

Improving Efficiency and Customer Service in Higher Education

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It's the day before the semester starts, and it's getting down to the wire: faculty are requesting support for the course management system; students can't connect to the network on their new devices; administrators can't access the business system to pull the reports they need; and

parents are anxious to stay connected to children who are leaving home for the first time. Compared to the industry as a whole, technical service and support in higher education is unique for many reasons. One reason is the variety of customers that call upon the support center—from internal administration, staff, and faculty to students, parents, and alumni—each of whom has specific needs, requests, expectations, and communication preferences.

In addition, this array of customers is often supported by support centers with a revolving staff of students and a budget set by a funding model that's very different than those of the corporate world. These challenges, combined with the distinctive business and classroom needs associated with higher education, create an environment unlike most other verticals in the technical service and support industry.

Recent HDI research revealed that support centers in the technical service and support industry prioritize their spending decisions based on one primary objective: growing the business. Higher education proves to be unique in this aspect as well, as leaders in these support organizations are working toward three primary objectives: improving customer service, reducing costs, and increasing efficiency.

Each year, HDI reaches out to the technical service and support community to learn about current practices in the industry at large. The results are shared in the [HDI Support Center Practices & Salary Report](#). In this report, the 2014 survey results have been subjected to further analysis to learn more about the unique challenges and practices in the higher education industry (N=126).

SURVEY RESULTS

Ticket volume and staffing

The need to increase efficiency is amplified by continuously increasing ticket volumes. It's critical that decision makers know the causes of increasing ticket volumes and manage the volume with the staff available, allowing support teams to proactively improve efficiency and, as a result, improve

customer satisfaction and reduce costs. Fifty-six percent of higher education support centers reported an increase in ticket volumes from the previous year. In addition, one-third reported that ticket volumes have remained about the same, and 10 percent reported that ticket volumes have decreased. Increases in ticket volumes in higher education are most commonly attributed to new applications or systems (42%), new equipment and devices (42%), and the number of customers supported (42%).

The results reveal that the number of customers impacts the number of tickets; unfortunately, staff numbers are decreasing in many organizations. Twenty-seven percent of higher education support centers are either cutting their staffs or are subject to hiring freezes that keep them from filling positions as they come open. Meanwhile, more-fortunate organizations (50%) are allowed to fill open positions, and an additional 23 percent are actually creating and filling new positions.

Similar to the rest of the technical service and support industry, higher education support center staffing ratios are directly related to size of the organization. Larger organizations (more end users) are supporting more customers per support staff member than smaller organizations (fewer end users).

Staffing ratios in higher education

	Size of organization	Staff to end-user ratio (median)
	Small (fewer than 2,000 end users)	1:67
	Medium (2,000–10,000 end users)	1:500
	Large (more than 10,000 end users)	1:2,340

Multichannel support

Higher education’s diverse customer base has an equally diverse set of needs and preferences for contacting the support team. For this reason, it makes sense that compared to the rest of the industry, higher education provides customers with more options for contacting support. While the rest of the technical service and support industry is more likely to provide three or fewer channels through which tickets can be submitted, 73 percent of higher education support centers have at least four options. Almost all higher education support centers provide the traditional channels—email and phone (92% provide both channels)—while many other support centers are using one or the other (only 67% use both email and phone). It’s no surprise that a higher



73%

of higher education support centers provide at least four channels through which customers can submit a ticket.

Contact channels through which tickets are received in higher education support centers

	Percentage of organizations using each channel	Percentage of tickets received through each channel (for those using it)
Auto-logging	21%	Limited data
Chat	33%	9%
Email	94%	33%
Fax	7%	Limited data
Phone	96%	45%
Mobile app	2%	Limited data
Social media	10%	Limited data
Text message	6%	Limited data
Walk-up	75%	15%
Web form	53%	17%

percentage (15%) of tickets are opened via walk-up than in support centers outside of higher education (8%).

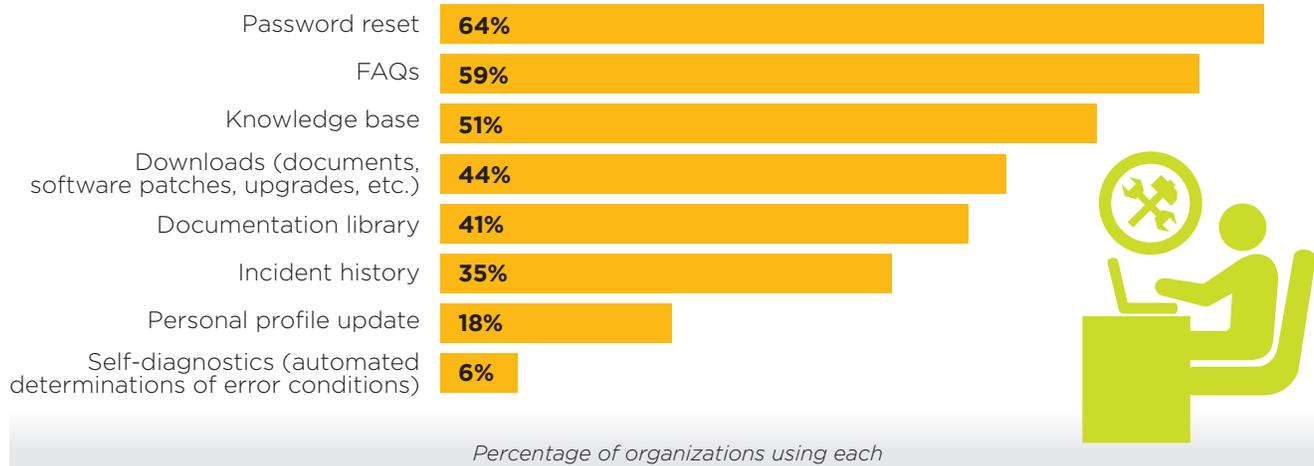
Not all support is provided via submitted tickets. One of the most common ways organizations are decreasing ticket volumes is by enabling end users to resolve their own issues through various means of self-service. In higher education, 91 percent of support organizations provide some type of self-service for their customers. Password reset tools are the most commonly provided self-service option in higher education (64%), followed

by FAQs (59%) and the knowledge base (51%).

Technology

As reported by the higher education industry, incident management (#1), knowledge management (#2), and remote control (#3) are essential to providing successful end-user support. It’s not surprising that such a large percentage of higher education support centers are using incident management systems (87%), but it is surprising that many (more than one out of three) are

Self-service provided for higher education end users



currently planning to update or replace their existing systems. It's also a bit surprising that even more higher education support centers are using remote control technology (90%). Finally, while knowledge management systems rank second on the list of must-haves, only 65 percent currently use these systems, though an additional 18 percent are planning to add them. This indicates that knowledge, while worth capturing for each

new group of students that mans the support center, may be being saved in tools like SharePoint, which is often used for knowledge management but is not a knowledge management system.

Also hitting high on the shopping list for higher education (i.e., a high percentage planning to either add the technology or upgrade/replace their existing tool) are

Technology used for support in higher education

	Use it, with no plans to replace or update it	Use it, but planning to replace/update it	Planning to add it	Do not use it
Asset management	36.2%	17.2%	24.1%	22.4%
Customer satisfaction surveying	50.4%	21.8%	16.0%	11.8%
Incident management	56.3%	30.3%	2.5%	10.9%
Knowledge management	42.5%	22.5%	17.5%	17.5%
Problem management	31.0%	15.9%	23.9%	29.2%
Remote control	75.0%	15.0%	5.0%	5.0%
Self-service	31.4%	30.5%	20.3%	17.8%
Service catalog/portfolio	21.9%	16.7%	33.3%	28.1%

Percentage of organizations

self-service technology (51%), service catalog portfolio (50%), asset management (41%), problem management systems (40%), and customer satisfaction surveying (38%). The table on page 3 displays the breakdown of current use and plans for each of the listed technologies.

Metrics

Higher education support center priorities are evident in their metrics. When compared to the industry, customer satisfaction and efficiency are noticeably important, as evidenced by metrics like customer satisfaction, average time to resolve tickets, and SLA (service level agreement) goals met.

Fifty percent of higher education support centers formally measure their customers' satisfaction, usually through survey invitations sent via email. Those measuring customer satisfaction report that, on average, 87 percent of customers are satisfied (above neutral) with their ticket resolution. This is compared to an 80-percent average for other support centers. In addition, when asked about the percentage of customers satisfied with the support center overall (not specific to a ticket or its resolution), higher education has an average of 83 percent, compared to the rest of the industry, which reports a 78-percent average.

Higher education is also outperforming the rest of the industry with regard to SLA goals met. Most higher education support centers (56%) report that an average of more than 80 percent of tickets meet their SLA goals, compared to just 45 percent of support centers outside the higher education vertical. Higher education support appears to be setting and meeting customer expectations more consistently, which is likely influencing the aforementioned level of customer satisfaction.

In addition to meeting customer expectations, higher education is resolving tickets faster than other support centers. In higher education, the average time to resolve

Average time to resolve tickets in higher education



nonurgent tickets is 4-8 hours (median); the rest of the industry reports a median of 8-24 hours. This difference speaks not only to the goal of improving customer satisfaction but also to the push for increased efficiency in higher education.

Support centers, when focused on their objectives, shape behaviors and processes, which, in turn, impact their performance in those areas. It's possible—and additional analysis will be needed to confirm this—that other verticals, with different objectives, may be performing better than the rest of the industry on metrics that align with their goals.

Conclusion

Not only do higher education support centers face unique challenges, they also have unique priorities and goals. Improving customer service and efficiency are at the top of the list of objectives for many of these organizations, and their support centers are utilizing multiple channels and technologies to support a wide range of customer needs and expectations. Based on the performance metrics findings, support centers that are responsible for keeping institutions functioning, parents and alumni engaged, students learning, and faculty on course, are using processes and practices that seem to be positively impacting both efficiency and customer service.

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