IT Think Paper #3

**IT Support Models**

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In my brief tenure at IFRC, I have heard much about technology service and support. From the business side, I've heard that we in ISD are harder to do business with.  Things may be better organized and more reliable, but it takes longer. As one department head put it, “when my PC is frozen and I’m panicking about a deadline, I need to hear a reassuring voice and see a friendly face now!” Or more starkly: when the building is on fire, “we should be showing up with hoses, not forms.”   
  
From the IT side, I heard that the breadth and complexity of the technology we support continues to grow. We need good processes to ensure we have consistency of service and learn more from each incident so we can work to eliminate the real issues, what we call root causes. If everything was an emergency, we would need to staff up with a larger, emergency response team.  However, we are a small team and we need our users’ help; we don't have enough hands to hold everyone's hand.   
  
I've also heard a growing interest in smart-phones, including the infamous Blackberry (I have two) and the ultimate iPhone.  I heard that Gmail is more reliable than some office email.  And then there are the cases where email has been banned as if the democracy of information that is the Internet Age never happened; and applications developed by the local guru flourish then flounder as the wizard moves on to another place.  
  
It is usually the case that a large variety of choices is able to meet the particular needs and desires we all have. It is also usually true that a single standard provides the lowest cost and is easiest to support. But standards have another benefit; they avoid everyone going in different directions. Imagine if there were a dozen varieties of formats for movies in our local stories. Would your DVD player work? Without standards, each year our offices would diverge with technology choices and it would become harder and harder to bring things together in the future. Why is that important? We gain purchasing advantages, can share support and transfer data among us more readily, and even find and communicate with each other more quickly, if we have more unified systems. Converging on common technologies is a strategy worth our investment.

An interesting counter-point has developed over the past three years. As the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) phenomena, as well as the application portfolio, grew at IFRC, we did not experience the expected increase in support needs. In fact, calls to our service desk have declined 10% to 12% from 2011 to 2013 (see figure 1) while support satisfaction ratings have increased. This has been borne out by other industry experience. Application and device variety does not increase costs, it may actually reduce them. Why is this so? One explanation is that when a user selects a device or application, they expect that they are responsible for operating it. Another possibility is that the often-more-intuitive consumer technology “just works” to echo Steve Jobs. It is possible that the traditional service desk will be less relevant in the near future.



Figure 1 - Declining Support Calls

Another aspect of our support experience is important to think about. If we take what we know, what’s familiar, and scale it up to serve 100 organizations rather than one, then the straight-line math says we need to grow ISD from 22 professionals to 2,200. Even if we distributed all of them around the world this is a ridiculous number. We need to find new ways of working; the old ways just don't scale.   
  
Our expectations for technology should not be different from those we have for cars.  We expect to get to our destination safely and comfortably.  We expect the engine to start when we turn the key and gentle lights to remind us when it needs petrol or servicing. If we bought the Lexus, we expect the dealer to pick up the car for servicing from our house and return it washed and filled with petrol.  If we bought a Honda Civic, we make other arrangements.  Both are dependable transportation, but we expect to get more when we pay for it.    
  
So what are we to do to the make the service better?  As in most things, choice empowers us.  We can select the level of support that meets our budget (and compares well with our colleague organizations.)  At this juncture, I can see a continuum of support models already in practice around us (see figure 2). The important point is that a third of these are user-directed.



Figure 2 - Support Models Continuum

I originally envisioned three levels of service as we expand to strengthen the “have-nots” among our national societies: a gold, silver and bronze level of support, if you will.  Our support model today, is based on a help desk of professionals who respond to issues and questions on the phone and sometimes in person.  This is the “silver” level of support.  It costs us about 5,802 CHF per user per year[[1]](#footnote-1).

For a “gold” level of support, we need to be more face-to-face, answer calls directly, and fill out information for you.  We also need to provide you with the best technology choices (plural), advise you on new trends and options and provide personal tips and 1:1 training as needed, when you need it.  Our senior executives are good candidates for this level of support, where the other support options may be a waste of valuable time.   I estimate that gold support costs 2-3 times the cost of silver support.   
  
For “bronze” support, we expect that users’ will be more self-servicing.  This is not much different than the support we get at home, although handing it to our son or niece is a home option!  (And this is not unlike asking the tech savvy person in your area for some quick advice.)  There are support options built into Windows (see the Help command Troubleshooters for instance), and a growing list of on-line support and training options, starting with the free ones that Microsoft provides.  There are also user forums, and “ask the expert” web sites, as well as communities of practice on the social media sites where people help people with all sorts of things.  And the price is very reasonable, sometimes free.  But we need to know where to go to find it, and a safety net of support when we get stuck. I estimate that this is less than 10% of our current "silver" support costs.  Self-service may not be a popular change, but it’s efficient, and a step up for those who have-not, as well as those of us who occasionally work into the wee hours of the morning.   
  
I could argue that nonprofit workers should be willing to help themselves, just as we work hard to have our beneficiaries be self-sustaining.  I could also argue that we should all have premium services and support, so that we increase our available time with and reach more of those in need.  But what I am challenging you to think about is that there is a cost involved with each choice.  And increasingly our financial context demands a drive toward more cost-saving alternatives. But simply driving down costs and not changing our traditional model of support is not the answer. We need to offer more choices and our customers need to decide what a reasonable investment is.  Together we can achieve what we need.

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1. Estimate based on 9M core ISD budget / 22 ISD staff \* 6 support people <2 FTE outside support team> / 220 GVA employees + 203 Zone employees supported on average)  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-1)