White Paper

Support is free? Or at least good value for money....

"Quality is free" postulates the title of Philip B Crosby's thought provoking book, and I could argue the same for support. Today however I'm going to limit myself to arguing that it is at the very least good value for money and highlight the paradox that the better the support team performs, the less you, as a Warehouse Manager, may perceive the value of the support team to be.

As humans we instinctively like people who help us in our hour of need. We bond over the shared experience of trying to resolve a serious issue at 3 a.m. when we'd all rather be asleep. As an operation you rely on the friendly assured engineer at the end of the phone who is able to react and resolve the issue that looks like preventing you from achieving your delivery schedule. If disruptive issues occur often enough, when the support contract renewal time arrives you will remember those instances when the support team helped you achieve your delivery schedules and happily sign on the dotted line with the view that the support contract is giving value for money.

As Hotline Manager a part of my role is to actively identify and implement strategies to reduce the number of support calls and reduce the duration of support issues. Current strategies include:

- Automatic monitoring of the system. This allows us to identify when files and disks are filling up, when software processes have stopped, or communication has been lost with a partner device. There have been many instances when we have identified and rectified an issue before the site operation was aware that a problem was brewing.
- Technical and management escalation procedures ensure that complex issues are quickly escalated to the appropriate level of expertise from first to second and then third line support. Management escalation ensures the people who need to know about an issue are informed, within Logistex and your business if required.
- By performing root cause analysis on the issues that are reported we are able to resolve the underlying cause and prevent the same issue recurring.

In the last year we have:

- Added a new first line (hotline) engineer to allow the team more time for training and site visits.
- Added another Systems Architect to the second / third line support team.
- Created an out of hours Oracle Database Administration team.
- Simplified, root cause focused, P1 reporting to make issues easy to understand for non-technical specialist. Using Red/Amber/Green alerts to demonstrate the degree of severity, the risk of recurrence and the actions taken to avoid recurrence

Strategies that are just starting to be implemented include:

- Initiatives to promote closer working relationships
    - Hotline engineers to be Site Support Champion for large scale distribution centres.
    - Site Support Champions visit sites, get to know the front line users and get to really understand how the operation uses the system.
    - Acts as a sweeper function. Identifies the workrounds and niggles that take time to circumvent, but are never reported as issues. Resolving these issues can improve performance and the user's satisfaction in using the system.
    - Site Support Champion to review reported issues, identify trends and highlight actions that should be prioritised for resolution.
    - Site Support Champion to improve and maintain site FAQs
- Proposals to reduce the time taken to resolve an incident
    - Better training – raising the level of generic and site specific knowledge. Training is provided by our own Systems team, meaning the Hotline team are knowledgeable about the most up-to-date features of our software. Time has been made available due to expanded first line team.
    - Improved technical escalation procedure. Fixed timescales to promote decisive action.
- Ticket View
    - A portal to our ticket system that allows you to view and add comments to your tickets.

Reacting to and resolving an issue is what the support team gets most recognition for. However, in my opinion, reacting to an issue is a failure. The role of the support team is to proactively look for weakness in the system and reduce the probability of any issue occurring in the first place.

The challenge is that to achieve the desired proactive status requires a sustained focus from the support team on all the areas of improvement described above.

Here lies the paradox.

The more work we do to reduce the number of issues that affect your operation, the less you see us helping you and the less you value the service. When the support contract renewal time arrives you will think "we hardly ever call the hotline, I don't think it's good value for money". I would argue that when you compare the cost of the support contract with the cost of your operation being unable to deliver goods and fulfil your contract to your customer, the support contract is providing good value for money. As well as providing continuous improvement to your system, ultimately we are your insurance policy – your partner who you can rely upon to work continuously to resolve issues that are affecting your ability to fulfil your deliveries.