



Building a global customer support framework for enterprises



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	02
Why do we need a customer support framework?	06
What makes customer support “global”?	07
Leadership in customer support	08
Customer support vs. Customer service	10
Chapter 2: Adopting a customer-centric approach	12
Roles and responsibilities	13
ManageEngine’s customer support framework	15
Setting up a global support team	23
Vital skills for championing customer needs	30
Chapter 3: Putting theories to the test	32
What went wrong?	32
What successful customer support looks like	34
AI in customer support	38
Setbacks and strategies	40
Wrapping up	43

Chapter 1:

Introduction

If you've ever placed an order online, ordered food, or booked a ride, then you already know the importance of great customer support. As consumers, we often face issues like incorrect deliveries, failed payments, or pending refunds, and occasionally, conflicts that require an escalation. These are challenges we cannot handle on our own, which is where a support agent's intervention is necessary. And as customers, we expect immediate responses and hassle-free, effective resolutions from them. Knowing that a quick fix is readily available is often a crucial factor in our decision to opt for a company's services.

When it's our turn to be service providers, isn't it our duty to ensure the same for our customers?

There's a fine line between good and **great** customer support. Let's say you purchase a gadget online and it malfunctions in less than a month. Luckily, the store offers a no-questions-asked replacement policy, and it's still within the replacement timeframe. You reach out to the support team, and an agent issues a replacement item that will reach you in two days. Good. However, the agent closes the ticket immediately without verifying whether the issue has actually been resolved. A great support experience would have been if the agent reached out for your confirmation to ensure that the replacement gadget works as intended before closing the ticket and ending the interaction.

Let's talk about the significance of customer support in SaaS. In a competitive market where the costs for clients to switch to a new provider are relatively low, the quality of support provided can be a factor that determines whether users remain loyal to an organization or seek an alternative. In this context, SaaS customer support is often end-to-end. That is, it should include pre- and post-sale service.

ManageEngine Ratings Overview

4.5 ★★★★☆

Service & Support

4.5



Source: Gartner



ManageEngine SupportCenter Plus Reviews

RATING: ★★★★☆ 4.3 ([14](#))

Customer Support

★★★★★ 4

Source: Software Advice

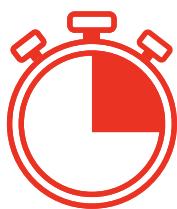
ManageEngine has always been a customer-centric organization that prioritizes end users' needs. We continually strive to improve our customer support systems, and our accomplishments are reflected in the favorable customer opinions we receive through independent and professionally administered satisfaction surveys. The favorable consumer rankings we receive reinforce the unwavering trust our users have in our services.

But how did we accomplish this, and how do our support reviews continually reflect a dedication to customer service excellence? It was not an overnight journey. Let's retrace our steps.

A company built from the ground up by hardcore engineers meant early efforts were mostly from the product engineering standpoint. While we had the SLAs and achieved metrics, our approach didn't focus on holistic customer support. As the organization evolved, our perspective of support did as well. Instead of just responding to queries, we actively and continually seek input from the people who shape our solutions. We look for ways to encourage and empower customers and streamline our support operations in the process.

Twenty years later, the framework we've built is an amalgamation of lessons from customers, satisfied or frustrated, and suggestions from support agents, both veterans and rookies.

SLAs are now a way for us to define service standards, ensure accountability, and set the right expectations for our customers. For instance, our in-house IT help desk enables our support teams to establish SLA rules and actions based on a priority matrix. It also ensures that we monitor violations and tickets that are near violations. The support guidance and framework provided in the SLAs allow our support agents to deliver high-quality service consistently, manage workloads, and be an integral source of best practices for customer support.



60 minutes



120 minutes

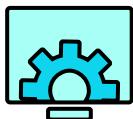


180 minutes

Sample configuration for requests approaching SLA violation

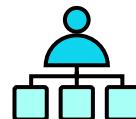
Customer support operations were provided initially through an on-premises software arrangement. With the conviction that the cloud is the future of work, our founders encouraged the switch to cloud-based software solutions. This helped us tremendously when our Indian headquarters was hit by natural calamities in 2015 and 2023, and during the pandemic. Our support teams could service customer needs with minimal technological disruptions.

In these pages, we'll uncover how a cohesive vision from our IT leaders transformed our customer support interactions. Our story discusses three main aspects of our journey:



Laying the groundwork

We'll address the strategic importance of a customer support framework, the elements that make it global, and the fundamental differences between customer support and customer service. We'll also briefly look at the crucial, often silent presence of senior leadership and how C-suite executives can be the driving force of customer support.



Our inner machinations

How do ManageEngine's support teams operate? We'll explore in greater detail our meticulously crafted global customer support framework that can be adapted by organizations at any stage of their journey. We discuss the key roles and responsibilities, the prerequisites to set up a global team, and the non-technical skills a support representative must possess to excel at their role.



Support rep's digest

We'll examine a few real-life narratives of poor customer service and the underlying lessons that can prevent similar occurrences. Plus, we'll share a pivotal support experience that led to the creation of a new feature in our flagship solution. Finally, we'll talk about the role of AI in customer support, along with challenges and best practices to help organizations make the most of their global customer support framework.

Let's begin.

Why do we need a customer support framework?

- **Improved customer experience:** A framework prioritizes customer-centric principles, builds stronger relationships, and aims to deliver a positive experience for customers. When customers are happy, everybody wins.
- **Efficiency and scalability:** Establishing a framework helps streamline support procedures and ensure quality services. As the organization grows, establishing clear roles, responsibilities, and workflows can help scale support operations without cutting corners.
- **Brand reputation:** Customers are willing to give second chances after a bad user experience if they sense sincerity in support. Even if organizations can't achieve perfection, they should strive to do right by customers and resolve issues quickly. Consistent service is a good way to uphold a reputation as a brand that values its customers, building trust and reliability in the process.
- **Improve customer retention:** The better the service, the longer the relationship with the company. There's also a visible increase in customer loyalty and satisfaction in non-English speaking countries when support is available in their native language. A small increase in retention can reflect through a large increase in revenue.
- **Increase in revenue:** If a customer is happy with their experience, not only will they invest more, but they will also bring in new customers. Word of mouth is by far the most powerful method to increase reach and revenue. Success in this area allows businesses to expand their market on a global scale.

- **Strategic decision-making:** A framework brings in valuable data like bestsellers and bottlenecks. Leaders are handed actionable insights that they can utilize to optimize internal operations, set long-term and short-term goals, and realign the roadmap for their products or services.
- **Compliance and governance:** A tedious but inevitable subject, compliance plays a role in customer support as well. Having a framework in place allows the organization to iron out details like consent for recording and monitoring calls in different regions, communication protocols for agents, and following local privacy guidelines.

What makes customer support “global”?

Global support function begins with the acknowledgement that the market base is diverse in terms of language, cultural and societal norms, work practices, and more. Service providers are responsible for catering to the customers' needs and adopting different strategies, rather than viewing it as an inconvenience or expecting customers to align with the organization's operations.

This includes:

- Providing multilingual support
- Hiring a culturally diverse team
- Enabling round-the-clock assistance
- Emphasizing cultural awareness
- Offering remote support capabilities
- Ensuring compatibility with various regulatory standards
- Understanding regional variations of product and service usage

Attracting a global customer base and catering to their needs, while challenging, is not impossible. With the right strategy, tools, and practices, customer support can accommodate the requirements of organizations across industries and varying sizes.

Leadership in customer support

Customer support is not just the responsibility of technicians. Leaders play a crucial role in nurturing a customer-centric culture and setting the overall vision for the team. They must be committed to ensuring that the support experience aligns with the organization's broader goals. This means appropriate allocation of resources, approving budgets, and investing in support infrastructure.

Additionally, executives must lead by example and display traits like active listening, empathy, and responsiveness in their interactions with customers and employees. They may even participate in customer advisory boards (CABs) or personally respond to escalated inquiries to further reinforce the organization's dedication to customer support. Above all, leaders must never lose their thirst for knowledge. Three leaders from Zoho Corp. give us their take on leadership in customer support. Here's what they have to say:

**- Bhaskar Sivaprakasam**

Global head, ITSM customer retention (on-premises),
ManageEngine

Leadership in customer support means transforming ourselves to truly prioritize our customers' needs. It's about going beyond merely resolving their queries—it's about showing compassion, putting customers first, and building personal relationships that make each customer feel valued and special. When we invest in creating genuine rapport, we turn service interactions into memorable experiences that foster loyalty and trust. Though technology evolves, industries transform, and jobs are automated, the essence of customer support remains irreplaceable. It is the personal touch and human connection that no AI can replicate.

As leaders, we believe in always being learners, growing with our team every day to deliver exceptional support and drive customer success. Over the years, we've been able to establish long-standing relationships with customers with our quality of support. Our support agents are trained to interact with empathy as a core value. We encourage them to eliminate jargon and simplify the problem for users.

**- Dhinesh Khanna Ramalingam**

Global head, customer success,
Zoho Corporation Pvt. Ltd.

The foundation of our customer support is solidified by the dedication to understand customers' pain points and how our solutions can address their challenges effectively. As mentors, we focus on rigorous training on product and domain-specific knowledge, ensuring our support agents are well-equipped to handle complexities in the customer's IT environment.



-Vishnu Priya Kumaresan

Global head, ITSM product support and customer success (cloud), ManageEngine

Customer support vs. customer service

Before we get into the details, let's review the basic definitions of both terms.

Customer service is a collective term that entails all the initiatives and processes designed to provide a positive customer experience throughout their interaction with a business.

Customer support is a subset of customer service that is dedicated to alleviating challenges faced by the customer using a business' products or services.

What do they have in common?

- ✓ A customer-centric approach
- ✓ Similar use of tools and skills for communication
- ✓ Each aims to improve customer satisfaction and retention
- ✓ Each plays a critical role in shaping the customer's perception of the company

The differences between service and support can be outlined as follows:

	Customer service	Customer support
Responsiveness	Proactive	Reactive
Tenure	Long-term	Short-term
Nature	Mostly non-technical	Technical
Focus	Relationship-oriented	Problem-oriented
End result	Positive experience	Problem resolution
Presence	All businesses	Some businesses

Customer support is an integral component of the SaaS industry. However, with practices like omni-channel support and increased emphasis on personalization and customer success, the lines are blurred and the traditional definitions no longer apply. Customer support has evolved from one-time, transactional interactions to those that invest in sustainable relationships.



Modern enterprises and SMBs recognize that customers view organizations as a single unit and expect a seamless and consistent experience across all interactions. For instance, a customer may initiate a support request via social media, which requires both support and service elements to work in sync. Therefore, support teams, though they have distinct roles and responsibilities, must operate with customer success as their end goal.

Chapter 2:

Adopting a customer-centric approach

A good customer support framework needs clear objectives, well-structured roles and responsibilities, tools, and practices—all of which we'll discuss in this chapter. Keep in mind that a framework isn't static; it evolves with new technologies, user expectations, and business objectives. Organizations must continuously adapt to trends to maintain a framework that not only resolves issues but also contributes to a relationship with customers.

Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities may vary across organization sizes, industries, and what they offer. Even within different product support teams at ManageEngine, there are minor differences in practices. However, support leads and senior management ensure that team operations align with the company's overall vision. The following table is a generalized version of a customer support team that can be modified as per business requirements.

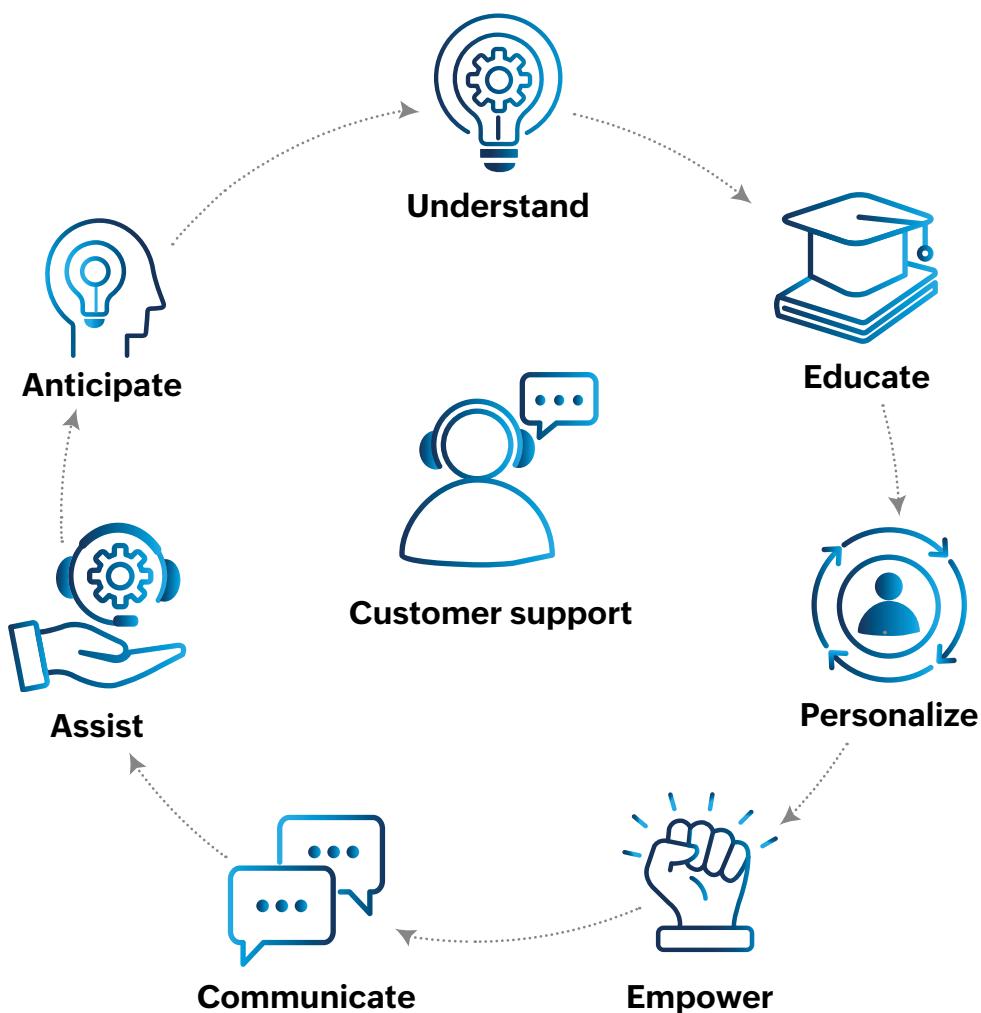
Teams	Responsibilities
Customer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respond to customer inquiries via communication channels.• Provide technical assistance, troubleshooting guidance, and product information.• Escalate complex issues to higher-level support or technical teams.• Document customer interactions, including issues reported and resolutions provided.• Follow up with customers to ensure their issues have been resolved satisfactorily and gather feedback on their support experience.
Technical support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diagnose and resolve technical issues related to software, hardware, or system configurations.• Collaborate with product development teams to identify and address recurring technical issues or bugs.• Work with the technical content team and provide insights for documentation such as knowledge base articles, how-to guides, and FAQs.

Teams	Responsibilities
Customer success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct regular check-ins and health assessments to monitor customer satisfaction, usage metrics, and renewal rates. Advocate for customers' needs and feedback within the organization to drive improvements like new features, modules, and initiatives.
Regional language specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve as a primary point of contact for customers who prefer to communicate in their native language. Translate customer-facing documentation into the regional language(s) to facilitate understanding and accessibility for local customers. Collaborate with teams such as product development, marketing, and sales to ensure alignment of messaging and strategies with the linguistic and cultural context of the region.
Training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct product training sessions for customers to improve their understanding and usage of the product.
Customer retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify at-risk customers and implement retention plans to prevent churn, such as personalized outreach, incentives, or loyalty programs. Gather customer feedback and insights to understand satisfaction levels, identify areas for improvement, and address the root cause of churn. Collaborate with other teams to coordinate retention efforts.

Teams	Responsibilities
Support quality analyst	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitor and evaluate the quality of customer interactions.• Conduct audits of support interactions to ensure compliance with established policies, procedures, and quality standards.• Provide constructive feedback to support representatives to help improve their communication skills, product knowledge, and adherence to best practices.

ManageEngine's customer support framework

A customer-first approach is essential for fostering customer loyalty and retention. By demonstrating genuine commitment to comprehending and addressing needs, preferences, and pain points, enterprises can earn the trust of their customer base and deliver solutions that resonate with users. Our framework is a reflection of this philosophy and is centered around the customers' priorities.



Understand

Comprehending a customer's needs and issues thoroughly from the initial contact is crucial for providing impactful assistance. When a customer reaches out for help, they deserve a representative's uninterrupted attention and commitment to active listening to truly understand the customer's emotions that relate to the interaction.

What's the best way to obtain information from a customer? Technicians can start with open-ended questions to gather more information, followed by clarifying questions to nail down the specifics. This helps display genuine interest in the customer's situation and ensures that the technician has all the necessary details for the resolution.

Educate

A great way to reduce the dependency on support teams is by creating a single source of relevant information, commonly called a knowledge base. Educational resources help customers derive the most value from their products or services. Resources can be created in different formats like user manuals, articles, and how-to guides.

In addition to readable resources, ManageEngine's product specialists conduct workshops, webinars, and interactive demos on product usage, best practices, and industry trends that allow customers to stay updated, make informed decisions, and overcome challenges independently.

Personalize

Tailoring support interactions to the individual needs and preferences of customers can enhance their experience. Here are a few ways that customer support teams can provide personalized support:



1. Pre-interaction reviews:

Many things a business needs to know about their customer is readily available through tools like the CRM and help desk. This includes details like demographics, user history, product usage, prior interactions and incidents, and preferences. Taking a few moments to review this information enables support agents to provide customized responses and more easily recall additional details if needed.



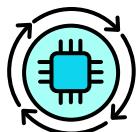
2. Personalized greetings:

Initiating conversations by addressing customers by name and acknowledging any relevant information helps establish rapport with customers from the outset. Seems simple enough, doesn't it?



3. Individualized recommendations:

Customer support teams can proactively recommend solutions to address potential issues that customers might encounter based on usage patterns or past interactions. Let's say a customer complains about the slow performance of software running on their computer. The support agent can proactively suggest adjusting the settings and recommend hardware upgrades if necessary to enhance performance.



4. AI and automation:

Chatbots and AI-powered systems can analyze customer inquiries, predict customer needs, and provide personalized responses. In the next chapter, we'll dive into the benefits of AI in customer support. Meanwhile, here's a glimpse of what Zia, Zoho Corp's chatbot, can accomplish:

Prompt: Apologize to our customer, Mr. John Doe, for the delay in response and offer a free one-month extension on his standard subscription plan.

Zia's response:

Subject: Apology for Delay in Response and Offer of Free One-Month Extension

Dear Mr. John Doe,

I am writing to sincerely apologise for the delay in responding to your inquiry. We understand how frustrating it can be not to receive a timely response, and we deeply regret any inconvenience this may have caused you. Please know that our team has been working tirelessly to address your concerns and we are committed to providing you with the best possible customer service. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, we were unable to respond to your inquiry within our usual timeframe.

To make up for the inconvenience caused, we would like to offer you a free one-month extension on your standard subscription plan. This will automatically be applied to your account and you will not be charged for the upcoming month. We value you as a loyal customer and your satisfaction is our top priority. We hope that this gesture will show you how much we appreciate your business.

Again, please accept our sincere apologies for any inconvenience caused. If you have any further concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. We are always here to assist you.

Thank you for your understanding and continued support.

Best regards,



Providing a personalized experience helps improve satisfaction levels, increases engagement, reduces churn, and improves overall brand perception. Combined with periodic follow-up and feedback, a personalized engagement also creates long-term value by fostering stronger relationships and improving customer loyalty.

Empower

Nothing gives us satisfaction more than being able to resolve our problems by ourselves with the resources available to us. Most customers expect businesses to have a self-service option. A study by Microsoft revealed 66% of users globally attempt to resolve issues through self-service before they reach out to a representative. Chatbots are a great way to help users take control of their problems. The self-service option allows users to find relevant information or troubleshoot independently. This also reduces dependency on human assistance, reducing the number of incoming tickets and freeing up agents to focus on complex issues.

Chatbots also guide customers on using products or services. This educational aspect empowers users to become more proficient in the domain and utilizing the resources made available to them. Zia, our AI-powered conversational agent assists users 24/7 with their queries using information from the knowledge base. In our e-book, [Zia for Enterprises](#), we talk about the role the chatbot plays in our business and IT operations.

Communicate

Clear communication channels are a must-have to establish availability and improve the relationship between customers and businesses. Provide omnichannel support through calls, email, live chat, and self-service portals. Social media DMs and comments are also a popular way younger generations reach out for assistance. Ensure these channels are easily accessible.

Support agents can follow guidelines to standardize communication across the organization. Simple practices like active listening, timely response, and clear and concise language facilitate clarity and effective communication. It's also important to be candid about ongoing resolution efforts. Instead of stalling or providing vague answers, which can increase customer frustration, communicate transparently about any delays, challenges, or changes in the resolution timeline to manage expectations.

To further develop communication skillsets, an English language program for ManageEngine and Zoho employees is available to support agents who want to refine their English-speaking capabilities. Training begins with the fundamentals like pronunciations and moves on to help support representatives structure their flow of thought and rely less on templates. Staff practice phonetics, voice modulation, and the influence of sounds on word meanings.

Assist

Helping customers resolve their issues requires two components:



1. Promptness:

Many users prefer quick and effective resolutions with limited interaction. One way to achieve this is by implementing a tiered support structure. Common and simple issues, like password reset, are handled by first level (L1) technicians. Complex problems are escalated to higher levels (L2, L3, etc.), depending on the degree of technical expertise required. This structure ensures that customer issues are directed to the right resource and resolved efficiently.



2. Accountability:

Ownership within a team ensures that each query is taken seriously and followed through to resolution, especially since things might not work out as originally planned. Follow-ups after issue resolution to confirm that the overall experience and results were satisfactory for the customer further reinforce accountability.

Anticipate

In the earlier sections, we talked about the dissolution of separate responsibilities in customer support and customer service. Being proactive, once considered the customer service team's role, is now a mandate in support as well. Instead of constantly putting out small fires, anticipating customer needs and addressing potential issues can help prevent problems before they escalate.

Customer success programs are rapidly gaining popularity amongst SMBs and most enterprises already have a team dedicated to monitor customer health metrics like renewal rates and advocate for customers within the organization. ManageEngine has domain-wise customer success programs, such as the ITSM customer success program for customers that uses ITSM solutions like ServiceDesk Plus.

A few other ways to encourage proactive measures include:

- Using predictive analytics to monitor ticket queues in real-time and identify emerging issues.
- Collecting feedback to understand customer needs, preferences, and pain points.

- Implementing standby alerts for upcoming licensing renewals, sales, or disruptions.
- Communicating new product tips, feature updates, and use cases.

As organizations expand their customer base and offer more products and services, maintaining high-quality support becomes increasingly challenging. A solid customer support framework, particularly one designed for global enterprises, is crucial for sustainable growth. When implemented correctly, the enhanced quality of support also acts as a key differentiator in a competitive market.

Establishing a global support team



1. Build a multilingual team :

Hire staff based on the languages spoken across the organization's customer base. Customers find it easier to express themselves and voice their concerns in their native language. Hiring a linguistically diverse team enables them to provide users with a positive support experience. ManageEngine's customers are distributed across 190 countries, and in most, we either have a local support team or partner team to assist users in their native language. This includes languages like Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, and Hindi.



2. Plan for round-the-clock coverage

Some organizations opt for a “follow the sun” approach, where they set up support teams in different countries to ensure 24/7 coverage without requiring employees to work overnight shifts. Others prefer setting up teams that work shifts around the clock at a centralized location to unify customer support. In that case, organizations must focus on a seamless hand-off between representatives and ensure customers remain unaffected by internal changes. The majority of ManageEngine’s support team is based at the Indian headquarters in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A smaller percentage of support staff is present at hub offices worldwide.



3. Invest in expertise

Don’t forget about internal customer support. We can’t solve a customer’s issues if the support team isn’t prepared. This means going beyond documentation. Organizations must conduct training programs for support agents to ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills and product knowledge to deliver quality support to customers. They can go one step further and provide opportunities to upskill and stay up to date on industry trends and best practices in customer support.

Another popular program, conducted by the organization’s internal training and development team for ManageEngine and Zoho employees, prepares support representatives for customer interactions. INCU, an incubation style workshop, is designed for new hires or veterans looking for a refresher. This one-day program is divided into three phases and focuses on the quality of interaction during chat, call, and email.

Some of the topics covered in the program include:

- Understanding the importance of support in the big picture.
- Responding to customers as one unit.
- Bringing the human touch to our interactions.
- Emphasizing respect and empathy towards customers.
- Integrating constant learning and consistent improvements.
- Handling challenging interactions.
- Documentation and best practices.



4. IT-driven support

It wouldn't be a ManageEngine e-book without IT, would it? IT in customer support should focus on infrastructure and technology, workforce management, and performance monitoring and analytics. There are many ways to incorporate IT processes in support, like a knowledge management system and omnichannel support. Here, we'll review a few more key practices.

- **Centralized ticketing system:** With omnichannel assistance, support teams face an influx of tickets with varying levels of criticality. Deploying a centralized IT help desk to manage customer inquiries and track tickets can streamline communication within the team while ensuring seamless services for the customer. Collaboration tools can also encourage knowledge sharing, especially with teams working from different locations.
- **Remote support capabilities:** Remote support capabilities like remote desktop and video conferencing tools facilitate troubleshooting and resolution of technical issues without the need for on-site visits. ManageEngine provides a web-based [customer support software](#) that enables support teams to deliver virtual assistance efficiently and cost-effectively while providing a superior customer experience.

- **Monitoring and analytics tools:** Support teams must track key performance metrics such as response times, resolution rates, customer satisfaction scores, and ticket volumes. For an enterprise, a global dashboard providing region-wise data plays a role in decision-making. Data-driven insights help leaders identify trends, patterns, and areas for improvement in support operations
- **Data security and compliance measures:** Implement robust security measures to protect customer data and ensure compliance with data privacy regulations like the GDPR and HIPAA. Encrypt sensitive information, follow privilege-based access, and audit security protocols regularly.



5. Metrics and KPIs

Metrics provide invaluable insights into the overall efficiency of a customer support team. Are organizations meeting customers' needs and their own goals? What are the areas of improvement in the framework? These questions can only be answered through tangible data like metrics and KPIs. They also allow organizations to benchmark their performance against industry standards, best practices, and competitors. Metrics are often of two types: quality-based and operational.

Quality-based or organizational customer support metrics are more focused on customer satisfaction. Some examples include customer satisfaction (CSAT), net promoter score (NPS), and customer effort score (CES). Like most organizations, ManageEngine's customer support teams send out surveys for satisfaction ratings. If a customer marks the survey as dissatisfied or assigns a low score, regional managers or team leads get in touch with them through email or call to get their feedback on how the support team can improve the process. This is accomplished via our in-house business help desk.

Operational metrics or KPIs are quantifiable measurements that help organizations monitor day-to-day progress. They play a crucial role in decision-making for resource allocation, product development, and continuous process improvement. Examples include:

- Average first response time
- Preferred communication channels
- Ticket resolution rate
- First contact resolution
- Number of interactions per request
- Threshold of support count per technician

Let's assume a team of five handles incoming support tickets for a region. Ideally, each technician can handle 40 tickets at a time split as 10-15 open tickets, with 25-30 tickets waiting on customer response. Five members with 40 tickets each can be marked as the maximum threshold. If the ticket count is exceeded for a prolonged period, it should require reevaluation by a support manager. Additionally, a support manager can monitor monthly metrics like the number of cases closed based on the level of complexity.

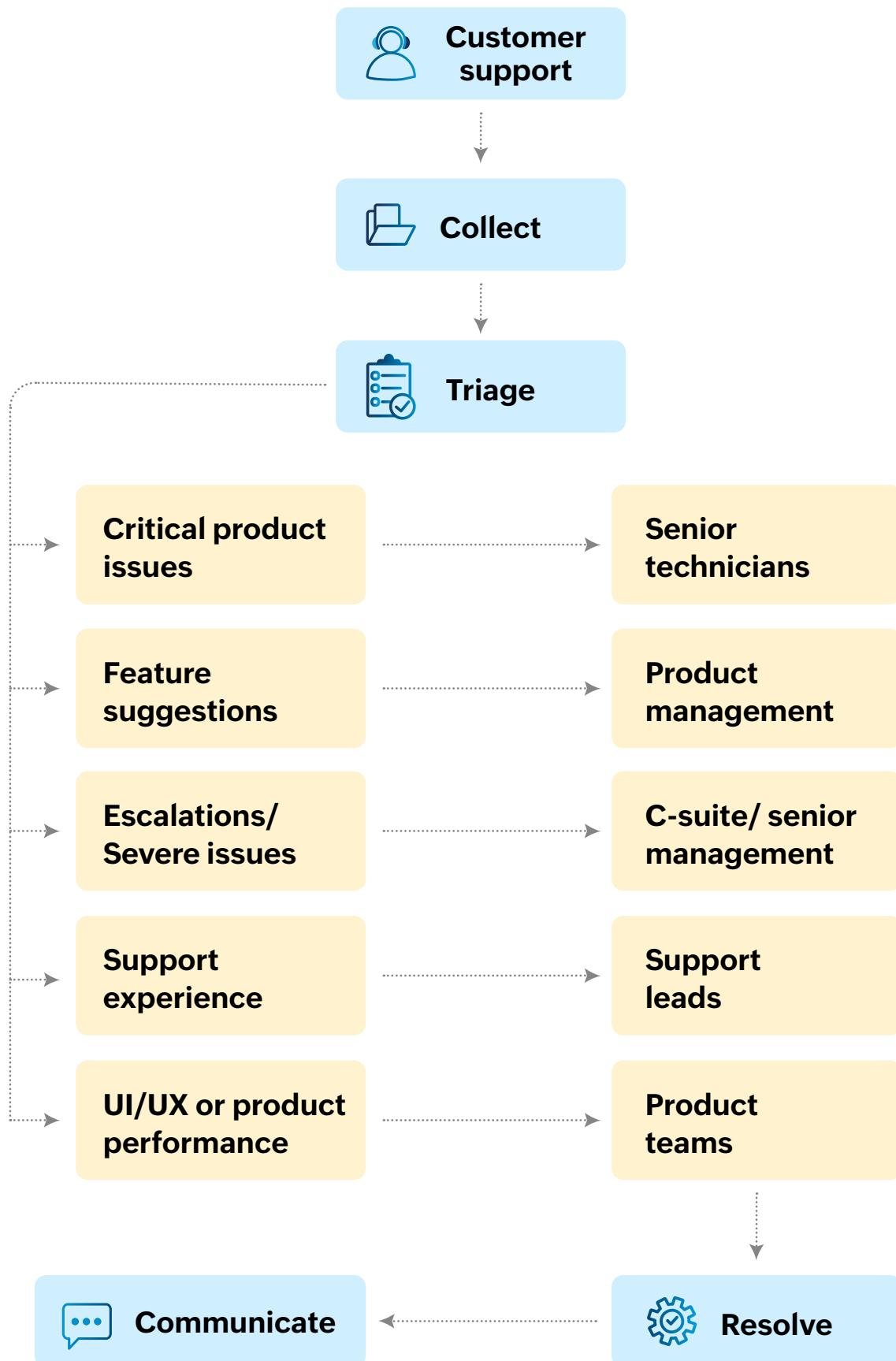


6. Create an integrated feedback system

Fostering a culture of continuous improvement is vital for an organization's growth. Businesses should actively seek feedback from customers to optimize their solutions and services. This could be in the form of surveys, follow-up calls, emails, or even focus groups. Feedback should cover all bases for complete understanding, including pre-sales, sales, and post-sales support.

Moreover, it doesn't end with just collecting feedback. To continue receiving input, constructive or otherwise, customers must know their opinion has value and can influence the organization's operations. One way to emphasize the importance of receiving the customer's viewpoints is by providing periodic updates on how this feedback is utilized in customer support policies and product features. Incentivizing feedback helps too. Incentivizing feedback through reward points and vouchers, for instance, can also bring in more valuable data.

The customer support team plays a key role in the feedback loop. They must collect and forward feedback to relevant teams for analysis. Being customer advocates, engaging with internal stakeholders helps them bridge the gap between end users and product or service providers. This also ensures feedback is taken seriously and implemented. When the feedback is acted upon, they must communicate that to customers. Here's a sample of what an integrated feedback loop looks like at ManageEngine.



Vital skills for championing customer needs

These aren't just keywords on a resume. Aside from the obvious understanding of the products or services offered, so-called "soft skills" play a crucial role in the quality of customer support. Here are some key skills a customer support team must have:



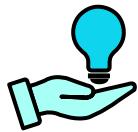
Communication:

Regardless of the mode of communication, it is imperative that a support agent does not come across as judgmental, rude, or disinterested. They must be able to express themselves in clear, concise, and more importantly, positive language. For instance, instead of just apologizing for a delay, thank the user for their patience.



Active listening:

When a customer reaches out to support over a call, chances are they've exhausted other available options like self-service portals, chat, and email. Calls are often considered a last resort. At this point, they want to be heard. It is the support agent's responsibility to understand their concerns, pay attention to details, and identify their needs.



Problem-solving:

Often, customers know they're facing an issue but don't necessarily know what the problem is. That's where the agent's problem-solving abilities take over. Asking the right questions is not as easy as it seems, and it takes an in-depth understanding of the product or service to identify the most suitable solution for the situation within a reasonable time frame.



Empathy:

A little kindness goes a long way. A support agent must put themselves in the customer's shoes and mirror their emotions. Respond in a way that helps them understand that it's an us vs. problem and not a company vs. customer problem. Emotional intelligence is a must-have in any customer-facing role.



Conflict resolution:

Support agents must be able to work under pressure and remain calm during a crisis. Customers are also employees facing challenges at work, and they may channel their stress towards the support agent when they feel their concerns have not been addressed. It is the agent's duty to remain neutral and stabilize the situation, even when emotions run high on the other end.



Multitasking:

Managing wait times, following-up with customers, working with cross-functional teams, and documenting each of these scenarios is demanding. Support agents need to manage their time and organize their tasks effectively, especially because delegating work isn't always an option.

Chapter 3:

Putting theories to the test

What went wrong?

Most customers believe in second chances and don't jump ship right away—unless something severe occurs that affects them negatively. In this segment, we'll review a few real-world examples of poor customer support. We'll analyze the series of events that snowballed into an overall drop in quality of service and resulted in a loss of revenue for these businesses.

1. Customer support for dummies idiots

After a dispute with their wireless network operator, one customer found their account nickname changed to "Idiot idiot". According to the customer, they had been trying to contact support every five days to get information on credits that weren't added to their account. Presumably, after one such interaction, an irate customer rep changed the username, unaware that it would be displayed for the customer as well.



Lesson:

Lack of training on respectful communication, responsiveness, and appropriate usage of customer data can have serious repercussions for businesses.

2. Press one for...

An all too familiar situation, almost a rite of passage, is the permanently inactive or busy customer support line. This isn't an isolated incident. Social media is filled with complaints from frustrated customers trying to contact businesses through the numbers on their websites, only to find the numbers either disabled or ignored. After a few failed attempts, some customers opt for competitor products or services just for their prompt customer support.



Lesson:

Organizations must ensure availability on the channels they provide. If round-the-clock support isn't available, an IVR message to inform callers about working hours should be set up for clarity.

3. Infinite transfer loop

A customer was facing technical issues with their online shopping application. They ordered a product through the app but were facing unusual delays in delivery. The app offered an option for a refund. However, the customer was unable to claim the refund, and the support staff only offered template responses and no real resolution. When asked for further explanation, the customer was transferred to another agent. This agent transfer action occurred multiple times. Finally, the customer expressed their concerns on social media. After a couple of months and multiple back and forth emails, the issue was resolved and the customer received their refund.

A former customer service representative later admitted online that employees don't often stay with the company for long. With limited work experience, agents are expected to handle scenarios, most of which vary from the theoretical scenarios taught in the training sessions. They also shared that some product features were not addressed during the training period, making it tougher for agents to identify a resolution.

**Lesson:**

Support agents need thorough product knowledge to respond to customers and resolve problems effectively. Organizations must invest in adequate training with real-world scenarios and ensure agents are fully equipped to handle challenges. This can be done with evaluations or certifications. Support managers must also monitor ticket resolution within a team and identify agents with the highest resolution rate for each domain. This way, tickets can be directed to the right technicians to enable resolution on the first interaction.

What successful customer support looks like

Regardless of whether an organization sells products or offers services, nothing is foolproof. ManageEngine's road to becoming a sustainable enterprise is paved with some unsuccessful experiments and minor missteps. However, what sets an organization apart is its ability to take these errors in stride and turn them into learning opportunities. Our customer support is no different. We know our products are a constant work in progress, as we are continually trying to solve new business problems for our customers.

This also means we hear feedback—some that came from a place of frustration. Let's take a look at a real example of how ManageEngine's support team was able to navigate through a challenging situation.

In this scenario, we'll review the steps taken by the ITSM (Cloud) product support team. First, the roles. At the time of inception, the team had six members. Today, they stand tall with over 80 members managing ITSM support worldwide. The team is comprised of:

- Customer support manager
- Product specialists
- Technical support engineers
- Support coordinators
- Community specialists
- Customer success representatives
- Technical trainees
- Help desk coordinators

New recruits engage in a two-month immersive training session—a concept backed by the global head of ITSM support at ManageEngine, who firmly believes practical sessions provide more value than theory lessons alone. This training period is split into:

1. A three-week conceptual training session where trainees study the framework that bolsters the product and understand why each feature is built.
2. A two-week technology-related training session to understand the operations.
3. A nesting period where they are assigned minimal support cases (L1) under the supervision of a lead support engineer.

Following this, trainees are encouraged to go into full production and take on support requests—emails first, followed by chats and calls when their supervisor is assured of their product and domain understanding.

In the early days (over a decade ago) of our flagship product, ServiceDesk Plus, there were times when the product was not stable, as with any growing tool. Occasionally, the application would slow down and users experienced performance issues. This was a problem, especially when it affected customers from major industries like airlines and banking, where time is of the essence. Unfortunately, we were unable to review the logs because we didn't have the mechanism to collect relevant logs at the exact moment of impact. By the time the customer reached out for a remote session, the application's performance had often returned to normal.

There were instances where the support team was on call with the customer's IT team for hours just to be able to collect the logs at the precise time the performance issue was happening. This level of engagement often exceeds the time allotted for a support request, so it can disrupt other support operations.

When this issue occurred again, the support team realized it was time for a focused internal collaboration. The technical support engineers collected customer feedback and worked with product specialists and the customer support lead to brainstorm solutions. The product engineering team was then notified and provided its input on how the tool could be adapted to collect logs related to the performance issue more efficiently. How does it work?

However, when an application is experiencing performance issues, one log file isn't enough for analysis. The team requires five to six types of log files to compare, analyze, and identify the root cause of the issue. The engineering team came up with a feature called performance debug URL. When a customer is facing performance issues, there is a URL the customer can utilize to efficiently collect the log files.

Once this new tool was implemented, the support team began monitoring incoming tickets to verify that it was accomplishing its job. As anticipated, many customers found this URL to be useful, and it was described as a resounding success. The support team shared their feedback with the product team, and decided to incorporate this URL as a feature in the product. For example, if the application is found to be consuming more CPU or memory than expected, now the URL will automatically activate and capture logs to determine the root cause of the performance issue. Even if customers can't or don't reach out in time and advise about a performance issue, the support team can still obtain the applicable logs as they've been recorded by the application. Utilizing this helpful feature, the support team can now quickly and efficiently identify the root cause and fix it promptly for customers.

Being the voice of the customer



Customer success management (CSM)

ManageEngine's customer success program strives to foster long-term relationships with customers. The CSM team begins interaction with customers a few months after purchase of solution. Here, the point of contact isn't senior leadership but the IT manager who knows the product best and oversees day-to-day operations and implementation of the tool.

With a continued focus on retention and expansion, the CSM team conducts health checks on customers. They collect information on the customer's environment, training, consultation, and implementation processes. This data is crucial to identify gaps in product usage, customer education, user engagement, and product adoption.

After every consultation, the customer success team shares a report with the customer to study their current practices and recommend changes in line with their business requirements. They also conduct specialized training sessions and workshops to encourage optimized product usage. Additionally, they interact with departing customers to identify potential problem areas.



Customer Advisory Board (CAB)

ManageEngine's CAB is a platform that facilitates open dialogs between key customers and senior leaders in the organization. The company invites select customers of different sizes from various regions and industries to connect with their peers. These customer-driven conversations focus on industry trends, common IT challenges, and what they expect from ManageEngine which help us design the roadmap for our solutions.

AI in customer support

Predictive and generative AI tools hold the potential to elevate an organization's customer support game. We've talked about 24/7 chatbots, but here are a few more ways to implement AI and provide customers with an all-in-one personal butler:



Wait time monitoring

Customers aren't patient. We know this because we aren't patient either when we're the target of the seemingly endless elevator music. Giving customers a definite response is a great way to retain their attention and resolve their issue. AI systems can monitor queues and give customers an estimated wait time or their position in queue. This is calculated using a combination of real-time data analysis, historical call data, and predictive algorithms.



Intelligent routing

AI can read incoming tickets and queries and identify the most suitable support agent. Let's say we have an online store that sells tech gadgets. A customer is facing issues with the printer they purchased and contacts support. Intelligent routing systems, rather than relying on round-robin scheduling, can direct the ticket based on the technician's success rate related to printer issues and their availability.



Call transcriptions

AI-powered transcription tools can document customer calls in real time or after the call is recorded. This usually serves two purposes: first, it facilitates faster response and follow-up actions from the support agents. Second, having a written record of the conversation often helps with dispute resolution. Transcripts can be used to train new hires and speed up the onboarding process for the support team.



Ticket responses

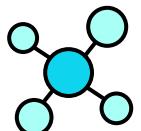
Support agents deal with a flurry of tickets on a daily basis, which can be hard to track without the right tools. Incorporating AI, specifically natural language processing (NLP) tools, into the help desk system can assist agents by providing them with a summary of the ticket, an analysis of the sentiment of the customer, and generate a suitable human-like responses.



Multilingual support

We've established the importance of having multilingual support for a global user base. If it isn't feasible to set up exclusive customer support for smaller regions, organizations can benefit by using AI-enabled translators to respond to customer queries. Of course, AI cannot replace humans. But NLP can translate the content so the AI-enabled translator can detect cultural subtleties or offer appropriate responses the way humans do. AI cannot replace the real deal.

Setbacks and strategies



Identify emerging digital hubs

The "Ok" sign made with the thumb and index finger signifies approval, at least in Western countries. In some non-English speaking European countries, the same symbol is considered rude and disrespectful. A support technician could make an innocent mistake via chat if they aren't aware of this. However, this is not common knowledge, which is exactly why it's crucial to invest in a local support team.

Understanding cultural differences and social subtleties can be a challenge with customer support, especially if you're operating from one location. However, it can be expensive to set up teams in popular cities to cater to your target market. Setting up smaller teams and shifting focus to localized recruiting at emerging digital hubs is a great way to respect these nuances and address customers' needs simultaneously. Zoho Corp. has hub and spoke offices worldwide, most of which are situated in rural or suburban regions, with staff native to the region and fluent in the local language.



Automate wherever possible

Let's not forget, support agents are humans too. Even the most diligent agents can make errors, especially when handling monotonous tasks or when operating under pressure. Moreover, the sheer volume of incoming inquiries can be overwhelming for support teams in growing organizations. In order to scale operations without staggering costs, automation should be an integral part of the customer support domain.

Workflow automation can free up agents from redundant tasks like sending welcome mails for new tickets, responding to FAQs, and generating reports. It can also be combined with AI for automated ticket routing based on a predefined criteria. ManageEngine's help desk allows workflow automation to auto-create/auto-close tickets, assign tags, initiate approvals for escalations, and generate responses.



Support your support team

Working in customer support can be demanding, frustrating, and sometimes a little monotonous. One negative customer interaction can affect a technician's productivity for the rest of the day. In the long run, low morale can take a toll on the team and, in turn, on customer satisfaction. It's important to take employee experience into account and make sure support agents feel heard and valued.

Support managers need to be more hands-on and try to understand the operational challenges faced by the team. Remember that support goes beyond numbers; team members are humans too. It's important for an organization's management to take the time to hear support employees and encourage open discussions. Implementing a reward system for providing exceptional customer service is another great way to incentivize their work and show the support team that their contribution makes a difference to the company.



Under-promise and over-deliver

Getting an Amazon package a day before the estimated delivery date is probably one of the top ten joys of life. Amazon announces to customers conservative delivery dates that take into account multiple variables like supply chain issues, logistic challenges, or unexpected increases in demand. Customers might not recall when a business meets expectations, but they will remember when a business fails to do so. Providing conservative customer service estimations gives the organization the buffer time it might require to handle unexpected hiccups without disappointing customers. A similar ideology is important in customer support.

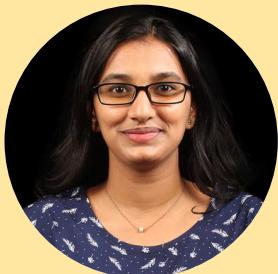
If a business promises response to tickets within three hours, customers expect response within three hours. However, the support team might actually target a response time of within an hour. Additionally, throwing in complimentary goods or services is a great way to keep customers happy. For instance, tickets to an upcoming tech conference in their city could be a pleasant surprise for the customer.

Wrapping up

Customer support is crucial to succeed and stay in business. Being the bridge between customers and the product teams is no small feat and shouldn't be dismissed as "just responding to queries". Conversations with senior leadership at Zoho and ManageEngine highlight a common theme in support—our actions must mirror our words; and our goal is to provide a world-class support experience. The framework we've provided today helped us achieve exactly that, and we hope it works for other organizations as well.

About ManageEngine

As the IT management division of Zoho Corporation, ManageEngine prioritizes flexible solutions that work for all businesses, regardless of size or budget. ManageEngine crafts comprehensive IT management software with a focus on making your job easier. Our 120+ award-winning products and free tools cover everything your IT needs. From network and device management to security and service desk software, we're bringing IT together for an integrated, overarching approach to optimize your IT.



About the author

Mahanya is a content writer who specializes in IT stories, documenting the journey of enterprises like ManageEngine - their ups and downs, internal processes, and core principles. She is keenly interested in interacting with IT thought leaders to get their perspective on digital transformation. A true zillennial at heart, she spends her spare time on social media finding homes for rescue dogs.