

Support services transformation: Daunting, doable and worth it



Across industries and organizations, support services executives typically face three expectations from their higher-ups: Increase customer satisfaction with better, faster support. Contribute to healthier margins by being more efficient. Maintain an engaged, effective workforce with low attrition.

Support services leaders recognize that fulfilling these mandates over time requires more than incremental operational improvement. Their organizations need to make a step change in how they fulfill their role—a people, process and technology transformation.

What does transformation mean to a support services organization? Foremost, it can dramatically improve performance. A recent transformation initiative undertaken by Avaya Client Services has produced benefits including accelerated issue resolution, reduced service backlogs, higher customer satisfaction and gross margin growth. Employee engagement is up, and attrition is down (see *Reaping the rewards of service transformation*).

Reaping the rewards of service transformation

The transformation effort Avaya undertook from 2011 to 2014 has produced substantial improvements in client care and business efficiency:

- 5 percent gross margin increase
- 57 percent reduction, over a three-year period, in the cost of a service event
- 44 percent reduction in Tier 1 and Tier 2 support staff requirements, with concurrent growth in Tier 3 support resources
- 66 percent reduction in extended service backlog
- 91 percent restoration of outages in two hours or less
- 8.6 percent improvement in client satisfaction
- 12 percent improvement in employee engagement
- Attrition reduction from 18 percent to 10 percent

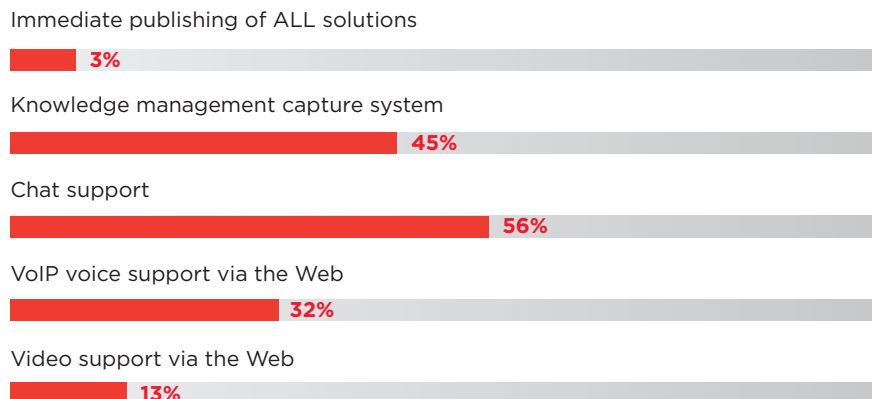
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Achieving such results is neither fast nor easy, however. Transformation takes time, the commitment of management and employees, and the capacity to envision a new services paradigm. It entails a full migration to Web-based support and a dramatic shift in how contact center agents focus their time and effort. Support services executives considering such a transformation journey can benefit from understanding five characteristics of high-performing support organizations.

Support services transformation today — a snapshot

Responses of participants in a 2014 Avaya Client Services Webinar survey provide some insight into how support organizations are employing communications tools now available and why continued transformation is needed (Figure 1).

Figure 1. How companies use communications tools



More than half of participants (56 percent) provide Web-based chat support, reflecting the channel's growing popularity. Chat enables an agent to handle multiple customer sessions simultaneously, improving productivity.

Encouragingly, nearly one in three (32 percent) respondents provide voice support via the Web. Combining Web and voice support into a single channel can help create a more holistic customer experience by maintaining service without making the customer transfer to a different system.

Video support via the Web is likely the next frontier of support services. While only about 13 percent of survey participants indicated their organization provides Web video support, uptake will grow as customers increasingly use mobile devices and services such as Skype and FaceTime.



Despite such advancements, the online survey results highlighted one important, lagging area of adoption. While nearly half of survey respondents (45 percent) employ knowledge management systems to capture, structure and reuse information that agents acquire in helping customers, *less than 4 percent immediately publish all solutions*.

This considerable gap is perhaps partly attributable to concerns over potential legal ramifications of disseminating poor information. At the same time, the disparity indicates that live agent interaction may still be the primary method of resolving issues. This likely represents a significant missed opportunity to shift customers toward more self-service options for diagnostics and issue resolution, an instrumental step toward achieving the Holy Grail of support services: increased margins, improved customer satisfaction and reduced agent attrition.

Nonetheless, the fact that so many companies are using knowledge management systems is encouraging. With a few more refinements, businesses should be able to truly transform their support services.

Making the transformation journey worthwhile

Support services transformation is a balancing act of maintaining a good customer experience while fundamentally changing the support services paradigm. It's a process that doesn't happen overnight. Transformation typically takes 18 to 24 months to complete and requires significant process, technology and personnel investment to make the needed mindset and cultural shift. While the commitment can cause organizational leaders to recoil from the challenge, companies around the world are proving up to the task. Avaya has identified five steps that can help organizations complete the journey.

Step 1: Shift live agents from answering known questions to solving new issues, and immediately publish the solutions.

"First call resolution" is the mantra of many support services organizations. In reality, it's the wrong chant. Support staff repeatedly providing answers to known questions may boost resolution rates, but it is an expensive task for personnel to carry out, and one that technology solutions can handle more efficiently. Support staff should instead work on new problems, and when they find solutions publish them immediately.¹

¹ Note that "immediately" should be carefully defined. For example, at Avaya our support agents are required to publish issue resolutions within 30 minutes of completing an interaction with a client. However, with required internal reviews, it can take up to 24 hours for the information to appear on the Avaya Support Website.

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Step 2: Deploy a comprehensive multimedia knowledge base, with a virtual attendant, to give users easy, intuitive access to known solutions.

Every service agent-customer interaction, whether chat, voice or video, is a potential solution to a problem. The services industry has long hewed to the notion that solutions are so plentiful, and knowledge management systems so limited, that teams of people are needed to root through the answers and uncover the small percentage that warrant publishing.

This approach has several limitations. It is expensive, requiring the time and talent of agents with deep product knowledge to sift through solutions. Publishing answers can take days or weeks, while hordes of users clamor for help. Because humans have limited ability to sort through lists of possible solutions, key answers can go unnoticed, leaving agents to reinvent them repeatedly.

Support organizations can take several steps to avoid these problems. Knowledge capture systems can be structured to automatically prioritize articles, sending the freshest and most viewed to the fore and pushing others to an archive. A virtual attendant can mimic a Tier 1 agent, fielding user questions and accessing articles in the system. Multimedia resources can demonstrate, as well as describe, how to solve problems. The Avaya Support Services Knowledge Base, for example, provides access to more than 146,000 solutions.

Agents can be trained and encouraged to search the knowledge base for possible answers to a customer question. Audits can determine whether agents are taking this step, or skipping it and writing articles that address already answered questions.



The knowledge system can also capture customer questions coming through the support Web site. Issues regarding quality, documentation, and ease of installation and use can be cycled back to development teams on a daily basis for prioritization and resolution. Today, 65 percent of Avaya clients find answers through the Avaya Support Website without agent assistance.

Step 3: Reinvent the support Web site and drive customer adoption so customers are confident that solutions are available, however they want to access them.

Many customers are ready and willing to solve problems on their own, provided they can quickly get to the information and resources they need. Others prefer interaction with support agents. Service teams should strive to put troubleshooting and solution management tools into customers' hands so customers can interact with the company in whatever way they choose.

For example, Avaya makes available to clients at service renewal nearly 200 diagnostics, including some Tier 2 and Tier 3 tools. Clients can monitor quality of service, use built-in sniffers to uncover potential network issues, and troubleshoot problems, without the need for agent support. However, if customers want agent support, they have multiple options: Avaya Web Chat, Web Talk and Web Video, as well as a fast, direct option for issue escalation and a Total Service Outage button for emergencies.

A challenge for businesses going forward when they offer multiple Web-based channels for support, such as chat, voice, mobile and video, is aligning the right channel with customers depending on their needs. This will require constant vigilance over time to discern patterns of customer use that will indicate which channel to offer under different circumstances.

Step 4: Make it fast and easy for customers with new issues to collaboratively access qualified live agents via the support Web site.

Customers across industries are using automated solutions to resolve more and more issues. Sometimes, though, they need an agent — immediately. A key to the transformation from a phone-oriented support organization to a truly automated system is making it simple for customers to reach a live agent when they need one and providing them easy access to published answers.



Customers want the ability to access support in the manner they want, whether it's via Web-based chat, voice or video. A support Web site should be easy to log into and provide fast connection to the right live resources.

Though in its infancy today, live video support accessed through the Web site has the potential to dramatically alter the support dynamic. Video can foster rapport and understanding between customers and support personnel more quickly and convincingly than other support formats. Agents like it too, recognizing its potential to elevate dialog and connection with clients. Higher customer and agent satisfaction scores will be the tangible proof of video's impact in the contact center.

Step 5: Provide emergency escalation procedures and outage buttons on the Web site to give customers immediate, collaborative support access for the most serious issues.

Establishing a system to automate escalations from field personnel, in-house employees, customers and business partners can accelerate problem resolution. Escalation schemes can be established for various issues, such as comments on agent performance or sales department queries regarding pricing and quotes.

For example, Avaya installed a "Total Service Outage" button on the Avaya Support Website that provides our clients with immediate restoration assistance. We have emergency recovery teams on call to tackle issues and assemble technical talent to swarm the problem if needed.

Another benefit of this approach may be somewhat less tangible but is still important. By automating, managing and speeding the escalation process in the way described above, a company can discourage customers from going around the system and contacting senior executives. When customers go around the system, it can actually prolong the issue resolution process while the executive seeks out the appropriate personnel to address the problem, ultimately defeating the customer's purpose for doing so in the first place.

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About Avaya

Avaya is a leading, global provider of customer and team engagement solutions and services available in a variety of flexible on-premise and cloud deployment options. Avaya's fabric-based networking solutions help simplify and accelerate the deployment of business critical applications and services. For more information, please visit www.avaya.com.

Sustaining the effort

Transforming support services is a major undertaking, and keeping customers and employees engaged and believing in the process is crucial to its success. New technologies should be a core part of the transformation, but don't be overly focused on specific advancements, such as Web-based chat, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), video and mobile applications. Instead, keep the broader strategy in view and understand all of the building blocks that will make transformation a reality, including less visible, behind-the-scenes elements such as knowledge management, instant publishing of resolutions and rapid escalation processes. Also, it's important to establish and attain measurable objectives throughout the transformation. By demonstrating the value of transformation as it happens, support organizations can sustain the momentum for change and position themselves to meet growing customer and employee needs.

Learn more

Transformation of any support services, contact center or sales organization can be a significant undertaking. When we describe the Avaya support services transformation journey to our clients around the world, those clients often want to learn more about the processes behind the transformation — what approach did we take, what issues did we encounter, and how did we make the changes “stick”? To learn more about our methodology, resources and tools and how they might be applied to your own transformation, please contact your Avaya Account Manager or Avaya Authorized Partner or visit <http://www.avaya.com/usa/service/customer-engagement-transformation/> or support.avaya.com.



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