6 service desk best practices to elevate your game

How do you build a service desk that can serve the needs of a scaling organization? At Atlassian, we've faced this question ourselves. In 2010 we had 230 employees. That number has exploded -- we're well into the thousands these days. With fast paced growth, we look for every opportunity to get more efficient, and running a successful service desk is a big part of that.

What is a service desk?

First thing's first: let's be clear about what service desks do. The [ITIL 4 glossary](#) defines a service desk as "the single point of contact between the service provider and the users." A typical service desk manages service requests and incidents.

The service desk is the center where customers (e.g. employees or other stakeholders) can find help from their IT service providers. Regardless of what type of help is being provided, the goal of a service desk is to deliver high-quality service to customers in a timely manner.

Help desk vs service desk

There are often questions about [the differences between service desk and help desks](#). To some extent, these may be semantic differences. That said, typically the IT help desk is seen as more tactical and designed to quickly resolve immediate issues. Service desks are considered more strategic and are designed to accommodate broader business needs. They often support multiple ITSM practices.

Service desk best practices

Your service desk is the frontline for support, a representation of your IT team, and critical in enabling teams. It is at the heart of productive organizations. Embracing service desk best practices can help with managing costs and delivering excellent service experiences. Between setting up new offices, onboarding new employees, and scaling at a rapid speed, we've learned some things that have helped along the way. Here are our tips:

1. Use your service desk software to its fullest potential

Long ago at Atlassian, we weren't using a purpose-built service desk, so with the creation of this global support team, we decided to switch from tracking issues in Jira Software to using [Jira Service Management](#) for self-service, SLA tracking, and collaboration.

We had to adapt to manage high ticket volume alongside contributing to and maintaining our support [knowledge base](#). We also embraced knowledge centered support as a way to ultimately reduce ticket volume and improve resolution times.

2. Stop treating your IT teams as "catch-alls"

Ticket variety can often be a bigger challenge than incoming ticket volume. Like many of our customers, our infrastructure is pretty complex. It's safe to say that we have miles of cable and tons of metal and myriads of VMs that run our local offices, data centers, and application services. Before we launched a dedicated level-one support team, our IT people ran a mad dash back and forth between: user account management, desktop and hardware support, office and network infrastructure, application and system change requests, project work, and maintainance.

Our first major lesson was to stop spreading so much variety and volume across a single team. Instead, we divided into three more specialized teams:

- Office engineering, to handle the local network and technology needs unique to each location
- Workplace tech, which covers our workplace productivity tools like Jira, our travel booking system, etc
- Atlasdesk, our global service desk team

Life became far simpler, because the teams receive much more targeted work. Plus, areas of specialization allow team members to become actual experts over a particular domain, and ultimately resolve incidents and problems faster because our knowledge is more deeply rooted and our attention more focused.

3. Build a customer portal

It shouldn't be hard for customers to ask for help. We use Jira Service Management to provide a single customer help center that links the IT service desk and many of our departmental service desks like legal and HR, so customers can come to one place to find every service they need.

It's super easy to get to the portal, too. Employees just type go/ithelp in their browser, and they are redirected instantly to the right place. New employees learn this as part of onboarding, so they know how to get help quickly and easily from day one.

4. Get smart about SLAs

Like every good service desk team, we want our customers to get the best service possible. To measure how we're doing, we've always set goals for ourselves – but they weren't always easy to track or to customize for different geographies, teams, priority levels, etc.

When we launched our global service desk team, we started from day one with clear SLAs that are easy for service desk analysts to understand and track. Plus, they're extremely customizable, so managers can set SLAs that are meaningful and relevant to their teams, not just arbitrary measurements.

5. Promote self-service for customers

Studies show that 72% of customers prefer to use self-service support. In order for that to be true, though, it has to be easy to use. The self-service portal that is mentioned above, is one way to make it easier for customers to find what they are looking for. Knowledge bases and Q&A communities are also helpful.

6. Look at the big picture and measure your progress

We definitely keep an eye on key operational metrics like most IT organizations. But we've stopped obsessing over random KPIs, and we're way more focused now on measuring what matters most. To summarize, we put the customer experience first, and spend our time drilling into the trends and numbers that can help us make the biggest improvements.

We spend our time looking at the peaks and valleys in data, and then asking ourselves "why" to get to the bottom of what causes "good" experiences vs "bad" ones for customers, and low volume vs. high volume days for our team. We focus on preventing incidents, not just solving problems. This is important both to the effectiveness and the happiness of our support analysts. It's also been helpful in reporting up to management, who appreciate this view of the business.

As you would expect, our teams experience growing pains as we adapt to new challenges. Yours will too. What's important is that you have the right tools to measure your effectiveness and make the best decisions to guide your team.