User Support 2.0 – New Communication Channels in the IT-ServiceDesk at RWTH Aachen University

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1. Summary

The world we live in is increasingly becoming mobile. Smartphones and tablets act as our daily companions. As a result, our communication habits have changed. At the same time, the demand for quick answers to questions and requests is rising. Telephone and e-mail experience competition from chats and web portals while blogs with corresponding communities as well as information portals enjoy increasing popularity. Looking at the annual user satisfaction survey conducted by the RWTH Aachen University IT Center, the results of 2014 confirmed this trend for the customers of the IT Center. Regarding the survey results and against the backdrop of the above mentioned developments, the IT-ServiceDesk conceptualized scenarios for additional future-oriented communication channels that have been implemented in 2015. Hence the IT-ServicDesk that was recently based on telephone and e-mail communication has step by step advanced to a multi-channel service provider. This was a necessary precondition to establish an omni-channel system in the future.

2. IT CENTER OF RWTH AACHEN UNIVERSITY AND ITS IT-SERVICEDESK

The IT Center is a central organization of RWTH Aachen University that supports crucial IT processes of the university, provides and distributes approx. 34 basic as well as individual IT services for other organizational units of the university and external partners. As a provider of IT services, the IT Center has to analyze the wants and needs of its customers. The implementation of IT Service Management in 2008 already showed that a central contact for users of the IT services provided by the IT Center is essential to bring a high-quality approach to the increasing user requirements. The IT-ServiceDesk (IT-SD) is responsible for accommodating any concerns the user may have and for directly processing 1st-level support queries. Additionally, the IT-SD organizes and structures the communication between the user and the various specialist departments of the IT Center in the event of more complex issues. The variety and complexity of the services and the heterogeneity of users pose a significant challenge to the IT-SD supporters, their knowledge and communication skills. These communicative competencies include a very broad range of content knowledge and expertise on the one hand and allow the IT-SD staff to operate in a particularly professional and customer-oriented way on the other hand. In order to better and more sensitively respond to customer needs and hence to increase customer understanding, the IT-SD has been conducting annual user survey since 2011. The user survey of 2014 indicated that the customers of the IT Center are requesting new and modern contact channels.

3. IT-SERVICEDESKS WITH NEW COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The self-conception of the IT Center as a modern IT service provider and changing communication habit of the users affected the IT-SD to intensively discuss and deal with new, modern communication channels. We started by looking at other outstanding universities (TU9 and Idea League). The analysis revealed that except for the Delft University of Technology none of the above-mentioned universities offered e.g. a chat support or a blog with community for their support teams, helpdesks or information centers. Issues concerning work organization, staff workloads as well as implementation scenarios were subject of intensive discussion. Initial experience with our ticket portal (live since January 2015) that allows the user to check the status of their inquiry online and at any time proved helpful in this matter. We had also gained experience of posting information via the Facebook account of the RWTH Aachen University. Against this background and with the wish that our customers would open up to new, modern communication channels, the IT Center blog with its support community, the web chat available via the website of the documentation portal as well as the support chat of the RWTHApp were designed as a multi-channel solution. Multi-channel means having various channels available for

customers to submit requests: email, chat, social media, etc. This implies that the customer support department has to run 5 or even more applications to manage all of those customer interactions. For the customer, there is no connection between the systems, so there is no information flow between different requests. There is also no connection for the supporter due to the non-integrated information about the customer history. Despite of this challenges the implementation of a multi-channel system was an appropriate step forward. From the perspective of the user the diversity of communication channels -that had been realized in the short term- is highly convenient and allows an individualized communication behavior. Otherwise the IT-SD and its staff gained organizational and individual experiences in dealing with the new channels. Hence the IT-SD met the requirements of its customers, upgraded its communication system and created a positive image as a modern service provider.

3.1. Chat Support via RWTHApp and Web Chat

Owing to the pre-existing functionalities of the audience response system, integrated in the RWTHApp, the integration of the support chat in the RWTHApp was not a real issue. The integration on the documentation portal website could also be implemented rapidly. What proves more challenging is the development of a suitable, user-friendly backend for both use cases. It had to be ensured that the chats are integrated in the requirement of the existing reporting rules (number, duration, time of reception etc.). Additionally, it was necessary to test how many chats are to be processed by the staff and how many staff members are basically required to realize a swift and high-quality chat support. Questions e.g. how quickly a chat had to be responded, how users should be addressed and what questions were even suitable to be processed and answered via the communication channel chat had to be answered beforehand. "Go live" was in November 2015 and at present it can be stated that the prudent procedure of not promoting the support chat via the IT Center blog and not yet releasing a Facebook post gives us time to deal with this new additional communication channel and to learn what our customers will expect from this channel.

3.2. IT Center Blog and its Community

The IT Center blog was designed as a modern information platform that provides weekly, target-group-specific posts. A defined process that regulates what posts are released at what time and how, allows the authors to "produce to stock" and backlog posts but also to permit guest commentaries. As a result, we have succeeded in consistently releasing at least one post each week, since July 1, 2015. The objective is to involve users in moderated discussions so that finally support communities will emerge. Contests and quizzes are intended to encourage users to participate actively in the creation of the community. Experience from networking groups of student dormitories have shown that there is a great deal of readiness to act as supporters on the user side.

4. CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

Today it´s self-evident that users communicate via chats, web portals, apps and Facebook beside the conventional contact channels. This diversity of communication opportunities is already established in business. The IT Center followed this development through the implementation of a communication strategy including chats and blog. Along with major challenges, the progressive digitization also presents a wide array of possibilities to intelligently control customer inquiries, prevent calls and enhance the benefits for the customer. However, the implementation of new channels must be closely coordinated and tailored to the individual customer target groups. It has to be taken into account what channel is really needed and what technical support possibilities can be integrated accordingly. Securing a fully integrated reporting that spans across all channels should also be considered. The impact of the changing communication behavior on the staff has to be taken into consideration. E.g. the level of flexibility and the willingness to communicate with the customers on a multitude of channels will increase. The aim is to synchronize and integrate various communication channels at the IT Center in a way that will eventually ensure a special user experience and at the same time reduce the staff's workload. In this system of omni-channel communication all customer information and contact points are cross-linked through various applications. Specifically, this represents that the advantages of digital and conventional communication and distribute/sales channels are seamlessly tied together, guiding the customer from the initial information search through contacting and up to the order process, irrespective of when and, in particular, which channels were utilized for the individual steps. The strategic vision of IT Center is to become an omni-channel service provider.

5.   AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Sarah Grzemski studied Economic Geography, Geography and Economics. She received her Master's degree from RWTH Aachen University in 2002. Until 2007, she worked as a research assistant in the Department of Economic Geography of Services. Her main research focus were employees in call and service centers. Since 2007 until today, she has been employed at the IT Center of RWTH Aachen University. Initially, she worked for the division of Process IT Support. Since 2010, she is the head of the division IT-ServiceDesk. In this role, she assumes responsibility for the staff and the strategic development of the IT-ServiceDesk, particularly with regard to customer support and service.