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Service Level Agreements

Every organization of men, be it social or political, ultimately relies on man’s capacity for making promises and keeping them.
—Hannah Arendt

Key Findings

- Only about 20 percent of respondent institutions have service level agreements (SLAs) in place for at least one central IT help desk service. If implementations now in progress or planned for the future succeed, that percentage will rise to 50 or 60 percent in the foreseeable future.
- Incompatibility with institutional culture is the most frequently cited reason for not planning to implement SLAs.
- Most planned or in-progress SLA implementations have executive or management sponsors; fewer have dedicated staffing, completion dates, and/or have begun to work with clients; still fewer have dedicated funding.
- SLAs are now in place mostly for academic and administrative departments, the university as a whole, and constituent groups such as students or faculty.
- SLA specifications include lists of supported hardware and software, and goals for service availability and response time.
- Definition of a complaint escalation process is the only conflict-related provision included in SLAs by a majority of respondents who have SLAs in place.

Service level agreements (SLAs) are contracts, usually formal ones, between service providers and recipients. Improvement of service quality is the usual goal—and the frequent effect—of putting SLAs into place. SLAs clarify the nature of the relationship between the signatories, document the expectations on both sides, and establish methods for measuring performance.

In their simplest form, SLAs specify the nature and extent of the services the provider commits to deliver and that the recipient agrees to accept. Frequently, SLAs also address the recipient’s responsibilities, such as attending training sessions, directing all service requests to a single telephone number or e-mail address, or adhering to specific policies.

SLAs are usually developed jointly between service provider and recipient, so that the terms of the agreement are mutual and well understood. Because IT environments change...
rapidly, IT SLAs commonly specify a renegotiation schedule.

Where IT services are provided on a for-fee basis, SLAs also specify the costs of an overall service plan or of individual services.

**Service Level Agreements on Campus**

According to the United Kingdom's Office of Government Commerce, "Today most organisations have introduced [service level agreements]." Our survey results tell us that SLAs for higher education IT help desks in the United States and Canada are much less common than that. Only about 20 percent of our respondents reported having SLAs in use, and just under 10 percent said they are currently implementing them. Lumping these with the roughly 30 percent that reported they were planning SLA implementations, and assuming that most implementations will be successful, we anticipate that a slim majority of respondents will have SLAs in place within a few years. The results reported here outline the forms that higher education IT help desk SLAs are taking in 2007.

**Implementation Status**

As depicted in Figure 8-1, SLAs were in use at only 2 in 10 respondent institutions. SLA implementations were under way at another 10 percent and planned for the future at almost a third; if all the implementations under way are successful and all those in the planning stages are successfully carried out, the number of institutions reporting SLAs in use in the foreseeable future could exceed 60 percent. Nevertheless, well over a third of respondents said they had no plans to implement SLAs.

The occurrence of SLAs at our respondent institutions was significantly associated with Carnegie class, as illustrated in Figure 8-2. Among U.S. institutions, doctorals were most likely to have implemented SLAs. Master’s and associate’s institutions followed. Bachelor’s institutions were the least likely to have SLAs and by far the most likely to say they had no plans to implement them.

While Canadian institutions reported the lowest rate of SLA use among all respondents, they are on track to catch up quickly; their reports of implementations in progress led the entire survey population, as did their implementations planned for the future. Canadian respondents were even less likely than U.S. doctorals to report having no plans to implement SLAs.
SLA status also varied significantly with FTE enrollments. Institutions with 4,000 or fewer FTE were less likely to have SLAs in use or implementations in progress than midsize or large institutions. Midsize institutions with 4,001 to 15,000 FTE enrollments were only slightly less likely to have SLAs in use or implementations in progress than larger institutions. Almost half of small institutions said they had no plans to implement SLAs, compared with about a third of midsize institutions and just over a fourth of the largest ones.

Institutional control was also significantly related to SLA status, with public institutions taking the lead. The percentage for SLAs in use was only four points higher for public institutions, but public institutions were more than three times as likely as private ones to have implementations in progress. Around 30 percent of respondents in both categories reported planned implementations, but fewer than a third of public institutions reported having no plans to implement SLAs, while almost half of private ones did.

One report of SLAs in action comes from the University of St. Thomas, a midsize private institution in St. Paul, Minnesota. Vice President and CIO Samuel Levy says, “We have a fairly extensive number of SLAs. We have a well-developed, -published, and -understood set of baseline services; some of our SLAs are driven around our promises for supporting these baseline services. We have SLAs with departments which have technology needs outside our baseline support, too. For example, the computer sciences department needs access to different ports on the network from what the French department needs.

“Advice: You should have what amounts to an institutional SLA that specifies the baseline services and outlines guaranteed levels of performance for them. When there are divergences or different needs—such as research or discipline needs—then there needs to be a particular SLA for that situation. I do not view SLAs as adversarial.”

Chapter 9 discusses the significant relationship between SLA adoption and selected IT service management practices.
Reasons Not to Use SLAs

When we asked respondents to select up to three reasons why their institutions had no plans to implement SLAs for help desk services, by far the most frequently reported reason (a quarter of those not planning SLAs) was that SLAs would not be compatible with institutional culture (see Figure 8-3).

At best, this suggests a smooth-functioning, coevolved relationship between the help desk and the client, in which the help desk offerings are well balanced with client needs. At worst, it may mean that the relationship is so broken that agreements about service levels would be impossible to reach. In most cases, though, it probably just reflects the complexity of campus relationships with regard to IT. David Todd, CIO at the University of Vermont, puts it this way: “For us, the biggest factor in institutional culture is the highly decentralized support structure at UVM. About 60 percent of the IT support staff are outside our central IT organization, and while we’ve standardized many of our software tools and hardware platforms, there are still substantial variations among different schools. And some, like the College of Medicine, have environments that are very much tailored to their needs and use tools that none of the others on campus ever would.”

The next most frequently cited reason (17.8 percent) was that higher priorities exist for central IT staff. This may mean that the central IT organization is understaffed and personnel can’t be spared from user support duties to focus on developing needed SLAs. Or it may indicate that the service relationship between the help desk and its clients is close to what central IT would like and that incremental improvements, while desirable in an ideal world, are not perceived to be as necessary to the help desk’s mission as other priorities might be.

Lack of acceptable return on investment and lack of funds were both selected by about 8 percent of respondents. In the case of lack of return on investment, it would appear that while funds might be available,
the institution is unwilling to risk them to derive whatever gains the SLA implementation might bring. Respondents may be uninformed of the benefits of SLAs or may not be confident that those benefits would be realized on their campuses.

Where lack of funding was selected as a reason not to use SLAs, the implication is that other priorities require all of the central IT organization’s budget and the implementation of SLAs is simply not possible, however significant the benefit might seem.

Fewer than 6 percent of respondents chose each of the remaining reasons; thus, these probably exert little influence on SLA planning at most institutions.

Planning for SLAs

Respondents who said they had SLA implementations in progress or planned for the future gave varying responses to our detailed questions about the status of those projects (see Figure 8-4).

Very few of our respondents’ efforts to develop central IT help desk SLAs, whether in progress or planned for the future, had been allocated funds or assigned completion dates. Among respondents reporting implementation efforts in progress, these percentages were a few points higher than among those whose implementations were only in the planning stages, but these differences are probably unimportant. The real story here is that more than 90 percent of SLA development efforts have neither funding nor completion dates. This suggests that SLA development is done “on the margin” at most of the institutions that have them under way. The fact that so few of the efforts under way have been assigned completion dates suggests the low priority of those efforts.

A slightly more substantial 10 to 12 percent of respondents’ efforts had participation from functional business/academic units or had been assigned staffing. Again, the minor differences between the status of implementations in progress and those planned for the future are of little significance and the more interesting point is that so few of the efforts in question yet involve external entities (the term agreement does imply both parties’ engagement) or have been assigned staff. We

![Figure 8-4. Status of Planning for SLA Implementation](image-url)
might explain the latter finding by invoking the notion of work being done on the margin again, but the lack of external involvement seems contrary to the very interests that make SLAs desirable in the first place.

A management or executive sponsor is a key player in SLA development, and we see some evidence of this in the substantial numbers of respondents indicating that they have one. Interestingly, SLA development efforts planned for the future are 1.85 times as likely to have a sponsor as those currently in progress. Two possible, if not entirely intuitive, explanations occur to us. First, SLA development efforts without sponsors may be more likely to proceed to implementation than those that have sponsors. Perhaps those with sponsors proceed more uncertainly because of the tricky political groundwork the sponsors must lay; unsponsored efforts may evolve more naturally and easily. Alternatively, a sponsored effort once under way may tend to lose its sponsor, perhaps as the project takes on a life of its own and leaves the sponsor’s direct control behind. We could interpret both explanations as reinforcing the most commonly selected reason for not planning SLAs—that campus culture can play a limiting role. In the context of executive/management sponsorship of SLA development efforts, campus culture may be synonymous with campus politics.

Constituencies for Service Level Agreements

The simplest way for the help desk to implement SLAs would be to commit to one level of service for the entire campus. Indeed, a majority of respondents with SLAs in use report having done that. Help desks often find, though, that the most difficult constituencies to serve well are small ones, where service needs may be very specific and highly technical. However, we found help desk SLAs with such constituencies to be relatively rare among our respondent institutions.

A Variety of Constituents

We asked the 93 respondents who reported having SLAs in current use to identify those client groups for which the central IT help desk had SLAs in place covering at least one service. The groups we listed were:

- academic departments;
- administrative departments;
- the institution as a whole;
- constituent groups such as all students or all faculty;
- institutional centers, institutes, and other organized research units independent of academic departments;
- other institutions within a system or consortium;
- external customers;
- affiliates such as a hospital teaching program or research organization; and
- other.

The responses, depicted in Figure 8-5, indicate that academic and administrative departments were the help desk’s most common partners in SLAs. The only other group selected by a majority of respondents was the meta constituency, “the institution as a whole.”

A third or more of respondents selected groups related to IT user class, such as all students or all faculty. Fewer than 2 in 10 respondents selected “other institutions within a system or consortium,” perhaps reflecting the fact that only a small proportion of respondents are members of consortia or systems.

Only 1 in 10 respondents had SLAs in place for external customers and affiliated programs and organizations. This is a little surprising in that both categories exist apart from the campus mainstream, where the clients might be unsure what to expect and the help desk might be unsure of its obligations. These categories would seem to be ideal venues for SLAs. Perhaps they were selected so few times because relatively few respondent institutions have such entities in their environments.
Finally, 8.5 percent of respondents selected “Other,” suggesting that our list covered most SLA constituencies but left one or more minor ones unmentioned.

As Figure 8-6 shows, 61.6 percent of respondents with SLAs in use had established them for one, two, or three of the groups from our list; almost a third (33.0 percent) had SLAs for four, five, or six groups; and only 5.5 percent served more than six. Note that these calculations include the “Other” category, and for some of the relatively few respondents who selected it, it may embrace more than one group.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this finding is that relatively few respondents claimed to have SLAs for only one group. It appears that once an institution decides to move forward with SLAs, it establishes them for multiple groups.

Whole-Institution SLAs

We wondered if respondents who indicated help desk SLAs were in place for “the institution as a whole” (N = 55) might have selected only that all-embracing option. We found that 14.5 percent of that number did select no other options. The remaining 85.5 percent reported having SLAs for one or more other constituencies as well.

The response pattern among those who have help desk SLAs for the institution as a whole closely parallels that of the rest of the population with SLAs in use (see Figure 8-5), with the exception of SLAs for aggregate groups such as all students or all faculty. Among respondents who did not report having SLAs for the institution as a whole, only 18.4 percent had them for such aggregate groups. Of respondents who did have SLAs in place for the institution as a whole, more than three times as many (61.8 percent) also had them for aggregate groups. Thus it appears that once the idea for large-group SLAs catches on, it is likely to spread.

The presence of SLAs for the institution as a whole was significantly associated with FTE enrollments. For smaller institutions (4,000 or fewer FTE) with SLAs in place for at least one constituency, almost 9 in 10 (87.1 percent) respondents told us they had SLAs in place for the institution as a whole; 52.5 percent of midsize institutions (4,001 to 15,000 FTE) reported them; only 33.3 percent of larger institutions did so. We speculate that the scope and extent of large-institution IT
could make a whole-institution SLA for help desk services difficult to construct, let alone to fulfill.

**What SLAs Address**

To get a look inside the SLAs our respondents have implemented, we asked about two types of components: specifications and provisions. We chose these terms somewhat arbitrarily to distinguish between a group of eight “business as usual” specifications and a group of three provisions that would come into play only in extraordinary circumstances.

**Specifications**

SLA specifications relating to performance goals and supported hardware and software were much more common than those dealing with SLA processes and schedules. As shown in Figure 8-7, more than three-quarters of respondents who had SLAs in place reported that those agreements covered supported software, service availability goals, goals for user support metrics such as response time, and supported hardware. Majorities also reported including specifications for processes to monitor and report against goals and scheduled review of the SLA terms. Less common were a schedule for renegotiating the agreement and fees for services.

Of the specifications we asked about, only one was related to a key demographic variable. A schedule for the review of SLA terms was much less common among institutions with 4,000 or fewer FTEs (25.8 percent) than at larger ones (62.2 percent at institutions with 4,001 to 15,000 FTEs and 66.7 percent at institutions with more than 15,000 FTEs). This suggests that at smaller institutions an SLA is more often considered a static document. One reason for this difference might be a more comprehensive—and less negotiable—approach to IT support in the central IT/client relationship at smaller institutions versus a wider range of options for provisioning and supporting components of the IT environment at larger ones.

**Provisions**

Finally, our respondents with SLAs in use reported the status of three SLA provisions designed to address problems that might develop in the relationship between the central IT help desk and its SLA partners. Figure 8-8 shows that the definition of a complaint escalation process was the only...
provision we asked about that a majority of respondent institutions included in SLAs. Fewer than a third of respondent institutions included in their SLAs terms under which service recipients could cancel the SLA, while only 8.9 percent included conditions for refund or compensation to service recipients.

**Summary and Implications**

While service level agreements are currently fairly rare among our sample of higher education IT help desks, implementations now in progress and those in the planning stages should result in a 50 to 60 percent adoption level in the foreseeable future.

Well-implemented SLAs promise improved service quality, achieved in large part through improved communication between service provider and recipient. Because respondents from smaller institutions and those awarding only bachelor’s degrees were most likely to say they had no plans to implement SLAs, we surmise that formalizing communications in those institutions is not generally seen as a good way to improve them.
Substantially the most frequently cited primary reason for not planning to adopt SLAs was that they were not compatible with existing institutional culture. Higher IT staff priorities were also cited often. Both of these reasons ring especially true for smaller institutions where communities are often tightly knit and have smaller numbers of staff among whom to distribute SLA development tasks.

While reports of planned and in-progress SLA development efforts suggest that this practice’s penetration will more than double in the foreseeable future, relatively few planned and in-progress SLA implementations were reported to have dedicated funding or staffing, completion dates, or the beginnings of the close collaboration needed between service provider and recipient. We suspect these development efforts will be conducted on the margin, leaving their success largely to chance. The most positive indication concerning these projects is that two-thirds of them have executive or management sponsors.

SLAs are now in place mostly for large constituent groups: academic and administrative departments, the university as a whole, and aggregate groups such as all students or all faculty. A third of existing SLAs involve institutional centers, institutes, and other organized research units, where—because of the units’ specialized needs and their organizational distance from central IT—the formal communication that SLAs encourage may be particularly beneficial.

The most common specifications included in SLAs at our respondent institutions were lists of supported hardware and software, and goals for service availability and response time. Inclusion of a schedule for renegotiation of the SLA was reported much more often by midsize and large institutions (in terms of FTE enrollments) than by smaller ones. This suggests that small institutions, where SLAs are generally less attractive to begin with, may be saddling themselves with SLAs that are relatively inflexible and may become burdensome (or irrelevant) as the IT environment changes.

We asked about the inclusion of three provisions to be invoked in the event of unsatisfactory SLA compliance and found that the definition of a complaint escalation process was fairly common. Terms under which an SLA could be canceled were less common, and conditions for refund or compensation to the recipient were rare. Rarity of the latter two items in higher education IT SLAs is hardly surprising: they imply rigid business relationships that are only infrequently found between entities within the academy.

Endnote