

BEHIND THE HELP DESK: CAREER, SALARY AND TRAINING EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

What happens when the information technology you take for granted fails? While you may use email, or voicemail, a webpage, a smartphone, or a tablet to contact a help desk, in the end you are reaching out to another person for help. Who is this person and what are his or her career expectations? What skills best prepare new personnel working in Information Technology help desk positions? This qualitative, exploratory study seeks to shed light on these and other questions based on the responses of 23 help desk employees who participated in four focus groups held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and one focus group held in Washington, DC. It appears that management needs to re-evaluate education and training requirements, develop career path opportunities, enhance compensation, and improve communication if they wish to hire and retain help desk employees who give their best. Future studies might examine more effective training and certification to align with industry needs, as well as industry options for increasing longevity of technology help desk workers, including a specialization and professionalization in help desk work within the field.

Keywords: Help desk, critical interface, customer satisfaction, employee dissatisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Workplace and personnel issues of employees behind the information technology help desks of modern organizations have most often been studied from management's point of view. Employee qualifications and certifications, abandonment and cost-per-contact metrics, performance data and accountability, concerns about the lack of qualified candidates, difficulties meeting salary expectations, and retaining staff members once they have been trained are well documented in the literature. In fact, it appears that management concerns such as these have established the boundaries for this field of study and indeed have framed the issues. Unfortunately, relatively little research touches on the concerns of help desk personnel. The key research results of this study are best expressed in a series of questions formed by help desk employees themselves: What constitutes a qualified candidate? Which certifications are most useful? What is a fair salary? What are the actual duties? How do you deal with on-the-job stress?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our review of the literature found three major management concerns: first, a lack of qualified candidates with the proper training or useful certifications; second, difficulty meeting salary expectations; and third, low retention of help desk employees. A fourth critical issue — job stress — was identified by the focus group participants.

First, as to a lack of qualified candidates, participants in all five focus groups felt the requirements as stated on help desk job announcements were too broad and did not reflect the actual duties of the positions. Poorly written position descriptions that make it difficult to determine who is considered a “qualified candidate” could partly explain why candidates are in short supply — or at least difficult to identify. Training and skill sets were no less muddy. For example, while over 80 percent of organizations surveyed by the Help Desk Institute (HDI), a professional association and certification body for technical service and support professionals, identified certification as either required or an important criteria for hiring [16], the focus group participants were unsure which certifications were considered to be the most useful qualification. They often cited having a general maintenance certificate, which unfortunately would not help a hiring manager sort out candidates with the best skills for a given position.

Second, the help desk literature is rife with salary issues. In particular, managers felt that they could not hope to match overinflated expectations of those entering the field of information technology in a help desk position [9]. Difficulties meeting salary expectations was one area of agreement between the literature and the focus groups. Surprisingly, those study participants new to the profession expressed great satisfaction with their salaries, while those with more than two years' experience expressed dissatisfaction.

Third, with respect to retention, we found that managers were trying various and sometimes creative approaches to retain help desk personnel, but could not identify any consistently successful practice. Based on their individual experiences, focus group participants were clearly of different opinions about help desk work. Participants new to the field wanted to leave the help desk as soon as possible, while those with more experience expressed a fondness for the work, but voiced a frustration that there were no career paths specializing in help desk work.

Finally, with respect to stress, the literature indicated that managers generally felt that two years is about the maximum anyone should be on a help desk. This being due to the monotony of the job, the stress of dealing directly with upset people, and the challenge of maintaining current technical skills in a rapidly changing field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative, exploratory study following a phenomenological approach using homogeneous and snowball recruiting techniques to build a better picture of the help desk work experience [6]. The “homogeneous” nature of the recruitment refers to seeking out participants with the specific technical expertise, that is, having been employed in a technical help desk service and support function. The “snowball” approach to recruitment refers to finding participants either through their place of employment, or socially through others currently working in a help desk position [4].

Qualitative data was collected to explore rather than explain the issues raised [13]. This phenomenological approach allows a better understanding of the issues being examined and can be used to shed light on the “meaning for several individuals of their lived experience.” [4] Obviously the study is limited in that the sample size is small and the participants are intended to be narrowly focused on the phenomenon studied, rather than representative of a larger group of society [5]. Participants in five focus groups held between July and October 2012 were asked the same open-ended questions designed to mirror key issues raised by help desk managers found in our review of the literature.

All of the study participants were actively working in help desk positions at the time the focus groups were conducted. As we wanted an employee-centric point of view, only one participant worked in a management position. The groups ranged between three and eight participants in size. Of the 23 participants, 65 percent were male and 35 percent were female. Ages ranged from 19 to 69 years-of-age [6]. The focus group held in Washington, DC, consisted of recent graduates of an information technology-training course who were working as help desk personnel for the first time. The other four focus groups held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, consisted of help desk personnel working in academia, health care, and a major infrastructure development company. We wished to avoid holding these focus groups in the participants’ workplaces. As a result, focus groups were held in classrooms, conference rooms, and, in one case, at a restaurant.

Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information prior to the discussions in order to characterize the members of each focus group. The demographic information requested included age, gender, education level, professional certifications, number of years in the field, and type or level of support provided. In terms of this research, knowing that the participants were relevant and related to the issues being explored [15], helps to demonstrate the validity of the study. Written notes and audio transcripts of the responses of these groups revealed themes that opened an informative window on the critical interface between users and computer technologists working at help desks.

RESULTS

Qualified Candidates

Help desk recruiters often seek college graduates with technical degrees. Nevertheless, many of the participants reported a great deal of training was necessary before new coworkers could function proficiently. College graduates with technical degrees often view help desk positions as an unpleasant but unavoidable requirement to get into the field before they can move on to a better job, which feeds into the high turnover rate, as well as lessening the chance of creating camaraderie amongst the workers [18].

The training issues identified by help desk personnel appear confounding when one considers the prevalence of programs, courses and information technology degrees available today. Managers are looking for certain skills, but seem to have to settle for personnel who will have to be trained once hired. Moreover, according to Hill [8], almost 60 percent of hiring managers claimed that hiring for projected jobs was taking longer than expected due to a scarcity of personnel qualified in the technical skills required.

Focus group participants' comments about current training and certification programs revealed that employers were often ineffective in defining their requirements for particular skill sets. This may in part be due to the wide variety of information technology skills required to support all aspects of the economy, as well as differences in the core missions of various organizations.

A recent national survey of more than 2,300 chief information officers (CIOs) by Robert Half Technology [17] indicated that 35 percent planned to hire new information technology graduates in 2013. However, more than one in four respondents (26 percent) said that entry-level technology professionals were not prepared to contribute immediately and more than half (55 percent) of these information officers said that interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict resolution, teamwork, and diplomacy — the very skills needed for help desk success — were most lacking.

A 2011 Help Desk Institute survey of certification requirements for desktop support technicians indicated that 11 different certifications are considered “required” for help desk personnel by ten percent or more of the companies surveyed [16]. While less than 20 percent of employers surveyed required formal certification, over 60 percent indicated certifications were considered in hiring and promotion. Certifications most often required for help desk technicians are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Certifications most often required (adapted from Rains [16]):

CompTIA A+	74.3%
MCDST (Windows XP)	36.6%
ITIL Foundation certification	35.6%
CompTIA Network+	24.8%
MCPID: Enterprise Desktop Support Technician 7 (Windows 7)	22.8%
HDI Desktop Support Technician	20.8%
Warranty certifications (i.e., DELL, HP, Lenovo)	19.8%
HDI Support Center Analyst	18.8%
Microsoft Office User Specialist	12.9%
MCPID: Enterprise Desktop Support Technician (Windows Vista)	11.9%
CompTIA Security+	10.9%
ITIL – other	9.9%
Apple Certified Support Professional 10.6	7.9%
Legacy certifications	5.0%
CompTIA Linux+	2.0%
Other	15.8%

Certifications may be a way to objectively sort out potential applicants, but participants in this study felt they were an ineffective tool in determining help desk professionals' ability to perform the required tasks. Moreover, few of the participants felt the requirements stated on job announcements were applicable to their actual duties once they began working. This may reflect a reticence by employers to unnecessarily screen out potential candidates, or the possibility that information technology support is evolving too fast to accurately reflect the required skills.

Details of current certification programs for customer service and interpersonal skills were not discussed in depth during the focus group interviews. However, participants largely viewed certificates and many training programs as formalities that didn't prepare them for dealing with people in a highly stressed state. As several respondents put it, coping with highly stressed customers or coworkers simply cannot be learned from a book. Yet all of the help desk professionals who participated in this study understood the importance of customer service and were well aware of the difficulty of preparing someone for the human demands of the work. When asked about interpersonal skills and their preparation for the human aspects of the job, a majority of the participants emphasized the importance of the "right type of personality" and suggested that scenario-based programs presenting trainees with realistic situations would be the best option for preparing new help desk personnel for the interpersonal challenges of the job.

Although technical skills are an obvious requirement for help desk positions, technical proficiency is not even among the "Top Five" most sought-after help desk skills. Help desk managers most commonly cite communications and stress handling skills as most important for their personnel. "Customer skills and motivation are more important than technical skills," said David Gregson, manager of the user support group at Ropes & Gray, a large Boston law firm. "You can train people in technology but you can't teach great customer service" [11].

According to a majority of the focus group participants, identifying the ability to tap technical knowledge and translate that knowledge into a workable solution for those seeking support positions appears to be outside the capabilities of current training programs. Perhaps this is why some managers use certification programs as a screening tool and prefer to conduct over-the-phone interviews to get a sense of effective communication and interpersonal skills.

Regrettably, when asked for their opinions on professional and workplace issues, the level of excitement expressed by study participants indicated a serious lack of interest on the part of management. Rather than ask help desk professionals how to improve service and support, several respondents suggested the "bean counters" in their organizations were more concerned with performance metrics than actually solving information technology issues.

Lack of understanding underlying issues is particularly worrisome with respect to recurring problems, because, as Gartner Group Analyst Jarod Greene has observed, 50 percent of the perceived value of an organization's information technology derives from its help desk [3]. Moreover, as Gonzalez, Giachetti, and Ramirez [7] have pointed out, "The speed and quality of the solutions provided influence customer satisfaction and therefore the business's image." It would be understatement to say that help desk performance is critical to both internal and external audiences.

Summarizing briefly, while certification requirements at least provide a window on the potential tasks help desk employees might perform, most of the participants felt certifications were an ineffective means of screening, as they were relatively easy to obtain, not applicable to the tasks actually performed, and not good indicators of "personality," which they identified as the key factor in successful help desk service.

Salary

While high job security and benefits were cited as key points of satisfaction among study participants, pay remained a primary issue of dissatisfaction. Participants universally stated that the pay they received did not match the responsibility of their work. A review of the literature confirms that information technology managers have difficulty meeting pay expectations and without exception all the participants who had been performing help desk functions for more than two years felt they were not fairly compensated.

In 2011, the average salary for entry-level help desk positions ranged from \$37,755 to \$47,046, according to HDI [16]. This situation is in stark contrast to the economic expectations of many entering the field. As Neil Hopkins, vice president of skills development at a non-profit information technology trade association observed [9]: "The kids coming out of these higher institutions are expecting these \$70,000 to \$80,000 jobs, and it's tough for the employer to say, 'Here's where you start.'"

The crucial need to maintain a functioning technology infrastructure was readily acknowledged by the study participants — but this need did not translate into pay commensurate with retaining the best qualified professionals. The consensus of the groups was: “leave the help desk if you want better pay.” Even more troublesome, participants considered the difficulty in getting what they felt was sufficient compensation to be a clear indicator of how little their employers valued their contributions.

Yet motivating help desk employees is a key component in creating a cost-effective organizational interface. As Likert [10] pointed out long ago: “A substantial body of research findings demonstrates that the greater the loyalty of the members of a group toward the group, the greater is the motivation among members to achieve the goals of the group, and the greater is the probability that the group will achieve its goals.” More than a decade ago, Smith [19] estimated that a lack of commitment to organizational goals and inaction by employees withholding their best efforts was costing American businesses more than \$50 billion annually.

More recently, O’Boyle and Harter [14] have noted that two-thirds of American employees remain uncommitted to their company’s success: “Only 30 percent of American employees are engaged in their jobs — a figure that hasn’t moved much in more than a decade.” Unmotivated help desk employees, several of whom cited the need to move or change jobs to improve their pay as their previous organizations had refused to meet the market value of their skills and abilities, are costly on a number of levels.

Summarizing briefly, while information technology remains a top employment opportunity for the foreseeable future, the income potential within the help desk environment does not appear to be sufficient to keep professionals satisfied, motivated, or from moving on to other positions within the field.

Retention and Career Expectations

Career expectations for help desk personnel vary greatly. Help desk personnel provide computer-related advice, acting as the first line of incident support, linking technology departments and users, generating service-quality reports, and troubleshooting hardware and software problems for users [12, 22]. Focus group comments supported the notion that employers are not willing to spend the time or money required to build and retain a highly skilled help desk staff. Bolman and Deal [2] frame the general situation admirably:

Few employers invest the time and resources necessary to develop a cadre of committed, talented employees. Precisely for that reason, a number of authors (including Cascio and Boudreau, 2008; Lawler, 1996; Lawler and Worley, 2006; Pfeffer, 1994, 1998, 2007; and Waterman, 1994) have made the case that a skilled and motivated workforce is a powerful source of strategic advantage. Consistent with core human resource assumptions, high-performing companies do a better job of understanding and responding to the needs of both employees and customers.

During focus group discussions about help desk careers and retention, the issues of stress and customer service emerged. Participants in this study reported that dealing with customers and coworkers was one of the most rewarding and yet one of the most frustrating aspects of working on a help desk. In general, the participants reported that they were motivated by a sense of contributing to the mission of their organizations and the knowledge gained through the daily challenges of problem solving. For those hoping to move on from the help desk and remain in the field, dealing with customers was the number one motivator for seeking other work. Not surprisingly, we found that managers responsible for hiring and operating information technology help desks were often concerned with a candidate’s ability to communicate and deal with the stress of the job [11].

According to the study participants, several organizations for which they worked were able to effectively channel those divergent themes to create a help desk environment that encouraged their staff to stay, for example, by allowing personnel to work at different levels of responsibility within the help desk area and rewarding their efforts. To our surprise, not one participant in this study cited monetary bonuses as a motivating factor for staying on a help desk.

Even if they enjoyed working on a help desk, participants offered several reasons to move on. These included the lack of a help desk career path, desiring a career beyond helping users, and avoiding the sometimes repetitive nature

of the work. Several respondents felt they were judged not by their technical skills — or customer service ability — but by the speed and number of issues they resolved.

Perceptions of help desk positions run the gamut from the “bottom rung” [18] to the “place to learn about information technology” [9]. Without a clearly defined career path, it would seem that help desk employment is likely to continue to be a short-term transitional position leading to other information technology opportunities that require specialization to advance.

Stress

“To be honest, if I can keep people on the help desk for two years, I’m doing well. It’s a burnout kind of a job [1].” That’s how Terry Davis, director of enterprise architecture and telecommunications at Coors Brewing, summed up one of the toughest jobs in information technology. Because they are the interface between frustrated users and the systems that cause the frustration, help desk functions are considered one of the most stressful roles within this career field. Indeed, some people resign from help desk positions because of the abuse they receive from frustrated customers calling for help [21].

Most managers recognize that the help desk is highly stressful and often serves as a gateway to other jobs within information technology. The average length of time people spend in help desk functions appears to be between two and three years. Two factors in particular should be mentioned: first, the burnout experienced dealing with the stress of help desk functions; and second, the perception that help desk positions are entry-level. This relatively short period of serving on a help desk has created a persistent employee churn, which Moore and Burke (2002) have described as a “turnover culture.”

Because of the combination of stress and limited career horizons inherent in most help desk positions, most managers agree that personnel should only be kept in these positions for 18 to 24 months to avoid burn out. In fact, some organizations use the promise of training and a career path to solve another help desk problem: convincing high-quality workers to take those jobs in the first place [9]. The downside of a policy of moving people off the help desk within 24 months is the loss of personnel who have reached a high level of skill in dealing with users. The damage done from sloppy help desk service, long waiting periods, or poor customer service can be lasting [18].

The issue of stress was included as part of one of the questions regarding help desk positions requiring a balance of technical and interpersonal skills. The question generated the most discussion amongst all five groups. No matter their level of experience, all participants felt the stress of interacting with angry customers was intense. For those with more experience, resolving a difficult customer’s issue was one of the most satisfying achievements at work.

CONCLUSIONS

Every segment of our economy — business, government, non-profits, academia — requires help desks to support information technology. A help desk represents a critical interface between humans and computers, one that communicates very clearly what value an organization places on its customers and employees.

These exploratory results suggest that the persistent difficulty finding the right people with the right skills in the help desk area of information technology — despite the draw of the industry for job seekers and the availability of training — is perhaps in part due to a serious disconnect between the critical nature of help desk operations and lack of salary support.

The art of setting up and maintaining an empowered help desk is a mix of sophisticated business engineering, science, psychology, and marketing [18]. Examination and modification of the structure of help desk support in various sectors of the economy might reduce personnel churn by offering greater job satisfaction and longer term career opportunities.

It is also clear that confusion reigns on both sides of the qualification question. Clearly defining actual job functions and specifying the most desirable certifications would greatly benefit help desk employees, organizations that have help desks, and technical schools and universities that offer training programs for help desk personnel.

Creating a culture of excellent customer service is difficult when those on the front line are ignored. If, as Bolman and Deal [2] assert, “An organizations’ culture is built over time as members develop beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that seem to work and are transmitted to new recruits,” management needs to re-evaluate education and training requirements, develop career path opportunities, enhance compensation and motivation, and improve communication if they wish to hire and retain help desk employees who give their best.

Recognizing that personnel screening and selection is fraught with uncertainties, industrial and organizational psychology have identified several approaches that lend themselves to the prediction of success. The *Biodata Handbook*, a guide to the use of autobiographical data [20] and personality tests based upon the so-called Big Five factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness) have shown some promise.

Finally, the single most important qualifier of successful help desk professionals identified by the participants in this study was “personality.” While personality is not a causally efficacious concept, identification of a psychometric pattern of key traits common to effective help desk personnel could be a fruitful area for future quantitative analysis.

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