

White Paper

Customer Service & Support in the Age of IT-as-a-Service

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Introduction

We all recognize great customer service and support when we see it: whether it's in our daily lives, returning to the restaurant where the staff treats us especially well, or in business, favoring the supplier who not only meets its commitments, but takes risks with us, going above and beyond will help win our loyalty. These same principles and benefits of excellent customer service and support apply to complex enterprise technology as well. We judge those with whom we engage in our personal lives, as well as our business lives, through perceptions and preferences we create around the total customer experience, not just the exchange of goods.

With IT organizations intent on transforming the current legacy mode of “if you build it, they will come” into a dynamic service provider model, often referred to as “IT-as-a-Service,” organizations must not overlook the customer service and support aspect of the equation. It has become so important, in fact, that one recent public-sector organization ESG spoke with stated that service and support is often given as much as 60-70% weight in major IT purchasing decisions.

IT customer service has evolved along with the IT industry itself and, traditionally, even the best service models have been primarily product-focused. Today, the world of IT is more sophisticated and multifaceted, and IT service models must be as well. World-class global customer service and support will not simply be a factor among many buying criteria for customers evaluating next-generation technologies. In many cases, customer service and support will be a major differentiator and the reason to choose a particular vendor.

The Importance of Customer Service and Support

ESG has tracked the importance that IT buyers place on service and support. Consistently, IT users have indicated that service and support are among their top three criteria when making infrastructure investments. This pattern has appeared across the board as organizations of all sizes deploy a wide variety of technologies—and it is becoming even more apparent now.

Service Continues to Be a Prime Purchasing Consideration

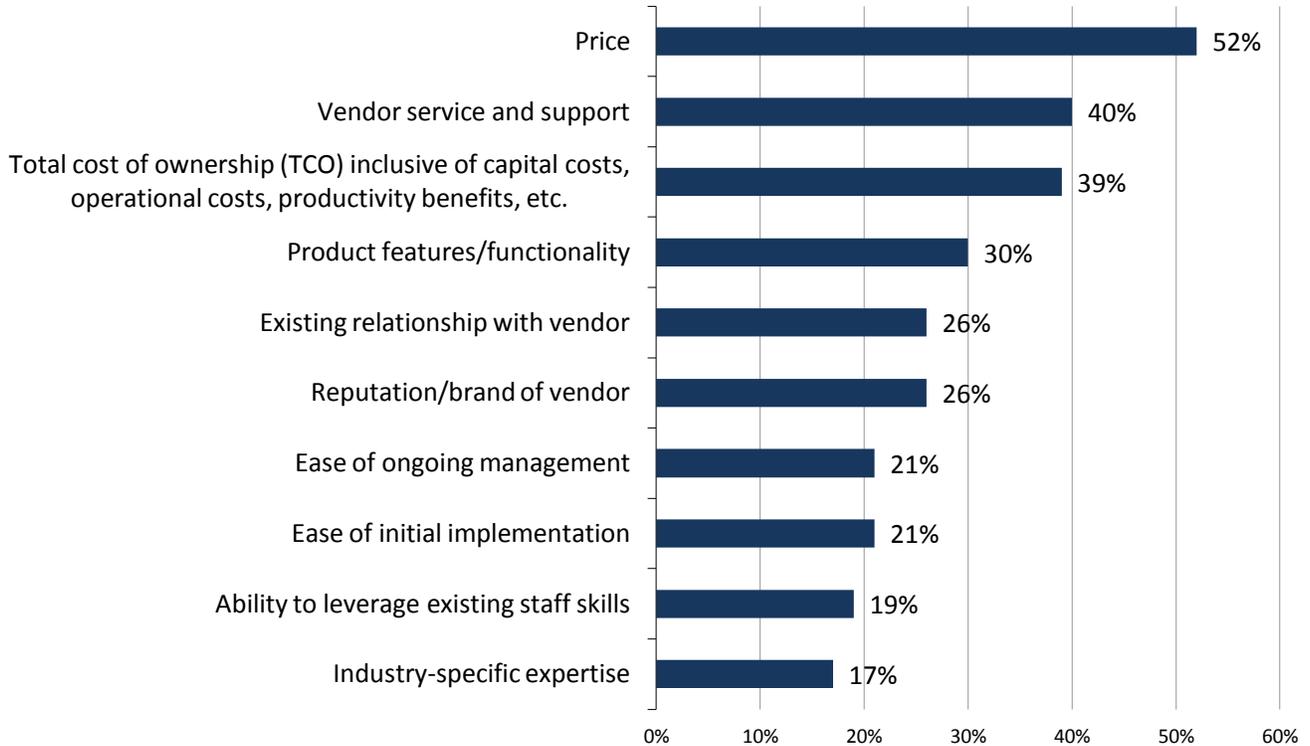
This fact is driven home by recent ESG research. When asked to rate the criteria for selecting a technology/vendor solution, survey respondents ranked vendor service and support second—just behind price and ahead of important considerations such as total cost of ownership, product features and functionality, and ease of implementation and management (see Figure 1).¹

These results are not surprising given how heavily today's IT users rely on vendor service, support, and consulting capabilities during implementation and steady-state operation. It is also notable that service and support, and a good vendor relationship, tend to increase in importance as IT environments grow.

¹ Source: ESG Research Report, [2012 IT Spending Intentions Survey](#), January 2012.

Figure 1. Top Ten Most Important Criteria in Selecting a Technology/Vendor Solution

In general, what would you consider to be the most important criteria to your organization when it comes to selecting a technology vendor/solution? (Percent of respondents, N=614, five responses accepted)



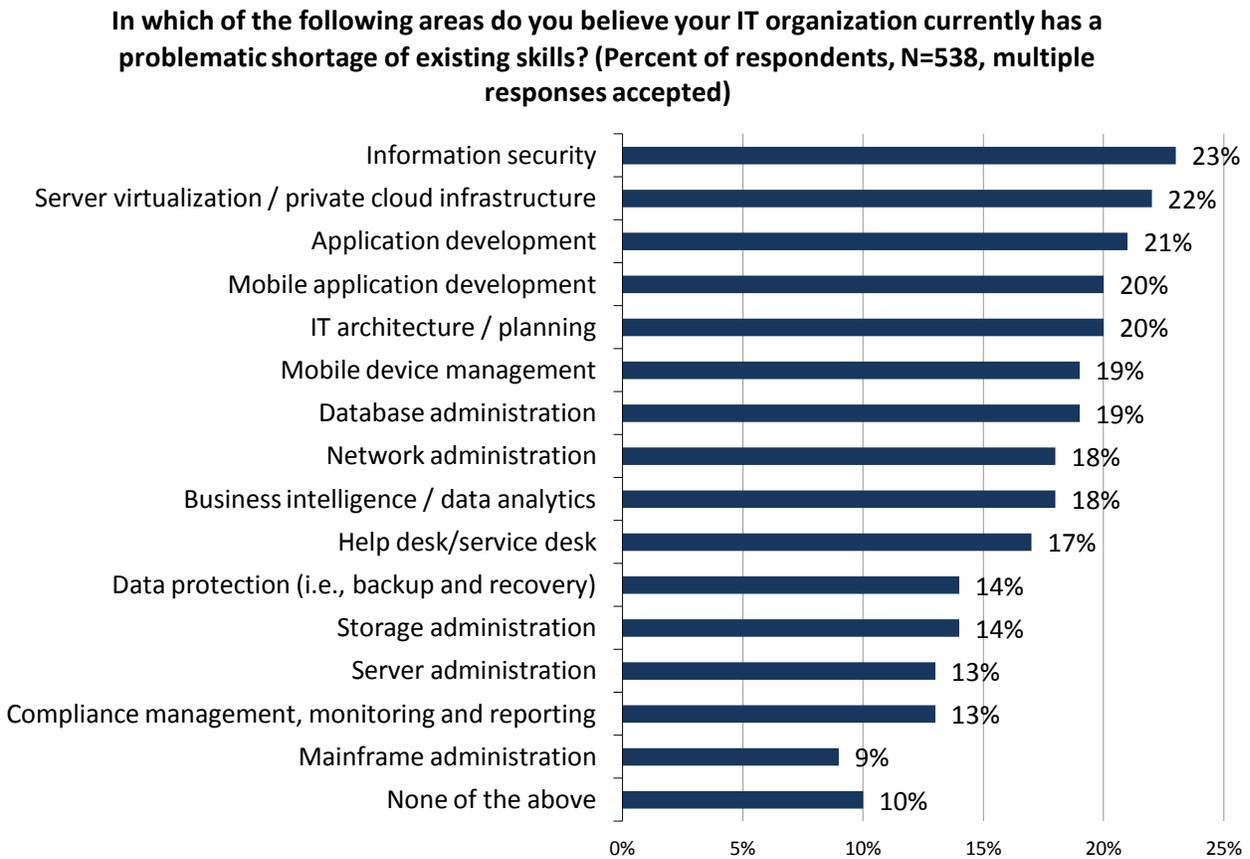
Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, 2012.

Evolving Technology Complexity

Particularly when evaluating new cloud and integrated technologies, support breadth and quality become increasingly important for a variety of reasons: IT staffs have become chronically overburdened, in-house skill shortages are evident, and SLAs have increased. In recent ESG research, 48% of respondents reported that staffing levels will stay flat or decrease.² Even more revealing, when asked in that same survey in what areas they were experiencing a problematic shortage of existing skills, topping the list were security, virtualization/private clouds, application development, and IT architecture/planning, with mobile application development/device management and data analytics close behind (see Figure 2).

² Source: ESG Research Brief, [2012 IT Staffing and Skills Trends](#), February 2012.

Figure 2. Areas of Technology with Skill Shortages



Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, 2012.

Initiating or gaining ground with these newer technologies will be difficult with a skills shortage. In addition, a lack of skilled employees will cause organizations to struggle with the “consumerization” of IT as mobile devices penetrate the boundaries of the workplace—whether IT is ready or not. With economic and competitive pressures growing more acute, acquiring and retaining the right talent has become even more challenging, leading firms to rely on the support they get from external providers to an even greater extent.

Primarily, the rapidly evolving and shifting technology landscape centered on virtualization and cloud computing drives IT buyers’ needs for excellent support. Organizations everywhere are moving to implement private cloud environments or investigating the use of public cloud services. Those environments are marked by a composite of integrated technologies from several IT vendors. Organizations taking advantage of these environments need *one* customer support provider they can rely on to help keep the whole stack running well.

Virtualization

The benefits of deploying heavily virtualized environments are enormous. Virtual environments can help an IT organization decrease long-term operational costs, add new pieces to the IT environment more easily, and improve both application performance and availability. The challenge becomes ensuring that both the internal and external support models for virtual environments evolve with the changes that this technology brings. No longer can front-line or back-end support resources be purely siloed into a single technology expertise. Support teams must be staffed by individuals experienced across security, servers, networks, storage, and applications in order to resolve issues in the virtual world.

Internal virtualization skills and overall maturity with the technology also play a role. Toward the end of 2010, ESG conducted a major study on the maturity of server virtualization environments and created a maturity model that categorizes end-users into three different phases of virtualization adoption based on a number of criteria.

Companies categorized by ESG as “Basic” in their level of virtualization maturity are nearly three times as likely as “Advanced” users to cite a lack of in-house virtualization skills as a reason why their organization does not use server virtualization more pervasively.³

The reality is that 75% of companies deploying virtual infrastructure fit into the categories of “Basic” or “Progressing” users. Virtualization skills gaps definitely exist in these shops. These IT teams need partners who will take ownership of virtualization platform support and help them navigate the terrain, going beyond simply troubleshooting within the various silos.

Integrated Computing

Integrated computing platforms comprised of server, storage, networking, and management components are gaining ground. While adoption of integrated computing technology has been relatively tempered to date, there is a rising interest level. ESG research reveals that while only 10% of survey respondents were already using integrated computing platforms, another 66% were interested in using them.⁴

IT managers tell ESG they are adopting integrated computing platforms predominantly to simplify management, reduce costs, and achieve faster deployment/provisioning. But they are also seeking out integrated systems because they believe such platforms may be accompanied by a better level of both serviceability and support.

Vendors should make note of the fact that these platforms raise the bar on the level and breadth of support across technology disciplines the customer will demand. With many of the prominent reasons for interest in integrated computing revolving around ease of management, reduction in integration and deployment time, and, in fact, improved service and support, both end-users and the customer service organizations supporting them must be prepared to take ownership of more complex, less siloed support issues, and provide a single point of resolution across multiple vendors’ technologies. This will allow them to provide true value to their clients and a true competitive advantage to their own organizations.

Cloud and the Transition to IT-as-a-Service

Cloud computing will ultimately blur the lines between on-and off-premises resources. Users are beginning to adopt approaches where some applications are provided by third parties and some computing is done on site. Some users implement a hybrid of the two approaches, where users take advantage of “burst” capacity in public clouds where necessary. As management tool vendors develop platforms to look across all these environments in an integrated view, support personnel must also learn to support environments that span both physical geography and ownership and access. This largely becomes a matter of skill and preparedness. Has the support organization invested in the training necessary to understand how to operate and provide support in these new environments? Are they familiar enough with public cloud platforms to know how to approach issues when they arise? For end-users, this means relying on support organizations that are at the cutting edge in terms of the training and have the skills profile necessary to support cloud environments.

Innovation in Customer Service and Support

Customer service organizations are broadening the tools they leverage and the options they provide to enhance and expedite the service experience for their customers. Innovation is necessary to accommodate the shifting priorities of businesses.

The Need for Innovation

Today, organizations are increasingly focused on business process optimization. Recent ESG research confirms this: survey respondents identified business process improvement as the single most important consideration for justifying IT investments to senior management, replacing cost reduction as the key consideration for the first time

³ ESG Research Brief, [Introducing the ESG Server Virtualization Maturity Model](#), November 2010.

⁴ ESG Research Report, [2011 IT Spending Intentions Survey](#), January 2011.

in four years.⁵ Maturing virtualization deployments are a prime example of this: while early on, organizations are attracted to the cost benefits of consolidation, expansion of virtual server deployments are driven by the prospect of business process improvements such as fast application provisioning, enhanced disaster recovery, and better backup.

As transformation occurs in the data center, service and support must change as well. There is a natural correlation among emerging technologies, new deployment strategies, and the role of service and support. The decision to purchase a particular solution is being driven more and more by business objectives and less by component specs and features. Senior managers are asking, “Can I get applications on-demand? Instant scalability? Continuous data access and productivity at all locations?” They aren’t asking about processor speeds or which storage protocols will be used. As infrastructure is consumed more as a service, they are interested in the total package that enables their business objectives. The same is true for service and support: it is becoming less a contract for break-fix (although that is part of the package), and more a holistic portfolio of investments, processes, technologies, and people that enable the vendor to serve as an essential partner in the achievement of business objectives. The key question is not, “How much for 24x7 call center support?” It is more along the lines of “How does this vendor’s selection of service and support options contribute to increasing my productivity and, ultimately, my market position?”

Internal IT Pressure

These changes are necessary based on what organizations face today. Emerging technologies highlight particular skill gaps, while budget constraints make it difficult to hire more staff. In many cases, even if there is budget for hiring, trained professionals aren’t available. Squeezing IT from the other side are higher and higher end-user expectations, driven by service-oriented IT and seemingly “instant” IT services that virtualization enables. Users are coming to expect applications and data to be available and accessible around the clock, with no interruptions. These circumstances magnify the importance of service and support innovations that can fill a skill gap and keep the organization on track.

IT organizations are under additional scrutiny due to the easy availability of public cloud computing. When business managers can plunk down a credit card and get processing power, storage, and networking in just hours, it can be difficult to justify an internal IT procurement process that takes weeks or months. As a result, IT is being held more accountable, forcing them to develop benchmarks and measurements to prove their worth. As they measure themselves, they begin to look at their vendors differently, expecting greater commitment and innovation, and applying metrics to evaluate suppliers and partners.

Examples of Value-added Service and Support Innovations

In the services arena, vendors do assist customers in business process optimization. Break-fix services are expected but the larger portfolio includes value-added features running the gamut from multichannel support to up-front vendor investments.

For example, some vendors identify the source of demand for services and then provide the optimal delivery method. Service requests may come from customers, partners, service providers, etc., in locations around the globe. Each of these has unique needs—some are seeking assistance with preparation and assessment, some want installation and deployment, some need operations and management. Optimally, these services are provided in a geographically convenient location, in the customer’s language, and through whatever channel is most appropriate from self-service, to online chat, to dedicated on-site support teams. Value-add personalized support services are also core to enabling the age of IT-as-a-Service, as they help augment customers’ in-house expertise with dedicated technical personnel and appropriately aligned dedicated support resources that are experts in products or specific technology areas.

Other investments vendors make in advance further demonstrate their commitment. Investing in interoperability testing can dramatically improve a customer’s deployment process. Hours of work and IT staff time are saved when

⁵ Source: ESG Research Report, [2012 IT Spending Intentions](#), January 2012.

the vendor has identified and resolved interoperability issues before the product is even purchased. Another innovative investment is to design links to integrated support ecosystems into management applications. This enables an organization to immediately access knowledge bases of documents and video, community forums, online training, and connections to support staff directly from a device's management interface. In this scenario, the vendor's service and support are part of everyday operations—not separate external processes, but integrated management features, enabling better access to education and faster problem resolution.

From basic break-fix to advanced project planning and implementation, vendors must be willing to invest and innovate in areas of service and support as much as they invest in product innovations. Examples of such innovation include opening new lines of communication like providing self-help resources, online, multi-lingual communications channels, or mobile communications channels. Or even leveraging business intelligence and data mining to consistently improve the service experience.

Vendor Evaluation Must Include Service and Support

Even when customers aren't deploying private or public clouds on integrated computing stacks, they are still building environments with many moving parts.

When evaluating vendors, users should be mindful to consider all aspects of the total customer experience, inclusive of touch points from the pre-sales configuration experience, to consulting and implementation services, and all the way through customer service and support. These are major factors that should be considered when looking at the total customer experience. Can a vendor assist in the upfront analysis of the problem and solution design? Do they, or their partners, have the expertise to integrate the technology on-site? Are they able to teach users what they need to know to operate the environment and assist with any change management and process engineering that might be required? Do they offer remote managed services, enabling them to leverage their own operations capabilities to deliver reporting, remediation, or management services globally or on off-shift hours to augment the users' team?

A checklist can be helpful for evaluating a service and support portfolio, and the extent to which a vendor has committed to partnering with customers. Table 1 lists some criteria to include.

Table 1. Service and Support Portfolio Checklist

✓	The number, tenure, and skill levels of service professionals, including industry certifications in products, solutions, emerging technologies, and common deployments.
✓	Investment in a global infrastructure including a network of regional support centers and local onsite support presence.
✓	Multiple service channel offerings, including online, onsite, e-mail, chat, social media, and phone with language preference.
✓	Proactive, preemptive support technologies including early warning systems and secure monitoring.
✓	Partnerships, alliances, and cooperative support agreements with key vendors. For example, virtualization and integrated computing usually involve multiple vendors; cross-company collaboration—from service agreements to service centers, knowledge bases, problem re-creation labs, and processes—can make their assistance seamless.
✓	Partner programs that include training, certification, and benefits for technical support.
✓	Support offerings (maintenance & value-added services) that match your budget, response time objectives, and skill requirements.
✓	Vendor service management by metrics; vendors may evaluate their responses and customer satisfaction results on an ongoing basis for continuous improvement.
✓	The range of services offered, including consulting on particular technologies or implementations, assessment and design, security, training and education, health checks and performance improvement, etc.
✓	Awards and recognition over the long term that can provide insight into the vendor’s level of commitment and use of industry best practices and processes.

Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, 2012.

The Bigger Truth

Customer service and support must be a key decision criterion, particularly in the evolving world of cloud and integrated computing. Anyone who is evaluating or implementing complex IT infrastructure in an IT-as-a-Service model will no doubt experience some challenges along the way.

Customers should consider tailoring the previous checklist to their needs when evaluating both customer service and support and the total customer experience. Take a serious look at technology vendors' service and support offerings and make them an important part of your selection criteria. A committed vendor that has made investments in service and support innovations will actually contribute to improving your processes and achieving your business objectives.

Customer service providers, in turn, need to think more holistically about owning the integrated IT stack and regarding it as a single problem to solve instead of doing things as they were done in the "old days," where service was provided in a siloed manner and different vendors touched only their own company's piece of the stack. As IT organizations adopt a less siloed and more service-oriented model, taking an integrated approach to servicing end-users with new and innovative methods, so, too, must their IT vendor customer service and support organizations.



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