

Navigating the rise of repetitive tasks at ICT service desks

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The role of a central ICT service desk in large organisations has evolved significantly. Traditionally, helpdesks focused on reactive incident management, but modern service desks are increasingly proactive, aiming to prevent incidents and enhance service quality, ultimately boosting customer satisfaction. In this article we focus on a large organisation, which was confronted with the doubling of support ticket volumes over the past five years, from 17,415 tickets in 2018 to 42,725 in 2023 (see Figure 1). The increasing complexity of applications, more vocal users, stricter security measures, and the enduring impact of the pandemic (with more people working from home) have all contributed to this rise. Additionally, new support channels, such as social media, have heightened response expectations.

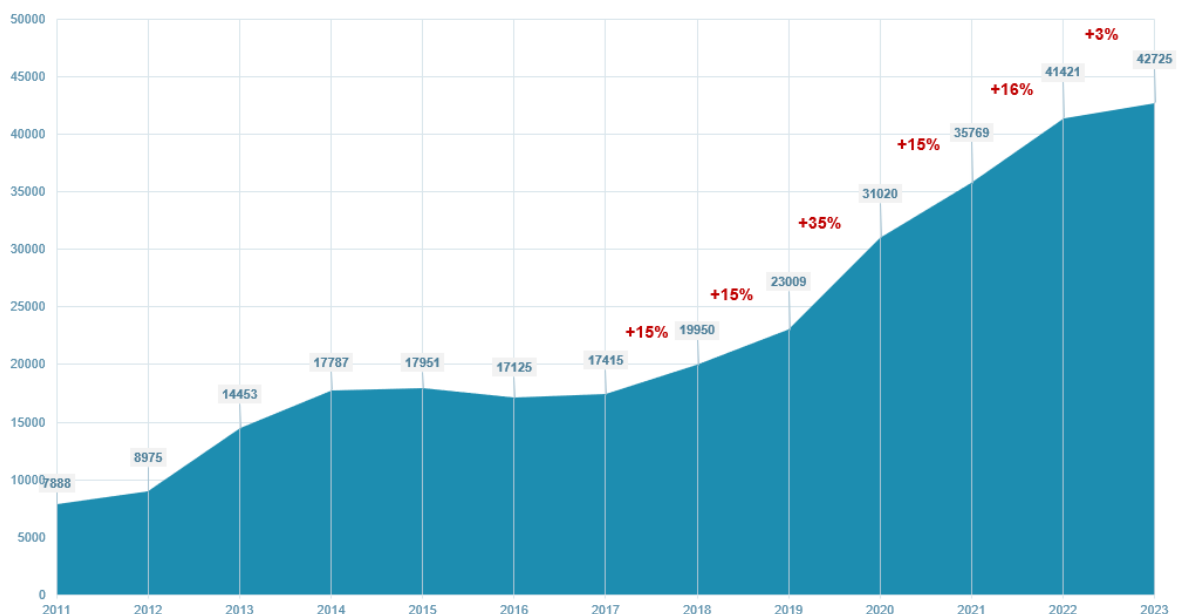


Figure 1 – Annual ticket resolution report

Increasing workload and routine tasks

Together with the rise in tickets, the service desk's workload became increasingly repetitive and routine. These tasks, requiring minimal knowledge or creativity, include generating activation codes, supporting authentication, and performing administrative duties like granting access rights or managing mailboxes. The shift towards a higher volume of monotonous work negatively impacted job quality, increasing workload and emotional strain, leading to higher absenteeism, general dissatisfaction, demotivation, and employees seeking other employment opportunities.

Identifying issues through employee surveys

In early 2022, the situation reached a critical point when all service desk employees reported sick on the same day, highlighting the need for urgent intervention. Following this incident, the team was

expanded with additional employees, and a shift towards a lean and agile self-organising team structure was initiated. An anonymous survey was conducted among the nine permanent service desk staff members. The results revealed a strong commitment to service quality, personal service, and customer orientation. However, these motivators were compromised by increasing workloads. Employees showed varying preferences for repetitive or complex tasks, influenced by personal preferences, education, and experience, as well as the context: familiar tasks were preferred under stress, while complex tasks were favoured when there was more time and freedom. When there is an excess of repetitive tasks, employees who need more challenging work are particularly left unsatisfied. Predictability was valued, yet the inherently unpredictable nature of incident management often clashed with this preference.

Strategic interventions

Based on the survey findings, several strategic interventions were implemented to improve coordination, information flow, task automation, dynamic task allocation, and overall predictability.

Improved coordination

Coordination between various IT and administrative services and the service desk was enhanced to ensure changes with significant impacts were planned collectively and phased. Relationships were strengthened through internships, visits, and meetings. Additionally, a temporary halt on changes was imposed after the yearly planned peak period to allow staff to recover.

Better information provision and flow

Professional call centre software will be implemented to visualise waiting queues in terms of time, order, and urgency, enabling better anticipation of busy periods. Preventive communication to users before and during changes was also emphasised.

Handling repetitive tasks

Job students were employed for repetitive tasks, and automation was introduced where possible, allowing staff to focus on more challenging tasks. However, repetitive tasks remained, especially with ongoing updates and security measures, which continued to generate peaks in routine work.

Dynamic task allocation

Autonomy and self-sufficiency of requesting departments were increased, enabling them to manage shared drives and administrative mailboxes independently. Task rotation was introduced across three platforms with varying response expectations: social media (high priority), phone calls, and support tickets. Front and back-office roles were also split, with two permanent staff and job students handling simpler front-office tasks, while more experienced staff managed complex back-office support. Opportunities for project work were offered to employees seeking more challenges, such as documenting solutions for internal troubleshooting or writing documentation for the intranet.

Monitoring and responding to workload

To continuously monitor the situation, the 'routine task barometer' was created. This tool anonymously gauges staff satisfaction with the amount of routine work every two weeks via a group

chat survey. Employees respond with an emoji that best represents their feelings, providing valuable insights into individual and team trends. Since its inception in March 2022, 36 surveys have been conducted, averaging five responses each. In Figure 2, you can see the average score per survey (orange line) alongside the total number of processed tickets per month (blue line). It is notable that the two lines are largely mirror images of each other. As the number of tickets increases, satisfaction with the amount of routine work decreases. The results are discussed regularly to address possible causes and plan further interventions, supported by a better understanding of trends, expectations, and how everyone feels.

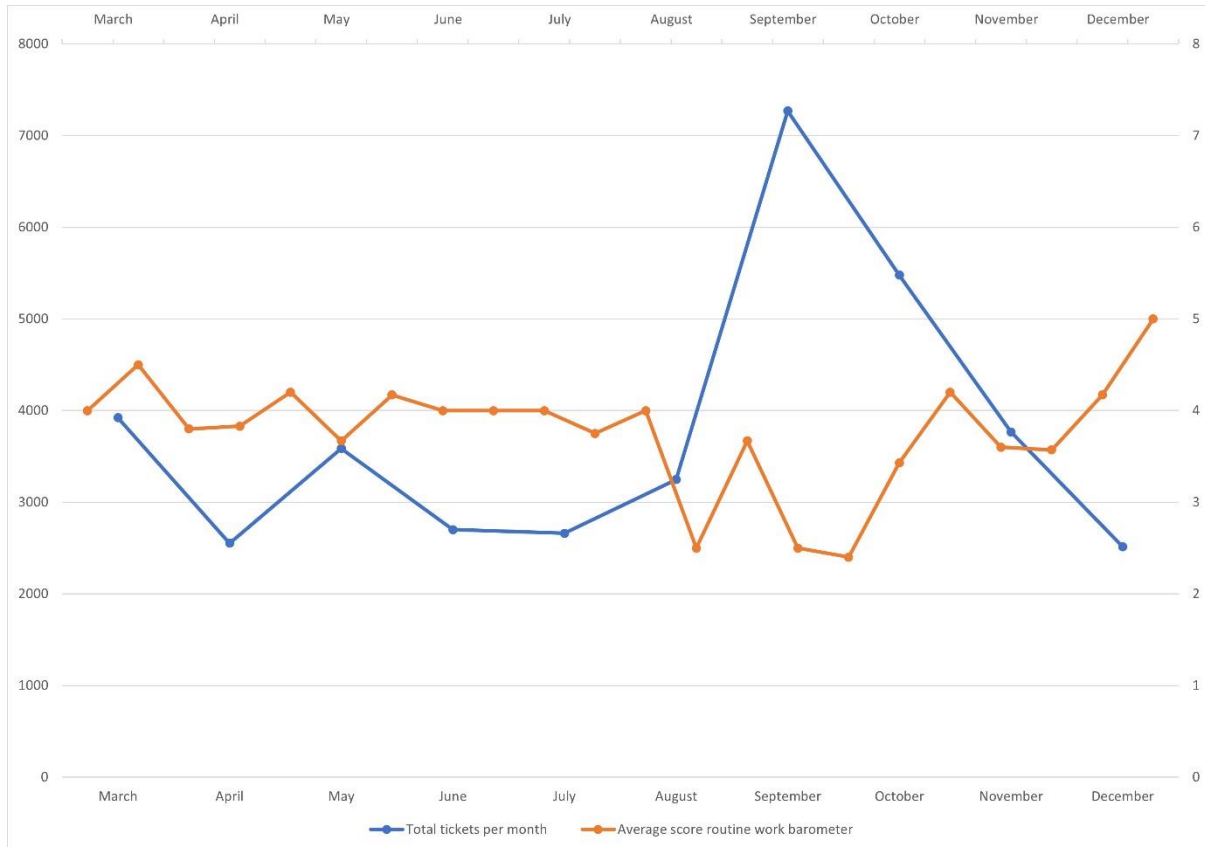


Figure 2 - Total tickets per month versus average score of the barometer

Conclusion

Enhanced coordination, better information flow, automation of routine tasks, and dynamic task allocation have all contributed to a more balanced workload and increased employee satisfaction. The introduction of the 'routine task barometer' has heightened awareness of participation, thereby stimulating greater involvement. By continuously monitoring and addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction, the organisation is better equipped to meet the demands of its users while maintaining a motivated and effective service desk team.



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