

THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER: INNOVATIVE AND STRATEGICALLY BALANCED SUPPORT

Whether we want to admit it or not the service and support industry might be the most schizophrenic industry on the planet today! It seems one minute we are in the back office providing service and support behind the scenes to end users and customers. The next minute we are moved to the front of the organization and considered “strategic”. Today it is “strategically outsourced and off-shored”. So what’s it going to

be? Back office, front office, strategic, outsourced, or off-shored?

The answer lies in the ability of Service and Support leaders to find support models offering what their company’s want; cost effective, scalable, and customer centric service. These objectives are at the core of any service and support model. You can dress up your support

organization and call it “strategic” with enhanced processes, new technology, and highly talented resources, but these factors do not make support strategic. Today strategic support is providing service and support that meets and exceeds the company’s objectives through *innovative* and *balanced* delivery solutions. The key



word in this statement is balance, and balance is required for support organizations to survive and remain strategic.

Strategic support organizations are now seeing the next generation of service delivery using the Virtual Support Center. The Virtual Support Center is a model comprised of Virtual Support Professionals, working remotely and consistently providing higher levels of service. This model of support has now become the new “norm” for support organizations and is gaining maturity by the day. Support organizations realize they can leverage their existing technology, resources and processes to transform their traditional brick and mortar support models to the innovative and balanced Virtual Support Center. The advantages of the Virtual Support Center seem endless because you are breaking down traditional brick and mortar barriers and opening your support center up to a world of new and innovative ways to execute on your strategic objectives; reduced costs of operations (Strategic Objective 1), Scalability (Strategic Objective 2), and improved service delivery (Strategic Objective 3). Additional benefits also include:



- ✚ Business continuity
 - Savings in “Dark Space” costs
- ✚ Reduced turnover
 - Industry statistics show less than 10%
- ✚ Higher productivity
 - Industry statistics show 20%+ increase
- ✚ Larger recruiting pool
 - Global resource pool
- ✚ Enhanced work/life balance
 - Eliminates average commute of 50 minutes per day
- ✚ Environmentally friendly
 - Averages 5 tons of CO₂ eliminated annually per remote employee

Every support organization is unique and the benefits you can glean from the Virtual Support Center are what will transform your vision into reality.

In order for the Virtual Support Center to become a reality and make strategic sense, support leaders must recognize the top 10 requirements. With every requirement comes the opportunity for support leaders to provide innovation and leadership to place a strong hold on their strategic position in the organization.

So what are the top 10 requirements for leaders to provide Strategic support through the Virtual Support Center? How can they turn the Virtual Support Center into a “strategic reality” for their company? Here are the top10 requirements.

1. Get “buy-in” or approval to establish a Virtual Support Center
2. Make the Virtual Support Center an integrated function of the decentralized model
3. Build a virtual profile for remote professionals
4. Prepare your support managers on new Virtual techniques
5. Measure the success of the Virtual Support Center
6. Your personnel department plays a role in the success of your Virtual Support Center
7. Engage your technology organization to leverage existing IT Infrastructure in establishing the Virtual Support Center
8. Determine your cost savings
9. Train and certify your team for success in the Virtual Support Center
10. Ensure customers are not negatively impacted by the Virtual Support Center

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO STRATEGIC SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES

Turning the vision of the Virtual Support Center into a reality is done by addressing the challenges presented and converting them into an innovative strategic support model. The Virtual Support Center offers a support organization the opportunity to diversify and decentralize its Support Strategy. In order to do that they must overcome some of the challenges that can occur when considering the deployment of a Virtual Support Center. Here are the opportunities to convert the challenges listed above into a Strategic Virtual Support Center.

1. GET “BUY-IN” OR APPROVAL TO ESTABLISH A VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

In order to execute on the Virtual Support Center you have to develop a plan, or business case. This business case should explain the benefits of a Virtual Support Center and the Strategic value it has within your company. Take the opportunity to demonstrate your strategic vision for the Virtual Support Center and the benefits it can provide to the company (Remember the 3 objectives described earlier). Turn the challenge of how to get started into an opportunity to become a thought leader within your company and change agent for Strategic Support.

2. MAKE THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER AN INTEGRATED FUNCTION OF THE DECENTRALIZED MODEL

Contrary to the “consolidation wave” in support over the last several years a decentralized and balanced model for support is becoming popular again. Why? Virtualized technology has advanced to the point where extending the traditional support center to a Virtual Support Center, and is no longer cost prohibitive. Therefore a decentralized model which includes the Virtual Support Center, and even 3rd party outsourcers, is the most balanced solution. The solution provides scalability, business continuity, and cost control in your Strategic Support Model.



3. BUILD A VIRTUAL PROFILE FOR REMOTE PROFESSIONALS

As you move further into executing and building a Strategic model of support that includes the Virtual Support Center, you need to consider who will operate in a remote role. The concept of working from home or remotely will appeal to most support professionals, but the role is not suited for all professionals. Therefore, take the opportunity to assess your current support team and conduct a Virtual Assessment, developing a Virtual Profile of the candidates who will be right for the Virtual Support Center.

4. PREPARE YOUR SUPPORT MANAGERS ON NEW VIRTUAL TECHNIQUES

This is a unique opportunity for support leaders to develop an additional set of skills necessary for supporting a remote workforce. There are dynamics in this model that require training and skills that most traditional support managers do not possess. Exceptional communication and collaboration skills along with the ability to coordinate and eliminate challenges to Virtual Support Professionals are just some of the required skills a “Virtual Support Manager” will need. When deploying a Virtual Support Center consider training for both the support manager and the support professionals that enables them to successfully execute in their new roles.

5. MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

Success can be defined in many ways for the Virtual Support Center depending on the audience. For some it may be the costs savings and what is considered successful will be a long term reduction in costs utilizing the Virtual Support Center. For others it may be an increase in productivity of the team, or even reduced turnover. For this reason you want to take the opportunity to assess your current Key Performance Indicators (KPI'S) and determine their relevance to the Virtual Support Center. Try to use existing measurements which will allow you to compare the Virtual Support Center to the existing support model. If you need additional measurements to quantify the success then determine them prior to deployment of the model so you can establish good benchmarking data.

6. YOUR PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT PLAYS A ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF YOUR VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

Your HR department plays a critical role in the short and long term success of the Virtual Support Center. Take the time early on to develop processes, as well as policies if necessary, to establish the guidelines for success of the Virtual Support Team. Working as a partner with HR will provide the support organization the opportunity to position themselves more strategically. Include in your policies documentation items such as updated job descriptions, productivity measurements, asset usage policies for equipment deployed to the remote resource, and job satisfaction surveys for Virtual Support Professionals.



7. ENGAGE YOUR TECHNOLOGY ORGANIZATION TO LEVERAGE IT INFRASTRUCTURE IN ESTABLISHING THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

By deploying a Virtual Support Center you are adding an additional level of complexity to the IT organization. While the long term benefits outweigh the additional complexity and time requirements, you must work as a partner within your IT organization to extend and deploy the technology for your Virtual Support Center effectively. Take the opportunity to communicate the value of the Virtual Support Center and how the IT organization can be part of a strategic initiative that will enhance their value in the company. Get buy-in and sense of collaboration from IT on how to deploy the technology for your Virtual Support Center.

8. DETERMINE YOUR COST SAVINGS

As mentioned earlier, every service and support organization is unique in their own strategic support model. In order to accurately capture your cost savings you want to take the opportunity to produce an ROI (Return on Investment) for the Virtual Support Center. This ROI should include productivity increases, facilities and real estate savings, turnover and recruitment savings, as well as labor savings if you choose to hire or pay at different rates for your Virtual Support Professionals. There are many statistics in the marketplace today to use as benchmarks for your ROI model, so invest the time to map your cost savings to that of the rest of the service and support industry.

9. TRAIN AND CERTIFY YOUR TEAM FOR SUCCESS IN THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

Being trained and prepared to deliver support from a remote setting requires a special set of skills. As mentioned in requirement #4, your Virtual Support manager and team need to be prepared to work in a remote setting long term. This includes how to communicate effectively, perform at a higher level, and remain focused on servicing customers while working in a home based environment. Take the opportunity to deploy a Virtual Support Center with trained and highly effective resources.

10. ENSURE CUSTOMERS ARE NOT NEGATIVELY IMPACTED BY THE VIRTUAL SUPPORT CENTER

Customer satisfaction is singularly focused, but organizationally promoted and reinforced. Therefore as a company you need to provide the tools and resources necessary for Virtual Support Professionals to deliver support services to customers at

a higher level. Motivating your Virtual Support Team to provide excellence in service is the first step to increased customer satisfaction. That motivation can come in various forms including the initial benefits of working from home. It should also include traditional motivation techniques like rewards and recognition for exceptional performance and service.



SUMMARY

Change is the essence of survival today for service and support organizations. To become strategic, support organizations need to adapt to their environment and to the changing conditions of the marketplace. Those conditions include the lowest cost solution with the highest value provided to the customer. Virtual Support Centers offer that and more. Getting started requires effective planning and collaboration. The Virtual Support Center is not unique, but does require a unique set of skills, and tools for success. Invest the time necessary to prepare your team for the change.

The service and support industry will continue to change. One thing however is constant; Strategic support organizations have the opportunity with the Virtual Support Center to remain on the leading edge of change, and provide continuous value while doing so. Making the right strategic decisions for support can reduce some of the schizophrenic tendencies our industry seems to portray!

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