



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Your Business Applications are Useless without a Good Support Staff**

Thirty or forty years ago, complex business processes were understood by a handful of people who had been with the company a long time. If you looked at your billing process, for instance, the reasons for why certain things were done in certain ways were in the collective minds of the people who had been there the longest. If your organization was lucky, you could also have a dusty old manual that might provide some insight into the processes. However, the manual was usually obsolete before the ink was dry, since it was never updated to reflect changes in the process. That was a scary time.

You might think that the situation is better today. In some ways it is, and in some ways it is even scarier. Today, all of the complex business processes, like your billing system, run on computer software and hardware. The bad news today is that there is typically no one in the organization that has a full grip on all of the details of the software and why certain things work the way they do. Programming logic is so complex, and user options are so numerous, that to a certain extent you need to just step back and trust that all of the calculations are working like they should.

There is also good news about the business application environment. Since the software basically controls the process, you no longer have to worry about what would happen if some of the business staff leaves. The software typically knows what to do, even if current people leave and new people are hired.

There is another “gotcha” in this equation. Just like people, software and hardware are susceptible to errors – only they are called “bugs” when software is involved. Combinations of data and parameters can provide erroneous results, or even cause the business application to crash and burn. This can cause the business process to stop as well. If it is the billing system, we are no longer sending out invoices. If it is an inventory system, we may no longer be able to tell how much product we have on the shelves.

Since all major business processes run as IT business applications, every company must have an application support organization to ensure that these business applications run successfully, and are error free. These support groups provide the backbone services to keep the production business applications going, which in turn allows the business itself to keep functioning.

#### **What is application support?**

First, let's put application support into perspective. Application support is the work required to keep the IT business applications functioning properly. This includes systems like Accounts Payable, Payroll, Customer Relationship Management, Inventory, etc. It does not include work such as supporting phone lines, operating systems or hardware. (These are also support functions, but they are not “application” support.)

Even though all companies perform support, there are many ways for the organization to be structured. You could have a dedicated group(s) that does nothing but application support. You could also have a group(s) that performs the support function, as well as



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discretionary enhancements and projects. Usually the organization structure is based on size. If your company is large enough, you will typically have specialists that work only on application support, and perhaps small enhancements. As companies get smaller, it is more common to see the same people work on support and projects since they do not have enough people to specialize in one or the other.

### **The value of application support**

The value of support is usually fairly obvious. Your company usually puts together a project team to install a business application package or to develop a business application from scratch. When the project ends, you still have a product that continues to exist. The project team usually gets disbanded and goes away. The support staff is then responsible for ensuring that the application continues to run as it is supposed to. They fix problems, answer questions, and generally do whatever is required to ensure that the application is reliable and stable. They ensure that ongoing business value is received through the application lifespan.

Even though most organizations perform the application support function, there are a myriad of ways that the work is performed. In many cases, the work is done efficiently and effectively. In other cases, the work is organized and managed very ineffectively. Companies must strive to create an environment where the support staff can be successful.

### **Application Support Services**

One of the ways companies can help the support staff succeed is to be clear on the services that the staff is responsible for. "Services" refers to work done for clients that does not result in the creation of tangible deliverables. Services provide value by fulfilling the needs of others through people contact and interaction. There are many times that people within the support function help each other. However, the term "service" refers to the execution of an activity and the delivery of value to a client or stakeholder where no deliverable is produced.

Once you identify the major service areas of the support function, you need to agree on common definitions. If you do not have agreement on definitions, you will still find yourself struggling at times to determine whether a specific activity falls within support or not. A common example is an application error that does not cause a major problem, but is more of a nuisance. For instance, there may be a misspelled word on an online screen. There is no question that this is an error. However, it is certainly not an emergency. Depending on your workload, it may be months before you have a chance to update the description with one that everyone can agree on. Does this work fall under support? If your definition says that any production errors are considered support, then it probably does. However, your strict definition of support may not include minor problems or nuisances that can be scheduled for completion at a later time. In that case, the work would most likely fall under discretionary requests.

In general, the support organization produces very few deliverables. Your support group may produce deliverables, but when you do, you are typically performing in an



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enhancement, project or management capacity. In fact, it might be argued that the support function actually produces no deliverables. In general, support services can include the following:

- Responding to production emergencies, including applications that are down, as well as applications that are running but have a substantial logic error
- Fixing errors
- Assisting users / answering questions
- Responding to environmental changes
- Trivial software/hardware upgrades and changes
- Assisting with business processes
- Communicating with the client
- Cross training
- Documentation updates
- Management and planning associated with support

### **Summary**

Sometimes it seems that projects get all the publicity. However, when a project is completed, there is usually a deliverable that needs to be supported over the long term. Application support staff are responsible for IT business applications. They ensure that the applications remain stable and effectively support the underlying business process.

It is hard to overstate the importance of application support. If a project team has trouble and delivers late, they may have some embarrassment. However, if a production application is down, your business processes may have stopped as well. The entire company may be affected.