

“The Power of Community”

by Greg Oxtan

Houston, We Have a Problem

Every day tens of thousands of users of technology call for help. Why is that? We could point to lots of reasons but fundamentally the usability of technology is not in sync with the needs of its users. This imbalance creates an endless demand for assistance and is a challenge both for the user and the support professionals who are supposed to be able to help. If you have ever called for assistance as a user of technology yourself you know it is often not a pleasant experience.

The premise, three points of view

The users are frustrated by the technology's inability to help them do what they want to do and then are further frustrated with the unfriendly process of trying to get help. Whether it is searching multiple Web sites or having to negotiate with VRUs (voice response units) through their telephone keypads, then waiting on hold only to be connected to someone who does not know the answer anyway, getting answers is tough.

On the other end of the process is the support engineer or analyst who has to deal with repetition, uncertainty and a never-ending stream of frustrated callers. The repetition comes from the fact that a high percentage of the calls that come into a support center are the same issues or questions over and over again. The uncertainty stems from the fact that the calls that are not repetitive are likely to involve products with which the support engineer has no experience. In the open systems market place it is impossible to identify all the possible combinations of products that might be involved in the next support call. It is therefore impossible to adequately prepare the support engineers with the necessary information and training to handle all the products they might encounter. What we have here is one victim, the customer, calling another, the support engineer, trying to sort things out.

An interested third party in this whole situation is the support manager who is faced with the challenge of increasing demands from customers and increasing pressure from executive management to curtail the upward spiraling costs of support. Management has a dilemma. What is the reward for being really good at handling customer requests for help? More customer requests for help! Customers will seek the path of least resistance and best results. A company bold enough to invest in customer support and provide smooth, painless answers will be inundated with calls. It would seem that if your customers have questions

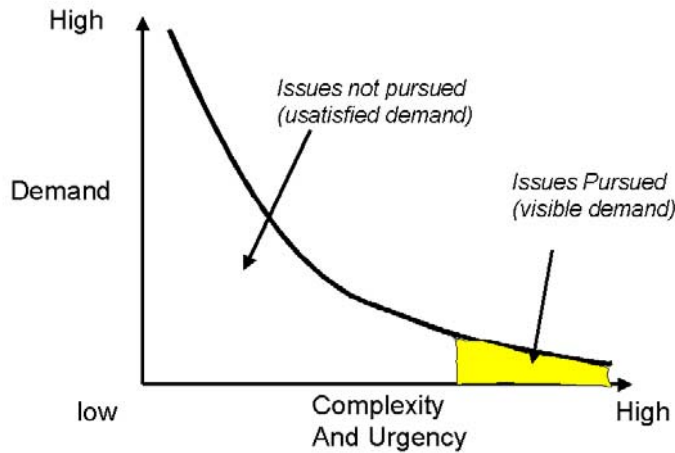
or problems you would want them to call. As Tom Peters points out, it is not whether or not you have problems, it is how well you respond to the problems that builds customer loyalty. Unfortunately with the current support practices and structure this it is prohibitively expensive to be really good at customer support. We need a new approach!

Simply Unsatisfying

Consumer demand for technology support is largely unsatisfied because there is no easy way to get answers, people have questions that they do not bother asking because seeking the answer is too troublesome. Whether it is help functions built into the product, reading a manual, searching a web site, calling a friend or colleague or as a last resort calling a vendor, getting answers is tough. If I consider my own use of technology as a small business user, I have encountered lots of problems but I seldom pursue answers, it is just too much trouble. As I have talked with other colleagues I find they have the same experience. We simply find another way to do what we are trying to do or give up and use the original form of pencil paper, cut and paste.

If users had an easy, effective way to get questions answered I believe they would ask fifty to one hundred times more questions and the value of technology would increase correspondingly. If vendors had a way to capture the issues their users were having with the products they would have a wealth of information about how to improve their products and their customers' success.

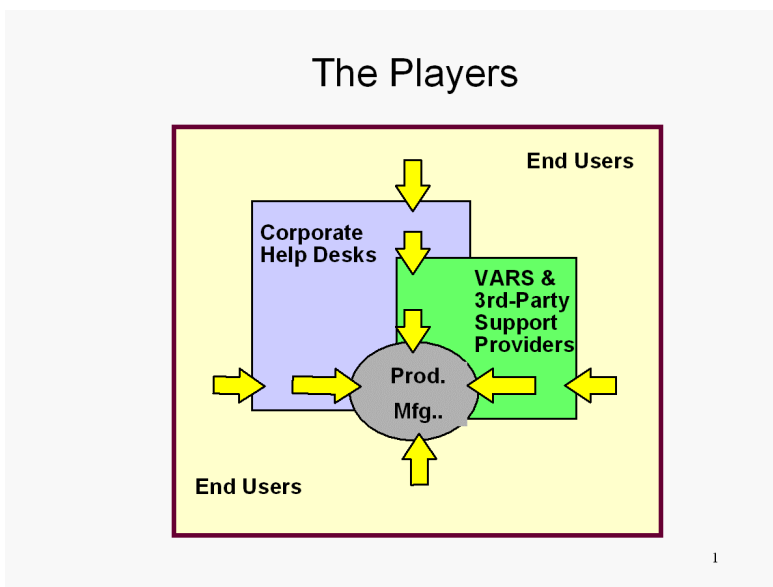
There is significant unsatisfied demand in the technology user community. In today's world the complexity and urgency of a support request has to be strong enough to overcome the discomfort and inconvenience of the current support processes offered by support providers and product manufacturers. Therefore, there is a huge demand for support that never enters the support process. We will call this the *unsatisfied demand*. The *visible demand* is made up of the support requests seen by support providers, measured by counters such as hits to a support website or number of support calls logged. In the graph below we see the unsatisfied demand versus the visible demand.



This graph shows the dynamic of demand Vs the combined characteristics of complexity and urgency of the problem. The assertion is that there is a large amount of “un-satisfied demand” because the inconvenience pursuing a resolution in today’s model for support.

When an issue or problem is pursued by the end user it is often solved by a peer, an internal helpdesk or a third party integrator. The volume of problems that actually reach the product manufacturer is a very small percentage of the visible demand.

The support process at the industry level, with it’s many players, is not well connected. The interaction between the players is not well defined. Each time an issue or incident moves from one player to another it is re-described . Information does not follow seamlessly across the boundaries in either direction. The current industry structure does not serve anyone’s interests.



The lack of standards for information flow and the unpredictability of these relationships is both a deterrent and a filter. The current structure is a deterrent for the end user in actually pursuing help because of the marginal probability of success and the amount of time and patients required. It is a filter in that the users don't have access to the information they need to be productive with a given product and the product manufacturers do not have the information they need to improve the product based on the users experience. Each is insulated from the other.

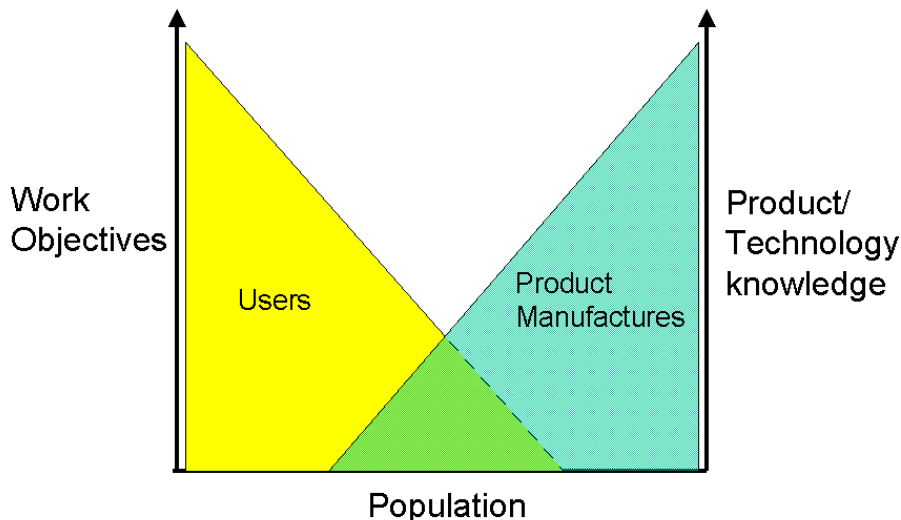
Support: A Vendor's Money Pit

Why can't product manufacturers offer some sort of support for this unsatisfied demand? Why aren't the support providers more interested in the experience of the user? There are two issues with the current structure for support, cost and context. The current approach is very expensive and self-limiting.

The costs show up in each player in the support process and in the ineffectiveness of the interactions between the between the players. The economics of the current model do not allow product manufacturers to engage with their users. Companies simply cannot afford to respond to the unsatisfied demand.

Context becomes an issue because of the filtering that occurs as a problem moves from player to player. At one end of the process we have the user who's objective is to get their work done, not learn about products and technology. On the other end of the process is the product manufacturer who knows the product and technology but does not know the users environment. The area of intersection is actually quite small. A great example of how some deal with this issue is Intuit. In customer support Intuit hires support representatives who understand accounting and then train them on the technology. Most support organizations struggle to deal with this mismatch.

What is to be done? The model seems fundamentally flawed.



This graph illustrates the lack of alignment of purpose and therefore common context between the user and the product provider. In the population of users there is a small segment that understand enough about the technology to have a meaningful conversation with the product provider (even their support organization). Likewise there is a small population of the product manufacturers who understand enough about the customer's objectives and what they are trying to accomplish with the product

Web based support – leveraging the Internet?

Clearly the Internet offers new ways to do things. In many cases companies today are using the Internet to do what they have always done. Allowing customer to submit problem or incidents via the web instead of the phone is not very interesting. Characteristic of the application of any new technology, it is often used as a new way to do an old process. The potential of the internet for support is not yet fully understood. Allowing customer access to knowledge bases (especially if it is well-structured knowledge in the customer's context) starts to become interesting because it offers the customer a new avenue for information. They can (and do) search for answers and fixes on their own time and terms. The effectiveness of this approach is greatly enhanced if good knowledge management practices are used in the creation of the knowledge base. While this is generally well receive by customers for certain types of problems searching databases built by service providers is still in the old model. Instead of the support analyst searching a database on behalf of the customer,

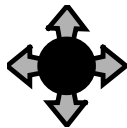
the customer is doing it themselves. While this is an improvement in support it still suffers from the issues of relevance and context. How do people who don't use the product to get work done create meaningful information for the people who do?

Does the Internet enable a whole new structure for support?

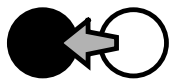
A model for support communities

The Customer Support Consortium has been working on a model for virtual support communities for some time. Communities are defined as a collection of support organizations that have mutual or complimentary interests. The fabric that holds a community together is the relationships that exists between the members of the community. The Consortium has identified four relationship models the are characterized the nature of the interaction and level of commitment between the members of a community.

The four relationship models



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.

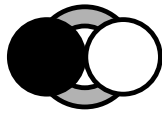


The *Assistance* model provides a consistent mechanism for people who do not know each other to interact on a specific incident. These may be individuals or support organizations. This model enables a person who needs help (the requestor) to interact in a predictable one time relationship with someone who can provide help (provider). This could be thought of as a "just in time" outsourcing model.



The *Collaboration* model provides a rich set of standards for establishing relationships between support organizations that will be frequently exercised. These are contractual relationships that are established with known entities based on business need. This model enables two support organizations 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.



The *Alliance* model supports an ongoing relationship between strategic partners. This includes both per incident and general solution sharing, as well as proactive problem prevention information sharing. This may be in the form of 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 business objectives of each alliance relationship. We expect that these relationships will be highly customized and few in number.

Both the *Information* and the *Collaboration* levels of the model represent an improvement over the formal structures that we have and do today. While they offer significant efficiencies and service level improvements they do not represent a new structure for support. The *Assistance* level of the model, on the other hand, does not exist today in any formal structure. What if, through the use of the Internet, we could quickly engage with those we needed to when we needed to?

The Power of the People

Where is the knowledge users are seeking about how to use technology? Isn't it in the community of users? Today we launch requests into a process that very quickly moves or escalates issues into an environment that has no context of what the users are trying to do.

What if the users themselves were well connected and could leverage their collective knowledge about how to use technologies? There are two powerful factors in this idea; first the population of users for most of the common software products today is very large and growing, second, the users of an application or tool share a common context.

Consider a network or community of users being able to benefit from the collective experience. The collective experience of a community of users by definition is relevant to users and is better positioned to provide support.

This thought challenges a lot of the structures we hold dear but may not be serving our best interests. Questions arise such as how would the quality of the support be managed, would it be reliable or predictable, who would control such a community, what is the motivation or economic model for participation? All

interesting issues and all based on the structures and models that have been with us since the turn of the century.

The Linux Phenomenon:

An analogy: Linux is to traditional organizational structures and economic models what Unix was to proprietary operating systems.

Linux's success challenges the fundamental structures of business as we knew it before the internet. Linux is a community of users who have developed, enhanced and supported a complex operating system with out the normal hierarchical structures and with out the traditional economic model!

In the Linux world if a user needs help with a problem they get on line and through a number of different forums and submit a question. Other members of the community respond with answers and assistance.

Linux support is a structure without a single point of control. The members of the community have developed norms of behaviors through experience. It is a model where control is inherent in the system and constantly evolving. It is an ecosystem, a network of relationships enable by the Internet and driven by mutual benefit and a strong sense of community. It is an organic self-managed community that serves the interests of its members. Could this be the basis for a new support model, a new structure for support that captures and leverages the collective experience?

Summary

The use of technology in today's world has increased much faster than its usability and reliability. The productivity potential that technology provides us with is great, but the time saved is often consumed by the time spent trying to resolve technology problems. When technology fails, our choices for help seem very limited. Contacting a modern-day help desk requires negotiating with Voice Response Units, spending time on hold, and sometimes waiting days before receiving a response. Most major corporations have addressed this problem by providing an internal help desk that supports the employees with the use of the technologies the company has deployed to get its work done. This approach is expensive and has had marginal success in addressing the problem. The people most impacted by the unsatisfied demand are the so-called small office home office (SOHO) users and the home users. Relief for this growing base of users is not going to come from the traditional structures, the economics don't work.

There is a new possibility for support, a new approach. The Internet offers the opportunity for users to benefit from the collective experience of a huge audience. This experience is more relevant and more extensive than the perspective of the product manufacturer. The Linux community demonstrates a whole new value proposition. Linux demonstrates a whole new economic model and organizational structure.

The idea of support communities forming that use network structures to connect people of similar interests and context challenges our traditional hierarchical thinking. The hierarchical model is almost 100 years old – maybe it's time for us to let it go.

References: moving us towards communities:

The Dance of Change by Peter Senge: Thinking of organizations as organisms not machines.

Co-opetition by Brandenburger & Nalebuff, game theory and value-nets
net.gain by Hagel & Armstrong, discusses reverse markets “Communities refine the market by becoming the market.”

The Death of Competition: Leadership and Strategy in the age of business ecosystems by James F. Moore.

Society for Organizational Learning: www.sol.org

Douglas Engelbart's Bootstrap organization: www.bootstrap.org