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Tech Support Forecast: Partly Cloudy



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TechNewsWorld
Part of the ECT News Network
04/23/09 4:00 AM PT

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Businesses that keep their IT operations in-house have tech support staffers on hand to fix just about any problem that could arise. How does the tech support worker's role change as a firm moves some of its systems to the cloud? A new mix of talents and responsibilities will be required to manage technical support resources while supporting cloud-based operations.

Moving a company into cloud computing changes a lot more than just where the servers happen to be located. For instance, tech support might move out the door as well.

In some cases, tech support workers may still have their desks, but they will no longer be their company's go-to guys when a problem develops. Instead, they will have to talk to their own go-to guys at cloud central -- or perhaps be replaced by an engineer at the cloud service provider's location.

Think about the domino effect when you consider these scenarios: When the folks in accounting fail to get that file to open, who're they going to call? When the head of the HR department needs to access every single email a recently fired employee sent and received over the last two months, whose number does the clerk dial first? When the CEO gets the the old [BSOD](#) for the third time this year, who gets sent to the top floor to make the problem go away?

Cloud technology is changing the rules. It is also changing the traditional roles of [tech support](#) workers. Sometimes, enterprise tech support no longer has to know how everything in the company's computer system works. The hardware and software don't all live inside the office building's walls. Much of this new cloud technology is actually hosted outside.

"Moving to the clouds should be an empowering thing for tech support on the enterprise level," Michael Sutton, vice president of security research at [Zscaler Labs](#), told TechNewsWorld. "It should free up IT staff to deal with more proactive tasks instead of security and logs. For

example, one of the key jobs for IT workers is log consolidation. They spend a lot of time writing scripts. With cloud computing, they don't have to do that."

New Marching Orders

As applications and the servers that host them migrate to the cloud, a new set of priorities is emerging for tech support companies. Tech support firms now have to become cloud management experts. They also have to adjust their [technical support](#) focus to utilize more-consolidated management techniques and resource allocation models, according to Gerry Libertelli, president and CEO of [ReadyTechs](#), a digital infrastructure services firm.

"Centrally managed groups of technical support workers become more efficient if they don't have to visit the on-site operations of the customer," Libertelli told TechNewsWorld. "However, if the technical support company does not change its training and resource-allocation focus, they will not realize the benefits of centralized cloud operations, and thus [will] not be able to compete as cost metrics become more constrained."

A new mix is now required to manage technical support resources while supporting cloud-based operations. Those providing the tech support have to adopt a data center/call center approach to client support, explained Libertelli. At the same time, clients must be conditioned to expect different results and different problems when working with cloud-based systems.

"Telecom slowness, shared resource consumption and back-end disk [IOPS](#) become the new ghosts in the machine," Libertelli noted. "High-touch client support and trouble recognition techniques must be used aggressively when integrating new clients into a cloud-based environment."

War Stories

That complex process does not always work as expected. When it falls short, enterprises may have unpleasant and inefficient experiences. Consider a foggy cloud-support incident suffered at virtualization platform security and compliance firm [HyTrust](#).

One of the company's critical applications was hosted in the cloud. Officials there started seeing some undesirable behavior: Email messages were bouncing back to senders. Normally, an enterprise tech support pro would have investigated, reached out to the appropriate internal IT person, and resolved the problem in less than an hour, explained Hemma Prafullchandra, chief security architect at HyTrust.

With the application running in the cloud, the provider's tech support person still has to investigate, reach out to the internal IT person, and narrow the problem statement until it's clear, she noted. Then, the cloud provider needs to take action to resolve the problem. In this case, though, the email messages were bouncing because the cloud provider had been blacklisted -- not HyTrust itself.

"An issue ticket was filed, and the tech support person and the IT person had to just wait to get it resolved. Basically, all the troubleshooting still has to be done if you want an expedited resolution, but the actual fix is no longer in your control," Prafullchandra told TechNewsWorld.

New Expectations

From an infrastructure and provider perspective, cloud computing requires more-rigid tech support standards due to the flexibility and diversity offered in the cloud. In general, tech support needs are the same or more demanding on both sides of the cloud, according to Rick Cameron, head of [customer support](#) services at IT infrastructure consulting and services firm [GlassHouse](#).

What is happening in the tech-service space is that the line of demarcation has moved. End-users are responsible for much less than they were before, "and this is the way they want it," Cameron explained.

"End-users now view working in the clouds as being serviced by a utility company. People want electricity but just want to plug in and let the [electric] company take care of everything else," he told TechNewsWorld.

Apt Analogy

The popular attitude is that the clouds should just take care of it. That trend is just as evident with GlassHouse's own customers as with its tech providers. They come to GlassHouse to have their systems handled as outsourced services, Cameron said.

As the push to the cloud continues, providers are under growing pressure to handle the support.

"So, now the cloud providers are starting to partner with service providers to manage the integration of the enterprise into the clouds," noted Cameron.

Cloudy Conceptions

Several misconceptions about tech support are making their own migration to the cloud. One is that tech expertise requires a high level of control and even physical contact with all parts of an IT infrastructure.

"That doesn't always have to be the case," said Andres Kohn, global solutions manager at SaaS email infrastructure provider [Proofpoint](#).

"While there is less control of the application itself, the cloud can enable higher visibility into the cloud with better customer support and usability," he told TechNewsWorld. "As a result, tech support should ideally run more efficiently, and any issues can be resolved much quicker."

Some IT professionals even view the emergence of cloud applications as a threat to their jobs.

Those concerns, however, are usually unfounded, according to Kohn.

The cloud can never replace the human aspect of troubleshooting; thus, no need exists for IT to fight the loss of some control when it is being replaced with visibility and usability, he reasoned.

Transition Time

Cloud computing may need something like three to five years to be fully adopted, and a big part of an IT department's role during this period is to pave the way for the migration, according to Dave Rice, founder and CEO of [TrueCloud](#), a Web-based enterprise resource planning (ERP) firm.

"As far as migrating to the cloud, IT can help the company perform more efficiently. IT will be able to finally concentrate on helping the business to get more out of its software products. IT can do an enormous amount of good," Rice told TechNewsWorld.

IT departments may eventually morph, taking on a new role as processing officials, he believes. Rather than worrying about the technology, IT workers will be able to focus on helping the company gain leverage and increase utilization.

"IT tends to see how all the pieces fit together," Rice said. "It is a horizontal process. Individual departments don't see this whole operation. It is a unique perspective."

SaaS Impact

Another factor to consider is the impact on traditional tech support caused by the rapid growth of SaaS. As more and more applications move to the cloud, quality of service trends upward due to better service availability and redundant infrastructure, according to Kohn.

Quality SaaS providers invest more resources into building and maintaining a bulletproof service delivery environment than most companies can afford to maintain on their own. This improved quality of service and availability reduces the number of calls to tech support due to service interruptions. Tech support can benefit from more-sophisticated monitoring and alerting tools that provide better visibility into the health and status of an application or user's situation.

In this scenario, tech support jobs can become more virtual, Kohn noted. The job can be done from a remote location, enabling access to better and less expensive talent.

"This does not mean that tech support can all be offshored, which faces issues of language, accent and technical expertise," Kohn said. "What it does mean is that the tech support staffing model is opened to allow the best talent to be brought on board in smaller towns or with workers looking to telecommute." [ECT](#)

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