

# Service Desk Roles Are Seen as a Stepping Stone to Operations Roles

by Ante Brinkman

The field of service management uses many different terms for what ITIL calls “the Service Desk”: help desk, call desk, support desk, and of course service desk. With complex terminology and philosophies, we draw distinctions between these types. But there are also many similarities. You almost never hear about those—and they’re underexposed. That’s odd. This article is about the service desk, but you may substitute the name of your own “customer contact” function.

Service Strategy and Service Design ultimately take shape through the people who staff help desks, call desks, support desks, or service desks. The answers they provide determine the customer’s service experience. What competencies should they have?

## The “Face” of the IT Organization

The service desk is the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) of the IT organization at the operational level. Because of this specific task, the service desk is the “face of your organization.” It’s the place where the IT organization meets the customer (the business). This is where customer satisfaction is made—but also broken.

In recent years, I’ve been involved in shaping service desks. What struck me is that staffing firms often send junior IT professionals to man service desks. When there’s a vacancy on a service desk, it’s typically junior IT professionals who apply as well. That’s a curious phenomenon. After all, the service desk is the hub of the organization. Naturally, performing such a role requires a basic knowledge of IT—but it certainly also requires strong communication skills. In practice, the first criterion—basic IT knowledge—is often the only one that’s met.

The countless conversations I’ve had with staffing firms and applicants, as well as internally with organizations themselves, have made it clear that no one seems willing to take a different approach to staffing. That’s strange, because—as noted—the service desk largely determines customer satisfaction.

## Communication vs. IT Knowledge

A recent discussion on the ITSMF.nl forum presented two propositions about the service desk.

Proposition 1: A good service desk can make up for the IT organization’s mistakes through effective communication with the customer—and unfortunately, the reverse is also true. Even if the IT organization runs very well, if the service desk communicates poorly, the customer will still be dissatisfied.

Proposition 2: Is a good service desk agent an IT professional with a feel for communication (the Technician), or someone who communicates well and has a feel for IT (the Communicator)?

Starting with the first proposition: most people will agree with it. It names one of the service desk’s primary goals, as described in ITIL theory. If a service desk keeps its agreements with the

customer and communicates about them clearly and transparently, a less efficient or less effective back office will be less noticeable. End users won't quickly get the impression that things are structurally going wrong. Nor will they be inclined to approach management (the customer) to complain.

The reverse case is harder. If an incident is resolved properly but the service desk forgets to communicate about it, there remains a risk that the customer will complain. Suppose, for example, an incident is resolved outside the agreed time (SLA), and there's no communication with the user organization during the process—then a disappointed user will certainly report this to their own management. The fact that the IT organization had a good reason why the incident couldn't be resolved on time hardly matters anymore. If this happens often, the damage is incalculable.

Recognizable? And yet it seems many organizations miss opportunities to communicate well. That's related to uncertainty about the type of staffing to choose. Proposition 2 rightly asks: "Who are we actually looking for on a desk?"

On ITSMF.nl, many similar reactions came in to this proposition, as they did during the recent ITSMF workshop "Successful Publishing," developed and delivered by publisher TIEM, where this topic also came up. From another quarter, however, very different responses appeared. A number of team leaders of second- and third-line resolver groups reacted that a service desk is a good breeding ground for "their resolver groups" (the Technician). Someone from Australia remarked: "An IT help desk is also a good IT employment pool for an organization." Another reaction painted a similar picture: "If you choose the Communicator, the step up to second- or third-line is very big." Yet another: "If a service desk agent doesn't know what they're talking about, calls won't be logged clearly enough."

Apparently, there is a growth path from service desk to operations (second-, third-line support). That explains why, when hiring service desk staff, the focus is mainly on technical knowledge. Managers assume these employees will eventually be responsible for operating (parts of) the IT environment.

## **A Badly Needed Shift**

In summary, we can say that a service desk role is seen as a stepping stone to an operations role. However, because the service desk's role is crucial in delivering services to the user organization, the ability to communicate well should be considered more important than technical IT knowledge.

Despite the fact that this is widely known, we're not seeing major shifts in the competencies required on the service desk; technically driven entrants remain predominant. Yet the shift toward communication competencies is badly needed to fulfill this key role properly.

Apparently, this shift is difficult to achieve, given how long we've been grappling with it. So how, from within our field, can we convince the parties involved of the value of this change? And why exactly? In the period ahead, we will conduct further research into this phenomenon to gain a better picture of how the shift can take place—so that we can achieve real IT-and-business alignment.

Source: "Servicedeskfuncties," i-cons.nl