Understanding Help Desks: A Hawke's Bay Study

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ABSTRACT

Help Desks and their management have emerged as functional operations across a variety of organizations and industries. With continuous advancement of technology, questions have been raised about how Help Desks are operated, how they cope with change and potential increased demands from end-users.

To clarify these question areas, a mail survey was developed and forwarded to randomly selected business (n=136) in the Hawke's Bay, with the intention of capturing pertinent information relating to the size, nature, operation, and policies and procedures these businesses have. A response rate of 65% was achieved.

Of those responding, 34% indicated they had a Help Desk operation of some description. Interestingly, service industries more so than manufacturing or primary industries were more likely to have a Help Desk. Outsourcing played a major role in the overall Help Desk environment and many organizations surveyed did not have any Service Level Agreement (SLA)

Help Desks tend towards the traditional telephone call submittal mechanism, which is out of ordinary considering advancements in technology. However, this may have some relationship to the way end users function and their natural tendency to just "pick up the phone". Procedural oversight may also be a factor when it comes to SLAs, and hence will have a relationship to the number of calls submitted.

Further research areas are identified, including the concentration around the Service Industry relationship, outsourcing and those who indicated they had no Help Desk functions at all.

1. INTRODUCTION

Help Desks are becoming increasingly important and as technology has evolved over the last 20 years so too has the need to manage and support these changes. Recognition of these dual needs in coping with change has seen the evolution of Help Desk operations as a functional activity in many organizations.

This paper, as a pilot study, examines which Help Desks in Hawke's Bay are satisfying the current needs for management and support of IT activities, and what directions these may take in the future. As this evolves, so to does the need for resources, specifically, staffing and managing what is known as a functional "sweat shop".

So, what is happening with Help Desks in Hawke's Bay? To what extent do Help Desks exist and function? Is there room to align these functions with students studying in this area? What opportunities are there to share resources and expertise amongst these operations?

This paper exams the above questions and identifies areas of interest around the characteristics, size and nature and policies and procedures of Help Desks in Hawke's Bay. It describes many of the features of the Help Desk's surveyed as well as some of the more important discussion areas.

The paper then concludes by looking at some of the significant findings and drawing conclusions around the characteristics of a typical Hawke's Bay Help Desk, the size of their operations and the policies and procedures employed. Further areas of research have also been identified following the analysis of the data and the conclusions.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Help Desk - YES		Help Desk – NO		Significance
	N	%	N	%	
Industry Service Manufacturing Primary	 21 6 2	 72 21 7	 24 14 16	 44 26 30	ChiSq = 7.433 df = 2 p=.024
Average Time in Business (years)	55		29		F = 8.874 p = .004
Average Number of Employees	255		38		F = 11.509 p = .001

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Of the 134 surveys mailed to potential respondents a total of 86 responses were received of which 85 were useable. Of these only 34% indicated they operated a Help Desk of some description. All respondents were categorised into three major industry areas; Manufacturing, Primary and Service. Significantly, 72 % of those who indicated that they had a Help Desk came from the Service Industry. (ChiSq=7.433, df=2, p=.024)

Respondents had varying amounts of time in business and this in itself may help explain some of the responses surrounding the size and nature of their Help Desks. Of all the respondents, 27 % had been in business for less than 10 years and had employees totalling no more than 11. Of those who indicated that they had a Help Desk, the average time in business was 55 years and they employed an average of 255 full-time staff. In contrast, those who didn't have a Help Desk have been in business for a shorter time (29 years) and the average number of employees was 38. Based on ANOVA, both of these measures show significant differences. Table 1 summarises this data.

Centralisation of Help Desks proved to be popular as 79% of those who operated a Help Desk, provided a centralised solution for the business's requirements. This is further emphasised with 69% of the Help Desk operations only having one physical unit.

This structure tendered to then outline the call submittal and escalation polices of many of the Help Desks with 52% operating a single support structure with no further escalation of the problems to higher levels. This may be a result of the structure of each individual Help Desk, and this will be explored in a subsequent section.

2.2 SIZE, NATURE AND MAKEUP

The size, nature and make-up of the Help Desks surveyed uncovered some interesting findings in the areas of size, call submittal and outsourcing, which help to explain the nature and purpose of some of these operations.

One of the most interesting areas surrounding this was the size of the Help Desks in relation to staff numbers; either 1 or 2 employees staffed 48% of the Help Desks. Size was highlighted when respondents were asked to indicate how many calls they received per month. Here 48% of the Help Desks respondents indicated that they took fewer than 100 calls per calendar month.

Respondents were asked to indicate the various methods by which calls were submitted. Interestingly, more than half (56%) indicated that 60 % of their Help Desk calls were received via the telephone. However at the other end of the scale 67% of the respondents indicated that only 10% of their calls were logged by personal visits to the Help Desk

Of the calls submitted, the vast majority of respondents (83%) indicated they prioritised their calls according to importance and urgency. Whilst the very nature of a call may signal its priority, an examination of several variables (e.g., operating hours, number of Help Desks, number of Help Desk employees, user policy) failed to show any significant difference between those respondents who prioritise and those

who do not. Reasons for prioritising calls may be area for further investigation.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they outsourced any part of their Help Desk operations. Interestingly, 52% of respondents showed that they outsourced some of their operations. However, this activity has nothing to do with such things as number of Help Desk employees, monthly call levels, number of Help Desks, or type of industry. It does appear, however, that length of time in business my be a factor. On average, those outsourcing have been in business for 75 years compared to the 27 years in business for those who do not outsource. ANOVA shows this difference to be significant (F=13.573, p= .001). Again, reasons for engaging or not engaging in outsourcing activities could prove to be a useful area for further research.

2.3 OPERATIONS, POLICY AND PROCEDURES

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they offered a *24 hour-365 day* support practice in their organisation. In total, less than half of all Help Desk respondents (48%) indicated that they did offer this type of coverage. However, such indications do not fully translate to the actual operating hours respondents provided. For example, amongst those saying they provided the *24 hour-365 day* support (n=13), six indicated 9 hours of operation, one operated 10 hours, one operated 13 hours and two signalled 24 hours of operation. The remaining three respondents offered no response. Whilst there may have been some confusion present in these question areas, it remains that Help Desk support parallels a business's operating hours; 71% of Help Desks operate between 6 and 9 hours. This could be an area for further research as technology now allows employees to work outside of normal business hours and surroundings.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that they had a Computer Use Policy (CUP). Such policies are issued to employees either upon commencement of work or at some later date. CPUs are designed to outline how an employee should use the technology and associated packages as part of their employment with a firm. This study notes that the issue of such policies has no relationship to type of industry, number of full time staff or length of time in business. However, a significant ANOVA result was found with Help Desk operating hours (F=3.835, p= .064).

From a functional perspective, Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are a different issue CUPs. Despite the presence of Help Desks and stated hours of support, only 38% of respondents indicated they operated a Help Desk SLA. Such a practice has no relationship with type of industry, operating hours, number of full time staff or length of time in business. Given the generally help perception about the importance of these agreements in terms of end-user or customer expectations, SLAs (or their absence) could be a further area for research.

It is generally accepted in Help Desk (literature) that having a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) support mechanism empowers employees to resolve some of the more common support issues they might experience and thus reduce the number of calls fielded by Help Desks. In the current study, only 41% of Help Desk respondents showed they had FAQs to which end-users or customers could refer. This condition had no bearing with industry type, operating hours or length of time in business, but does have some meaning with the number of full time staff; having larger staff numbers results in a significant ANOVA result (F= 3.329, p= .079 of having a FAQs. Amongst the group having FAQs, 87% indicated that these were updated within a 12-month cycle.

It is interesting to note that 50% of the respondents identified that they had recurring issues. Of this group 58% did not have a SLA and did not have FAQ support. Such levels of activity, could indicate some serious underlying problems and a further area for research around whether some of these recurring calls are part of the overall number received or whether this reflects on some other matter may be necessary.

3. CONCLUSIONS

From the characteristics of the sample, it seems that the existence of Help Desks in the Hawke's Bay region is function of time in business, number of fulltime employees and type of industry. A possible explanation for this may rest with the current use of technology (e.g., EFTPOS, POS, inventory databases) and an increased emphasis on customer service and speed of delivery. These later aspects prominent within service industries demands control and could go some way to explain the centralisation of the Help Desk operations.

Given the data surrounding the size, nature and makeup of the sample, it appears that the Help Desk operations in the Hawke's Bay are small. This is further emphasised by the number of staff manning Help Desks and call volumes. This may be a symptom of organisational size, or the nature of the people employed. Furthermore, the way in which these calls were submitted may have some reflection on the education of the users, as well as their reluctance to uptake to methods of submittal. The size aspect is further reinforced by the number of Help Desks