasis on the phone and email as the primary and secondary ways of communicating with customers. This white paper is intended to help support centers understand why and how they might move into a broader multichannel environment, and how they can be successful. "Handled appropriately, they [multiple channels] can improve the efficiency of your support organization [and] greatly increase customer satisfaction....Mishandled or not addressed at all, you run the risk of being out of touch with modern communication channels and at a competitive disadvantage."[3]

> Multichannel support allows customers to interact with support centers through diverse forms of communication, including (but not restricted to) phone, email, chat, instant messaging, autologging, social media, forums and discussions, and self-service portals.

For years, support centers have operated on the premise that their customers would pick up the phone and call whenever they needed assistance. This resulted in a very phone-centric set of metrics and organizational structure, which is largely still in use today. The phone model also produced a reactive mind-set: we wait for the customer to tell us there's a problem or a question.

To understand the move to multichannel support, we must look at it from several perspectives. This paper will cover the following considerations in multichannel support:

- Strategy
- Customer expectations
- Time
- Money
- Culture
- Technology
- Processes

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[1] While positions are being filled in the computer, financial, outsourcing, and retail industries, positions in other verticals are not. Jenny Rains, *2011 HDI Support Center Practices & Salary Report* (HDI, 2011), p. 83.
[2] John Custy, *The State of the IT Service Desk* (InformationWeek Analytics, 2011).
[3] *A Guide to Multichannel Customer Support* (Zendesk, 2011), p. 3.

These are inextricably bound up together, but each sheds light on the emerging multichannel model from a different direction. Ever-present in this mix is the explosion of mobile device usage and the development of corresponding apps. Drawing upon HDI research and other sources, we can illuminate shifts in the ways organizations need to do business now to be successful going forward. Bear in mind, this paper is not intended to become a blueprint, but to illustrate emerging practices in the various contact channels.

Strategy

Everywhere we look, articles and blogs admonish IT to not only "align with the business," but to integrate with the business's goals and strategic initiatives, and help drive innovation. It is not enough to be more efficient at the things we do now. We need to understand what our organizations want from us *and* what they want to achieve.

Once we understand the strategies and goals of our businesses, we can look at our array of services (service catalog) and capabilities to see what we already can do. We can then see where the gaps are between business strategies and service capabilities, and we can begin to assess what we need to do to eliminate the gaps and provide ways for the business to excel.

Cost reduction is not a strategy. It is one of the goals of moving to multichannel support, but any support strategy needs to consider, first and foremost, the real needs of the organization and its customers. One of the major—and usually hidden—costs in any company is the cost of downtime incurred when people cannot do their jobs because of failures in IT services, systems, and applications. Consider, for example, the consequences of the inability to accept customer orders via the web, or the inability to file for a grant or loan or patent by the required deadline. Of less-immediately-apparent impact might be delays in getting information entered into an enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer relationship management (CRM), or other enterprise system. By thinking proactively, it may be possible to eliminate or at least mitigate the causes—and therefore the effects—of downtime.

Customers, whether defined as those who buy your company's products and services or as the employees who are customers of an internal support organization, need effective and efficient support delivered in a cost-conscious manner through channels that provide swift service and accurate solutions.

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The channels through which customers' needs are communicated and solutions are delivered are diverse. Any strategic approach to multichannel support should take into consideration the following characteristics of your customer base.

- **Technology comfort:** The level at which most of your customers feel "at-home" with troubleshooting, applying changes within the scope of their ability, and finding their own solutions in self-help.

- **Virtual work**: Is your company's workforce physically present at one site, or are they working from home and remote locations around the country/world?

- **Social media use**: Do you have a young workforce or do you deal with predominately younger customers? Chances are they'll be happy to engage via various social media channels to both seek and provide help.

- **Urgency of need**: When something goes wrong for someone in your customer base, is it likely to have an immediate impact on the delivery of key services, whether yours or theirs? (Consider healthcare, where lives might be at stake.) What is the most efficient, fastest, and best way for them to get help? (Hint: It is not always by phone.)
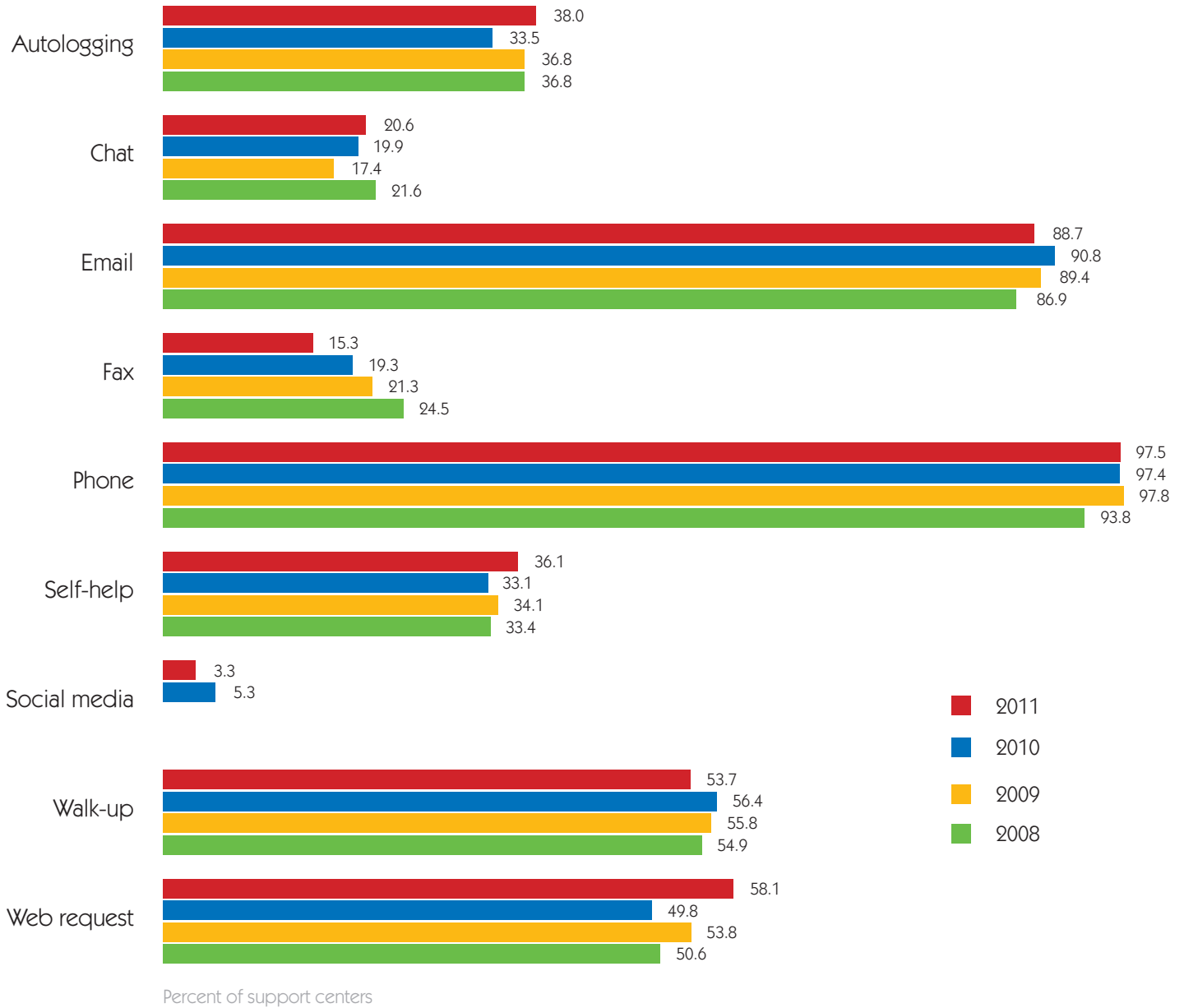
To create a plan of action for multichannel support, Lori Bocklund and Brian Hinton suggest this four-step approach:[4]

- **Take inventory**: Look at your entire support environment, not just the obvious components.

- **Identify technology**: Look beyond the support center and see what tools you have that can enable effective multichannel support.

- **Determine a model:** How will you approach governance and ownership of the channels? ITIL? Other?

- **Define channel priorities**: How will you implement your multichannel plan?

After these components have been addressed, you can begin to see how the total costs play into your channel choices and the sequence of their implementation. Also, consider exactly what you will need to measure (metrics), how the measurements will be gathered, how they will be reported, and to whom. Each channel has its own challenges for measurement, and each has particular benefits.

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[4] Lori Bocklund and Brian Hinton, "Does Your Multichannel Strategy Jive with Your Customers' Expectations?," ICMI, October 6, 2011.

Figure 1: Support Channel Usage

Autologging
- 2011: 38.0
- 2010: 33.5
- 2009: 36.8
- 2008: 36.8

Chat
- 2011: 20.6
- 2010: 19.9
- 2009: 17.4
- 2008: 21.6

Email
- 2011: 88.7
- 2010: 90.8
- 2009: 89.4
- 2008: 86.9

Fax
- 2011: 15.3
- 2010: 19.3
- 2009: 21.3
- 2008: 24.5

Phone
- 2011: 97.5
- 2010: 97.4
- 2009: 97.8
- 2008: 93.8

Self-help
- 2011: 36.1
- 2010: 33.1
- 2009: 34.1
- 2008: 33.4

Social media
- 2011: 3.3
- 2010: 5.3

Walk-up
- 2011: 53.7
- 2010: 56.4
- 2009: 55.8
- 2008: 54.9

Web request
- 2011: 58.1
- 2010: 49.8
- 2009: 53.8
- 2008: 50.6

Legend:
- 2011
- 2010
- 2009
- 2008

Percent of support centers

Source: 2011 Support Center Practices & Salary Report, p. 18.

Customer Expectations

To say that customer expectations have risen over the past few years is both an overstatment and an understatement. As support professionals know, everyone wants things fixed *now*, and wants their requests fulfilled *now*. Customers don't care if your senior managers have called an all-hands meeting to discuss the latest reorganization—they want someone to respond. This has not changed. What has changed is that now the customer might be sitting in an airport or a hotel or a coffee shop, working at 10 p.m. to get a critical report out before an 8 a.m. meeting, and having trouble accessing needed data through a secure mobile app. That customer also might not want to use voice communications (i.e., phone) as their first choice. People's work habits and capabilities have changed, but, in terms of their own sense of urgency, their expectations have not. In addition, new technologies and new ways of doing business have contributed to the "always on, always available" way of thinking. Cloud, mobile apps, managed services, automation, and the availability of outsourced services have enabled businesses to interact with customers—and their own employees—anywhere, at any time if they wish so choose.

The customer (whether an internal employee or an external paying customer) may need to be able to connect and work from anywhere at any time because of the competitive pressure to produce more with fewer people, and do so at lower cost. The support center's most essential function is providing support in such a way that it gets the customer back to work as rapidly as possible, and can provision for new hires or new initiatives as needed.

It is very important to bear in mind that there is no single "customer," even within a small-to-medium-sized business (SMB), and that people's expectations may vary widely by background and role.

Time

Although not usually listed among the drivers of multichannel support, time is one of the key elements in customers' selection of contact methods. Time is used in more than one sense here: the amount of time it takes to complete a support transaction, and the time of day (or night) that the transaction takes place at the customer's location.

There are two general categories of support channel with respect to time: synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous. The customer wants to have a choice between the two, but one thing is clear: Fast response is uppermost in the customers' minds. According to a June 2011 Forrester report, the statement "I am able to interact with a customer service representative quickly" was the first choice of 43 percent of respondents, outpacing both "My query is resolved quickly" (41%) and "I am able to access the information I need to resolve my query myself" (38%). It is also very noteworthy that 79 percent of these respondents said that phone was the channel they prefer to use, although only 44 percent reported that phone had been the channel they used in "the last three months."[5]

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[5] *2011 Consumer Preference Report: Contact Centers* (Forrester, 2011), p. 6.

Besides phone, other synchronous contact methods include text message (SMS), some social media forms (e.g., microblogs like Twitter, Yammer and Chatter), chat, instant messaging and some collaboration tools, and walk-up, where someone needs to be immediately—or nearly immediately—available on the receiving end of the contact in order for the channel to work. Email, self-service, self-help, forums or message boards, and some types of social media (e.g., blogs and wikis) do not require someone to be immediately available (asynchronous), and customers may select those during off-hours if their issue or question is not of high urgency, or if they are simply looking for information, interested in training or tutorials, or want to give feedback. It is essential to remember that the channel selection is up to the customer, and is based on his or her preferences and expectations. Clear information about time to respond should be known and obvious to the customer for every channel to assist in the selection of the appropriate method of contact. Email may not be the best way for a customer to report a critical outage, for example, but if a reasonable alternative does not exist, it may be the customer's choice by default.

In addition to hours of operation, time zones also factor into channel choices. If your support center is open from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. ET, seven days a week, but you have a group of customers in Singapore and another in London, there needs to be some provision for those far-flung customers to ask questions or report problems during the hours they are at work. In case of a critical outage or emergency request, there should be a clear and simple alternative process for customer contact. For example, if a mail server is down, someone in Singapore should be able to trigger a process to have someone paged or otherwise get attention on the outage as soon as possible. In the better case, autologging[6] systems can trigger the process before the customer does; in the best case, the fault is fixed or a workaround is implemented before the customer notices that there is trouble. It also may be the case that you can expand your support center hours of operation by adding a specific channel that is outsourced or handled by virtual workers. Analysts in California, for example, may be able to pick up chat interactions for your organization for a specified period late—by east coast standards—in each day.

Time also figures into many of the calculations and reports that the support center provides: time to respond (chat, email, self-service, etc.), time to resolve, time to answer (phone), and possibly the amount of downtime the customer experienced because of a fault. Can these metrics still be used? Absolutely—but the channels and their characteristics must be taken into account. In other words, if there's a shift from phone to email as the primary contact channel, there will be a resulting shift in the time to respond, which will become longer. Longer time to respond is usually viewed as a negative, so this metric may raise a red flag for management. It must be clear to all stakeholders that the measurements will be different for each channel, and that they should not be compared against each other. It is paramount that you allow the customer to drive the choice of channel, and customer expectations should be set in service level agreements (SLAs).

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[6] Autologged tickets are generated by monitoring software or self-monitoring devices. When there is an event that interrupts normal operation, a ticket is logged without human intervention.

Money

Support center managers and directors have been dealing with budget constraints and cuts for years. Like many other aspects of business, however, this pressure has increased during the current economic downturn. In many cases, staff has not been allowed to grow, despite the continued increase in the number of incidents and requests being logged. In 2009, 70 percent of respondent support centers reported an increase. The number dropped only slightly to 67 percent in 2010, and went up slightly again in 2011, to 68 percent. In each of the last three years, therefore, more than two-thirds of support centers reported an increase in contacts.[7]

As a result of the continuing growth in volume, cost per contact has become an increasing concern. Those with budget responsibilities for the support center have been looking for ways to reduce costs even as volume goes up. Not only has there been more interest in first contact resolution (FCR), but also in introducing lower cost channels to the mix.

Phone is one of the more expensive ways to handle customer calls, with an average fully-burdened cost per call of $17. Email contacts cost $14 each, and chat costs $10.[8] The $7 difference between phone and chat may not seem like much when taken alone, but shifting only 30 percent of a call volume of 3,000 calls per month (900 calls) to a combination of less expensive channels could save thousands of dollars a year, as shown below.

Channel (3,000 contacts/month)	Fully-burdened cost per contact	Cost per month	Cost per year
100% phone	$17 × 3,000	$51,000	$612,000
Total (single channel)			$612,000
70% phone	$17 × 2,100	$35,700	$392,400
20% chat	$10 × 600	$6,000	$72,000
10% self-help	$6 × 300	$1,800	$21,600
Total (multichannel)			$486,000

The fully-burdened cost in this example was reduced from $17 per call to $13.50 (average) per multichannel contact, for a savings of $126,000 per year. As we see, the most dramatic effect is shown by shifting to self-help.[9] Also bear in mind that not all cases will be resolved completely in one channel. A case opened via email may require a phone conversation to clarify and complete. Costs in the cases of these channel conversions are difficult to measure, but keeping track of how many cases are moved between

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[7] Jenny Rains, *2009 HDI Practices & Salary Report* (HDI, 2009); *2010 HDI Practices & Salary Report* (HDI, 2010); *2011 HDI Support Center Practices & Salary Report* (HDI, 2011).
[8] Ibid. (2011), p. 9.
[9] These numbers are averages, and are not intended to predict specific results.

channels—and to and from which channels—will help in cost analysis and also assist in service improvement. Care should also be taken not to record two or more separate transactions when a single case is converted from one channel to another.

There are many other factors besides cost to consider when planning to implement multichannel support. As with any decision involving organizational change and the investment of resources, cost—while important—should not be the single determining factor.

Culture

The term "culture" is used to describe tendencies to behave according to certain patterns, and these patterns may be either part of a national or regional culture, or that of a specific organization.

If service is delivered internationally, particular care must be taken to accommodate the culture of the nations or regions into which support is being delivered. This includes the correct and appropriate use of language, titles and names in all communications with the customer. North America has a high percentage of Internet penetration (78.3% of the population), while Asia (23.8%) and Africa (11.4%) do not.[10] Those organizations having international responsibilities, then, should not expect Internet-based channels such as web chat or forums to gain high adoption rates in areas of low Internet penetration, and may need to pay more attention to channels like SMS. Again, it is the customer who selects the channel of communication.

Inside the organization, culture also has a large influence on communication channel use. Some companies encourage self-help in every aspect of an employee's work life, providing copious documentation via intranet about HR topics, benefits, and requests for maintenance, while other companies prefer to provide information by phone contact or email directly to and from the departments involved. It should be expected that employees who work in a culture that utilizes self-help across the board will take better advantage of that channel with regard to the support center. Likewise, if the method of contact has broad adoption within the company or customer base for other purposes, adoption is more likely for support, except in cases of poor implementation.

Technology

To say that technology is rapidly changing in this decade is to understate both the speed and importance of the changes that are occurring. Mobile devices, the consumerization of IT, the advent of cloud services and infrastructure, and virtualization of applications and desktops are all major trends, and will continue to evolve rapidly. The technology is both the reason for and the response to increasing needs and desires to make working from anywhere at any time possible. Virtual workers[11] are increasing in number: According to the *2011 HDI Support Center Practices & Salary Report*, "Forty percent of support centers have at least some staff working virtually, and an additional 10 percent are

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[10] "Internet Users in the World: Distribution by World Regions, 2011," Internet World Stats, March 2011.
[11] Defined as workers who are not present at their place of business.

planning to implement this practice in the next twelve months. This makes for half of the industry."[12] That trend is reflected in many industry verticals and many types of jobs. Some companies have instituted a "results-only" work policy, meaning that attendance is not required as long as the work is being completed and goals are being achieved. This allows companies to spend less on construction or leasing of office space, parking areas, and utilities, as well as reduce or eliminate expensive face-to-face meetings.

These changes in our approaches to work introduce vastly increased demands for communication of all kinds. Customers calling into a support center must make virtual support workers' phones ring, websites must take mobile devices into account, and options should exist for support from anywhere.

Ready adoption of self-help, self-service, and web chat should also not be expected from those portions of the workforce who do not use computers as the predominant tool in their work. A design engineer who works in computer-aided design (CAD) all day is a different type of customer from the maintenance worker whose job it is to keep large machinery running, and who may only log on to a computer once a week, and then only to check email or to use the company's time-tracking system. The purpose of multichannel support, after all, is to provide customers with a range of options for contacting the support center according to their needs.

If I am a traveling worker, I'm likely to find myself working at a coffee shop at some point, because most of these shops have good Internet connectivity and don't charge you for it, at least not directly. If I have a question about something IT-related, or if I run into a computer malfunction, it is not practical for me to call into the support center and bother everyone around me at the coffee shop while I try to get my point across, or make up for the fact that the built-in "screen pop" features of the support center's tools don't work when I'm calling from my mobile phone. I need to be able to communicate quietly and quickly from a working device, using email (do I have company email on my phone?), instant messaging, chat, or social media of one type or another. In short, I need to be able to communicate in a channel or channels other than phone. As the number of virtual workers in the support center and elsewhere in the organization increases, so must the ability to communicate and receive assistance. While a great number of support centers take cases via email (~90%, depending on size and vertical), the median time to respond is 1–4 hours.[13] If I'm on the road and suffering a failure, that may just be too long.

The "traditional" model of the support center, where employees call in from known telephone extensions while connected to the corporate local area network (LAN) is fading away, and increased interest in multichannel support is one of the results.

On the upside, communication tools have not only proliferated, they have—on the whole—become less expensive. Chat did increase in cost per incident in 2010, but it

[12] Rains, *2011 HDI SCPSR*, p. 68.
[13] Ibid., p. 60.

dropped in 2011 to its previous level.[14] In addition, many tools that were solely used on desktop or laptop computers are now readily available for mobile devices, and mobile devices have themselves become more user-friendly for using tools like chat, with larger screens and better interfaces. Consider the difference of trying to use web chat on a small-screened mobile phone versus a new iPad or other tablet, for example.

In light of these scenarios, it is surprising to see that there was only a very small increase in the number of support centers using chat over last year (<1%), but "external support providers (29%) are also more likely to use chat in this manner (i.e., receive tickets through chat) than are internal support providers (15%)."[15] Since those providing external support are dealing with customers who are off their LAN and local phone system, this makes sense.
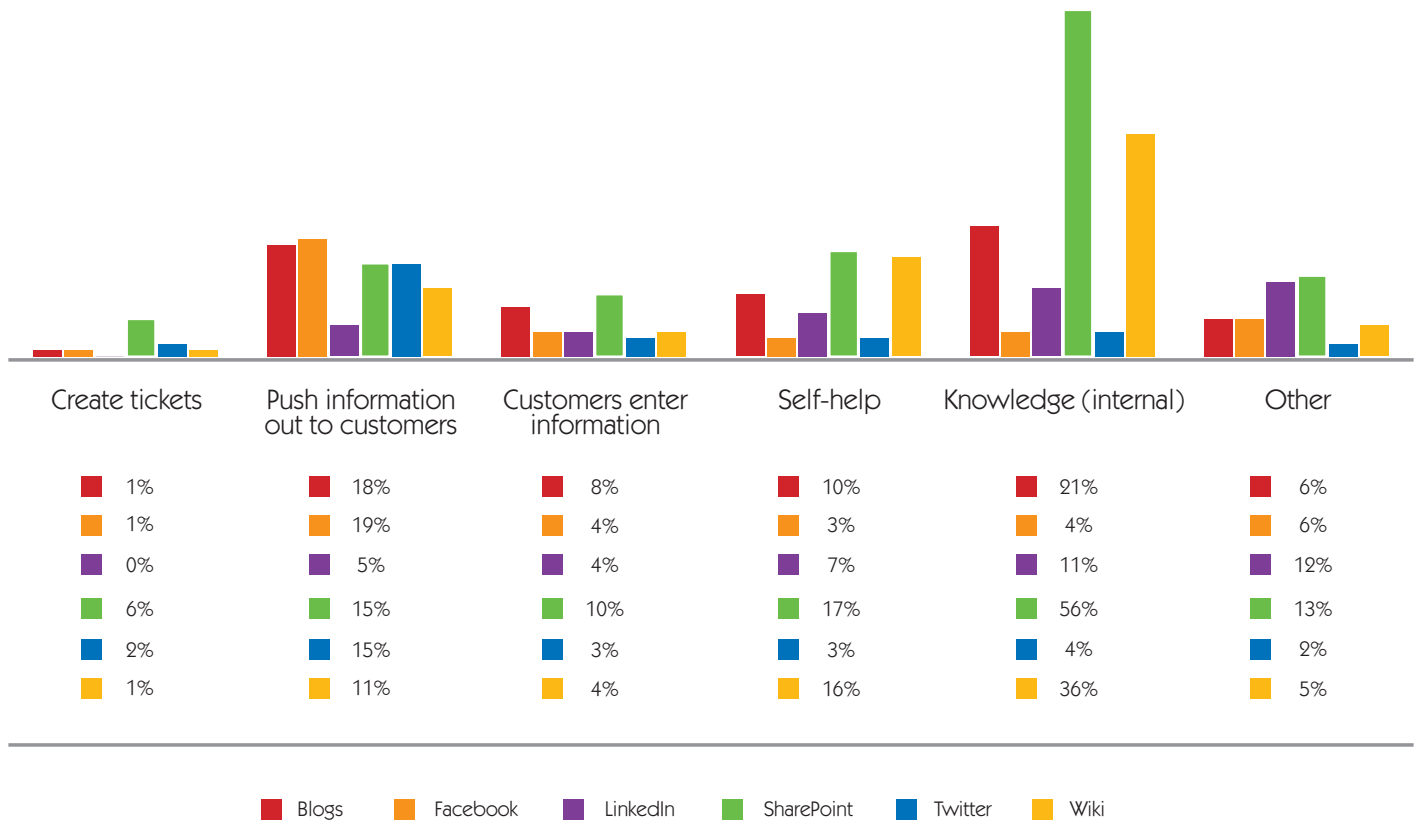
Increased technological capabilities have also come into play by reducing the need to manually log tickets following interruptions in monitored services. Alerts and monitoring have increased, and many monitoring systems have the ability to send messages directly to service management software, creating tickets and notifications of the correct groups. For example, an interruption in your email system could automatically trigger the creation of a Priority 1 ticket, which in turn can trigger whatever actions your organization has in place for such an eventuality, including off-hours paging.

Only a small fraction of support centers are currently creating tickets using social media tools, but it is highly likely, given the popularity and penetration of these tools and the absorption of more social media savvy workers into the workforce, that there will be additions of social media channels in the near future.

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[14] Ibid., p. 9.
[15] Ibid., p. 17.

Figure 2: Social Media in Today's Support Center

	Create tickets	Push information out to customers	Customers enter information	Self-help	Knowledge (internal)	Other
Blogs	1%	18%	8%	10%	21%	6%
Facebook	1%	19%	4%	3%	4%	6%
LinkedIn	0%	5%	4%	7%	11%	12%
SharePoint	6%	15%	10%	17%	56%	13%
Twitter	2%	15%	3%	3%	4%	2%
Wiki	1%	11%	4%	16%	36%	5%

Legend: ■ Blogs   ■ Facebook   ■ LinkedIn   ■ SharePoint   ■ Twitter   ■ Wiki

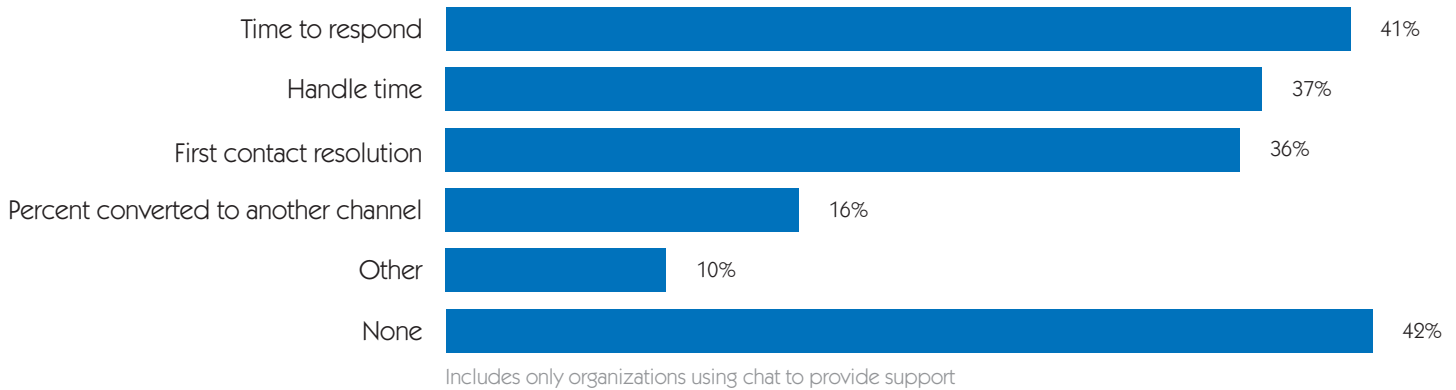*Source: HDI Research Corner Compilation, 2010–2011, p. 30*

Process

Are the main processes of support the same in a multichannel environment? Yes, they are. There will still be incoming contacts for incidents or requests, support centers will still have to gather information and still have to respond. There will still be escalations. The details of those interactions are what will change, and moving to a fully integrated multichannel support center will have its challenges.

In a July 2011 HDI Research Corner, we asked about the metrics being used to measure chat interactions. An alarming 42 percent of the respondents who use chat reported that they do not gather any metrics at all.[16] Indications are that the same is true for social media and some other channels.

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[16] Jenny Rains, "Chat as a Support Channel," HDI Research Corner, July 2011.

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Figure 3: Chat Metrics

Time to respond	41%
Handle time	37%
First contact resolution	36%
Percent converted to another channel	16%
Other	10%
None	42%

Includes only organizations using chat to provide support

Source: "Chat as a Support Channel," HDI Research Corner Report (July 2011)

In some cases, metrics may be tracked for informational purposes, but may exclude elements of resolution entirely. For example, a forum article written by a customer may or may not warrant any sort of tracking by the support center, other than noting that it has been posted. Likewise, the support center may or may not know whether a customer's question or concern has been addressed by the article. If forums are a frequently used support channel for your customers, you will need to make some critical choices about how you deal with questions and answers. Do you need to intervene when a customer provides what you consider to be an incorrect solution? Do you need to convert the question to a different channel? If so, what effect does monitoring and intervention have on the efficiency of the channel?

Without understanding how we interact, how often, how long it takes us and how we spend (or earn) the organization's money, we cannot mature into the real business partner that we need to be to survive in the world of managed services, outsourcing, and heavily regulated industries such as healthcare and finance.

As stated earlier, for years, call centers and support centers have been using metrics primarily designed around phone calls. Much of our terminology and thinking is still in the one-to-one, phone-based support era, and we need to have better ways to measure in a multichannel world. One of the best ways to determine what and how we should be managing is to remind ourselves which questions we asked about customer interactions in the first place.

Listed below are some metrics as they can be applied to various channels. It goes without saying that your organization needs to determine for itself which measures are important, and who needs to see the reports each day, week, or month.

- How long does a customer wait for response when they contact us?
    - » Phone – Speed of answer
    - » Email, chat, social media, instant messaging, forums – Time to respond
- How much time does an analyst spend engaged with a customer, working the case?
    - » Phone, chat, instant messaging: average handle time (AHT)
    - » Email, social media, forums: effort[17]
- How much time elapses from open to "close" of a case?
    - » All channels: time to resolve
- Did the case need to be escalated, or did we complete the work on the first try?
    - » Phone: first call resolution
    - » All other channels: first contact resolution[18]
- Was the information provided to the customer in an asynchronous channel helpful?
    - » Was a forum question answered? By support or by a customer?
    - » Are there comments or follow-ups to a forum question, self-help article, or blog post indicating that the answers provided are not helpful or not intelligible?
    - » Are customers checking self-help and then immediately calling support or creating a case?
- Did the case need to be moved to another channel before being resolved?
    - » All channels: channel conversion rate[19]

In any channel, it is important to gather information through monitoring and metrics to determine what improvements need to be made. In addition, it is extremely beneficial to indicate what improvements are being made, so that people who have been unable to find a solution in the past will return to that channel in the future.

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[17] Effort is defined as the actual time spent working to find a solution for a customer, applying the solution, and verifying the solution. In the case of field service, this may also include travel time to and from the customer's location or desk. It does not include the total elapsed time from open to close, as *time to resolve* does.

[18] First contact resolution may require additional definition for each channel. In email, for example, it is usually counted as one exchange (i.e., one email into the support center and one email back to the customer). In self-help, it is a measure of a customer finding the correct article and applying the solution without further interaction.

[19] In "Chat as a Support Channel," HDI reported that 16 percent of chats (for those respondents who measure them) needed to move elsewhere before resolution.

Summary

Multiple channels, implemented as part of a broader business strategy, can help support organizations solve some of the problems they face: increasing demand and volume, limited resources and changing work environments. Costs can be reduced, but should not be the primary consideration of a multichannel implementation. Integration of existing technologies can make support organizations more responsive to customers' changing needs. Generational and cultural differences in both the workforce and the customer base should be carefully considered when planning for multichannel support.

Multichannel support will be part of many support organizations' futures, and the appropriate ways of measuring success should be considered beforehand. How you define success will vary from how other organizations define it, but it will probably include increased customer satisfaction, better incident and request tracking, and—after ramp-up—adjusted lower costs for as much or more support coverage. As with any strategic investment, plan carefully and define your goals and expectations based on the goals and needs of your organization, not necessarily the latest technology.

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About the Author

Roy Atkinson is HDI's senior writer/analyst. He is an HDI-certified Support Center Manager and a veteran of both small business and enterprise consulting, service, and support. In addition, he has both frontline and management experience. Roy is a member of the conference faculty for the HDI 2012 Conference & Expo and is known for his social media presence, especially on the topic of customer service. He also serves as the chapter advisor for the HDI Northern New England local chapter.

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