The IT Help Desk:
From Cost Centre to Profit Centre

Company Name
Synstar International

Industry
Business Availability

Business Benefits
- Customer Support
- Service Level Agreement management
- Knowledge Management

Quick Stats
Product: HEAT
Users: 55
Employees: 120

COMPANY BACKGROUND

Synstar International is a pan-European, independent Business Availability and IT Services provider. Synstar offers a full range of integrated IT services and solutions comprising business continuity services, networking, storage management, desktop management, critical system support and repair services. These services combine to offer its customers a complete IT services solution, providing them with maximum Business Availability. The company employs over 3,000 people and has operations throughout the UK, Ireland and Western Europe. Synstar's customer base includes 55 of the FTSE 100 companies and in total has over 2,500 customers throughout Europe.

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Philip Mirfin, Help Desk Services Manager,

Synstar International

Some 55 highly trained front-line staff are combined in one help desk operation that takes on end-user queries from its customer base. Among its contractual obligations, depending on the customer, are warranty support, database support, applications and operating systems support and customer services.

More than 120 people are employed in the help desk operation, clearly vindicating claims of its mission-critical status within the company. Indeed, as help desk staff are the first point of contact for most end-users, the operation's speed, professionalism and integrity represent nothing more or less than Synstar's ultimate claim to success.

CALL LOGGING

The help desk operation was created in March 1997, with just five people and an earlier version of HEAT inherited from previous operations. According to Philip Mirfin, the help desk services manager responsible for inbound calls to Synstar's European Customer Support Centre, only 10% of HEAT's functionality was used.
"In fact it was just used for call logging," adds Mirfin, who is also responsible for managing the applications support desk, operating systems support, and remote services support operations. "Since then, however, its use has grown and now we're achieving 75-80% of its capabilities."

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Most of Synstar's help desk contracts come through its outsourcing services, and include responsibility for providing first, second and third line support for Microsoft and Lotus products, reservation system support and many other products. This enables the company to manage the third-party contracts on behalf its clients. Because of the nature of the tools and processes used the help desk can integrate with most other support operations or processes where escalation tools are in place.

"As a result of the expertise we have gained," says Mirfin, "and of the capabilities we have

built into the system, we're now in a position to start selling the help desk business as a service in its own right, rather than as an integrated component of another service."

There's clearly a growing need for more automated support technologies and processes in the market. Since the beginning of 2000, reports Mirfin, there has been a much greater emphasis on outsourcing the more mundane requirements by our clients, which are normally greeted with somewhat less than enthusiasm by their skilled help desk staff looking for a more challenging and rewarding job.

Not surprisingly, many in-house IT staff are leaving to take on more interesting or lucrative work elsewhere, in turn creating a market for service providers able to take on a greater volume of help desk calls without greatly increasing their own headcount.

The technologies and processes required to take on that challenge include the creation of an enterprise knowledge environment, where relevant information is readily available in any given situation, and knowledge administrators can better manage and provide quicker responses on top basic solutions.

Mirfin and his team are currently involved in a project to develop a knowledge base, initially accessible in-house for the help desk operation's benefit, but which will ultimately be made available as part of new customer services.

Currently, the UK and Dutch help desk operations are working towards updating each other's knowledge bases each month. Mirfin is seeking to create a personal knowledge administration system whereby key word searches will get to the right information regardless of the starting point, so increasing the effectiveness and capabilities of the help desk staff.

"We're trying to make knowledge more available internally and externally as much as possible," says Mirfin. "It may be possible, for instance, to slice and dice that knowledge base to unearth previously unknown issues. In the near term, we can certainly investigate regular recurring problems and use the knowledge base to better understand their causes."

ACCURATE AND PRODUCTIVE

Because the rollout of HEAT has occurred in line with process and operational improvements, specific return on investment figures are

difficult to come by. But Mirfin can point to capabilities which eliminates the need to double-key information, as a result boost accuracy and productivity.

He also points to straightforward comparative figures, such as a dedicated customer support desk which processes operating system faults in seven minutes, exactly half the time of similar competitive desks. In addition, the level of attrition among help desk staff is very low. Synstar provides a high degree of training opportunities, while HEAT's usefulness as a product interests staff enough to work more with it.

Other, softer issues also come into play. "We have evaluated other systems, and of course HEAT being in place helps. What impressed me is that as a product it's at least as good as anything else, but the big issue that tipped the decision is the level of support from FrontRange.

"FrontRange really is very proactive to our needs. This is key, along with their personnel, even to the degree of visiting some prospective contracts of ours, acting almost as a presales consultancy. And we're developing the product very much in tandem, so close is our relationship."

24/7

A company restructuring exercise in October 2000 saw the help desk operation fall clearly into the repair and customer services division. This enabled the help desk to relate to other parts of the company more effectively, and also provide the environment for growth, both internally and as an independent business in its own right.

Already the Synstar help desk operates 24 hours a day, seven days and week for a number of its customers, although the majority are based on a five-day week between 8:00am and 6:00pm, with applications support from 7:00am and 11:00pm.

"There's an enormous opportunity out there to meet the demands for seven-day 24-hour business," says Mirfin. "We have the facilities in place to support that, as well as the processes developed over time, not to mention the technology in HEAT. A successful help desk ultimately is a combination of all three, and that is what we have achieved."