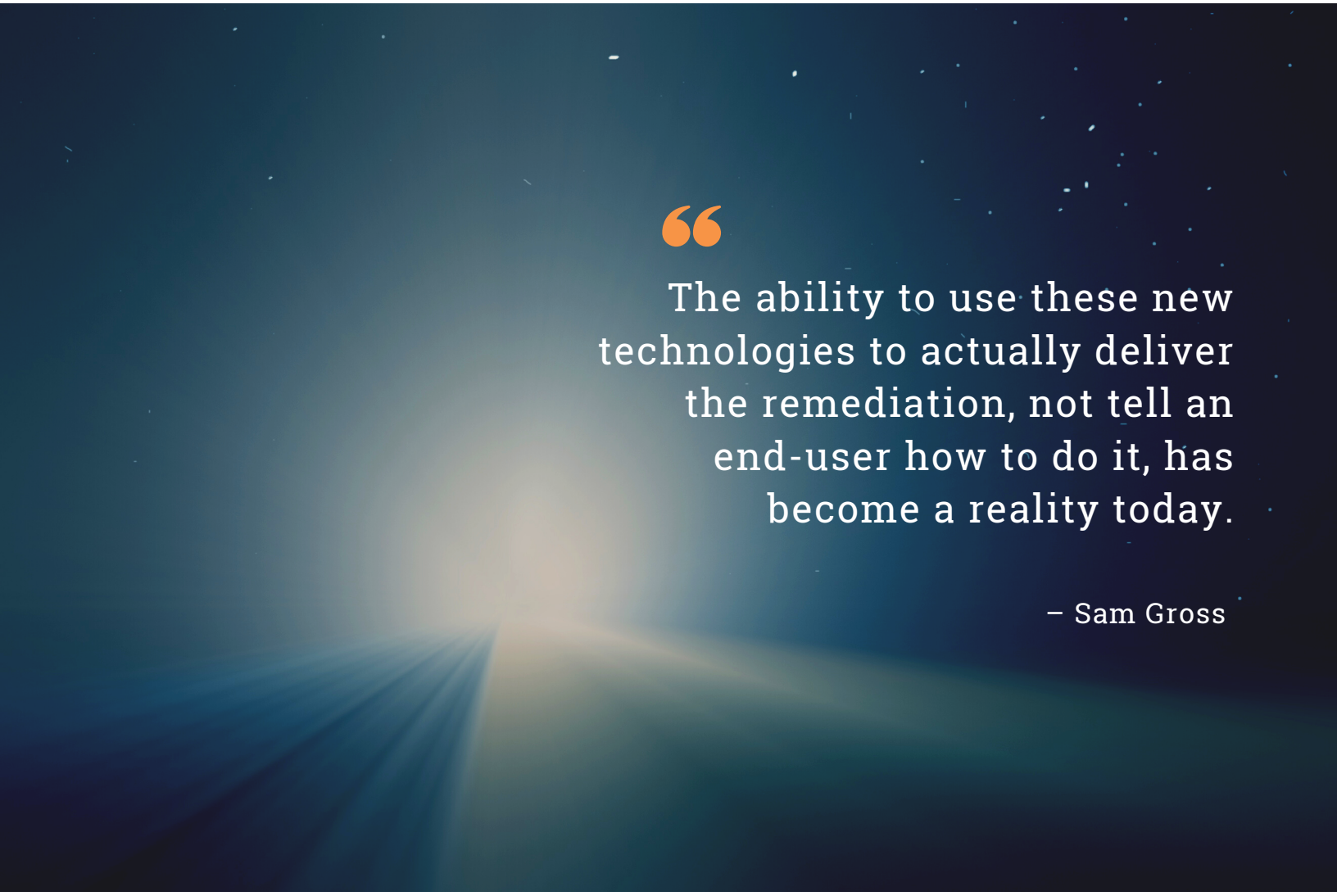
Transforming End-User Service and Support

An Expert Roundtable on Providing IT Service Without Human Intervention



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Introduction

Since the arrival of the first computers, service desks have been employees' lifelines. When their essential desktop equipment has failed to perform, employees have turned to their company's service desk, which in most companies is a core part of their IT organization. Its importance was amplified when the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly relocated workers from their offices and call centers to their homes, disrupting the way they work as it disrupted almost every other facet of our lives.

So, we thought we would take a look at the service desk function and how it has evolved over the years, and more importantly what changes we are seeing, now that artificial intelligence (AI) has come to the forefront of innovation.

What better way than to ask a panel of experts? Our recent panel discussion on the evolution of the service desk was hosted by Eric Hochstein, Business Development, with ChoiceWORX™. Joining Eric is a panel of three industry insiders with great insights from their years of industry experience. Jeff Rumberg is the founder of MetricNet, a company that has the most comprehensive database of IT benchmarks in the world. David Wright, from the Service Desk Institute, is the chief value and innovation officer, and is an auditor and consultant with 20 years of BPO and ITO service management and business strategy experience. And Sam Gross is the founder and president of ChoiceWORX™. Sam was previously a chief technology officer in global outsourcing and a leader for companies such as CompuCom, Unisys, CSC and Siemens.

This conversation has been edited for clarity and space.

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ERIC: Let us get started. David, can you give us some context for the discussion and tell us some of the highlights of the past 10 years in the history of the service desk?

DAVID: If you look at the last 10 years, adopting best practice frameworks, developing good practice through interactive and continuous improvement, that has been pretty much the mainstay of service desk challenges for a long time. Mitigating human error has always been one of my big ones, as is adherence to quality assurance along with managing the customer's perspective as well, or perception of service, if you like.

So I think certainly in the last 10 years, the introduction of SAAS solutions, self-service self-help to encourage more self-serving experience, for end users, that means, lower value workloads, repeatable work that is shifted left into technology, and automated processes requests – like password resets – along with providing more of front-end searchable knowledge-based proposition. So yeah, it has been a big 10 years.

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ERIC: Jeff, based on what David has told us, do you think the service desks are performing better these days and are the customer experiences getting better?

JEFF: Eric, I absolutely feel like service desks worldwide and the customer experience are improving and there are several reasons for that. One is that there is a lot more focus on the customer experience than there has been historically. Ten years ago, there was a lot of focus on technology without regard for how the customer might adopt the technology or react to that technology. Today, it is all about delivering the highest quality customer experience possible.

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Now that manifests itself in several ways. Customers now have channel choices that they did not have 10 years ago. They can interact through voice, chat, email a ticket, submit a web ticket, or they can self-serve. There is an emphasis within service desks worldwide on first-contact resolution because it is now well understood that first-contact resolution drives customer satisfaction. That is enabled by knowledge. It is enabled by effective training and by hiring quality resources that can grow into the job and mature to the point where they can deliver high first-contact resolution rates. Customers care a lot more about getting that resolution on the first contact. So, I think the industry has evolved from being very technology centric 10 years ago to being very customer centric today. As a result, service desks worldwide are performing better, and customers are having better experiences today.

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ERIC: Sam, you have the insights as a user from many of your experiences. Can you share some comments here?

SAM: Well, first, I certainly agree with Jeff's comments. I think both David and Jeff are really talking about the end-user experience. I have spent many years in the provision of that service to the end user and I cannot help but look at the back end, the way that the service is actually delivered.

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I am still amazed that the delivery engine still looks fundamentally the same way it looked for, I dare say, 20 years. ITIL has created a vernacular. But it has not really changed what happens; the way that customers connect, that has changed. The images they see on the screen have changed. But the fundamental provisioning of remediation has not changed in many, many years. And I think it is time for that to change as well.

ERIC: Jeff, do you agree?

JEFF: I do agree. The way service has been delivered has fundamentally remained the same. There have been incremental improvements in the delivery of that service. There is no question that the labor-intensive delivery of the service has been largely the same. Unfortunately, we have not seen the uptake or the adoption rates in the self-help, self-service channels that we were hoping for today. Worldwide, an average of only about 12 percent of customers can find a satisfactory self-service solution, despite the promise. Twenty years ago, I would have said that none of us would have jobs today because everybody would be self-serving. So, what has happened is that the technology used by users has outpaced the capability of the self-help portals. And so, fundamentally the services are being delivered the same way, and we are getting better outcomes. But we are still a very labor-intensive industry with relatively low adoption rates in the self-help, self-service channel.

ERIC: David, do you see the need for an incremental change or more of a reinvention?

DAVID: It is interesting. Jeff is obviously right. Every organization I see, apart from a very few who have got it right, the self-service, self-help is an underused channel. Jeff said under 12 percent; I see them as single figures. Much of the time, 10 percent is usually the average. You have to look at the return on that. What return is an organization seeing for investing in that type of thing?

I think many organizations may well be very content with incremental improvements now and in the future as well. I think other organizations will want to reinvent. Especially, if you look at the launch organizations, outsource organizations, or managed services. They are still looking for differentiators to drive down cost.

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The service desk does have an opportunity to look at new technologies to create a more proactive proposition harnessing assistive technologies, orchestrating service, augmenting service between humans and technology. That is the next stage, the evolution of the service desk.

The service desk is very human. And in many cases, much of that human time and effort is to fill the gaps between technology and process because the technology cannot do that. So, if you think of password resets, which is still a significant workload in many organizations, look for the advent of self-service and the opportunity to shift some of that into technology. High-volume workloads and repeatable low-value workloads enable humans to be more proactive. So I think the service desk does have an opportunity to look at new technologies, to create a more proactive proposition rather than looking backwards into more of a reactive proposition, to harnessing assistive technologies, orchestrating service, augmenting service between humans and technology. That is the next stage, the evolution of the service desk.

ERIC: David mentioned the evolution of the service desk, and to many people, the concept of a fully automated service desk is the holy grail. Is this a concept of vision or a reality at this point?

SAM: I would like to say that it is beginning to become a reality. Today, with the combination of data technologies that we have and various types of AI techniques, we can automate at least 70 percent of extremely repetitive work. If you can write a knowledge article for it, if you have a product classification code for it.

It is happening a lot. And so, our ability to use these new technologies to actually deliver the remediation, not tell an end-user how to do it, has become a reality today. And we have built that technology at ChoiceWORX™ in our Apptinuum™ product.

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ERIC: Sam, with the Apptinuum™ product, it does really begin on the endpoint of the environment. Correct? Can you talk about the how it works with the endpoint?

SAM: When you begin to think about applying AI to the problem set, which means remediating technology faults for the end user, you start with the end user, which means it is an end-user model that you must really embrace. Their experience is important, but you have a couple problems that you must solve. The users, the software configuration, the network configuration, everything is extremely diverse, and so handling them becomes an important problem. The second part of the problem, is how do you really "bind" an end-user and a device to an AI engine, in a way that end users are not only comfortable with, but delighted with? So, we built our product to use something that we call a Support Bot, which gets installed at the end point and handles all those problems for the end-user.

ERIC: Jeff, in the past, endpoint management has been an exceedingly difficult issue. Why has it been so hard for service desks?

In the 50-year history of this industry, maybe 60 years, IT service management (ITSM) began in 1972, there has really been no disruptive changes in this industry. There have been incremental changes with the introduction of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) systems, the introduction of ticketing systems, the introduction of knowledge systems, and more recently, the introduction of AI tools.

Now, if you all are like me, the demos that you have seen of AI-based tools, except for one, are not very impressive. I mean, I'm not going to call out names, but what I will say is that the AI tools out there basically read knowledge articles and then give the user an answer that comes directly from a knowledge article.

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Endpoint management is a tool being used by several organizations and it must be a part of any AI solution with service and support going forward. You do not want to just give the user an answer and give the user an answer quickly, you want to try and prevent incidents and service requests from happening in the first place. And that is where endpoint management comes in.

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So the tool that Sam was referring to, Apptinuum™, is really the first tool I have seen in this industry that has the potential to disrupt IT service and support not only from a preventive, proactive perspective, that is eliminating problems and incidents at the source through endpoint management, but also through machine learning, providing the user with intelligent solutions on the spot. So basically, it eliminates wait time at the front end when the user has an issue by preventing incidents and service requests to begin with.

So, I do believe that we are on the on the verge of seeing the first truly disruptive change in this industry with the introduction of Apptinuum™.

ERIC: David, any thoughts from the Institute's perspective? Is this the direction you think the industry should be going?

DAVID: Well, yes, we only rely on what our what our community says. So if you look at some of the research reports done over the last year, one report asked organizations about this type of technology, chat bots, virtual agents, not so much the endpoint stuff, but just the use of this type of technology. Twenty-two percent of organizations strongly agreed that they would be investing in this technology over the next two years, 43 percent agree, to a 65 percent there in total. So, there is an appetite for this kind of technology.

We also saw that there is a small shift in the way that people are using the channels. Telephony is shrinking slightly, and if you look at the statistics, self-service is going up. Over the last two years in one report, we saw over a 50 percent increase in organizations saying that their users were starting to use self-service. So, I think there definitely is a shift, and we could soon be at a tipping point. I really do not think there is a silver bullet here yet. It does take time, effort, and resources to identify, procure, implement, and train these types of solutions. And it takes people to do that, to make decisions around the systems, how they operate, and to what degree the technology is orchestrated. But I think there is a tipping point. I think we are on the brink of seeing something radical, probably in the next 18 months to two years.

ERIC: Jeff, you measure value. If we change the paradigm of the service desk, how do you measure value of a new environment like this?

JEFF: One way you create value is to eliminate work in IT service and support. Worldwide, your average end user has 1.1 level 1 tickets per month, and they have about a half a ticket per month in desktop support. So, you are talking about eighteen touches per year from an end user to service and support. Typically, they are losing about an hour of productivity per ticket, which is 18 to 25 hours of lost productivity per end-user per year. If we can eliminate half or more of those incidents, you are returning that productive time to the end user, which might be 10 or 15 hours per year, that can be monetized. The biggest source of value in IT service and support is the ability for service and support to return productive hours to end users.

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Value is going to come by reducing the number of tickets. From a preventive perspective, any effective AI tool has to do that. Endpoint management is a big part of that. We want to eliminate work if we possibly can and then the work that is left over, we want to get it resolved as quickly as possible at the lowest cost channel possible, whether that is the self-help channel or if necessary, a level 1 channel. Just a quick statistic on this. Today, there are 50 percent more level 1 agents worldwide than there were 10 years ago because the workload has grown at level 1. But there are 20 percent fewer desktop and field technicians today than there were 10 years ago. That is largely the result of a shift left, but also moving a lot of complexity into the cloud. The desktop environment is locked down and is a lot less complex than it used to be. But the implication is that level 1 is handling more complex issues and that requires a better trained, more qualified, more experienced resource than we have historically seen.

This is one of the reasons why some of the AI tools that are on the market now are simply not keeping pace with the complexity of the tickets that are coming in at level 1. The AI tools that can keep pace with the complexity, the tickets at level 1, they're going to be the winners here, both through reduction in ticket volume and endpoint management, as well as empowering the user to self-help, to give them a solution instantaneously without any weight.

ERIC: Sam, can you give us one example of how Apptinuum™ can handle some of these problem resolutions?

SAM: We take a real simple view of it. We think the challenge with the delivery engine lies in this digital/analog transformation process that we have used at the service desk or for the provision service since time immemorial.

> If we are going to live in the world of digital transformation, we cannot support it with human-speed support. We need digital-speed support for digital transformation. Therefore, we keep the fault messages in the digital channel. By keeping the fault message 100 percent in the digital channel, by mimicking what is primarily a lot of very repetitive techniques in a very finite domain, we can deliver the remediation proactively, instantaneously as well as conversationally.

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When you think about it, the fault that occurs for an end user generates a digital message. So, what we do in Apptinuum™, we make sure that those digital messages are confined within the digital channel. If we are going to live in the world of digital transformation, we cannot support it with human-speed support. We need digital-speed support for digital transformation. Therefore, we keep the fault messages in the digital channel. The support bot delivers those digital fault messages directly to an AI engine. That AI engine mimics what a human service desk agent or a Level 1 infrastructure engineer does by making a set of decisions and choices around what is the best way to resolve that problem, and then sends that information back to the support bot for that remediation to get executed locally. And so, by keeping the fault message 100 percent in the digital channel, by mimicking what is primarily a lot of very repetitive techniques in a very finite domain, we can deliver the remediation proactively, instantaneously as well as conversationally.

As an example, one of the top hitters in problem tickets is your Outlook e-mail. Apptinuum™ is able to detect faults that occur in Outlook while you're using it and then able to decide whether or not it is network activity that needs to take place, whether it is data in your OST or PST files or whether it is a configuration issue. We are then able to go in and automatically make those adjustments the same way, 100 percent digitally, that a service desk agent would do if they took remote control of your desktop. Except we would get the whole thing done in 30 seconds instead of a 20-minute remote control session.

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ERIC: Sam, how close are we to seeing Apptinuum™ in the market?

SAM: Apptinuum™ is rolling out as we speak. Some large health care clients, some large managed service providers. We are extremely excited.

ERIC: Well, it certainly does sound like it is a possible inflection point is coming to the service desk industry. We are looking forward to learning more about that in the future. David, Jeff, and Sam, thank you very much for joining me today.

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About ChoiceWORX™

ChoiceWORX™ is an intelligent automation software company that is revolutionizing IT Operations. Our proprietary platforms leverage the power and scalability of artificial intelligence to automate Service Desk (Apptinuum™) and Robotic Process Automation Management (Robotinuum™). Our solutions allow companies to significantly reduce labor cost, greatly improve end-user experience and drastically lower operations costs. **Learn more at www.choiceworx.com.**

About MetricNet

MetricNet's expertise provides their clients with valuable insights and information that they can use to enhance their performance and achieve a superior or favorable long-term position over competitors. Services include, but are not limited to, service desk, desktop support, and contact center benchmarking; procurement assistance for organizations looking to outsource service and support; ethical competitive intelligence and mystery shopping; industry trends and best practices analyses; and deep dive topic specific research corresponding to a specific business case. **Learn more at www.MetricNet.com.**

About Service Desk Institute

The Service Desk Institute (SDI) sets the globally recognized best practice service desk standards that provide clear and measurable benchmarks for service desk operations and professionals. The standards are designed to encourage service desks to embrace and value best practice to raise the quality of service delivery. **Learn more at www.servicedeskinstitute.com.**

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