

The future of support...

It seems odd to write an article for the December edition of Support World in September... In order to get in the appropriate mindset I decided to immerse myself in all things Christmas. Naturally after eating my third turkey dinner, watching an old 'Only Fools and Horses' special for the umpteenth time and perhaps drinking a little too much of the festive spirit my mind began to wander...

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

Scrooge to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

So come with me if you will on an investigation of one possible direction that the support industry may go. Although, to slightly contradict Scrooge, if the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Cern teaches us anything it is that our reality is little more than a theoretical construct playing itself out in parallel to an infinite number of other such realities – So this is less of a look into the future but more of a sneak peak at another point along the space time continuum. Everything you are about to read is fact. It most definitely is not whimsy or the musings of someone with a deadline fast approaching and limited time on his hands!

In the distant future, support will not exist. If we look to Star Wars, Dr Who, Star Trek, Quantum Leap or indeed any other sci-fi classic we can see that the future promises a nirvana state where IT is a utility or appliance that can be remedied by giving it a sharp tap on the side. Indeed, the self configuring Borg-like capabilities of tomorrow's technology devices means that the kettle will be able to calculate the level of the traditional first world's debt to the historic third world in the event that the toaster is having an off day. Worst case scenario, we may need to take a lump hammer to the Tardis, or indeed enlist the aid of a Wookie to fault find an issue with the deflector shield. But self reliance and self sufficiency is clearly the name of the game. You rarely, if ever, see the 'blue screen of death' in the future, and being left on hold by a support centre in the far wastes of Wales (or indeed Pune) is something that just doesn't happen. Yes, most definitely, support is an outdated concept in the future. It's not that the need for advice and guidance will disappear; it's just that the way in which these needs are satisfied will be radically different.

So how will we reach this state? Or perhaps I should say, how did this happen?

Early in the 21st century it became clear that the support industry couldn't fix the ills of the world on its own. The changes outlined above only happened because various elements of the IT industry came together and combined with other external factors. A process visionary by the name of Obi-When began working with the support community and solution vendors, developing a roadmap for improvement which was to become one of the most hallowed and respected writings that the world has ever seen. More perceptive than OK magazine and more descriptive than the ITIL framework, these writings became the mantra for support executives around the world.

The customer experience was broken down and it was found that there were six key factors that affected the way in which a customer or user related to the support organisation. These foundations of the support continuum as they were to become known included:

- Product / Service supportability
- Support technology
- Delivery Models and process
- The commercial dimension
- Relationships and Satisfaction
- Focus and role of the support function

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Each foundation element was accompanied by a pyramid of enlightenment describing the various stages of maturity and progression that an organisation must transition if it was to evolve into the support function of tomorrow and attain true wisdom and inner peace. The teachings of Obi-When promoted the concepts of harmony and mutual respect, helping to breach the void between IT and the business world and banishing distrust and confusion forever.

Product / Service supportability

Spurred on by the success of historic documentaries like 'Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines', the IT industry began making devices and solutions increasingly intelligent and ultimately more self aware. The IP enablement of practically every device on the planet with the inception of IPv6 paved the way for many, if not all, of these advances. This began with embedded monitoring and forensic error logs and evolved into pro-active self configuration capabilities based upon real-time predictive analysis using state of the art statistical techniques.

Support technology

Reactive service desk solutions evolved very early on to embrace the rise in predictive capability. Outage and incident prediction gave way to proactive service assurance which enabled the support function to reach out and make pre-emptive strikes against known errors and likely root causes in order to guarantee service availability and quality. Cross-function and cross-vendor collaboration became the norm as the rise of system complexity meant that tradition linear process approaches were ineffective and wasteful.

Delivery Models and process

Dedicated support teams became integrated within the business and the vendor development community. The need to extend beyond the vendor out into the customer organisation reduced as the rise of hosted or sponsored user forums and expert exchanges proliferated. Internet search engines combined with self service portals to give end users immediate access to multiple knowledge repositories and expert communities irrespective of location or time zone. Knowledge became the currency of support with lone independents trading their skills and experiences in the newly formed information marketplaces.

The commercial dimension

Support had historically been a cost centre, seen as a necessary evil by the business in order to enable them to get on with the business of doing business. Cost allocation and usage based charge backs helped demonstrate the relative consumption of IT capability. However, it wasn't until the positive contribution that IT made to the operational running of the business was clearly defined and understood that the commercial advantage of support became accepted. Failure cost tracking gave way to opportunity cost identification, which in turn matured into the predictive cost of inactivity measures that we use today.

Relationships and Satisfaction

Back in the mists of time support organisations used to poll their users periodically as to their level of happiness and satisfaction with the service they had received. This may seem quaint now, but at the time they knew no better and made do with Top Box analysis and crude loyalty metrics. The introduction of voice tone analysis and Natural Language Programming technology for intent identification within written communications helped somewhat. But the real improvements came when support stopped trying to satisfy their users and began trying

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to delight them. Satisfaction measurement gave way to proactive expectation setting and commitment tracking, ultimately evolving into the delight management processes that are commonplace today.

Focus and role of the support function

Support began life as the poor relation to the IT development and project implementation functions. Seen as little more than the oil that greased the wheels of the wider IT machine support was left to languish in break-fix hell for what seemed like an age. As it began becoming more proactive, support was elevated to the ranks of a peer within the IT community. Only when prevention became the standard mode of operation was it able to break free of its overt technology roots and begin promoting the use of IT in the wider business context. This evangelical role for the improvement of business processes by leveraging IT capabilities more effectively is the basis upon which today's support and mentoring functions are based.

It is important to remember that all of these events actually happened. Obi-When and his teachings are not fictional, they are an indisputable fact in an alternative reality. As we contemplate this possible disturbance within the force and its effects upon the mists of time, the hangover of the present returns and it is time to bid farewell to this view of the future, returning once more to our present reality such as it is...

Returning to reality...

Whilst the above may seem like a flight of fancy, or the deliberations of a maniac, it does represent one possible version of the future that may be closer than you think. It is incumbent upon every support professional to ensure that they remain up to date with current and potential innovations in their space if they are to remain relevant. These innovations will come from a variety of sources and directions and will undoubtedly have a significant effect upon the entire support industry. The concepts and themes briefly outlined above will be investigated in more detail in future research pieces and articles by the author. Readers who would like to discuss the above are invited to contact the author through the usual channels.

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