



Running a Technical Support Department with SaaS Solutions

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There is a quiet revolution taking place in technical support departments. Without fanfare or a major marketing push, Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solutions are making real inroads, displacing traditional technologies.

Call Centers: The Last Bastion of Change

The “call center,” a traditional label that today is applied even to high-end, complex support departments, remains slow to change. This is, in large part, due to stagnation among the vendors whose products serve the market. The same vendors sell the same solutions to the call centers year after year, resulting in a stale marketplace. As vendors essentially lose interest in improving their now-commoditized products, quality and innovation slip noticeably and the focus becomes maintenance. Both the sheer size and install base of their applications and the hefty annual maintenance fees they are able to charge create disincentives for these vendors to take on a new, innovative approach that would threaten this revenue stream.

Today’s generation of support executives has begun to embrace solutions that provide more flexibility. What has begun as a ripple will soon grow to a full-blown tidal wave as SaaS solutions move into the heart of the call center. The market has already demonstrated that buyers of sales force automation (SFA) software will embrace SaaS vendors. Instead of going through IT, sales executives have made independent purchase decisions, and have reaped the benefits of moving to an on-demand infrastructure that allows them to independently control their systems and modify them frequently to reflect current best practices. Support executives are seeing this progress and taking note of the contrast to their own hard-to-change systems.

Online Chat: A SaaS Solution Enters the Scene

Many support operations began experimenting with SaaS solutions when they started rolling out online chat several years ago. Vendors such as

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LivePerson, **InstantService**, **Proficient** (since acquired by LivePerson), and **NetSupport 24-7** allowed support agents to use instant messaging to talk to customers. Nobody called it “SaaS,” but it was. There were no servers for the customer to install, and the vendor had a true multi-tenant architecture. Support executives noticed how easy it was to set up and maintain and got an early taste of the “freedom from IT” that has made SaaS solutions so popular in the SFA market.

Customer Surveys: SaaS Solutions Are the Answer

Technical support departments also adopted SaaS solutions in customer surveys early. Three years ago, one of my support engineers wrote a survey system from scratch. Six months later, we migrated the surveys to **QuestionPro**. It was just too hard to keep up with server status, change requests, bug fixes, database issues, and reports. More importantly, there was no reason to even try. Plenty of vendors offer robust survey solutions for surprisingly low fees (e.g., QuestionPro, **Clicktools**, **ZipSurvey**). The common denominator is that all are true hosted SaaS solutions with robust web-based configuration tools, 24x7 availability, and easy access. If managers want to change a survey question or view recent survey results, they can simply go to a URL. Questions like “Hey, who wrote that survey app for us? Where is it hosted again? Do you remember how to get a database extract?” become unnecessary.

Phone Systems: Another SaaS Solution

More recently, support managers, tired of dealing with instability and vendor indifference, started looking for solutions to more traditional support-related services like telephone automatic call distribution (ACD) and interactive voice response (IVR) systems. Even in 2007, traditional ACD/IVR vendors like Aspect and Lucent produce archaic documentation, impossible-to-configure products, and expensive hardware that requires dedicated IT staff. Support managers quickly learn to stop asking for configuration changes and make the best with what they’ve got. When they learn of alternatives (SaaS ACD vendors such as **Angel.com**, **Contactual**, and **UCN InContact**, and IVR vendors like Angel.com, **Metaphor**, and **Five9**), it just seems too good to be true. Yet the success stories keep coming: support teams changing their queues and routing rules on-the-fly, troubleshooting problems without IT’s assistance, and reacting more quickly to their customers’ demands.

The Final CRM Frontier: Case and Contract Management

We are at a point of change today in the support industry. Nearly all support departments are now running some combination of SaaS applications. Yet relatively few have converted their core customer resource management (CRM) case and contract management systems to SaaS solutions. Vendors such as **salesforce.com** are turning their focus from SFA to Service and Support (S&S) systems. SaaS solutions

are a natural fit for case and contract management—especially within companies that have already adopted SaaS-based SFA solutions. The support department can join a more flexible system and share a common customer data model.

The legacy vendors in S&S systems have grown just as stale as those in ACD and IVR. Just one glance at the agent GUIs offered today in systems from Oracle (Siebel, Vantive), Amdocs (Clarify), BMC (Remedy), and even smaller solutions like iAvenue confirms that these vendors have shifted into maintenance mode. It is hard to find users of these vendors who are happy with their system. Tales of “it takes eight minutes to launch my client” or “I go get a cup of coffee while I wait for it to start” are common. By contrast, SaaS vendors are innovating at a rapid pace, creating an inviting environment for any support professional interested in experimenting with new ways to better serve customers.

To be sure, SaaS vendors have a tough battle ahead to grab the dollars currently being sent to vendors like Oracle and Amdocs for product maintenance. It is unlikely that support executives will keep sending in their annual maintenance check much longer, especially when they compare the size of these hefty payments to the cost of the same number of users with a SaaS S&S vendor. The proven track record for SaaS solutions currently in the call center has paved the way for the ultimate shift—a server-less call center, relying fully on SaaS vendors for all its operations.

About Glenn Weinstein.....

Glenn Weinstein is a principal and co-founder of [Appirio](#), a nationwide services firm that helps medium to large enterprises accelerate their adoption of Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) solutions. Prior to founding Appirio, Glenn was vice president for global support services at two enterprise software vendors, Borland and webMethods. He began his career as a software development consultant after serving eight years as a U.S. Navy flight officer and he holds a B.S. in Computer Science from the U.S. Naval Academy, as well as an M.S. in Computer Science from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

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