

Are you trapped in a counter-productive Service Level Agreement loop?

Practically every support organisation uses some form of service level agreements and key performance indicators to monitor their performance. These agreements and associated metrics usually define a threshold against which they are compared in order to determine their relative merit against an arbitrary measure of goodness defined by someone external to the function, an industry benchmarking report or some other such source that is equally disconnected from the actual work itself. Often, meeting the SLA or KPI target can be achieved at the expense of good customer service. Surely not! Well, alas yes. The weaknesses of man are many and varied and it is an unfortunate truth that the accuracy of service data can sometimes become the unexpected casualty of mans greed and avarice...

First time fix rates can be skewed by prematurely closing out tickets, only to have them re-opened at a later date. Incident volumes can be fudged by neglecting to record every instance of failure for recurring issues. Customer chase calls can be 'lost' or buried within work logs to prevent them negatively impacting the recorded number of interactions needed to close out a ticket. Extending call handling times can be manipulated by simulating telephony problems and periodically dumping calls manually and calling the user back. Likewise, excessive call waiting timings can be 'fixed' by answering the calls and hanging up immediately. Any negative comments from callers can be fielded easily with a catchall description of a generic CTI issue. Resolution times can be artificially constricted by applying generic workarounds such as reboots or bare-metal machine rebuilds for anything which cannot be diagnosed quickly and accurately. The underlying problems are never investigated and come back to roost with frightening regularity. Mean time between failure metrics can be hacked through the coincidental rescheduling of planned maintenance tasks to coincide with system outages. Customer satisfaction survey results may be clouded by the careful selection of recipients and/or the intervention of the support team to assist users with the completion of their responses.

And all this before the normal raft of statistical shenanigans is unleashed upon the poor unsuspecting data set. Considering the volume of data generated by the support function and IT in general, the level of statistical analysis used within many organisations is pitiful. So called analysis is often limited to a series of pie charts and bar charts depicting the distribution of hot issues discovered in the preceding month. If the service desk is to be taken seriously within the wider business it must develop the analytical and data presentational skills necessary to meaningfully interact with its peers. The basic concepts of business statistics (i.e. statistical analysis governing forecasting, trend analysis and the identification of correlations between multiple factors) are beyond the scope of this particular article, however until we take time to rectify this in a future piece, it is recommended that every service desk manager and team leader take some time to read up on the subject so that they are fully conversant with the basic principles of probability, variance, standard deviation and distribution models. This knowledge and the associated skills will prove themselves invaluable in the analysis of IT related performance data and the identification of root causes and potential issues. Anyhow, I'll get down from my statistical soap box for now and get back to the matter in hand...

Suffice it to say that the exclusion of non-representative samples, the judicious setting of included percentile ranges and the selection of statistical techniques and/or methods to apply can all be used to great effect as tools to mask reality by a suitably skilled and motivated support professional with a bonus plan to meet.

Wherever staff bonuses are tied solely to SLA compliance then it could be argued that the organisation may be indirectly promoting poor customer service. At the very least they are creating an environment and culture which doesn't necessarily completely align with their stated objective of delivering good service. It is often said that sales persons are 'coin operated' in so far as there is a direct correlation between their activity and their pay. Well I am sorry to have to burst anyone's bubble, but so are most people, support personnel

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included, it's just that the sales folk don't make any attempt to hide this slightly questionable and socially dubious character trait.

Management by numbers is a self fulfilling prophecy – People cheat! “Cheat” may be a little harsh but it's certainly catchier than “sub-optimally perform to the detriment of customer service due to a misaligned management reporting regime that promotes self-interest in divergence to the actual needs of the customer”...

Given that it is practically impossible to implement any reporting process that is totally secure and tamper proof, care must be taken to apply sufficient safeguards to make the process robust whilst remembering that these are not a substitute for ongoing management scrutiny and participation. Every system can be unduly influenced to some extent in order to deliver the metrics that management desire by the wily team leader with an eye on their bonus. The following suggestions may help to combat such behaviour, but it remains the job of management to continuously review the system, the metrics that measure the system and their effectiveness / usefulness on an ongoing basis.

- Avoid placing too much emphasis on any single metric – always base reward schemes upon a combination of factors (ideally factors which may conflict with each other so that focusing on one area will have a detrimental effect on the other) to ensure that the overall performance is raised
- Remove manual inputs wherever possible - using system generated times etc will help avoid low level cheating, however it should be noted that any system that utilises the local machine time is open to abuse if the local clock is not locked down or automatically synchronised
- Use impartial third parties to collect data where necessary – I have seen examples of satisfaction surveys being sent out by the delivery teams, they decided who received them and they worked with the end user to get the result that they needed...
- Prevent undue pressure being exerted upon the users – User satisfaction survey results should be confidential unless the respondent agrees otherwise. I have seen cases where users reporting less than the required level of contentment have been harassed by service desk staff and management in an attempt to get them to retract their comments and improve the rating given. All it meant was that these users refused to participate in the programme in future...
- Use sensible analytical models and avoid knee jerk reactions – Statistical blips are part and parcel of the infinite variation of support processes. Persons reviewing performance data must be educated in basic statistical techniques in order to prevent them making ill informed judgements based upon the data they have in their hand
- Pay particular attention to 'stop the clock' cases – Stopping the SLA clock may be a necessary evil within some organisations, although some purists would argue that it should never be stopped at all and that any extenuating circumstances should be documented within the SLA breach report.
- Define the consequences of cheating – There should be a clearly defined policy outlining the procedures to be followed and the potential fate of any individual found to be playing fast and loose with operational data. Many may consider this to be an unnecessary bureaucratic burden but you would be amazed by the difficulties that can be had when trying to take disciplinary action against an employee where such policies are left in the realms of assumption.

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- Check for cases or tickets that cross SLA reporting period boundaries – Often these transition states are not sufficiently documented within the SLA and can give an opt out for the unscrupulous agent or team leader allowing them to artificially keep a ticket open past the end of the SLA period to ensure it doesn't detrimentally affect their stats for the quarter etc.

There are of course many other ways that operational data can be tainted. This piece was never intended to be a definitive scoundrel's guide to SLA manipulation, or indeed on how to prevent it. It was however an honest attempt to try and get some of the more numbers obsessed supervisors and service desk managers to take their statistically blinkered eyes from their spreadsheets for a brief moment and to consider the possibility that maybe just maybe they should be managing a little more and monitoring a little less...

The content and guidance within this article could of course be used for good or ill depending upon your particular preference and inclination. I sincerely hope it is the former, but if your organisation is overly metric focused and lacking in leadership and management direction to allow the latter to prevail then I am sad to say that in all probability it will largely get the service delivery performance and customer satisfaction ratings that it deserves.

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