

Reducing Employee Dependence on Calling the IT Service Desk

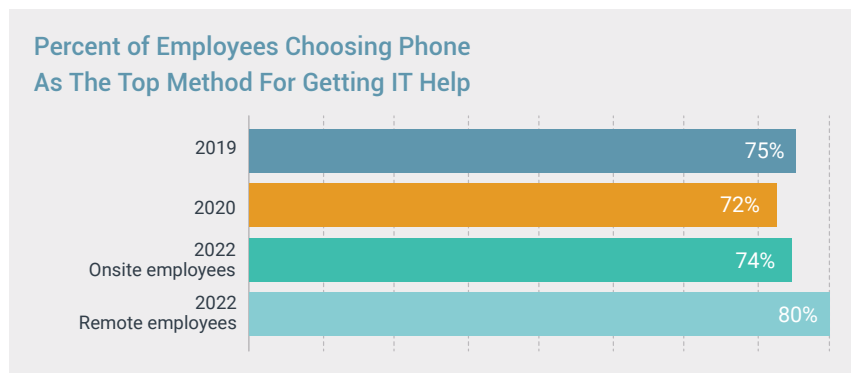
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Table of Contents

The Dilemma of High IT Service Desk Call Volume	3
Consumers Prefer Online Sites and Apps vs. Calling for Help	3
Bringing Automation to IT Service Management with an AI-Based Virtual Agent	4
The Importance of Organizational Change Management	5
OCM Best Practices For Helping Resistant Employees Adopt	6
Blueprint and Three Case Studies for Reducing Employee Dependence on Calling IT	7

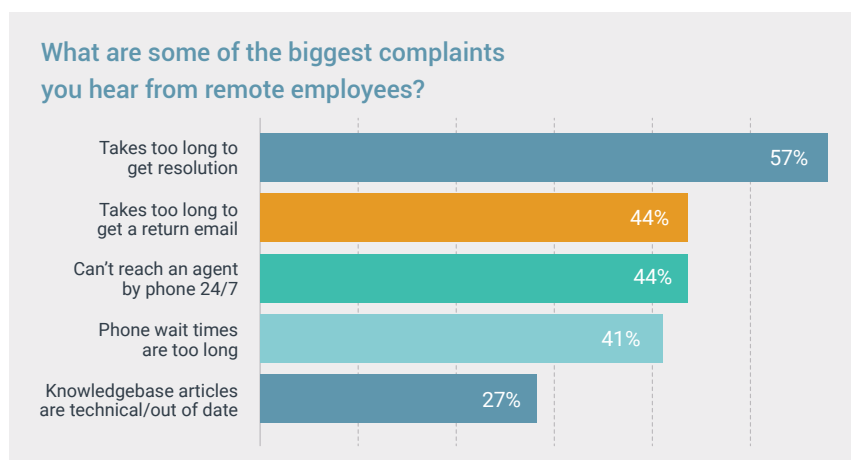
The Dilemma of High IT Service Desk Call Volume

Service desk call volume has long been an issue. In fact, according to [a study conducted by research firm Gatepoint](#), the number one ITSM initiative in 2019 was reducing service desk call volume. Not surprising, since research revealed in that same year that 75% of employees chose phone as their top method for getting help from IT. Despite the 2019 initiative to reduce call volume, [the number of employees choosing phone for IT help in 2020](#) was essentially flat at 72%. Fast forward to 2022 and the [latest Gatepoint research](#) shows that the trend for onsite employees choosing phone is still flat at 74%. However, the number has risen to 80% for employees choosing phone when working remote.



Without the ability to shoulder tap a colleague or walk up to a genius bar, remote employees face a greater challenge in getting IT help, amplified by the fact that IT leaders have not redesigned employee support for a hybrid world. The top options for help are traditional ITSM methods – phone, email, and portals – leaving employees dissatisfied at a time when employee experience is paramount.

Top employee complaints with getting help from IT are that it takes too long to get resolution, too long to reach an agent by phone, too long to get a return email, and phone wait times are too long. When they turn to portals for help, employees find knowledge articles are too technical, out of date, or irrelevant. So, while employees find phone calls to be their best alternative, they are losing productivity and employee satisfaction scores are going down. The result? According to Gartner, [employee productivity in 2022 is down 33%](#).



Consumers Prefer Online Sites and Apps vs. Calling for Help

You might have employees that resist change, and so you believe they will never use modern technology like Slack, Microsoft Teams, or a virtual agent to get help. While it might be hard to believe, in their consumer lives, those employees exhibit different behavior. Data shows that consumers prefer using online websites or mobile apps over speaking to humans for most transactions – no matter their age.

Think about how you booked a flight 10 years ago. Chances are you called an airline's phone number, waited on hold for a live agent, and then waited while the agent came up with various flight scenarios for you to pick from. That is not the case any longer. [According to Stratos Jet Charters, Inc.](#), 83% of US adults prefer to book their trips online today, and an estimated 700 million people will make a booking online by 2023.

The same holds true for airport check-in. Instead of waiting in long lines to check in for flights via live agents, most passengers are choosing online check in or using the airline's kiosk in the airport. Then they often go to their gates using a QR code on their mobile apps to board the flight rather than relying on printed boarding passes.

Another example of the trend for consumers transitioning away from picking up a phone to talk to live agents is with Amazon. When consumers make a purchase, they do it on the Amazon website or via the Amazon mobile app. If a problem occurs with the order such as a late delivery, they go back to the website or app to resolve the issue. They don't pick up the phone, sit on hold, and speak with a live agent.

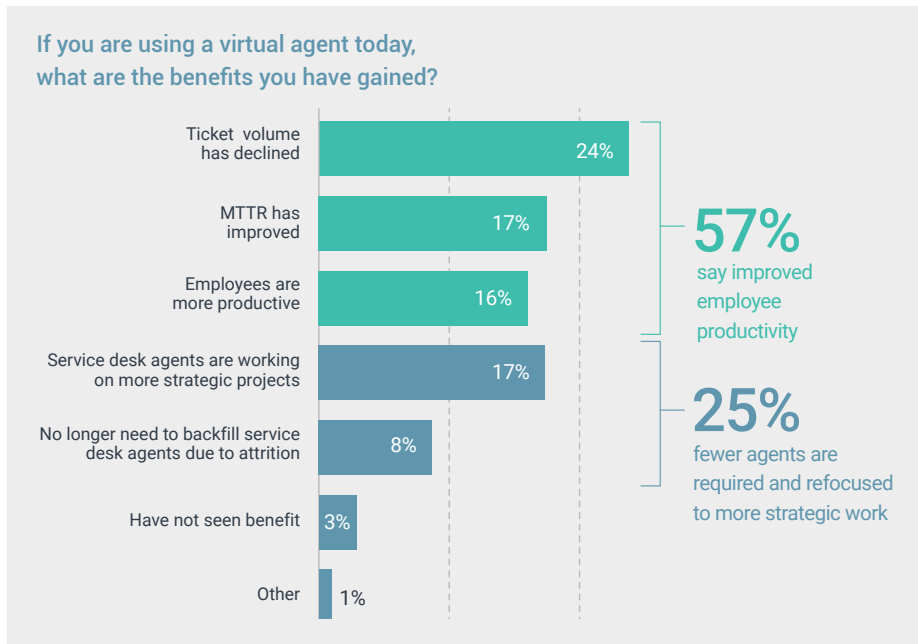
The choice for apps vs. speaking with humans is stronger for Gen Z and millennials, but all generations are trending toward online websites and mobile apps to place orders and get their problems solved as automated solutions become stronger with advanced AI. The key to getting even your most stubborn employees to move from calling your IT service desk to using modern technology for help is to give them something that delivers the ease of a consumer virtual assistant.

Bringing Automation to IT Service Management with an AI-Based Virtual Agent

With our consumer lives becoming increasingly easier via apps, it is interesting to consider that from an employee's perspective, the service desk has not fundamentally changed since the 1990s. The primary methods for employees to get help are via phone and email. Yet we have already established that employees are frustrated with those methods and are losing productivity. The idea of a self-service portal failed when it was introduced and is still failing today. This is because portals are predicated on: (1) employees understanding their questions/issues well enough to know what to search for; (2) employees being willing to sift through articles that are presented without personalization to get answers/resolution; and (3) service desk agents writing an enormous amount of knowledge articles in a language employees will understand and then keeping the articles up to date. As [Brian Kropp, Group VP for Gartner's HR practice said](#), "Employees want their 9-5 to look like their 5-9." A portal does not accomplish that.

Espressive Barista, our AI-based virtual agent, brings the ease of consumer virtual assistants, such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home, into the workplace. Built on a conversational AI platform that understands human language, Barista automates the resolution of employee questions, issues, and requests with immediate, personalized responses. At Espressive, we realize that employees need more than a Google-like search capability. They need end-to-end automated resolution. For example, if an employee wants a password reset, instead of having them read an article and telling them the steps, they want a consumer-like experience where they are taken through the process of updating their password in the moment.

According to Gatepoint research, organizations that have implemented a virtual agent for employee self-help are seeing significant benefits. 57% cite benefits such as a decline in ticket volume with an improvement in MTTR and employee productivity. 25% identify that fewer agents are required, and agents that are on staff are refocused to more strategic work.



A virtual agent helps to future-proof organizations. Generation Z are the first to grow up as digital natives, so it makes sense that **65 percent** prefer to communicate online than in person. Many millennials are also digital natives and **92 percent** of them own smart phones. Generation X were the first to incorporate digital technology in their youth. Baby boomers are likely your highest resisters to new technology, but their consumer lives are shifting them forward. A virtual agent delivers the digital technology that most of your employees are demanding, while delivering a consumer like experience that wins the resisters over.

The Importance of Organizational Change Management

If you have decided to modernize your ITSM self-help offerings to deliver a consumer-like experience to your employees with a virtual agent, it is not enough to just select the best solution and to install it correctly. The key to employee adoption is to address organizational change management (OCM) to ensure employees are aware of and excited about the new offering.

Espressive helps customers do that with an Employee Adoption Program that embraces core OCM tenants including:

- Creating awareness and enthusiasm
- Setting expectations that are met
- Providing tangible value
- Making it easy to consume
- Asking for feedback
- Engaging employees over time

While this is a strong program that has had success in Espressive customer deployments, some customers have taken it a step further and took on the issue of high service desk call volume by challenging the need for an IT service desk phone number. Understanding that employees are consumers in their personal lives and, as consumers, they have demonstrated a preference for not calling a phone number to get help, they have literally turned off the service desk phones. While many enterprises would be hesitant to do this thinking employee satisfaction would plummet, taking this step did the opposite – it raised employee satisfaction scores for these customers.

OCM Best Practices For Helping Resistant Employees Adopt

The next section of this white paper includes a blueprint along with mini-case studies about three customers who have challenged the need for an IT service desk phone number. Here are some OCM best practices they implemented to turn even the most resistant employees around to our virtual agent, Espressive Barista.

- **CREATE A FUN/IMPACTFUL WAY TO DEMO:** This company had “ambassadors” set up a table with balloons, signage, and free donuts to attract employees to learn about Barista at lunch. When someone came up for the free donut, that employee was asked, “What was the last thing you asked of IT support?” They would then ask the employee to hand over their smart phone so they could add the Barista app and show them a new way for getting help. After downloading Barista, they asked the person to type in the same question and watched the delight on the employee’s face when Barista answered. So, if they need to know the dental provider on a Saturday or need to open a ticket while walking to their car after hours, they can get the help that they need with Barista. This illustrates how easy it is to win employees over to chat channels vs. a phone call.
- **CREATE A VIP SERVICE FOR LEADERSHIP:** Another example is a company that was concerned that their CEO and others from the leadership team would not use Barista for support because they get quick attention when they call the support line today. Because of that, they created a VIP service within Barista. When a designated VIP asks Barista a question, if Barista does not know the answer or can’t solve the issue, the VIP is offered a direct path to a special live chat service that’s available 24/7. That took away possible objections from the CEO and has enabled the company to eliminate IT phone support one day a week. What they found interesting is that although they only eliminate phone support on Fridays, call volume immediately started dropping on all other days as well.
- **GIVE EXAMPLES FROM OUR CONSUMER LIVES:** Another best practice is arming your ambassadors with conversations to have with employees during training sessions. For example, the ambassador might ask, “Have you ever called Amazon because your package was late?” No one in the room raises their hand. Then they say, “Do you even know their phone number? No? That doesn’t concern you?” Inevitably an employee says it’s not a concern because it is so easy to resolve issues via the Amazon app or on their website. Asking these questions helps employees associate Barista with the experiences they have in their consumer lives that are very positive. Employees quickly realize that they don’t call the bank to reset their passwords or Microsoft to reset their Outlook account because they are empowered to do it through self-service.

Blueprint and Three Case Studies for Reducing Employee Dependence on Calling IT

These three case studies are of organizations who made the decision to shut off or reduce IT service desk phone access. They approached this in three different ways. One customer shut off phones all at once. The second, shut them off gradually. And the third, shut them off only one day a week. When you look across the three, this is the blueprint that they followed:

- 1** Gain buy-in from leadership for eliminating phone support
- 2** Verify that content is up to date for your top call drivers
- 3** Launch a change management campaign gaining employee awareness and buy-in
 - Develop compelling messages
 - Launch a multi-channel campaign customized for your organization
- 4** Script an IVR voice message instructing employees to use the virtual agent instead
- 5** Consider special VIP handling and/or a method for reaching an agent live
- 6** Plan and execute on a metered reduction of phone support based on your goals
 - One business day a week (i.e., Ask Barista Fridays)
 - Company shutdowns
 - Weekends
 - Then 100% with a possible escalation path
- 7** On a weekly basis, continue to add intents and personalize content to constantly increase deflection rates

Case Study #1: Energy Company Shut Phones Off All at Once

This long-standing energy company provides electric and natural gas services to their customers. They play a key role in supporting their state's economy and the quality of life of its citizens.

Motivation

The energy company brought in Espressive Barista with the plan of reducing calls to their outsourced IT service desk over time. That plan was upended, however, when a company mandate was issued to immediately bring all outsourced activities inhouse. Rather than hiring inhouse service desk agents to handle the phone lines, IT leadership decided to turn off the phone lines completely and rely on Barista instead.

Blueprint

1. Optimized content for all top call drivers
2. Got leadership buy-in for turning off phones
3. Turned off the primary IT service desk phone number
4. Provided two methods for speaking with a live agent; staffed with 4 agents to triage
 - Published a phone number where employees could leave a message and receive a callback
 - Employees could open tickets through their portal to also receive a callback
5. On a weekly basis, continue to add intents and personalize content to constantly increase deflection rates
6. Use of the phone number and employee-initiated tickets decreased significantly, requiring only 2 agents for triage

Results

By shutting down their outsourced service desk and launching Barista, the energy company saw an immediate return on investment with a 75% reduction in service desk costs. In the first week, Barista was able to deflect 62% of tickets going to the service desk.

Case Study #2: Solar Turbines Shut Phones Off Phones Gradually

Solar Turbines is a wholly owned subsidiary of Caterpillar Inc. and is a leading provider of energy solutions, featuring an extensive line of gas turbine-powered compressor sets, mechanical drive packages, and generator sets.

Motivation

When Solar Turbines experienced a 292% increase in call volume with a 26% abandonment rate in response to the 2020 pandemic and work from home mandate, their head of Client Support Services decided he needed a strategy for reducing employee dependence on phone support. He leveraged Espressive Barista to get employees the help they needed to be productive as they transitioned to working from home.

Blueprint

1. Optimized content to ensure it was up to date and relevant
2. Gained leadership support for the move to eliminate phones one day a week
3. Eliminated phone support one day a week
 - Added a message for employees to hear when calling the service desk instructing them to go to the Barista app on their desktops or mobile devices to receive immediate support
 - Advertised this as an advantage – it is a lot easier going to an app on your phone or desktop than it is to find and call an 800 number where you can end up on hold
4. Following success there, eliminated phone support during the summer shut down
5. Following success there, moved forward with eliminating phone support during business hours

Results

Because Barista was able to deflect 63% of calls in March of 2020, the head of Client Support Services was able to gain executive support to eliminate phone calls during the summer shut down. Barista continued deflecting at a very high rate, enabling the team to eliminate phone support to the service desk every day of the week during business hours.

Case Study #3: Dexcom Shut Phones Off on Fridays

Dexcom has emerged as a leader in diabetes care technology. Headquartered in San Diego, California, Dexcom empowers people to take control of diabetes through their innovative continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) systems, transforming diabetes management for both patients and healthcare professionals.

Motivation

Dexcom experienced 30% growth in 2020 and 27% growth in 2022, causing them to hire ~500 new employees each quarter on average. The Head of IT Desktop Support was faced with the prospect of hiring 20 new agents to support this growth when he decided to bring in Espressive Barista to handle Tier 1 calls. HR had similar challenges, so Barista was rolled out for both IT and HR as a single place for employees to get help. When they defined their objectives for their virtual agent, reducing calls to both the IT service desk and to HR was a top goal.

Blueprint

1. Rolled out Barista for both IT and HR so employees would receive more value for trying Barista
2. Leveraged the fact that employees were heavy users of phone for checking email, so they encouraged employees to download the mobile Barista app so they could get IT and HR answers while checking email
3. Did education via email, meetings, live events, and the Employee Adoption Program using analogies to help employees quickly grasp the benefits of Barista
 - You aren't going to memorize the IT and HR phone numbers; an app is easier
 - You do mobile banking and reset your password online vs. calling them for help
 - How many times have you called Amazon and spoken to a live agent? Never!
 - our manager would prefer that you are working and getting issues resolved quickly
4. Held events giving away donuts, downloading the app, and asking employees for the last question they asked IT and then typing that question into Barista to show the result.
5. Gained buy-in by optimizing content for top call drivers so that Barista would “work”
 - People who argued they wanted a live agent are quickly converted when they see that they get faster support 24/7 (10 seconds on average)
6. Provided VIP support through the integration with ServiceNow; Barista recognizes that they are a VIP and sends them directly to live chat 24/7 if Barista can't answer the questions
7. Implemented and promoted Ask Barista Fridays by putting a message on the service desk phone that instructs employees to use Barista (with instructions on access)

Results

Bolstered by positive interactions with Barista, employees continued using Barista even when the phones came back on the following Monday. In the three-month period since implementing Ask Barista Fridays, Dexcom realized:

- 236% increase in employee interactions with Barista
- 43% decrease in phone calls to the service desk

With the positive results from Ask Barista Fridays, Dexcom started using Barista to intercept emails going to the IT and HR service desks as well, and they plan on shutting off phones on all weekdays in the future. They currently achieve 63% IT deflection and 82% HR deflection.

Summary

IT service desks have been plagued with high call volumes for years, despite the introduction of the IT service portal for self-help. Portals were intended to make it easy for employees to get IT help, but they have not delivered on the promise. Research demonstrates that employees overwhelmingly choose phone as their top method for reaching out to IT, which is surprising considering their dissatisfaction with IT phone support. In their consumer lives, however, most employees have left the idea of calling a phone number for help behind thanks to consumer apps that make it fast and easy to get help online. Unfortunately, most organizations have not responded to this trend by deploying consumer-like apps for help in the workplace.

With the emergence of the new hybrid workforce, enterprises are realizing the need to automate employee self-help with a virtual agent that leverages conversational AI – thereby bringing the consumer-like self-help experience inhouse. Those who have done this report increases in employee satisfaction and productivity with improved MTTR and the requirement for fewer agents.

This white paper discussed all these issues and presented a blueprint for gaining adoption of virtual agents while reducing call volume. Some organizations have gone so far as to turn off their IT service desk phone lines one or more days a week. Rather than a revolt, they found increased employee satisfaction. Case studies presented detail on how three organizations have successfully taken this step with extremely positive results.