WELCOME TO **YOUR** NEW CAREE

TECHNICAL SERV & SPPORT!

by Paul M. Dooley

You made the jump and took the position. *Whew!* Now you're ready to start your new job in technical service and support. Congratulations! It's important that you realize:

- It's not just a job anymore—it's a career!

- The support industry had matured over the years in terms best practices, variety of positions, and industry recognition.

- It's where the action is. You are now in a position to really make a difference—improving customer satisfaction, lowering costs, and boosting productivity.

- In many support centers, you now have opportunities to grow and develop. Opportunities in the industry include technical and managerial advancement.

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Why the Increased Industry Focus on High-Performing Support Centers?

Organizations realize, now more than ever, that quality support is critical to organizational success.

- IT organizations are looking for quality support staff that have the right mix of technical skills and customer service skills (it takes both!).

- They know that the service desk/support center is the first line of defense for IT and that IT's reputation depends on the quality service and support it delivers to users.

- Externally-facing support centers are looking to make support a differentiator in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

The industry also recognizes how important it is to have trained, certified employees. According to Datamation, one of the top ten certifications an IT professional can achieve is in ITIL, due to the importance many organizations place on improving best practices. A key function in ITIL is the service desk and, of course, key personnel at a service desk include:

- Support center analysts
- Support center team leads
- Support center managers and directors

Studies by Robert Half Technology show that support, as a profession, is one of the most sought-after positions in the IT job market. Why? Because support analysts with the right combination of skills—strong technical skills, effective communication skills, and good problem-solving skills—are simply hard to find. It takes a unique blend of skills and talent to make an effective support analyst, which is why your position is so valuable.

It's also true that your position is recognized by many to be a "gateway" to more advanced technical or management positions, either within the service desk/support center or in other departments within IT or the organization. The reasoning should be obvious: customer support staff members are the ones on the frontline, in daily contact with users of the organization's technology, products, or services. They have to think on their feet, maintain good customer relationships, and think ahead. These traits are valued by any organization.

Career-Pathing Offers Opportunities for Growth and Advancement

It used to be that the service desk/support center was viewed as merely a way station, a rest stop on the way to another position within IT or the organization. But no longer. Times are indeed a-changin'. IT and support center managers realize that the service desk is the "face of IT," the point where customer satisfaction succeeds or fails. They know that to retain good talent, keep costs down and productivity up, and have an effective IT organization, IT must offer opportunities for growth and advancement.

This is even more critical in the case of externally-facing support centers. Support centers are in the driver's seat when it comes to delivering the organization's products or services and satisfying customers. Satisfied customers are less likely to defect, will refer others, and will probably buy additional products and services. It just makes good business sense these days to provide quality support for your products and services.

It's also widely recognized that a trained, well-equipped support staff often has vital skills and knowledge that make them ideal

candidates for other positions within IT or the organization. Communication, relationship management, problem-solving, effective utilization of technology—these skills are vital and often make the difference between success and failure. What's more, they are easily transferrable to other positions, thus making positions in the support center a foundation for advancement to other opportunities.

As a result, career-pathing is the new reality—at long last! More support managers are crafting both technical and managerial career paths for their support staff. Of course, depending on the organization you are working for, the breadth of career opportunities may vary:

- Smaller organizations tend to have fewer levels and choices.
- Larger organizations tend to have both technical and managerial career paths, with a variety of opportunities in both areas.

Below are some examples of support center career paths:

Level	Technical	Management
5		Support Center Director
4	Support Center Consultant (L3) Other IT technical positions	Support Center Manager
3	Senior Support Center Analyst (L2) Desktop Support Technician (L2)	Support Center Supervisor Support Center Team Lead
2	Support Center Analyst (L1)	
1	Customer Service Representative	

Also driving this trend is the fact that industry standards, such as the HDI Support Center Certification Standard, require best practice-compliant support centers to not only establish training plans for each position, but also career development programs.

Show Me the Money! Salary Ranges for Support Center Staff Are Trending Up

Salary ranges vary depending on the type of organization (public/private) and region of the country/world. Also, depending on the type of support—simple versus complex systems, administrative versus technical support, routine versus mission-critical—salaries may be higher or lower. Nevertheless, support center personnel tend to be well paid in comparison to other industries. Here are some examples of support center salaries from the 2009 *HDI Practices & Salary Report* (in U.S. dollars).

Region	SC Analyst (L1)	Senior SC Analyst (L2)	SC Supervisor or SC Team Lead (L3)	SC Manager
West	$45,480	$54,135	$67,782	$86,115
Central	$37,779	$45,732	$58,551	$78,273
East	$38,912	$46,973	$60,303	$76,407

Salaries for these positions have continued to rise over the past two years, a testament to the importance that organizations place on the value of technical support.

Support Industry Salary Trends, 2006-2009
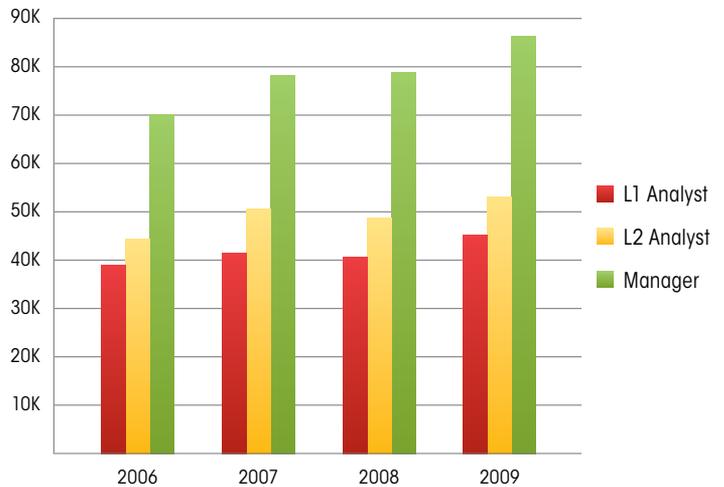
Source: 2006-2009 *HDI Practices & Salary Reports*

Bottom line: If you have the right mix of technical and customer service skills, are an effective problem solver, enjoy interfacing with people, and are willing to work hard, you can make good money and enjoy a rewarding career in technical service and support!

Getting to the Next Level

Typically, progressing from one level to the next—whether you are on the technical or a managerial career path—requires a combination of experience, skills, and competencies:

- Showing that you have exceeded expectations for the job at hand and are ready to move to the next level
- Demonstrating the skills and ability to handle the next level on your career path
- Acquiring the knowledge required to perform higher-level job functions at an acceptable level
- Completing any relevant training and certification for that position

Some of the factors that might be required to move from one career level to the next are illustrated below, for both the technical and managerial career paths.

Sample Technical Career Path

Position	Experience	Knowledge	Skills	Training and Certifications
Support Consultant (L3)	3–5 years	Expert level in selected area(s)	Expert level problem-solving skills; good customer service skills	MSCE, CISCO, or similar advanced technical certifications; ITIL Foundations; SCA or DST course and certificate
Senior Support Center Analyst or Desktop Support Technician (L2)	2–4 years	Advanced level in selected area(s)	Advanced problem-solving skills; very good customer service skills	MCITP, MCDST, A+, or similar technical certification; ITIL Foundations; DST (if applicable)
Support Center Analyst (L1)	1–3 years	Effective frontline technical support knowledge in most areas and operational processes	General problem-solving skills; excellent customer service skills	MCITP technical certification; SCA course and certificate
Customer Service Representative	6 months–1 year	Administrative and support processes; account management	Excellent customer service skills	CSR course and certificate

Sample Managerial Career Path

Position	Experience	Knowledge	Skills	Training and Certifications
Support Center Director	4–7 years	Broad, in-depth organizational knowledge; strategic planning; financial, resource planning	Leadership and management skills; communication skills	Business management; SCD training and certification; ITIL Foundations
Support Center Manager	3–5 years	Organizational knowledge; broad knowledge of technology supported; process and best practices	Tactical planning and management; communication skills	SCM training and certification; ITIL Foundations
Support Center Team Lead or Support Center Supervisor	2–4 years	Process knowledge; solid technical knowledge of all areas of responsibility	Operational team leadership and management skills; good customer service skills	SCTL training and certification; ITIL Foundations; relevant technical training and certifications
Support Center Analyst (L1)	1–3 years	Effective frontline technical support knowledge in most areas; operational processes	General problem-solving skills; excellent customer service skills	MCITP technical certification; SCA course and certificate
Customer	6 months–1 year	Administrative and support processes; account management	Excellent customer service skills	CSR course and certificate

Welcome to the Community!

As a support center analyst, you now have the opportunity to become a part of many communities that can help you grow personally and professionally. Of course, there are the over sixty HDI local chapters in the U.S. and Canada. As an HDI member, you get complementary access to monthly local chapter meetings where you can:

- Network with other support industry professionals,
- Learn from industry professionals speaking on a variety of topics, and
- Enjoy good food and just plain have a good time!

You can also connect with other support professionals and learn about evolving technologies and best practices at industry conferences, such as the HDI Annual Conference & Expo, itSMF's annual conference, and others. While you're at it, why not consider volunteering to speak at conferences or lead workshops? The possibilities are truly endless.

Besides websites like HDI's main site, local chapter sites, and other Internet-based industry resources, HDI and its local chapters even maintain LinkedIn and Facebook pages where you can connect, collaborate, and network with your new support peers! How about that?

A Note to Managers: Why Continual Learning Should Be an Integral Part of Your Support Processes

Continual service improvement is a key component of ITIL v3, and given that services are dependent on people, process, and technology, it's critical that every organization pay particular attention to its people resources. That includes its support center staff.

Just as support center managers and other IT managers monitor performance and look for opportunities to improve technology components and systems and supporting processes, it's imperative that support center managers build a continual learning approach into their people management practices. Why? Because well-trained and effective staff can:

- Handle incidents much more effectively and quickly,
- Deal with customers more confidently,
- Reduce the frequency of escalations, and
- Demonstrate higher resource utilization.

It's a fact. People resources (your analysts, team leads, and managers) that are continually learning lower support center costs, produce higher customer satisfaction, and boost productivity. Incorporating continual learning into the very fabric of your support center will ensure that your staff keeps pace with the demands of an ever-changing, rapidly evolving technical marketplace. 🌐

Paul will return to the topic of continual learning in the November/December 2010 issue of SupportWorld.

About the Author
Paul is the president and principal consultant at Optimal Connections LLC. With over thirty years of experience in the high technology and software development industry, Paul has held numerous positions in customer service, support and marketing. He has extensive experience in service desk infrastructure development, support center consolidation, deployment of web portals and knowledge management systems, as well as service marketing strategy and activities.

Paul has a B.A. in international relations from California State University in Fullerton, CA and an M.B.A. from National University in San Diego. He is ITIL v2 Foundations and Practitioner certified and an ITIL v3 Expert. He is also an HDI Certified Instructor and auditor.