KNOWLEDGE-CENTERED SERVICE (KCS) EXPLAINED

In the 21st century, digital is the way of life, especially inside any business or organization. With significant shifts in innovation and productivity, it seems that support functions can barely keep up. While technical support used to be an internal, back-office department that customers never saw, today's customers interact with technical service teams on a daily basis. Support teams within organizations may struggle to keep up, but Knowledge Centered Service is changing that. Knowledge Centered Service, or KCS, emphasizes knowledge as a critical asset for delivering service and support. KCS stood for "Knowledge Centered Support" until the v6 release in April 2016 at which time the phrase was updated to "Knowledge Centered Service". In this article, we are exploring the KCS principles and methodology.

What is Knowledge Centered Service?

To understand KCS, let's take the long view of service teams in digital workplaces.

In most organizations, regardless of size, IT help desks are swamped with requests, ranging from small, tedious items that are easy to accomplish but take time, to larger problems that must be dealt with immediately. IT service teams are always balancing these requests, based on priority, individual knowledge of a problem, and time required researching, which can mean reaching out to people outside of the IT service team.

The problems with these existing issues are clear:

- Time spent solving repetitive issues
- Time and resources spent researching complicated issues

Knowledge is a major solution to these bottlenecks. Accessing pre-existing knowledge helps drastically reduce the time spent solving problems, therein saving money and resources. This theory, known as knowledge management, is a popular way to mitigate the challenges of service teams that are under increasing pressure to respond to customers correctly, quickly, and flexibly.

When an IT service team solves an issue, often handled by only one person, it is very common for that knowledge solution to go by the wayside. With one problem solved, the IT staff moves onto the next problem. In a perfect world, that information would be captured for future use, in a sort of knowledge center, in order to save time and resources when the same or similar issues arise again. If no knowledge base has been built, there's no place for that specific knowledge to become part of a collective, collaborative knowledge.

While knowledge is a clear solution to the chaotic reality for IT desks, implementing knowledge management effectively still eludes many organizations. The challenges are two-fold: building a knowledge base, then using it successfully.

Building a knowledge base takes time, priority, and a joint approach with teams beyond just the IT service desk. Unfortunately, knowledge management often isn't prioritized or embraced by a large enough group of knowledge experts, often because it is seen as an extra task for an already overloaded team.

In cases where organizations have already implemented some type of knowledge center, there are still bottlenecks to successful implementation: too much bureaucracy in the way of reviews or approval cycles or a lack of priority or time in developing it. In some situations, content that has been created often isn't relatable or contextual to the customer experience.

This is where Knowledge Centered Service(KCS) comes in. The theory maintains that speeding up service is very doable within a provided network for the IT service team to access and maintain knowledge.

There are four core principles of KCS that aim to improve how IT help desks function:

- Abundance: Share more, learn more.
- Create Value: Work tasks; think big picture.
- Demand Driven: Knowledge is a by-product of interaction
- Trust: Engage, empower, motivate

KCS isn't just theoretical though: its tenets provide both a method and techniques that help organizations respond to issues quicker, including shortening the time necessary to address complex issues, and provide consistent answers for customers that enable self-sufficiency. The goal of KCS is to integrate the use of a knowledge base into an organizational workflow in order to:

- Create content as a by-product of solving problems
- Evolve content based on usage and demand
- Develop a knowledge base of the collective experience of an organization
- Recognize learning, collaboration, sharing, and improving

History of KCS

In 1992, the Consortium for Service Innovation formed as a non-profit alliance of support organizations. The member-ship based organization focused primarily on designing a tool with specific features and functionality that would assist organizations in capturing and reusing knowledge as a by-product of work performed.

Within a couple years, however, the members within the Consortium realized that no matter how good a tool was to manage knowledge, its success truly rested on people and behaviors. In the mid-1990s the Consortium focuses on defining an organizational that focused on people instead of technology.

In the mid-2002, the Consortium for Service Innovation partnered with HDI to promote and facilitate understanding and implementing the KCS approach to knowledge management.

Today, the partnership focuses on knowledge as a key asset of an organization. HDI and the Consortium offer regular training and certification programs to members that focus on two key areas:

- Methodology, principles, and techniques that leverage knowledge as a key asset of an organization
- Reusing, improving, and creating of knowledge articles to facilitate quicker resolution and enable self-service

As of spring 2017, KCS methodology is on its sixth version.

The Two Loops of Knowledge Centered Service

KCS provides a continuous loop for managing, sharing, and improving knowledge, effectively becoming the way an IT team provides technical support, both to internal and external users.

Relying on core concepts such as continuous improvement, collective experience and collective ownership, and seeking to understand before seeking to solve, KCS helps organizations create and review knowledge articles. The articles go through draft, approval, and publishing phases. The resulting cost-benefit savings includes fewer calls to the help desk and fewer incidents logged. It helps users become more self-sufficient and more proficient at using the software.

KCS approaches knowledge management so that it isn't an additional task when solving issues. KCS instead becomes the way in which issues are resolved.

Knowledge Centered Service relies on two continuous loops, the Solve Loop and the Evolve Loop, together known as the Double Loop Process. The Solve Loop is the more immediate loop, with the Evolve Loop working continuously in the background.

The Solve Loop has four steps:

- **Step 1: Capture Knowledge.** When a customer request comes in, those answering the request create an article as a by-product of solving the customer's problem. The IT team writes articles specifically for the customer, so that the information is inherently relevant to the customer and easily searchable.
- **Step 2: Structure Knowledge.** Using a template or form for writing an article keeps things easy and simple for service employees and it keeps the knowledge base consistent, making it

easier for customers.

- **Step 3: Reuse Knowledge.** Agents search the knowledge base when solving a customer issue, and they can link it to other relevant articles they may have used when solving a problem. This enhances the collective knowledge as another agent may not have known that two issues could be related.
- **Step 4: Improve Knowledge.** Agents are inherently reviewing the knowledge as they research articles to solve a problem. If there's an issue, the agent can directly update it just that piece of the article, and publish it to the customers. Topics that are frequently used therefore stay current.

The Evolve Loop has four components, which aren't necessarily steps, as they are more focused on knowledge reuse and product improvement:

- **Content Health.** Measure the effectiveness of each article.
- **Process Integration.** Usage stats indicate which articles are the most popular and requested, so these articles become ones the team always keeps an eye on.
- **Performance Assessment.** Tracking user searches also helps to identify missing knowledge – these are how the team knows to create new articles to fill in these gaps.
- **Leadership & Communication.** Knowledge authors are guided by coaches that provide automated performance feedback and manual article review alongside general mentoring, so the authors are progressed through sets of competency levels.

Who uses Knowledge Centered Service?

The issues that face IT service teams actually affect many teams across an organization. While the IT team is responsible for solving internal and external problems, they can't do it alone. Their specialty is IT systems, but they often are not experts in other areas of a business, instead having minimal knowledge of the product, business practices, sales and marketing, and more.

When implementing KCS, some organizations establish a dedicated knowledge team that goes beyond the IT service desk. Therein lies a similar challenge: a knowledge team is unlikely to have expertise in all subject areas.

Therefore, for KCS to offer the most benefit to the entire organization, subject matter experts from all disciplines must buy-in and prioritize the approach to knowledge management.

Beyond the IT service team and subject matter experts, there's actually a third user group: the customers themselves. KCS emphasizes the importance of people over processes, so at the end of the day, if the knowledge isn't directly helping the user, it isn't the best support it can be.

A case study in Knowledge Centered Service

KCS has been effectively and successfully implemented in organizations large and small, including some multi-national groups including Apollo Group, Autodesk, Avaya, Dell, EMC, Ericsson, HP Enterprise, Oracle, and Salesforce. KCS also fits within IT Infrastructure Libraries (ITIL).

One recent success story is Lowe's, a Fortune 50 company with more than 2,355 home improvement retail stores across North America. With no formalized best practices and little in the way of locatable knowledge, the IT service desk of nearly 300 people worked in a frustrated manner that exasperated thousands of customers.

When Lowe's began to implement KCS several years ago, they started small: they handpicked seven unique teams with a goal of creating a repeatable process that would be flexible enough to accommodate nuances among the various teams. Lowe's KCS effort also address employees' concerns head-on, comprised of many ideas including that IT staff aren't tech writers, that experienced employees feared replacement by cheaper, less-seasoned employees, and that subject matter experts would lose their expertise status.

[According to HDI](), Lowe's IT service team now fully implements KCS tenets. The company recognizes several components that made the knowledge overhaul successful:

- Leadership and communication, though a last-step in the KCS double loop, was always emphasized by those leading. As the audience changes, leaders would tweak the message so it was consistent yet effective, and the message on content creation became king.
- Lowe's relied heavily on the Consortium's guides and they also reached out to other large organizations that successfully implemented KCS. Understanding others' pitfalls helped Lowe's anticipate their own and navigate them more smoothly.
- Understanding that significant change takes time. In order for KCS principles to be embraced effectively, Lowe's provided constant attention to the change, coaching employees, cultivating successes, and listening to diverse feedback. KCS became a journey, not an end-goal.

Benefits of Knowledge Centered Service

The benefits of KCS are clear: when implementing content holistically, an organization should expect to see dramatic improvements in operating costs, incident/request resolution, customer satisfaction, job satisfaction, and reduction in training and onboarding new staff.

The idea that content truly is king is also a cultural shift: teams can now rely on collaborative knowledge instead of solely individual learning experiences. Collective knowledge means the service team doesn't have to be the only team solving issues, and it helps the organization onboard new agents a lot quicker and reliably while staying flexible and relevant to the customer.