



For Smoother Sailing:
*Transform Your Help Desk into a
Knowledge Center*



ABS Associates, Inc.
Making Technology Work For You

When the captain of a ship takes the helm, he is equipped with a plethora of knowledge to help him successfully navigate through the water. He gathers data points about the weather, stars, water depth, and tide schedule to determine the most successful route to the ship's final destination.

Like the ship's captain, CIOs are charged with making important, strategic decisions – decisions that can either keep their companies on course or run them aground. Myriad factors are taken into account when the CIO's vessel is underway; the needs of his end-users, pressures to simultaneously improve performance and lower costs, and the complexity of his infrastructure are all key considerations that impact the CIO's direction. Additionally, his recommendations must be anchored by factors for success: flexibility, rapid execution, and demonstrated ROI.

The help desk can serve as a reliable barometer for the CIO and his team when it is used as a *knowledge center*. Performing beyond its role as a reactionary tool, the knowledge center not only solves problems for the end-user but also “predicts” aspects of the future based on past performance. With the proper people, processes, and technology in place, the help desk is transformed into a *decision support tool* that will assist in allocating resources, targeting the greatest opportunities for return, and identifying potential obstacles and threats. Knowledge is power, and fully utilizing the valuable data a help desk captures can optimize the CIO's prospects for smooth sailing.

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The following case studies demonstrate how the help desk acts as a decision support tool when used as a knowledge center.



*Allocating Resources:
Ensuring your Boat Won't Capsize*

As the shipmaster of his company's IT equipment and staff, the CIO is responsible for ensuring there are no "stow aways" in his department. Because staffing expenditures impact the total cost of the IT infrastructure as well as the company's bottom line, the Help Desk Manager must justify a decision to increase the number of support personnel with compelling data. The CIO and other members of the executive management team, including the CFO and the VP of Human Resources, will expect a sound business case from the Help Desk Manager before they will appropriate the funds necessary for hiring additional people. The data contained in the knowledge center can help the company make an accurate, justified decision.

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The Help Desk Manager at The Douglas Company* recently noticed the company's help desk was experiencing an increase in calls as well as a decrease in the call resolution rate. Before requesting supplementary support personnel, however, the Help Desk Manager took a closer look at the data reported by his knowledge center. A thorough analysis of the information identified the types of calls coming in, the average time it took to resolve each type of call, and whether or not the rise in call volume was a constant trend or a temporary spike as a result of infrastructure problems. The Help Desk Manager was also able to pinpoint how the workload was distributed among the current

support staff, the skill sets most often required of the help desk, and if any employees needed additional training in these areas.

In the end, the Help Desk Manager realized there was a need to hire more people, and he could base his recommendation to do so on fact as the help desk gave a clear picture of the support resources available and how they were being used. He identified individuals who needed more training for certain types of calls as well as a need to add personnel with knowledge specific to an application users frequently questioned. Armed with facts related to the issue at hand, the Help Desk Manager was able to dispel any doubts of his recommendation when discussing the situation with the CIO.



Targeting Opportunities for Return: Moving with the Tide

IT departments are often faced with the challenge of managing and supporting several operating systems dispersed across their company. As new operating systems boasting of improved, user-intuitive features and increased reliability are rolled-out each year, CIOs are inundated with claims that migrating to a new OS will reduce the number of calls made to the help desk, allowing resources to be allocated to other projects. For example one vendor might approach companies with a new version of an operating system and promise a 30% reduction in the total support costs for the updated platform. While this might be correct based on beta tests of the product, it will most likely not translate into a 30% decrease in support costs for all companies. In some situations the actual cost of rolling out the new software will far outweigh the cost savings garnered once the software is being used.

The help desk as a knowledge center can assist the CIO in validating a decision to upgrade the operating systems used. Analysis of the data from the knowledge center can answer key questions, such as: What are the failure rates with the current operating systems in place? Are all necessary software applications compliant with the new operating system? Will any hardware need to be upgraded? What can I expect in terms of cost savings?

To validate vendor claims, the CIO can set up a test rollout of the operating system and monitor the support calls to the helpdesk. Recently, the CFO at Novak Associates* asked the CIO if switching all machines over to Windows XP would reduce support costs. After implementing a test group, the CIO was able to compare the support histories for both the old operating system and XP and determine if in fact users with XP placed less calls to the help desk. He was also able to identify the types of problems users encountered most often with each operating system and which system components needed to be upgraded in order to make XP successful.

Such information allowed the CIO to bridge the gap between speculation and reality by providing the data needed to calculate the total cost of upgrading *as well as* the anticipated cost savings. Ultimately, the help desk served as a tool to analyze the potential upgrade opportunity from a profit and loss standpoint and provided the data necessary to back the CIO's decision to migrate all machines over to Windows XP.



*Identifying Obstacles:
Using the Knowledge Center to Avoid a Squall*

A system failure can be like hitting an iceberg for the CIO; his ship can quickly sink. The knowledge center is an important tool for identifying problems *before they occur*. Reporting can highlight applications or systems that generate a large volume of calls over a period of time, providing an indication of where the problem lies.

Recently at JKL Incorporated*, the knowledge center received an increased number of calls from users in several of the company's facilities. It was not immediately apparent why there was a sudden wave of support requests. After diving into the data, it appeared that a majority of the callers were having trouble with a specific accounting application that was going to be rolled-out across the company in a few weeks.

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When the IT department investigated further, it found that the application itself was not corrupt. Instead, the Help Desk Manager and Director of Application Development determined that many of the trouble tickets described situations where the application was running slowly, thus creating a dissatisfactory user experience. There was also a correlation between the number of complaints about the application and the number of people using it.

From this analysis, the Help Desk Manager and Director of Application Development jointly decided that some components of the company's IT infrastructure needed to be upgraded before the accounting application was rolled out across the company. Without adding more system resources for the application, it was likely to operate extremely slowly and run the additional users aground.

The data resident in the knowledge center was instrumental in the analysis of the situation at JKL. The calls tracked alerted the Help Desk Manager to a potential problem, and after evaluating the generated reports, the CIO's team could implement the changes necessary to divert a major failure in the system.



*The Transformation:
Bridges to Cross Before Attaining the Knowledge Center*

Why don't more companies use the valuable information from their help desk to aid in key decisions regarding IT? The truth is that using the help desk as a knowledge center isn't easy. Strategy, process, and discipline are all required before the Help Desk Manager, Director of IT, CIO and other members of the IT department can glean insightful truths from the help desk regarding systems and infrastructure, user satisfaction, and support resources. First, these directors and managers must understand the types of information gathered as calls to the help desk are handled, tracked and resolved. Second, they must develop a system to collect and report the data. Finally, this system must become part of the project management process for the help desk.

For example, regular root cause analysis is central to utilizing the help desk as a knowledge center. Instead of reacting to potential problems, members of the IT department proactively identify areas for improvement through a consistent root cause analysis process. It is especially beneficial to evaluate support data as IT projects are rolled-out. However, even when there is a documented procedure in place for data analysis, significant time must be spent digging into the information before conclusions can be formed.

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There is also significant value in garnering feedback from the support professionals who converse with the end-users. Because they are on the receiving end of the problems and complaints, help desk personnel have their fingers *on the pulse of the organization*. When a server crashes or a specific application starts to run slow, the people staffing the help desk are the first to know something is amiss. The support professionals act as a compass pointing the IT department in the right direction.



*The Help Desk as a Knowledge Center:
A Sea of Information*

Companies today rely on technology in many ways, and it is the CIO's job to ensure that his end-users are able to efficiently communicate and conduct business. The help desk is a critical means to this end. With the proper people, processes, and technology in place, the help desk becomes a knowledge center that *supports* the strategic decisions the CIO and his team must make. While the knowledge center is not a magic ball with all the answers, it is a tool that can provide facts to support the CIO's recommendations, allowing him to set sail with the other members of his team on board.

**Note: All company names have been changed.*

About ABS Associates, Inc.

Founded in 1982, ABS is a leading provider of help desk, desk side, and network support and services. *ABS*help, the company's *web-enabled knowledge center* captures and reports data to help its clients make strategic IT decisions. For more information, access the ABS home page at <http://www.abs-inc.com/>