

# Service

# Transformation

By Jack Levin



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# Shifting the Distribution of Skills within the Service Organization

Unlike any other time in our service business history, we have the opportunity to invoke meaningful change—the kind of change that allows us to deliver on the promise of better service at a lower cost.

**D**oing more with less has become more than a cliché. It is now a required skill set for anyone who wants to succeed in services management within an equipment company. The resources an organization has available to serve its customers continue to decline, and customer demands are only increasing. Skilled labor is hard to find and expensive to keep. To make matters even more critical, competitive differentiation is shifting toward services and solutions rather than individual product features.

Traditional models of service delivery don't cut it anymore. There aren't enough skilled technicians to go around. Even if there were, they would be too expensive. Equipment service organizations have to invoke dramatic change in order to compete. They need to transform.

Remote service technologies can help us ease into the transformation. Unlike any other time in our service business history, we have the opportunity to invoke meaningful change—the kind of change that allows service organizations to keep up with growing customer needs and still keep costs in control. This is the change that delivers on the promise of better service at a lower cost.

Up until now, the impact of service technology within equipment companies has only yielded incremental results in efficiency and optimization. This is because the fundamental structure of the service organization

some current expert systems out there, and their application. It also makes you wonder how much money the company is wasting on personnel and technologies that don't add much value, and which also lead to frustrated customers.

At the same time, investment in field technologies has been minimal, which is rightfully so for the most part. Good field technicians overcome tool shortcomings anyway. They pride themselves on getting the job done no matter what obstacles stand in their way. As far as knowledge systems go, there is no better invention than the cell phone, which enables technicians to call one another when they are stuck. No one can argue the efficiency and speed of the human brain that possesses the right knowledge and experience.

The fundamental transformation of achieving scale and providing a quantum jump in service quality literally turns the organization inside out (and outside in).

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has not changed. The most valuable (and costly) human assets are in the field and are geographically distributed based on customer density.

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Once the company has accepted the need for such dramatic change, you will find that remote service technology is a key enabler to achieving this transformation.

The traditional model has lower-skilled workers located in a centralized call center. Here, the application of technology has attempted to make up for the lack of skills and experience. We have all experienced this when we call technical support for a problem with our PCs and get dragged through a less-than-insightful decision tree of diagnostic steps for an hour or more, only to be escalated to someone who can really help us.

This certainly exemplifies the shortcomings of

The first step is to place the best of the best technicians in the call center at central command. Give them the tools to remotely diagnose problems, and give them the autonomy to solve customer issues, all the way down to deciding if a dispatch is needed. If a dispatch is warranted, the next step would be to send a junior tech who can follow directions.

The thought of this may sound intimidating, but think about some factors going on in your own service group. What is the available career path for your best technicians? What about your “middle of the road” (yet vital) techs? Do you really understand why your techs leave?

When considering why someone in their right mind would want to become an equipment service technician in the first place, a couple of things become clear: They are driven by helping people, and they love a challenge. I never underestimate the power of wanting to help people. In fact, if senior technicians don't fill this personal need, they most likely will become bored or unsatisfied on the job. Junior techs are too busy learning to experience this sense of needing to help people. Just the

same, they are working hard to reach a point of productivity where they can experience a sense of fulfillment through service.

Ironically, the traditional structure of service organizations doesn't let people fulfill their basic need to serve. Call centers are designed to "script" junior techs through basic triage, but they don't really get any hands-on experience aside from tinkering with lab equipment. They sit on the edge of being the gatekeeper to the people who can really solve customer problems, and at times they become part of the customer problem because they can't fix very much.

The field technician solves customer problems. In fact, of all the people who interact with customers from an equipment company, the field tech probably has the best (and most valuable) relationship with an organization's customers. But most field techs are run ragged by being spread too thin and dispatched to too many sites on any given day. And if that is not enough, they get the brunt of the paperwork and documentation responsibility. Is it really a surprise that most equipment companies' service call records are lacking in detail and accuracy? Any sense of job fulfillment a field technician could experience is often suffocated by an insane amount of work and performance metrics that measure the equivalent of miles on the road rather than customer results. In both cases, the labor force is working against the grain of what motivates them personally.

Now let's flip things around and look at it from a future view. The top field techs are "promoted" to the call center with a full armament of remote service and diagnostic tools. The junior technicians are covering the field work by direction from the call center techs.

When a customer calls with a problem, or the equipment itself calls, the call center tech takes ownership of the problem from start to resolution. Since this tech is experienced, the thoughts going through his mind are, "How can I get this problem licked with the tools I have?" and "I will overcome the challenges and limitations of working remotely because I am that good!"

Even if a dispatch is required, the senior tech is still driving the case and now has a human being as a resource to direct. This becomes a powerful tool combination. The junior field tech is getting exposed to new things every day. Learning is happening at a quantum rate faster than before. In addition, the tech is part of the solution in everything they do.

From management's point of view, this is nirvana. The most expensive labor costs have been reduced to a concentrated group of people in the call center. The largest numbers of technicians are significantly cheaper junior personnel in the field. And, investment in technology is actually paying off—in spades.

With this model, I would argue that any investment in technology would yield higher returns than with a traditional model. And more important, you could defer



technology investment as long as strong remote diagnosis capabilities exist.

Senior technicians don't need expert knowledge systems as much as junior ones do. Giving remote service tools to junior techs is a waste of money. Give the tools to the people who can actually exploit their value and show return on investment immediately, rather than after months of configuration and programming.

Besides, most senior techs are reluctant to populate knowledge systems with what is in their heads. Expert service knowledge is currency within an equipment service organization. Until the senior techs are properly rewarded for sharing knowledge without feeling threatened, it will not pay off much.

Achieving this kind of transformation is not without its challenges. This type of change is like overhauling your engine while your car is barreling down the highway.

The biggest mistake service leaders make is poor internal communication. Lack of proper communication leaves people to their own imagination, which is an often incorrect perception of their destiny. Having

tions will be very much aligned with what motivates them to work in the services industry. Call center techs will own customer problems all the way through to resolution. Field service techs will follow the direction and leadership of more experienced techs and will be responsible for becoming more self-guided and better service ambassadors.

We also need to change metrics. Rather than measuring how much time a tech spends on one case, measure overall resolution time. This is important because with remote service tools, a tech might spend more time engaged on a case, but will dramatically reduce resolution time and possibly avoid a dispatch.

A critical success factor for this transformation is that the equipment lends itself to remote service and diagnosis. If you cannot give your call center techs access into problem situations, their ability to affect resolution will be limited. Most equipment companies underestimate the impact that remote technologies can provide if you put the right tools in the right hands—even if remote supportability seems limited. Even still, a long-range roadmap must include involvement from

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an open dialogue and including them in the process is vital to any change. While that is an obvious statement, the specific area that needs to be addressed with honesty and clarity is headcount reduction.

This is certainly a sensitive topic. In reality, most organizations will use this model to reduce new-hire needs as the business grows. Employees need to understand this and know their part. They need to know how their role will change and what they must do to make the transition successful. They need to trust that if they contribute to the transformation, they will be part of the new future. However, if they work against it, they have no place within the organization.

This begins by rewriting job descriptions. There is no better way to be taken seriously by employees than to change the way they are measured, all the way down to the definitions of their jobs.

The opportunity here is that their new job descrip-

the product development team in order to add remote supportability functionality into the product.

Transforming the service organization in this way is a journey. Market pressures make it a mandatory journey for companies to remain competitive. Not only are there too few highly skilled workers to fill the positions needed for the traditional model, but the cost structure will not sustain the business. Customers' service level demands are only going up. They struggle with a lack of skilled workers just like you.

If you wait for the market to move you toward this change, you will most likely have a long, hard road of working against your own organization. Most of your energy will be spent in conflict over what is right for the business. If your company is mature enough to realize that service is the competitive differentiator, you will still have a long road, but at least everyone will be moving in the same direction. **S**