How to Embed Continual Service Improvement and Make it Stick
CSI Must be Part of a Service Desk’s Culture

A formally recognized approach to continual service improvement (CSI) stretches back to the mid-20th Century. It has been one of the core processes of the ITIL® framework since the framework was created in the 1980s. However, many companies only start looking at CSI after something seriously goes out of kilter and starts to affect service delivery.

Taking up CSI after a service disaster is a good step forward, but this doesn’t guarantee that CSI will be embedded in the organization’s ongoing approach. It can be seen as a bandage—something that helps heal a specific issue but doesn’t stick after that initial issue is fixed.

For many teams, CSI is something that gets discussed but does not get taken up in the way that it is intended. Subsequently, it fails to deliver the value it’s capable of delivering. How, then, can we as IT service management (ITSM) professionals instill CSI within service- and customer-facing teams and beyond?

CSI will simply remain a three-letter acronym if it is not embedded within the business. To achieve this, data is needed to prove its worth. The ability to capture useful data is essential to demonstrate that service improvement strategies are creating the desired impact. Data allows for the definition and recording of metrics. Metrics can then be aligned to performance and thus achievement, success, or areas needing improvements can be identified.

For many people, the thought process here is, “I’m handling more issues, and customer satisfaction continues to be good, so I must be improving, right?” While this might be true, it’s not the whole story. The service desk plays only one part in the delivery of service, and too often, it doesn’t have the necessary information from elsewhere within the organization to build up the full picture needed.
The current vogue within IT is customer experience

Services are shifting to online portals and websites, and as more customer activity shifts to online, the competition for delivering an excellent customer experience continues to increase. As such, the bar of expectations continues to rise.

This in itself should help to establish a culture of CSI within the business. After all, if your competitors are offering a slicker experience for customers, customers will shift their allegiances. The challenge for any business is to join up what can be isolated islands of data and projects within the business that pertain to customer experience improvement and turn these islands into a unified mass.

Customer experience is now a demand of the consumer. Customers want to drive the experience they desire. Without CSI, this experience will remain static and not fulfill customer expectations. Status quo is no longer an option in the delivery of services. The inability to improve will lead to a reduction in customer satisfaction and delight.

Collaborate with other business units and share information

Depending on the organisation, this can be an uphill battle, but it is worth it for the ability to see how service quality is affected. At this point, however, it becomes easier to make service improvement more of a cultural force within the company. Improvement as a cultural ethos has to be wide ranging. Too often, companies concentrate improvement in one area without improving the supporting service or functions, thus an initial customer experience may be good but will quickly deteriorate through the lifecycle of the delivery.

Working with teams like customer service will make it easier to identify service improvement ideas and to gather anecdotal information direct from end users. There is another positive outcome here as well that may not be immediately identified; the customer service team can help to communicate service improvements to customers and therefore be the voice of IT.

Collaborating with another department to get feedback can be a good opportunity to check how service quality initiatives are performing, and it also provides the opportunity to evangelise projects and initiatives. Following on from this, setting up regular updates for the business around how service improvement has delivered better results can provide the impetus to keep CSI going into the future.
Establish a company-wide CSI understanding

Getting cultural buy-in around CSI is a long-term goal and should be based on how the whole organization aims to improve its operations. Each department will have its own ideas about how it can up its game to secure better results, but completing these in isolation means the whole remains less than the sum of the parts. CSI leaders have to get out into the business and help departments see where their own initiatives can link together. We may not be able to take on board every idea or proposal, but we must give the business the opportunity to share its thoughts. This engagement is vital for buy-in and recognition of the value proposition of CSI.

This outward focus will help to establish a more company-wide understanding of CSI. This will help to remove the challenge of CSI being perceived simply as something the service desk does. The best performing service desk with well-honed improvement processes will have a negligible impact on the business compared to actions that are taken across departments.

Making CSI a success

CSI is not just about service level agreements (SLAs). While SLAs may drive CSI, SLAs can only tell so much, and individual figures can be improved with no visible impact to the rest of the business.

Investment is required to make CSI a success. This mainly involves time, resources, and concentration in order to generate the best results. Investment in new technology may be required to bridge gaps, while existing ITSM platforms may be utilized to a greater degree to drive results.

For service teams running CSI programs, a 360 degree view, and 360 degree input, is necessary to help the whole organization benefit from the business value CSI can create.

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