



2005 Trends and Directions in Web-Based Support

a white paper

Sponsored By:



2005 Trends and Directions in Web-Based Support

Rare is the company that doesn't claim to place a premium on their service and support delivery, and while it behooves most organizations to do just that, there are companies operating in certain vertical sectors, geographical regions, and products and services for whom it's more a mandate than a convenient philosophy. Financial services, high-tech and communications providers are among those who strive to differentiate themselves from competitors by the ways they serve their accounts. Case in point: According to a recent survey conducted by Forrester Research, 33 percent of financial services firms said they have an executive — besides the CEO — in charge of their company's entire customer experience, while a significantly lower percentage of firms overall (24 percent) have someone dedicated to overseeing this function. For more and more companies, service and support have bottom-line influence.

Recognizing the need to optimize service, however, doesn't mean there's a formulaic approach to delivering it in a high-quality, cost-effective manner. Designing an effective service model — and the subsequent selection of technologies, process engineering and workforce hiring — depends on a range of factors, including the business value the service/support organization provides; the products and services it supports, the vertical sector in which it operates, the value of individual customers, and numerous others. While there's a wealth of rich, increasingly comprehensive technologies available enabling businesses to drive toward true service and support optimization — remote diagnostics and support, self-healing, intelligent search and navigation, service resolution, personalization, multichannel integration platforms, collaboration, predictive analytics — the decision to deploy and across what channels should depend on a strategy based on clearly defined goals.

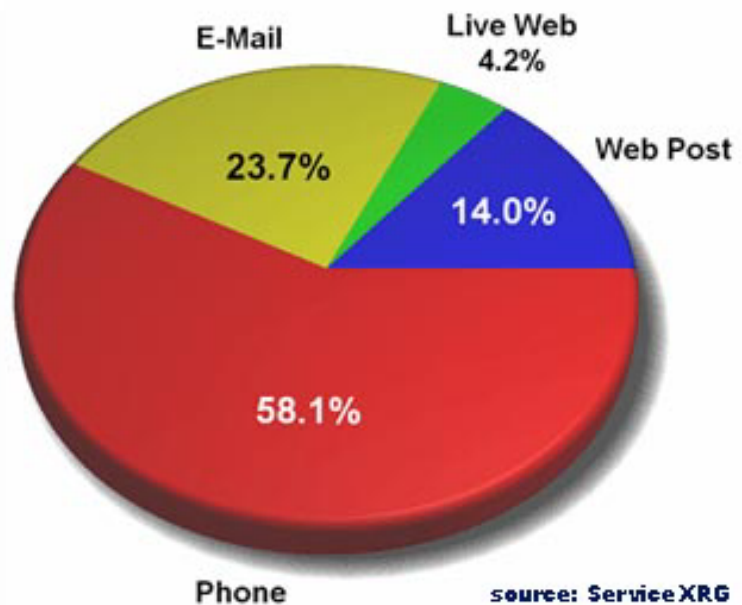
High on many executives' list of service goals, of course, is multichannel support to drive call deflection, in which customers and employees are inspired to seek help from less-costly channels — self-service rather than phone, a Web site rather than a storefront. Given that, integrated service channels and processes that map elegant and effective escalation are also high on service executives' wish lists.

"Companies are really concerned about delivering high-quality customer self-service in a multichannel environment," says Susan Aldrich, a senior vice president with the Boston-based Patricia Seybold Group. "It's extremely important in today's commercial environment that customers be able to get the answers to questions by themselves because in many cases, by the time they've picked up the phone, the relationship [with the business] is already ruined."

For companies who have multiple tiers of distribution, as many do, there's the added challenge of trying to extend a quality experience to customers seeking service and support through partners, whether they be distributors, system integrators, VARs, OEMs or others. "Most companies know they're not doing a good job of getting the right information into partners' hands, and it's giving them fits," says Aldrich. "They're having enough trouble with their own sites — if they can't make it work there, how can they do it on a partner's site? It's going to be a high-priority problem for businesses to solve."

Aldrich believes that once companies get their own self-service strategies, processes and technologies in place, they'll work with partners to establish service networks so that anyone seeking help — from an employee

Channels Used to Deliver Live Support



in the partner's store to a call center agent to the customer — can access the content they need consistently across channels.

These complexities are some of the reasons that the design and deployment of effective self-service programs — incorporating clean, targeted, up-to-date content, guided navigation and search, adaptive learning, seamless escalation capabilities and predictive analytics — can cost millions of dollars, with a great deal of the total cost of ownership consumed by maintenance activities.

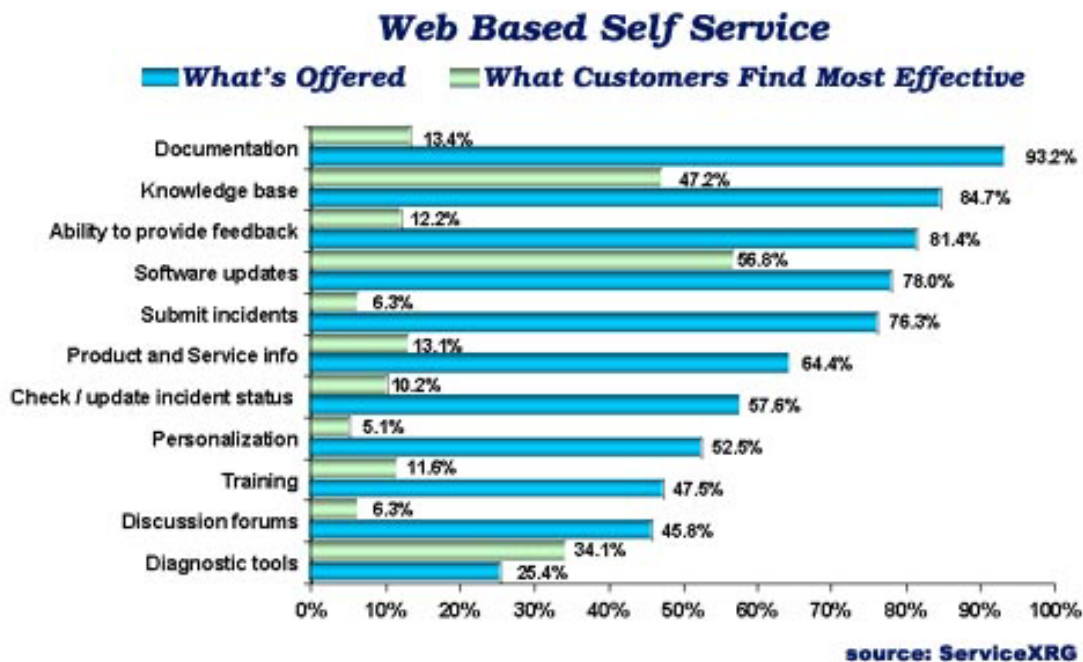
“Not enough companies understand that [deploying self-service] is not a project — it's a program. A self-service effort is ongoing and changing; every day someone should evaluate what people aren't finding through search and navigation, for example, and determine what steps need to be taken to fix the problem. In e-commerce and in customer support, those unanswered questions can be really important tips about what needs to be changed,” says Aldrich.

Further, according to Tom Sweeny, a principal with Boston-based consultancy and research firm ServiceXRG, Web-based self-services extend beyond creating, staging and managing content to numerous transactional activities that can be automated online — registering products, opening support cases, changing profiles, opting-in to newsletters or distribution lists, requesting merchandise returns and updating service agreements, to name a few. However, he says, many organizations forget these opportunities.

“There are numerous business transactions that can be automated through a Web self-service strategy that are often overlooked, but they're a critical part of self-service,” Sweeny says.

Mind the Gap

Providers of knowledge management and other service- and support-related technologies continue to see growth, increased sophistication in their product feature sets, and the merger and acquisition activity that characterizes maturing markets. Meanwhile, as business begin to realize ROI from their self-service deployments, they continue to invest in search and taxonomy improvements and content engineering, as well as providing access to structured and unstructured data both in targeted knowledgebases and across other back-end data sources. In many cases, the range of self-service options businesses are offering is vast, says Sweeny, which highlights their commitment to both call deflection and service improvements. However, he points to an interesting gap between what businesses offer in the area of Web self-services for technical support vs. what customers say they want.



“We made an interesting discovery when we studied users’ perceptions of support and those of the businesses that deliver the support,” says Sweeny, pointing to findings from research conducted by XRG. Responding to a recent survey, businesses cite a long list of online services they’re offering as part of their self-service strategies — online documentation, searchable knowledgebases, incident submission, personalization and many more. While such efforts are laudable, says Sweeney, XRG research shows that users are primarily interested in a much smaller set of Web-based self-services: 56.8 percent found online software updates most effective, while 47.2 percent cited searchable knowledgebases. Diagnostic tools followed at 34.1 percent and remote monitoring and support tools were next, cited by 27.8 of respondents.

Remote support, in fact, is an area that could see explosive growth over the next few years, according to Sweeny. Though he says the volume of transactions handled via remote support/diagnostics/realtime chat channels is still small, at around 5% of total transactions, the issues that have hindered adoption of such tools have been largely addressed.

Bandwidth problems, network security concerns and privacy constraints — caused not only by individuals’ worries over identity theft and other breaches but also by regulatory compliance such as that enforced by HIPAA — haven’t gone away entirely, but they don’t present the hurdles they once did. Meanwhile, the opportunity that remote solutions give both enterprise help desks and external service and support organizations to significantly reduce costs and improve time to productivity has begun to outweigh lingering concerns.

“For those technical support organizations that have an intimate relationship with customers and the problem complexity is high, remote support tools fit right in, particularly in industries that aren’t heavily regulated [on the privacy front],” says Sweeny. The area where remote support is currently seeing the greatest traction and growth, according to XRG, is in the B2C technical support segment — due, in large part, to the fact that remote control clients are now being shipped on many desktop models.

Along with other advancements in e-service and e-support come improved integration and interoperability, both in individual vendors’ product suites and across multi-vendor product lines. More and more service organizations are adopting customer interaction platforms in an effort to bring together multichannel contact capabilities, targeted knowledgebases and links to other content, analytical engines, and other service technologies, and then integrating best-of-breed solutions where necessary.

Integration is improving and — with multichannel platforms offered by CRM suite providers, traditional ACD providers, and peripheral e-service vendors — isn’t so much a technology problem at this point as it is a people and process issue, according to Sweeny. The integration burden is starting to shift to the enterprise itself, as executives realize that the departments handling key CRM functions often aren’t sharing their data in any meaningful way.

“Many companies have fundamental issues that have nothing to do with multichannel integration; there’s still a lack of integration among departments performing customer-facing functions,” says Sweeny. “In many respects, the support organization is actually ahead of the technology curve, but there are lots of other points of customer interaction within an enterprise.”

Analyze This

Another sign that e-service and e-support technologies are maturing are the sophisticated analytics functions springing up around them — businesses have collected scads of data from their operational CRM initiatives and now they want to put it to good use. In doing so, they’re discovering which initiatives are working and which aren’t, not only enabling them to improve service delivery but overall marketing efforts. In fact, according to John Ragsdale, a vice president at Forrester Research, marketing is emerging as a key influencer of e-service purchasing decisions. While call deflection and other cost-saving measures remain leading drivers, corporate brand reinforcement is an increasingly important factor behind e-service initiatives, along with revenue growth and improved customer experiences. Among other functions, analytics, according to Ragsdale, will enable support and service organizations to identify and generate cross-selling and upselling opportunities at the point of contact.

“What’s been buried in all the e-service stories until recently is the analytics piece, which is getting bigger and far more meaningful,” says Sweeny. Traditionally, he says, the service and support industry has set metrics for every function handled by contact centers and help desks and relentlessly measured their performance against them, but the functions they’ve been measuring don’t necessarily give any true indication of how the business is performing. Managers have used the first iteration of service-based analytics to review these metrics — hold times, abandonment, first-call resolution rates — but often don’t know how the data gathered could correspond to business improvements.

Now, Sweeny says, organizations are starting to use more sophisticated analytics to better tie how satisfaction with service translates to, say, more product purchases or renewed maintenance contracts, and understanding how they relate to increasing revenues and improving the bottom line.

“The analytics path we’re headed down is to use them to translate transaction metrics or indicators to business results,” says Sweeny. “Analytics is actually taking the next leap to enable users to learn something meaningful about how the data they’re looking at affects the business, and that’s particularly true in self-services.

“I think self-service is at a crossroads,” he continues. The basic technology is maturing and has significantly improved deflection rates, grabbing much of the low-hanging fruit. Analytics processes, he says, are ushering in the next phase of self-service, where the examination of performance indicators determine service and marketing improvements and future investments in technology, people and process.

Indeed, customer service and support as a whole is changing, according to Aldrich. The past tendency to consider support as a function that occurred only when a customer had a problem is giving way to a new view — one that encompasses a cradle-to-grave approach to service, from product consideration forward. “We see customer support as a series of capabilities that span the entire customer lifecycle,” says Aldrich.

Improving Service Delivery

Vendor consolidation, evolving technologies, and increasing demand for multiple delivery channels create an ever-shifting landscape for businesses trying to differentiate themselves through their service and support initiatives, according to Forrester Research Vice President John Ragsdale. In a recent report reviewing trends in e-service, he outlined steps business should take if they’re working to improve the support experience they provide for their customers and partners.

If the service organization doesn’t have a close relationship with the marketing department, develop one.

According to Ragsdale, those businesses whose marketing and service organizations don’t collaborate are either already battling for customer ownership or will ultimately do so. The service organization should ask for marketing’s input on competitors’ strategies, customer behavior and satisfaction, and other pertinent details if, for example, they’re rolling out self-service initiatives. Cooperation and collaboration among customer-facing organizations will only strengthen strategies and technology deployments.

Contact centers with a heavy reliance on phones should expand their channels.

Forrester’s research reveals that many contact center managers believe their customers aren’t interested in any service channel beyond the telephone, but that view, says Ragsdale, is short-sighted. If customers don’t appear to be interested in email or chat as a service delivery channel, they will at some point, and the support organization may be behind the technology curve by the time they realize they need to react.

Establish audit trails for Web collaboration activities.

To avoid legal troubles and customer dissatisfaction, service organizations should ensure they have in place strong tracking mechanisms— either packaged in their e-service applications or designed in-house — for Web collaboration. These audit capabilities enable organizations to track account activities so they can defend themselves against customers complaints or even lawsuits about “slamming,” in which agents push customers into new accounts or options without their approval.



iPhrase OneStep: Knowledge, at Your Service

Call it knowledge central. Through its flagship OneStep suite, iPhrase Technologies, an e-business and e-service solutions provider based in Bedford, Mass., enables organizations to leverage the vast amounts of valuable content housed within their enterprises and other pertinent sources to deliver a superior service experience to business customers, partners and consumers.

iPhrase addresses a problem that's long-plagued customer service organizations: the inability to offer up targeted content during a self-service session and to seamlessly escalate that session to higher-level tiers when self-service attempts fail.

More specifically, iPhrase addresses a problem that's long-plagued customer service organizations trying to harness the Web as a vehicle for practicing call deflection to reduce costs — primarily, the inability to offer up targeted content during a self-service session for first-contact resolution, and, further, to seamlessly escalate that session to higher-level tiers when self-service attempts fail. Even organizations who've garnered respect for world-class customer service through phone-based

communications have seen spectacular failures when it comes to developing self-service strategies. Unnavigable Web sites, simplistic keyword search mechanisms, scattered and often contradictory content presentation, disconnected channels, and labyrinthine escalation processes contribute to user frustration, dependence on more costly channels, and even defection — typically to businesses with better service models.

With iPhrase's OneStep platform — based on sophisticated technology developed in MIT's Spoken Language Systems laboratory that's been applied to the understanding of textual communications — businesses can treat each and every customer interaction as an opportunity rather than the annoyance it's been traditionally considered. Aptly named, OneStep integrates a set of interface capabilities — natural language processing, adaptive learning, dynamic result rendering, and search precision optimization — with such content services as document filtering, metadata extraction, linguistic analysis, and content integration to enable users to ask questions or choose intelligently suggested answers instead of having to waste valuable time browsing a site in search of help. Thanks to its integrated, multichannel capabilities, OneStep enables users who can't find their answer to easily escalate their search by sending an email or opening a Web case, or to move to a live agent session through chat or the phone. OneStep intelligently captures any search steps the user has taken and passes those along through the chosen channel so the problem doesn't have to be reiterated, minimizing frustration.

"Traditionally, if a customer using a search tool can't find what they need, they end up hunting for contact information [for escalation], but many businesses make finding that information difficult as they're trying to deflect calls. We avoid that frustration," says Roy Rodenstein, director of e-service solutions for iPhrase. "We start a dialogue with the customer if they're having problems with their search to offer them the opportunity to escalate, and we capture all the routes they've taken and package that for escalation."

The ability for businesses to develop an intuitive interface to back-end knowledge has long been a goal of CRM initiatives. While CRM vendors themselves excel in collecting and centralizing operational customer data, they don't typically provide the sophisticated search and navigation capabilities needed to fully leverage key content for a satisfactory service experience across the customer lifecycle. iPhrase's suite of applications, which integrate with CRM and ERP databases and other applicable content sources, act as the service interface for an enterprise's agents, customers and partners. The suite includes three e-service applications: WebResolve, for self-service resolution; ContactUs, for automated email and Web support requests, and AgentKM, an agent portal that interfaces to pertinent CRM systems. In addition to being able to search both structured and unstructured data sources, OneStep incorporates business logic that, for example, makes cross-sell and upsell recommendations at the point of contact and personalizes interactions based on past customer behavior. The product also integrates sophisticated reporting and analytics capabilities that enable administrators to improve service content and delivery.

Says Rodenstein, "We don't try to be a fullblown CRM suite, as there are many of those already out there. iPhrase is the interface that best enables users to solve support and service issues, whether through search and navigation, email or the phone."

Such capabilities are aggressively sought by its customer base, which comprises Global 2000 companies in vertical industries where customer service is a competitive differentiator, such as high tech and financial services. “Our customer base tends to be the kind of company that places a high priority on the customer experience,” says Rodenstein.

One such company is Waltham, Mass.-based Netegrity Inc., a well-known provider of access and identity management solutions that was acquired by Computer Associates for \$430 million in Q4/2004. Given the importance of its solutions to the continuing operations of its customers, which comprise more than 850 organizations worldwide, Netegrity has to deliver timely and superior customer service. Five years ago, company executives abandoned a set of inefficient, manual support processes in favor of an automated service and support infrastructure. Critical to the company’s new strategy, according to director of business systems Todd Clayton, was the ability to push customers’ less complex, more repetitive problems to self-service channels.

Initially, Netegrity built its own searchable knowledgebase but found it wasn’t dynamic enough to deliver the service levels required. After adopting CRM applications from Onyx Software for its sales and marketing efforts, it moved to build a more sophisticated knowledgebase, but found that front-end search and navigation capabilities were still lacking. While Netegrity executives were pleased that the majority of their customers were now opening their own Web cases if they couldn’t find answers to their problems, the costs associated with handling their complex problem sets over the phone meant Netegrity “wanted to get to the point where customers weren’t opening cases at all,” says Clayton.

After launching an initiative around improving knowledgebase content, Netegrity looked for technology that would integrate with Onyx to provide customers with guided navigation and search capabilities that closely paralleled the way they might interact with agents.

“We conducted a number of surveys and found that customers didn’t just want keyword searches; they wanted to be able to ask questions as if they were talking to an agent on the phone,” says Clayton. A seamless, multi-channel experience was also key. “Customers wanted to know that if they opened a Web case, it would route in the same way as if they’d picked up the phone,” Clayton says.

After an extensive search, Netegrity chose iPhrase’s OneStep and went into production last October, following a six-week pilot. “iPhrase impressed us with its guided navigation and sophisticated search capabilities,” says Clayton. After deploying the suite’s WebResolve application, they implemented ContactUs, which not only escalates a self-service session via email or Web case, but first makes an additional attempt at suggesting high-probability resolutions; and AgentKM, to improve knowledge management in the support center. OneStep incorporates personalization capabilities, so that Netegrity users only have to identify themselves the first time they seek support, and makes customers part of continuous knowledgebase improvements by capturing suggested solutions from their self-service sessions so that other customers can try them.

Among the metrics Netegrity established for its new support infrastructure were content quality and searchability, and overall satisfaction with their site; they wanted both the site and their knowledgebase to climb from an approval rating of 50% to 80% within a year of full deployment. Since implementation six months ago, Netegrity has already earned an approval rating of 74% for its site, and 77% approval for its knowledgebase. For self-service sessions that require escalation, the improved search and streamlined knowledgebase have decreased hold times from 14 minutes to two. According to Clayton, if the company can deflect just 10% of the 22,000 cases it handles a year — a solid goal given the complexity of the problems it fields — it can expect to save hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in support costs.

“Our goal is to keep customers on our Web site, where they can solve their own problems and even make suggestions as to what works to other customers,” says Clayton. “Our customers are people who support the infrastructures in their companies — they want to help themselves and avoid picking up the phone.”

“We don’t try to be a fullblown CRM suite, as there are many of those already out there. iPhrase is the interface that best enables users to solve support and service issues, whether through search and navigation, email or the phone.”

- Roy Rodenstein, iPhrase



WebEx Support Center: The Fix is In

Businesses the world over have gratefully removed the physical boundaries to collaboration by leveraging on-demand Web conferencing applications from Santa Clara, Calif.-based WebEx Communications Inc. For technical support organizations struggling to support increasingly distributed and remote workforces and an ever-growing set of mission-critical applications, WebEx extends those collaborative benefits through Support Center, its on-demand remote support and collaboration offering.

With its sophisticated, IP-based remote support capabilities, Support Center enables support reps to replicate an onsite visit by allowing them to remotely diagnose, control and provide fixes to a user's desktop, regardless of the platform they're using.

"Remote support is the most powerful story in service and support," says Jack Chawla, director, product management at WebEx. Whether a support organization is providing business-to-business technical support to a relatively small number of extremely valuable customers, or business-to-consumer support to hundreds of thousands of consumers, or help desk services to employees scattered across regional offices or out on the road, the prevailing dilemma is the same: It's extremely expensive, if not impossible, to deliver onsite support, yet problems are typically too complex to be solved simply by exchanging information over the phone. With its sophisticated, IP-based remote support capabilities, Support

Center enables technical support representatives (TSRs) to replicate an onsite visit by allowing them to remotely diagnose, control and provide fixes to a user's desktop, regardless of the platform they're using.

Thanks to offerings like Support Center, remote support is finally getting the attention that analysts have been predicting for years. While remote support tools have been touted for some time for their ability to dramatically improve resolution times without onsite visits — thereby dramatically reducing support costs and increasing time to productivity — their adoption has been hindered, say analysts, by network security concerns and bandwidth issues. As network performance improves through high-speed connections and users get more comfortable with the security of online transactions, the remote support market — though still handling a relatively small percentage of transactions — is poised for growth, according to Tom Sweeney, principal at ServiceXRG, a Boston-based analyst firm. The greatest traction for remote support has been in the B2C segment, he says, due both to the fact that remote control engine clients are often shipped on desktop machines and that bandwidth delivery to home-based users has improved significantly.

For its part, WebEx directly addresses many of the concerns that have led to past dissatisfaction and suspicion with remote support models. WebEx offers Support Center as an on-demand service rather than requiring installed software, hosting all its customers on a common, secure infrastructure based on its global MediaTone Network. The IP-based network platform — the third generation of which WebEx just released — not only enables highly secure Web-based collaboration through data, voice and video media, but provides unmatched performance and scalability for speedy remote support collaboration and problem resolution, according to Chawla.

"Not only is our service 100% reliable, with global service backup, but with our MediaTone platform, we're able to remove any latency and improve the performance of remote support delivery throughout the world," he says.

Further, says Chawla, Support Center doesn't require the installation of resource-intensive client software; users seeking support from an agent need only download a small client for the actual session if one isn't already resident on the desktop. Meanwhile, they can take advantage of any Internet browser they choose for the session. After connecting with a contact center or help desk via phone or chat, users give TSRs permission to browse their desktop and in some cases, to take complete control to enact a fix. Depending on the problem, TSRs can take whatever action is needed — transfer files with patches or updates or install new applications, for example. If escalation is necessary, TSRs can bring in subject-matter experts from within or outside their

organization for collaboration purposes, or package the results of a support session to pass on to a higher-tier support professional, obviating the need for that person to repeat steps already taken. Support Center also features recording and editing capabilities, so that support sessions can be captured for knowledgebase transfer, training purposes, and more.

Not only does remote support greatly improve first-call resolution, but it provides the opportunity to practice ever-critical call deflection, says Chawla. Taking advantage of a customer's or employee's satisfaction following problem resolution, TSRs can use the opportunity to market a support organization's less-expensive self-service options, so they can be explored first should a user encounter future problems.

"The remote support session is an opportunity to not only quickly resolve a problem, but to promote self-service channels, which provide a great cost-savings to the company," says Chawla.

One WebEx customer, enterprise applications provider Lawson Software, estimates that its Global Support Center (GSC) has saved around \$600,000 in technical support costs by using Support Center to deliver remote B2B support to customers. Not only has Lawson seen an ROI approaching 700% since it deployed Support Center in 2000, according to executives, but the company has greatly improved the satisfaction levels of its customers, who had previously dealt with lengthy resolution cycles stemming from the GSC's attempts to fix extremely complex technical problems over the phone.

Prior to the Support Center deployment, the average time to resolution for a complex support call — of which Lawson was receiving 1,000 per month — was two hours, meaning that the GSC was spending 2,000 agent hours per month trying to talk through problems with customers, as they had no visibility into remote systems. A dial-up access solution designed to complement phone sessions proved inefficient. Following a technology review process, Lawson chose WebEx's solution based on its ability to integrate with its existing front-office applications and processes, as well as to enable assisted, remote support and include additional TSRs in collaborative sessions should escalation need to occur. Another key factor in the decision was Support Center's hosted service delivery model.

WebEx customer Lawson Software, an enterprise applications provider, estimates that its Global Support Center (GSC) has saved around \$600,000 in technical support costs by using Support Center to deliver remote B2B support to customers.

Lawson completed a full rollout of Support Center in 2001, and was handling 1,200 sessions per month using the tools by the end of 2002. According to executives, use of the product has helped the GSC to reduce average handle times by 25%, resulting in the significant savings they're seeing.

While WebEx's Support Center customers have been primarily companies in the B2B space, particularly high-tech companies delivering external support, Chawla says the product is starting to gain traction in enterprise help desks as well. Though adequate budgeting is and will continue to be a problem for IT help desks, support professionals face mounting pressures to address the increasingly changing composition of the enterprise workforce.

"For IT departments, support is beginning to resemble B2B technical support, where the business is supporting several different customers without regard to physical boundaries. First, more workers are dispersed throughout remote offices, with little or no IT support onsite, and second, more and more workers are mobile, and it's difficult to have to rely on a corporate VPN for support," says Chawla.

Further, he says, the number of applications that are critical to business operations — and that IT is charged with supporting — is rapidly growing. "It used to be that a company had one or two mission-critical applications that needed supporting. Now there are often hundreds and each needs to have a certain service level. That has IT saying, 'we really need a remote support solution that will work no matter where our employees are,'" Chawla says.
