

Pro-Active Information Technology Support Services A State of Mind (And Readiness)

This paper describes the benefits derived from adopting a pro-active set of policies and procedures to guide the usage and maintenance of information technology resources: in short, IT support. In this context, IT consists of a complex myriad of equipment, software, procedures, and services. By inherent design limitation, each of these elements has failure points. Some are fairly well known, such as expected duty cycles of printers and hard drives, while others are fairly unpredictable, such as service provider outages.

Excessive frequency or duration of IT support-related downtimes should very definitely be the exception rather than the rule.

The Re-Active Philosophy

One of the obvious roles of IT support management is to apply resources to fix things when they break. This is the so-called “break-fix” sequence. In one manifestation of this philosophy, the entire organizational chain from management, through support, to end users simply operate IT mechanisms until they “break” and then call someone to “fix”. Then support responders respond to diagnose and remedy the issue. Unless all of the elements in the organizational chain are in a state of readiness or expectancy, each element in the chain will process through standard organizational inertia/coordination and ~~then~~ eventually respond and focus on the issue at hand. In this manifestation, end users of information technology are surprised and some even confused when things don’t work correctly. In some cases they are not certain about the symptoms they are ob-

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serving. This leads to communication delays when they then describe the problem(s) to their supervisor or to the first-level technical support element. When the technical support element fields the call for service, it may not have the benefit of history of type of problem being reported. A whole new support cycle is started for each instance. If a parts

replacement is necessary, the technical support element may be required to call or visit suppliers to identify and acquire the necessary part. And so it goes. In extreme cases, end users are left to wonder why the remedy of seemingly minor problems takes days or weeks to “fix”. The point is that unless everyone in the support cycle from management through support organization through end users are in a state of knowledge and readiness, the entire support cycle can become unduly long. The business of most enterprises today vitally relies on IT to perform even basic functions. In this sense, when an IT component is out of commission, one or

more functions of the enterprise are also out of commission. What is the cost of extended downtime? It varies of course with the essentiality of the downed functions, but in most cases it is viewed as significant.

Of course the philosophy described in this paragraph is theoretical. Most organizations use IT support resources and procedures that are timely and responsive. But most assuredly, some organizations indeed do not.

The Pro-Active Philosophy

Let's take the other side of this coin. IT support as described in the foregoing paragraph must plow through a sort of standing inertia. This takes time. In direct opposition to this mode of IT support operation is a philosophy that might be called Pro-Active IT support. We are still discussing "break-fix" here but in the Pro-Active philosophy, everyone in the loop is keyed to IT support problems. Users are trained on the symptoms associated with various problems; they know how to describe them. They are thoroughly familiar with the established protocol for reporting support issues when they occur. The communication chain from end user to support element, via supervisory level(s) if necessary, is swift and direct. IT support resources, whether they are internal or external, are ready with an organized base of knowledge and materials or parts to respond and remedy common support issues in a timely manner. Ideally, the IT support organization has an established continuity and familiarity with the IT equipment, network, and software infrastructure of the enterprise. Everyone in the loop is focused on minimizing operational downtime. This Pro-Active philosophy provides for more effective operation of functions that rely on IT components and of course decreases the overall cost of ownership and utilization of those components.

Preventive Maintenance

Another important role of IT management is to reasonably prevent things from "breaking" in the first place. This is in-keeping with the Pro-Active IT support philosophy. Of course there is no way to prevent equipment or software wear and tear any more

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than you can prevent wear and tear on the engine in your car. However, sticking with the car analogy for just a moment, periodically changing oil, oil and air filters, checking tire pressure, checking and filling brake fluids, etc. etc. are activities that extend the smooth running life of your car. These activities fall under the general category of preventive maintenance. Common IT preventive maintenance activities are highly cost effective because they can prevent or forestall numerous break-fix sequences. It is

always more efficient to take measures to prevent "breaks" than it is to "fix" them. Examples of common preventive maintenance measures include staying up-to-date with operating system updates and virus definition profiles, replacing equipment components as they approach their known end of duty life cycle, and routine periodic observation of data backup components to ensure proper functioning. CPU and case fans, hard drives, printer fuser, and printer photoconductor units are but a very few examples of components with fairly well known life cycles and they can be economically replaced with only minimal downtime as they approach end of life and before they "break".

Excessive frequency or duration of IT support-related downtimes should very definitely be the exception rather than the rule. Adopting a Pro-Active IT support philosophy and associated policies and procedures can bring this to reality.

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