

The Virtual Support Community Infrastructure: A Business Opportunity

An Opportunity Briefing from the Customer Support Consortium

Virtual support communities offer significant opportunities for improved customer service levels, increased operational efficiency and a shift in the value proposition of customer support. In light of escalating support costs and decreasing customer satisfaction, this seems too good to be true and it is unless we dramatically change the way we think about and manage support.

A New Approach

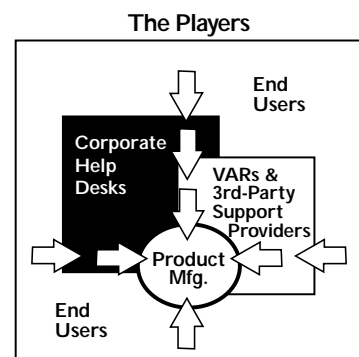
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The last innovation in high tech customer support was the move from on-sight support to remote support in the late 70s. The introduction of the remote support center offered customers faster access to more qualified resources. At the same time the support providers were able to dramatically reduce their cost structure.

The move to open systems over the past few years has resulted in a profound change in the characteristics of the install base. The proliferation of client server applications and the plug and play capabilities of products have created an environment that presents a huge challenge to support organizations.

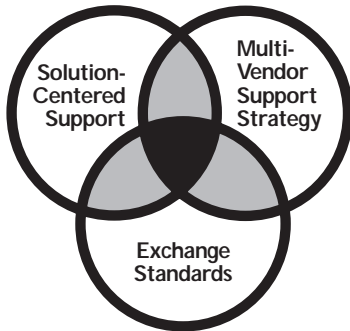
The Customer Support Consortium has developed a new approach for support. It involves knowledge management capabilities and the development of rich and dynamic relationships among the numerous players in the support supply chain. Implementation of these knowledge management and relationship capabilities will transform the support industry into a virtual support community. This new approach to support will be able to provide significantly better service to customers at significantly lower costs for both the customer and the support providers.



To capitalize on the benefits of this new model we must change the way we think about and manage support. It requires changes in perspective, culture, business processes, and technology. The support industry is on the threshold of a major and much needed transformation. To fully realize the benefits of a virtual support community, an infrastructure must emerge that offers the features and functionality required to enable this transformation.

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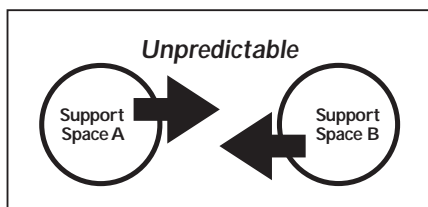
**The Opportunity:
A Vision Becoming
Reality**



Solution-Centered SupportSM is a breakthrough strategy that leverages support knowledge to lower costs, increase productivity, raise customer satisfaction, and ultimately generate key knowledge for organizational improvement and innovation. The strategy focuses on the capture, structure and reuse of support knowledge and defines five dimensions that must be considered for successful implementation. Solution-Centered Support represents a transition from a call-centric model to a knowledge-centric model and has tremendous benefit for web-based customer self-help functions.

Once organizations create well-structured knowledge, it becomes an asset that can be leveraged outside the support organization. The exchange standards and the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy enables support transactions across support boundaries. The Multi-Vendor Support Strategy defines four standards-based relationship models that outline the business norms for interaction.

There are two important concepts that help bring clarity to the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy, the “support space” and “primary versus secondary products”. First is the idea of a support space. A support space is any group of support analysts who use the same infrastructure. Analysts in the same support space share common business processes and vocabulary, can exchange knowledge, do research on known problems, and can electronically transfer or escalate a customer incident. A support space is independent of geography and organizational structure. Currently, huge difficulties arise when a customer incident must transfer from one support space to another or when it is desirable to share support knowledge across support space boundaries.



Interaction between support spaces is cumbersome and expensive

The second key concept involves “primary” versus “secondary” products. Each support space has a well-defined set of products they are responsible to support; their primary product set. Secondary products connect to or interact with primary products. While there is an expectation on the part of the customer that any product manufacturer should have the ability to resolve problems with secondary products, fulfilling that expectation is very difficult, expensive, and rarely supported by a revenue stream.

The Consortium research shows that support organizations spend an exorbitant amount of money supporting secondary products because of the unpredictable nature of the install base and the lack of efficient methods to interact with other support spaces. Conservative estimates indicate that 25% of the problems handled by a support organization (supporting open technologies) are responsible for over 60% of the costs. The table below highlights the costs of inter-support space activity based on today’s methods of interaction.

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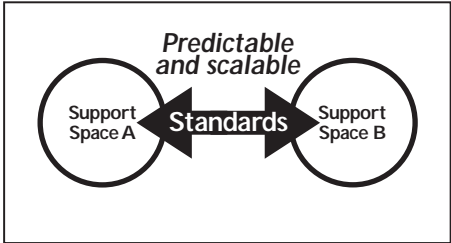
The cost of multi-vendor support

<u>What it took to resolve the incident</u>	<u>Cost/incident</u>
Support request solved within the support space (baseline assumption, primary product set)	\$50
Support request that required access to information outside the support space (secondary product set)	\$170
Support request that required interaction with an analyst outside the support space (secondary product set)	\$850

**The Opportunity:
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(continued)

Perhaps even more alarming is that most support organizations do not track or measure how much they spend supporting secondary products, or how much it costs them to interact with other support spaces. They do not understand their sources of cost and therefore do not recognize the opportunity to manage and improve the cost structure.

The Multi-Vendor Support Strategy seeks to dramatically reduce the costs of supporting open technologies by facilitating the flow of information across support spaces and enabling efficient interaction between support spaces. This is done through standards-based relationship models that can greatly reduce support costs and improve customer service levels.



The Multi-Vendor Support Strategy facilitates information flow across support spaces who choose to interact

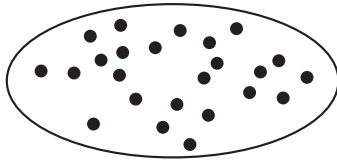
Efficient interaction between support spaces allows organizations to focus on supporting their primary products while still supporting the customer's environment by leveraging the communities skills and knowledge about secondary products.

On the engineering and development side of the high tech industry, competitors have shaken hands over standards. To reverse the escalating costs of support, support organizations must do the same. The exchange standards provide a scalable, predictable approach at the transaction level. The relationship models of the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy provide a scalable, predictable approach at the business relationship level. Both are required to create an efficient and effective support community and both require an industry infrastructure that offers the functionality needed to manage the interactions. The infrastructure is critical for the creation of a support community.

Four Phases of Implementation

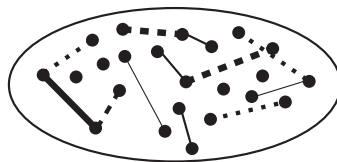
How do we get there? We have identified four phases in the evolution of support communities. Here are the characteristics of each of the phases.

Industry Support Spaces



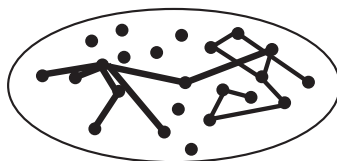
Phase I: Informal relationships

- Support analysts solve problems through their personal network
- No formal agreement between support spaces



Phase II: Point-to-Point relationships

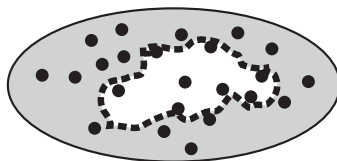
- Relationships are formalized
- Each relationship is unique
- Considerable time spent negotiating relationship(s)
- Large IT expense implementing unique transaction support



One to one connections

Phase III: Multi-Point relationships

- Same template/rules used for multiple relationships: more than two parties agree on the rules of behavior (TSANet is an example of multi-point relationships)
- Profile of providers
- Efficiencies in setting up relationships
- Contact is made on a one-to-one basis



Connect to the infrastructure for connection to your virtual support community

Phase IV: Network implementation

- Standards rich environment for transactions and relationships
- Technology infrastructure available to support/manage transactions
- Rich profiling of both providers and requestors
- Minimal time spent setting up relationships
- Once the IT investment is made to implement the standards it becomes scalable to serve many relationships
- Enables a one-to-many interaction

Most support organizations function in informal and point-to-point relationships today. The network approach offers the greatest levels of efficiency and improvements in customer service. When support organizations function as part of a dynamic network they can leverage the knowledge and resources of the community to efficiently serve mutual customers. Progress towards an efficient support community is limited by the absence of a standards-based infrastructure that offers the required features and functionality. The exchange standards are ready, the relationship models are defined and the support providers are increasingly aware of the need to interact with others. The infrastructure services are the missing element to enable the network approach.

We have identified the following high level requirements for an MVSS infrastructure (for more detail please see the appendix).

- Provide and retrieve solutions from multiple sources with a single search
- Profile management (requestors and providers)
- Brokering, connecting requestors with appropriate providers
- Support for Incident exchange standards (forward and backward release translation)
- Support/translation for multiple messaging technologies
- Security, profiles and transactions
- Accounting & billing
- Metrics

This functionality is required in order to create virtual support communities.

It is no secret that supporting open technologies is very expensive. The economics of the current support model are not sustainable. Based on our research, the economic benefits of moving to support communities are substantial and as a result there is a significant business opportunity in offering the MVSS infrastructure functionality. We believe there is ample room in the economic model such that support organizations will be motivated to pay for the MVSS infrastructure services.

A new approach to support is long overdue. Support organizations must begin to manage knowledge as an asset. Customer support must shift from a call centric focus to a knowledge centric focus. Support organizations must move from functioning as self-sufficient silos to participating in dynamic support networks. The Consortium believes this can be accomplished by implementing the exchange standards, the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy and the necessary infrastructure services to support and manage virtual support communities.

For more information about the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy please see the Consortium's white paper entitled "Multi-Vendor Support Strategy". For more information about the Consortium please see the web site www.customersupport.org

Multi-Vendor Support Strategy Infrastructure

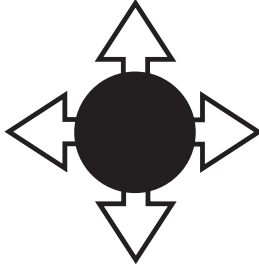
Summary

For More Information

Appendix
**Relationship
Models of
MVSS**

The Multi-Vendor Support Strategy defines four standards-based relationship models. Support organizations have varying requirements for relationships along a range of formality. Each of the models serves a specific purpose in the spectrum that goes from very informal to very formal.

Relationship Models of the Multi-Vendor Support Strategy and their related functional requirements for an infrastructure



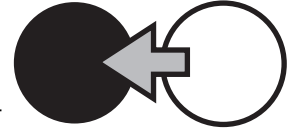
Information Model

The information model enables a support space to share information about known problems and frequently asked questions with a community at large. This is a blind relationship in that the support space providing the solutions does not know who will be making use of the solutions. Each support space decides what they want to make available to others. The typical motivation to provide information in this mode is call avoidance.

Functional requirements

- Submit search/request
- Route search to relevant databases
- Return results - abstracts (SES)
- User-defined attributes to return
- Store session (history of what was searched, queries, etc.)
- Monitoring usage - available to providers
- Feedback option for requester to provider
- Standardized Provider profiles
- Standardized Requester profile - Identity for security, entitlement
- Entitlement classifications for solutions (providers)
- Financial transaction support, accounting, reporting, billing (provider's option)

Assistance Model



The assistance model provides a consistent mechanism for contacting another support organization for assistance with a specific incident. This model enables one organization to interact in a predictable “just in time” relationship with another support space. There are two perspectives for this model; the requestor and the provider. The requestor can interact quickly and predictably with another support space in a just in time fashion to solve a customer request. This is helpful for situations where the need to understand the other product is infrequent. The second perspective, the provider, can respond based on product expertise and availability of resources. It is conceivable that model would enable the support community to balance workload with resources across multiple support spaces in a highly dynamic way.

Functional requirements

Standardized Requester profile – Identity for entitlement

Standardized Provider profiles for relevant support providers

- Service levels

- Products supported

- Engagement process

Standardized Request (SIS)

Engine to match requesters with providers

Status updates (as required)

Supports SIS response

Tracking, reporting

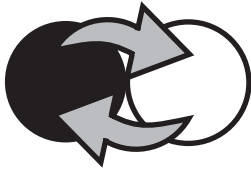
Spoofability (“authorized agent”)

Secure transaction for engagement

Financial transaction support

Forward and backward compatibility of the SES/SIS standards (enable interaction between requestors and providers on different levels of the standard)

Compatibility across messaging systems



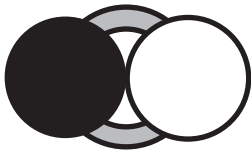
Collaboration Model

The collaboration model provides a rich set of standards for establishing relationships between support spaces that will be frequently exercised. These are contractual relationships that are established with known entities based on business need. This model enables two support spaces to work together to solve customer problems. Ownership of the problem can transfer, incident information may be shared and a richer level of solution data may be available under this agreement. Because this model is standards-based it is repeatable and therefore scalable to multiple support spaces. It will improve the analyst's effectiveness in solving problem and the organization's efficiency in establishing support relationships.

Functional requirements

All the assistance model requirements plus...

- Full support for both SES and SIS
- Transfer ownership of an incident
- Secure transactions and profiles
- Highly reliable functionality, no single point of failure
- Secure audit capability
- Proactive notification
- Visibility to partner availability



Alliance Model

The alliance model supports an ongoing strategic relationship between strategic partners. This includes both per incident and general solution sharing, as well as proactive problem prevention information sharing, which may include direct access to internal support and/or engineering resources. While this relationship may be based on the standards of the collaboration model it will also reflect the unique requirements of each alliance relationship. We expect that these relationships will be highly customized and therefore few in number.

Functional requirements

Unique to each alliance relationship

