

# The Comprehensive IT Help Desk: A Single Point-of-Contact for the University Community

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## ABSTRACT

The IT Help Desk at the University of West Florida provides services to a university community of over 9,000 students, 1,200 faculty and staff, and an undetermined number of alumni, prospective students, and the general public. Functioning as a single point-of-contact for IT information, questions, and requests, the Help Desk offers a comprehensive suite of services, and facilitates critical campus communication regarding IT issues. Services include: standard phone and desktop support, enterprise-wide system monitoring, campus IT alerts, eLearning support, classroom technology support, ResNet Help Desk, software purchases, and an IT event calendar.

Daily 8:00 AM briefings combined with work load “expeditors” and lead analysts in a highly team-oriented environment, allow Help Desk staff and student employees to move customer issues through a tiered support matrix. This matrix encompasses IT resources within the central IT department and throughout a distributed university support model. It also includes departments and offices that are not technical in nature. Customer surveys provide feedback and suggestions for continued improvement.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and People Management – *management techniques, staffing*

## General Terms

Management, Measurement, Performance, Standardization.

## Keywords

Support, Help Desk, Collaboration, Tools, Processes and Procedures

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Should IT support be centralized or decentralized? Regardless of the model chosen, the end result should be an easy way for customers to access help when using technology. At the University of West Florida, we have what is called a ‘federated support model’, a model most closely resembling decentralized support. We found that a major frustration for our customers was a lack of understanding of the support matrix. Users unable or disinterested in understanding the difference between an enterprise-wide system problem versus a desktop related problem, did not know who or where to call. Multiple help desks across the campus further confused the situation. We felt the need to provide a central point-of-contact for the University community. Critical to our evolution and success has been strong support tools, standard processes and procedures, and collaborative partnerships.

## 2. BECOMING COMPREHENSIVE

### 2.1 First Steps

We took a phased approach to establishing the help desk as a single point-of-contact. In our department, Information Technology Services, there were two help desks, one for students and one for faculty and staff. We combined the two desks making technology support easier by providing one central telephone number where students (prospective, current, and alumni), faculty, and staff could call for help. We dedicated staff to answering telephones. We established call standards, escalation and priority schema, and began developing and adding support tools. We promoted the new Help Desk and single phone number with campus announcements, postcards, and flyers.

### 2.2 Second Steps

The support tools we developed and implemented were for both us and our customers. We began offering customers multiple ways to request help. We expanded the ways we communicated to customers, to staff within the department, and to our federated support partners. We began developing formal and informal collaborations with other technical entities on campus. For example, we agreed to become the Help Desk for our Student Affairs ResNet program.

Our next steps involved an in-house merger between our call center and our own on-site desktop support services. Although,

our department does not support all campus desktop computers, we do support a good portion of these computers.

In April, 2004 we began a pilot for 24/7 support. We added staff, laptops, air cards, and cell phones. We created the Help Desk 'generalist', a support professional who can help users on the phone or be dispatched for on-site support. This new position gave us the ability to respond to the ever-changing university workload and expanded staff resources so that we could operate around the clock.

## 2.3 Next Steps

Our call and work order metrics have experienced impressive growth. We believe the campus sees our Help Desk as an asset, and we have several new initiatives under discussion. This summer we will begin providing telephone support and first point-of-contact for the largest of our three colleges, the College of Arts and Sciences. Our focus needs to always remain the customer and making technology support easy to access.

## 3. SUPPORT TOOLS

Important to our abilities and success in managing university-wide services interruptions, a large call volume, system monitoring and work order escalation are a number of support tools. Some of the more important ones are:

### 3.1.1 Automated Call Distribution (ACD)

A telephone system to route and support the call work of the help desk.

### 3.1.2 Help Desk e-mail support

A Help Desk email account to which users can communicate at their convenience via email.

### 3.1.3 Web forms

Help request web forms for customers who do not want to call. This tool is very useful during busy times where hold time for telephone support may be long.

### 3.1.4 Call and work order tracking software

An application that can track calls and work orders. This tool should be accessible to support partners.

### 3.1.5 Systems Monitoring

A server and network monitoring application that is able to page key personnel in the Help Desk and in the system support workgroups. We monitor our enterprise wide servers and network connectivity to all buildings (main campus and remote campuses).

### 3.1.6 Alert Center

An application created to track all services, servers, and building outages (scheduled and unscheduled) and degradations of service.

### 3.1.7 Bat Phone

A back door telephone line used to communicate with Tier III personnel such as networks, systems, and application developers. This tool is crucial during crisis situations.

### 3.1.8 Event Calendar

A weekly email sent to all staff in the IT department and campus-wide support personnel listing all scheduled outages for the next two weeks.

### 3.1.9 Support ListServ

A listserv list used to communicate with all technical support personnel around campus on any technical issues. It is also another excellent vehicle for crisis situations.

### 3.1.10 Knowledge Base

A repository of information for all services supported by the Help Desk.

### 3.1.11 Metrics

Provided by our call tracking software and ACD system. Metrics to assist in analyzing Help Desk work volume and potential IT problems.

### 3.1.12 Electronic Whiteboard

An electronic message board where Help Desk staff routinely post information concerning customer accounts, customer appointments, proposed operational procedures, and first solutions to newly identified technical problems. This is a must to assist with internal help desk communication.

### 3.1.13 Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Random surveys to measure the effectiveness of the service being provided by the Help Desk.

## 4. SUPPORT PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

Hand in hand with support tools are processes and procedures which facilitate work flow, team communication, and customer response.

### 4.1.1 Escalation Schema

Escalation schema for unresolved problems within the department (Tier II and III) and with partners. This schema should include a pre-determined priority for unresolved issues and for different IT services.

### 4.1.2 Priorities Schema

Schema for paging Help Desk leads, Help Desk manager, and Tier II and III support staff to ensure proper handling of priority problems.

### 4.1.3 Service Level Agreements or Operational Level Agreements

Essential agreements to ensure everyone understands service and response goals.

### 4.1.4 Internal and External Communication

All technology-related communication should be done by the Help Desk to insure consistency and reinforce a single point of contact. This includes communication to the department, other support personnel around campus, faculty, staff, and students.

#### 4.1.5 *Work Flow Charts*

Work flow charts to provide standardized support.

#### 4.1.6 *Morning Briefings*

A fast operational meeting where day-to-day operational issues are discussed at the beginning of each day.

#### 4.1.7 *Expeditor*

During busy time, a Help Desk staff person assigned to expedite the work flow in the Help Desk. The expeditor also assists in prioritizing pending work requests.

#### 4.1.8 *Help Desk Lead*

Assist Help Desk manager with work flow and work load assignments. Two leads are ideal. One lead manages the telephone work and the other lead manages desktop dispatching.

## 5. PARTNERSHIPS

Formal and informal partnerships with IT resources outside of the department provide opportunities for regular communication and collaboration.

#### 5.1.1 *ResNet*

All ResNet students call the Help Desk for assistance. Any unresolved problems are forwarded to ResNet via our work order tracking software. ResNet management routinely meets with Help Desk management.

#### 5.1.2 *Academic Technology Center (ATC)*

A center that provides assistance to faculty using our Learning Management System software. The Help Desk is the first point-of-contact for all faculty with LMS-related questions. The Help Desk handles technical and application related questions. Pedagogy and instructional design issues are forwarded to ATC via our work order tracking software. ATC staff regularly attends Help Desk staff meetings and provide training.

#### 5.1.3 *Local Support Providers (LSPs)*

LSPs are other university technical support staff. The Help Desk works on a daily bases with this group of employees. We have quarterly meetings. Shared tools include work order tracking software, alerts, IT event calendar, and Listserv.