



The Future of IT: Putting the Customer First

How to take an internal customer-first approach to gain a competitive advantage for the business

INTRODUCTION

The nature of today's business climate means that now, more than ever, companies look for any business advantage that helps them stay ahead of the competition. Often, that means companies take such steps as creating innovative products, increasing and maintain customer loyalty, and implementing cost-control measures to realize distinct advantages.

Leading industry analysts point to two areas internally where companies can achieve the best possible advantages, by focusing on a company's workers and work processes. These areas are:

1. Enhancing the level of interactivity between knowledge workers within the company itself.¹
2. Modernizing and enhancing the manner in which people work by aligning a company's IT functions with its core business processes.²

The use of social-enabled IT support tools in corporate settings, the proliferation of mobile devices and technology, and the advent of cloud-based solutions and services have all combined to create new ways in which workers go about doing their jobs. Workers are now no longer beholden to the typical 9-to-5 work schedules that have historically defined their jobs. These technologies empower workers to work virtually anytime, anywhere via their mobile devices, and they expect to have the freedom and flexibility to do so. As a result, companies must adapt internal processes and policies to keep pace with these newfound expectations.

One such approach that can help companies adapt to this new world of consumerized technology and shifting expectations is to think of their own employees as internal customers and focus on meeting their needs and expectations, much like companies would approach and market to their external customers. Companies can harness the powerful capabilities of social, mobile, and cloud-based solutions to implement a "customer-first" approach into their internal culture. This customer-first approach—powered by social, mobile, and cloud-based solutions—empowers companies to modernize their work processes and interactions to drive worker productivity and efficiency. The information that follows will show companies the importance of a customer-first approach and the processes needed for implementation.

BUILDING A CUSTOMER-FIRST CULTURE USING SOCIAL, MOBILE, AND CLOUD-BASED TECHNOLOGY AND APPLICATIONS

Social-enabled enterprise applications form part of the foundation upon which to build an effective customer-first internal company culture. Previously, social media tools and technology were focused primarily on targeting and marketing to a company's external customers. Trends show that companies are using these same social applications and tools to reach internal customers and keep pace with demand. Just this year, analyst firm IDC reports that the deployment of social-enabled enterprise applications are the number-one initiative for U.S.-based companies.³ Applications that include social features—such as instant messaging—and provide peer support are proving to be "must haves" critical to a company's overall efficiency and success.

The use of social-enabled IT support also has a positive effect on workers' overall personal productivity. A 2012 study conducted by the Netherlands' University of Twente found that nearly 8% of workers' productivity gets lost due to experiencing technical issues or receiving inadequate information and communications technical (ICT) support.⁴ For companies seeking any and all business advantages over their competitors, productivity losses such as these inhibit market growth. Connecting employees to information and resources via social collaboration is one way to maintain productivity.

Mobile devices and technology, combined with cloud-based services, also fill equally important roles in building a customer-first approach. Mobile devices are critical for workers today to stay productive. These devices, along with innovative mobile

1 Preparing for a New Era of Work, Mckinsey & Company, November 2012

2 IDG: The Role of IT Driving Next-Generation Business Growth

3 IDC Social Software Survey, 2013

4 CTRL ALT DELETE: Lost productivity due to IT problems and inadequate computer skills in the workplace, University of Twente, 2012

applications and services, keep workers connected and collaborative wherever they work. Plus, this technology grants remote workers access to mobile self-service IT management and support tools, such as Web portals, where business users can troubleshoot their own support issues; online device provisioning, where workers can configure their own devices and mobile services, set and manage device policies, add devices and access billing and accounting functions, and more; and mobile application stores and portals—either general business applications (think Apple or Google apps) or a company’s customized storefront—where workers can pick and choose applications best suited for their particular job functions and needs.

As a result, most leading organizations use each of these tools and technologies in creating customer-first policies to support an individual worker’s productivity and to accelerate the pace of interaction between their knowledge workers. As stated earlier, business can take place virtually anywhere and at anytime, which causes workers to spend as much time out of the office working offsite as they do at their desks. This means workers are more dependent than ever upon virtual collaboration tools powered by social, mobile, and cloud technologies to keep them connected and productive wherever work takes them.

Companies successfully deploying a customer-first approach follow a series of processes that incorporate social, mobile, and cloud-based technologies to serve the needs of their internal customers and enable them to serve themselves.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT INTERNAL CUSTOMER-FIRST PROCESSES INTO AN ORGANIZATION’S CULTURE.

An effective implementation of customer-first policies into a company’s internal culture should include the following elements. This list of elements may seem familiar, since they are also used in effective external customer-facing IT strategies, as the line between internal and external customers disappears and become one.

Internal customer-first approaches should consist of:

Simplified, intuitive customer experiences: A company’s internal productivity tools and applications such as self-service and knowledge portals should be designed with business-user customers in mind, i.e., the average worker, and not the more tech-savvy, power users found in the company’s back-office support teams. These tools and applications must be intuitive and easy-to-use for the everyday worker.

For example, in a customer-first setting, a company must consider the design, layout, and built-in functionality of its IT service management (ITSM) tool. A customer-first–inspired ITSM solution includes a flexible design that allows IT personnel to configure the tool by workers’ roles or internal company departments and contains all the information relevant to these particular users. Plus, the ITSM tool must include efficient and intuitive self-service capabilities, such as Web portals, online knowledge bases, app stores, company wikis, and more, that enable users to access applications and services quickly and easily without the need for additional IT help and input.

Freedom of choice: In the past, the multitude of available devices, solutions, and applications deployed within a particular company placed additional stress on its IT support department. Whenever a worker contacted IT to resolve a particular issue, the tech support person would first have to get up to speed by asking the worker a number of questions, such as which device or devices were used, what applications they may be using, or spending valuable time in unearthing potentially dozens of other items of information to fix the problem.

By taking a customer-first approach, a company’s IT department changes its focus from information-gathering to issue resolution. In this situation, the IT department supports all types of technology and stores all pertinent information about each individual worker and his or her technology assets with the company in its ITSM tool, making it easier and more effective to support each user. Now, whenever a worker calls tech support, IT personnel has his or her information on hand, so more time is spent to troubleshoot and resolve the issue, rather than wasting time getting up to speed.

Sense of community: Each worker wants to feel a sense of belonging to the company, a connection to their peers/fellow-employees and feel they make a valuable contribution to its overall success. The use of peer support and social networking solutions to resolve issues and communicate frees up valuable support resources to focus on other tasks, while creating a sense of community and inclusion for workers who work offsite away from the office.

In a customer-first setting, a sense of community can be generated through the creation and usage of knowledge bases, frequently asked questions (FAQs) documents, application development tools, and interfaces, or related tools. Workers can take the opportunity to individually contribute to the overall success of the company by adding new information to its knowledge bases, developing new processes or improving upon existing processes to solve an issue, or creating a new business application and upload it to the company's app catalog for all to use.

Responsiveness to increased customer demands: As work continues 24/7 and the multitude of mobile devices that require a corporate network connection increase, the need for anytime, anywhere access to ITSM becomes increasingly vital. The addition of cloud-based solutions and services that do not require client-side applications are best suited to keep up with the increased demands on company resources.

For company workers, increased demand responsiveness means they get IT services delivered much faster and more efficiently. Web portals and related online tools allow workers to simply log on to the company's IT system and download or access the services and solutions they need for their specific job functions.

Within a company's tech support department, increased responsiveness enables IT personnel to troubleshoot and solve tech issues much more quickly. A worker's specific details, such as devices used, and applications and systems access, is immediately available to support personnel, allowing them to access this information quickly, then use online tools and mobile technology to diagnose and solve the problem remotely, if needed.

CONCLUSION

The nature of how, where and with which tools workers do their jobs has changed drastically over the past several years, which means companies must consider new approaches to achieve distinct advantages in a hyper-competitive global business environment. Taking the approach of customer-first policies provides companies the means to modernize their business processes and how the work gets done. Customer-first policies make use of social, mobile and cloud technologies to change how and where workers go about their jobs, giving them the freedom and flexibility they desire to drive company productivity.

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