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The Six Big Trends for 2006

By Françoise Tourniaire, Founder and Principal of FT Works

Happy New Year! As you define the initiatives that will make a difference to your organization in 2006, why not get inspired by your peers in the support industry? This article describes six trends many of my clients are facing, along with some solutions they're considering.

1) Value-add support packages are profitable

If you're still stuck with a one-size-fits-all support package focused on remedial support, you are missing the boat. At least some portion of your customer base expects (and would pay for) added services that can be bundled into higher-cost offerings.

>> Spend some marketing dollars to analyze customer segments and to define offerings that cater to the high-end.

2) Good self-service support is possible

Are you still "making do" with an anemic knowledge base accessed through a pitiful search engine? You know it's not good self-service, and your customers, having experienced better systems with other vendors, are demanding adequate self-service options.

>> Take a hard look at the quality of your knowledge base and your searching options. Upgrade as needed. If you are already doing well there, look at adding self-service options such as self-diagnosis.

3) Onshoring is in

After a surge of interest in offshoring, support organizations are taking a second look. Offshore support may look inexpensive on paper, but many have found that it requires careful implementation, hands-on management, and unexpected expenses to ensure that new staff is trained. Offshoring is not dead or useless: you simply cannot beat the price for larger, relatively simple support. On the other hand, if your offshore team is small or you simply demand top-shelf quality, you may well do better with an onshore team, whether insourced or outsourced.

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>> Review the cost and benefits of offshoring for your team. If you cannot hit your quality goals despite your efforts, consider your onshoring options.

4) Turnover is up

A more robust economy means that staffers have a choice. If they don't like working in your organization, they will soon exercise their right to vote with their feet. Although a good financial package never hurts, many support staffers are more responsive to being able to work on interesting products, working for a manager that respects their relationship with customers, and being able to organize their time to suit their personal needs. Be sure to provide all that.

>> Identify your key players now and see how you can retain them for the long run. Do not underestimate the power of a skilled management team in retaining talent: are your managers capable of generating loyalty?

5) Troubleshooting tools go beyond CRM

CRM tools have done much to automate support and organize the way we manage customer contacts. But have you noticed how they are pretty much incapable of helping the support staffers to actually *resolve* customer issues? New troubleshooting tools are promising to tackle the hard business of case resolution. They may be clunky for now, but they should prove to be of real help to the technical staff.

>> Explore how troubleshooting tools can help your organization.

6) Dashboards make the business run better

Don't struggle through inadequate reports each week to figure out how well the organization is running. Creating a support dashboard is well worth the initial investment since you can track the same metrics for the long run. Take care to select a complete set of metrics to measure all the aspects of the business (a la balanced scorecard) and to choose measurements for results rather for activities (e.g. happy customers rather than 10 customers per hour.) A good dashboard allows outsiders to get a real feel for what's going on in support as well as helps the support organization manage the business day to day.

>> Create a dashboard for your organization.

Are you already on top of these trends? Good for you: you are in a position to create *next year's* trends.

Francoise Tourniaire is the founder and principal of FT Works, a consulting firm that helps technology companies create and grow their support operations. She's the author of *The Art of Software Support*, a practical guide for managing support organizations, *Just Enough CRM*, a business manager's blueprint to selecting and

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