Foreword

A mechanical engineer, a chemical engineer, an electronics engineer, and an IT help desk administrator are riding together in a car when suddenly the engine dies. The mechanical engineer suspects a drivetrain failure. The chemical engineer thinks it must be a problem in the fuel system. The electronics engineer is sure that a control chip is defective. The IT help desk administrator simply asks, “Why don’t we all just get out of the car, then get back inside and see if it works again?”

Actually, in most versions of the joke, the fourth occupant is a computer scientist. But it would be a rare computer scientist who spent his or her day telling dozens of people to reboot their PCs. The joke is funny in part because computers sometimes get balky for no clear reason and then return to normal for reasons that aren’t much clearer. It’s also funny, though, because many of us—most of us, probably—call an IT help desk from time to time and know exactly what the first piece of advice will be.

Maybe the joke isn’t so amusing to help desk professionals, who often have to troubleshoot a subtle problem while exercising the skills of a diplomat, a psychologist, or, occasionally, a saint. But it shows that the work they do is prominent enough to earn a place in pop culture. And that’s a reminder that of all the services that make up the IT portfolio, none has a more direct customer-facing role than the help desk.

IT organizations have provided technical support for as long as there’s been a distinction between administrators and users of computing technology. Technical expertise, of course, is a core competence of user service organizations. But the user service domain has expanded as much with computing’s sociology and culture as with its technical demands. In early data processing days, the interface between information systems experts and their business department clients was fairly intimate and manageable. That changed when personal computing and mass Internet adoption brought two consecutive quantum leaps in user demand, turning technical support from a conversation between near-peers into a large-scale exercise in customer service.

The many challenges of keeping a college or university’s enormously diverse range of users productive while they use an enormously diverse range of technology inspired this ECAR study. In some ways, ours is a story of grace under pressure. Despite the challenges of managing technical support supply and demand, our survey respondents seem almost cheerful in their self-assessment of overall help desk service quality. More than half rate it as very good or excellent, and many others

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thought it was at least good. Where they set goals, as they often do, they tend to say that they meet them. Our study clearly reflects respondent pride in help desk organizations that feel they have rolled with the punches, kept up with demand, and made quality support available where it’s needed.

Yet we found signs that the exhilarating task of responding to a whole community’s IT needs has also kept many help desk organizations tactical, conservative, and focused on tried-and-true methods. We found only spotty adoption of the IT service management frameworks that many organizations in the commercial sector have used to achieve tighter IT alignment with strategic goals. Self-service tools were not as widespread or numerous on average as we expected them to be, and perhaps for this reason institutions were ambivalent overall about their effect on reducing help desk demand. We found communications methods surprisingly traditional for an era in which the student population is known for its fast-changing communications culture. And, perhaps explaining much of this, 56 percent of our respondents characterized help desk funding as less than or much less than adequate.

A certain wary focus on proven methods is understandable for an organization that is all too often called on to clean up the mess when gee-whiz technologies prove unreliable or user-unfriendly. Help desk administrators and staff frequently find themselves, in principal investigator Mark Sheehan’s apt phrase, on the front line of higher education IT. But all is not reaction and constraint. As Mark details in the following chapters, we found a complex of practices that tended to move together among the most mature and high-performing help desk organizations. Among our respondents, implementation of service management framework practices (excluding service level agreements), use and communication of performance metrics, and the existence of strategic plans all proved to be associated with higher reported service quality levels. And what’s more, high service quality levels tended to be associated with higher evaluations of the central IT organization’s reputation within the institution.

Acting as scout and intelligence officer in our foray to IT’s front line was ECAR Fellow Mark Sheehan. In his initial mission as principal investigator of an ECAR study, Mark has crafted a broad and deep assessment of higher education help desk practice that reflects his long experience as a CIO and IT professional. The meticulous data presentation and clear, lucid prose of the following chapters testify both to Mark’s scientific training and to the writing skills for which he was already known before joining ECAR. Mark has been aided by ECAR’s talented and collegial fellowship. Bob Albrecht, Judy Caruso, Judy Pirani, Don Spicer, and I helped with qualitative interviews and took part in creating the four case studies that accompany this project. Gail Salaway participated throughout, advising on survey design, data preparation, and analysis, and conducting the “buddy check” of quantitative findings that we perform on all ECAR studies. The incomparable and invaluable Toby Sitko brought it all together as usual, from coding the survey instrument for Web presentation to needling the interim director to finish the Foreword on time. Richard Katz, ECAR’s founder and director, helped conceive of the project, brought it to fruition, and was its steward throughout its initial phases. Finally, transforming ECAR’s digital prose and charts into polished publications has depended on the professionalism, and often the patience, of our EDUCAUSE colleagues Nancy Hays and Gregory Dobbin.

Appropriately, given the topic, we have also had a great deal of help from higher education colleagues and other professionals. The seed for this study was planted by Betty Leydon, Vice President for Information Technology and CIO at Princeton University, when she suggested at an EDUCAUSE
conference session that we take on IT service management. Proving the principle that no good deed goes unpunished, we also asked Betty to review the study prospectus and survey draft, and she graciously did so. We are also indebted to the user services professionals who assisted us with a review of preliminary findings: Vivianne D. Johnston, Help Center Manager, Regis University; Denise Schuette, IT Customer Support Services, Metropolitan State College of Denver; and Herb Wilson, Director of IT Support at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

We are also indebted to HDI (formerly the Help Desk Institute) and its higher education forum steering committee for valuable discussions and observations. In particular, we thank HDI’s Leslie Cook; Mark Fitzgerald, Boise State University; Bill Vriesema, Calvin College; and Jon P. Garvin, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Likewise, we are grateful for the assistance of Ann Lamanes of the IT service management consulting firm Pink Elephant.

The foundation for this study, of course, is the 454 respondent institutions that took part in our survey, identified in Appendix A. We are profoundly aware that a survey invitation from ECAR can hardly help but impose on our respondents’ time and patience, and we are constantly gratified that so many colleagues see enough value in our work to respond. And we are all the more indebted to the IT professionals who agreed to qualitative interviews that contributed greatly to understanding and interpreting the survey findings. These colleagues—36 individuals at 24 separate institutions—are named in Appendix B.

Other higher education colleagues opened their doors and generously donated their time to collaborate with us on the four case studies that accompany this study. We are especially grateful to

- Bowdoin College and Colgate University for showing us two different but equally compelling ways to optimize the help desk’s strategic value;
- New York University for sharing with us the details of its IT Infrastructure Library implementation;
- the University of Alberta for giving us insight into ways of improving the help desk’s self-service applications and optimizing student workers’ contribution; and
- the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which provided a model for creating and sustaining a highly distributed fabric of IT support services.

We are proud to deliver the first in-depth study of IT help desk practices in higher education, and we firmly believe that the findings here will be of interest and value to IT leaders and line staff alike. One theme running throughout these pages will surprise no one familiar with the topic: the commitment of IT professionals to deliver excellent services that support their communities and advance higher education. We thank them for their contributions and dedicate this study to them.

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