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Customer Support: One Size Does Not Fit All

Table of Contents

- Executive Summary** 1

- Support Needs Vary** 2

- Factors Driving Premier Support** 2
 - > Increasing Need for Help 2
 - > Increasing Level of Customer Expectations 3

- Criteria for Effective Premier Support** 3
 - > Proactive..... 3
 - > Comprehensive, Flexible, and Structured Offering 3
 - > Assigned Personnel..... 4
 - > Onsite Visits 4
 - > Fast Access to Vendor Experts 4
 - > Availability of Test System 4
 - > Links to Consulting and Educational Services 4
 - > Seasonal Flexibility 4

- Reaping the Benefits** 4
 - > Major Healthcare Provider..... 4
 - > Large Global Bank 5

- Conclusion** 5

Executive Summary

Imagine what would happen if you were driving an automobile and your instrument panel went dark. You wouldn't know about a problem until it was too late. This situation creates the potential for serious consequences, such as severe damage to your auto, even injury to the people inside it. Also, it could lead to financial loss, the loss of your primary means of transportation for an extended period, and even to litigation.

Running your enterprise infrastructure without Business Service Management (BSM) solutions is like driving an automobile without instrumentation. Without these solutions, critical business services may be impacted, leading to serious business consequences, such as revenue loss, lower employee productivity, and decreased customer satisfaction.

BSM solutions are as vital to your business as the critical services they manage. They combine best-practice IT processes — including those from the IT Infrastructure Library® (ITIL®) — automated technology management, and a shared view of how IT resources directly support the business. They ensure that the actions your IT staff takes and the decisions they make are based on business priorities.

IT often faces the need to improve service while lowering cost, and that drives up performance and availability requirements for your BSM solutions. IT is also under pressure to maintain regulatory compliance. BSM solutions help your IT organization gain greater control of the environment to increase service quality, lower cost, and maintain regulatory compliance. Because of the business criticality of these BSM solutions, you must keep them operating at peak levels of functionality, performance, and availability.

The support needs for different IT organizations vary widely, however. One size of support does not fit all, so vendors must offer a variety of support options, including an elevated level of support to meet more urgent support needs in the most cost-effective manner.

As BSM solutions grow in functionality and integration, the level of expertise required to support those solutions increases. For many IT organizations, an elevated level of support — often referred to as “premier support” — is a necessity. With premier support, the vendor plays a more involved and proactive role by assigning support experts to the client. This additional involvement pays off handsomely in business benefits.

This paper:

- > Examines the factors that determine the level of support required
- > Describes the increasing need for premier support and what is driving this need
- > Discusses the criteria for premier support offerings
- > Presents examples of organizations that have invested in premier support and shows the value of this support

Support Needs Vary

To derive maximum value from your investments, you need to implement and support your BSM solutions in the most effective manner, keeping them running at optimum levels of performance, availability, and functionality. You'll deliver higher levels of service, while at the same time, lowering costs and achieving and demonstrating regulatory compliance.

Implementing and supporting BSM software for maximum value requires:

- > Deploying and configuring the software properly and in a timely fashion to achieve fast time to value
- > Keeping the software up to date on patches and updates
- > Detecting and resolving issues quickly
- > Maintaining high availability and fast performance
- > Ensuring that your staff members know how to use the software effectively

Organizations vary widely in their ability to perform these tasks due to a number of factors, including:

- > Complexity of the IT infrastructure
- > Sophistication of the BSM software
- > Expertise, skills, and workload of the in-house support staff
- > Current service management process maturity level
- > Geographic coverage requirements

Support needs vary widely across organizations. Some organizations do not have sufficient in-house support resources to perform the tasks effectively. Others do, but want to supplement their in-house support teams with vendor support to free up their own people for more strategic endeavors. Some organizations, such as retail and tax preparation companies, have seasonal fluctuations that result in usage peaks and valleys of IT services. During these peaks, they need to temporarily augment their in-house support team with outside help. Other organizations need help in providing support across a wide geographic area.

To meet these widely varying support needs, BSM solution vendors need to provide a variety of support offerings. Variety gives IT organizations the flexibility to match support with their specific needs and select the most cost-effective approach.

Factors Driving Premier Support

Two major factors are driving the requirement for premier support. First, the need for outside help is increasing. Second, customer expectations for service are increasing in just about all industries.

Increasing Need for Help

The support needs of many organizations are increasing due to the convergence of several factors. IT infrastructures are rapidly increasing in complexity due to the emergence of multi-tier applications; mergers and acquisitions; and the appearance of new technologies, such as virtualization and services-oriented architecture. In addition, IT is under intense pressure to improve service while reducing costs. Finally, there are increasing requirements for regulatory compliance that entail maintaining tighter control of the IT infrastructure through more effective IT governance. These factors are driving IT organizations to move up to higher levels of service management maturity through greater integration of IT processes.

These factors affect the use of BSM solutions. The increasing complexity of the IT infrastructure increases the sophistication of the solutions used to manage the delivered services. Greater integration of IT processes requires greater integration of the BSM solutions that manage these processes. This integration, in turn, increases the complexity of the solutions. At the same time, higher performance and availability requirements are driving the need for IT organizations to take a more proactive approach in supporting BSM solutions. IT has to detect and resolve issues before they result in service disruptions. Finally, the need for tighter control increases reliance on the BSM solutions that enforce this control.

As a result, many organizations need increased levels of BSM solution support from their vendors in a number of areas, including:

- > Planning, testing, and rolling out the solutions
- > Keeping the solutions running at peak performance and availability
- > Keeping the solutions current with the latest patches and updates
- > Resolving difficult problems
- > Ensuring that the internal staff is deriving maximum value from the solutions

IT organizations are looking to vendors to meet these needs through premier support offerings that feature a higher level of participation by vendor experts. By offering premier support options, your vendor can provide the expert help you need. With this help, you'll gain maximum value from your BSM solutions and achieve substantial, measurable business benefits. This is why support should be viewed as an investment, rather than an expense.

Increasing Level of Customer Expectations

IT organizations expect more service from software vendors than they have in the past. This expectation is driven by an increased level of complexity and integration in today's IT environments, and an increased level of dependence of business processes on IT.

No two IT organizations are exactly alike in their IT environments and BSM implementations. Yet, IT organizations are still expecting their BSM solution vendors' support teams to provide a more personalized approach to supporting customers.

The increased integration of IT environments is driving a corresponding increase in the integration of IT service management tools and solutions. Vendors are integrating previously standalone, point products into BSM solutions that cover the end-to-end service lifecycle. They span multiple IT processes and operational areas. In line with this evolution of the scope of BSM solutions, IT organizations are increasing their expectations for support — from product-oriented support to a more solution-oriented approach.

The growing level of dependence of business processes on IT is driving the need for faster resolution of issues and problems in the IT environment, and consequently, in the BSM solutions that support the environment. IT organizations are expecting faster response from their vendor support teams. They are also expecting improved self-help facilities, such as comprehensive knowledge bases that are easy to search.

Vendors can help IT organizations meet these expectations through premier support offerings. These offerings must provide more demanding service level agreements and more involved, proactive participation by vendor experts, such as assigning expert support personnel to customer accounts.

Criteria for Effective Premier Support

In choosing BSM solutions, evaluate not only the solutions, but also the vendor's support offerings for the solutions. This step is especially important if your organization needs a premier level of support. This section presents criteria that such a support offering should meet to be truly effective.

Proactive

The vendor support team must operate proactively, helping you address problems before they result in disruption of services. Proactive support means getting involved early and participating in the planning and rollout of your BSM solutions. The vendor support team keeps your in-house support team up to date on patches and updates. It evaluates all patches and updates, recommending which to deploy based on your particular environment. It also participates in the rollout of patches and updates to minimize risk. Operating in this manner, the vendor support team ensures that you can take advantage of solution enhancements to increase solution value, and it relieves the in-house team of this time-consuming task.

The vendor support team also actively participates in the proactive handling of issues in your enterprise infrastructure. The team works closely with your in-house group to provide early warning of issues and help in resolving issues quickly.

Comprehensive, Flexible, and Structured Offering

Look for a vendor that provides premier support offerings that cover all of the solutions offered by that vendor. (Some vendors offer premier support for only a partial list of their solutions.) The premier support offerings should be flexible, giving you a choice of programs, so you can best match support to your specific requirements.

The support offerings should be structured and available in complete packages. (Some vendors offer only a la carte support, and leave it up to you to assemble the pieces into a unified support plan. That makes it extremely difficult and confusing to determine the optimum mix for your particular requirements.) The structured support offering should include a sufficient number of packages to satisfy the requirements of most organizations, while at the same time keep the number of packages to an understandable amount.

Assigned Personnel

The vendor should assign personnel to work closely with your in-house team. Assigned personnel gain and maintain familiarity with your account, learning your environment, priorities, people, and processes. They act as partners to your internal support team.

Assigned personnel enable a proactive approach to support. They also speed problem resolution by eliminating the need to re-familiarize vendor support representatives with the specifics of your environment every time you report an incident.

Onsite Visits

Knowing your people, your business atmosphere, and your technical environment creates a huge advantage in support, and nothing helps the vendor support team gain that knowledge more effectively than actually being in your environment and working personally with your staff. Onsite visits facilitate not only incident and problem resolution, but also strategic planning and knowledge transfer between your support team and the vendor team.

Fast Access to Vendor Experts

Some issues require the participation of highly specialized experts, such as engineers from the vendor's development staff. For example, a fix may require an engineering change. Such issues require that the vendor's assigned support personnel have immediate access to other vendor experts when necessary. The vendor support team must be able to quickly involve experts at whatever level is required to ensure timely and effective problem resolution.

Availability of a Test System

Look for a vendor that can create a mock-up of your BSM solution environment in a test lab. The vendor support team can use the mock-up to test the deployment of new solutions, and to test the deployment of patches and updates before you release them to production. Testing reduces the risk of new deployments or updates introducing problems. The vendor support team can also use the lab system to re-create reported problems in a test environment, speeding resolution.

Links to Consulting and Educational Services

The vendor support team should have close links to the vendor's consulting and educational services. The assigned vendor support personnel can get involved early, working with its consulting team to gain familiarity with your computing environment and in-house support capability. The assigned support personnel can also work with the consulting team to help you select and implement the optimum support plan for your organization. This ensures a smooth transition to an effectively supported production operation, so you achieve a fast time to value.

Based on an assessment of your in-house support capability, assigned vendor support personnel can also work with their educational services group to help you select and implement the optimum training plan for your organization. This ensures that your in-house support team is up to speed quickly to derive the most value from the BSM solutions you implement.

Seasonal Flexibility

Organizations that have seasonal usage fluctuations require the ability to scale up the level of vendor support during the peaks, and scale it down during the valleys. If your organization has support needs that vary with time, look for a vendor that permits flexibility in its premier support offerings. This allows you to make seasonal changes easily and with no financial penalty.

Reaping the Benefits

IT organizations are already reaping significant business benefits from premier support. Here are some examples of customers that have opted for BMC Premier Support:

Major Healthcare Provider

The in-house IT support team at a major healthcare provider is responsible for supporting the platform that runs the company's BSM solutions, as well as custom business applications. The platform serves about 6,500 users.

By taking advantage of premier vendor support, the team has shrunk its average incident resolution time from eight hours to just 30 minutes. Moreover, the team has been able to move from a reactive to a proactive support model, identifying and addressing issues before they result in service disruption.

The support team attributes its success primarily to the dedicated support engineer provided through the premier plan. The engineer has expertise related to the platform, is intimately familiar with the specific platform environment at the company, and has immediate access to other vendor experts. This familiarity and immediate access has enabled the support group to dramatically shrink its average incident resolution time.

The dedicated engineer has also streamlined the maintenance and updates process by tracking patch and update releases, assessing their impact on the company, and helping plan their implementation. In addition, the engineer tests the patches and updates in a replica environment in the vendor's laboratory before releasing them to the healthcare company. Pre-testing in the mirror environment helps avoid problems when a release is rolled out to the company.

Large Global Bank

A large global bank provides financial services to millions of private, commercial, and corporate customers around the world. The bank's IT department had installed a variety of BSM solutions across its worldwide infrastructure to help the staff maintain the high performance and availability of its mission-critical services.

The bank's IT department contracted premier support to augment the capabilities of the in-house support team in supporting the BSM solutions. This has allowed the bank's support staff to transition from a reactive to a proactive support approach. The results are compelling. Within three months, the total case count for the installed BSM solutions decreased by 50 percent — from an average of 40 cases a month to only 20 cases. The time to resolution has also steadily decreased. The average time a case from North America is open has decreased from 16 days to 13 days, and the initial response time has shrunk from an average of four hours to only one hour.

The bank states that these improvements are the direct result of BMC Premier Support, which provides an assigned support engineer and an assigned support account manager. The assigned support engineer resolves cases quickly, due to his familiarity with the bank's environment and an understanding of the bank's BSM solution implementation. The engineer also

conducts best-practice and troubleshooting sessions with the bank's support staff in the areas that are the most strategic and critical to the bank's business. In addition, the engineer reviews new releases and maintenance requirements with the support staff, pointing out new features and functionality, and answering questions.

The assigned support account manager, on the other hand, reviews BSM solution enhancement requests and product roadmaps with the in-house support team on a quarterly basis. These reviews permit the support staff to plan upgrades proactively and provide feedback to the vendor's product marketing teams. The support account manager also partners with the in-house team on planned outages and data center projects, reviewing the processes and helping prepare for these events to minimize downtime.

Conclusion

BSM solutions have become an integral part of the IT infrastructure fabric. They are as critical to the business as the business services they support. Consequently, you need to ensure that your solutions are maintained at optimum levels and that your IT staff is able to leverage them to gain full value.

Many organizations do not have sufficient resources in house to fully support their BSM solutions. Even if they do, there is usually a desire to free up in-house support personnel from routine, but essential, tasks so they can pursue more strategic endeavors. These organizations are turning to vendors for more help in the form of premier support.

Look for a vendor that provides a choice of support offerings that includes premier support. Through this elevated level of support, the vendor becomes an active partner to your in-house support staff and is committed to your organization's success. That partnership enables you take a more proactive approach to supporting users, so you can enjoy the resulting business benefits.

BMC offers a variety of levels of support, including premier support. For more information, visit www.bmc.com/supportofferings.



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